

CHAPTER
8

HISTORYMAKERS

The Nok Culture

Ancient Artists of Africa

Section 1

"The truth of the matter at present is that we just do not know who the Nok peoples were or how they lived. We have no written records, we have no legends or myths that explain them."—historian E. Jefferson Murphy

In 1936, some tin miners in the central Nigerian village of Nok accidentally unearthed the head of a monkey made of baked clay. That small head was the first clue that a clever, artistic people had thrived in the area long ago. Archaeologists named the people the Nok, after the village near where these artifacts were found.

Less than ten years later, more clay figures were uncovered. A nearby town, Jemaa, revealed a finely shaped human clay head that showed great artistic ability. Nok itself offered even more objects. The two sites might never have been connected, but one worker thought the Jemaa find looked similar to the monkey head found in 1936.

More finds and further study have led to some insights about the Nok. They lived in West Africa from about 500 B.C. to about A.D. 200. Their area of settlement was about 100 miles from north to south and 300 miles east to west in the valleys of the Niger and Benue rivers.

They became the first people to make iron in West Africa around 500 B.C. Researchers have found stone hoes and shallow pottery bowls that had deeply cut patterns on the inside. Scholars conclude that the bowls were used for preparing food. The patterns provided a surface that could be used to scrape tough fibers. These clues suggest that the Nok farmed. They may have also raised cattle. Scientists know more about Nok sculpture than other aspects of Nok life. The figures that they produced have certain traits in common. The heads of Nok figures are about one-third of the overall size of the body—much larger than in real life. Scholars think that it reflects the belief that the head was the center of the person's life force and therefore of the most importance.

Nok artists also put great attention on the head, which had more detail than other parts of the body. Eyes are usually in the shape of triangles or partial circles. In almost every head, a hole has been made for the pupil in the eye. The heads also have long noses with holes for the nostrils. Ears are often of extremely large size. While the human heads have great detail, they are generally not realistic. The use of geometric patterns gives the head a stylized or abstract look. This is not true of animal heads, which are rendered in a true-to-life way. The heads were often made by modeling the clay. Many were also pieced together. The artist created the basic head and then added pieces of clay that represented details such as eyes, ears, or noses. The artists often decorated the head by scoring or cutting it with a pointed stick or toothed comb. Then the heads were polished after they were baked. Still, unanswered questions remain about the Nok. The fact is that historians and archaeologists do not know who the Nok people were or how they lived. There are no written records or myths that might give an understanding of these mysterious people. The Nok sculpture and a few artifacts are the only remnants that tell the story of this ancient culture.

Questions

1. **Summarizing** How did archaeologists become aware of the existence of the Nok people?
2. **Determining Main Ideas** What made researchers conclude that the Nok practiced agriculture?
3. **Making Inferences** Why did the Nok artists make heads as they did?