Exploring the Nok enigma

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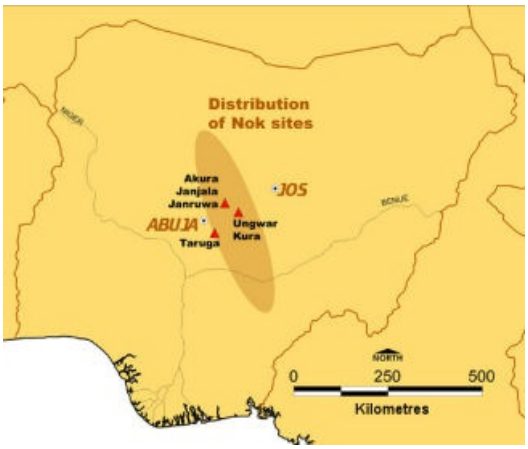


Figure 1. *Distribution of Nok sites in central Nigeria (oval). The sites mentioned in the text, are indicated by triangles.*

Introduction

The Nok culture of central Nigeria (Figure 1) is well known for its terracotta figurines and represents the first sculptural tradition in Sub-Saharan Africa (Willett 2002: 64). Nok plays also a prominent role in the emergence of iron technology, providing some of the earliest evidence of iron smelting in West Africa around 500 BC as demonstrated by excavations in Taruga (Fagg 1968; Tylecote 1975a & b). In contrast to its scientific importance, Nok remained an enigma for a long time, since little archaeological fieldwork has been devoted to the Nok culture, and, until now, little is known about the creators of those impressive works of art. Few excavations were carried out in the 1960s, and results remained unpublished except for Taruga.

Since 2005 research on the Nok culture forms part of an interdisciplinary project named 'Ecological and Cultural Change in West and Central Africa' (Research Unit 510; a team of archaeologists, archaeobotanists and geographers of the German Universities of Frankfurt am Main and Tübingen, and African partners from Nigeria and Cameroon). The programme focuses on the settlements of the Nok culture and aims to place the terracotta art into its economic, environmental and social context. Recent surveys and excavations have revealed not only an astonishing abundance of archaeological finds, among them hundreds of terracotta fragments, but also first insights into the economy, thus providing valuable elements for deciphering the Nok enigma in the future.

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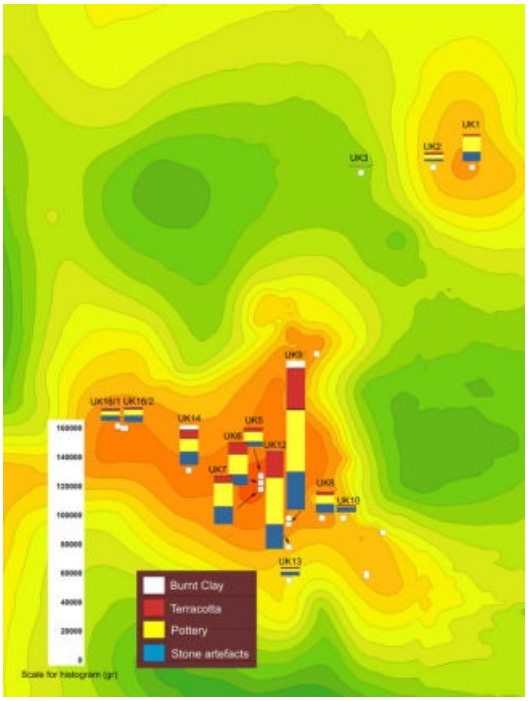


Figure 2. *Topography of the site of Ungwar Kura with location of the trenches and the weight of most representative artefact categories.*

Site density and economy

Surveys conducted in 2005 (Rupp *et al.* 2005) and 2006 in the core zone of the known distribution of Nok sites have shown a considerable variety in the environmental setting and character of Nok sites. The density of the recorded settlements which occurred from the beginnings of the Nok culture is of particular importance. This has been demonstrated by intensive fieldwork on sites around the town of Kagarko. Here, the distance between the sites of Janruwa, Janjala and Akura is merely one kilometre (Figure 1). Radiocarbon dating shows the sites to stem from a period around 500 BC, thus underlining their contemporaneity and consequently revealing a population density, which had previously never existed in the region.

Another important discovery was that pearl millet cultivation was confirmed on all three sites. Thus, the Nok culture represents the earliest evidence of a sedentary farming complex in central Nigeria. The population increase and the existence of an efficient farming system during early Nok times are substantial arguments to hypothesise on its prosperity.

The character of the recorded sites differs considerably. Some might be classified as settlements because of the amount of pottery sherds and other domestic finds, but others lack these materials and require alternative interpretations, for instance as 'grove[s] for religious ceremonies rather than a habitation site' (Willett 1971: 15). Extensive excavations are planned to gather data suitable to recognise structural patterns and to understand the purpose of the sites. First steps in this direction have been taken in 2007 during field research at the site of Ungwar Kura.



Figure 3. *This large head was found by farmers of Ungwar Kura at the site known by this name.*

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Excavations at Ungwar Kura

The site of Ungwar Kura, named after a nearby village, is located north-east of Abuja (Figure 1), According to surface finds the site spreads over the crests of two hills, separated by depressions (Figure 2). These surface materials, as well as terracotta fragments found by villagers while farming (Figure 3), clearly indicate that Ungwar Kura was a site of the Nok culture. Investigating this site had a particular advantage: most parts of it were not affected by illegal excavations. Thus, substantial, undisturbed deposits had been preserved - an almost unique situation with regard to the high number of sites looted so far.



Figure 4. *Ungwar Kura. Head with tumour on the cheek.*

During fieldwork 18 trenches, each measuring 5 x 5m and arranged in a transect to cover the whole site, were excavated (Figure 2). Hilltops, slopes and the depression between the two hills were included. The extent of the site was to be assessed in three trenches (UK 4, 11 and 15). But there, bedrock immediately surfaces. This is probably the result of erosional processes at the edge of the hilltop. On the other hand excavations in the centre of the plateau provided large quantities of archaeological materials. Other trenches oriented south, east and west showed a clear decrease in finds (UK 8, 10, 13 and 16) and most likely mark the fringes of the site (Figure 2). Apparently only the plateaus were occupied.

We conclude from the stratigraphic evidence that the original surface of the site and its cultural remains have not been preserved. At least parts of the original cultural deposits constitute today's farming ground. This agricultural soil and the layer beneath it (about 20-30cm thick) represent the former Nok horizon, indicated by scattered finds without any specific concentrations within the excavated areas. Below this horizon finds are restricted to pit-like structures dug into sterile ground. These pits are the only undisturbed features on the site. Therefore the horizon's structures can hardly be reconstructed in detail.

More than 7500 artefacts were excavated in total, marking out the assemblages of Ungwar Kura as the most substantial collection of Nok cultural materials scientifically excavated and recorded to date. The finds comprise pottery sherds, fragments of terracotta figurines and a few complete pieces, stone artefacts, mainly huge grinding stones and grinders, as well as ground stone axes. Of particular importance are iron objects, which represent not only the first iron tools from a clear Nok context, but also belong to the earliest finds of iron in West Africa.

Large quantities of charred botanical remains help to reconstruct subsistence and environmental conditions. Archaeobotanical analyses are still in progress, but one of our first results is that pearl millet (Pennisetum glaucum) is consistently present in the cultural deposits of Ungwar Kura. Located in the Nigerian Middle Belt, the environment of the site is at present dominated by Guinea savannah with tall grasses and woodland vegetation. Guinea corn and New World cassava constitute the staple crops, whereas pearl millet only plays a minor role in cultivation. Our recent finds demonstrate that this had been quite different in the past.

Future outlook

Archaeobotanical investigations will continue to focus on the question of the economic and ecological

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conditions of the Nok culture. Could changes, possibly climatically induced, be the reason for its rise and fall? And how did population growth and metal production during the Nok period affect the natural environment?

Significant amounts of new data on the terracotta have been gathered, but the enigma of its function remains unsolved. In general, the omnipresence of terracotta on the site indicates that it was a part of everyday life. Some aspects, particularly the careful individual designs on the terracotta figurines, hint at the depiction of real life characters. For example, diseases are shown, such as a head with a tumour on the left cheek (Figure 4). In these cases the terracotta figurines may represent dead members of the community and could have been a votive offering at, for instance, a shrine. Alternatively, the terracotta figurines may have been grave goods. This cannot be resolved yet, since bones were not preserved and therefore graves cannot be identified. There may also be other reasons for the accumulation of terracotta art, for example regular deposition in sacred places over a longer period of time.



Figure 5. *Ungwar Kura. Life-sized head.*

The excavations at Ungwar Kura have produced more terracotta finds than any other previous scientific investigation. These finds thus provide an empirical basis for considering stylistic, technological and chronological aspects. This is much more than what can usually be expected from the very beginning of an excavation programme. But the sheer quantity of materials cannot answer all questions; one setting with terracotta artefacts in a meaningful context would be more valuable than hundreds of fragments. So far substantial questions remain unanswered, for example: why are almost all terracotta figurines broken? Does this represent intentional damage or is it the result of a natural process such as erosional redeposition? Some terracotta fragments like the head from UK 9 (Figure 5) are part of life-sized figures. Where are their torsos and where are the fragments of all those other broken pieces we have excavated? Perhaps they are lying just outside the areas our trenches could cover. If this is the case only the excavation of the complete site could provide new insights. Larger excavations and geomorphological studies of the environmental processes and natural influences on the formation of the cultural deposits are necessary. We will address both aspects in future studies.

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