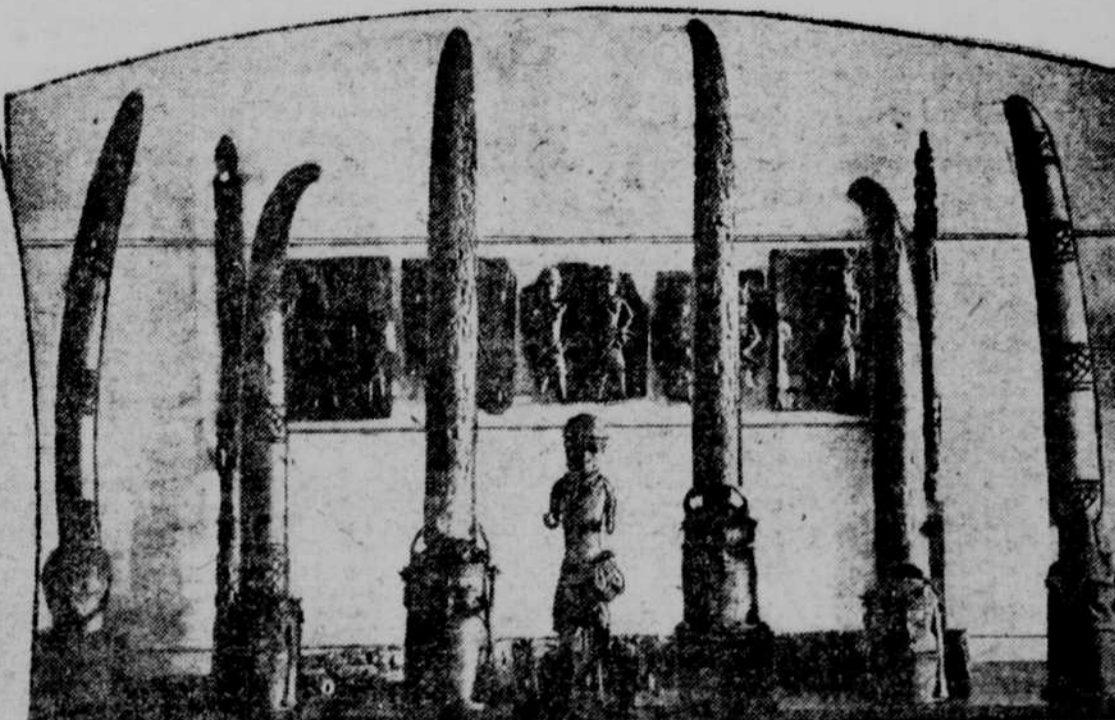


The Altar That Claimed Thousands of Human Victims

Until Only a Few Years Ago Men, Women and Babies Were Sacrificed on This Shrine to Appease Strange Heathen Gods



Large bronze bust of a heathen deity or a dead king that stands in the center of the altar. The left hand holds a sort of ax or hammer, and the right probably once held a staff.



"Altar of human sacrifice" from the mysterious city of Benin in West Africa as restored at the University museum in Philadelphia. Note the long fetish tusks with bronze pedestals, the altar bells and rattle staves to drive away evil spirits and the statues of gods, goddesses and dead kings.



Bronze bust of a prisoner of war who was slain on Great Benin's bloody altar.



At the right, the huge wooden image that stood beside the sacrificial altar and into which a thorn was thrust every time a human life was sacrificed.



Above, interesting example of wood carving found in the royal palace at Great Benin and showing how well advanced the people were in this difficult art.



Another bronze head of an altar victim, the style of sculpture showing a curious similarity to that of ancient Egypt.

Perhaps no other object in the whole world is more deeply drenched with blood and tears and the cruel memories of utterly needless human suffering than the sacrificial altar of a curious and little understood African tribe which has lately been restored to all its original barbaric magnificence and placed on exhibition in the University Museum at Philadelphia.

If this ancient shrine could speak it is believed it could tell a story that would almost pass belief—a story of thousands of men, women and children whose lives were pitilessly claimed in the superstitious effort to appease the wrath of vengeful heathen gods. And the horrible practices which this altar witnessed came to an end only a matter of 25 years ago.

The altar consists of a collection of bronze likenesses of the dusky kings and their ancestors, surmounted by elephant tusks carved with scenes symbolic of their lives and deeds; a group of bronze bells, wooden rattle staves and bronze plaques. All that is missing is the ax with which the royal executioner, until 25 years ago, cut off the heads of the victims who were forced to kneel before the altar.

This blood-stained shrine was once in daily use at the mysterious city of Great Benin, in the heart of West Africa, long a puzzle to archaeologists. It might still be in use if King Eduboa hadn't made the error of sacrificing every member of a peaceful mission sent to his city by the British as recently as 1897.

For a long time no word was received of the fate of the members of this mission. Then through adjoining tribes the British learned that every man had been beheaded to propitiate the gods, and forthwith a military expedition was sent out to depose Eduboa and teach him a milder system of religion.

Until that time very little had been known of the city and of its worship and royalty. The king lived in seclusion, rarely seen even by his own subjects. For a half century it had been known that Benin had once been the center of an unexplained craftsmanship in wood-carving and in bronze casting, so far superior to the art of other African savage tribes that there was no comparison. Occasionally some examples of these works were smuggled out, but with them came crude copies indicating that the former culture of the city had become extinct.

When the British force entered they discovered on the tops of the

temples and many of the more important buildings of the royal compound huge brass snakes, so constructed that their heads hung down over the doorways. The city was accidentally burned on the third day of their occupation and thus many of the finer works of early art still preserved were destroyed.

But enough information was obtained so that scientists at the University Museum have been able to solve the mystery of Benin's former art and culture. They were due to a Portuguese missionary, who lived in the city in the year 1516 and taught the inhabitants many things.

In common with nearly all the savage tribes of Africa, the Bini, as these people are known, cut off the heads of their captives and preserved them. It is believed that the Portuguese, known to the savages as Ahamangiwa, taught the natives how to make casts of the heads of captives and that this led to the idea of immortalizing the features of kings and other important personages in bronze. They were then set up as idols on the altar, and instead of killing captives where they were caught, the Bini brought them to the temple.

"The most striking and the essential part of the ritual of the worship of the Bini," says Dr. H. U. Hall, who reconstructed the altar from the collection obtained by the museum, "consisted in sacrifices to their ancestors, who were conceived as directing for good or evil the affairs of living men. These spirits might be angry and the wilder powers which death had conferred on them by association with the spiritual and the invisible—that is, with other spiritual forces and elements never incarnated and always malignant—made their anger most formidable.

"They must be propitiated, and blood, the essence of life, was an acceptable offering if not a necessary revivifier to them. Altars and images, containers of the ancestor spirit, the god, were drenched therefore with the blood of victims, fowls and goats and oxen, and also men, women and little children. The gods were spirits; other spirits, liberated by bodily death, must be made messengers to them of prayers and wishes, and a human spirit was naturally the most efficient messenger.

"The gods were subject to the same needs as their children on earth, so when a king or a great king died attendants must be dispatched with him to the spirit world

and others must follow at each anniversary celebration of his death. For lesser men a lesser sacrifice of fowls or goats or oxen must serve, though the poultry yard and the herd were not spared in the former case, either.

"As being himself fetish and representing the interests of the divine predecessors, the king had the right to sacrifice human victims. This prerogative was not unique. The chief officials, agents of his powers and kingly functions, though but one of them bore a priestly title, shared also this sacerdotal prerogative and were thus strongly entrenched in all fields, military, civil and religious, over which the royal power extended, and wielding that power for the king, kept him in the background, an awe-inspiring puppet; invested with all the influences of superstitious terror which were the sanctions of the acts they performed in his name.

"Not only the king, then, but also the queen mother, the captain of war, the principal judge and the chief priest might sacrifice human beings to their ancestors. From these ancestors they inherited their offices and, like the king, thus wielded power by a kind of divine right, since ancestors who are sacrificed to and to that extent worshiped are, if not already deified, at least in a fair way of being so.

"Benin was, it seems, a holy city—it was cut off not only physically by a wall but spiritually by a king of taboo from the rest of the kingdom—governed by a hierarchy whose members were possessed of varying degrees of supernatural power. Apparently the city maintained its supremacy over the other towns of the kingdom chiefly by the superstitious awe which this theory of government inspired; supported as it was by the bloody terror of ritual murder.

"The actual slaying of victims was delegated to a professional executioner, a public official of considerable importance. If the act of killing was originally essential to the office of celebrant at these sacrifices, perhaps we may see a survival of the primitive exercise of this right or duty in the circumstances that attended the capture

of a leopard by a hunter. Here we seem to see the king in his double capacity of priest and god, offering in his own person a sacrifice to him self, for an essential part of the ritual of sacrifice on other occasions was the sprinkling of the fetish images of ancestral deities with the blood of the victim.

"There was a considerable variety of such images, for the cult of ancestors was not confined to those of the king; every family owed worship and sacrifice to the spirits of its forebears, and these were supposed to inhabit objects of several kinds and forms.

"The king's special fetish was a representation in bronze or brass of a human head, probably a portrait of an ancestor, surmounted by the tusk of an elephant often carved all over with figures of men and animals. These were set up on altars which there is reason to suppose were in some cases also the tombs of royal ancestors."

Benin City also was known as Edo and was the capital of the country of the same name which is now part of the British protectorate of Nigeria. The king left the compound in which his palace was situated only on very rare occasions, according to Mr. Hall's account. Yet he ruled at one time over a territory reaching as far as the sea on the African seaboard between the rivers Volta and Niger.

His subjects believed that he required neither food nor drink to sustain his life; that, although he might die, he would come again to life and his kingdom. Offenders against the law and prisoners of war furnished most of the victims.

"Great Benin," says Dr. George Byron Gordon, director of the University Museum, "was the last example of the old style barbarism that has furnished history with one of its principal motives from the beginning. That barbarism may very well be represented by its altars."

"In the museum we have set up an altar such as might have been seen in Great Benin prior to 1897 and I am not aware that any de-

tall has been omitted from its array of idols, heads, tusks, bells and staves, but realism could not be attained without the presence of a sacrifice, for the altar required human victims and it was usually wet with blood and reeking with fresh offerings.

"Including the objects on the altar, there are in all about 200 specimens in the museum's Benin collection. Other collections similar in kind are in the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford and the Berlin Museum. Benin art objects are rarely obtainable now.

"All of the pieces shown in the University Museum were collected in 1897 by members of the expedition that visited Great Benin in that year, when the human sacrifices were stopped and the king made a prisoner.

"The chief interest of the collection is the fact that it is the only one of its kind in the world. (Continued on Page Seven)