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ORIGINAL ARTICLES.

Africa, West.

With Plate G.

Joyce.

Steatite Figures from West Africa in the British Museum. By **57**
T. A. Joyce, M.A.

In the *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, Vol. XIV, p. 195, Dr. L. Rüttimeyer published a long paper dealing with the curious soapstone carvings found in Sierra Leone. In this, the first systematic treatise dealing with these interesting relics of a forgotten craft, the author brings forward the following facts concerning them. They seem to be peculiar to a comparatively small area, between the Boom and Kittam rivers; they make their first appearance at a distance of about 20 kilometres from the coast, but are found in their greatest numbers from 30 to 40 kilometres further inland. The natives, knowing nothing of their manufacture, explain their existence somewhat naively by attributing to them a supernatural origin. For this reason they are considered to be of great value, and natives who are lucky enough to find them keep their existence as secret as possible.

The localities in which they are found may be divided into two classes, primary and secondary. The first are certain tumuli in the interior, where they are said to be discovered in considerable numbers, up to fifty or so; the existence of these tumuli, it should be noted, is only known from the reports of natives. The secondary localities are disused native fields, where single figures are occasionally obtained by digging. The explanation of the presence of these images in the latter localities is found in the fact that the natives employ them as agricultural charms.* After a description of their chief characteristics, which include, in the case of the greater number, a vertical hole in the top of the head occasionally communicating with the eyes and ears, the author proceeds at length to discuss their origin, drawing comparisons with carvings from many other parts of Africa.

He calls attention to the extreme rarity of stone carvings in this continent outside the sphere of ancient Egyptian civilisation, and mentions the soapstone carvings of Zimbabwe as the only parallel, pointing out that a foreign influence has been more than suspected by many leading archaeologists in the art of the latter locality. He cites the art of Benin as an instance of the proficiency to which the negro can attain under the guidance of external culture, and finally, after frequent reference to a paper by Delafosse,† in which the latter tries to establish the presence of Egyptian culture on the west coast, arrives at the following conclusion: that, at a period more or less remote from the present, a negro race, indigenous or immigrant, produced these sculptures under the influence of an inspiration issuing from Egypt.

The rest of the paper is occupied by a description of the figures of this class in the various continental museums, most of which are reproduced in a series of excellent plates.

The object of the present note is to supplement Rüttimeyer's paper by describing a series of these carvings in the British Museum, and to record a little additional information which I have been able to collect through the kindness of various correspondents. Most of this information is in corroboration of Rüttimeyer's facts, but, as will appear later, I do not arrive at the same conclusion as to the ultimate origin of these interesting figures.

At the time when Rüttimeyer's communication appeared in print there were only three specimens of soapstone carving from Mendiland in the British Museum, and none of these were remarkable for size or perfection (Fig. 1 *b, c, d*); but recently two

* In this case it is possible that figures have been found in fields where tumuli containing them have been levelled in cultivation.

† *L'Anthropologie*, 1900, Nos. 4-6.

STEATITE CARVING FROM MENDILAND, IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

additional specimens have been acquired, one of which is not only an unusually well-finished example, but in design, as far as I am aware, unique. It is figured on Plate G, and represents a figure 13 inches long reclining at full length on its back on an oblong plinth, 14·2 by 4·6 inches. The legs, which are inferior in modelling to the rest of the figure, are crossed above the knee. The eyes are open and highly protuberant; the nose, exceedingly platyrrhine, is considerably damaged; the chin projects sharply, in fact, it seems possible that the artist intended to represent it as furnished with a short beard. The lobes of the ears are pierced. On the head is a closely fitting cap; on forehead, temples, and upper arms are carved zigzags in partial relief representing tattoo marks; lines in relief from the corners of the mouth to the ears probably have a similar signification; bands of lines, also in relief, running from the shoulders across the collar bones, and combining to form a plait pattern down chest and abdomen, may represent either tattoo marks or a necklace. On the left arm is a large armlet with a fetish or amulet: the right wrist bears two bracelets; the left, one. The right hand is closed, but hollowed out as if some object were originally inserted in its grasp. The general workmanship is good, the form of the body well moulded,

FIG. 1.—STEARITE CARVINGS FROM SHERBRO AND MENDILAND (BRITISH MUSEUM).

and the position easy and natural. It was collected in Mendiland by Mr. G. Garrett, late Travelling Commissioner.

Fig. 1 *a* is the head and shoulders of a figure of which the lower portion from the arms downwards has disappeared. It has the same goggle eyes and highly platyrrhine nose as the first, but is altogether of coarser workmanship. Across the head from ear to ear runs a fillet, to the ends of which cords are attached; these cords are grasped by the hands, which are brought close under the chin. In the centre of the crown, just in front of the fillet, is a vertical hole, a common feature in these figures. A similar hole is found on each shoulder. A ridge running from the hole on the head to the root of the nose may represent tattooing. This figure was obtained from Mr. F. J. Alldridge.

Fig. 1 *b* represents a squatting figure 7·6 inches high, exceedingly roughly carved; so rude is the workmanship that it may possibly be a modern imitation. The surface shows no signs of age or weathering.

Fig. 1 *c* is the head of another figure 4 inches long; like Fig. 1 *a* it has a band running over the head from ear to ear, and the nostrils are extremely broad. This and the preceding were obtained on Sherbro Island by Captain C. W. Soden.

Fig. 1 *d* is a small figure in a squatting attitude, 4.9 inches high, elbows on knees and hands supporting chin. One arm, one leg, both feet, and half the body are missing. The face is well carved, with plenty of expression; the nose is again very platyrrhine. An interesting peculiarity in connection with this figure is that at some time, perhaps when it was broken, an iron ring has been fastened round the body immediately under the arms. A portion of this ring, much oxydised, still remains. There is a large vertical hole in the crown of the head, at the bottom of which is a lump of iron oxide. This figure was dug up at Bendu on Sherbro in 1883, and has been in the Museum collection since 1886.

I am able, by the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. May, to figure a specimen in their possession, which, like the British Museum figure, I believe to be unique in design (Fig. 2). It represents a seated native, once more with exceedingly broad nostrils and a hole in the top of the head, leaning against a three-legged back-rest. This form of support is still in local use; the leg in rear is pierced with a traverse hole near the top. The carving was acquired in Mendiland.

In addition to these specimens, I have recently heard of several private collections of steatite carvings from this neighbourhood, and it is evident that such figures are by no means as rare as was at first thought.

As regards the position held by these figures in the estimation of natives of the present day, I will first quote Mr. W. J. Bruce, of the Railway Survey of Sierra Leone, who was kind enough to give me some notes on the subject headed "Steatite carvings preserved by the Mendi as part of their worship, and called *Nomorí* (*Nomoli*)."^{*} He continues, "I was shown three of these images in the Tiama district in 1902, but was unable to obtain much information about them as my enquiries aroused suspicion. I was informed by Mendi and Timni alike that they were of supernatural origin ('God made them') and that no one in their country could make anything like them; that they were dug up, one man adding that he knew 'a hill' where 'plenty' had been found, but declining to locate it; that they were treasured by the families who owned them; and that they made farms fertile. A negro schoolmaster described the ritual he had seen followed when a *nomori* set 'up in a newly-sown farm. The image was placed on a pedestal of earth, usually an old ant-hill, in the field, and the farmer and his household walk round it chanting an appeal for a good crop, each in turn striking it with a whip. My informant could give no explanation of this. I have seen the empty places covered with a small thatch, and heard these images called 'farm devils.' I have been told that the Mendi are the only race which possess them."

An important piece of additional information was kindly given me by Miss Fairbrother, and consists in an extract from a letter from Mr. G. Hart to his sister. The writer speaks of the figures as "found only in this [Bandajuma] and the Panguma districts, and in the bordering parts of Liberia. The people find these on the farms when digging and 'boushing' them. They look on them in something the same way that the Gold Coast people look on the *aggri* beads, but they have no value for them. They say 'devil make them,' and they put them in the shelters in the rice-fields, partly as protection, and partly in their capacity of 'rice-master.' For they believe that, if severely flogged, at night these stone images will go out and steal plenty of rice from other farms and plant it in that of their owner.*" But here's the quaint part about it. The tribes here now, who find these things, never by any chance work in stone. They make rough wood figures of an entirely different kind for certain ceremonies connected with the secret societies, but never anything else."

* This, perhaps, explains the ceremony described to Mr. Bruce.

FIG. 2.

From the same source and by the same channel the following interesting note regarding the cult of these images in Liberia has just reached me: "I'm collecting " *nomoris* here. . . . Apparently the Kissi worship them, because each one I've " found, or been brought, has been spattered over with blood (chicken's) and egg. But " none I've yet seen here is as good as those obtained in the Panguma district."

With regard to the original makers of these images and the artistic influences which attended upon their manufacture, I should like to say a word rather in deprecation of the tendency shown by some to explain relics of pre-existing artistic and technical activity in savage Africa by a reference to Egypt or the external world. In certain cases, the bronze-casting of Benin for instance, there is no doubt that such a reference is just; but with regard to these soapstone figures, not only does no trace of such external influence appear, but there is no reason why it should be invoked.

In the first place the argument from the rarity of stone carving in savage Africa loses its force when it is remembered that steatite is far easier to work than wood, it has no grain, and is softer, a mere scratch with the thumbnail being sufficient to make a considerable impression. In fact, from this point of view, these figures strictly do not belong at all to the same category as carvings in stone. Nor is there any necessity to regard them in consequence as relics of the far-away Stone Age of Africa; the fact that the present inhabitants know nothing of them is of little moment. In a country which has little or no history the word "prehistoric" bears little significance. In this quarter of Africa, as in many other parts of the continent, tribal migrations and wars of extermination have effectually blotted out the past, and it is perfectly conceivable, in such an environment, that the manufacture of these figures disappeared with the tribe which made them.

In the second place the figures themselves display attributes which are associated closely with the negro; their facial traits, especially the extreme breadth of nose, are manifestly negroid; the chair shown in Mr. May's specimen is of a type still locally common and has nothing foreign about it, the tattooing and the amuletic bracelet shown in the specimen on Plate G, are equally "negroid"; in fact, no figure which I have yet seen actually or in photograph shows the least hint of any connection with Egyptian or foreign art. Had there been such it is impossible not to believe that some trace would have survived, in the same way that the figures of Europeans are introduced into the art of Benin, or Chinese and Japanese designs appear on European porcelain.

With regard to the evidence of Egyptian culture on the west coast laboriously collected and ably put forward by M. Delafosse; the points of resemblance found in certain institutions, &c., apply equally well to other races scattered all over the globe. And in regard to this point another word might be said. It is too often forgotten that, while a great deal of the Egyptian civilisation may have been exotic, yet it must have contained a large substratum of what was native African. Or, at least, indigenous culture must have played a considerable part in modifying and contributing to the imported civilisation. Many small points of correspondence between civilised Egypt and savage Africa may be explained by this very natural assumption of a common ethnographical element, indigenous in character. Professor Thomson and Mr. Randall MacIver in their recent monumental work on the *Native Races of the Thebaid*, have shown that a negroid type was present in the population from the earliest time downward.

From the evidence to hand, therefore, there seems no reason to doubt that the figures under discussion are not only of native manufacture but the products of a local and indigenous art. The final solution of the question may perhaps appear when the tumuli mentioned in the native reports are located and explored. But at present the very existence of these cannot be regarded as proven.

T. A. JOYCE.