The British & the Benin Bronzes

the historical background

After the abolition of the Slave Trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century British attention on the West African coast was turned towards 'legitimate trade' - supplying trade goods in return for raw materials or semi-processed commodities, in particular palm-oil, a major lubricant for the industrial revolution. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, following the carve-up of Africa into 'spheres of influence' by the European powers, the British had an established presence along the coast of present day Nigeria, with some areas administered directly from Whitehall and others under trading company control. Spheres of influence were defined by European powers in relation to each other, and often had little meaning on the ground, being based on ambiguous treaties entered into with traditional rulers.

The Niger Coast Protectorate included the Niger Delta and the trading ports to the east. By 1895 the Protectorate government had established its authority, frequently by use of force, over all the major trading centres except the ancient kingdom of Benin which insisted on retaining sovereignty and trading independence. A 'trade and protection' treaty had been concluded with Benin in 1892 by Capt. Gallwey on the first official visit to the city in thirty years. But trade, conducted via the intermediary of the coastal Itsekiri people, was less profitable than expected and the Protectorate administration was feeling the pressure from the rival British administrations of Lagos Colony and the Royal Niger Company, both desiring to 'open up' the hinterland to trade. Ralph Moor, the Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, felt hampered by the Foreign Office's reluctance to allow him to mount an armed expedition against the kingdom of Benin. This is the background against which the events of 1987 occurred, when Moor was on leave in England and a newly arrived Acting Consul-General, James Phillips took up his post.

the events of 1897

Phillips had met Consul-General Moor only once, in London, just before his departure. Moor, who had a history of violence against African rulers who did not submit to his authority, had already proposed a military operation against Benin but had been prevented by his more cautious superiors in Whitehall (military expeditions could become very expensive and produce disappointing returns). Phillips intentions become clear in his despatches to the Foreign Office. Immediately on arrival he called a meeting of traders and officials and wrote a report to Whitehall:

> *The whole of the English merchants represented on the river have petitioned the Government for aid to enable them to keep their factories* (trading posts) *open, and last but not least, the revenues of this Protectorate are suffering ... I am certain that there is only one remedy, that is to depose the King of Benin ... I am convinced that pacific measures are now quite useless, and that the time has now come to remove the obstruction ... I do not anticipate any serious resistance from the people of the country - there is every reason to believe that they would be glad to get rid of their King - but in order to obviate any danger, I wish to take up sufficient armed force ... I would add that I have reason to hope that sufficient ivory may be found in the King's house to pay the expenses incurred.*

Before he had received a reply to this despatch Phillips had undertaken his disastrous mission. He had sent a message to the Oba informing him of his intention to visit Benin soon and had received a reply requesting him to delay his visit for some time due to customary rituals during which foreigners could not enter Benin City. Phillips ignored several such messages and the advice of a trusted Itsekiri chief to lead his colleagues, carriers and servants to disaster. The party of nine British officials and traders together with their

servants and carriers, were ambushed on a narrow forest path south of Benin City. Their only weapons, revolvers, were locked away in their luggage. Only two of the white men survived the attack.

His decision to undertake this unsanctioned mission was either motivated by personal ambition - to achieve a result before Moor's return - or he was acting under Moor's orders and had, in fact been set up by him to provide an incontrovertible excuse for military intervention. Either way Moor got his desire in the violent overthrow of the independent kingdom. The immediate British response was to raise a Punitive Expedition which looted and sacked the City and sent the Oba into exile.

the official version

The 'official version' of these events was that a brave and humanitarian mission was massacred because of African treachery and barbarity. A small but successful war of colonial conquest then punished the perpetrators and freed the populace from the depredations of a 'Fetish-Priest-King' and his rule of terror. Much was made of the practice of human sacrifice in Benin as a justification for interference:

> *The King of Benin, in the treaty he signed with Captain Gallwey, had agreed to place himself and his country under H.M.Protectorate and it was becoming a perfect disgrace that in the Protectorate ... so terrible a state of affairs continued as that in what was not very improperly called the City of Blood.*

Captain Boisragon, Phillips' colleague on the journey, and one of the two whites to survive, stressed the humanitarian motive for the mission:

> *The object of the expedition was to try to and persuade the king to let the white men come up to his city whenever they wanted to. All their horrible customs could not be put down at once, except by a strong-armed expedition, but could be stamped out gradually by officials continually going up.*

A later British official historian suggested:

> *Phillips' opinion was that every pacific means towards approaching the King would not be complete until he as Acting Consul-General paid a visit to the King. This was surely a humane desire, a benign wish, to avoid force if possible.*

the Benin perspective

Philip Igbafe, a Nigerian historian comments:

> *Phillips' visit was against the remonstrances of the Itsekiri traders, the advice of Chief Dogho* (a trusted trading partner of the British), *the Oba's refusal and in utter disregard for the traditions and susceptibilities of the Benin people.*

The few statements recorded from the Benin witnesses at the trial of the Oba suggest a very different situation to the official version. They indicate that Oba Ovonramwen sought to avoid conflict with the British. Benin had trading contacts with Europe since the fifteenth century with early Portuguese, Dutch and British visitors expressing admiration for the kingdom. However relations had become strained in the preceding decades as the British established permanent trading stations and consulates along the coast and sought to interfere in the internal affairs of African kingdoms.

The 'Gallwey Treaty' had been concluded under veiled threats. The pro forma document was

anslated verbally from English via a dialect of Yoruba into Edo. The people of Benin have always argued that they understood it as a statement of co-operation and trade, certainly not a relinquishing of sovereignty. However its existence was uses as a justification for military action:

> *It was an insult to the prestige of the Protectorate not to be able to assert its authority within its own limits.*

There were internal divisions within the Benin court, dating back to Ovonramwen's accession, and disagreements over an appropriate response to British pressure provided a focus for discontent. Ovonramwen's approach was to refuse visits for all official visits after Gallwey's and to withdraw into isolation from the British, although he still conducted trade via the Itsekiri middlemen. Despite the Oba's attempts to dissuade Phillips from coming, in a courteous manner so as not to provoke him, Phillips stubborn insistence played right into the hands of the radicals who sought to weaken the Oba in the name of defending the nation's sovereignty. The rebels argued that Phillips incursion was a gross insult and that it was too dangerous to allow him into the city and the presence of the Oba. It was hardly credible to the Benin warriors waiting in ambush along the forest path that the party, with its large boxes and over two hundred carriers and servants, was really unarmed.

the outcome

As Ovonramwen foresaw, the attack on Phillips sealed the fate of the Benin kingdom. Within six weeks of the ambush Benin City had fallen. The resistance to the Punitive Expedition was far greater than anticipated by the British but ultimately bows and trade guns were no match for Maxim guns, rifles and rocket tubes. The Oba, 36th of the current dynasty stretching back to the thirteenth century, was deposed. The accumulated works of art from many centuries which adorned the palace were removed wholesale.

A great grandson of Ovonramwen provides a perspective on the outcome:

> *Many people believe today that the British decided to burn the town as an 'appropriate finale' to the punishment for the people who murdered their sons in cold blood ... Whatever their reason, that should have been punishment enough. But they carried away all our works of art too and today we have to buy them back at extortionate prices from the descendants of those who took them. If the British had been so intent on showing us a better way of life, they could at least have given us a better example that to remove our treasures and fire out city.*

There is a strong sense of grievance of events which are comparatively recent in the oral history of a people whose dynastic legends are datable back through forty generations to the thirteenth century. After the death of Oba Ovonramwen in exile his eldest son was allowed to return to Benin and the dynasty was restored. The Oba of Benin is one of the most influential of modern Nigeria's traditional rulers.

The art treasures

The Benin art treasures were treated as little more than curios when they were first brought to this country but as the wonderful quality of the ivory carving and bronze casting became appreciated it was reflected in ever increasing prices in the art auction rooms of the world. The Foreign Office sold considerable quantities of ivory to defray the costs of the expedition and many of the officers retained collections of their own. The British Museum acquired the leading collection (partly direct from the Foreign Office, the rest by gift or purchase) while much went to the USA and Germany. Pieces were lost or destroyed during the Second World War in Liverpool and Berlin (apparently quantities of Benin art have been rediscovered in the eastern part of Germany since reunification).

Relations between Nigeria and Britain were cooled when Nigeria was refused loan of an ivory mask which was the visual symbol of the 2nd World Black & African Festival of Arts & Culture (FESTAC) held in Nigeria in 1977. Since a major exhibition of Benin art at the Museum of Mankind in the early seventies most of the British Museum's collection has lain in storage.

In 1980 the Nigerian Government spent £800,000 on acquiring four Benin pieces and one Yoruba mask at auction in London.

Increasingly within Nigeria, as well as within international organisations such as UNESCO, issues are raised over the legality of holding art collections expropriated by force (there are many precedents for the negotiated restitution of artworks, dating back to the Napoleonic wars). Parallels are drawn with the campaigns by Greece and Egypt for the return of their antiquities.

The Benin artworks belong to a living culture and have a deep historical and social value which goes far beyond the aesthetic and monetary value they hold in exile.