A report on newly discovered soapstone figurines from North-Central Yorubaland, Nigeria

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Introduction

Between November 1994 and July 1995, I conducted my third field season in north central Yorubaland, the homeland of Igbomina, a Yoruba subgroup of Kwara State, Nigeria. Survey and excavations took place between November 1994 and March 1995, and analysis of finds between April and July 1995. Most of the materials recovered, including pottery, tobacco pipes, soapstone figurines, iron implements and porcelain, are stored at the Esie Museum, Nigeria. This research is part of a general archaeological inquiry into the culture history of the Igbomina. This paper will discuss one aspect of the research, the discovery of soapstone figurines.

The Site

Recent archaeological investigations conducted in western Igbomina have resulted in the discovery of a number of soapstone figurines. These figurines were recovered from an abandoned settlement known in the area as Pee. The Pee site lies about 1 km west of Igbaja town, close to its periphery. Pee is the ancestral site of Okeya, an Igbomina town located about 4 km south of Igbaja (Map 1). In the oral tradition of Okeya are praise songs linking the people to the site. For example, omo mole ni pee in Igbomina dialect means “the indigenous child of Pee” (Usman 1987).

The Survey

In order to assess the archaeological potential and the limit of the Pee site, a survey was designed and conducted. Our focus was the mapping of the maximum limit of the site, and the identification of cultural features. The first day of investigation was spent walking through the site to assess what was visible on the ground. The method of traversing was employed in mapping. This method uses a prismatic compass, two linear measuring tapes and three ranging poles. A series of control points (peg stations) were assigned. Whole circle bearings of successive (traverse) lines and their lengths were measured. In the course of this survey, features such as middens, ash mounds, baobabs, etc. were located and recorded. Using the limits of the surface scatter of pottery and baobabs as a guide (Usman 1983), the site was estimated to extend over an area of 199,280 m² (0.199 km²) (Map 2).

Stone figurines

About nine fragmentary soapstone figurines were found in the southwestern section of the site. At first glance, they resemble ordinary rock; upon closer inspection it is evidence that they have been modified into figurines (Figure 1). They were not found in situ; they have been moved from their original position through plowing activities. Seven figurines were scattered in a farm immediately behind a large baobab tree. Two large pieces were found very close to the tree trunk. A large ash mound with a heavy pottery concentration is located near the baobab, and may be the former pottery manufacturing center suggested in Okeya’s tradition. The Pee stone figures consist of two torsos (Figure 2), three heads with conical caps (Figure 3), one trunk, an almost complete figure with a two-strand necklace (Figure 4) and two unidentified fragments. The figures weigh between 1.5 and 13 kg and are between 17 and 33 cm long.

Relationship with other stone figures in the area

Since they were first discovered more than five decades ago, over 1000 pieces of Esie stone figurines have been recorded. Detailed descriptions are found elsewhere (eg. Stevens 1987; Courlander 1973; Daniels 1973; Fagg 1959; Milisburn 1963; Hambolu 1987). Researchers trying to explain the origin of the figures have been divided into two camps: those who link the sculptures with Oyo-Ile (the former capital of the Old Oyo empire) and the ancient Yoruba kingdom of Ife (eg. Stevens 1978; Adepegba 1982) and those...
Map 1: Map showing the location of Pee site and some surrounding towns.

Scale 1:50,000
Map 2: A survey map of Pee settlement site
Figure 1: A stone figure (trunk and torso) in its original place of discovery

Figure 2: A stone figure (trunk)
Figure 3: Stone figure (head) with conical hat

Figure 4: A fairly complete stone figurine with two-strand necklace
who believe in a local origin (eg. Obayemi 1980; Hambolu 1989; Onabajo 1982; Andah 1982). Apart from Esie, soapstone figures have been discovered elsewhere in Igboninaland at Owode Ofaro and Ijara-Isin (Hallan 1978; Stevens 1978). But we found out during a 1990 visit that the two stone figurines discovered in the village of Owode Ofaro have been stolen.

An examination of Pee stone figures show some similarities to Esie and Ijara Isin ones in the material used in carving and in body adornment and costume. Steatite is a very soft stone that can be worked easily and carved with woodworking tools (Atherton 1980). That the figures were carved with woodworking tools is suggested by tool marks on some of the stone figures. The magnificent dresses, ornamentation and headgear depicted by the Pee stone figures can also be found in the Esie and Ijara-Isin collection (Stevens 1978; Hallan 1978). Aside from the similarity in raw material and body decoration, we have no other information to suggest how or where the Pee stone figures were derived. Unlike the stone figures of Owode Ofaro and Ijara-Isin, which have been historically linked to those of Esie (Stevens 1978; Hambolu 1989), the connection of Pee stone figures to these other three is still a mystery.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that intensive archaeological research supported with ethnohistoric and ethnographic data from Esie would help answer the numerous questions about the origin of the soapstone figures of north central Yorubaland (Hanboulu 1989; Andah 1982). The results here indicate that the raw materials used for the stone images occur within the Esie and surrounding area (Hamboulu 1989). Second, evidence of isolated sculptures within and outside Esie (Hamboulu 1989; Ameje 1994: personal communication) suggest that the origin of soapstone figures should first be sought within the immediate environment. In addition, the discovery of soapstone figures at Pee, some 18 km northwest of Esie, is a further indication that soapstone sculptures may have been present at more than one location in Igboninaland in the past. To date, the research at Pee has not gone beyond site survey. Further work involving systematic surface collection and excavation is needed to help place the site in its proper chronological framework, and to unravel the mystery surrounding the soapstone figurines.

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