

Nok terracotta figures, first unearthed in 1943 during tin mining operations on the Jos Plateau between the Niger and Benue rivers in Nigeria, are the most ancient extant examples of figurative African sculpture, as well as the oldest evidence of advanced, organized society in sub-Saharan Africa. Employing modern technologies such as thermo-luminescence testing and radiocarbon dating, scientists date the Nok figures from 500 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. Fabricated from local clay, often mixed with gravel and fired in kilns, the terracotta Nok works are generally hollow human or animal figures of coil construction. Nok animal figurines are relatively realistic, whereas the portrait sculptures reveal an impressive degree of stylization. Most surviving Nok pieces are heads that were once part of full-body figures. The heads appear disproportionately large, with facial features that include triangular-shaped eyes, flared nostrils, and full lips. Nok portrait heads are distinguished by meticulous renderings of elaborate hairstyles and jewelry, thus reflecting a culture that appreciated and emphasized bodily adornment.