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THE LOWER NIGER BRONZES

BEYOND IGBO-UKWU, IFE, AND BENIN

PHILIP M. PEEK

ROUTLEDGE

The Lower Niger Bronzes

This book demonstrates that copper-alloy casting was widespread in southern Nigeria and has been practiced for at least a millennium.

Philip M. Peek's research provides a critical context for the better-known casting traditions of Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, and Benin. Both the necessary ores and casting skills were widely available, contrary to previous scholarly assumptions. The majority of the Lower Niger Bronzes, which we know number in the thousands, are of subjects not found elsewhere, such as leopard skull replicas, grotesque bell heads, ritual objects, and humanoid figures. Important puzzle pieces are now in place to permit a more complete reconstruction of southern Nigerian history.

The book will be of interest to scholars working in art history, African studies, African history, and anthropology.

Philip M. Peek is Professor Emeritus at Drew University and a Research Associate at the Smithsonian Institution. He has also previously edited *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, with Kwesi Yankah (Routledge, 2004).

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The Lower Niger Bronzes

Beyond Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, and Benin

Philip M. Peek

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Preface

There is an inevitable sense of *déjà-vu* when one starts a project that really began over fifty years ago. I certainly had no idea that a few photographs I took in 1964 would become the basis for a study that has absorbed me for over six years. During my Peace Corps years in southern Nigeria while teaching English Literature at St. Michael's Teachers Training College in Ole via Ughelli, one of my students invited me to visit his home town, where we met his uncle, the priest of the clan deity Akawa. Although Sam was a practicing Anglican, he was on good terms with his uncle, who willingly brought out two ancient bronze bells (Figure 0.1). I was amazed by these fine bells and was permitted to take a few shaky photographs. Although I was only a novice English Literature teacher, I realized these were truly important objects. A correspondence followed with William Fagg, who agreed that these were works of great significance.

This incident and other personal encounters with Isoko elders and priests led me to eventually choose to study the history of Isoko traditional religion for my PhD. After an absence of five years, I returned to Isoko country and soon visited the priest of Akawa once again. Sadly, he only possessed one of those fine bells; but, curiously, it was the more interesting one, a humanoid horned head bell. On this second visit to Isoko country, every day was spent with elders and priests who still carefully managed their religious lives and tended their small shrines. With an interest I wish I had developed

Figure 0.1 Two Lower Niger bronze bells held by the priest of Akawa, Uzere, Isoko. 1971. Photograph: Philip M. Peek.

earlier, I now found that many shrines housed fascinating copper-alloy cast objects. From more humanoid bell heads to various types of manillas, from a pipe bowl to a small human face, over fifty cast-metal objects were to be found. I learned that one type of shrine, Eri-Anwan, devoted to generalized spirits, was often the resting place for such metal and terracotta objects found in the area. Much as the people respected them, they never claimed that their ancestors had produced them. There were local casters among the Isoko, but these objects were made by spirits.

Although I finished my ethnohistorical study of Isoko traditional religion (Peek 1976), I never returned to those mysterious bronzes except for writing up a rather superficial statement on them (Peek 1980). Together with my old friend Keith Nicklin, who had engaged in far more serious study of copper-alloy works from the Cross River, we returned to the topic with hopes of a more comprehensive study perhaps being able to determine the sites of the "Lower Niger Bronze Industries" (Nicklin 2002; Peek 2002). Sadly, Keith succumbed to cancer. Remaining fascinated by these extraordinary creations and seeking to finally complete work initiated so long ago, I started this investigation. Many have generously aided this work and are cited in the Acknowledgments. Most notable among these is John Picton, with whom I co-wrote an initial statement on the Lower Niger Bronzes and one of the most spectacular forms, the "Osun bell heads" (Peek and Picton 2016).

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1 Introduction

Fagg's Prophecy, Previous Research, and Lower Niger Bronze Forms

The first major presentation of works to which William Fagg attributed the "Lower Niger Bronze Industry" label was his *Nigerian Images* (1963), but this was not the first time such pieces were displayed publicly. While Fagg never intended this label to be permanent, he did imagine a single "industry" or cultural complex to be responsible for these castings.[1] Although he had referred earlier to this corpus that did not seem to fit with other copper-alloy works from Benin, Ife, or Igbo-Ukwu (1952; Fagg and Elisofon 1958), *Nigerian Images* illustrated fourteen exceptional pieces that established a sort of definition of Lower Niger Bronzes (LNBs). These pieces do not reflect the delicate castings found in Igbo-Ukwu burial sites, nor the exquisite realism of the Ife heads or the stately dignity of the royal busts and plaques of Benin. While there are some fascinating correspondences that will be examined, there are virtually no formal features to firmly locate LNBs in these well-known centers. "Lower Niger" identifies the area below the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers and between Nigeria's borders with the Republic of Benin and Cameroon. Virtually all of the LNBs have been associated with this area.

While introducing the LNBs, Fagg was emphatic in his praise of these unusual pieces: "this is no mere miscellany of pieces otherwise unaccounted for, but in my estimation the very pinnacle of Nigerian artistic achievement"; "if the source of the far more sculptural style of the antelope-hunter [see Figure 1.1] can be identified, it may well prove more important than Ife itself"; and, with reference to the fine male head (1963: fig. 59), "among the most beautiful African examples of poetic generalization of the human head" (1963: 39–40).

There are many possible explanations for the uniqueness of these works, which so impressed Fagg. The "freedom of expression" that attracted him could be the result of an apprentice's efforts or work by an accomplished caster simply producing slightly different works, perhaps for a non-Edo patron. For example, as different as the two LNB heads (1963: figs 63 and 69) are – from each other as well as from other court works – they have no parallels outside of Benin and do reflect a number of Benin characteristics. Possibly Fagg felt the vast number of busts, plaques, and other royal cast works dictated that these somewhat different pieces could not be included. I am sure that Fagg never imagined the number of cast-metal works that would eventually be grouped under his rubric. I have tracked down over 1,000 copper-alloy objects that can be attributed to the LNBs. Not all of the pieces that Fagg illustrated in 1963 can be considered LNBs.

Virtually all of those bronzes that Fagg distinguished as different came out of Benin with all the loot from the 1897 Punitive Expedition; therefore, it is indisputable that

Figure 1.1 The Hunter. Trustees of the British Museum (# 1952.11.1), 36 cm high. Note the "second right leg."

Figure 1.2 Mudfish Man. Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliches Museum zu Berlin (# IIIC 10873), 32cm high.
Photograph: Claudia Obrocki.

they were present in Benin City at the end of the nineteenth century. The thousands of cast-metal pieces taken by individuals formed a truly heterogeneous collection of masterpieces and truly minor works (see, for example, catalogs of the time such as Read and Dalton 1899; von Luschan 1919; and Pitt-Rivers 1976). I do not think this mix of quality has ever been commented upon.

Of Fagg's original selection of fourteen pieces, the most striking are probably the three figures: the famous Hunter (1963: fig. 58) (see Figure 1.1), the warrior figure with a square helmet (1963: fig. 62), and, my favorite, the "Mudfish Man" (1963: fig. 70) (see Figure 1.2). He also included two unusual heads, each with very different expressions than most Benin heads (1963: figs 59 and 69). Two vessels are distinguished – a small vase with three human heads (1963: fig. 60) and a pedestal bowl with monkeys on the stem (1963: fig. 63a). Another category includes two small castings of figural groupings perhaps meant as shrine decorations or possibly prestige items. One tableau is of a male and female couple facing a game board with possibly a leopard lying down behind them (1963: fig. 61). The other grouping is of two helmeted hunters with axes following two small elephants (1963: fig. 67).

Fagg's 1963 illustrations also include two very different bells that he calls LNBs. One is a fairly large flared bell with six ram or antelope heads (1963: fig. 63b), while the other is a horned humanoid head bell (1963: fig. 65). Of the final three items, one is a "mask" of an elephant (1963: fig. 64), while another is a "pendant plaque" with

the familiar Benin triad of a central figure bracketed by two attendants (1963: fig. 66). Finally, Fagg has included a very realistic replica of a leopard skull (1963: fig. 68).

If we review each of these fourteen works in the context now available of cast-metal works from throughout southern Nigeria, only two will clearly fit our revised LNB corpus. Both the humanoid head bell and the leopard skull are very similar to a significant number of works that have been found outside of Benin. The comparisons will be developed in separate chapters below. If only because of its unique transformational aspects, the "Mudfish Man" may be ascribed to the LNBs but the importance of mudfish to Benin iconography certainly keeps it close to Benin.

That these works came from Benin does not prove they were cast there because they could have been brought to the capitol as tribute or stolen from elsewhere; but it certainly means that Benin must be our first consideration. Fagg himself offered several possible alternatives. The first such reference in regard to the Hunter is an attribution to "some centre within the limits of the Benin empire. Udo, a small town near Benin with royal connections was suggested. As well this alternative might have been one of the Yoruba towns to the west or north of Benin"; but then he turns to a friend's suggestion "that it may be Igbirra or Igala work, that is, from the region of Idah on the Niger some 90 miles to the northeast of Benin – a region which, with that of the lower Benue may prove crucial in Nigerian art history" (Fagg 1952: 145).

This remained his most explicit estimation of the LNBs' origin, which he extended a few years later when he added "the Bassa-Komo tribes of the Confluence" (Fagg 1960; see also Fagg and Plass 1964: 123). In later publications, as the LNB corpus grew to incorporate the bronzes of Tada and Jebba as well as the distinct Igbo-Ukwu, Andoni Creek, and Forcados River discoveries, he allowed the possibilities of origins from the Yoruba (especially Ijebu-Ode), Igala, Igbira, Igbo, and Ijọ (1963: 40) and later he included Owo. While Fagg continued to hope for archaeological evidence to allow firm attributions for these intriguing works, he never considered the Niger riverain or the Cross River areas as possible sources of LNBs; but, as will be demonstrated, these areas are rich in LNBs.

Turning back to earlier-twentieth-century commentary, it is interesting that colonial government anthropologists offered little information on cast-metal objects although Benin's heritage was well known by then. N.W. Thomas reported that while there were blacksmiths "everywhere," "except for Edo [Benin] itself there appears to be little brasswork, though bracelets of brass, and in some parts broad brass collars, are not infrequent" (1910: 23). A few years later, this conclusion was echoed by P.A. Talbot concerning the Igbo: "Practically no brass-work is done by the Ibom among whom, however iron-work seems to have flourished from earliest times" (1926: 927).

K.C. Murray, first director of antiquities for Nigeria, had a much lower anticipation of future finds than did Fagg. Dark (1975: 98, note 65) quotes Murray: "I still see no evidence for any brass industry in the Lower Niger Region unless the term is taken in relation to the whole River Niger and not to Nigeria alone." I would certainly second Murray here in the sense that the Niger River should have always been considered as an avenue of trade and object dispersal; but, as will be overwhelmingly demonstrated, there can no longer be any question that there were numerous Lower Niger Bronze "Industries."

The only other firmly established groupings of copper-alloy cast art works are Ife and Igbo-Ukwu, which have nothing in common with each other. The famous Ife

heads provide no correspondences with LNBs but there are some important similarities among LNBs to works from Igbo-Ukwu.

Given the decades of analytical discussion of cast-metal works from Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, and Benin, no attempt at summaries of those complexes will be attempted here. Where appropriate correspondences can be found, references to other centers will be made throughout this study. One previously recognized group of copper-alloy pieces does necessitate further comment. This is the wildly heterogeneous "Tsoede Bronzes," so-called because they were said to have been brought to the small villages of Jebba and Tada from Idah (just below the confluence of the Niger and Benue) by Tsoede, the Nupe cultural hero. Over the years, Fagg vacillated about including these works with the LNBs. In fact, the "Tsoede Bronzes" have attracted much speculation, which will be reviewed in Chapter 13.

It is of historical interest to note that several of the key LNBs noted by Fagg were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in their ground-breaking 1935 exhibition of "African Negro Art" (Figure 1.3). The square-helmeted warrior (Fagg 1963: fig. 62) was labeled "figure with bell at neck" (Sweeney 1935: # 249) and the beatific male bust with a lattice-work hat (Fagg 1963: fig. 59) was labeled "man's head" (Sweeney 1935: # 248).

Despite the decades that have passed since Fagg's first identification of this body of work, despite the decades of collecting by museums and individuals of works associated with LNBs, and despite the decades of occasional scholarly commentary, there has never been a comprehensive study of all LNB copper alloy objects. In the following chapters, I will carefully review what little is known about various aspects of the LNBs, such as their alloy compositions and formal features, by surveying all those

Figure 1.3 "African Negro Art," March 18–May 10, 1935; Museum of Modern Art, New York; MOMA Archives IN 39.15. Lower Niger pieces are in foreground.

Photograph: Soichi Sunami.

works in public and private collections that have been (or should be) attributed to LNBs. While fieldwork is incorporated in the following discussions where possible, the major methodology here is, frustratingly, analysis of objects out of context and mostly freed of firm temporal or spatial links.

Previous Research on Lower Niger Bronzes

The vast majority of research and discussion about southern Nigerian copper-alloy cast arts has been devoted to the three major complexes of Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, and Benin. If LNBs are mentioned at all, they are essentially marginalized as incidental works. Even the most impressive of "unclaimed" bronzes, such as those from Jebba and Tada, remain unstudied mysteries.

Nevertheless, when one carefully considers the record, there have been a few publications that shed light on parts of the LNB puzzle in addition to Fagg's initial work. Perhaps the earliest entry was Horton's survey of "brasswork" among the Ijọ of the Niger Delta (1965). In a short research note, Denis Williams (1964) outlined an ambitious research project to study all forms of Yoruba bronze art; in fact, his list of objects parallels this study. Several years later he published a major study of southern Nigerian arts, *Icon and Image* (1974), which included valuable observations on the LNBs. Working from an art historian's perspective, Williams identified five casting "schools": Ife, Benin City, Ijebu-Ode, Abeokuta, and Obo-Aiyegunle (and possibly Oyo), but he did not distinguish the Lower Niger Bronzes as a separate entity because they did not constitute a "school" (1974: 115–119). Frank Willett's survey of the Benin City Museum's holdings includes a number of works that he considers to be LNBs (1973).

My own early research on the Isoko was later augmented by limited comparative study (1976, 1980, 2002). Recently, this work has expanded to a full survey of LNBs (2013, 2015, 2019a), an entry on the *ọvọ/ọfọ* complex (2020), and an article on Osun bell heads with John Picton (Peek and Picton 2016). Nancy Neaher Maas focused primarily on the role of Awka smith-casters (1976, 1979, 2019), lost wax casting along the Benue River Valley (2011), and various LNB bell types (2020). Keith Nicklin contributed the most thorough research in his study of copper-alloy works from the Cross River and Andoni Creek areas (1980, 1982, and 2002). He also co-authored two valuable studies with Fleming (1980, 1982). Another very helpful entry in *The Art of Metal in Africa* (Brincard 1982) was Carol Ann Lorenz' valuable review of LNB bell types. Kathy Curnow has contributed significantly based on her work in Benin City and among the Itsekiri (2007, 2015). Perk Foss published photographs of LNBs (2004). Although collectively these studies have treated many of the LNB sub-groups, there are many forms, such as the leopard skulls, scepter heads, and humanoid bell heads, that have never been studied before.

Others have commented on these anomalous bronzes, such as G.I. Jones: "The bronzes referred to at the beginning of this section and classified as a Lower Niger bronze industry seem to be of considerable age and, unless data to the contrary are forthcoming, are better treated as archaeological antiques rather than as modern (i.e., 19th century and later) sculpture" (1984: 26). More recent studies have also noted the LNBs in passing (e.g., Cole and Dierking 2012: 63–64), but most references, especially in labels for illustrated examples in surveys of southern Nigerian copper-alloy works,

are only broad generalizing dismissals. Despite the relative lack of serious scholarship on LNBs, it must be noted that quite literally hundreds of works attributable to this grouping exist in private and public collections, but tracking them down is no easy task. And once "discovered," they are often mislabeled.[2]

Luckily, many of the Lower Niger Bronzes are scattered in museum collections and thus available for study. Of the numerous museums that have facilitated this research, the largest collections are in the British Museum; Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren; National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; Fowler Museum at University of California, Los Angeles; and the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin.

Lower Niger Bronze Forms

Not even Fagg in his enthusiasm for the vitality of these objects realized the diversity of forms. I have not included spears, swords, or knives in this survey, although they might well be considered LNBs as well. Each of the following chapters will review those works held in private and public collections and what little is known of their provenance, composition, age, and use.

The study starts with the most fundamental forms: coiled and elaborated manillas. While the ultimate sources of the manilla form are still not decided, although there is strong evidence for an African origin, many of these objects found expression in myriad shapes and sizes. Vessels and replicas, often skeumorphs, are reviewed next in Chapter 5 because these primarily involve the replication of natural objects, such as calabashes, and of ritually important objects, such as *ọvọ/ọfọ* and leopard skulls. Actually, these latter two categories are so large they are treated in separate chapters. Chapter 6 is devoted to perhaps the single most important ritual item rendered in cast copper alloy, the *ọvọ/ọfọ* complex involving ancestral authority and personal integrity, which is enhanced by being transformed into a bronze object.

Chapter 7 focuses on small humanoid figures from the Cross River and elsewhere as well as larger works. Recall that Fagg's first praises were directed to "The Hunter" (see Figure 1.1), a magnificent casting now in the British Museum. Other images range from strange humanoid figures to horse and rider statues. Cast-metal faces and masks are treated in Chapter 8. These are popular items in Benin court regalia, but are not well understood outside of Benin. The next chapter contains some of the most unique of the Lower Niger Bronzes – leopard skull replicas and small images of hippos that are found nowhere else in Nigeria. These leopard skulls are cast replicas in both extremely realistic detail and fanciful abstracted forms. As with other LNB forms, the presence of an example among the Igbo-Ukwu burial finds gives a time depth of at least a millennium. Pendant plaques are discussed in Chapter 10 and exemplify the difficulties in studying works with so little ethnographic data available. Popular in Benin, they lack context outside the metropolis.

The most numerous of LNBs are bells and are one of the most iconic forms. Chapter 11 is based on the many and varied bell forms found throughout southern Nigeria and in collections around the world. While a few might have European prototypes, the vast majority are definitely local in origin as well as use. There are regional sub-types of bells and some can be safely located, such as the Igala bells (Neaher Maas 2011). Not always rung as we might expect, they are often hung in groups on

leather bags of priests and elders. In fact, they are so numerous that I have separated bell heads that include the extraordinary phantasmagoric "Osun Bell Heads" (Peek and Picton 2016).

Chapter 12 focuses on scepters and staffs, which are found in different media throughout southern Nigeria. Of special interest here is the "Aro Knot," a unique knot form that is found in a variety of contexts and has not been studied before. Next, three highly problematic categories are discussed: the "Tsoede Bronzes," "Enowe's Girdle," and "Death Rings." The heterogeneous collection of human and animal figures found in two small towns on the Niger River have baffled scholars for decades. These include some of the finest copper-alloy castings in all of the continent. "Enowe's Girdle" is yet another puzzler from the non-traditional works found in Benin. It is a series of eight artfully cast open-work bars with birds and human heads, which has been linked to one of the Benin Kingdom's greatest warriors, Enowe. Its tale of discovery and loss exemplifies the dilemmas of LNB research. This chapter ends with a brief review of the still mysterious "Death Rings," which depict vultures and decapitated humans. Last, there is a summation chapter reviewing the most significant scientific data and important motifs with final thoughts on the meaning of these complex creations.

Notes

1 Frank Willett (1973: 11) was the first to "pluralize" Fagg's designation as it had become obvious that there were a variety of casting traditions involved (see also Peek 1980).
2 Another cautionary note: all measurements presented here must be taken as approximations. Many objects that I saw in publications and museums had varying measurements.

2 Historical and Ethnographic Background

Cultural Ebb and Flow

Origins involve questions of a difficult nature. Where and when does an artifact originate in terms of concept, production, and use? Each aspect can be an independent factor. Complex trade networks, the fission and fusion of ethnic groupings, as well as the ebb and flow of production techniques and traveling metal casters all contribute their own dynamics to this research. Answers to these questions are even more problematic when one is engaged in archival research such as this one with only limited field work to draw on.

There are no absolute geographical boundaries for the Lower Niger Bronzes. In fact, that is one of our problems – these virtually indestructible metal objects are relatively small and mobile with no limits to their physical distribution. Nevertheless, our area of primary concern is centered along the Niger and Benue Rivers in central Nigeria, the Niger Delta to the south, and the Cross River Basin in the southeast. Thereby, the major ethnic groups involved are (as they are distinguished today) the Yoruba (mostly northeastern groups), the Edo and Igala in the center, the Igbo in the east, Delta peoples such as the Isoko, Urhobo, and Ijọ, and southeastern peoples such as the Andoni and Yako. Other ethnic groups will be noted in various chapters that follow, such as those in the Benue River Valley. Movement within this broadly defined area was extensive in the past despite the dense rainforest. Especially considering the complex network of rivers and creeks through which much trade and migration occurred, there was an historical picture of constant flux. For example, the Cross River and its tributaries provide links to the Benue River Valley peoples as well as eastwards to Cameroon.

There may be some truth to Mockler-Ferryman's disparaging observation about southern Nigerian history: "What relation one tribe bears to another will probably never be known, and the most that we can hope to do is to forget the past and deal with the various peoples as we find them" (1902: 222). Indeed, part of the problem that faces us is that how peoples are today may not be at all how they were centuries ago, either in terms of location or ethnic identity. To cite but one observation, not only do we need to distinguish between the "owners of the land" and those who arrived later (often becoming the rulers), but there is the possible heterogeneity of the autochthonous population (Picton 2018). Nevertheless, we still must face the past in order to understand the present.

Ironically, the Lower Niger Bronzes in their desired condition of permanence have outlived their owners and creators. Thus, we must imagine their meaning