Name: _____

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The Mysterious Nok Culture

In 1928, a tin miner working near the village of Nok, Nigeria, unearthed a small terracotta head shaped like a monkey. The mine's owner sent it to a museum in nearby Jos. For the next fifteen years, the object remained in the museum as a barely noticed curiosity — the first trace of a culture whose people had once made remarkable terracotta sculptures and later became early ironworkers.

The Mysterious People

They were farmers who grew grains and kept animals, and their culture lasted for more than a thousand years, beginning around 1500 BCE. No one knew what they called themselves. Archaeologists eventually named them the Nok, after the village where the head was found.

Bernard Fagg and the Terracottas

For years, miners occasionally found other terracotta figures, but some, fearing the finds meant a poor tin yield, destroyed them. In 1943, a mine clerk found another head and, not understanding its worth, used it as a scarecrow in his yam field. When Bernard Fagg, an archaeologist working for Nigeria's British colonial government, saw it, he recognized its resemblance to the head found fifteen years earlier.

Fagg traveled through central Nigeria asking miners and villagers about similar objects. Soon, terracotta figures buried for centuries began turning up. Fagg eventually collected more than 150, along with pottery and stone tools from the same sites. The terracotta artifacts included nearly life-sized sculptures of animals and people, made from clay fired in a kiln.

Clues from the Artifacts

The sophistication of the objects led archaeologists to believe the Nok may have based their terracotta figurines on woodcarvings. However, any wooden artifacts would have disintegrated long ago in the humid climate of West Africa. The refinement of the objects suggests that the Nok artistic tradition began long before the oldest surviving sculptures.

The Ironworkers

In 1961, Fagg led an excavation at Taruga, about sixty miles southwest of Nok. This time, his team found more than terracotta. Buried with fragments of the familiar figurines were iron slag and the remains of furnaces used to smelt iron ore. Later excavations uncovered thirteen furnaces at Taruga. The discovery showed that the Nok were not only artists. They were also among the earliest known ironworkers in West Africa.

The Iron Mystery

Ironworking presented archaeologists with a problem. In many ancient societies, metalworkers learned to work softer metals such as copper and bronze before developing furnaces hot enough to smelt iron. Archaeologists have found no evidence that the Nok did. Somehow, they appear to have moved directly from stone tools to iron.

Either the Nok learned ironworking from outsiders, or they discovered it themselves. Yet archaeologists have found no people who clearly taught them and no trail showing how the technology reached central Nigeria. The other possibility seems just as unlikely. People using stone tools would have had little reason to build the extremely hot, carefully controlled furnaces needed to smelt iron. Yet the furnaces are there. Something happened. Archaeologists just haven't figured out what.

What Happened?

Another mystery is what happened to the Nok. Archaeologists have found no Nok terracotta figures or pottery dating later than about 200 CE. What replaced them in the region is still unclear. The Nok disappeared, but ironworking did not. Other West African peoples continued to smelt and work iron.

The Search Ends

Archaeological digs in the Nok region are currently on hold. In 2017, gunmen attacked an excavation team and kidnapped two German archaeologists. Two local villagers were shot and killed at the scene. The archaeologists were released four days later, but researchers have not returned to the excavation area because the region remains too dangerous.

And the mystery remains.

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Name: _____

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Fill in the Blanks

In 19____, a tin miner near the village of Nok, N__g__r__a, discovered a small t__r__a__o__ta head. Archaeologists later named the ★u__kno__n creators of the figurines after a nearby v__l__a__e. The Nok were f__r__e__s who lived in West Africa beginning around 1500 BCE. They made sophisticated s__u__p__u__es of p__o__le and a__i__a__s. In 1943, a__c__a__o__o__i__t Bernard Fagg began searching the region and eventually c__l__e__t__d more than 150 figures.

In 1961, Fagg's team discovered f__r__ac__s used to s__e__t iron. Archaeologists were surprised to have found no e__i__e__ce that the Nok first learned to work softer metals such as c__p__er or b__o__ze, but instead moved directly from s__o__e tools to iron, but no one knows how they l__a__n__d to b__i__d furnaces hot enough to smelt it. The Nok eventually disappeared, and a__c__a__o__o__i__ts still do not know what happened to them.

Answer in Complete Sentences

1. What superstitious belief led some miners to destroy some of the terracotta figures they encountered?

2. What caused Bernard Fagg to begin searching for more terracotta figures?

★3. Why is the Nok's ability to make iron especially puzzling to archaeologists?

★4. Archaeologists believe Nok artists developed their skills over time. What is something you do much better now than when you first started?

★ This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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