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The iconography of Benin brass rings

The grisly epithet »City of Blood« bestowed on Benin City after its capture by a British punitive expedition in 1897 and the discovery of numerous human sacrificial victims, is nowhere in the corpus of Benin art more vividly portrayed than on the group of large diameter brass rings now found in museums and private collections. These unusual objects, varying in diameter from 20 to 26 centimeters, depict in cast relief incredibly grotesque scenes of human sacrifice: vultures pecking at severed heads and bound, decapitated bodies. They are all the more remarkable because the practice of human sacrifice is curiously not a regular feature of the events portrayed on the many brass plaques which are an invaluable source of information on traditional Benin court custom.

The rings fall into two easily demarcated groups: six castings, heterogeneous in style and iconography, display highly stylized birds and facial striations on some of the victims (fig. 1). These are of Benin provincial provenance, and may have been cast in Owo or in Benin City itself for use in Owo (Fagg 1979: 37), a Yoruba town roughly equidistant between Ife and Benin City and historically influenced by both. A second larger group of about two dozen thematically and stylistically similar rings fits well within the Benin court style found on other examples of brass regalia and ritual implements. The appalling images of human sacrifice appear in conjunction with intriguing figures of musicians, attendants, and a central, commanding figure (figs. 2–4).

There has always been a great deal of mystery about the placement and purpose of these rings. The scanty available information is that a ring in the provincial manner was »found with several similar rings upon the Altar« (Vice Admiral Sir George le Clerc Egerton, quoted in Vogel 1983: 333). The vagueness of this statement tantalizes, but does not much enlighten. The altar would very likely have been a shrine at or near the Oba's (King's) palace where most of the brass art was kept. However, this does not necessarily mean that the rings functioned as altar furnishings; all sorts of rather bizarre objects serving no specific ritual purpose may be stored on Bini shrines for safekeeping, like car keys left in a cabinet pigeonhole. Egerton's comment, if factual, may be misleading. Half a century ago, Miles (1937: 11) and Beasley (Fagg 1979: 37) suggested that the rings served as bases for flangeless Middle Period (mid-16th to late 17th centuries) brass commemorative heads until the production of Late Period flanged heads. But as Vogel (1983: 333) points out, the shape and size of the rings most likely would not have permitted their use in this way. Besides, there is hardly any similarity between the motifs on the rings and those on the flanges (Fagg 1979: 37). Vogel's own suggestion – based on stylistic analysis – derives primarily from her detailed study of ten Yoruba rings which she concludes were produced in various Yoruba kingdoms that looked to Ife for legitimacy and were sent there as an acknowledgement of that sacred city's spiritual supremacy. She contends that the Benin rings may have served a similar purpose »and were sent to Ife on the death of a king to signal the legitimate transfer of rule« (1983: 350). Her conclusion rests on an uncertain tradition that »the heads of the obas... were traditionally sent to Ife for burial and certain symbols [were] sent back to Benin before a new oba could be installed« (1983: 350). While the rings certainly do contain iconographic elements related to both kingship and death, the