The Yoruba are perhaps the most urban of all African groups. By the eleventh century AD, what they consider to be their founding city, Ile-Ife, was a thriving metropolis, the center of an influential city-state. Over the ensuing centuries, numerous city-states evolved, all claiming descent from Ile-Ife. This urban tradition continues to the present day, when Yoruba cities may number in the hundreds of thousands. The Yoruba peoples of southwestern Nigeria and southern Benin did not consider themselves a single group in the past. The term “Yoruba” was first used to describe people of the Oyo kingdom, which once dominated most of the region. British colonizers noted similarities of language and culture among those peoples tracing descent from Ile-Ife and referred to all of them as Yoruba.

To the west of the Yoruba, in the Republic of Benin and Togo, live the Fon and their relatives, the Ewe and the Popo, collectively called the Aja. According to tradition, the dynasties of Aja kingdoms originated in Tado, located in what is today Togo. Legend claims a Tado princess had union with a leopard spirit and gave birth to Agasu, whose descendants founded the kingdoms of Ardra and Dahomey. Tado may have developed as early as the twelfth or thirteenth century, Ardra by the sixteenth century, and Dahomey by the seventeenth century. Fon traditions claim close relationships to the Yoruba, and some versions of Aja origin stories claim that the first Tado king was Yoruba.
Although Yoruba and Fon cultures are distinct from each other, they have interacted for centuries through both trade and warfare. The Fon share many elements of Yoruba culture, including the institution of centralized kingship, a system of divination for communicating with the spirit world, and a similar pantheon of gods and spirits. Artistic influence has also flowed from the Yoruba to the Fon.

**EARLY IFE**

In Yoruba mythology the city of Ille-Ife is “the navel of the world,” where creation took place and the tradition of kingship began. There the gods Oduduwa and Obatala descended from heaven to create earth and its inhabitants. Oduduwa himself became the first ruler, oni, of Ille-Ife. To this day Yoruba kings trace ancestry to Oduduwa.

The largest and most coherent body of artistic and archaeological evidence for the proto-Yoruba culture of early Ille-Ife dates roughly between AD 1000 and 1400, an era known as the Pavement period. Numerous finds predate these centuries, however, and there is evidence that the site was occupied by at least the eighth century AD. While little is known about these earlier centuries, scholars have proposed two broad periods of development, an Archaic period, to about AD 800, and a Pre-Pavement period, from about AD 800 to 1000.

**Archaic and Pre-Pavement Periods**

Among the most remarkable works surviving from the Archaic period are a number of stone monoliths. A dramatic granite gneiss monolith known as Opa Oranmian, the largest of these, set with spiral-headed iron nails in a trident pattern, rises over eighteen feet (fig. 8-2). There is no way to know exactly what the monolith represents. Its name, meaning “the staff of Oranmian,” dates from recent times. Mythical son of the god Oduduwa, Oranmian is associated with the founding of the dynasties of both the kingdom of Benin (see chapter 9) and the Yoruba city-state of Oyo.

In contrast to the abstract, radically simplified forms of Archaic sculpture, Pre-Pavement figures depict human and animal subjects in more naturalistic styles. One of the most famous Pre-Pavement works is known to present-day inhabitants of Ille-Ife as Idena, “gatekeeper” (fig. 8-3).
Exaggerated columnar legs provide a stable base for the bare-chested male figure standing with its hands clasped at the waist. Spiral-headed iron nails embedded in the head suggest the texture of hair while linking the figure back to the iron-and-stone works of the Archaic period. The heavy collar of beads, the bracelets, and the intricately tied wrapper suggest a person of high rank.

**Pavement Period**

During the eleventh century Ile-Ife blossomed into a substantial urban center. Beginning in the thirteenth century, as rivalry between neighboring city-states intensified, Ile-Ife fortified itself with a defensive moat and earthen ramparts. Intermittent warfare between city-states continued into the nineteenth century and is probably in part responsible for the Yoruba cultural pattern of living in densely populated, walled cities surrounded by radiating farmlands.

Excavations suggest that early Ile-Ife was laid out in an orderly plan (fig. 8-4). Like most Yoruba cities it was roughly circular, with the palace at the center. Two concentric systems of walls surrounded the city. Near the palace, but also sprinkled throughout the city, were shrines to the deities. Major roads radiated outward, linking Ile-Ife to neighboring cities. Marked by a large gateway that likely housed guards, each opening in the moat and wall complex was both a military post and a ritually consecrated space.

The basic unit of architecture seems to have been a square or rectangular courtyard surrounded by a veranda. Most homes would have been formed of several such court-

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8-4. **Plan of Ile-Ife.** The letters indicate where works illustrated in the text were found or are located:

- a Oni's palace (see fig. 8-1)
- b Iya Yemoo (see fig. 8-8)
- c Wunmonije (see fig. 8-10)
- d Opa Oramiyan (see fig. 8-2)
- e Ore Grove (see fig. 8-3)
- f Obatala shrine
- g Oouduwa shrine
- h Olukun Grove
- i Obalara's Land (see fig. 8-7)
- j Iafogido (see fig. 8-6)

8-5. **Pattern of a pavement excavated at Ile-Ife.**

**Drawing by Peter Garlake**

Short lines indicate pottery shards set into the earth on edge in herringbone patterns. Small ovals indicate stones that filled the spaces between rows of shards.
yards, while the palace probably had great numbers of them. At least one palace courtyard of great size accommodated a large portion of the population for ceremonies. The most important courtyards in palaces, shrines, and gateways were decorated with elaborate mosaic pavements of stone and pottery shards (fig. 8-5).

Paved courtyards were sacred spaces. The semi-circular voids at the top and bottom of the diagram indicate where raised altars made of packed earth would have stood, their sides inlaid with shard mosaic designs. Ritually buried pottery has been recovered from such courtyards. One courtyard yielded fourteen buried pots set into the earth along the pavement's border and fitted with lids depicting the heads of various animals (fig. 8-6). The ram's head, at the left, wears a royal crown, suggesting that the animal served as a metaphor for kingly power. Other animals such as the elephant, leopard, or what may be a hippopotamus on the pot at the right, may also refer metaphorically to the oni, for they too wear elaborate beaded headdresses with a royal crest and forehead pendant.

A single vessel was often set into the center of the courtyard; its position emphasized, as in figure 8-5, by a circular arrangement of stones and shards around the protruding neck. One of the most interesting of these vessels to have been recovered is shown in figure 8-7. Typical of such vessels, the bottom was broken prior to its burial so that libations poured into it penetrate directly into the earth. Decorations in relief depict a series of eight undoubtedly potent symbols, similar to symbols found on fragments of other vessels. Among them is an altar or shrine such as those that probably stood in the semi-circular spaces framed by the courtyard pavement. A snake, whose sinuous body moves over the shoulder of the vessel, hovers over the altar. Just to the right, two human legs project from a basket, suggesting sacrifice. Next to the basket, a pair of carved blades connected by a cord loop around a knob. Barely visible is a tall drum. The circular form to the left seems to represent a curved rod, its ends slightly overlapping. Next to the rod, a pair of horns connected by a cord loop around a knob.

Perhaps the most intriguing image on the pot is the altar. Enclosed by posts supporting a roof of palm fronds, it is set with three sculpted heads. The central head is in a fully naturalistic style, while the flanking...
works are abstract. Both styles closely resemble works that have been found at Ife and allow us to assume that these seemingly disparate styles were created concurrently and served similar purposes.

As the descendant of Oduduwa, the oni of Ile-Ife was viewed as a god-king. Confined to the palace, his life was lived as a continuous set of rituals. Much of the art of ancient Ile-Ife was probably created for the royal court, including figures that may have been intended as portraits of rulers, officials, and their families. The naturalistic style of Pavement period sculpture is beautifully illustrated by the terracotta head in figure 8-8. The most elaborate terracotta head thus far found, it depicts a queen wearing a complex crown with five tiers of beads. A row of feathers projects over the serene face. The crest that once adorned the front of the crown has broken off, leaving evidence of a circular pendant on the forehead. Traces of pigment suggest that the sculpture was once painted in bright colors. Many of the terracotta heads discovered at Ife are complete works in themselves and were destined for use on altars, as the vessel in figure 8-7 makes clear. The way the neck is broken on this head, however, indicates that it once formed part of a larger, perhaps complete figure.

In modeling the face, the artist has faithfully rendered the way flesh and muscle lie over bone, yet this closely observed naturalism embraces a marked degree of idealism as well. Many parts of the anatomy are noticeably stylized, especially the lips, eyes, and ears. This restrained, idealized naturalism is characteristic of the early centuries of Pavement period sculpture, which became freer and more expressive in later centuries. We do not yet know exactly what to make of such images of women who wear crowns such as this or who are shown in other works of art. Some Yoruba kingdoms' "kings lists" include women as rulers and, in more recent times, some kingdoms have royal positions that are specifically for women.

A typical example of the abstract Pavement period style is the cylindrical head illustrated here (fig. 8-9). Two holes suffice for eyes, a simple wedge-shaped cut indicates the mouth, and rounded horn-like knobs sprout from the top. The simultaneous use of two such radically different styles may reflect the need to embody two quite different ideas. The inner head, ori imu, and the outer head, ori ode, are important concepts in Yoruba thought. The terms reflect complementary spheres of being. The inner head is spiritual and invisible. Perceivable only through the imagination, it embodies a person's spiritual and true being. The outer head is the physical entity perceived through the senses. The terracotta heads of early Ife are thought to...
embody this duality, with the abstract style depicting an inner, spiritual reality and the naturalistic style depicting the outer, physical reality. An altar such as the one depicted on the vase in figure 8–7 may have been used in blessing the inner head of the king, a custom that survives in present-day Yoruba courts.

Pavement period artists also produced works in cast metal. While these sculptures are often spoken of as bronzes, most were created from alloys of zinc, lead, and copper more properly classified as brass. A few are almost pure copper. Although some recent scholars argue that copper may have reached Ife from deposits located less than a thousand miles away, we do know that metals were obtained through trans-Saharan trade networks that extended to northwest Africa and even tapped into routes that continued to central Europe.

Cast by the lost-wax process (see Aspects of African Cultures: Lost-Wax Casting, p. 234), these sculptures show the same idealized naturalism as the early Pavement period terracotta heads, and thus were probably produced during the same centuries.

The life-size brass head shown here stands on a cylindrical neck (fig. 8–10). As on the terracotta head earlier, the eyes, lips, and ears are stylized according to ideal models. Yet the features are still strongly individualized, and the head may well have been intended as a portrait. The face bears the vertical striations found on many terracotta and brass heads at Ile-Ife. While these markings are often thought to represent scarification, the Yoruba in recent times have not been known to use this particular scarification pattern, and it is entirely possible that the striations are purely an aesthetic device.

Holes along the hairline were probably used to attach headgear, most plausibly a crown. Other heads feature holes along the lower part of the face, just above the jawline and across the upper lip, perhaps for attaching facial hair to heighten the effect of realism. More probably, however, they allowed a beaded shield
Aspects of African Cultures

Lost-Wax Casting

The lost-wax casting process, still in use today, was first employed in the ancient Near East during the fourth millennium BC. The technique was used early in China, and subsequently passed along as well to the many overlapping civilizations that ringed the Mediterranean, including Kemet. Although copper was cast in the southern Sahara by the seventh century BC, the earliest evidence for the process south of the Niger River is from the tenth-century site of Igbo-Ukwu.

The drawings below illustrate the steps used by sculptors in Benin. A heat-resistant core of clay is formed, approximating the shape of the sculpture-to-be. This core is then covered with a layer of wax, which the sculptor models, carves, and incises. Wax rods and a wax cup are attached to the base of the completed wax model to prepare it for casting. A thin layer of finely ground liquid clay is painted on the wax model, and the entire assembly is then covered with increasingly thick layers of clay. When the clay is completely dry, the assembly is heated to melt out the wax, leaving an empty image or mold of the sculpture for the molten metal to fill, and channels where the wax rods have been to allow the metal to be poured in. The mold is turned upside down to receive the molten metal, which is generally a copper alloy approximating brass. When the metal has cooled, the outer clay casing and inner clay core are broken up and removed, freeing the brass sculpture. After the pouring channels are filed off, the image is ready for final polishing. A sculpture produced with this method is unique, for the mold is destroyed in the process. HMC

for displaying crowns during annual rites of renewal and purification when the ruler’s inner head was blessed.

While many of the terracotta heads found at Ife originally formed part of a larger figure, most of these have survived only in fragments. A worker digging a road to an Ife shrine unearthed a particularly intriguing sculpture. It may depict a king and queen (or queen mother), or two allied rulers, or deified royal ancestors such as Obatala and his consort, Yemoo (fig. 8-11). The brass, barely one-sixteenth of an inch thick, attests to the skill of the craftsmen who cast it. While detailed, the proportions of the figures with their oversized heads are not naturalistic, further emphasizing the conceptual nature of Ife sculpture. Each wears beaded collars, necklaces, bracelets, anklets, and a crown of beads, not unlike that in figure 8-8, all connoting royal position. The male figure hooks his index fingers together in a symbolic gesture, while the female figure locks her arm through his. Their legs entwine. We may never learn the precise meanings of these gestures. The combined figures representing male and female possibly allude to the interdependence of male and female, an idea of importance in the art and thinking among the Yoruba peoples today, many of whom claim descent from Ile-Ife.

The most remarkable of all Pavement period sculpture was found some 120 miles away in a shrine on the banks of the Niger River near Tada (fig. 8-12). Dated to around AD 1300 and cast in almost pure copper, the figure is distinguished by its relaxed asymmetrical pose, the palpa-
ble sense of weight conveyed by rounded fleshy forms, and the more naturalistic proportions of head to body. The face wears an attentive and dignified expression. A patterned wrapper around the waist falls over the thighs and is fixed on the left hip with an elaborate tie.

How this extraordinary work came to be in Tada is a subject for speculation. It may have been sent from Ife as a token of authority, and may thus mark a boundary of Ife's influence at a certain moment. It may also have been carried off as a trophy of war. The sculpture is one of eight metal figures found around Tada and nearby Jebba Island. According to oral histories of the Nupe people, the present-day inhabitants of the region, the works were stolen from Idah, the capital of the Igala people, by the

Nupe folk hero Tsoede. During the sixteenth century the Nupe were in fact involved in wars with the Yoruba city-state of Oyo, which was then extending its boundaries. Oyo claimed close ties with Ife, and it may well be that the statue was taken by the Nupe from Oyo. As many as four different styles are represented by the eight works, supporting the theory that they were imported into the area from various sources. The variety of styles also suggests that casting technology was known outside Ife, though these other ancient casting centers remain to be discovered.

In view of the widespread use of masks and masquerades in African art, the discovery of masks at Ile-Ife is particularly fascinating. Two masks are known, one of terracotta, the other, shown here, cast in pure copper (fig. 8-1). Copper is exceedingly difficult to cast, and the flawless casting of this mask is a tribute to the high level of technical skill attained by Ife artists. The mask is said to represent Obalufon II, the third ruler of Ife, who is credited with introducing the techniques of casting. Narrow slits below the eyes suggest that the mask was made to be worn. Holes along its back were likely used to attach a costume. The work is kept on an altar in the palace of the present-day oni of Ife, where it is believed to have resided since its creation some five hundred to seven hundred years ago.

EARLY OWO

The city of Owo lies about eighty miles to the southeast of Ile-Ife. In centuries past it was a powerful city-
ues to watch over the figures even in the context of a museum setting.

RECENT YORUBA ARTS

After the early splendors of Ife and Owo, a series of horrific civil wars led to the deaths or the enslavement of vast numbers of the Yoruba, the Fon, and their neighbors. During this dark period, their homelands became known by Europeans as the Slave Coast. Only the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the early nineteenth century allowed Yoruba kingdoms to regain stability. By the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, a wide range of objects, forms, art styles, and art events had developed in a number of Yoruba centers. Some of the art forms were found throughout Yorubaland, while others were purely local. Although art production in this region had changed significantly by the twenty-first century, some Yoruba artists continue to create works to underscore the leadership systems of the royal court and the society of elders known as Ogboni, or to address the spirit world and facilitate communication between the humans and the realm of gods and spirits.

Royal Arts

Much of the art produced in the Yoruba region calls attention to the king and his court. As a visible symbol of the deity, the king is the high priest of the community. Although Yoruba kings are free to appear in public today, in the past they were confined to the palace, making public appearances only when the welfare of the state required them to participate
in public ceremonies. Even in those instances, the individual who held the office was not really seen, for royal garb concealed his identity, emphasizing instead his mysterious, sacred nature.

The king shown in figure 8-18, Arawajoye I, oba of the Igbonina Yoruba, wears and carries a number of references to his position as sacred descendant of Odudua. Bead embroidery is normally reserved for the oba. The beadwork on the king's robe, on the cushion that elevates his feet above the earth, on the tall staff in his right hand, and on the intricate crown signals that this is the sacred ruler, descendant of gods.

The crown is the foremost attribute of the sacred king. Yoruba crowns are made of a wickerwork cone covered with stiff fabric or canvas. Glass trade beads are strung and attached to cover the entire surface in boldly colored designs. The beaded fringe veil, the prime symbol of kingship, is supposed to be worn only by those kings who can trace their lineages to Odudua. In fact, legal cases have challenged the rights of certain kings to wear the beaded crown. In the past, the sanctity of his very existence prevented the king's being seen by ordinary people, and the fringe protected him from the gaze of the profane when he made public appearances.

Three tiers of abstracted faces (their staring eyes clearly discernible) decorate the body of the crown. Depicting royal ancestors, ultimately Odudua, they refer to the mystic union of the living king with his deified predecessors. As delegate of the ancestors, the king relies on their wisdom and powers. The multiplicity of faces alludes to the all-seeing nature of ancestors and spirits and thus to the role of the king whose supernatural vision allows him access to such authority.

Attached between the faces are small, three-dimensional beaded birds. A larger beaded bird ornamented with actual tail feathers tops the crown. Birds are another important element on Yoruba crowns. The great bird at the top is said by some to represent the egret, the bird of decorum, a symbol of orderliness and settler of disputes. Others suggest it is the paradise flycatcher, a royal signifier whose tail sports extremely long feathers, or the pigeon, a symbol of victory and political power. Still others see the birds as a reference to the special powers of “night people” such as Osanyin priests, Ifa priests, even the king himself, all of whom must ingest a secret substance in order to work either with or against mystical powers described as sorcery, or witchcraft. In some regions of Yorubaland, such birds are references to “Our Mothers,” a collective term for all female ancestors, female deities, and elderly living women. “Our Mothers” are believed to have special powers and to be able to transform themselves into birds of the night. Kings cannot rule unless they are able to control or counteract the powers of such beings. References to witchcraft and similar manipulations of power appear in popular Nigerian culture as well as in Yoruba royal arts, and characters labelled as witches are the wicked protagonists of many television shows and videos catering to Yoruba audiences today.

When the king wears the sacred fringed crown, his being is modified. His outer head is covered by the crown, and his inner head becomes one with the sacred authority and power, ashe, of the ancestors. He cannot touch the earth, and thus stands on a mat or cloth. Seated in state, his feet rest on a decorative cushion or footstool. His own face disappears behind the veil, and the faces of the royal ancestors stare out instead. It is the vision of dynasty that is emphasized rather than the individual who wears the crown.

The king dwells in the afin, the royal palace. The most imposing architectural structure in a Yoruba city, the afin is also the site of the
most sacred worship and celebrations. As in early Ife, the palace stands in the center of the city, and all roads lead to it. The king’s market, usually the most important market in town, lies at its door. An *afiri* consists of numerous courtyards of varying sizes, most surrounded by verandas. Steep roofs, once thatched, are today covered with corrugated steel.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists fashioned wonderful objects to enhance the splendor of the palace, record the exploits of the kings and chiefs, and display religious symbols and metaphors to the public. In making such commissions, kings historically sought the most skillful artists from their own realms and beyond. The best artists achieved the title *are*, which literally means “itinerant,” suggesting that they moved from kingdom to kingdom accepting work from a number of patrons.

One such artist was Olowe of Ise (died 1938), one of the best-known Yoruba sculptors of the twentieth century. Praise poetry still chanted in his memory calls him “the leader of all carvers,” one who carves the hard wood of the iroko tree “as though it were as soft as a calabash.” Olowe was born during the nineteenth century in Efon-Alaiye, famed as a center of carving. He grew up in Ise, to the southeast. Over the course of his career he produced doors, posts, chairs, stools, tables, bowls, drums, and ritual objects for palaces and shrines in the kingdoms of Ijasa and Ilesha, and in various smaller kingdoms of the Akoko region of Yorubaland.

Between 1910 and 1914 Olowe worked at the palace of the king, *ogoga*, of Ikere, in northeastern Yorubaland. The *ogoga* was probably familiar with the works that Olowe had carved for the palace at Ise and wanted to make his own *afiri* equally magnificent. Among the works Olowe created at Ikere are three verandah posts that once stood in the courtyard in which the *ogoga* sits in state for ritual and ceremonial occasions (fig. 8–19). The central group, a freestanding

![8-19. VERANDAH POSTS, IKERE PALACE, IKERE, OLOWE OF ISE, YORUBA, NIGERIA, 1910–14. WOOD AND PIGMENT. PHOTOGRAPH 1959](image)
in mid-air. By adjusting the scale of his figures, Olowe evokes two concepts. The first is that the power of a Yoruba king is not in his physical stature but in the mystical powers that he derives from his royal ancestors. These powers reside in the crown, which dominates the composition. Repeating textured bands, ancestral faces, and an enormous bird whose beak touches the crown just above the central ancestral face all draw our attention to the crown, whose carefully textured surface contrasts with the more plainly carved form of the king.

The second concept Olowe evokes is the power of women. The imposing bird atop the crown concedes that the king relies on forces that women control. The large, physically imposing figure of the queen, painted a startling blue, also alludes to the supporting power of women. Although the power of the king is overt, that of women is hidden. The king and all creation rely on the energies that women command.

Two weight-bearing posts flank and face the central group. To the right, another queen, wearing an elaborate coiffure, presents her twin children. To the left, a warrior on horseback approaches, holding a cutlass in one hand and a spear in the other. A European gun rests at his waist. A small herald to his side announces him with a Y-shaped whistle. The horse is the most profound of his attributes, for it is symbolic of great cavalries in the days of Yoruba warfare. The secret powers of dynasty, the military might of men, and the hidden and reproductive energies of women are all evoked in this set of posts.
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Olowe also produced a door for the same courtyard (fig. 8-20). A remarkable example of palace art, it depicts the ogoga's reception in 1897 of Captain Ambrose, the British Commissioner of Ondo Province. Each of the door's two vertical panels is divided into five registers. In the foreground, figures carved in high relief carry out the action of the story; the backgrounds are carved in low relief and the patterns are picked out in color. On the left, in the second register from the top, the king is