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# Two Thousand Years in Dendi, Northern Benin

Archaeology, History and Memory

*Edited by Anne Haour*



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# Two Thousand Years in Dendi, Northern Benin

*Archaeology, History and Memory*

*Edited by*

Anne Haour



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# Figurines and Terracotta Objects

Romuald Tchibozo

## 1 Introduction

The survey and excavation carried out by the *Crossroads of Empires* team led to the recovery of a number of modelled clay objects. The fact that the pieces were found in a range of contexts, some dated to over 1000 years ago, challenges conventional art-historical wisdom in terms of contemporary perceptions of the technological and artistic situation of this part of Benin. People in this area are now overwhelmingly Muslim in belief; this fact, together with the distance from most of the Béninois centres for art historical research, which are in the south of the country (Tchibozo 1995; Gnonhouevi 2013), has led to the easy and rather lazy assumption that no figurative tradition had existed in Dendi. This chapter presents a few brief observations on the objects of modelled clay that were recovered. These should be read as art-historical in approach and should be seen as preliminary, as future research and publications will allow further refinement.

## 2 Classification of the Pieces

Before beginning the analysis, a few starting points must be outlined. The objects derived from several sites and different contexts, all situated on the Béninois bank of

the Niger valley. Several forms of object classification are envisageable depending on the specifics of each research site, or the objectives of particular studies. In this case, as nothing had previously been published concerning terracotta art in the region, the choice has been made to provide a basic yet rigorous typology. The study of modelled clay objects from Jarma (Libya) by Townsend (2013) served as a useful model; it adopted the principle of ordering each item by category, form and genre. The items described in the present chapter are studied as a whole, without discrimination by site or year of discovery, distinguishing them solely through the method of classification. Objects are classified only in terms of major category, and here category is understood to be the various forms that the pieces can take.

Four categories are proposed: Category 1, anthropomorphic pieces; Category 2, zoomorphic pieces; Category 3, utilitarian objects, and Category 4, unidentifiable objects (Table 22.1).

## 3 Methodology

For reasons fundamentally related to the specificity of this study, the methodology adopted is qualitative and not quantitative. One reason for this choice is the relatively

TABLE 22.1 Classification of terracotta small finds

|       | Anthropomorphic | Zoomorphic              | Utilitarian  | Unidentified  | Total |
|-------|-----------------|-------------------------|--|---|-------|
| 2011  |                 |                         |  | SF 09, 11.  | 2     |
| 2012  | SF 140, 149.    | SF 148.                 | SF 07, 29, 35, 62, 79, 136, 257.   | SF 67, 68, 125, 126, 134, 139, 147.                 | 17    |
| 2013  | SF 89, 203.     | SF 91, 93, 95, 99, 204. | SF 19, 20, 21, 22, 90, 96, 102, 103, 105, 111, 112, 206, 211, 212.   | SF 92, 106, 110, 115, 205, 207, 209.                | 28    |
| 2014  | SF 31, 39.      | SF 19, 22b, 32b.        | SF 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, 08a, 10a, 10b, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 20a, 20b, 21a, 21b, 22a, 23, 26, 32a, 33, 34b, 35b, 59, 78, 200. | SF 08b, 09, 16, 17, 24, 25, 27, 29, 30, 36, 37, 40. | 44    |
| Total | 6               | 9                       | 48   | 28  | 91    |



FIGURE 22.1  
A zoomorphic figurine from Birnin Lafiya, Trench 13  
(SF 2014-19)

small number of objects; it is recognised that only a general assessment of the assemblage is achievable. A total of 91 items were examined, coming from the four seasons of excavation. Another factor linked to the sites from which these items were recovered is that objects from Birnin Lafiya predominate within the assemblage. This is because the site received the most sustained excavation, as it had proved an exceptional example of the mound culture within the region. Modelled clay objects were present from other sites, some quite close to Birnin Lafiya, but their low number does not allow any reliable analysis including quantitative method and statistical projections. A qualitative methodology must therefore be preferred, until further research has taken place that can allow for a fuller corpus of modelled clay objects from the region to be studied.

### 3.1 Formal Analysis

Given the relatively small size of most of the objects found on the different sites, no subcategories were created to reflect the measurements of the pieces, but this information is provided in the Small Finds tables (see Part 6, this volume). Also, in view of the poor state of some of the pieces, with irregular shapes, it is difficult to assign particular functional categories to the various objects without using personal judgment, which Hurcombe (2007: 57) called the intuitive type. The one exception might be that of items of personal adornment. Amorphous items were catalogued, but have not been studied in detail.

The total corpus studied consists of 9 zoomorphic objects, 6 anthropomorphic objects, 48 utilitarian objects and 28 unidentified.

In terms of the zoomorphic objects category, classification criteria relate to a clear identification of quadrupedy.

This is the case for example of SF 2014-19, which was excavated from Birnin Lafiya Trench 13, Context 19 310–330cm (Figure 22.1). This piece is recognisably zoomorphic and resembles a cattle representation. The four members and the animal's position can clearly be identified, even though the head is broken off. The fact that SF 2014-22b, which is also zoomorphic, was recovered in the same context suggests a tendency to craft this kind of piece. The presence of the cattle shape is common in other studies of the wider region, for example in the Chad Basin (Breunig 2008; but see also his brief overview of the distribution of cattle figurines through the African Sahel and Sahara from the second millennium BC).

As outlined above, in other cases classification became a matter of intuition and of subjectivity in assigning a category. That is the case of SF 2012-148, SF 2013-95, SF 2013-99 or SF 2014-32b. In the case of these four items, the subject of the figures is not plainly distinguishable, but the shapes suggest an animal form in comparison with other pieces.

Only six objects feature in the anthropomorphic category. Again, some pieces are readily characterised thanks to relatively clear indications of bipedalism. This is the case for three items issued from the deep sequences at Birnin Lafiya: SF 2014-31, from Trench 13 Context 13, 130–140cm (Figure 22.2), SF 2013-203 from Trench 9, Context 11 (Figure 22.3), or SF 2012-149 from Trench 4 (Figure 22.4). All fall within the mid-first to early second millennium. These three pieces share one same specificity: their feet are not clearly distinguished. SF 2012-149 appears to have had feet, but they have been broken off, as has the head. SF 2013-203 is highly stylised, while the third, SF 2014-31, is much more realistic. Of the three pieces, only SF 2014-31 seems to possess a distinguishable



FIGURE 22.2 A terracotta figurine from Birnin Lafiya Trench 13 (SF 2014-31)

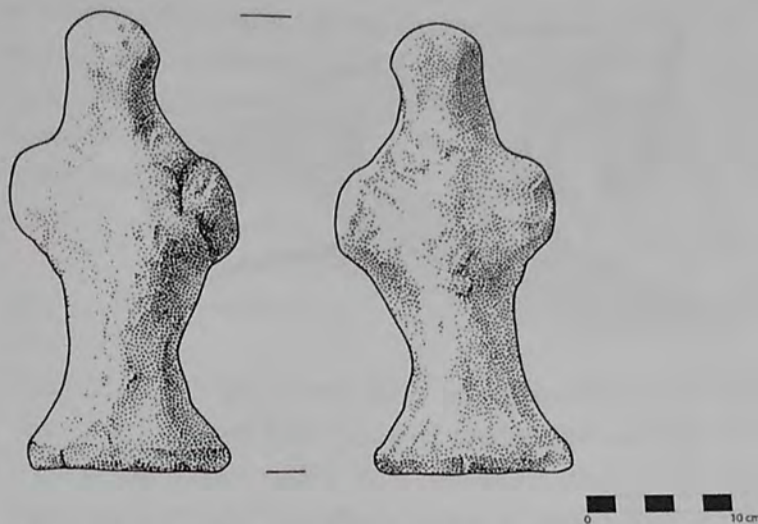


FIGURE 22.3 A figurine from Birnin Lafiya Trench 9 (SF 2013-203).

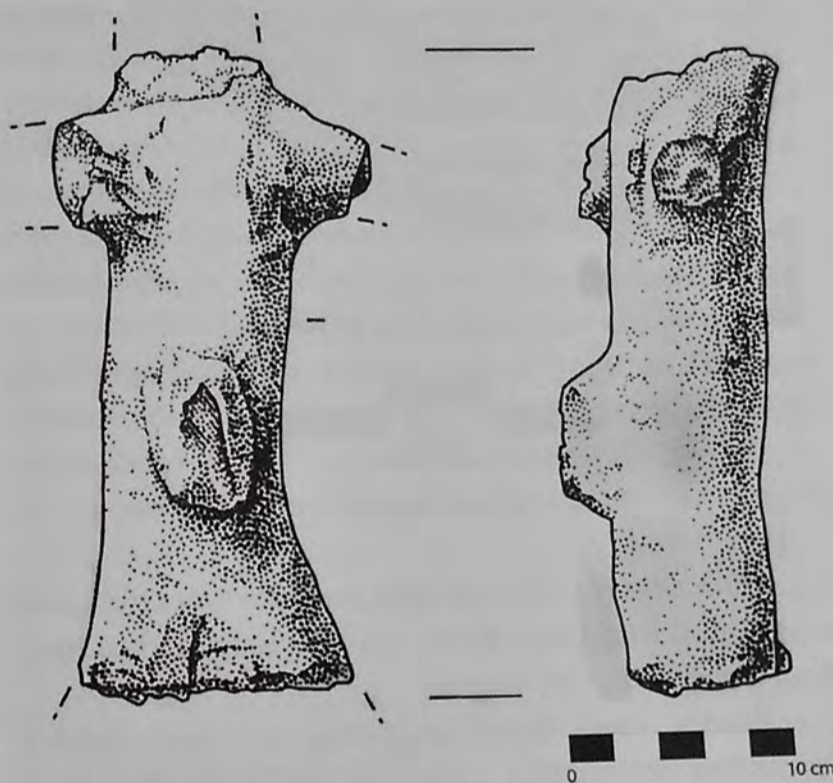


FIGURE 22.4 A figurine from Birnin Lafiya Trench 4 (SF 2012-149)

face with eyes, nose and mouth, at least the traces. It is possible these facial features have faded over time from the other figures. One noteworthy comment concerns the navel visible on SF 2012-149. Little or not featured on the two other objects, here not only is it visible, but it features so prominently on the sculpture that one would say there is a face at this place.<sup>1</sup> Looking at these figures collectively it is interesting that three different types of figurine appear to coexist in the same time period and at the same site.

As with the previous category, there are objects for which a certain degree of subjectivity is necessary in assigning them to a specific category. Regarding the category of utilitarian objects, these are easier to identify. There are all kinds of items useful for daily life without prejudging their intrinsic function. SF 2014-05, -06 (both

from Kwara zeno), -07 (from Torouwey), -08a, -10a both from Gorouberi) and -35b (from Madekali) are pipe fragments. SF 2013-96 is from a surface context and is thus not studied in detail, but provides a good illustration of this type of artefact (Figure 22.5). Three miniature pots were recovered (SF 2012-257, 2014-26 and 2014-200), but the role of such small items is unclear; some may be toys or medicinal items, as discussed below. Objects clearly linked to crafts are the possible spindle whorls SF 2014-22a from Madekali, 2014-59 from Tondo windi in Birni Lafia, and 2014-78 from Toutakayori. However, it can be difficult to distinguish spindle whorls, which can be conical, bi-conical or spherical, from clay beads. Certainly, clay beads were rare in the material, with stone beads and pendants much more common (S. Magnavita, this volume). One

<sup>1</sup> SF 2012-149 bears some similarity to the figure shown in Breunig (2008: Figure 6).

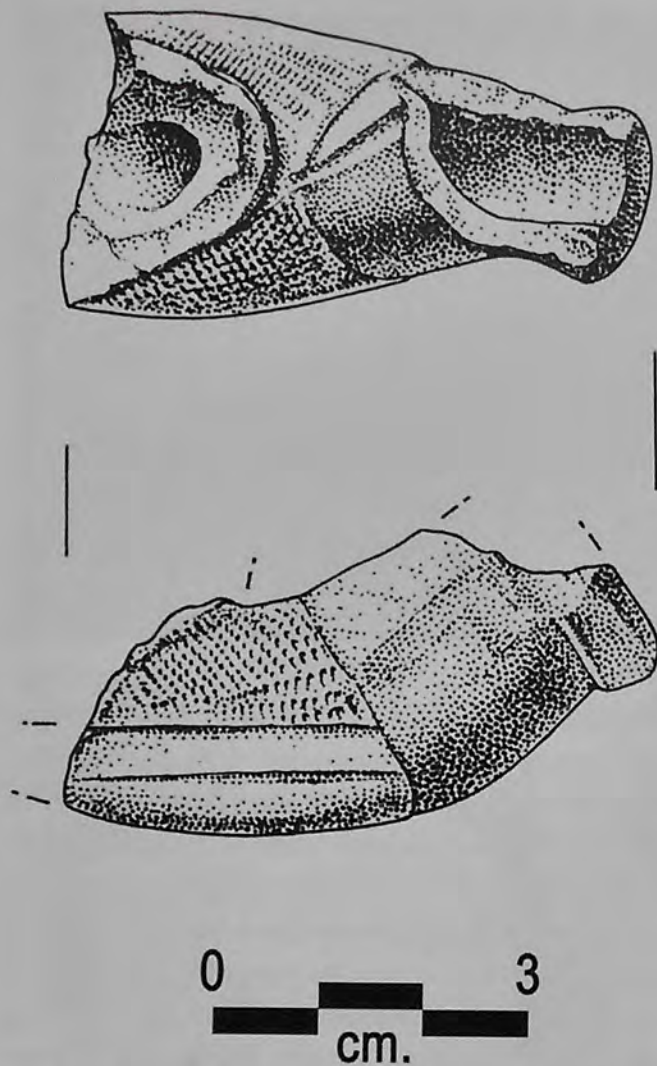


FIGURE 22.5 A pipe fragment from surface survey (SF 2013-96)

exception here is a clay disc with multiple holes (SF 2014-20a) from Birnin Lafiya Trench 13, which appears to have been a pendant.

Following these three categories, one final class is devoted to objects that could not be clearly identified. Their usage or their connection to other objects may remain unknown. For the most part, these are fragments of objects and it will not be necessary to present them here. Our classification methodology allows this, as we offer a schematic reading of the pieces in our study.

#### 4 Interpretation and Discussion

The relatively small number of items found on various sites does not detract from their diversity in form and style. Yet two main problems create limitations to this study.

The first is the lack of field data concerning these items. Interviews were conducted on the topic of these pieces, and during the various field seasons a specific thread of enquiry was dedicated to the field research on these objects and on changes in the production of such ceramics. It was however, impossible to pursue this due to a lack

of collaboration from the local populations. One factor is certainly the current religious context, which made these questions almost taboo subjects. This was palpable on the ground at the stage of the initial enquiries, when informants were asked whether there was once anything other than Islam that ruled the daily lives of people. This resistance to acknowledge the existence of non-Islamic belief was encountered by the author while researching the textiles of the Dendi region as part of the *Crossroads* fieldwork, and this was true also for figurines.

The second difficulty in interpretation arises through the fact that this seems to have been a region of cultural exchanges. The corpus as it was recovered consists almost exclusively of portable art, items that can easily be held in the hands; they are easily transportable, and may be trans-contextual. It cannot be assumed that these objects were manufactured in the place they were recovered.

Against this, it should be mentioned that one of the potters from Birni Lafia recognised a vessel used to keep medicines in one of the small jars recovered from surface survey at Birnin Lafiya (SF 2014-200), which may suggest that at one point such items were manufactured in the region, or not very far away. Conversely, many of the figurines go a long way back in the history of Dendi; for example, several of the anthropomorphic representations (e.g. Figure 22.2, above) likely date to the second half of the first millennium AD.

Future studies on these issues will allow further progress. Here, a certain number of pieces have been showcased for the study, and their selection was carefully undertaken in order to be representative of all categories of items and all sites.

It is clear that, at a certain time in its history, artistic practices existed in this region of which the recovered material culture is living proof. Despite various studies of these and similar materials in West Africa (Tchibozo 1995; Gnonhouevi 2013; Koukpaki 2014),<sup>2</sup> it would be inappropriate to try to confirm clear stylistic trends at this stage of our knowledge.

This said, the question can be posed: why did past people only choose to express themselves through this category of items? There is a rather intractable problem that leads us to adopt an analysis close to that of Townsend (2013). The creative process sometimes uses strategies from designed forms to create significant modes of communication of the pieces that are made and passed on

<sup>2</sup> These studies refer to the evolution of sculpture practices in various parts of the Benin territory, notably Dassa, Abomey, Savè, Savalou, Agonlin and also in Couffo. All of these are in southern or, in the case of Dassa, central Benin.

to other generations. To develop his analysis, Townsend refers to the work of anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998: 163) who argues that "Style is to artworks what group identification is to social agents." In support of this, he cites the anthropologist Georges Devereaux (1961: 367) who defines art as a stylised form of communication, and once again Gell (1998: 215) who defined it as: 'Relations between relations of forms.' In other words, style can be recognised as the main form of communication, the mode of transmission of information on society, and thus as part of the process of setting out identity.

In the case of the sites we have investigated, further research will allow an improved interpretation and analysis of the artefacts. However, their considerable variety, which indeed conditioned the classification methodology used here, has allowed for initial analysis and interpretation. The present author hypothesises that the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines were probably not created as toys, though of course this will never be known for sure (though see Okoro 2008 for some useful thoughts on the interpretation by archaeologists of objects in the Ghanaian archaeological context). In the present study, as stated above, difficulties are compounded because pre-Islamic contexts are concerned, and it is almost impossible to make a comparison with the contemporary realities. The context in which the figurines were recovered tells us little about their function; many were found

in stratigraphic contexts together with items of daily life such as pottery sherds or faunal remains, which we associate with habitations. The small size of the objects does however seem to suggest they may have been linked with individual practices.

## 5 Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with a number of terracottas found during the four years of excavations on the Benin side of the Niger valley. This represents rich evidence for past society, and although there is much that remains unknown, a few closing notes are possible. The recovery of pipe remains, clay beads and jewellery suggests a society where the development of technologies exceeded mere daily needs, to add pleasurable activities. The possible spindle whorls give indications of the processing of fibre. Artistic creation could be related to several circumstances, given the special character of the area, which is a crossroads of many human influences. However, at present we have no other source to confirm the tradition out of which these artefacts were issued, and from there to place any analysis in a diachronic perspective. The hope is that studies will intensify in this area to bring additional elements which will improve knowledge.

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## Figures

### Table 1

Figure 22.1 : SF 2014-19 or SF 2014-02,

Figure 22.2: 2014-31

Figure 22.3: 2013-203 SF 2012-52 from Birnin Lafiya Unit VI

Figure 22.4: and SF 2012-149 from Birnin Lafiya Unit IV

Figure 22.5 : SF 2013-96 pipe fragment

*In Two Thousand Years in Dendi, Northern Benin* an international team examines a little-known part of the Niger River valley, West Africa, over the *longue durée*. This area, known as Dendi, has often been portrayed as the crossroads of major West African medieval empires but this understanding has been based on a small number of very patchy historical sources. Working from the ground up, from the archaeological sites, standing remains, oral traditions and craft industries of Dendi, Haour and her team offer the first in-depth account of the area.

Contributors are: Paul Adderley, Mardjoua Barpougouni, Victor Brunfaut, Louis Champion, Annalisa Christie, Barbara Eichhorn, Anne Filippini, Dorian Fuller, Olivier Gosselain, David Kay, Nadia Khalaf, Nestor Labiyi, Raoul Laibi, Richard Lee, Veerle Linseele, Alexandre Livingstone Smith, Carlos Magnavita, Sonja Magnavita, Didier N'Dah, Nicolas Nikis, Sam Nixon, Franck N'Po Takpara, Jean-François Pinet, Ronika Power, Caroline Robion-Brunner, Lucie Smolderen, Abubakar Sule Sani, Romuald Tchibozo, Jennifer Wexler, Wim Wouters.

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