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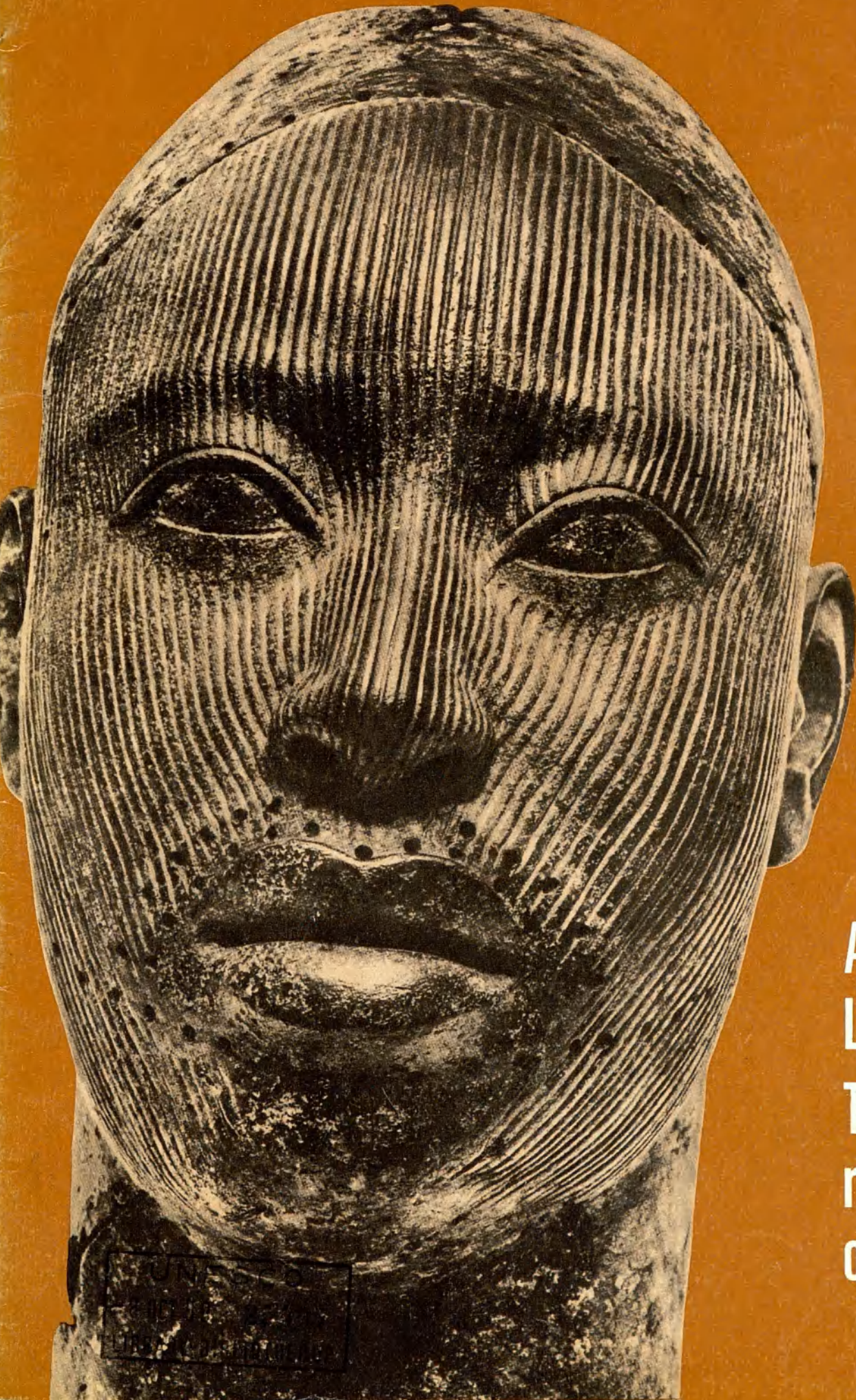
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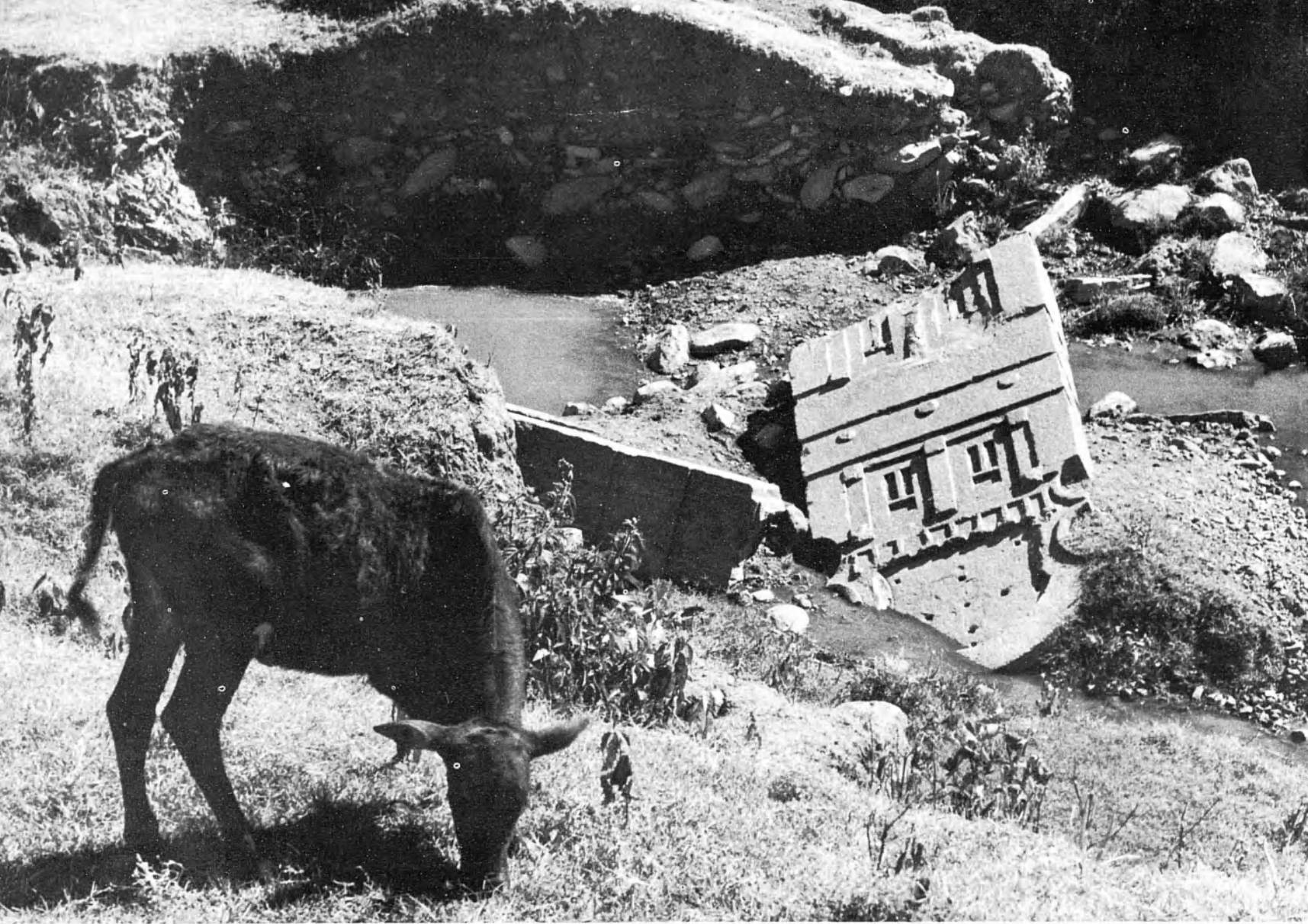
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**AFRICA'S  
LOST PAST**  
The startling  
rediscovery  
of a continent





## GIANT OBELISK OF ANCIENT ETHIOPIA

One of the most intriguing chapters in African history concerns the growth and survival of Ethiopia, a country converted to Christianity some 1,600 years ago, which conserved its religion and developed a highly advanced civilization independent of the Muslims to the north and east and of the Negro cultures to the south. Its foundations were laid when highly sophisticated and technically advanced peoples crossed over the Red Sea during the millennium before Christ and set up a powerful kingdom with its capital at Axum. The people of this Axumite Kingdom cut enormous blocks of hard stone and erected the giant monoliths and other kinds of standing stones still found in Ethiopia today. Some, like the giant "obelisk" (left), the tallest in Ethiopia, standing nearly 70 feet high and dominating the tombs of the kings in the ancient capital of Axum, have resisted the ravages of time. Others, their engraved lines and symbols a still unexplained mystery, have come crashing down to earth (photo above). The Axumite Kingdom and its Amharic successor acquired an identity and distinction which have helped to give the Ethiopia of today a unique culture and civilization. (See page 30)

Photos © Almsy, Paris

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**COVER PHOTO**

Bronze head from Ife in West Africa which is the spiritual capital of the Yoruba peoples. Lines scored on the features may represent facial scarification or be a way of suggesting long strings of small beads such as many of the Yoruba divine kings still wear hanging from their crowns. (See pages 12 and 15)

Photo Eliot Elisofon from "The Sculpture of Africa". © Thames and Hudson, Ltd., London, 1958

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# THE REDISCOVERY OF AFRICA

by Basil Davidson



**ROYAL CONGO STATUE:** This head is a detail of the effigy of the 119th monarch of the Bushongo Kingdom in the Belgian Congo. The practice of making royal portrait statues during the lifetime of the kings apparently began with Shamba Bolongongo, the 93rd and greatest of the Bushongo kings (c. A.D. 1600). The kings are usually shown sitting cross-legged with some object (like a drum, an anvil etc.) symbolizing the special achievements for which they are still remembered.

Van de Straete Collection



© Almasy, Paris

**SAND-BLURRED RUIN** of Musawarat es Safa, to the north of Khartoum, in the Sudan, was once a palace or temple, built at the beginning of the Christian era as the residence of a god-king or goddess-queen. Today there remain only the solitary ruins of palaces and temples lying amid the sands surrounded by the undisturbed city mounds of the Kush civilization which [built them.

**I**

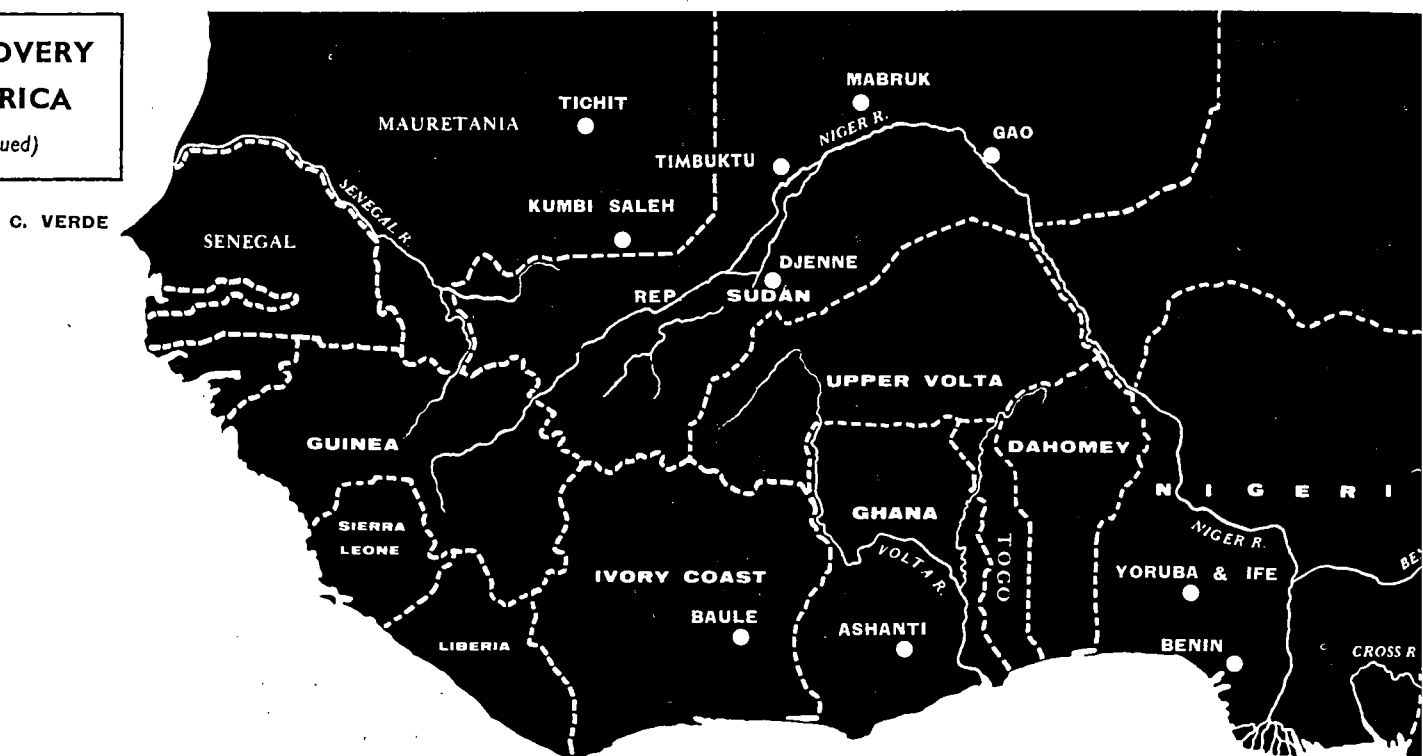
s the negro a man without a past? Not many years have passed since the outside world took an affirmative answer more or less for granted: to what point, indeed, will be easily remembered by those many Africanists who watched the stubborn efforts of Melville Herskovits—and notably in his book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*—arguing that the answer should be no.

But now of recent years, in the wake of the colonial hurricane, there emerges a new approach to the whole question. It is increasingly realized that the cultural contributions of African peoples to the general history and progress of mankind were not limited to interesting works of art, whether in wood or ivory or in bronze or gold, but comprehended a wide range of political and social achievements that were none the less important or remarkable because they were ignored or little known. It is seen, indeed, that these works of art that so many Asians and Americans and Europeans have now admired were not the more or less mysterious products of a social vacuum,

CONT'D ON NEXT PAGE

## REDISCOVERY OF AFRICA

(Continued)



but, on the contrary, the ornament and attribute of early African civilizations.

This reassessment of the African past occurs when many African peoples achieve new positions of independence in the world, and when their voice begins to be heard at the United Nations headquarters and other places where governments and nations meet. These middle years of the 20th century may be remembered for many troubles and upheavals, and for risks and dangers greater than any that humanity had ever run before: on the side of good they will also be remembered as the central years of African emancipation. And they mean, of course, much more than a purely political emancipation—much more than that some 80 million Africans, within a few years from now, will be governing themselves: they mean, as well, an intellectual and moral emancipation, a breaking down of obstacles that have stood between Africans and a sense of full equality with the rest of the world, and of barriers that have helped to isolate these African peoples from the general family of man.

Enquiry into the course of pre-European African history is an important aspect of this reassessment. It is the work of many scholars and specialists in many lands. International scholarship, these past ten or twenty years, has joined together in a common effort to make good, as well as may be, much of the mutilation that was done to African repute through four centuries of slaving and another century of imperialist rule. And what is happening now—this special issue of THE UNESCO COURIER is something of a symbol of its happening—is that the fruits of all this patient work and painstaking research are now being gathered in. Let me offer one small but typical example. For the last twenty years the standard British work on East African history was that of Sir Reginald Coupland, who devoted some forty pages to the pre-European past. Last year one of Britain's leading university presses decided to commission a multi-volume history of British East Africa; and this will devote a whole volume to the pre-European past.

Something of the range and often bewildering variety of the work that is being done, up and down the continent, can be glimpsed from articles which distinguished specialists contribute to this special issue of THE COURIER. It would be invidious to mention names where so many men and women are at work. There is almost no African territory, however outwardly silent and remote, that has failed to produce some contribution, however small, to the vivid and compelling picture of African history that is now beginning to emerge.

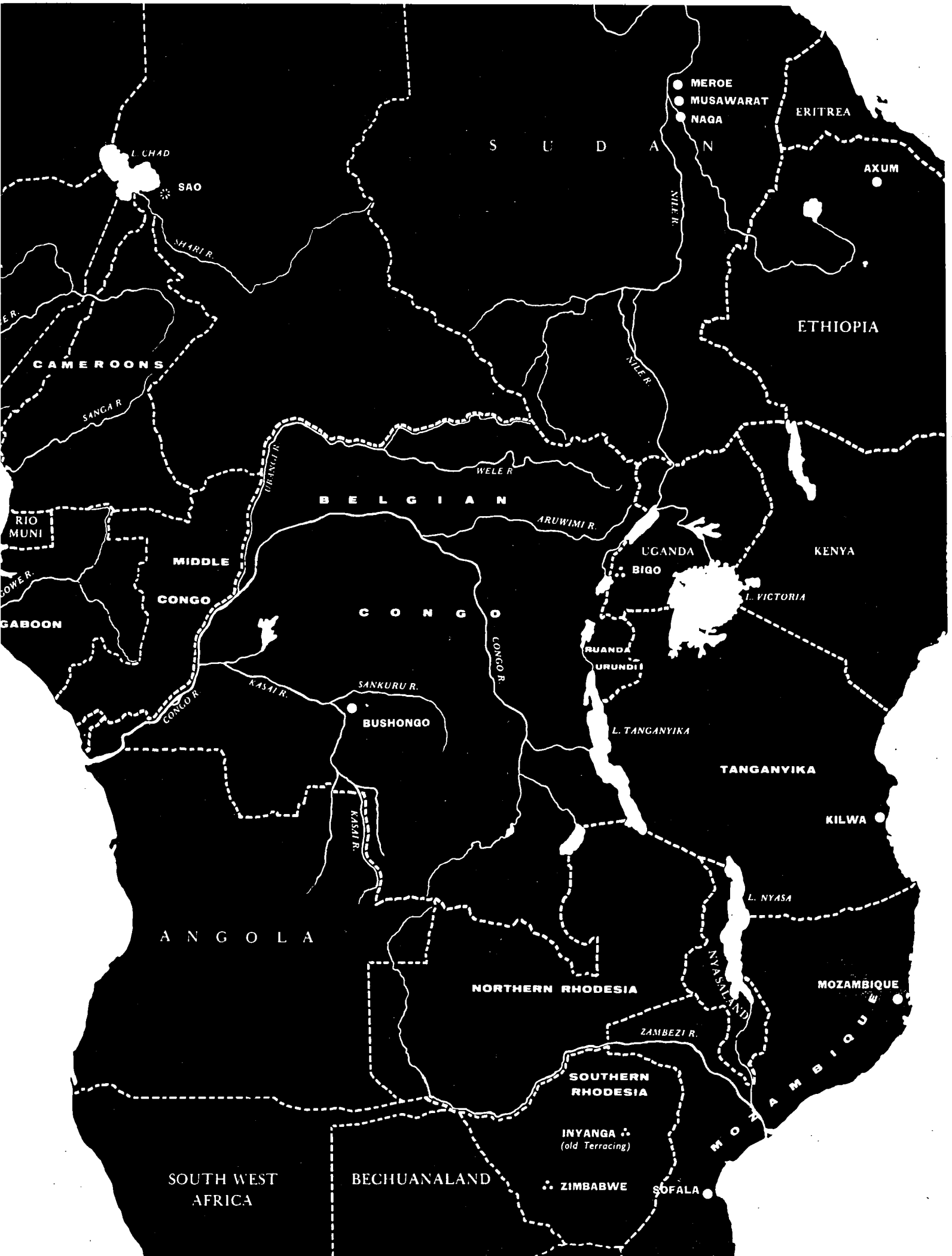
Colonial government—in British territories, notably those of Tanganyika and Southern Rhodesia—have passed careful ordinances for the safeguarding and maintenance

**AFRICA SOUTH OF THE SAHARA** is shown in almost its entirety on this adaptation of a map by Palacios, originally published in "The Sculpture of Africa", © Thames and Hudson Ltd., London. To it have been added the names of important archaeological and historical sites mentioned in this special issue of "The Unesco Courier". From these sites modern historians and archaeologists have unearthed a vast body of evidence which proves that remarkable African civilizations flourished long before the arrival of the Europeans on this continent, civilizations which were mostly unknown to other peoples and whose achievements are only now being recognized.

of ancient monuments. They have given money, little but precious, for the subsidizing of museums and research. They have begun to appoint salaried specialists in the fields of history and archaeology. In French territories the pioneering labours of M. Monod and his colleagues of the Institut Français de l'Afrique Noire have laid bold and solid foundations in this new soil of interest and enquiry. The Emperor of Ethiopia, in a land so often barred to archaeology in the past, has shown himself magnanimous and enlightened. The Government of the Republic of the Sudan, increasingly aware of its rich inheritance from ancient Kush, has embarked on the building of what promises to be one of the greatest museums of all Africa. Such examples could easily be multiplied.

And now African scholars, working in African universities, have themselves begun to take a hand. Nothing more clearly shows the progress that is being made, and may increasingly be made, than the way in which this history of the mediaeval Nigerian kingdom of Benin is now being sought and written. Three years ago the British and Nigerian Governments joined with the Carnegie Foundation to award a sum of £42,000 for team research into the story of mediaeval Benin; and the leader of this distinguished team is an African, Dr. Onwonwu Dike of Ibadan University College. (See page 13.)

*Homo sapiens* may first have seen the light in central or east Africa. For some thirty years now, Africa has yielded discovery after discovery revolutionizing earlier concepts of the remote origins of humanity; and the work of men like Dart, Breuil and Leakey has a much more than purely African significance. But the present enquiry, the subject of this special issue, has another direction. What now becomes possible is to sketch the outline of the comparatively recent pre-history and history of large regions of Africa: the record, that is, of





# A FACTUAL REAPPRAISAL OF THE AFRICAN PAST

the pre-mediaeval and mediaeval centuries that came immediately before European contact and penetration.

It is this that is really new—this assertion that Africans went through successive, distinctive, and knowable phases of growth and development in the fifteen or twenty centuries before the European records of Africa become frequent and various. Reassessment of the African past, in the sense that I have spoken of, is essentially the unravelling and writing of the history of the African Metal Age in the lands that lie to the south of the Sahara desert.

Let us try and summarize the core and heart of this great matter. Late Stone Age peoples on the lower reaches of the Nile, and in nearby regions that were much more fertile then, thrust their way into history in about 3,000 B.C., when the "first dynasty" of the Pharaohs took power in the delta of the Nile. This great forward step in northernmost Africa, interwoven with the comparable achievements of peoples in the Near East and the Mediterranean, acted and reacted as the centuries went by on lands to the South and West. Its influence spread southward up the Nile and there, reacting on the peoples that it found, stimulated and helped to create the civilization of Kush—of that renowned kingdom of Napate and Meroe whose kings and queens would rule in more or less continuous succession for a thousand years after about 800 B.C.

## With a mastery of metals came victory over Nature

**I**ts influence also spread westward along the southern shores of the Mediterranean: Phoenician Carthage, founded in the ninth century B.C., helped to stimulate and create the Libyco-Berber civilizations of northern Africa. And, thirdly, these ancient civilizations of the Near East and of Egypt produced in the southernmost tip of Arabia—that Arabia of the Queen of Sheba whom Solomon knew and loved—another region of high civilization; and from southern Arabia this civilization of antiquity despatched its settlers and traders and warriors across the Red Sea into the Horn of Africa, and its mariners and colonists down the long east coast of what is now Somaliland, Kenya, Tanganyika, and Mozambique.

These pioneers and their mastery of metal-working and of other material techniques did not move into a void. They moved into a land that was peopled then, if thinly, by several branches of the human family to which anthropologists have awarded the names of bushman, negrito, hottentot, negro, and hamite. Now the origins of these peoples of continental Africa are obscure and confused. They too, apparently, had moved southward across the continent, coming perhaps from outside it, in centuries beyond calculation.

Probably the bushmen and the negritos—the pygmies—were the first of all the surviving peoples of Africa to inhabit the land. Some of them survive today in a more or less Stone Age simplicity: there are groups of pygmies in the central forests of the Congo, and bushmen in the wastes of the Kalahari, who live only by hunting and fishing and collecting food.

Perhaps the Hottentots—the natives whom the first Dutch settlers would find at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652—were the next to arrive. At some time after about 5,000 B.C.—but nothing of this is clearly known—the peoples whom we know as negro and hamite began to emerge, multiply, and follow the earlier migrants in a generally southward direction. As they wandered across the continent these later peoples, often mingling with earlier peoples whom they found, worked out new ways of living. They invented tropical agriculture. They began to settle and raise new crops. They learned how to smelt natural copper and make primitive tools and weapons of this metal.

At a time that was shortly before or after the beginning of the Christian era these peoples of the southern continent began to mine and smelt iron, and to make more efficient tools and weapons; and with this they acquired a new and, as it would prove, revolutionary control over the material environment in which they lived. It is from about this time—from about 2,000 years ago—that the peoples of the continental heart of Africa begin to multiply and form their present major groupings.

It is from then, as it seems, that the largest of all of Africa's existing human groups begins to spread into and populate the empty or near-empty forests and savannahs. This group is called the Bantu; but the term has little or no racial significance, being a linguistic term for all these many peoples who speak a closely related language. Racially the Bantu are the product of intermingling over long periods of time between negro and hamite and bushman and hottentot. Physically, therefore, they vary greatly among themselves; but all their languages go back, more or less obviously, to a common root. We do not know the origins of this root.

Thus it is the last 2,000 years, more or less, that emerge as the formative period of most of the peoples of continental Africa. This is the period of their Iron Age. Some authorities prefer to call this their Metal or Palaeometallic Age, because, although knowledge of ferrous metallurgy was the decisive influence, African peoples also knew the working of several other minerals, including gold and copper and tin. In time, too, some of them worked extensively in brass and bronze; but they knew, as ancient Asia and Europe had known, a Bronze Age that made a long distinctive period of development before their Iron Age.



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Bilthoven, Netherlands



Now it is in studying this Metal Age—or, more narrowly, the fifteen or sixteen centuries before European contact along the coast—that present research is principally and dramatically engaged. Advancing along three different but related lines, history and archaeology and anthropology now begin to bring their findings together and to offer a coherent picture that was invisible only a handful of years ago.

Anthropology in its wide sense—comprehending the study of language and institutions—has embarked on a systematic recording of the oral history of a significant number of African peoples. Archaeology has at last turned its attention to some of the major site-regions of the continent. And history, working against the background of this growing knowledge has renewed its study of written sources, which, for the mediaeval period, are mainly in Arabic, Portuguese, English and Chinese.

New translations—edited with the new and fuller knowledge of the past twenty years—are now being projected or prepared of several classic works, such as the first century A.D. *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (in Britain) and the 16th century writings on the Western Sudan of Leo Africanus (in France). The Central African Archives (of the Federation of Central Africa) is collaborating with Arquivo Historico de Mozambique in the editing and publication of some 15,000 hitherto unpublished documents from the libraries of Goa, Lisbon, and the Vatican; and these, when they finally appear, should throw much new light on early European contacts. Joseph Needham, in his monumental study of the history of science in China, has meanwhile devoted part of his sixth volume—due for publication in the not distant future—to Chinese maritime technology, and, in so doing, has shown how great was the Chinese contribution to that Indian Ocean trade which had its western terminals on the East African coast.

**HIGH COLLARS** of copper or beadwork rings traditionally a major item of adornment among Africans are still widely favoured. Left, woman of the N'debele, a Bantu people living in the Transvaal. Right, 12-inch high Benin bronze from Nigeria (c. 17th century). It is an example of numerous "choker" bronze heads, so called on account of the high coral collars of Benin court dress.



© British Museum.

African archaeology has had important successes in the past few years. Mauny and Thomassey have gone far towards completing the excavation of the ancient city of Kumbi Saleh, probable site of the capital of mediaeval Ghana. Lebeuf and Masson-Detourbet have uncovered the remarkable bronze-using civilization of the Sao people of early mediaeval Chad. Vercoutter, in the Sudan, has completed a preliminary list of sites of the imposing civilisation of Kush. Other French specialists have continued the investigation of early Ethiopia.

In British Africa Mathew and Freeman-Grenville have listed ancient and mediaeval sites on the coast of Kenya and Tanganyika, while Kirkman has excavated the late mediaeval ruins of Gedi, near the Kenyan port of Malindi. Further to the north, in Italian Somaliland, Cerulli and Grottanelli have thrown important light on early settlements and migrations on the coast and coastal islands. Throughout this large region there is good hope of progress, if funds are forthcoming, not only of writing the history of the coastal cities and trading stations which flourished in pre-European times, but also of discovering much more about the nature of their suppliers and markets in the hinterland.

Coins and durable imports such as china offer hopeful means of dating these many stone ruins of the coast and interior. "I have never in my life," remarked Sir Mortimer Wheeler after a fortnight's visit to Tanganyika in 1955, "seen so much broken china as I have seen in the past fortnight along the coast here and the Kilwa Islands: literally, fragments of Chinese porcelain by the shovelful... In fact, I think it is fair to say that as far as the Middle Ages are concerned, from the tenth century onwards, the buried history of Tanganyika is written in Chinese porcelain."

To the southward there is fresh effort at uncovering the story of another great complex of stone ruins—forts and huts and vast hillside terrace systems—that stretch

over several thousands of square miles in Southern Rhodesia and neighbouring lands. Summers has lately completed an initial survey of the stone ruins of Inyanga on the Rhodesian-Mozambique border; and now, with Robinson, is working on the foundations of the great walls at Zimbabwe in the hope of finding out whether those tall ruins were built on the site of a previous and more humble culture, or whether the first settlers were also those who built so well in stone. A full list of all the sites that archaeologists have looked at in the past twenty years or so, and are looking at now, would fill many pages.

Even so, we are only at the beginning of this search for the history of pre-mediaeval and mediaeval Africa. Beyond the barriers of ignorance we may glimpse an historical landscape that is thick with cities or strong stone settlements and loud with the din of ports and ocean-going shipping, that glitters with old armies and the pomp of states and empires and is restless with the rise and fall of dynasties and powers. But at present we can do little more than glimpse at this.

What is now required can be stated bluntly in a few words: it is more money and a closer co-ordination of effort. As to money, resources even in favoured territories are almost always slender; and many potentially fruitful territories are still a void on the archaeological map. Next to nothing, for example, is known of the archaeology of Portuguese West and East Africa; yet both may have much to contribute, the first to a study of the origins of the stone-building civilizations of southern Africa, and the second to a study of the links between these and the trading cities of the Indian Ocean seaboard.

Yet this great task of unravelling the African past remains, and must remain, an international endeavour. Occasional conferences on African pre-history and history have proved, over the past few years, how much can be gained from the pooling of knowledge and the wide discussion of problems. They have stimulated public interest, and helped to create an atmosphere that is favourable to more intensive research. It is to be hoped that they are only the forerunners of many others of their kind. To this end, indeed, Unesco can powerfully contribute.



# GREAT ZIMBABWE

Ruins of an unknown  
Negro civilization

by Henri Bart

**N**INETY-ONE years ago a wandering hunter named Adam Renders returned southward from the unexplored lands of what would become Southern Rhodesia, beyond the river Limpopo, and made himself famous with a strange tale. Not far beyond the river, not as much as 200 miles beyond it, he had seen tall grey ruins in the bush. He could say little more than that, for he had never seen such walls and towers before; but the tale passed round, and grew the stranger as it passed, and those who heard it reckoned that Africa had once again sprung one of its surprises. A hidden civilization in the northern plains: who could have expected that?

A German geologist called Mauch was next to see this mystery in towering stone. Four years after Renders, he in his turn came back across the Limpopo and declared that he had seen a fortress on a hilltop that was surely a copy of King Solomon's temple on Mount Moriah; below it, in the valley, he had seen a great building in stone that was just as surely a copy of the palace in which the Queen of Sheba had dwelt at Jerusalem in the 10th century B.C.

The story spread across the world. Thirteen years after Mauch's return, an unknown writer called Rider Haggard made name and fortune with a book called *King Solomon's Mines*, a fine romantic tale of diamonds and Africa. And a few years later the land was opened for European occupation by an invading British column, and many more reports came back. Yet Renders and Mauch, it seemed, had not exaggerated: the ruins really were tall and spacious—and inexplicable. Could any African "native" have built them? The idea seemed absurd. Here an alien hand had been at work: another and much earlier conqueror from outside. England was only entering on that vanished conqueror's heritage.

## Gold rush in the 'Land of Ophir'

"**T**ODAY then", wrote one of the pioneers of 1891, the year when the British took possession of these lands to the north of the Limpopo, "The Englishman is in the land of Ophir—opening afresh the treasure house of antiquity... (and soon) we may expect to see the image of Queen Victoria stamped on the gold with which King Solomon overlaid his ivory throne, and wreathed the cedar pillars of his temple."

And then it was discovered that the ruins of Zimbabwe were not alone. Little by little, as pioneering columns pushed northward across the plains and spread away on either side, men stumbled on many other such ruins: none of them so large and splendid as Zimbabwe, but all of them bearing an undeniable stamp of dignity and civic strength.

Yet if this was the Land of Ophir, the source of all those talents of gold which the Queen of Sheba gave to Solomon, surely much of it must still remain? Many asked themselves this question; and many hastened northwards in the hope of treasure. They found unmistakable signs of ancient mining: hundreds, even thousands, of abandoned mine workings thirty or sixty feet deep or so, scattered across the land. They staked new claims; and they were not always disappointed.

Others took an easier road to wealth. They plundered the ruins. A prospector called Neal teamed up with a

couple of hopeful investors in Johannesburg to form an Ancient Ruins Company Limited, and managed to loot 500 ounces of worked gold from burials in the ruins of Rhodesia before high authority, realizing what precious knowledge was probably being lost for ever with the gold, ordered them to stop. That was in 1900. "But the damage done", wrote the late J.F. Schofield, "was immense, for everything except the gold was treated in a most reckless manner"—while the gold, or most of it, was melted down and sold.

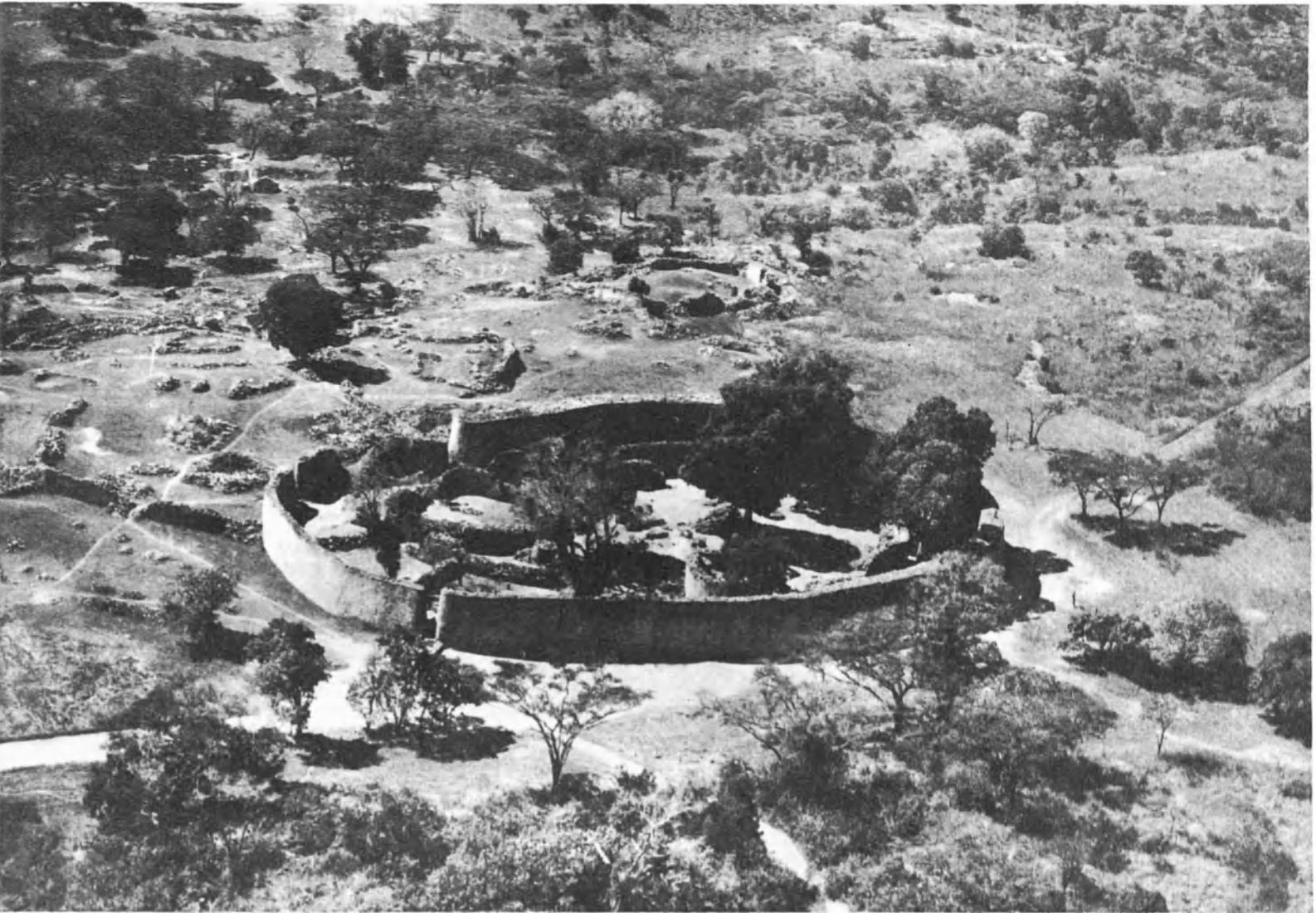
When it came to explaining the origin of these ruins and mine workings, the "legend of Ophir" for long led the field. Amateur archaeologists, eagerly investigating these ruins with their minds full of remote antiquity, declared they were Sabaeen and Phoenician. They belonged, that is, to a period going back some thousand years and more beyond the beginning of the Christian era. These towers and battlements, it was said, were manifestly the work of civilizing intruders from the north, from beyond the seas: they were not the work of native Africans. Nothing like them, after all, existed anywhere in southern Africa: nor was it in any case thinkable, it was added, that the savage ancestors of these savage natives whom Europeans were even then subduing with such toil and bloodshed could ever have raised such monuments to a civilized past.

But a few others were not of this opinion. On the contrary replied Selous, some of these Africans are still building in stone in much the same way: and some of them are still sinking mines. It was hard to deny authority to Selous, for none of the wandering hunters of those pioneering days knew the country half so well. The controversy raged.

Impressed by the bitterness of argument, the British Association entered the fray in 1905. It appointed a train-







ed archaeologist called David Randall-MacIver to make a report on these much disputed ruins. MacIver's findings added fuel to the flames. He dismissed as nonsense the claims of ancient or foreign origin: the ruins, he said, could be proved to be relatively modern—dating perhaps to the 14th or 15th century A.D.—and in his opinion they were undoubtedly the work of native Africans.

The "Ophir-ites" were not dismayed. They returned to the charge. And they returned with such good effect that a quarter of a century later, in 1929, the British Association appointed another trained archaeologist whose work, it was thought, must surely carry conviction.

Three years later Miss Gertrude Caton-Thompson published her great book, *The Zimbabwe Culture*, and confirmed the substance of everything that MacIver had said about Zimbabwe. The ruins, she found, were mediaeval in date and Bantu in origin. They were probably a little older than MacIver had thought; but not by much.

### Stone monuments to an Iron Age

**E**VEN in face of this—and Miss Caton-Thompson's book has since become the "Bible" of all serious archaeological investigation in southern Africa for the relatively modern period—a few wishful-thinking romantics still cling to the legend of Ophir. All authorities now accept the general conclusions which Miss Caton-Thompson reached. A radio-carbon dating from pieces of timber, taken from the base of the main encircling wall at Zimbabwe, suggests that some structure was already here in the 6th or 8th century A.D.: and the general time-scale of these ruins is now agreed to refer to a period ranging from about 500 A.D. to about 1750 A.D. Valuable information tending to the same conclusion has come from the painstaking work of Mr. Roger Summers, Keeper of the National Museums of Southern Rhodesia, and his colleagues.

What, then, should one think about this most remarkable complex of stone ruins in a land where people had never been known to have built in stone, nor possessed the civic coherence to need and justify such palaces and forts and chiefly dwelling places? The answer of the experts is that these many ruins of Rhodesia, with Great Zimbabwe most prominent among them, mark the early growth and steady flowering of an Iron Age—an age of metals—across some twelve centuries before Europeans entered on a land they thought entirely savage (see page 20). They are the solid and indisputable fragments of a truly African civilization which, if illiterate and technically limited, nonetheless offers once again proof of the skill and ingenuity of men who are thrown, as these Africans were thrown, almost entirely on their own resources.

To the south of Salisbury, capital of Southern Rhodesia, lie the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, former capital of a powerful Negro state. With its massive stone walls, terraced battlements and towers, Zimbabwe is only one—though the best preserved—of a score of ruins in Rhodesia which, together with even more numerous sites where gold, copper, iron and tin were mined, prove that an age of metals grew and flowered across some 12 centuries before Europeans entered a land they thought entirely savage. Vital evidence about the Negro civilization which built Zimbabwe was lost when gold, jewels and other objects were looted from the ruins towards the end of the 19th century. Mapungubwe, another site to the south in the Transvaal escaped this fate and important finds of gold and other objects made here have thrown light on the metal culture that gave birth to this city. At Zimbabwe two buildings stand out. One, the "Acropolis" (top of opposite page), was a hilltop stronghold built into a natural mass of rocks. The other, "the elliptical building" (above), rests on the plain below, its massive girdling walls 30 feet high and 20 feet thick. Among the remains which have been found within the ramparts is a conical tower (left), at the foot of which important findings have recently been made.

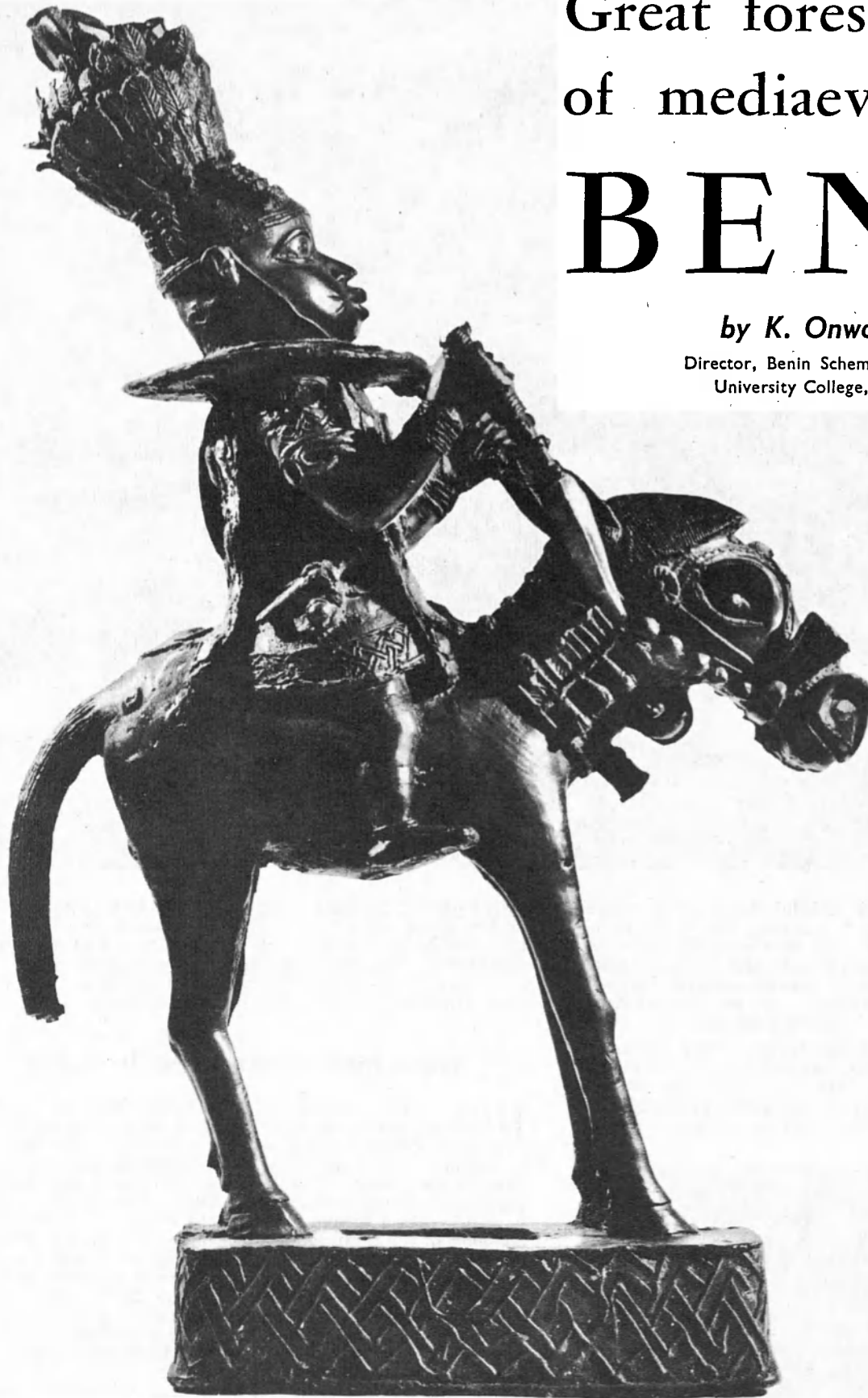
Photos Office of the High Commissioner for the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland

# Great forest kingdom of mediaeval Nigeria

# BENIN

by *K. Onwonwu Dike*

Director, Benin Scheme, Dept. of History  
University College, Ibadan, Nigeria



**MOUNTED WARRIOR**  
and his steed was made by a craftsman of the Benin Kingdom in Nigeria where remarkable techniques of bronze casting were developed many centuries ago. More than a dozen of these figures of warriors and chiefs mounted on horses or mules are known and may be attributed to the 17th or early 18th century.

Photo by Eliot Elisfon, from "The Sculpture of Africa", © Thames and Hudson, Ltd., London, 1958

**N**owadays more and more African scholars working in African colleges are helping to lift the veil which has so long obscured the past history and culture of their continent. One example is to be found in the Department of History at University College, Ibadan, in Nigeria where, since 1956, a team of researchers has been piecing together the story of the great mediaeval Nigerian kingdom of Benin under the leadership of a distinguished African, Dr. Onwonwu Dike, Professor of History at University College. In the absence

of written archives, the Benin researchers are experimenting in a new historical technique: the abundant use of unwritten sources such as archaeological evidence, oral traditions, linguistic findings, ethnographic data and material artefacts. It is hoped through intensive study of Benin's history and culture to evolve techniques and general principles which should guide scholars working on the history of non-literate African peoples. Here, Dr. Dike tells the story of Benin, an ancient Nigerian kingdom, its institutions and culture, and the remarkable flowering of art to which it gave expression.



**T**HE Kingdom of Benin is undoubtedly one of the most ancient Nigerian Kingdoms and before the advent of Europeans perhaps the most powerful state in Southern Nigeria. It remains the best example of an African forest kingdom which originated and developed away from all Arab and European influence.

From Nigerian standards Benin is very rich in oral tradition and material artefacts. There are, for example, the works of art in bronze, ivory, wood, iron, pottery and other materials for which Benin is justly famed throughout the world; works which reveal a superb degree of artistry and technical skills and which were fully developed before the coming of Europeans. This art was produced at the command of the Obas (Kings of Benin) to commemorate outstanding events and persons of their reigns and the results are, consequently, invaluable historical records provided they can be properly interpreted.

Finally Benin is one of the few West African kingdoms that maintained contact with the trading Europeans from the 15th century. The Portuguese arrived in 1485 and were followed by the Dutch, the French and the English. Spaniards, Danes and Brandenburgers occasionally joined in the scramble for Benin pepper, ivory, slaves and palm oil. But the contact between Benin and Europe from 1485 to 1897 was largely commercial; and contact of this kind produced business letters, ships logs, personal letters, diaries and an occasional official report. Since the 15th century persistent but intermittent efforts were made by Roman Catholic Missions to establish outposts in Benin and because of that contact missionary archives may yield useful material on Benin history.

The work of the Benin scheme is in the early stages and much of the history of the Kingdom still lies buried in legend and oral tradition, illustrated in brass and ivory, represented in existing customs and ceremonial, or alluded to in the records of traders and missionaries. When these sources are fully unearthed new light will be thrown on the history of Benin. At this stage only a very brief account of this mediaeval West African kingdom can be attempted here.

The ancient Kingdom of Benin, which maintained its independence until 1897 (when it was overthrown by a British punitive expedition) was situated in the tropical rain forest of West Africa, bounded on the east by the River Niger and the vast swamplands of the Niger delta, on the south by the sea, to the west by the Yoruba kingdoms of Oyo and Ijebu, and to the north by the savannah lands where cavalry came into its own. When and how the Kingdom was founded can only be conjectured, for the Binis were a non-literate people, and the first European who visited them in 1486 found the Kingdom at the height of its power with traditions reaching far into the past.

### Reigning king 35th of his line

**T**HOSE traditions which the Binis still remember do not refer to any general migration, but they agree that a first dynasty of kings came to them from Ife (pronounced "eefay") the spiritual capital of the Yoruba peoples. Most of the stories concerning the twelve kings of this first dynasty have a mythical and magical character which throws little light on the history of Benin. Their rule is said to have been ended by a revolt that established a short-lived republican form a government.

Before long a new ruler from Ife established himself in Benin either by force or, as tradition maintains, by invitation. He founded the dynasty of kings (or *Obas*, as they are known in Benin) which has ruled until the present day, the reigning Oba being the 35th of his line. The names of all these rulers is still recited, with minor variations, and the arrival in 1386 of the first European, the Portuguese Joao Afonso d'Aveiro, is usually placed in the reign of the 15th Oba, Ozolua. So that the most probable date for the founding of the new dynasty would seem to be sometime in the 12th century.

The greatest Obas united in their persons the spiritual, political and military leadership of their people. They enjoyed absolute religious and political authority over their subjects, to whom their person was sacred and endowed with magical powers. An elaborate ritual which surrounded every act of the Oba, even his eating and sleeping, kept him withdrawn in his palace save on great ceremonial occasions, and thereby heightened the awe of his people. As high priest of the nation, on his per-

formance of numerous ceremonies in honour of the gods, the royal ancestors and his own divine attributes hung the fate of the harvest and the well-being of the nation. Certain groups of priests participated in these ceremonies, many of which involved human sacrifice, but there was no priestly caste able to wield divine sanctions against an Oba.

To his mystical powers the Oba joined a political absolutism limited only by his ability to impose his will through force and religious sanctions. Justice, legislation and the conduct of all political business within and without the Kingdom lay in his hands. In practice, even the ablest or most ruthless of rulers was compelled to seek advice from important men in the kingdom and palace and eventually a royal council emerged composed of three groups of title holders.

### A royal agent in every village

**O**NE group traced its origin to the first dynasty and its seven titles were hereditary. The other two—"town chiefs" and "palace chiefs"—owed their origin to the reigning dynasty, were hardly ever hereditary, but were bestowed by the Oba on whom he pleased and added to or altered whenever political expediency dictated. Besides advising the Oba, the members of these title groups individually or in groups performed all ritual and administrative duties.

The oldest order, the *Uzama*, installed the Oba and its members were responsible for the conduct of wars, the watch on a city gateway and the welfare of the heir to the throne. Among the "town chiefs" were the second-in-command of the army and the priest of the people. The principal duties of the "palace chiefs" were to supervise the royal wardrobe and act as personal servants to the Oba. All title groups included warrior chiefs among their members.

To make his power effective in the numerous small towns and villages scattered in the dense forest, the Oba appointed a title holder in Benin to be responsible for a town, a group of villages, a single village or an even smaller unit. It was the duty of this man to act as intermediary between the Oba and his subjects in the collection and delivery to the palace of the tribute of foodstuffs for which the village or group was assessed. He also acted as spokesman for his group whenever they wished to communicate directly with the Oba.

The tribute of foodstuffs was not the sole economic support of the elaborate court in Benin: large numbers of slaves laboured for the Oba in Benin and in villages and farm settlements throughout the Kingdom. He gathered, too, a large revenue from his monopoly of the most important articles of external trade, notably slaves, ivory and palm kernels.

Religion as well as the law guarded these privileges for him. The advent of European traders made the monopolies still more profitable, and usually they ensured that the Oba was the richest man in his kingdom. Even so an enterprising man could amass great wealth, and there are stories of such men who lost their riches and their lives at the hands of a jealous monarch.

Benin City, the capital of the Kingdom, lay within a high earthen wall and deep ditch roughly rectangular in shape and enclosing an area some three miles across. Broad, straight avenues crossed the city from gate to gate at right angles, lined neatly by houses built of the local red earth in a distinctive style. An outer and inner rectangular wall roofed with a thatch of leaves provided living quarters and left in the middle of the house an open sunken courtyard from which the torrential rain could be drained, and around which the overhang of the roof afforded the use of an open verandah.

Altars for the worship of one or more of an elaborate pantheon of gods were incorporated in the house, the choice of deity depending upon the predilection or duty of the owner. Most important of the deities were a high god, the god of the sea, the god of iron, the god of medicine, the god of death, the god of fertility and the god of divination. But the most personal aspect of Bini religion was represented in each house by an altar for the worship of the spirits of the owner's ancestors, who were daily propitiated, consulted and honoured.

The more important the man, the more elaborate would be his house, so that the greater title-holders might own

# An advanced civilization deep in the tropical forest

many buildings grouped together within a wall, but still adhering to the general pattern. The palace of the Oba which stood entirely apart from the rest of the city, was the largest and most complex of all. In general plan it consisted of a number of very large courtyards surrounded by high walls and verandahs. Each courtyard was entered by a gateway surmounted by a high pitched roof covered with wooden shingles and crowned with a large brass snake.

In the apartments around the courtyards lived the palace officials, servants and the Oba's guard. Stables for the royal horses were ranged around another courtyard, while in the inmost parts of the palace and inaccessible to most visitors, were the quarters of the Oba and his harem. Shrines and altars for the worship of the deities and the royal ancestors were prominent everywhere, and most were magnificently decorated with carved ivory tusks and brass heads and figures of superb workmanship. Brasswork illustrating the deeds of heroes and kings also adorned many wooden roof supports and carved beams within the palace.

## Tribute sustained a costly state

**B**RASSWORK, ivory carving, iron work, wood carving leather work, weaving, drum making, etc.—all necessary to the ceremonial of the palace—was the specialized work of distinct and highly-organized guilds, each of which occupied a particular street in the city. Each had its own hierarchy of titles, a system of apprenticeship and its own communal shrine. Some, especially the brassworkers and ivory carvers, worked almost exclusively for the Oba and a few important title-holders. Thus a high proportion of the population of Benin City was engaged in the service of the palace.

In order to sustain the economy of this highly centralized and elaborate government, the Obas had to exact heavy tribute from their subjects and ensure a steady inflow of slaves. The latter need and the struggle to extend the frontiers kept the Kingdom constantly at war with its neighbours. As late as the sixteenth century the Oba himself accompanied his warriors and directed campaigns, and in this way carried Benin to the height of its power. Later Obas were confined more strictly to the palace and the conduct of war passed into the hands of title-holders.

Benin warriors depicted by the brassworkers are

equipped with sword, spear and shield. At the beginning of the sixteenth century the lure of firearms brought a hard-pressed Oba to send ambassadors to Portugal, but since the Papacy had forbidden the export of arms to infidels, he had first to receive Christian missionaries. For brief periods different Catholic missions seemed to make headway in converting the princes and sons of noblemen, they may even have begun to build a church, then either the Oba ceased to need Portuguese arms, or else he felt his supernatural power undermined, for the priests were compelled to leave.

It is noteworthy that the great period of Benin expansion coincided with the introduction of firearms by the Portuguese in the reigns of Ozolua, Esigie and Orhogba. Ozolua conquered large areas in the Agbor, Kukuruku, Ora and Ekiti districts. The Benin army occupied and spread Benin influence in places as far apart as Idah, Lagos, Akotogbo, Ikale and Agenebode. Portuguese missionaries reported that they accompanied the Oba to the Idah war in 1515-1516. Groups of Benin migrants fleeing from oppression at home settled in various parts of Southern Nigeria. Thus the Kingdom of Warri was founded by Prince Gnuwa from Benin, in the reign of Oba Olua and parts of the Niger Delta and the Urhobo country were according to Benin tradition, settled by Benin emigrants.

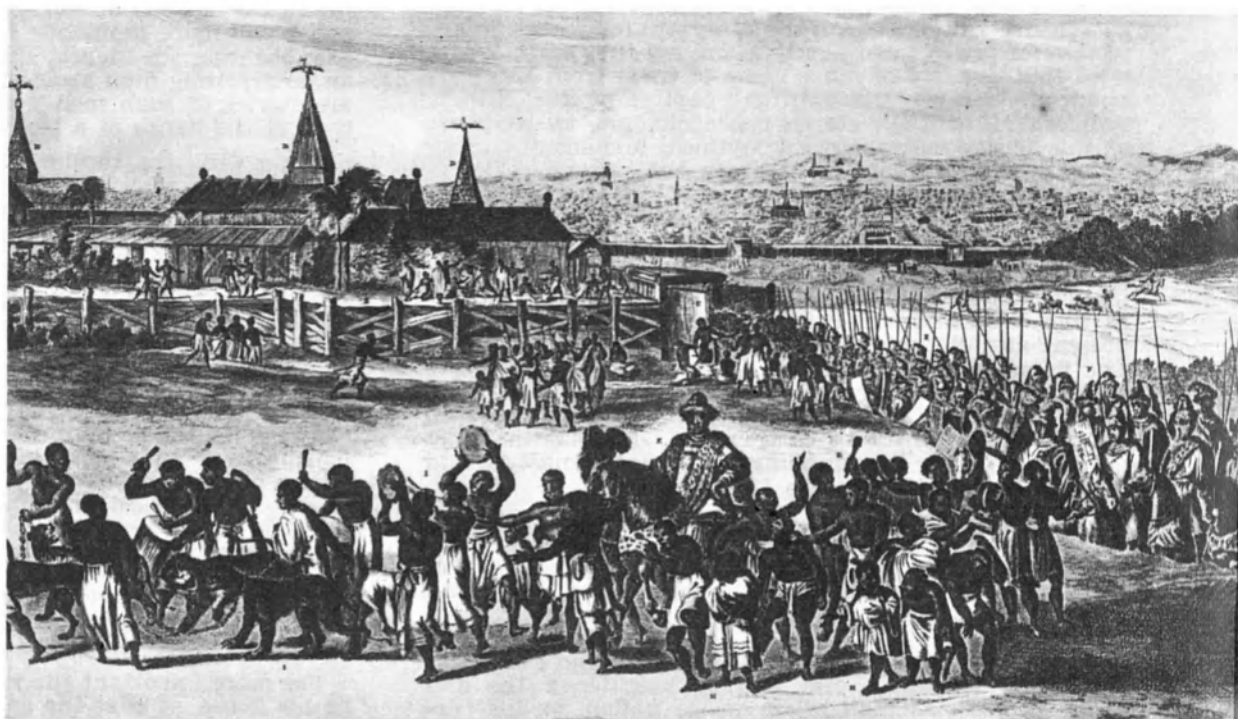
Within a century Portuguese traders were joined by French, English and Dutch who bought thousands of slaves for the American plantations as well as ivory and pepper. It became necessary for the Obas of Benin to increase the supply of slaves in order to feed this market, and the fact they were less successful in doing so than many other West African states may indicate that the power of Benin declined from the end of the sixteenth century. Certainly artistic skill, as manifested in brass-casting, deteriorated and the city itself was more than once devastated by civil war.

Although the power of Benin evidently declined in the last century of independence, the Kingdom did preserve its ancient institutions and culture essentially unchanged up to the time of its fall. In themselves these institutions and culture are well worthy of study, for they present us with a detailed picture of a tropical-forest civilization which, despite the difficulties of environment, evolved a complex political and social structure based on a divine kingship whose sway extended over a great area. Intrinsically too the culture merits our attention, for in their best work the craftsmen of Benin gave inspired expression to the values which underlay their civilization.

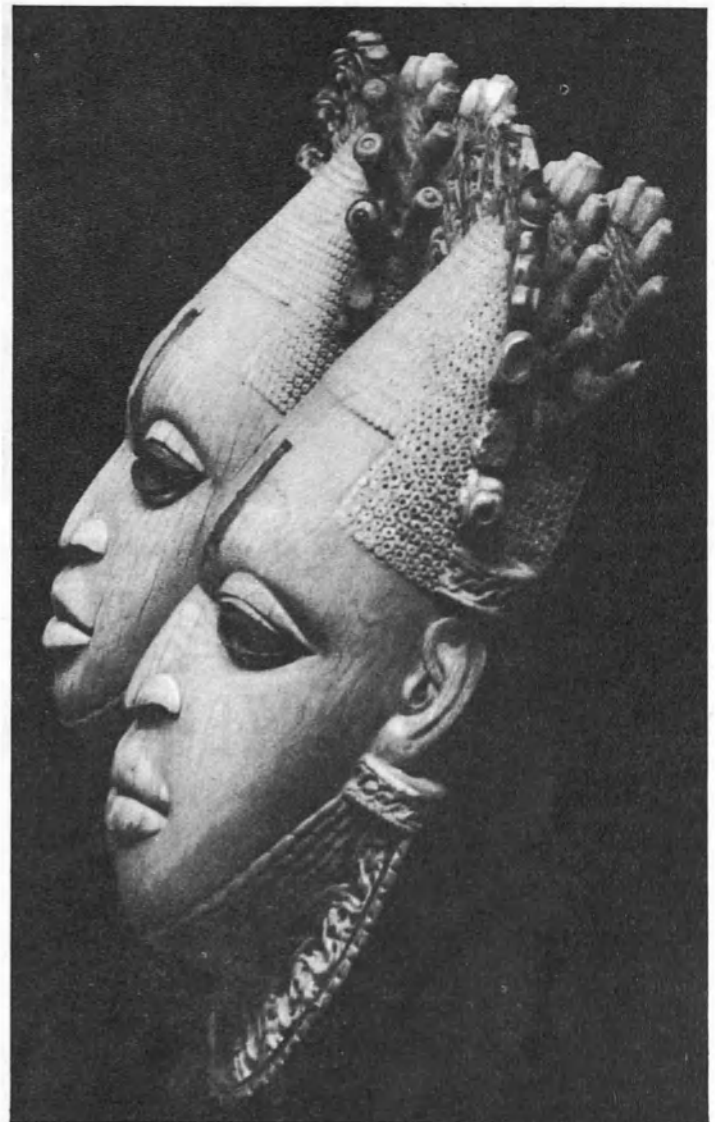
### THE FIRST EUROPEAN

to visit the Benin Kingdom of West Africa in 1482 found this realm at the height of its power with traditions reaching far back into the past. Benin City, capital of the Kingdom, enclosed behind its high earthen wall an area some three miles across on which straight avenues crossed from gate to gate, lined by houses built of the local red earth. Right, a European impression of Benin City depicted in an engraving published in Dapper's "Description of Africa" in Amsterdam in 1686. It shows the "Oba" or King of Benin leaving the city in ceremonial procession. (The present Oba is the 35th of this same dynasty). On the left are buildings of the royal palace.

© Musée de l'Homme, Paris







Photos © William Fagg

**IVORY MASKS** (above right) are probably the most valuable works of West African Benin art in existence. The nearer of the two was sold last year for £ 20,000 to the Museum of Primitive Art, New York, the other being in the British Museum, where this photo was taken. Nine inches in height, the masks were probably made in the 16th century to be worn at the king's waist in the annual ceremony of banishing evil spirits. Above left, three carved posts before the throne of the Ogoga of Ikere in eastern Yorubaland (neighbour to Benin). They were carved about 40 years ago by Olowe of Ise, one of the great Yoruba masters of modern times.

## Ife & Benin

# TWO PINNACLES OF AFRICAN ART

by *William Fagg*

Deputy Keeper, Dept. of Ethnography, British Museum

**T**HE extraordinary growth of museums—and still more, in Malraux's phrase, of "museums without walls" or reproductions of art in book form—has put at our disposal not only the fine arts of the high civilizations of Europe and Asia, but also the far more varied arts of the tribal cultures all over the world.

These have been discovered and appreciated by travellers and ethnologists during the past three centuries, and especially in the last seventy years, but it is chiefly thanks to the modern movement in art that we are now able to think of them on the same plane as the high arts of Eurasia. The term "primitive art" (though still often used for want of a better) no longer refers to the bottom rungs of a ladder at whose top stand Praxiteles and Donatello.

But the chief centres for this new appreciation of the

tribal arts (as I prefer to call them) were in France and Germany, and later in Belgium, and thus, by historical accident, it was works from the colonies of these powers which chiefly caught the eye of the modern artists, and also occupied most of the plates in the picture books which appeared in ever-increasing numbers from 1915 onwards. The arts of the western Sudan, the Ivory Coast, the Cameroons and the Congo received full recognition, but those of the most prolific and populous of all the African territories—Nigeria—remained, with one notable exception, hidden under a veil of ignorance, simply because they were not well enough represented at the centres where modern art was in ferment.

The exception was the art of Benin, which had burst upon the civilized world with such disconcerting force after the discoveries of the 1897 British Expedition that

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



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**HEADS FROM A HOLY CITY.** These terracotta heads fashioned between seven and eight centuries ago, were discovered recently by British archaeologists on the site of Ife, the holy city of the Yoruba people in Nigeria. Used to decorate sacrificial altars, they illustrate the Yoruba taste for naturalistic representation with a scrupulous respect for anatomical proportions. Loaned by the Oni (king and religious leader) of Ife they were photographed here during a special exhibition at the Musée de l'Homme, Paris.

## IFE & BENIN

(Continued)

# BRONZE-CASTING WORTHY OF CELLINI

it could not be ignored. Yet although it included some of the very finest works of African art, the greater part of its enormous output was unworthy of much of the praise which was lavished upon it, and was moreover unrepresentative, as we shall see, of the essential nature of African art in general. Nevertheless, the realization, with general amazement, that Africans could perform such complicated feats of bronze-casting (worthy, as one authority put it, of Cellini) did much to prepare the way for the acceptance of tribal art in the art world of Europe a few years later.

Research has been proceeding apace on the antiquities of Nigeria, especially since the Second World War. Only a part of these recent researches, by many fieldworkers, is as yet published, but enough is known for us to present a summary picture of Nigerian art which is remarkable for its chronological depth and suggests that Nigeria was the scene of some of the most striking developments in all African art history.

Nigeria is known to have been inhabited in Lower Palaeolithic times, perhaps a quarter of a million years ago, but the first known appearance of art there—and the earliest art in all Negro Africa to which we can assign a date—was in the first millennium B.C. This was the extraordinary terra-cotta sculpture of the Nok Culture (discovered in the tin mines near Jos on the plateau of Central Africa in 1943 by Bernard Fagg, now Director of Antiquities in Nigeria), which was recently shown by the Carbon-14 test—that happy by-product of the atomic bomb—to have flourished during the period 900 B.C. to A.D. 200.

Sculptures in this style have now been identified over a very large area of central Nigeria, at least 300 miles wide, and we have no reason to think that the limits of its distribution have yet been reached. Though there is a certain superficial similarity to some Etruscan work, any historical connexion between the two is in the last degree improbable; and a study of the hundreds of fragmentary heads and figures in the Jos Museum reveals an astonishing degree of artistic invention, especially in the imaginative treatment of the human head in terms of cones, cylinders, spheres and many other conceptual forms, which does not suggest that this art can be attached to any other known tradition. In particular, no connexion has been found with ancient Egyptian art, and it is not inconceivable that its antecedents go even farther back than the Pre-dynastic Period, when tribal art was expiring in Egypt.

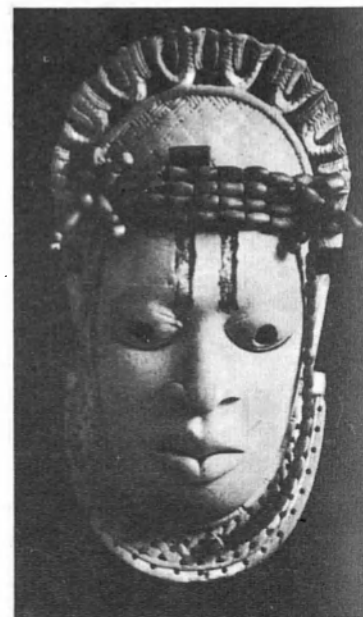
It seems that the Nok Culture may not have died without issue, but may rather have formed a kind of artistic substratum from which later sculptural traditions in the Nigerian area drew some of their sustenance. The

Sao Culture, which was excavated by J.P. Lebeuf in French territory to the east and south of Lake Chad and which seems to have flourished during the Middle Ages of Europe, does not appear to owe anything to Nok, although excavations projected by the Department of Antiquities in Nigerian Bornu might possibly establish a link.

There is, however, a strong possibility that the world-famous art of Ife derived in part from Nok. The Yoruba tribes, who made Ife their holy city and to whom we almost certainly owe the marvellous bronzes and terra-cottas which are found there, seem to be latecomers to the Nigerian scene, most of them probably having arrived, no doubt from an easterly direction, during the first millenium after Christ.

It may be that the aboriginal people with whom the Yoruba warriors intermarried after conquering them had inherited from the Nok people the skill of making large pottery figures for their shrines; the more sophisticated and materialistic Yoruba hierarchy of Ife may then have developed a taste for naturalistic representation. Such at least is the impression gained from a close study of the fragments from Nok and Ife. These alone among the past or present cultures of Negro Africa have attempted life-size statues in terra-cotta; and although they treated the human head in very different ways, the bodies and their copious ornaments are very much alike. But such speculations can hardly be confirmed in the present state of our knowledge.

Ife art is dated to about the twelfth to fourteenth centuries chiefly on the basis of the tradition accepted at Benin that the Oni of Ife sent a master bronze-founder to his fellow ruler, the Oba Oguola of Benin, perhaps about A.D. 1350-1400, to teach his people the craft. This tradition squares plausibly enough with a comparison of the styles; the earliest extant heads from Benin seem hardly less naturalistic than those of Ife, although they show a diminishing interest in problems of representing bony structure and fleshy contours, besides some technical differences.



© Musée de l'Homme, Paris

**PENDANT MASK** from Benin, Nigeria. Head wears a band of coral beads and is crowned by a carved "halo" of stylized catfish.



With Benin art we leave prehistory behind and reach the realm of proto-history and later, when the Portuguese arrive there in 1486, of history itself (although the tribal history still has a large content of legend).

A series of great warrior kings had established at Benin by the late fifteenth century an absolutist regime which subsisted, with minor fluctuations, until 1897, and, in its forms, to the present time. At that time, the apogee of Benin power, there took place, I surmise, a subtle but vital deviation from the classical or "pure" form of divine kingship in which king and people are the interdependent parts of an indissoluble unity of tribal life force.

At Benin, as in early Dynastic Egypt, I think that this balance was upset and the king became an end in himself, even though the outward forms of the divine kingship were in both cases, and at Benin still are, maintained; the people continued to depend on the king for their wellbeing, but the king's will was no longer subordinate to that end. And this was to have profound effects on Bini art during the next four centuries.

Benin art as it is generally known is not really tribal art at all; it is the art of the royal court, an alien art transplanted from the more sophisticated urban culture of Ife. Dynamism is absent, or virtually so, from this style, as it was also from the art of Ife—that strange florescence of idealized naturalism, indigenous or imported. Rather it inherited from Ife art its essentially static quality, and for perhaps one or two centuries the court artists (whether Yoruba or Bini) kept alive this humanistic mode of art, producing many works technically and artistically worthy of Ife, and a few, such as the priceless ivory masks, which are the truly distinctive contribution of Benin to the world's masterpieces.

But as the Benin kingdom begins, about the late sixteenth century, to decline from its apogee, we see a corresponding change in the court style: uniformity supplants the individualized variety of the Ife style; the bronzes grow heavier and more massive and a kind of defensive stolidity seems to express a need to make up with outward pomp for the loss of real power.

In this middle period, with inexhaustible supplies of European bronze, the Oba's bronze-founders produced, within perhaps 150 years, not only a great many bronze heads and figures in the round, but the great series of rectangular plaques, numbering many hundreds, which seem to have commemorated noteworthy events and personages. These works are consistently impressive, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Assyrian sculpture, and similarly lacking in any really free exercise of the artist's imagination. In short, this period, on which the fame of Benin chiefly rests, is one of high competence rather than of brilliance.

Throughout the middle period, the aesthetic canons of Ife seem still to have exerted enough influence in the bronze-workers' guild to maintain strict standards of pleasing proportion; but suddenly, perhaps towards the middle eighteenth century, these standards seem to collapse, giving way to increasing flamboyance and exaggeration, and above all to an undisciplined variability of design, technique and quality. In this, the late period, which lasted to the end of the nineteenth century and the birth of the tourist trade, there are rare works which show the hand of a master, but the great majority are ugly and badly executed, by mediocre or inferior artists with no safely classical uniformity to fall back upon.

From all that we know of Benin political history in this period, it appears that the court style in its decadence faithfully represented the increasing deterioration of the state. We find examples of this dating from the time of Oba Osemwenede (1816-1848), whose reign coincided with the contraction of the slave trade from an international to a much less lucrative local commerce. (Contrary to a widespread belief, the arts of Africa seem to have suffered more from the abolition of the trade than from its earlier excesses.)

At about the same time the beautiful wooden ram and

antelope heads in the tribal style, which Edo chiefs place on the altars of their ancestors, began to be supplanted in Benin City itself, with the Oba's permission, by wooden imitations of the bronze heads used in the royal cult; and thus after some four centuries the alien tradition which began at Ife at last penetrated and leavened—not to its advantage—the tribal style in the capital and its environs, though fine examples of the old style may still be seen in many outlying areas of the kingdom.

Yet the immense artistic output of the Bini tribe is only a small part of that of Nigeria, and the least representative part because of the dual character already described. Far more numerous and more varied are the works in bronze, iron, ivory and above all wood of the five millions of the Yoruba tribe, the most prolific in art in all Africa. Yoruba wood sculpture is among the more naturalistic styles of African art, but it is impossible to say whether its naturalism is derived from the style of Ife or whether that style was a specialization which developed there within an already existing Yoruba tradition.

Of the hundreds of thousands of carvings still extant in Yorubaland, all but a few are immediately recognizable as Yoruba work by the use of certain conventions, as in the form of the mouth; yet the variety of sculptural forms employed by the artists is immense and it is possible by careful fieldwork to distinguish the styles and substyles of different areas, towns, families and individual carvers in the same way and by much the same methods as is done by the art historians of Europe.

The richness of Yoruba art must be closely connected with the great complexity of Yoruba religion, which is perhaps the most "advanced" to be found in Africa and is rather like the Hindu and Ancient Greek religions in the way in which ancient and impersonal nature deities have been humanized and have even come to be regarded as deified kings or heroes.

Only in recent years have we become aware that there flourished in the lower Niger Valley a group of bronze-founding industries whose works are quite independent of the Benin court style and show a far greater artistic imagination. Perhaps the finest example is the figure of a huntsman, collected at Benin in 1897 and now in the British Museum. Many of the pieces seem related to the work of the Ijebu Yoruba to the west of Benin, but others seem to lead us east to places on the Niger itself such as Idah. Here lies scope for great advances in the study of Nigerian art history.

In the Delta itself are the Ijo, who are thought on linguistic and other grounds to be one of the earliest of Nigerian populations; their wood sculpture, concerned mostly with water spirits and snakes, is a pre-eminent example of something very like Cubism in tribal art. The Ibo, who form most of the population of Eastern Nigeria, are probably almost as numerous as the Yoruba, but rather less prolific in art.

Of all the African territories Nigeria is the richest not only in the extant products of traditional art but also in its practice, although the number of carvers in the tribal styles continues to diminish, and their work too seldom equals that of their fathers. Fortunately, the devoted work during the past 20 years of a few British servants of Nigeria, and the increasing appreciation of Nigerians in authority, have given the country the best-equipped museums service and the finest museum collections in Africa between the Sahara and the Zambezi. Research schemes under the direction of scholarly Nigerians, with valuable financial help from abroad, are making important contributions to our knowledge of Bini and Yoruba history, including art history.

There is urgent need to encourage all such efforts, for the field still to be covered before it is too late remains immense. Any people in the world can—as Nigeria also does—produce contemporary artists working in the international styles; only Nigeria can make the unique contribution to the sum of beauty in the world which derives from her millennia of tribal art.



© Musée de l'Homme, Paris

**DANCE HEADDRESS** of the Eko of Southern Nigeria. Masks like this are used at festivals and funerals. From the National Museum, Stockholm.



# TREASURES IN BRONZE



Before the coming of the European to Africa, a great civilization flourished in Nigeria which produced a remarkable bronze art. The Kingdoms of Benin and Yorubaland and the city of Ife are rightly famous for the many masterpieces in bronze which have come down to us, and some of which are shown here. Left, casting found at Benin of a huntsman returning from the chase with his dog and carrying a dead waterbuck. Above, two leopards, the symbol of kingly power, are among the most technically perfect of Benin castings. Right, Yoruba memorial figure. This casting, found in 1938, with seventeen brass heads, probably represents an early Oni (divine king) of the city-state of Ife. Regalia, with exception of the crown, are like those used by modern Onis at their coronation. Photos : Eliot Elisofon © Thames and Hudson, Ltd., London 1958.





# THE MARCH OF IRON ACROSS A CONTINENT

by *R.R. Inskip*

Keeper of Prehistory, The Rhodes Livingstone Museum  
Livingstone (Northern Rhodesia)

Everywhere in the ancient world the development of iron metallurgy was a revolutionary advance that permitted men to build new and more complex societies. Africa was no exception to this rule. It saw the rise of great African kingdoms equipped with a new mastery over the soil and the forest and over their non-iron-using neighbours. This iron-work was the product of home industries practised for generations and which originally owed nothing to the white man. It is now known that great iron civilizations developed as early as the beginnings of the Christian era in at least two widely separated regions of the continent: one in West Africa (the Sudan, Dahomey, Ghana etc.); another in eastern and south-central Africa. A few years ago it was hardly suspected that iron technology in south-central Africa dated back so far, but since 1953 evidence has been piling up with the discovery of early Christian period iron centres near Lake Tanganyika and elsewhere. Photo below shows an ancient smelting furnace recently discovered in southern Africa, and above, an early type of iron arrow head showing marks of binding to hold poison on the tang. Photos opposite show metal ornaments worn by modern Bantu women of this region today.

Photos Rhodes Livingstone Museum.



**I**F you were to tour Africa to-day, almost anywhere from the Cape to Nairobi you would find abundant evidence of the iron and steel industries of the Continent; railways, bridges, steel-reinforced buildings, and even steel barges sailing the peaceful Zambezi. These are all reflections of the metal age as introduced to Africa by European colonists. But if you wandered off the beaten track almost anywhere along the same routes, you would find more or less primitive Africans also using iron; iron spears and knives, iron arrow-heads, iron axes and hoes, and even iron musical instruments.

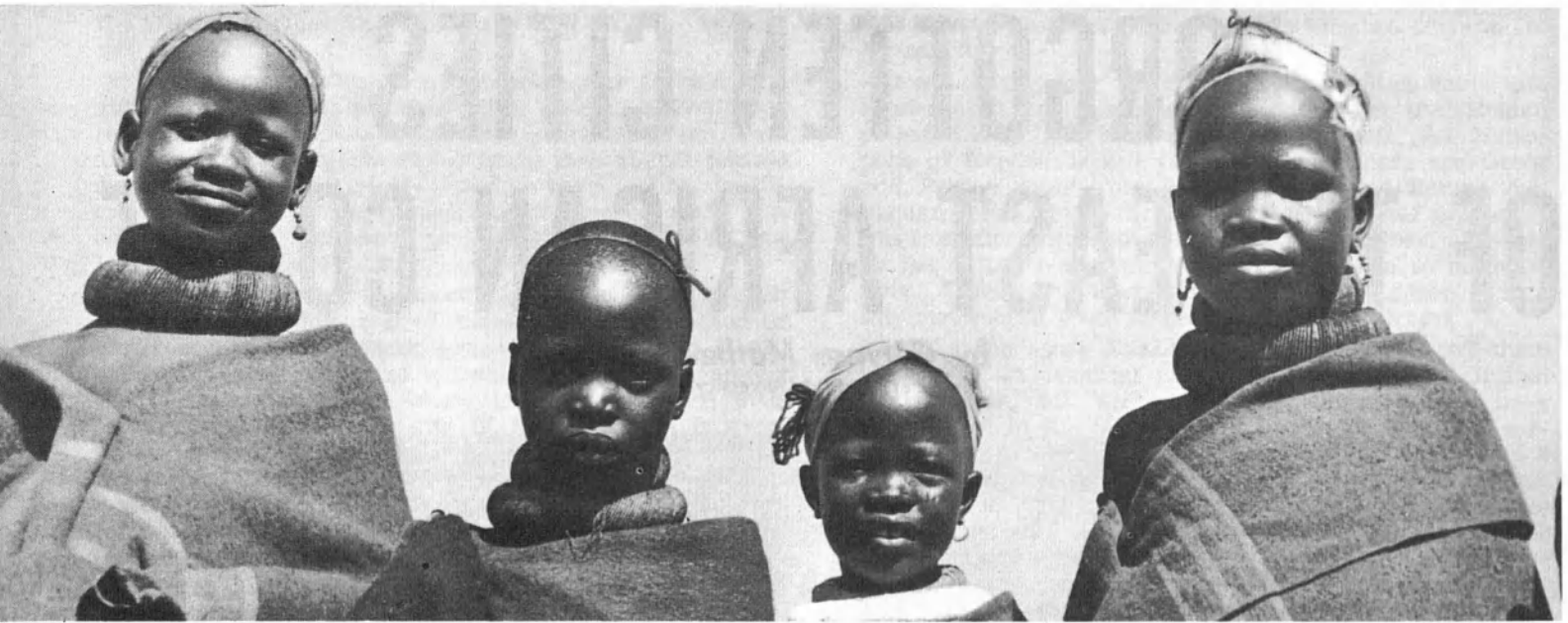
This ironwork is the product of a home industry which has been practised for generations in and around Bantu villages, and which originally owes nothing to the white man. In a few places in Tanganyika, the Equatorial forests of the Congo, and the remote Kalahari desert you would find small groups of hunting peoples who still do not know the art of smelting and shaping iron. But even these most primitive folk now have tools and weapons of iron which they obtain by trade from neighbouring Bantu or Europeans. Some will obtain odd scraps of the metal which they shape to their own requirements, not by the methods of the metal worker, but by the age-old methods of the stone-age; beating and hammering the cold metal with a lump of stone on a stone anvil.

It is hard to think of an Africa in which no one had any knowledge of metal working, and where all tools, weapons and ornaments were of stone, bone, ivory, wood, or other non-metallic materials. But archaeologists have shown that this was the case in Africa just as it was many years earlier in Europe and the Near East. Everywhere from the south coast to the southern fringes of the Sahara we find the old camp sites and living places of stone-age hunters. Then, occasionally, we find in the living places of some of the latest of the Stone Age peoples fragments of Bantu pottery and even traces of iron smelting. These are the sites which show us a picture of the old stone-using, hunting peoples coming into contact with the first metal-using farmers in the subcontinent.

## Hunters turned to farming pottery and iron-working

**H**UNTING peoples must essentially be mobile, and they have little use for cumbersome and brittle pottery. I mention this because we generally associate the appearance of pottery with the coming of iron. The earliest pottery in Southern Africa is probably that of the Hottentots, a cattle-owning, non-agricultural people who migrated into South Africa ahead of the Bantu. We shall have more to say about these people in connexion with metals a little later.

Iron-working did not arrive in the sub-continent as an isolated trait. It was accompanied by well-made pottery in use on a large scale, and, more important still, by agriculture. Normally when we find evidence of any one of these three things we can generally infer the others.



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Agriculture meant that man could produce his own food instead of having to chase and gather it about the country side. For the first time in history it became possible to live a settled existence in permanent villages. This led to the development of more complex and closely-knit societies, with more time to develop their arts and crafts. The advent of these earliest farmers in Southern Africa, with their knowledge of smelting and smithing was without a doubt the most significant change that the country had seen during half-a-million years of human occupation.

### Were first skills brought by southward moving Bantus?

**B**UT who were the earliest iron-using peoples in Southern Africa? Whence came they? And *when* did they first appear on the scene? These are questions to which we must admit that we don't know the complete answers. But we do have some clues, and archaeologists are now actively engaged in looking for others. It is relatively easy to go into the bush and find sites where there is evidence of early iron-working, but it is another matter entirely to say how old the site is, or who the people were who lived there.

The immense period of the Stone Age, and the various cultures represented in the period can be divided up and given some sort of dating on the basis of geological events, but the period of iron-working is far too recent for geology to be able to provide a clue. Some help can be had from the writings of early European explorers, and it is from these that we learn something of the early use of metals in the extreme south.

It is clear from records dating back to 1510 that the Cape Hottentots had no tools, weapons or ornaments of metal and that during the ensuing centuries they only acquired the art of metal working from the Dutch ships that called there. They always relied on the ships for their supplies of raw material. In 1661 an expedition despatched by Jan van Riebeeck to the Namaqua Hottentots some 200 miles from the Cape found these people in possession of beads and chains of copper and iron which they had mined and smelted themselves. Similar reports exist from 1719 for the Ba Tlaping Hottentots who were, however, in fairly close contact with the earliest Bantu in the area. We thus see that metal working in the extreme south is a comparatively recently acquired skill, and was in all probability learned from first Bantu immigrants in the 16th or 17th centuries.

If the knowledge of iron-working was introduced by southward moving Bantu then we should expect to find it at earlier dates the further north we travel. This is in fact borne out by the archaeological evidence from Central Africa. Here, however, dating becomes much more difficult as there are no records earlier than the 18th century and very little of any value until Livingstone's explora-

tions during the latter half of the 19th century. The answers must lie almost entirely with the archaeologist aided by the radio-chemist who, by processing carbon recovered from old living sites, can tell us approximately how old the sites are.

Let us digress for a moment and consider when the knowledge of iron-working may have come to Africa. Objects of iron are found in Mesopotamia in deposits dated to the middle part of the 3rd millennium B.C. The real focus of iron production in prehistoric times, however, was in the Hittite empire during the period 1400 to 1200 B.C. and it is most likely that it was from here that the craft first spread into Europe, and south to Egypt, and to other points along the North African coast. Iron does not become really common in Egypt until around 600 to 500 B.C. The inhabitants of Meroe (650 B.C. to 350 A.D.), an island in the Nile just north of Khartoum knew the use of iron, and settlements, which can be linked with Meroe by the pottery they contain, have been traced considerably further south on the Blue Nile.

Here then is a possible route by which iron might have been introduced to the people who later carried it by migration to areas of Central and Southern Africa. Alternatively the Horn of Africa and the East coast have been suggested as a possible route. So too has the West coast of Africa along the margins of the Sahara desert. But at present there is insufficient evidence to favour any of these suggestions, although the physical characteristics of the Bantu, who form the largest element in Africa's population suggest that they came from the North East of the continent.

### 'History book' inscribed in thirty feet of clay

**A** FEW SITES in the Rhodesias help to provide something a little more certain in the way of dates. At Kalambo Falls, at the south end of Lake Tanganyika. Dr. J. D. Clark has found a hollow containing up to thirty feet of swamp clays which contain early Iron Age pottery at all levels from top to bottom. There is also iron slag at some levels, and traces of hearths and clay floors. A carbon sample from near the middle of the deposit has given a date of 100 A.D. Since the pottery is typologically early this may be a living site of some of the earliest iron-using folk to reach Northern Rhodesia.

Another interesting and much discussed site is Zimbabwe in Southern Rhodesia. All romantic claims that this intriguing ruin was once a temple of the Queen of Sheba, or that it was built by the Phoenicians must, in the light of scientific discoveries, be dropped. Careful excavation, and close examination of the objects found shows quite clearly that Zimbabwe (See page 10) is to be attributed to early Bantu settlers: the same Bantu who carried into the country the earliest knowledge of metal working and farming.



# FORGOTTEN CITIES OF THE EAST AFRICAN COAST

by *Gervase Mathew*  
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Official photograph: Public Relations Office, Tanganyika Territory

**MARITIME TRADING CITIES** of African origin grew up and flourished on the East coast of the continent in pre-European times. Greatest of them was Kilwa which was built on an island off the coast of Tanganyika and which once stretched for a mile in length and half a mile inland. Today only the low houses of a small village cluster on and around ruins like those of its old fort (above). Growing rich on Indian Ocean trade with countries as far off as Siam and China, these coastal markets knew their greatest prosperity from the 13th to the 15th centuries. Their decline came with the arrival of the Portuguese who altered the immemorial Indian Ocean trade routes.

**T**HE western shore of the Indian Ocean is littered with fragments of ruined towns. It is now clear that the largest group among them dates from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sometimes they are completely deserted towns almost as well preserved as Pompeii, like Au Garvin in Somalia, a little to the north of Merca and Kua in the Mafia islands off the coast of Tanganyika. Sometimes there are the reed huts of a modern fishing village among the fallen masonry. But all are linked by masses of broken shards of blue and white Chinese porcelain and by similar types of house and palace, mosque and pillar tomb.

They represent the Swahili culture of the coast between the fading of the power of Portugal and the rise of the nineteenth century Arab Empire of Zanzibar. They formed a group of small city states, oligarchic in social structure and grown wealthy through trade in ivory and

slaves. As a culture it was elaborate and in many ways sophisticated.

The small two storeyed palaces built of coral were ringed by the houses of nobles, and among the rich the standard of luxury seems to have been high. There were elaborate series of niches in the inner rooms for the display of porcelain; in the words of a Swahili proverb, silver ladders led to ivory beds. It was a culture that was evolving its own art forms; an intricate style in wood carving and in many-coloured textiles and in verse.

All this was only possible because of the trade that came south with the Monsoon. But they remained African towns. It is revealing that alone among the trading centres of the Indian Ocean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they did not use coins—except occasionally as amulets. Their economic system was based on barter and on currency of beads and rolls of cloth.

Though nominally Islamic, the chief religious forces seem to have been the fear of spirits, the belief in propitiatory sacrifice that accompanied it and elaborate witchcraft. Women held a position quite different from that accorded to them elsewhere in the Indian Ocean world. They were the guardians of the ritual objects of each little state, they were frequently the nominal rulers; even

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*Assisted by Dr. Freeman-Grenville, Father Gervase Mathew completed an archaeological survey of the coastline and of the islands from the British Somaliland Protectorate south to Portuguese East Africa. An archaeological map of the sites that have been recorded will be published from the Oxford University Press as part of the first volume of a History of East Africa.*

the Decorated Ones, the courtesans, seem to have possessed status.

The department expected of a noble was African; the author of that greatest of Swahili poems, *Al Inkishafi*, remembered the nobles of eighteenth century Pate arching their long necks and swaying their supple-jointed arms as the common people gazed on them. Most significant of all the strength and spirit of each state was conceived of as enshrined in a single sacred object, an Ivory Horn or a Great Drum.

There are also the remains of far larger cities of a much earlier period. Only two of these sites are occupied or partly occupied by modern towns—Mombasa and Mogadishu. The low houses of a small village cluster among the tall ruins on Kilwa island in Tanganyika. A little to the south the palace city of Songo Mnara is overgrown by bush. In Kenya the city of Gedi lies deserted in the forest. At Port Durnford, in Somalia, fragments of masonry and occasional pillars stretch along the estuary for nearly a mile and a half above the reed huts of the Baguin fishermen.

It is the extent of each of these earlier sites that is so unexpected. It was estimated that there were twenty thousand inhabitants of Mombasa at the time of the coming of the Portuguese. Mediaeval Mogadishu was larger still, it spread far beyond the modern town across the modern air field. Mediaeval Kilwa stretched for over a mile along the coast and for half a mile inland.

All these cities had grown rich through the Indian Ocean traffic; they had trade contacts as far as Siam and China. They exported slaves but it is easy to exaggerate the importance of the slave trade for their economy—perhaps the majority of negro slaves in this period were brought to the South Arabian markets by the short sea passage from more northerly ports like Aidhab on the Red Sea, Zeila or Berbera. But Mogadishu and Kilwa had grown rich as storehouses for the gold trade that had its source far south in the Rhodesian workings. Both to the

east and to the north there was an unsated demand for African ivory.

It is not yet clear when any of these cities came into existence; there were trading centres in the Roman period, though the most important of these, the Metropolis of Raphtha, is not yet found, and there are Greek and Roman coins from Port Durnford and Roman and Persian coins from Zanzibar. Still, their chief prosperity was from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Already by the fifteenth century some of them seem to be declining. They were doomed when the Portuguese altered the immemorial trade routes of the Indian Ocean.

Unlike the small Swahili towns that succeeded them they were an essential part of the structure of Indian Ocean trade. Mr. Kirkman's excavations at Gedi have shown that in the Malindi area in Kenya the chief currency was in cowrie shells. But elsewhere there was a money economy; there were three mediaeval East African mints. The number and elaboration of the Mosques show that all the mediaeval cities had become Islamic. But it is becoming untenable to consider them as Persian or Arab colonies though some like Kilwa and old Zanzibar may well have come into existence clustered round a trading settlement from the Persian Gulf.

The cities described by mediaeval geographers seem negro cities—more negroid than any present inhabitant of the coast. In the fourteenth century Ibn Batuta describes the citizens of Kilwa as jet black with incised faces, and his account of the royal ceremonial at Mogadishu—the state umbrella and the birds of gold borne high on staves—is reminiscent of West African Kingship. A fifteenth century Chinese visitor to Mogadishu noted not only the tall stone houses “four or five storeys high” but the fact that the women there “apply yellow varnish to their shaven crowns, hang several strings of discs from their ears and wear silver rings round their necks.”

At least in my present judgement the deserted cities of the East African coast are deserted African cities.

## THE MARCH OF IRON

(Continued from page 21)

The builders of Zimbabwe were a lively, energetic people; farmers and cattle owners, producing tools and ornaments in copper, gold and iron, and acquiring beads of foreign origin by trade. A radiocarbon date for Zimbabwe suggests that it was in occupation during the 7th century A.D. although it must be admitted that for technical reasons this date is slightly suspect, and Zimbabwe may not be as old as this. It does, however, give us an approximate idea of when these folk first arrived in Rhodesia.

Pottery from the earliest levels at Zimbabwe is closely related to pottery from several sites in Northern Rhodesia. Two such sites in the south of Barotseland have been dated by radiocarbon tests to between 100 and 400 A.D. Unfortunately, owing no doubt to the acid conditions of the soil, no iron has yet been discovered at these sites, and because no proper excavation has been carried out we know nothing of what the settlement was like.

A recent discovery about a hundred miles north of the Victoria Falls may help to provide a link between the earliest iron age folk hereabouts and the present day inhabitants. At a tiny settlement known as Kalomo has been discovered what is virtually a miniature tell; that is, a mound formed from the accumulation of centuries of rubbish. The occupants of this old village lived so long on the one spot that they ended up by sitting on a heap of their own rubbish some nine feet high! A trial excavation showed us that the last inhabitants lived there comparatively recently, perhaps in the last century. The

earliest levels have not yet been dated, but they will almost certainly take us back several centuries.

These folk were farmers who decorated themselves with snail shell beads, and fashioned razors and arrowheads from iron. They also made little figurines of cattle and fat tailed sheep, but whether these were children's toys, or fertility cult objects we cannot yet say. Their grain they stored in large bottle-shaped pits dug up to nine feet into the rotten granite subsoil. It may be that the man-made mound at Kalomo was fortified, but whether against attack from neighbouring Bantu, or from the last of the Stone Age tribes into whose territory they had moved, we cannot say until more work has been done.

To sum up then we may say that the period in question has been so little studied that we are not yet in a position to describe in detail what was happening during the change from Stone Age to Metal Age. All the evidence suggests, however, that the knowledge of iron-working was not discovered independently in Southern Africa, but was brought here by migrant peoples; simple farmers from some unknown area either to the north east or north west of the sub-continent, or perhaps, who reached Central Africa fairly soon after the beginning of the Christian era, but who did not penetrate to the extreme south until as late as the 15th or 16th centuries A.D. These migrant peoples were undoubtedly the direct ancestors of the present day Bantu-speaking inhabitants of the country.



# KUMBI SALEH

## ancient capital of the 'Land of Gold'

by Raymond Mauny

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ON March 6 1957 a new State—Ghana, formerly the British-administered territory of the Gold Coast—came into existence on the shores of the Gulf of Guinea.

The choice of Ghana as the name for the new-born state may have puzzled some students of African history. No part of the former Gold Coast was ever included in the Empire of Ghana, which extended over the Western Sudan and the Southern Sahara from the seventh century until at least the thirteenth century A.D., but whose southern expansion seems to have stopped at the Niger. Some writers have suggested that the Akan, one of the principal local tribes, may have been connected with the Empire of Ghana. The selection of this name for the new West African State was actually probably due to the glamour surrounding the first great Sudanese Empire.

Nothing definite is known about its origins. The only documents that touch on the question—the *Tarikh el-Fettach* and the *Tarikh es-Sudan*, both written by scholars from Timbuktu—belong to a very late period (sixteenth-seventeenth centuries); these give a long list of kings said to have reigned before the Hegira. (The date from which the Mohammedan era is reckoned—622 A.D.

We find the first mention of the Empire of Ghana in the works of the astronomer Al-Fazari, written just before 800 A.D. He calls it "the land of gold." Certain ninth and tenth century authors mention it briefly, but the only good description of the State and its capital is given by El-Bekri (1067). In his day, the Empire was at the height of its prosperity and stretched from the Sahara, the Niger and Central Senegal to the Lake Debo area.

Despite the great tolerance it showed towards Mohammedans, this State with its animistic religion, offended the fanatical Almoravides, who invaded and conquered it in 1077. An Arab dynasty, possibly of Sherifian origin, ousted the Sarakole Negro kings and, until its destruction by the Mandingos in 1240, the capital continued to play an important part as a centre of trade between the Arab and Berber merchants from the Mograb and Egypt, and the "Dioulas" from West Africa. Sudanese gold was brought there to be exchanged for salt from the Sahara and manufactured goods from the Mediterranean countries.

For at least 500 years the city of Ghana was one of the best known markets in the Moslem world. Its trade later passed to Oualata, founded in the thirteenth century, which in its turn was supplanted, in the fifteenth century, by Timbuktu.

What traces of the ancient capital have remained? Strangely enough it was not until 1914 that its ruins were discovered—by A. Bonnel de Mézières, following up suggestions made by the historian, Maurice Delafosse. The site was that known as Kumbi Saleh, 200 miles due north of Bamako and just north of the Mauritanian frontier.

The identification of the town of Ghana—or, at least, of the trading centre described by El-Bekri—with the Kumbi Saleh ruins is, in my opinion, the most plausible yet advanced. The *Tarikh el-Fettach* says definitely that

the capital of Ghana "was Kumbi, and this Kumbi is a great city"; and the tradition that Kumbi and Ghana were the same still survived at Oualata at the beginning of the present century. Moreover, this is the largest group of ruins to have been discovered in the Mauritanian Sahel, and all the objects found there date from the early Middle Ages.

Neither the study of aerial photographs nor reconnoitering at ground level has as yet, however, revealed any trace of the royal city, which El-Bekri declares to have been situated at a distance of six miles from the merchant settlement.

The Kumbi Saleh ruins extend over an area of approximately one square kilometre, lying between two pools—which are generally dry—and flanked on the north-west and south-east by two burial grounds covering almost twice that extent. The outskirts of the city are strewn with pottery shards and must have been built over with straw huts. The town itself is constructed entirely of stone—a grey shale, found locally, which splits into symmetrical slabs. This was used everywhere—for walls, floors, ornamental work, the tombstones in the graveyards, and so on.

### Thousands of tombs yet not a single gravestone

THE houses had upper storeys, and when these subsided they filled in the ground-floor rooms which when uncovered were found to be magnificently preserved under a mass of rubble averaging 12 feet in thickness.

The central part of the town is built round a large square, from which several streets branch out; the most important of these, which is very wide, led eastward and was marked on the plans as the "Main Avenue". It was lined by quite high buildings, including a mosque of which the *mirhab* has been excavated. The streets are clearly visible at ground level, despite the collapse of the walls, and also stand out in aerial photographs.

As already mentioned, two very large burial grounds lie just outside the town. In the one to the north-east, the section nearest to the city contains simple Moslem graves, edged with stones. Further away there are collective burial-places, surrounded by walls; the largest of these, with at its centre the so-called "pillared tomb", is surrounded by six square walls, the outermost of which is over half a mile in circumference.

The south-eastern burial ground stretches from the city to the pool of Sohobi, beside which stands the tomb of Bouhahim, reputed by tradition to have been the comrade of Abu Bakr ibn Omar, the Almoravide. This, too, contains several collective burial-places surrounded by concentric walls.

Though these cemeteries contain thousands of tombs, no ancient gravestones have been found; cattle, wild animals, forest fires and rain must have destroyed the

brittle shale. Unless some new finds are made therefore, we shall lack the invaluable data provided by inscribed tombstones, such as was the case at Gao, where the royal burial ground of Sane was found to contain a whole series dating from the twelfth century. (See page 26)

We have learned quite a lot about the architecture of the city through successive excavations—conducted by A. Bonnel de Mézières in 1914, D. Lazartigues in 1939, P. Thomassey in 1949 and 1950, and G. Szumowski and myself in the latter part of 1951. Bonnel de Mézières' work was the most extensive; helped by some 50 workers, he excavated 22 structures (houses, tombs and various other buildings). Unfortunately nothing is now known about the material he collected through his excavations.

Of greater practical value was the work done between 1949-1951, especially by P. Thomassey, who lived on the site for several months and cleared two groups of buildings of very fine architectural style. The flagged floors, the wall-tablets painted with passages from the Koran, the graceful lines of the niches carved in walls and pillars, the stone staircases, and the wealth of skilfully-fashioned objects (iron tools and weapons, pottery, beads, grindstones, and some extremely rare glass weights used for weighing gold) give us a good idea of the type of civilization that flourished here.

### Cradle of a Sudanese Negro-Islamic culture

THESE must have been the houses of wealthy Arab or Arab-influenced merchants, or of Sarakole or other grandes who had been converted to Islam. For everything discovered at Kumbi dates from the concluding period of Ghana's existence, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, shortly before its destruction by the Mandingos. No pre-Islamic finds have been made and it is highly probable that everything suggestive of animism was destroyed by the Almoravides.

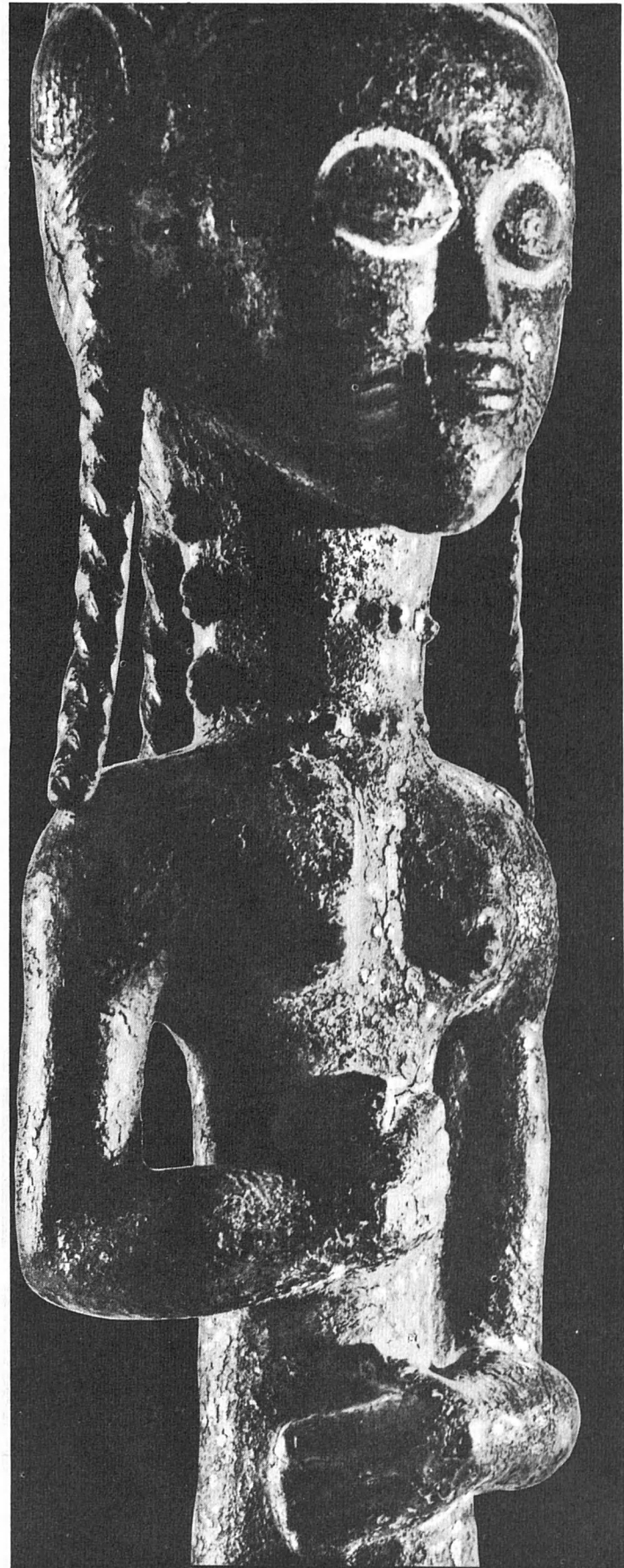
El-Bekri relates how the town of Awdaghost, a dependency of Ghana, was sacked in 1054, only 23 years before the capture of Kumbi, for the simple reason that it "acknowledged the authority of the Sultan of Ghana". We may be sure that the Almoravides must have treated Kumbi itself in the same way, and that the temples of the "idols" and the royal tumuli were razed to the ground and pillaged. No trace of the pre-Islamic civilization of Ghana now survives in the former capital of the Sarakole kings. Everything brought to light is Islamic in origin, the architecture being particularly reminiscent of that of the Arab-Berber caravan cities in Southern Mauritania.

But the ancient capital of Ghana has another claim to distinction: it was the cradle of the Negro-Islamic culture which flourished in the Sudan from the eighth century to our own day, bringing fame to centres such as Timbuktu and Djenné.

Arab merchants, and scholars from The Magrab attracted by the renown of the land of gold, founded families at Ghana and elsewhere. Their descendants of mixed blood spread all over the Sudan, more especially in the big trading settlements, taking with them the Koran, and Moslem civilization, from the confines of Senegal to Chad. It is no accident that the foundation of all the great empires—Ghana, Mali, Songai and the Hausa States—can be traced back to the Sarakoles and their near relations, the Malinkes, or that people of the same stock should have carried some semblance of the Islamic civilization of the Sudan into the very heart of the forests of the Bondoukou country, Ashanti and elsewhere, to which they were drawn by the gold trade.

There is a direct, clear and indisputable connexion between Kumbi, Tichit, Oualata and the other towns of Southern Mauritania. But there is also an undeniable, though more distant and less obvious, connexion between Kumbi and the Sudanese "banco"-built towns—Timbuktu and Djenné in times past; Kayes, Bamako and Mopti today. Their architecture is the same, though clumsier in appearance, since the building material is dried earth—"banco". And the deeply-rooted Moslem culture of the inhabitants is also the same.

This is the old and wondrous heritage bequeathed to the Sudanese by Ghana. Could anything do greater honour to the ancient city whose remains are gradually being brought to light by archaeologists?



**BAULE ART**, from the Ivory Coast of West Africa, is among the most sophisticated of African styles. Baule figures may be carved for the ancestor cult, as secular "portraits" of living or dead persons, as repositories of personal force, or simply for art's sake. On this female figure is superimposed the typical Baule relief scarification (decoration through skin incisions).

Photo Eliot Elisofon from "The Sculpture of Africa"  
© Thames and Hudson, Ltd., London, 1958



# Ancient chroniclers of West Africa's past

by Thomas Hodgkin

WHEN people talk, as they still sometimes do, about Africa south of the Sahara as "a continent without a history", what they really mean is that Africa is a continent about whose history we Europeans are still deplorably ignorant. The reasons for this are complex. Partly, whether we like it or not, we remain absurdly ethnocentric: "history" for most of us means national, or at best "European" or "Western", history; if any African history creeps into our curricula, it is usually under the old-fashioned rubric—"the Expansion of Europe."

Partly, so far as West African history is concerned, the documentary evidence for the mediaeval period—say, up to 1500 A.D.—comes almost entirely from Arabic sources: few Arabists have taken much interest in Africa south of the Sahara; few Africanists—most of them Frenchmen, or Africans trained in the French tradition—have been equipped to handle the Arabic material. Finally, one must admit, we are all to some extent still victims of a colonial mentality: we find it hard to realize that Africans possessed their own indigenous civilizations for many centuries before we Europeans, beginning with the Portuguese at the end of the 15th century, conceived the idea of trying to sell them ours.

Yet in fact extremely interesting civilizations existed, from at least the 8th century, and probably much earlier, in the region known to the Arabs as *bilad al-sudan*—meaning literally "the country of the black people", but used conventionally to refer to the great belt of savannah to the south of the Sahara, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. The major States of the western Sudan—Ghana, and later Mali, in the area of the upper Niger; Gao, dominating the Niger bend; Kanem-Bornu, in the region of Lake Chad—had certain common characteristics. Their wealth depended above all on the fact that they controlled the southern end of the trans-Saharan trade-routes, by which they exported to North Africa, and thence to Europe, their main supplies of gold, as well as slaves, ivory, and kola nuts, receiving exchange copper, cowries, cloth, horses, cattle and beads.



THESE States developed relatively centralized forms of government under dynasties of divine kings which, in most cases, showed a remarkable continuity (the Sefawa dynasty in Kanem-Bornu survived for a millennium—from approximately the middle of 9th to the middle of the 19th century). They possessed a complicated hierarchy of officials, closely associated with the palace; an elaborate court ritual; considerable military forces; and an administrative system capable in normal times, of preserving public order and raising taxes in the outlying provinces.

From the 11th century on, the royal families and ruling classes of these States were converted to Islam—either by Almoravid pressure, or by the peaceful penetration of Moslem missionaries from North Africa. As a consequence of the spread of Islam, and the developing relations between the States of the western Sudan and the wider Moslem world—through such focal points as Fez, Tlemcen, Tunis, Cairo and Mecca—West African centres of learning grew up, above all at Timbuktu and Jenne.

Until the journeys of Mungo Park and his successors—Horneman, Denham and Clapperton, Laing and Caillé—at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, Europe was almost totally cut off from direct contact with the civilizations of the western Sudan. Hence our depend-



**HELMET MASK** made by the Bobo Fing—a tribe of the Sudan in West Africa—is a single-piece wooden carving with a surmounting female figure. The most important examples of sculpture in the Sudan—the vast belt of subdesert and savannah country south of the Sahara, stretching across Africa from the coast of Senegal to the Red Sea—are found in the western part, in and to the west of the Niger River bend.

Photo Eliot Elisofon, taken from "The Sculpture of Africa" © Thames & Hudson Ltd., London 1958

# JOURNEYS OF DISCOVERY THROUGH THE 'COUNTRY OF THE BLACK PEOPLE'

ence upon Arabic sources for an understanding of the histories of these States. These sources include not only the works of Arab geographers and historians, from the 9th century on, but also the writings of local West African historians and chroniclers—trained in such centres as Timbuktu—and also (though these are rare) Arabic inscriptions.

How, for example, do we know that the ruling dynasties of Ghana, Mali (or Kangaba, as it was called at this time), Gao, and Kanem, were converted to Islam in the 11th century? Partly from literary sources: Ibn-Khaldun, the great 14th century Tunisian historian, sociologist, and philosopher, gives a brief account of the Almoravid conquest of Ghana, in 1076. But, in the case of Gao, the evidence of the historians is supplemented by a remarkable series of dated tombstones of members of the Gao royal house bearing Arabic inscriptions, discovered in 1939 a few kilometres from modern Gao.



THE earliest of these bears the *Hijra* date 494, i.e. 1100 A.D.; the latest is dated 663 A.H. (1264/5 A.D.). The earlier tombstones are beautifully carved in Qufic characters, whose style has led Professor Sauvaget to suggest that they were the work of craftsmen from Almeria in southern Spain, the craftsmen, or more probably the finished stones, being transported by camel across the Sahara for the purpose. Others are clearly of local workmanship. Here is a translation of one of the inscriptions:

"Everything on earth is destined for annihilation. This is the tomb of a very powerful king, of noble station, who protected the religion of God, who trusted in God, who carried out the commandments of God, who fought for the cause of God, Mama, son of Kma, the son of Ai, known by the name of Omar ibn al-Khattab. May God have mercy on him. He was called to God on Sunday, 17 Muharram, 514 A.H. (18 April, 1120)."

The Koranic text with which the epitaph opens, the use of indigenous Songhai names (the Songhai are the people of Gao) side by side with Moslem names, the evidence of cultural and commercial ties between the western Sudan and southern Spain during this period of Almoravid rule—all these bear out the historians' view, that the 11th century was essentially the period when Islam began to be diffused throughout the region.

From the 9th century on, the Arab geographers and historians begin to provide valuable information about the States of the western Sudan. For example, Yaqubi, writing in about 872, knew of the kingdoms of Ghana and Kanem, and described the gold trade of Ghana and Kanem's trade in slaves with North Africa, by way of the Fezzan. Ibn Hawqal of Baghdad, in the first half of the 10th Century, travelled as far as the Saharan town of Audoghast, on the outskirts of the Ghana Empire. Al-Bakri, who wrote his *Masalik wa Mamali*, an account of "Routes and Kingdoms", in about 1067, just after the Norman conquest of England, though he lived most of his life in the Moslem State of Cordoba, in southern Spain, was clearly well informed about the western Sudan.

He has given us the classic account of the Empire of Ghana at the height of its power, before the Almoravid conquest: The capital, consisting of two towns, about six miles apart, one Pagan, where the King lived, the other Moslem, containing twelve mosques; the court, where the King held audience, surrounded by his horses in gold trappings, his hounds, pages holding gold-hilted swords, the sons of vassal princes, his viziers, who were mainly Moslems, and the governor of the city; the army, consist-

ing of 200,000 men, of whom 40,000 were archers; the royal monopoly of gold nuggets, and the use of gold-dust for currency.

Here again, the evidence of the Arab historians has been supplemented by the archaeologists. We know, from a 16th century Timbuktu historian, Hahmud Kati, that the name of the capital of the Kingdom of Ghana was "Kumbi". Recent excavations, carried out by MM. Mauny and Thomassey at Kumbi Saleh in French West Africa, about 250 miles north of Bamaka, have uncovered what is almost certainly part of the Moslem town referred to by Al-Barki—well-constructed stone houses, a mosque, and tombs outside the town. (See page 24.)

In some ways the most valuable of all the Arab sources are the first-hand reports of the two—as far as I know, the only two—Arab traveller-authors who made extensive journeys through the western Sudan: Ibn-Battuta and Leo Africanus. Both were remarkable men. Muhammed ibn-Abdullah ibn-Battuta was born at Tangier in 1304, and spent the greater part of his life travelling through the Moslem world of his day, visiting Arabia, Asia Minor, Khurasan, India, China, and Indonesia, as well as West Africa, which he reached in 1352. At this time the Empire of Mali still dominated the western Sudan, and Ibn-Battuta gives an extremely interesting and human account of some of its institutions:

"The Negroes possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. Their Sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveller nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers of men of violence... They are careful to observe the hours of prayer... On Fridays, if a man does not go early to the mosque, he cannot find a corner to pray in, on account of the crowd... Another of their good qualities is their habit of wearing clean white garments on Fridays. Even if a man has nothing but an old shirt, he washes it and cleans it and wears it to the Friday service. Yet another is their zeal for learning the Koran by heart..."



Leo Africanus, originally known as El-Hasan ibn-Muhammad el-Wazzan el-Zayyati, was born at Granada in Spain in about the year 1490. At the age of about 17 he accompanied his uncle on a diplomatic mission from the Sultan of Morocco to the court of Muhammad Askia, ruler of the Gao Empire, which had by that time taken Mali's place as the dominant power in the western Sudan. He later followed this by a second journey through Africa south of the Sahara. In about the year 1518 he was captured by a Sicilian corsair, and handed over to Pope Leo X, who baptised him with his own names, Johannes Leo de Medecis, in 1520.

Thereupon Leo Africanus settled down to write his famous *Description of Africa*, which was first published in Italian in 1550, and provided Europe with its main, though increasingly out-of-date, information regarding the States and peoples of the western Sudan for the next two centuries. His account of the flourishing commercial and intellectual life of Timbuktu and other centres of the Gao Empire at the height of its power remains of the greatest value:

"There are at Timbuktu numerous judges, doctors, and clerics, all appointed by the King. He greatly honours men of learning. Many books in manuscript, imported from Barbary, are also on sale here. More profit is made from the book trade than from all other branches of commerce."



# LOST TEMPLES IN THE DESERT

Among the low, dry hills to the north of Khartoum in the Sudan lies a practically untouched archaeological site which may be one of the richest that remains anywhere in the world. Here, in the former kingdom of Kush ("in some respects the most African of all the great civilizations of Antiquity") are the great monuments of Meroe and its sister cities of Naga, Musawarat es Safra, Nuri and Napata. Meroe, once the centre of the largest iron-smelting industry in Africa south of the Mediterranean coast, has been called "The Birmingham of Ancient Africa." Its products and later its technology moved progressively into other African lands to the south and west. Among the most impressive of the Kushite ruins are those at Naga, dating back some 2,000 years, and shown in these photos: (1) The "kiosk," as this columned building is called, recalls a Roman example. It is thought to have been a temple. (2) Coiled serpent with lion's head climbs out of a lotus flower on a column forming a corner of the Lion Temple. (3) Figures sculpted on Lion Temple wall include Lion God (left) and Aminitere, one of the goddess-queens who ruled in splendour during the Kushite Civilization. (4) The ram became one of Kush's divine symbols and today many granite rams lie discarded in the sand at Naga.

Photos © Almas, Paris





2



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4



# THE GREATNESS OF ETHIOPIA: LEGENDS & REALITY

by Jean Doresse

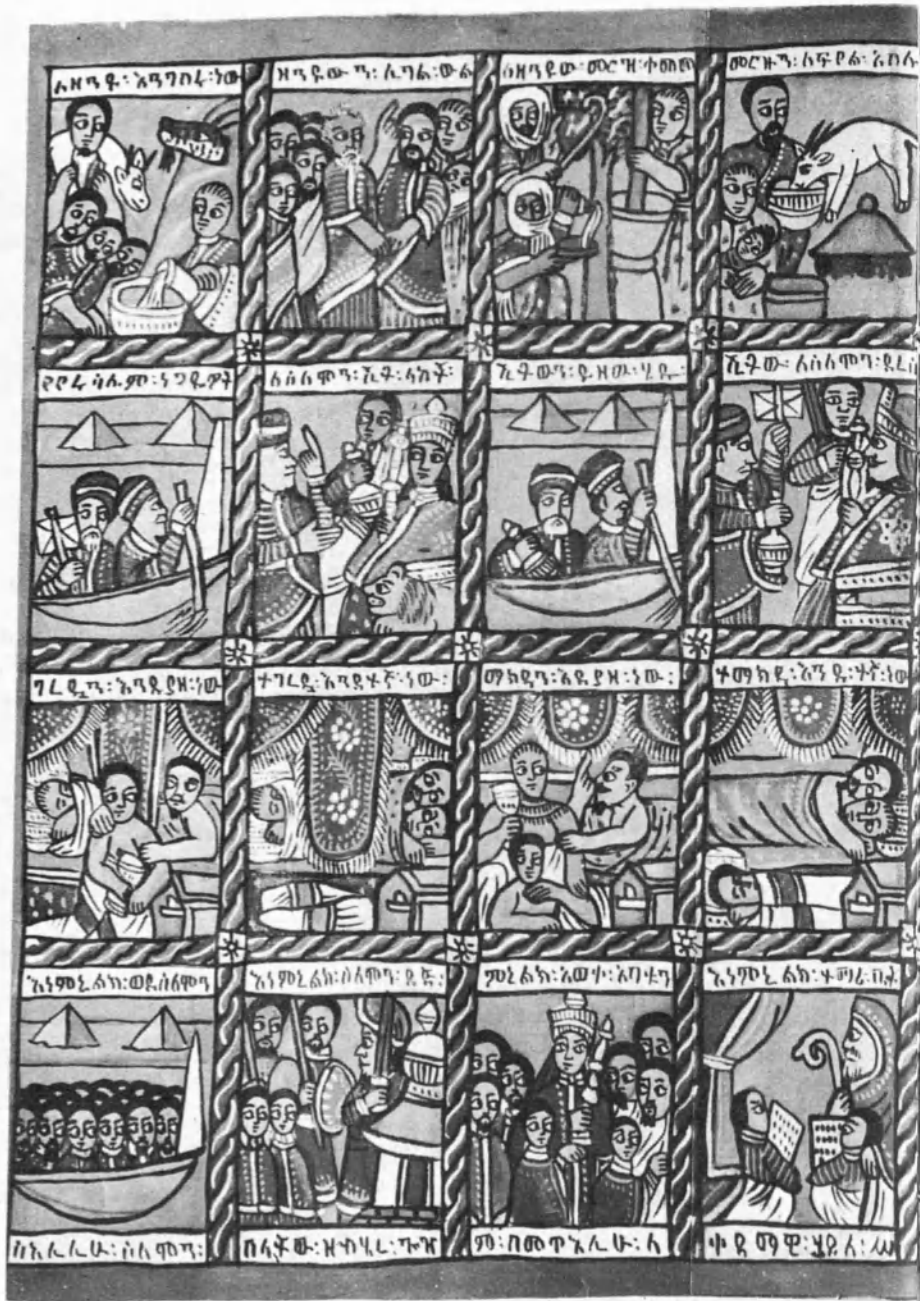


© Jean Doresse

**A**LTHOUGH a variety of races with widely differing languages has met and mingled in Ethiopia, a remarkably closely-knit culture has developed there over the centuries. The primary reason for this unity is probably geographical—the peaceful scenery, greenness and cool temperatures of these high plateaux, at an altitude of over 6,500 feet, which call to mind some of Europe's mountains rather than Africa. There is another element making for unity—the majority of the peoples living in these uplands are, despite their dark skins, akin to the white race.

It is for these reasons that long ago a civilization grew up which distinguishes Ethiopia from the Negro-inhabited parts of Africa, by which it is largely surrounded, and which gives to the country affinities with the lands of ancient civilization—Egypt, Syria and Arabia—with which it had historical contacts.

Let us first of all set aside a myth—still too widely current—that ancient Ethiopia had ties with the land of the Pharaohs. This romantic idea was widely advanced by classical writers two thousand years ago. Yet the country referred to both in the writings of Herodotus and in the *Aethiopia* of Heliodorus was not Ethiopia itself, but merely the Sudanese Kingdom of Meroe. There is, however, evidence that a protohistorical Ethiopian



**ANCIENT LEGENDS** are written large into the story of Ethiopia, a country of ancient and distinctive civilization. They are still told graphically, for example, in the brightly coloured paintings which in the "cartoon" style of a series of panels reproduce scenes from the 14th century "Glory of the Kings," Ethiopia's National Book, which has a biblical

civilization already existed some thousands of years before our era, though it left behind no monuments.

Ancient Ethiopia was known to the Egyptians as the "Land of Punt" or the "Land of the Gods", names which covered more specifically the regions producing incense which lay along the southern shores of the Red Sea, both in East Africa and Arabia. Egypt in its earliest times had traditions that some of its gods and legends had come from those parts of the world, and its traders brought back rare merchandise from these coasts. The expeditions sent by the Pharaohs, however, never penetrated to the high plateaux; some merely went up the Nile to the markets of the Sudan; others, coming by sea, put in at the points on the coast where wood, ivory and costly animals were to be bought.

It is worth noting that, while the Minaean, Sabaeen and other kingdoms of Southern Arabia began to be famous for their wealth and their culture about a thousand years B.C., it was not until eight or ten centuries later that the first travellers from the shores of the Mediterranean reached the Abyssinian highlands, where they found large cities and powerful rulers.

What they tell us is borne out by monuments still extant. There was undoubtedly, at that time, a lively civilization in Ethiopia, with firmly established, characteristic institu-



Musée de l'Homme, Paris

background. Painting reproduced above dates from the 19th century. It tells the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and of the birth of Menelik, first Emperor of Ethiopia whom Ethiopians believe was the son of Solomon and the Quenn. Left, early Ethiopian gold coin minted at the end the 3rd century A. D. It is inscribed in the Geez alphabet.

a form of writing that originated in Arabia, crossed the Red Sea and became assimilated and adapted in Ethiopia. The Geez alphabet has survived to the present day although Ethiopia's principal language is Amharic. The Ethiopian money which was struck in the third century had its own distinctive designs and was used until the 9th century.

tions of its own. The gateway to the country was the great port of Adulis, where fleets from the Egypt of the Ptolemies and from the Indian Ocean alike put in. The chief towns were Coloë, the centre of the ivory trade, on the edge of the plateau above Adulis, and Axum in the interior of the country.

It was certainly a powerful nation, for the rulers of Axum extended their power even to Arabia, from which the first seeds of their own culture had come. In the third and fourth centuries, the Ethiopian nation thus secured a monopoly of trade in the south of the Red Sea, on which, up to that time, only the Southern Arabian kingdoms, producing incense and spices, had built their greatness. From the end of the third century, Axum's international importance was emphasized by the fact that, for a short time, Greek was used in certain inscriptions and even on coins. For an Ethiopian coinage was struck, using the same weights of metal as the various Roman gold pieces of the time but with its own quite distinctive designs; it was to survive until the ninth century.

The peoples who held these cities belonged to races which had been long settled on either coast of the Red Sea. The most highly civilized of them used a Semitic language and, in their inscriptions, they even employed the Sabaean writing; they had abandoned the religion of Africa in favour of one, with temples and altars, akin to that of the great kingdoms of Southern Arabia. The earliest monuments they had built had drawn inspiration from the remarkable buildings whose countless remains are still to be seen today on the plateaux of the Yemen and the Hadramaut.

The man who did most to develop this Ethiopian civilization was the Emperor Aizanas (about 320-350 A.D.), who introduced the general use of Geez writing, based on the Sabaean script, for the Semitic language spoken by his people. At the same time, about 340 A.D., he introduced Christianity, which has ever since been the nation's religion. It very soon developed characteristic features of its own, however, being very biblical in inspiration and sometimes showing a marked tendency towards Judaism, clear traces of which are still to be seen in its myths and

But these were not mere imitations. All had been assimilated and transformed on African soil. The Sabaean writing was soon to develop into Geez, which Ethiopia has preserved to modern times. The Sabaean architecture was to be treated in new ways by races accustomed to cutting enormous blocks of hard stone and to erecting monolithic obelisks as huge as those of the Pharaohs.



# THE GREATNESS OF ETHIOPIA

(Continued)

practices. Churches were built for the new religion, reminiscent in design of the Axumite temples and combining decorative features drawn from Arabia, Syria, Persia and Coptic Egypt. Many monasteries were founded, in which libraries grew up, starting with collections of translations.

From the beginning of the seventh century onwards, the Axumite Empire felt the repercussions of the decadence which had recently destroyed the last splendours of the Southern Arabian states. The maritime trade of the Red Sea on which its prosperity had been founded also collapsed and in a short time an impoverished Ethiopia found itself cut off, except for a few ties with Egypt, from the rest of the world. This situation lasted until the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, its culture scarcely suffered and under the dynasty of the Zagués (tenth or twelfth century to 1270 A.D.) a fantastic capital, the city of King Lalibela, grew up in the mountainous province of Lasta. Its twelve monolithic churches mark the end of the old Axumite artistic tradition as well as representing, no doubt, its highest achievement.

Then began the Middle Ages, with the greatest development taking place further south than the provinces of Tigre and Lasta, in the bleak mountains of Amhara and the fertile plains of Shoa. There the Geez script had to be adapted to a vernacular in which only a few traces of the old Sabaeen contribution were to be seen. This was Amharic, which is still today the principal language of the nation. But Geez was not forgotten; it was still used in Christian liturgy and literature.

Against this new background, a series of kings who proved themselves as distinguished statesmen, heroic warriors, strict jurists, theologians and, in some cases, inspired poets too—one of the greatest was Zar'a Ya'kub (1434-1468)—brought into being a prosperous nation which, in its monuments and paintings, its extensive literature and its practical and detailed chronicles, calls to mind the Middle Ages of Western Europe. In both literature and art, the recognizable outside influences at work come mainly from Coptic Egypt and from Syria, though occasionally a few European features, brought there in some way unknown, were sometimes mingled with the others.

Unfortunately, the Middle Ages in Ethiopia were marked by violent religious struggles. Islam, with which the old rulers of Axum had maintained the most cordial relations, had gained a foothold to the east of the high plateaux, in low-lying regions where independent kingdoms had been established. This branch of Islam, thoroughly Ethiopian in spirit and (although it adopted Arabic as its language) in its writings, remained peaceable for a time. Then it allowed itself to be drawn on by certain hitherto uncivilized peoples for whom it provided the unifying element to make an all-out attack on the more prosperous Christian table-lands. This was basically an economic war; only at rare intervals did it assume the character of a holy one. The fiercest challenge came shortly before the middle of the sixteenth century, when the assault of the armies united by the Imam Gragne laid waste the great trading centres, towns and churches of Shoa, Amhara and Tigre. Only the intervention, in 1541, of a small band of Portuguese soldiers led by Dom Christophe de Gama saved this 1,500 years-old empire from ruin.

These men from the West, though few in numbers, were bearers of new techniques, yet they brought about no change in the traditional culture of Ethiopia. The Western influence in fact died out particularly quickly because the only people who came after the Portuguese



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**AXUM**, holy city of Ethiopia, adopted Christianity in the 4th century. Today the imposing vestiges of its past still stand. Above, view of the ancient cathedral. Below left, stone statue of a prince dating from the 3rd century which was found in the Tigre region of northern Ethiopia.

soldiers (the survivors of whom were very soon absorbed and lost in the mass of the Ethiopian population) were a handful of Catholic missionaries whose teachings were immediately rejected by the nation.

Ethiopia clung to its rich, ancient culture, although, at the end of this period, there were fresh developments in its painting, its miniatures and a picturesque form of architecture which is particularly well represented in the imperial castles of Gondar. The Western influences to be seen in these works, however, are more or less indirect and probably came not by way of European masters, but through builders or painters from India, where the Portuguese had recently been spreading a wide knowledge of their techniques and their art-forms.

Ethiopia was to undergo yet one more trial before the advent of modern times—a sudden invasion by wave upon wave of the Galla peoples coming from the south and the south-east. Within a few centuries, however, the nation was to absorb this hardy strain, some groups of the invaders adopting Christianity and some Islam. Once again, Ethiopian culture emerged untouched from this period of turmoil, while the invaders, on the contrary, adopted the classical dignity of Ethiopian dress and certain features of the law and the social organization of the old empire.

Ethiopia's real contacts with Europe date from the opening of the Suez canal, from which time European specialists were called in by some of the rulers to teach the people those modern practices and techniques that could be integrated with the country's simple way of life. Ethiopia's contacts with European culture were made easier by the fact that, the nation had throughout its history been familiar with writing and legislation, and had its own characteristic code of aesthetics.

The personality of Ethiopia developed in circumstances exceptionally favourable to a proper balance, in a part of Africa in which it could gather together elements of all the great civilizations, from the most "classic" to those of the distant East.

# THE EL DORADO RULED BY THE ASHANTI KINGS

by *Jacqueline Delange*

Département d'Afrique Noire, Musée de l'Homme, Paris

**T**o the martial din of drums, bells, gongs, horns and rattles, amid puffs of smoke from muskets fired in salute and under German, Danish and British flags gaily fluttering in the breeze, the British emissaries to the monarch of the Ashanti peoples made their way to the Kumasi Palace through a host of over 5,000 soldiers and war chiefs in full dress array. Their slow progress through this amazing assembly had taken them no less than one-and-a-half hours.

The head of the mission wrote an account of this occasion, which is a veritable panegyric on gold and silver and the dazzling use made of them by this royal court at a time—the early nineteenth century—when it was barely known to the outside world. The Europeans were astounded by the wealth of Ashanti, but the things in all this glowing pageantry which struck them most were what they took to be barbaric elements; they did not discover therein the history of a culture.

“...A hundred or so great parasols or canopies, large enough to shelter at least thirty persons, were being continually waved to and fro by their bearers; they were made of silk, in scarlet, yellow and other bright colours, and surmounted by crescents, pelicans, elephants, swords and other weapons, all of solid gold... The king's messengers wore great gold breast-plates, captains and persons of consequence wore solid gold necklaces skilfully wrought, the chief executioner bore on his breast a solid gold axe, maidens carried golden bowls and the interpreters stood behind clusters of gold-knobbed sticks...”

Gold was everywhere, glaring more intensely than the sun itself; it was more heavily concentrated in the palace, where it was worn by the officers responsible for the royal household, the chamberlain, the hornblower, the captain of the messengers, the king's executioner, the controller of markets and the priest in charge of the land where members of the royal family were buried. But, above all, it cast a glow of light and prestige on the great sovereign descended from Osai Tutu, the founder of the Ashanti nation, whose reign had presaged the future glory of the kingdom, a golden stool, symbol of the royal authority, having been sent to him from the skies.

## Fire-bearing smiths led emigrants to new lands

**E**VEN today we cannot help being astounded by this elaborate metalwork, through we know of only a fraction of its countless treasures. The techniques themselves—casting by the lost wax process, hammering and repoussé work, and the application of metal to a wooden core—show a peerless mastery of the materials used. In all probability this exquisite workmanship—as early as 1700 a traveller considered some of these works “quite pleasing”—must be regarded as the fruit of ancient craft traditions which had been the monopoly of the smiths' caste.

In the old Akan communities of which the Ashanti are a branch, the smiths, bearing their fires with them, used to set out at the head of groups of emigrants, leading them to new lands. But as Ashanti power grew and the royal court increased in importance, the various craftsmen all turned their steps to Kumasi and the arts were used for the service of the king. All the African monarchies, such as the kingdoms of Ife, Benin and Abomey in the West, and of the Loango and Bakuba in the Congo and

the great sultanates or chiefdoms of the Cameroons, greatly increased the demand for art objects as the outward signs of power were built up.

Corporations of craftsmen serving the royal families, ritual institutions on a more or less national scale, and a victorious nation, took the place of the castes and the initiated artists of the little peasant communities in which wood-carving, either as a stylized or a realistic art, had been linked directly with ancestor and divinity worship.

## Uproar and torchlight marked the Spring festival of the yam

**T**HE “Odwira” or yam ceremony of the Ashanti, a Spring festival and also the feast of the dead, still has the feudal pomp and splendour of a great day including sacrificial rites and entertainments, uproar and torchlight by night, dancing, the waving of feathers and elephant tails by young people, endless processions of dignitaries weighed down with gold and supported by slaves, other slaves bearing golden pipes, ostrich-feather fans, golden swords, silver vases and the king's ivory and gold chair.

Among the pendant masks, breast-plates, rings, bracelets and other jewelry, ornaments on ceremonial weapons, vases and weights for weighing gold dust, all are so richly decorated that one is at a loss to single out any object as more remarkable than the rest. The pendant masks depicting human features, are well known. All the Akan kingdoms made heads finely cast by the lost wax process, some of which are genuine likenesses.

An amazing variety of weights were used for weighing gold dust, some having geometrical designs, others representing proverbs. The imagination displayed in the former type of weight knew no bounds and the goldsmith's genius for decoration is matched by the accuracy of his observation. The geometric designs are by no means unlimited in number but it is difficult for us to grasp their meaning, which would provide the clue to the weight system used.

The lids of Kuduo or ritual vases, the shapes and ornamentation of which bear a certain resemblance to antique cists or to Chinese bronzes, are also surmounted by symbolic decorative motifs; an orchestra conductor surrounded by his musicians represents the undisputed pre-eminence of the chief. The elaboration and lavish decoration found in these vases are also a feature of the splendid ornamentation of the great inlaid-copper hexagonal chests, covered with black velvet and golden rosettes, in which members of the royal family were laid to rest in the funeral chambers set aside for each of the kings in the Royal Mausoleum.

Legends, proverbs and popular sayings reflecting not only aristocratic institutions but also everyday activities are likewise represented in the Ashanti textiles.

Besides goldsmiths and weavers the royal institutions also required potters. Women were not permitted to make anthropomorphic ceramics, vases or pipes for ritual use; they had to confine themselves to commercial or everyday pottery. But in their terra-cotta works, the women, too, show the flair for decoration, instinct for beauty of form and technical skill so characteristic of the Ashanti.

The Ashanti genius for expressing beauty in form is perhaps yet more strikingly revealed in the so-called “Akua Ba” figurines, finely carved in wood with a reddish-





**GOLDEN DEATH MASK**  
of King Kofi of Ashanti is now stored in the Wallace Collection in London. It demonstrates the peerless skill displayed by Ashanti metal craftsmen, for whom gold was a working material par excellence. Nineteenth-century Western envoys to an Ashanti king found gold decorations widely used in his palace and worn by his chief officers of state. The king himself wore necklaces of golden shells and a breast-plate in the form of a full-blown rose and he carried gold castanets which he clicked to attract attention.

© Wallace Collection, London.

brown or black patina and representing the stylized image of beauty. It is believed that pregnant women possessing one are bound to have a child as handsome as these well-proportioned wooden figurines.

Once diverted from the religious uses of ancestor worship and from aiding small groups, struggling to survive, in placating supernatural powers, the Ashanti arts were used exclusively in the service of the royal institutions. The availability of gold, favourable economic relations, power and prestige, and extensive contacts with the outside world account for the luxury, refinement and beauty of the art that grew out of the traditional qualities of the old castes of craftsmen.

The rich arts of the Ashanti kingdom thus take their place among all the other African arts, and the cultures behind them, as the embodiment of an impressive civilization. For was this not a civilization whose exceptional destiny was miraculously revealed to the people? The story is told that in the presence of a great multitude, under lowering clouds and amid resounding claps of thunder, the air grew thick with white smoke and a threelegged golden stool with its gold and silver bells dropped gently from the skies into the lap of the Ashanti king. In later days, neither the Ashanti nation nor its artists were ever likely to forget this supernatural wonder of their kingship's origin.

## SOME BOOKS ON AFRICA

"OLD AFRICA REDISCOVERED" by Basil Davidson is the first book which deals in a general and non-specialist way with the history of Africa south of the Sahara in the 15 or 20 centuries before the colonial period began. Must reading for all those interested in knowing more of the discoveries made in recent years concerning Africa's little known past. Publisher Victor Gollancz Ltd., London; 25/-. American title: "The Lost Cities of Africa," published by Atlantic Monthly Press, Boston 16, Mass., U.S.A.

Other works on specific aspects of Africa's past which may interest readers:

FAGG, W., AND ELISOFFON, E., *The Sculpture of Africa*, 1958 (Thames and Hudson, London, 70/-).

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September / October 1959

- The shortage of doctors in the world

world health



BIRTH OF A DOCTOR  
at Leyden University (see pp. 20 to 21)

Newly-qualified physician at one of the world's most ancient and most famous universities : Leyden.

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There are 1,300,000 doctors for the 2,700,000,000 human beings in the world : one doctor per 700 inhabitants in some countries and one per 180,000 inhabitants in others. This means that at the present time there are immense populations without any medical aid.

"World Health", the magazine published by the World Health Organization, devotes a special number to this dramatic situation.

**world health** can be obtained from the Division of Public Information, World Health Organization, Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland.



# AFRICA'S LARGEST IRON SCULPTURE

This shrine figure is the largest piece of wrought-iron sculpture known from Africa. It is five feet five inches high. The sculpture, very modern in appearance, comes from Dahomey, West Africa, and is said to have been made for the cult of Gu, God of Iron and War. Headdress bears various implements symbolizing the metal-working trade.

Photo Eliot Elisofon, taken from "The Sculpture of Africa" © Thames & Hudson Ltd., London 1958

