



WORKS of ART from BENIN CITY. By C. H. READ and
O. M. DALTON.

[WITH PLATES XVII-XXII.]

THE city of Benin lies about seventy-three miles from the mouth of the Formoso or Benin river. It was the capital of the kingdom of the same name, and was regarded as the political and religious metropolis of a wide area containing several provincial towns, of which Gwato, the river port, was commercially the most important. The Bini, like all the negro tribes, appear to have been pushed down from the north by the impact of more warlike peoples; but, once arrived at their present seats, the nature of the country enabled them not only to maintain themselves, but to extend their influence along the rivers and the coast to Warri, Badagry and Lagos. Though their language differs somewhat from that of the inhabitants of Yoruba and Dahomey, in manners, customs and religion these peoples must be regarded as integral parts of a single ethnological whole.¹

Benin was one of the first important negro kingdoms which became known to Europeans, and it looms large in the history of early travel. Discovered at the close of the fifteenth century, in the sixteenth and seventeenth it was styled "The great Benin," and was an important market for European commerce. It then seems to have entered upon a period of decadence, only terminated by the episodes of the present year, when the capital was overthrown and its site doomed to lie waste for ever.

Although the present orientation of Benin seems to be towards the south, it may well have had indirect relations with the north and east from very early time. On that ancient water-way the Niger, near the lower course which it lies, stand the once imperial cities of Jenné and Timbuctoo; the former the home of a race supposed to have derived its origin from Egypt, and to have maintained relations with that country; the latter the Nijni-Novgorod of North-West Africa, on which caravan routes from Morocco and Tripoli converge. And even before these empires arose, who can say what shreds and patches of Mediterranean civilization may not have drifted with the drifting peoples far into the darkness of the interior? But

¹ R. F. Burton: "Abeokuta," I., p. 222. London, 1863.



whatever the antiquity of such trade-routes may be, they emerged as great arteries of commerce when the Arabs and the Moors penetrated the Sahara to the Soudan, and sold pepper and slaves on the Mediterranean seaboard. To what extent Benin may have been affected by such traffic it is now almost impossible to determine. It is sufficient to recall the fact that at a period previous to the first European voyages, the far interior was traversed by a network of ways connecting the negro countries with the northern inland sea and with Eastern Africa, and that it contained markets frequented by merchants representative of various races and lands. The belt of states lying to the north of the Guinea Coast, Borgu and Bornou rich in horses, Sokoto and the commercial district of Haussaland, would all be possible conductors of foreign influence ; and that trade flowed regularly along this line towards the east we learn from Leo Africanus, who, at the beginning of the sixteenth century descended from Morocco to Jenné and Timbuctoo, passing thence through Kano and Bornou, to a point somewhere to the east of Lake Tchad.

If we turn now to the southern side and to the Gulf of Guinea we have something more definite than conjecture to record. Dismissing as too remote for our purpose the old or disputed stories of Necho and Hanno, of the Genoese in the thirteenth century, and the Normans of Dieppe in the fourteenth, we find that the coast of Benin was first passed by two Portuguese captains¹ in the year 1470 A.D.

But though one Sequeira is said to have discovered Benin in 1472² it seems that the interior was not explored until about fifteen years later, when the first visit to Benin city was made by Alonso d'Aveiro, who is said to have brought back not only "pepper with a taile," but also an ambassador from the King of Benin to King John II of Portugal, asking that missionaries might be sent to his capital. The request is said to have been due to interested motives, and may have been immediately suggested by d'Aveiro himself, or by the King's previous knowledge of European power, derived through native trade to the Gold Coast, where Portugal had been established for some years.

This early ambassador is responsible for the story that the kings of Benin received their investiture from a powerful monarch dwelling some hundreds of leagues towards the east, and either himself called Ogané or inhabiting a city of that

¹ João de Santarém and Pedro de Escobar. Major: "Life of Prince Henry the Navigator," p. 328. London, 1868.

² Antonio Galvano: "The Discoveries of the World," Hakluyt Soc. London, 1892, p. 75.

name.¹ This monarch is reported to have sent to each new king of Benin as insignia of his office, a cross, a staff, and a cup, all of shining brass. When we remember that at this period Africa was the home of all marvels and the seat of the empire of Prester John, we shall not be surprised to learn that the Portuguese found in these statements a confirmation of their favourite geographical dream. It may well be that the ambassador's picturesque tale of inland intercourse may have an actual foundation in fact, and that relations of some kind or other did exist between the negroes of Guinea and some of the peoples of Eastern Africa.² The sequel appears to have been that a mission did go to Benin, but that it met with little success, and was withdrawn in the following reign.

Between this time and the middle of the next century, isolated adventurers may well have gone up into the interior, men perhaps in some cases possessing mechanical skill, who, like Bultfinch Lamb³ and some Portuguese craftsmen in Dahomey two centuries later, would have been highly appreciated at the native court. But it was after 1550 that the tide of commerce began to set strongly in this direction, the Portuguese having in 1536 abandoned their claims to exclusive trading rights on the Guinea coast.⁴ It was now that our own countrymen began to fit out expeditions, several of which reached Benin before Queen Elizabeth died. But the leaders of these expeditions were not literary men, and they add little to our knowledge of the place and people. The quaint description which Hakluyt gives of the voyage of Windham and Pinteado (1553) forms one of the most amusing narratives of sixteenth century travel.

The first detailed picture of Benin city was derived from Dutch sources, and published in De Bry's compilation.⁵ The narrative, illustrated by plates by Theodore De Bry, is evidently based on accounts derived from eye-witnesses, and is a fount of information freely drawn upon by other

¹ Major, *op. cit.*, p. 387, and João de Barros, A. Asia, Decade I, Part I, Book III, chap. 4.

² See the remarks of Mr. R. B. N. Walker, in the discussion following this paper. There are certain points about the decorative art of Abyssinia which resemble the art of Benin. The cross worn on the neck by some of the cast figures looks more like an Oriental than a Latin cross. The custom of circumcision also appears to have been carried out in a similar way in both countries.

³ W. Smith: "New Voyage to Guinea," p. 176. London, 1744.

⁴ Anderson: "History of Commerce," vol. i, p. 365.

⁵ "India Orientalis," Part VI. Published in German, Latin, and French at Frankfort-on-the-Main about 1600 A.D. by the brothers de Bry. The original Dutch account of Benin is by Peter de Marces. The German and Latin translations are by Artus, of Dantzic. In giving references to the "India Orientalis," de Bry's name is used for the sake of convenience.



writers, often without acknowledgment. The description of Van Nyendael, another Dutchman, appeared about a hundred years later to share a similar fate. Van Nyendael reached Benin in 1702, and his account is published at length in Bosman's "Description of Guinea." Other accounts by Dapper, Villault, Barbot and others are less fruitful in original observation; and it is not until the beginning of our own century, when the glories of Benin had long been on the wane, that we get narratives which furnish us with many details connected with works of native art. Of these, that of Lieutenant King¹ in 1820, that of Captain Fawcner in 1825,² and that of Messrs. Moffat and Smith in 1838³ are especially deserving of notice. It may be mentioned that Belzoni had ere this met with his death at Gwato, and that Sir Richard Burton,⁴ who has left an exceedingly valuable description, was at Benin in 1862. Coming to more recent years, we find that the city was visited in the present decade by an official of the Niger Company, and by a member of a private firm; while Captain Gallwey of the East Lancashire Regiment went up on a mission in 1892. The story of the final expedition needs no recapitulation here.

In reviewing the history of European exploration, we must assign a pre-eminent position to the Portuguese. Not only did they precede the English, the Dutch, and the French, but here, as elsewhere, they seem to have possessed a peculiar power of adapting themselves to the conditions of tropical life. Even their slave traffic between Elmina and the districts about the Rio Forçados seems to have conduced to closer relations with the natives than those enjoyed by other European peoples, and in the sixteenth century traders appear to have settled down upon the banks of that river.⁵ The first English expedition, led to the city by a native of Portugal, found in Benin a king who had been brought up from his youth to speak the Portuguese tongue. And at the commencement of the seventeenth century, when the Portuguese were beginning to recede before their more energetic rivals on the coast, we are told that many of them retreated up the country, and, intermarrying with the natives, were able to place difficulties in the way of explorers, and largely control the inland commerce.⁶ They are said to have had chapels near their houses and to have been energetic in making proselytes. Towards the close of the same century a

¹ "Journal des Voyages," XIII, p. 313. Paris, 1822.

² "Narrative of Capt. J. Fawcner's Travels, &c.," London, 1837.

³ "Journ. R. Geog. Soc.," vol. xi, 1841, p. 190.

⁴ *Ibid.* "Fraser's Magazine," Feb., March, and April, 1863. "My Wanderings in West Africa," by a F.R.G.S. Also "Cornhill Magazine," 1850.

⁵ "India Orientalis," Part VI, chap. 51.

⁶ Villault in Astley's collection, in, p. 382. London, 1715.

regular mission was established at Warri, traces of which are still believed to exist.¹ Burton, commenting on the permanent effect produced by the Portuguese, notes that even in 1862 the old men could speak a kind of Africo-Lusitanian.

According to Sir Ralph Moor's report,² Captain Boisragon's book, "The Benin Massacre," and Commander Bacon's work, "Benin; the City of Blood," Benin city was a rambling town divided into two parts by a broad avenue. On the south side of this was the king's quarter, consisting of a number of successive courts, and once much larger than our expedition found it. On the north side were the houses of the lesser chiefs and people; but the whole was in a state of decay, so that the town had become little better than a large and scattered village. The gradual process of degeneration had been marked by successive travellers, and was accelerated by the evil effects of sedition and civil war. The city had probably seen its best days before 1600, though it can hardly have ever resembled a large European capital with towers and spires—the guise in which a plate accompanying Ogilby's description presents it to our view.³ The palace had not escaped the general decay: several parts of it appear to have been disused, and in the once extensive stables no horses were to be found. Fawcner in 1825 saw three solitary horses belonging to the king which no one was bold enough to ride; and these may have been almost the last of the great numbers which the city must at one time have contained.

The houses in general had clay walls and palm-leaf roofs. If large, they had several courts, and some may have had outer verandahs.⁴ The rooms had no windows but had flat roofs with a central aperture. Under this opening there was often a tank to receive the rain-water, which was conveyed away through a hole in one corner, while in the centre was placed a fetish, such as a cone of clay or half-buried pot of water. This seems to be the foundation of the report that the Benin and Yoruban house had an atrium and impluvium after the Roman fashion. Burton goes so far as to conjecture that this style of architecture may have actually been derived from the Roman colonies of North Africa.⁵

Besides the private places of worship, which were in alcoves at the ends of the rooms, there were seven large Ju-Ju compounds not far from the palace, each two or three acres in extent, surrounded by mud walls, and with a pent roof at one

¹ "Fraser," 1863, p. 288 note.

² Blue Book, "Africa," No. 6, 1897.

³ "Africa," London, 1670. See also Dapper, ed. 1676.

⁴ De Bry, Part VI, chap. 55.

⁵ "Fraser," 1863, p. 278, and Fawcner, *op. cit.*, pp. 32 and 71.



end. Under this roof was a long altar of clay, on which stood the carved ivory tusks supported at the base by human heads of cast metal. On the altars were maces for killing victims—possibly only those connected with the royal blood, who, as in Dahomey, may have been first stunned, and not decapitated straight off like common folk.¹

It is important to note that in 1702 Van Nyendael saw in the palace eleven tusks, supposed to represent the king's gods,² and supported in this identical manner; while in 1820 Lieutenant King saw eight or ten before one of the façades, arranged on each side of the central door, and with the points turned to the wall. Tusks were found in fetish houses in several towns, as also were cast metal and wooden heads, life-sized wooden birds, and sticks surmounted by a carved hand with pointing index. The hand and arm are frequently represented on metal objects and are either cast or chased.

The palace itself had several points of interest. It seems to have had in the centre of one side a pyramidal tower 30 or 40 feet high, which is remarked by several travellers, and caused Captain Fawckner to compare the whole building to a British shot factory.³ From the top of this tower was fixed a cast metal snake, the head of which came down to the ground, while the body was as thick as that of a man. Lieutenant King was told in 1820 that this snake had been there for centuries, and this may be true, for Van Nyendael evidently saw more than one snake cast in metal on different parts of the roof. It may be noticed that where the snake occurs it is usually represented head downwards. When the city was entered this year, a similar snake was also observed on the roof of the palaver house.

Some of the rooms had transverse beams covered with metal plates ornamented with divers figures. This peculiarity had also been observed by earlier visitors, for it is mentioned by Dapper,⁴ who speaks of pillars cased in metal, "on which are engraved their victories, and which are always kept very bright." It is possible that the allusion here may be to thin plates of brass with figures executed in repoussé work, although another explanation may perhaps be suggested. Wood seems to have entered more largely into the construction of the palace than into that of ordinary houses; indeed Fawckner speaks as if the whole of one part were wooden. In the interior decoration native cloths were largely employed.

The king of Benin lived in the usual atmosphere of a West

¹ Sir R. Moor, "Report," p. 45.

² Bosman's "Descr. of Guinea," in Pinkerton, vol. xvi, p. 535.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁴ Ed. Amsterdam, 1686, p. 308.

African court. His title was *Obba*, and he was an object of adoration to his subjects; on this fact his power may have largely depended.¹ Under him were the captain of war, who seems to have resided in a suburb, and possibly two or three other great chiefs, who were his principal advisers. Below these were the great body of chiefs or "homograns," from whose number the principal public officers and local governors were taken. Then came the *fiadors*, or brokers, and the subordinate functionaries, then the commonalty, and finally the slaves. The sign of nobility and also of office was a coral necklace placed round the recipient's neck by the king himself, sometimes with great solemnity, at a festival called the coral feast: to lose this necklace was death. Coral was highly valued, and a man's rank seems to have been in proportion to the amount he was allowed to crowd upon his person. The queen-mother sometimes played a great part at the court, and the king's wives were exceedingly numerous.²

In the sixteenth century the more important chiefs were wont, as De Bry tells us, to ride side-saddle upon led horses, a fact which is now borne out by better evidence than that supplied by his rather fanciful plate. They were supported by retainers, who held over their heads either shields or umbrellas, and accompanied by a band of musicians playing on ivory horns, gong-gongs, drums, harps, and a kind of rattle.

Of costume it is difficult to say much in view of the multiplicity of fashions and the necessity for a careful comparison of all available materials. A point which should be noticed is the extraordinary variety in the style of dressing and covering the head; in this respect the remark in De Bry's Latin edition, "*quot homines tot sensus*," seems perfectly accurate, and in a group of fifty people very few would be seen with the same kind of headdress.³ Coral beads were sometimes threaded in the hair⁴ or attached to the hat; the "crown" of the King of Warri was of the latter kind, and 3 feet high.⁵ In the manufacture of caps the skins of leopards and other animals were used, and leopards' skins were also worn on the body. The following is Fawcaker's description of the king's special messenger sent out to greet him: "He wore a sort of short petticoat from the waist down to the knees of a cloth . . . resembling our white bunting. This encircled his loins and set off like an ancient dame's hooped petticoat⁶:"

¹ Burton in "Fraser," p. 414.

² On the "constitution" of Benin, *vide* Burton *loc. cit.* 288 note.

³ "Ind. Orient.," Part VI, chap. x, and Plate XXVI, where different coiffures are assigned to different ranks and professions.

⁴ Fawcaker, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁵ King, *loc. cit.*, p. 318.

⁶ Cf. Burton, *loc. cit.*, 414, 283.



the upper part of the body was naked, as well as the legs and feet. His neck was ornamented with strings of red coral: in his hand he held a leather fan."¹ And this is a description of the king in 1820: "The king came in clothed after the fashion of the country and wearing on his head a large round hat ornamented with gold lace. One of his arms was extended in a horizontal direction,² and supported by a great officer of state. The nail of one finger on each hand was of prodigious length, to show that his exalted rank placed him above all necessity of working for his living."³

To the fact that the king's arms were supported by attendants we shall have occasion to recur. Meanwhile we may remark that the same ceremony was observed by Fawckner five years afterwards, and that the queen-mother received a similar mark of respect from her women. 'The same honour was paid to the captain of war.

Warriors appear to have worn thick clothing on the upper part of the body, especially a kind of surcoat of leopard-skin, often terminating in long pendants fitted with small bells. The weapons used were bows and arrows, swords and spears, with long shields for defence, apparently of rather slender construction in wattlework, and faced with metal plates: on none of the castings in the British Museum does a gun seem to be placed in the hands of a native. The people have nearly always been branded as cowards, and second-rate fighting-men.⁴

The social order rested on a basis of slavery, the slaves being largely drawn from the Sobo country to the east of Benin.⁵ The Bini themselves were fond of trade, and a very large market was held in the city. All commercial transactions with Europeans were carried on by officials or brokers, called *Fiadors*—a word derived from the Portuguese—who went down to Gwato and bought cargoes on behalf of the king. They seem to have had some social status, and to have been invested with the coral collar.

The objects most in demand from Europe were stuffs, metal vessels, beads, horse-tails, and pieces of ring-money called *manillas*, which seem to have been exported as early as the sixteenth century,⁶ and before cowries were first brought round the Cape from the Maldive Islands. The Bini must have been somewhat hampered in trade by the fact that the sea forbade them to cross water.⁷

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 82.

² Cf. Burton, *loc. cit.*, 414 and 286.

³ King, *loc. cit.*, 315.

⁴ Rosman, *loc. cit.*, p. 531.

⁵ Folsomen, "Benin Massacre," p. 14. London, 1897.

⁶ Hakluyt, vol. ii, Part II, p. 52.

⁷ Blue Book, p. 1.

Religion as such lies rather outside the sphere of the present paper. It was of the usual West African type, especially similar to that of Yoruba and Dahomey, with plentiful sacrifice of the living to the interests of the dead. Various animals seem to have been regarded with veneration, and the "fetish" practices dominated the daily life of the people. Snakes, leopards, crocodiles, fish, birds, and heads of oxen, are all represented on the works of art.¹

The panels which are our principal subject, form part of a series of about three hundred which are now in the British Museum, at present as a loan from the Foreign Office, but eventually the greater part of them will probably remain there as the property of the trustees. The history of their coming home is this. When it was announced that Benin had been taken and that many curious objects had been discovered there, official representation was made to the Government on behalf of the British Museum, so as to secure at any rate some of the specimens, and samples of these tablets were in consequence sent from the coast, as well as some other objects destined for the Queen. It was recommended that any other such tablets should be sent home, rather than be disposed of on the coast, and eventually the series now at the Museum arrived at the Crown Agent's, and subsequently it was arranged that they should be shown at the Museum.

Their appearance seemed to point to their originally having been buried, for they were, and many of them still are, covered with a fine red earth, in some to such an extent that the details could not be made out. It is not easy to understand why they are covered with this earth, but it seems certain that they were not buried, for Major Gallwey in a letter written just before he went out again, says, "The plaques were found heaped up anyhow on the floor of an empty house in the king's compound. None of them were hanging up nor were any buried. They appeared to be simply thrown in a heap and uncared for. As they all came from the king's compound, it would appear that they were not public property, and one can only suppose that they had been handed down from king to king for many successions, their value being evidently an unknown quantity." This is the only account of their finding that we have, and it effectually destroys any hope that a clue to their origin or use might be found in Benin itself, and we are thus thrown back upon the tablets themselves to solve their own mystery.

¹ Burton in "Fraser," 278; "Abeckuta," vol. i, p. 222. Ellis, "Ewe Speaking Peoples," etc.

It need scarcely be said that at the first sight of these remarkable works of art we were at once astounded at such an unexpected find, and puzzled to account for so highly developed an art among a race so entirely barbarous as were the Bini, and it must be confessed that the latter problem has not yet been solved.

The whole of the tablets are cast in moulds, and to those who are familiar with castings in metal, it will be clear that it is no exaggeration to call these highly developed. The only added tooling upon any of them is apparently the punched diaper, with which the background of nearly all is covered, and the ornament of a similar kind upon the dresses, bodies, or weapons of the figures. It may be that the faces and smoother surfaces have been tooled over, but until the very tenacious coating of red earth is cleaned off, it is not easy to speak with certainty as to this. The relief of some of the parts is very high, in many instances portions of the figures standing quite clear of the background, and it would seem as if the artist who modelled the originals had set himself to put as many difficulties as possible in the way of the caster. All of these difficulties have, however, been overcome with a certainty and skill which only long practice of a familiar art could produce. This alone, it may be mentioned in passing, goes to prove that at whatever period the objects now before us may have been made, they were produced by a people long acquainted with the art of casting metals. The method by which the tablets were produced can only be that known as the "*cire perdue*" process. By no other is it conceivable that so much extravagant relief and elaborately undercut detail could be represented with success. This process is probably familiar to most of the Fellows, but can be described in very few words. The model is first made in wax, and every part of its surface is covered with fine clay, and the whole work is eventually hidden in a mass of clay. An outlet is then made for the wax to escape, and the mass is heated until all the wax has been melted out, leaving of course a mould of exactly the design of the wax in its original state. The metal being poured in, fills every hollow left by the wax. What measure of success has attended the operation cannot of course be known until the clay is broken away to show the metal, and it will be obvious that only one casting can be made from the wax. Subsequent copies must afterwards be made with piece moulds from the first cast in metal. This peculiarity of the "*cire perdue*" process accounts for the fact, that while in several cases there are practically duplicate panels, in no instance are any two identical, the details always presenting some differences. As an instance of the sound apprenticeship that these savage metal-workers

must have served, it may be mentioned that wherever a projection of any size is seen on the front of a panel, a corresponding hollow is found on the back, thus at once lessening the weight and economising the metal.

This "*cire perdue*" process is that by which many of the finest Italian bronzes of the best period were produced, and we thus find the Benin savages using with familiarity and success a complicated method which satisfied the fastidious eye of the best artists of the Italian renaissance.

The panels vary in size, the largest being about 20 inches by 15 inches and the smallest about one quarter of this area. They seem to have been all made for the same purpose, as if to fit on a series of pilasters or on a beam. On Plate XIX, Fig. 1, may be seen one instance of a possible use of them, where they, or something like them, appear on the decoration of doorposts. Nearly all of them have been fixed up by large nails, as may be seen by the holes left where the nails have been roughly driven through. The want of regard for the designs, shown by the careless way in which the holes have been made, might be brought forward as an argument that they were used in this manner at a date long subsequent to their manufacture. But this belongs rather to the region of hypothesis.

The tablets or plaques, though by far the most numerous, show only one side of the art of bronze casting in Benin; the artificers were equally skilful in casting in the round, and the objects brought home comprise human heads, elaborate cylindrical pedestals for the equally elaborate tusks which represented their gods, armlets, and many articles of minor importance. Probably the most artistic and technically perfect of all the castings in the round is the really charming head of a girl,¹ with a reticulated conical head-dress, for which the Museum is indebted to the liberality of Sir William Ingram, Bart., who presented this as well as a very fine bronze stand for a tusk.

These tusks were remarkable both for their intricate carving and, in some instances, for their great size. In one case a tusk measured 7 feet 11 inches along the curve, in these days, I believe, a very unusual length. A considerable number of them were sold on the coast and afterwards disposed of at a City sale. The British Museum could not at the time buy more than one of them, from lack of funds, and two or three more would be welcome additions. It must be confessed, however, that the tusks present fewer variations of design than the bronzes; and the character of the carving is not novel, though many of the designs have not been hitherto known. The carving

¹ See p. 382.

upon them cannot at all compete with the modelling of the bronzes. The wax used for the latter presented no difficulty to the artist, who could easily produce a smooth rounded surface. The ivory carving, on the other hand, is not only inferior to the bronzes, but inferior also to much of the carving seen in the tusks produced further south, in Loango, for instance.

So far as the objects themselves furnish us with evidence, there would seem to be no difference in date of production between the tusks and the bronzes. The symbolism is much the same, as are also the dresses and other details. The tusks themselves show signs of considerable age, and we know more-over from the account of Van Nyendael that the tusks were in the city in the seventeenth century. This brings us to the question of the period at which these objects were produced. On Plate XVII is seen a European with a matchlock, in the costume of the middle of the sixteenth century, the details showing a familiarity with the dress that could scarcely be found at any time far distant from that in which the costume was daily before the artist's eyes. It would scarcely be reasonable, in fact, to think that so accurate a figure was produced in any other way than direct from the original. If it be so, we have a limit of date on one side, say the beginning of the reign of Elizabeth. It then becomes a question whether all of the castings were made at the same time. Another of the Europeans has what may perhaps be a flint-lock in his hand, and this would point to a later date for some of them. Again a large number of the figures of natives wear a well-marked dress, a kind of surcoat with the lower part of the front representing a leopard's face, and a dress of this pattern is in the Museum, from the spoils of one of the officers in the expedition. This coat was the garment of a modern Benin warrior, and though there is no proof that the pattern has not been in use in Benin for three centuries, yet its being in use at the present day is a fact which renders clear proof of its antiquity desirable. Many of the weapons, wands of office, and other objects represented on the tablets are also found in actual use in Benin. Thus the evidence available would seem to show that whereas the earliest date at which we can show the tablets to have been made is the middle of the sixteenth century, perhaps with the help of the Portuguese, there is a possibility that the manufacture continued later, though for how long we cannot at present say. Casting of an inferior kind continues down to the present time.

The term bronze has been used for the metal in which the tablets are cast, but it must not be imagined that they are all

of true bronze, *i.e.*, copper with a percentage of tin. Some of them are certainly of brass. On this point, however, one Fellow, Mr. Gowland, will speak with more authority.

In conclusion it is right that the thanks of the Institute and of all interested in its objects should be given to Sir Ralph Moor, K.C.M.G., Her Britannic Majesty's Consul-General and Commissioner for the Niger Coast Protectorate. But for his prompt and friendly action these very interesting monuments of a lost art might have been dispersed over the globe, instead of forming, as they now do, an important collection so large and various as to furnish a complete history of the dresses, weapons, and ceremonies of the Benin natives.

NOTE.—The foregoing brief account is intended merely as a preliminary sketch of the subject, which the writers hope to treat in a more exhaustive manner in an official publication.

Mr. W. GOWLAND, F.S.A., read the following remarks: Through the kindness of Mr. Read and Mr. Dalton, the authors of the preceding paper, I have been permitted to examine many of the specimens of the art castings from Benin, and to make a chemical analysis of fragments of four of the plaques.

An examination of the greater number of those in the British Museum by means of the touchstone showed that they consisted chiefly of two distinct types of copper alloys, one embracing mixtures of copper, zinc, and lead, and the other, mixtures of copper, lead and tin. The former may be termed "brasses" and the latter "bronzes"; but in neither have any definite proportions of the constituent metals been adhered to, and some of the castings contain both zinc and tin. This, however, is just what might be expected, and what indeed we find in most old metal-work, owing to defective castings, and old broken objects being melted up together, regardless of their composition, and recast. The plaques are generally of bronze, and the statuettes, with a few exceptions, of brass.

It by no means, however, follows that although these two classes of objects differ in composition they also differ in age. For, as the copper-lead-tin bronze is much easier to cast than the copper-zinc-lead brass, especially in the forms of the thin plaques, it would always be employed in making them whenever available.

The following analyses were made of a typical specimen of each type of the alloys.

PLAQUES FROM BENIN.

	Copper-zinc-lead-alloy.	Copper-lead-tin-alloy.*
Copper	78·50 per cent.	84·76 per cent.
Tin	·57 "	2·75 "
Lead	5·85 "	8·38 "
Zinc	14·34 "(by diff.)	1·54 "
Iron	·54 "	·59 "
Nickel	Trace.	·35 "
Arsenic	·11 "	·61 "
Antimony	·09 "	·78 "
	100·00 "	99·76 "

* The amounts of arsenic and antimony present, and the association of these metals with nickel in this alloy, would seem to indicate the Iberian Peninsula, rather than Northern Europe, as the source from which the copper used in making it was obtained.

From these analyses it is evident that neither of these alloys could have been used for the manufacture of guns, or of wire, or rods, or of any objects in which strength was required; nor could domestic utensils, such as pots or pans, have been hammered out of them. They contain so much lead that they are too brittle for such purposes.

Hence the castings consisting of them have not been obtained by melting down any of these articles. The composition of the alloys undoubtedly indicates a foreign origin and points to Europe as the source from which they were derived. They were hence probably imported for the purpose of barter by the Portuguese in the form of ornaments, or of the armlets *manilios*, such as have been long used in that region as currency, and are represented on some of the figures on the plaques.

With one exception, the head of a negress in bronze, the castings are less perfectly modelled than those a trained sculptor would have produced by the *cerà perdata* process by which they have been cast. I hence think they are the work of some of the artisans or armourers, who always formed part of the crews of Portuguese ships of the sixteenth century, or of natives who were taught by them.

A somewhat parallel example to the introduction of European methods of working in metal by these Portuguese navigators in the countries they visited and traded with, is seen in Japan, where the sword-guards of the sixteenth century often bear European designs, executed by European methods.

It is hardly necessary to point out that the presence of zinc by no means indicates that they are of recent date, as brass,

i.e., an alloy of copper and zinc, was made by the Romans before our era, and very largely in Europe generally in the tenth century, by melting copper with calamine (a natural zinc carbonate).

From the foregoing it will be seen that the evidence derived from my examination of these castings in the laboratory, supports the opinions of the authors of the preceding paper with respect to their age, and which are based on entirely different data. I have to thank my friend Professor Roberts-Austen for kindly permitting me to make these analyses in the Research Laboratory of the Royal College of Science.

Mr. R. B. N. WALKER wished to draw attention to a paper recently published in the "Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de Paris,"¹ and entitled "Les Tentatives des Franciscains au Moyen Age pour pénétrer dans la Haute Ethiopie"; par F. Romanet du Caillaud. In this paper was a reference to a Spanish MS. of the fourteenth century, which was published at Madrid in 1877, under the title of "Libro del conocimiento de todos los reynos y tierras y señorios que son por el mundo"; being the recital of the travels of a Castilian Franciscan friar, who, in the fourteenth century, had journeyed throughout the then known world, not only in Africa, but in Asia and in Europe.

M. du Caillaud's version was as follows:—"It was from the Gulf of Guinea that this Castilian reached Christian Ethiopia. He first arrived in the pagan kingdom of Amenuan by a branch of a river which he calls Euphrates, but which he distinguishes from the Asian Euphrates. This African Euphrates must be the Niger." . . . "The pagan kingdom of Amenuan appears to be the same as the kingdom of Benin, which in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had, although idolatrous, say the Portuguese historians, relations of homage with a puissant Christian prince, bearing the name or title of *Ogane*, and who resided at the distance of twenty moons from Benin, in going towards the East."

In the following paragraph Prester John was mentioned.

Description of Plates.

PLATE XVII.

Fig. 1.—European going out shooting. He wears a round metal helmet with a feather at the back and a hood with vandyked collar, rising to his lower lip. He has on a short pleated kilt and short trousers. The fact that the toes are not represented leads one to suppose that he is meant to be wearing boots. He is armed with a matchlock and short sword, and is accompanied by a dog wearing a collar.

¹ Septième série, tome xvii, 2^e Trimestre, 1896, p. 212.

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- Fig. 2.—European wearing round helmet without feather, and ruff round neck. His jacket is single-breasted and appears to have points across the chest; the rest of his dress resembles that of Fig. 1. He holds a matchlock (?), the match being very distinct, and wears a sword with an elaborate guard.
- Fig. 3.—European (?) of another type with long straight hair, but clean-shaven; he wears a round helmet and a ruff round his neck. The rest of his costume resembles that of Fig. 2, except that the kilt is longer. He is armed with a sword, and is shouldering a matchlock.
- Fig. 4.—European (?) with long hair, conventionally treated, and round full beard. He wears a helmet with raised bosses and two feathers, and is armed with a sword, and what appears to be a pike. He has no ruff but otherwise is clothed like Figs. 2 and 3. In the left hand top corner is a small bust of a similar European, holding an indeterminate object. Below, at the left hand corner, is a complete figure holding a matchlock(?) and in the right-hand corner a bust of a European holding his hand to his mouth. The swords carried by the figures on these four panels are all different, and some seem to have a resemblance to Moorish as well as European types. Fig. 3 wears his sword slung across the shoulder like the natives (de Bry, c. 55).

PLATE XVIII.

- Fig. 1.—A god, or king considered as god. He wears a helmet-like headdress, with vertical top, recalling a Persian form. This is apparently covered with beadwork made of cylindrical coral beads. To the front are attached three larger beads or possibly some sort of charm. He wears a jacket covered with similar beadwork, from the lower border of which are suspended small human masks, possibly of cast metal. On his wrists are large [carved ivory] armlets. He wears the usual "beluku" or long loin-cloth, with guilloche border and covered with chased ornament, of which specimens are given in Plate XXII. He has broad anklets probably of coral beadwork, which were a sign of higher rank than necklaces.¹ A fish resembling a catfish, of a kind constantly repeated in both casts and carvings, issues from each of his sides, while in each hand he swings a leopard by the tail, after the fashion represented in Sassanian carvings.
- Fig. 2.—A group of three persons dressed very similarly to Fig. 1. The central figure or god has both arms supported by kneeling attendants who wear the collars² and anklets which testify to their high rank. Instead of legs, his body terminates in two fish resembling those seen in Fig. 1, giving him a superficial resemblance to the gnostic figure Abraxas. Round his neck is a coral necklace, and to his girdle are suspended masks in the form of crocodiles' heads. At the bottom of the plaque are two leopards in curious perspective. The god is represented in various forms, and with various attributes. Compare Plate XXI.
- Fig. 3.—Group of three figures, the central person seated on a cylindrical stool and holding an axlike object in the right hand. The two other figures are kneeling. All are dressed as before, but the central figure has five larger beads (?) on the front of his headdress. Above are two small busts of long-haired Europeans, wearing curious helmets or hats with feathers and three bosses. One holds a "manilla" in his right hand, the other is holding something to his mouth.
- Fig. 4.—Group. In the centre a king or chief with elaborate headdress and necklace of coral and agate beadwork. He has long armlets, and the high coral anklets, and wears the long loin cloth. An attendant on each side holds a shield over his head as a mark of honour.³ All three

¹ Burton in "Fraser's Magazine," 1863, p. 288.

² Burton, *loc. cit.*, p. 414.

³ De Bry, "India Orientalis," Part VI, chap. 55.

figures have the tribal marks of the Bini, consisting of three vertical cicatrices over the eyebrow and long parallel scars down the body.¹ Between the two attendants and the king are two smaller figures, possibly boys, one of whom appears to be holding a drum in his hand.

PLATE XIX.

Fig. 1.—Verandah of a house with four standing figures, all with the cicatrices over the eyebrows and down the front of the body. None of these appear to represent very important persons, for they have neither the broad coral collar, nor the broad anklets. The mode of dressing the hair differs slightly, the two inner figures not having the long plaits terminating in [lumps of clay].

The same pair carry the characteristic shield, apparently of bamboo or other wattlework faced with a metal plate. In addition to necklaces they wear gorgets of leopards' teeth and the "beluku."

The nude outer figures may possibly represent the king's "cutlass boys," who, according to Burton,² appeared naked. They hold in their hands the circular fan made of hide which is in common use to the west of the lower Niger.

The roof does not appear to be covered with palm-leaf in the usual style, but rather suggests the use of tiles or shingles. The pillars are remarkable as being composed either of carved or cast figures superimposed, or of wood faced with metal plaques.

The three steps in the centre are in accordance with a statement in de Bry.³ On the uppermost stand two cast-metal leopards, such as have been brought home by the expedition, and what appear to be two neolithic axe heads. Such axe heads seem to be represented on several of the cast objects, under circumstances which suggest that they were held in veneration. This supposition would be confirmed by a similar veneration for stone implements in other countries after the introduction of metal, but more especially by a case in point from Fernando Po.⁴ The last and most important thing to notice is the snake fixed head downwards on the roof, to which allusion has already been made.⁵

Fig. 2.—A noble, riding side-saddle, after the fashion depicted in de Bry's plate.⁶ The upper part of his body was bare, as was apparently usual in time of peace; and he wears the "beluku" and broad anklets. Round his brow are coral bands; and a feather projects from his head, which is dressed in one of the more familiar fashions: broad bracelets of carved ivory (?) adorn his wrists. Each arm is stretched out and supported by an attendant walking on either side, and wearing only a narrow necklace, but no anklets. Each of these attendants has an ornamental band "*en bandoulière*" across the right shoulder, with a long pendant down the left side, ending in a small bell. Their heads are partially shaved, and dressed in ridges with pig-tails. The horse, which is small and asinine in appearance, is led by another attendant and answers both to Burton's⁷ description of the Yoruba pony and to

¹ De Bry, *loc. cit.*, Part VI, chap. 55, "Auch schneiden sie in ihrem Leib von der Achsel an bis ungefähr an die Weych . . . drey grosse lange Schnitt auf beyden Seyten . . . und halten dasselbe für eine gresse Tugend, so zu ihrer Seligkeit dienlich"; and Burton, *loc. cit.*, 147, 410.

² In "Fraser," p. 414. De Bry says that all young people went naked until marriage.

³ *Loc. cit.*, chap. 55.

⁴ Hutchinson, "Impressions of West Africa," p. 192. London, 1858. The axe heads were in the custody of the king.

⁵ See above, p. 61.

⁶ De Bry, *loc. cit.*, c. 55, and Plate XXIII. In this chapter is a full description of the way in which Benin nobles rode to court.

⁷ "A'ekata," i. 61.

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in 1588 A.D., where the following sentence occurs:—"Their money is pretie white shels, for golde and silver we saw none."¹

If points like these could be definitely settled we should be in possession of valuable evidence with regard to the date of the plaques in general, on so many of which manillas and cowries occur, the latter always in the form of ornament. It may be added that the frequent appearance of manillas in the hands of the long-haired foreigners would suggest their introduction from the part of the world from which those foreigners came.

The central figure has a helmet with bosses, but no peak; it is furnished with a large looped chin-strap. On his legs are narrow anklets, and in his right hand is a staff terminating at the upper end in a crocodile's head with a fish between the jaws—a *motif* which we meet with on other objects. Possibly this staff is a "king's stick" carried as a badge of authority as is the usage in other parts of West Africa.

PLATE XX.

Fig. 1.—A warrior, with curious mitre-shaped headdress, with a curl of hair protruding by the left ear. He also wears a horizontal band across the chest with pendants and bell. In his right hand are barbed spears, in his left a shield with a curved object which may represent some form of club.

It should be noted that the chased background of this plaque shows a variation on the usual quatrefoil design.

Fig. 2.—The central figure is here attired in what appears to be a feather dress, on the front of which, as also on the arms, snakes may be seen, invariably with the head downwards. Whenever the feather dresses occur these snakes are found, either singly, or intertwined like the snakes of a caduceus. This would suggest that the figures wearing such dresses held some particular office; possibly they are "Fetisseros" or "Fetishmen." The headdress with its long pendants is remarkable, as also are the broad chainlike anklets, which do not appear to be coral. The broad knife with loop at the butt seems to have had some ceremonial significance. (Burton, "Fraser," 281.)

The spears, one of which is held by two persons, are of a type already illustrated. The costume of the other figures presents few features which have not been already noted. They wear leopard skins and bands across their chests with bells depending from them, while on their necklaces and headdresses cowries may be remarked. One of the smaller figures holds a pair of "gong-gongs" chained together at the base.

Fig. 3.—This figure is remarkable for the curious humped breast and for the long loose garment. The hump recurs on several plaques sometimes on persons nude to the waist, the sex being always male. It would seem to represent some malformation of a well-known and distinctive nature or to have been derived from some sort of corset.

The hair appears to be made up with coral beads and to be dressed in a ridge, recalling the Hawaiian helmet. In each corner of the plaque is a raised crescential object the meaning of which it is hard to determine, although it is found upon other objects besides the plaques. Under the crescent in the left hand top corner is a standing or walking figure of a straight-haired foreigner, holding a stick (?) in his right hand.

Fig. 4.—The man on the left in this group is wearing a cross on his breast. Unless we are disposed to accept the story about Oguné, we must assume that this fact gives us a *terminus a quo* in attempting to date these castings. For it seems probable that the idea of wearing a cross

¹ "Hakluyt," vol. ii, Part II, p. 127. London, 1599.

² Fawcaker, "Narrative," p. 5.

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point. *a* and *c* are found on the base of a brass pedestal; *b* occurs on a tusk; *d* is frequently chased on the garments of the figures on the plaques. It seems to be meant for an arm; but the fingers often disappear leaving it almost crescent shape.

The hand in *b* and *c* is clasped upon some small object, and the general appearance of *c* suggests that of the little amulets used in South Europe against the evil eye and carried by the Spaniards to South America. The triangular object in the centre of this row might conceivably bear some relation to the elephant's head above; but this is a mere conjecture, for which there is no satisfactory evidence.

In the lowest row are four different versions of a leopard's head.

PLATE XXII.

Details of Chased Ornament.

This plate presents various details of the ornaments found chased upon the plaques or executed in *repoussé* work on brass plates. Many of these seem to illustrate a continuous process of degradation or conventionalisation. This may be more especially remarked in the upper rows. The human head with long hair, together with a detached arm (see cut *d*) is nearly always found engraved on the *belukus* or loin-cloths. The conventional treatment of the leopard's skin may be noticed to the right of the third row from the bottom; and in the bottom row to the left of the central head is a leopard's ear with its curious leaf-like treatment, while on the right is one of his "whiskers."

A native head, like one of those in the second row from the bottom, is usually found on the *belukus* in addition to a head of the long-haired type.

Of the various designs represented in the border, the most interesting are those on the left hand side. In the central section the artificer has left traces of his method of work, the transverse lines running across the tops of the "petals" having been first incised, and two triangles being subsequently drawn upon them and filled in by punching. It may be added that the sequence of many of the details within the plate is of course very far from being complete or final.



HEAD OF A GIRL CAST IN BRONZE.

