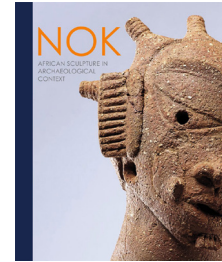


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## Book Review

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**Nok. African Sculpture in Archaeological Context.** By Peter Breunig (ed.). Africa Magna Verlag, Frankfurt a. M. 2014, 303 pp. ISBN 9783937248462. € 49.80 (Softcover).

This book is the English language version of a catalogue published by Africa Magna Verlag in 2013 under the title *Nok: Ein Ursprung afrikanischer Skulptur*. That publication was designed to accompany an exhibition of the same name on show in Frankfurt from 30 October 2013 to 23 February 2014. As stated on the title page, the exhibition highlighted the results achieved so far in a joint research programme conducted by the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt and the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM). The programme, which started in 2005, is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. There are 25 chapters in the English language edition, with contributions by 20 different authors, so obviously this is a team work, edited by Peter Breunig, who is the overall director of the project. The chapters in this edition are identical to those which appeared previously, apart from two in a closing new section called “Beyond Nok”. As stated by Peter Breunig in his Preface, the intention of this volume is to present a preliminary summary of past and current research into the Nok Culture, but naturally the main emphasis is placed on the work of the team since 2005.

There is no getting away from the fact that the project has been conducted against a difficult social and political background. Acting on their own at first, the team were quite unable to locate any Nok site suitable for excavation, until they were introduced to Umaru Yusuf Potiskum, the son of the late Bernard Fagg’s assistant Yusuf Potiskum, a man whose business for many years has been the trade in “Gunkis” — fetishes or idols as the Nok terracottas are referred to in Hausa. He showed the team some of his sites near Janjala, later at Ungwar Kura, and then at other places. Eventually, a research station was established at Janjala, and it was decided to concentrate on a given study area 20 x 15 km or 300 km<sup>2</sup> in all. Within this area, it is estimated that 90 % of the sites have been disturbed

by looting, so in many cases it is a question of making the best of a bad job. Even a looted site can yield some information, and the team have been fortunate to find others which have increased our knowledge of the Nok Culture considerably. The work of the team was halted temporarily in 2013, due to the crisis in Mali, and even though it has now been resumed on a smaller scale, there are obvious risks attached.

Virtually no sites prior to Nok have been found in the region. It is assumed that these people came from elsewhere, probably from the north, and that they spread rapidly through a wooded terrain. In the study area, there are about 250 sites, each 2–4 hectares in size. The existing remains consist for the most part of shallow depressions about 50 cm deep, filled with finds, indicative not of villages but of scattered farmsteads. We do not know if these people had domesticated animals, since all traces of fauna have been destroyed, but almost all the sites have carbonised plant remains, including both cultivated and useful species: *Pennisetum glaucum*, *Vigna unguiculata*, *Canarium schweinfurthii*, and *Vitex doniana*. Since Fagg’s excavations at Taruga, where the remains of 10 smelting furnaces were found, it has been known that the Nok sites are associated with iron working. It is assumed that the furnaces, each about 1 metre in diameter and usually occurring in groups, were situated at a distance from the farmsteads. There are such things as axe blades, but on the whole the number of finished objects is small, suggesting that these served more as status symbols than as tools. Nonetheless, these iron objects are among the earliest known in sub-Saharan Africa, and they strengthen the argument that iron working developed in this region independently.

113 new radiocarbon dates have been obtained, all with a sure provenance from 79 localities. On the basis of these dates alone, three Nok phases have been

distinguished, which in calibrated calendrical years are as follows: Early 1500–900 BC, Middle 900–300 BC, and Late 300–1 BC. The terracottas for which the Nok Culture is most well known are associated with the Middle phase, and it is at this time too that iron working appears. The post-Nok sites (for which there are also TL dates) are characterised by a different pottery style and an absence of terracottas, as well as an increased use of iron, and new domesticates including oil palm and fonio (*Digitaria exilis*).

So far only a few features indicative of settlement pattern have been identified, including a single site with house foundations at Puntun Dutse. There were a number of stone circles 4–8 metres in diameter at this location, but it is indicative of the problems faced by the project that most of them were destroyed before they could be properly examined. The associated finds show, surprisingly enough, that this site belonged to the Early phase of the Nok Culture. The team had noticed stone settings accompanied by pots and beads at Ido and Kurmin Uwa, which seemed to reveal a recurring pattern, and it was suspected that these might be the traces of burial places. The properties of the earth in the vicinity were examined by Klaus-Peter Nagel using the XRF technique. A sample grid was laid out at the second site, and concentrations of calcium and phosphorus were detected. These are interpreted as indications that the burial of a person did in fact take place here.

The most remarkable discovery, however, was that made at Utak Kamuan Garaje Kagoro in 2008. Nine self-contained blocks of finds were found at about 1.5 metres distance from each other, the ground between them being sterile. The excavators believe that each block was originally probably contained within a basket which was sunk into the ground. Each contained jumbled terracotta fragments belonging to several different figures, none of them complete. It is clear that they were destroyed before being buried. “Eine Fragmentierungsortgie”, it sounds more drastic in German. As the authors say, it looks like a ritual process, and helps to explain why we have virtually no complete Nok terracottas (at least, not authentic ones). One of the blocks, Block H, was cased in plaster in 2008 with the intention that it would be removed to Germany for excavation in the laboratory. Due to a dispute, this did not happen until 2011, when it arrived for treatment at the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum Mainz. In the meantime, three poisonous moulds had taken hold beneath the plaster. In order to carry out the dismantlement of the block, therefore, the intrepid excavators Jasmin Munir and Stephan Ritter had to be clothed from head to foot in protective gear. What they found was the same pattern of fragmentation as in the other cases. Identification of a ritual breakage process

at this site (and no doubt others) of course still leaves open the question of what the figures were used for in their previous existence.

In seeking to explain this phenomenon, Breunig and his colleagues are inclined to speak in terms of ancestor worship — “discourse with the ancestors” — or of sacrifice leading to a renewal process. It should be noted that a pattern of breakage and burial of this sort is not confined to Nok. It was demonstrated at Ife by GARLAKE (1974), where at Obalara’s Land he found a group of already damaged terracottas covered with red clay, which had been deliberately buried as such. The site was interpreted as a shrine and is radiocarbon dated to about 1190–1470 AD. This is not to suggest that there is any direct connection between Ife and Nok. As Breunig quite rightly says, “the Nok sculptures did not go into hibernation only to reawaken, 1000 years later, in the form of the Ife sculptures”. Rather, as he puts it, “it appears that many West African societies have shared a latent connection for about 3000 years: they use — independently of one another — sculptures as symbolic expressions of their belief systems”.

The terracottas themselves are abundantly illustrated in this volume, with high quality photographs, and also drawings by Monika Heckner and Barbara Voss. The authors emphasise that the figures were created in a uniform style, the salient characteristics of which are quite well known. Most are of adult men and women, and there are a few basic gestures, such that one can speak of a “typical Nok posture”. A particularly spectacular figure comes from Daji Gwana, skilfully restored by Birgit Frohreich. There are also some human-animal combined figures, which it is assumed have shamanistic significance, where the shamans take on the qualities of the beings into which they are transformed. Noticeable too is the importance given to snakes and lizards, such as a double-headed lizard from Ungwar Kura. Snakes shed their skin, an indication of immortality. Ancestors can appear as snakes, and they have connections to the underworld. In other words, they are “frontier-crossers” between the worlds of the living and the dead. Such ideas are common in Africa, and appear in literature, such as Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant Noir* (1953) where *le petit serpent noir* which appears in his father’s workshop is *l’animal totem du clan des forgerons*.

Once again the German team has thrown light on the significance of these figures by means of the application of scientific techniques. A geochemical analysis conducted by Christina Beck on samples of Nok terracottas and ordinary pottery vessels showed that there were differences between them which cannot be accidental. Both temper and matrix were analysed

by thin sections and XRF respectively. The latter proved particularly revelatory. A total of 17 elements were selected. The results for two of them (vanadium and rubidium) from two sites (Ido and Ungwar Kura) are shown diagrammatically (Figures 22.5 and 22.6). At the two sites, the composition of the terracottas is practically identical, whereas the ordinary potsherds are completely different. In other words, local clays were used for everyday objects, but a single or at least limited sources were used for the terracottas. This is taken as an indication of their centralised production, and helps to explain why over the whole area their style is so homogeneous.

With regard to the exhibition material, this has now all been returned to Nigeria, and is awaiting display at the National Museum in Kaduna. As Peter Breunig

says, it is intended that the work of the team will be continued, in collaboration not only with the NCMM but also the Universities of Jos and Ahmadu Bello Zaria. It is hoped that this will be so, because a project such as this, which combines a clear aim, meticulous fieldwork, and the application of scientific method, is surely what Nigerian archaeology needs.

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### References

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