

Nok Terracottas

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about Nok terracotta sculptures, the earliest known sculptures in Africa from a site other than Egypt, produced by an Iron Age culture. While little is known about the society that produced them, these sculptures provide a few clues about the structure and values of this culture. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Discovering Nok Terracotta Sculptures](#)
2. [Methods of Production](#)
3. [Nok Sculptures in the Present](#)

1. Discovering Nok Terracotta Sculptures

Around the year 1944, a series of **terracotta** sculptures consisting of heads and some full figures were discovered near the town of Nok in Nigeria. They are the earliest known sculptures in Africa from a site other than Egypt. They were found through tin mining and were dug up without recording any other information about the site, how they were found, or if there was any other archaeological evidence nearby.

As a result, we know almost nothing about the society that produced these sculptures. We refer to them as “Nok” because that is the name of the town closest to where they were found, but we do not know how these people referred to themselves since they left behind no written records. We know that they existed from approximately 500 BCE to 200 CE and that they were an **Iron Age** culture, since iron tools and smelting ovens have been found nearby. But we do not know much more than that.



Nok sculpture
500 BCE–500 CE
Terracotta



TERMS TO KNOW

Terracotta

A type of clay that is brownish red in color and often used in pottery or sculpture. It can be either glazed or unglazed.

Iron Age

A prehistoric period when people in Europe, Africa, and Asia began making tools and weapons out of iron, usually between 1200 to 600 BCE.

2. Methods of Production

The sculptures were most likely all individually produced, using coils of clay to create overall shapes and then carving out surface details. They are hollow inside and would have been fired until they hardened and turned reddish orange or brown. Originally, they were covered in slip, or a thin layer of clay that would provide some color, and/or a shiny glaze. Since the slip has worn away, it is possible to see that the clay is not perfectly smooth but has some chunks in it. All of the clay used to produce these objects came from the same source, although we have not yet identified where it is located.

3. Nok Sculptures in the Present

Many of the sculptures that survive today consist of heads, but these are fragments and would have originally been attached to bodies. We know this because the broken-off arms, legs, and body parts were found as pottery shards near the heads. They were not fired at a high temperature, so they are fragile and tend to crumble easily.

For this reason, there is only one Nok sculpture that has been found intact, and it is only four inches tall. The shapes of the human figure are simplified into geometric shapes, with triangular eyes and circular holes for pupils, nostrils, and mouth. The faces have holes, which allowed air to escape while the sculptures were being fired. The sculptures depict both men and women, and their elaborate hairstyles and jewelry may indicate high social status. The style of the objects is consistent throughout, suggesting that Nok culture valued adherence to tradition over individual expression.



Nok terracotta head
600 BCE–250 CE

There are many reasons why we do not know very much about Nok culture. The first objects were found by tin miners, who had no knowledge of archaeology and no motivation to excavate sculptures in a methodical and scientific manner, recording where and how they were found and if other archaeological evidence was found with them. The popularity of Nok sculpture and the prices it can sell for on the black market have resulted in numerous commercial digs organized by people whose only goal is to find artifacts to sell. Political unrest, corruption, and the expense of travel to Nigeria are other factors that have prevented us from learning more about Nok culture.

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **discovery of Nok terracotta sculptures**, the earliest known sculptures in Africa from a site other than Egypt. You learned that these sculptures were found by tin miners and thus not excavated in a scientific manner, with no recording of archaeological evidence found with them, so very little is known about the Nok culture that produced them, other than that they were an Iron Age culture. You examined the **methods of production** used, noting that the clay used to produce these objects came from the same source. Lastly, you learned that the popularity of **Nok sculptures in the present** has unfortunately led to commercial digs aimed at finding artifacts to sell on the black market, further preventing us from learning more about Nok culture.

Source: THIS CONTENT HAS BEEN ADAPTED FROM [LUMEN LEARNING'S "ECONOMIC THINKING"] TUTORIAL.



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