

Surviving Works: context in Verre arts

Part Two, Chapter Six: Conclusion

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Chapter 6 Conclusion: late works – Verre brasscasting in context

It seems to be accepted as fact by specialists that no evidence from Africa south of the Sahara has yet been found to suggest a period of copper or copper alloy smelting or working that antedates iron smelting (for overviews, see Bisson 1975; Geary 1982; Brincard 1982; Herbert 1984a, 1984b; Bisson 2000; Picton 2012). What in many African languages, though not Verre, is translatable as 'red iron' or 'red metal' was valued for its difference from other metals: in terms of the symbolic colour triad, it was 'red' whereas iron was 'black'; it was sonorous like iron but, thanks to modelling in wax or latex, malleable like clay; and while redder than gold, where that metal was available, it was more durable. While pure copper was worked, the more common materials were a variety of copper alloys predominantly either bronze, mostly composed of copper and tin, or increasingly brass, mostly composed of copper and zinc. Although, unlike gold, prone to oxidation, copper alloy objects in use were typically polished or abraded to maintain their shine. More detailed analyses of copper alloy materials reveal greater or lesser components of lead and other traces which provide fascinating insights into the origins of historic metals; more recent alloys might have additions of elements like aluminium given the diverse origins of scrap recycled. In the absence of analyses of any Verre metalwares, we cannot draw upon similar insights and can only report the origins of their raw material as told by Verre to Chappel. According to these informants, from the advent of the Fulani reused copper alloy scrap provided the raw material of casting (for the museological implications of recycling scrap metal in Africa, see Tana 1985). Predominantly, probably entirely, this material is likely to have been brass, which could not be produced in Africa south of the Sahara: some of it previously cast by African smiths, some of it recycled from imported artefacts, and some deriving from currencies like rods and manillas. Verre smiths recalled mining their own ores at some distant period and, as described earlier, provided accounts of what this had involved to Chappel. While copper mining is amply documented from central southern Africa, it was for long thought to be absent from tropical West Africa, but evidence of mining has been reported from the Benue Rift of southeastern Nigeria in confirmation that local ores were used to make bronzes there (Craddock et al 1997; Sutton 2001; Bisson 2000: 85). As we noted in Chapter 3, samples of ore from the Verre Hills analysed recently on behalf of Tim Chappel had 20% copper content, reopening the question of the technical capacity to extract copper or copper alloy given that iron smelted in the region was typically reported to have been sourced from fluvial deposits rather than mining.

Turning to a narrower regional context, recent research on West Africa and particularly Nigeria has built on foundations laid in the classic works of Williams (1974) and Herbert (1984a, 1984b). Writings on Nigerian copper alloy works have predominantly been concerned with one of three areas: the most extensively researched with, at least in relative terms, the most informative archaeological and historical records is in the south of the country, including the early Igbo-Ukwu excavations, and the extensive Yoruba and Benin corpuses (Neaher Maas 1976; Picton 2012). Recent research demonstrates that intensive use of records from these

sites remains able to provide entirely fresh insights (e.g. Gunsch 2018 for the Benin plaques). The artistry of the 'Lower Niger Bronzes', the second research area, as well as their immense variety has struck everyone since Fagg outlined the 'Lower Niger Bronze Industry mystery' and coined the regional term (1963: 39), but the difficulties of tying down their dates or centres of production, conceivably 'across a millennium', has hardly lessened this mystery (Peek and Picton 2016; Neaheer Maas 1979, 2011). The patiently researched account of Philip Peek (2021), based on a thousand objects, demonstrates these were produced over centuries with stylistic and thematic continuities detectable in their variety. Yet, as Peek is at pains to point out, we are far from able to relate many of the most striking objects to precise contexts of production and use, several of which are likely to have been effaced from the map. The third area of production lies to the northeast of Nigeria including areas of Northern Cameroon. The brass-casting and brass-using communities within this region were delineated by Wente-Lukas (1972, modified in 1977; see also Neher 1964, Rubin 1974, 1982) whose accounts have been refined in their details by Wade (1986) to reveal a complex patchwork presence and absence of brassworking, not just from one people to another but between different communities of people otherwise considered similar.¹ As Wade's later essays, discussed below, argue this patchwork was temporal as well as spatial. Brassworking, far more than ironworking which was essential to farming livelihoods, had a tendency to come and go at different places and times, on occasions depending on the movements of a small group of people, or just an individual. Much of the brassworking region of northeastern Nigeria and North Cameroon was in the mountains, with populations whose relatively low degree of centralization contrasted with the more powerful states of the plains. Wade believes it likely that at least the brass industries of the eastern Highlands (Higi-Kapsiki, Bana, Fali, Gude-Tchédé, Daba and Nzangi) were similar in technological terms and may all have derived distantly from that of the Sao (1986: 5). He cites Jean-Paul Lebeuf's 1982 summary of the archaeology which notes the disappearance of metalworking after several centuries by the eighteenth century (1982). Scott MacEachern has subsequently proposed a nuanced scenario of gradual displacement of plains peoples towards the hills in the past half millennium where they merged with existing peoples, raising population density and further intensifying agriculture, a picture which would have provided ample opportunities for the transfer of technologies (2012: 58-59). Given the thin documentation of brasswork in the plains, connections can hardly be pursued in more detail than this.

Highland peoples would not have provided the level of courtly demand that fuelled brass production in some parts of the southern Nigeria over centuries, and perhaps also in the plains around the Highlands. While numerous types of objects were cast, and in a few places are still, these were and continue to be overwhelmingly skeuomorphs. The range of specifically brass objects is narrow, a factor that Herbert, for instance, associates with the early stages of the uptake of brasscasting by Igbo and Yoruba (Herbert 1984a, following Shaw 1973). How might any of this bear on our understanding of the Verre assemblage?

¹ The significance, or lack of it, of contemporary ethnic identities to, say, nineteenth-century intercommunity relations would take us too far from our main subject, but we should recall that our usage may be anachronistic applied to earlier circumstances.

Peoples like the Verre, also the Tiv, may be considered intermediary in terms of the existing, tri-part, research geography. The Verre Hills lie south of both the Mandara Mountains and the River Benue; it is conceivable that they were linked with Highland populations in regional circuits that ran via the Bata and Bachama, but there is no evidence of direct connection. The Verre Hills are neither as extensive nor as formidable as the Mandara Mountains. Turning to the Tiv, although they claim origin from a hill to the southeast of their current distribution, the historically intrusive Tiv have occupied increasing areas of the plains south of the central Benue over at least the past couple of centuries. On geographic grounds, we might anticipate the Tiv to be closer to the Lower Niger Bronze and Cross River industries (Nicklin 1982; Peek and Nicklin 2002), and the Verre to have more in common with the brass industries of northeast Nigeria and Northern Cameroon, of which they are a southwestern tip. To a high degree, this turns out to be the case. Simply for convenience, and without wishing to suggest it was sealed from its surroundings, in what follows we shall refer to the copper alloy casting of the mountains and hills both sides of the northeastern Nigeria-North Cameroon border as the 'Highland brass industry(ies)'.

The variations in scale and intensity of brassworking between the Verre Hills and different parts of the Mandara Mountains within this Highland region are instructive. Having devoted a half century to its study, James Wade is the best-informed commentator on the variety within Mandara Mountain smithing. He has drawn attention to the importance of agricultural security to brass industries, a connection that is made plausible both because brass was primarily associated with prestige, status, beautification, and display, and because these distinctions were sought in societies that were relatively uncentralized (Wade 1989 [1986, cited below from 1988]). Courtly coercion was not a factor in supply. In comparative Mandara terms, Wade's intensive area of research among the Fali was both well-provided with farmland and had a productive brass industry that may have dated only from the nineteenth century but nonetheless 'on a conservative estimate ... manufactured tens of thousands of brasses' (1988: 5). If brass production thrived for eighty years, then twenty thousand brasses might have meant an annual production of 250 which does not sound unfeasible. Some commentators have applied the term caste or casted to Highland metalworkers, and other specialists with whom they may be categorized. The analogy with caste elsewhere is a shorthand to describe endogamy, restricted commensality with respect to eating and drinking, and evaluation as unclean and polluting. This last becomes self-fulfilling when it aligns with responsibilities that include the burial of non-smiths. Fali *Mihin* were specialists in a wide range of crafts, not simply smiths with potter wives; they were also weavers in a region where cloth functioned as currency. Brasscasting might easily have been added to this roster of crafts, which included such roles as barber and scarifier, as woodworking has been more recently (1988: 11).

Verre metalworking was sufficient in scale to encourage the formation of distinct communities of smiths, something not reported from the Highlands where a few smiths lived in farming communities. Recall that these Verre communities of smiths had largely dispersed in the forty odd years between Meek's and Chappel's field researches. Given that smiths are recalled not to have farmed in the past, segregated residence would have required agricultural production sufficient to support them, whether that was channelled from Verre

farmers or from wider regional markets or something of both. In the southern Nigerian and Lower Niger industries, the finest of copper alloy works were often the prerogative of chiefs and courtiers. While it seems plausible that the Fulani sourced metalwares from the Verre, direct evidence is slight. We do, however, find that the Verre smiths so prospered that they restricted, or at the least are recalled as having restricted, use of their more prestigious wares to themselves, allowing farmers to buy only the less expensive wares, or, if they did possess finer objects, not to use them. In effect, the *Tibaai* inhabited a parallel society to the farmers; their age grades proceeded alongside one another without mixing; and their displays of wealth, at initiation and in the performance of various cults, outdid Verre farmers in their ostentation.

If the situation informants recall is at all an accurate reflection of circumstances on the ground, then at least by the second half of the nineteenth century, the Adamawa Emirate had established a wider context in which some of the Verre, though not necessarily all, were well positioned as farmers and specialists. These circumstances must have arisen after the early years of the jihad. While we do not know in detail what occurred then, we have noted the near absence of specific recollections of severe conflict between Verre and Fulani. Verre were close to the two earlier Adamawa capitals, perhaps even the original inhabitants of the lands on which they were built, and they remained in a direct relationship to Yola when the capital moved there because their Fulani overlords belonged to the Lamido of Adamawa's family rather than to the lamidates to the south of Yola, like Tchamba and Koncha, which expanded aggressively along the Faro-Deo river valleys. Whether or not the Verre brasscasting industry began under the Fulani or was of longer standing, even involving local ores, are not questions we can answer in the present state of our evidence, but the expansion of the Verre brass industry under at least the later Emirate and the early colonial periods seems clear. And the scale of production, to judge by the residence pattern, looks likely to have been at least that of any of the Highland industries of the Mandara Mountains.

The similarities between the Verre product range and that described by Wade for the Fali inspire a degree of confidence that a shared broad picture that may apply across a 'patchwork of largely undocumented, major and minor industries' (Wade 1986: 7). Supposing the precolonial population attributed the Fali of around forty thousand is reasonably accurate, then they were about twice as numerous as Verre. Although the Fali lived in politically independent kingdoms of 2-6,000 inhabitants, the functions of the chief appear to have been largely ritual (1988: 4; see also 1997). As Wade emphasises, brass was fundamentally a prestige material, 'Fali brasses are essentially symbols used in secular strategies, prominently pursued in ritual contexts' (1988: 5) and as in the Verre case, 'the Fali brass corpora are to a notable extent based upon known non-brass prototypes. There is no figurative sculptural tradition' (1988: 15). Wade's more precise calculations cannot be replicated for the Verre since he does not provide the data on which they were based. He calculates 60 types of brass objects that were certainly made by Fali (and a further eight probably made by them). Of these 68 brass objects, 43 had prototypes in materials that were not brass, leaving 25 with no known prototypes. Hence, almost two thirds of brass objects were skeuomorphs (1988: 14, 2014: 105). Unfortunately, we are not told which brass objects were based on no prototypes known in other materials; although we may deduce some of them from his earlier listing of:

'rings, beads, bracelets, arm-pieces, leg-pieces, smoking pipes, knife hilts and sheaths, spearheads, hats, waistbands, pedestalled bowls, crotals, bells etc.' (1988: 5). A list of Verre brass objects would look very similar. Although a few brass figures have been collected from the Verre, there is no evidence of a long tradition of figurative brass sculpture in their case either. Wade notes the particular importance of male and female dance 'axes' (2014: 105, fn 10), which puts us in mind of the Verre hoes, and the indications provided by at least some of Chappel's informants that they also were gendered by form. This said, quite whose criteria are being used to identify 'copies' is unclear. If we were to apply a lexical criterion to Verre brass objects, then only clapper bells, crotals and possibly arm cuffs have names that do not also apply to items made in other materials (albeit copper alloy versions of these may have the descriptor *suk-* added to them). If, however, we took close resemblance to be the defining feature of a skeuomorph, then we might argue that although a brass-handled dagger shared its name with a wooden-handled dagger, wood was never carved into the shapes into which a brass hilt might be cast. Even if the basis of a Fali-Verre comparison is not entirely clear, we can generalize with confidence that skeuomorphs predominated, and that figurative forms were rare, in both cases, and the two ranges of skeuomorphs are likely to have overlapped given the many similarities between their everyday material cultures.

Fali brasscasting was centred on two communities in particular: Bagira and Jilvu. Taking oral traditions at face value suggested to Wade that brasscasting was not adopted in Jilvu until 1860-80 upon the arrival of an escaped slave called Danakula who had learnt the *cire perdue* technique in captivity. In turn, the Bagira industry was largely or exclusively the work of a Jilvu-derived lineage settled there for three generations. By the 1940s, the brass industry was in decline, having flourished for less than a century (Wade 1989). We are not aware of an origin story for Verre brasscasting resembling that of the Fali, but circumstantially it is likely that the heyday of the Verre industry covered more or less the same period as that for the Fali.

Turning to the practitioners, *Mihin*, the Fali counterpart to the Verre *Tibaai*, constitute 5-8% (also cited as 3-5%, 2014: 108) of the population and enjoyed a monopoly on metalwork. In addition to working with metals, the men were also 'diviners, musicians, healers, sacrificers, ritual specialists and morticians' and the women 'potters, cicatrizers and midwives' (2019: 111; see also 2005, 2012). This distinction between *Mihin* and non-specialists, *Muyin*, was underpinned by a 'strong pollution concept', although, 'contact with various *mihin*, who make and mend, divine and heal, and entertain as musicians, will acquaint every child with members of the familiar "other"' (2019: 117). *Mihin* were able to become wealthy, and some, like Danakula the founding brasscaster of Jilvu, became renowned when casting became prestigious and casting centres increased in importance. Brasswares were judged in terms of *fwari*, an aesthetic category applied both to the adornment of objects and the adornment of people by objects (2014: 105-7). But for *br'bn*, the men of wealth, the important appeal of brass objects was to display their riches more than to make themselves aesthetically appealing. For both Fali and Verre, the stages by which initiation generations progressed in seniority provided occasions for brass objects to be displayed by those who could afford them (Wade cites thirty-five Jilvu life cycle rituals, 1988: 19).

Another people of the Mandara Mountains frequently cited in relation to brasscasting are the Kapsiki (van Beek 1987: 22-31, 1991), particularly because their manufactures have become well known from the artisanats on the tourist trail through the mountains developed from the 1970s (van Beek 2015: 111-14). Their long-time ethnographer Walter van Beek feels that brasscasting was of less importance to Kapsiki than it was to the Fali, the Verre, or the Bana, the last of these not well documented. Kapsiki types of brassware appear less numerous than was the case for Fali. They fell into three local categories that reflect similar considerations to those significant for the Fali and Verre: 'things to boast about' or prestige objects; women's ornaments; and the brasses worn by male initiates. The most expensive objects in the first category include daggers in brass scabbards, stemmed brass goblets, and replicas of the leather pouch worn by Kapsiki, as well as the medicine holder (van Beek 2015: 105). In the second category are the ornaments which beautify women: bracelets, rings, bells, crotals, lip plugs, beads and brass pendants which are used for pubic covers (2015: 106). The brass objects worn by male initiates are particularly distinctive, including triangular and four-cornered plaques worn on the forehead and hip respectively, as well as particular designs of bell (2015: 106-7).² Illustrations suggest that even Kapsiki brass objects of similar types are readily distinguished from their Fali counterparts: for instance, brass-handled daggers are less ornate, the pommel ornament consisting of a pair of prongs; clapper bells are cone-shaped, without the shoulder and waist of Verre bells. The closest resemblance would appear to be between the arm cuffs (see Glar 2012:13, *Stulpen* (cuffs) 6-12). Glar attributed to Werner Fischer the information that such cuffs, specifically those with the closest resemblance to the cuffs collected from Verre and Bata, were worn by Fulani slaves in warfare, which if true would account for their wide distribution.³

Conclusion

The historical characteristics of Highlands brasscasting may seem contradictory. Evidence from the plains of the Sao and the later kingdoms suggests that copper alloys have been worked for centuries, and that there has been movement between the adjacent plains and the mountains. But against this, in both the mountains and the plains, brasscasting traditions are discontinuous spatially and temporally. Wade's refinements of Wente-Lukas's casting and non-casting zones have restricted the wider temporal and spatial ranges she proposed initially: the Bana, where Wente-Lukas worked, had probably taken up casting recently; on the basis of Wade's own fieldwork, Bura cast small objects up until the 1920s-30s; Fali were brasscasters, but the number of practitioners was relatively small and restricted to particular

² For illustrations of Kapsiki brasses, see van Beek 2015: 107 fig 17, 2012: 307 fig 11.3; 308 fig 11.4, 309 fig 11.5; colour versions of images from this book can be found at:

<http://people.ucalgary.ca/~ndavid/Homepage/Mandara%20Metals%20figs/Fig%2011.05%20Kapsiki%20brasse.s.jpg>

The variety of Kapsiki rings and bracelets may be appreciated from Glar 2012. We are indebted to Clara Himmelheber for access to the database of 361 objects in brass in the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum Köln which apparently derive from the collection of Fischer (see also following note).

³ Glar's reference is to an unpublished MS dated 1987 provided to him by Werner Fischer, 'Gelbgüsse der Kapsiki', Gelsenkirchen, a claim also found in Fischer 1987: 27, and illustrated on page 18, upper.

communities; Margi may have used brasses, but Wade notes that no evidence of their casting for themselves was published by their ethnographer Vaughan; Glavda brasscasting was carried out by a Mandara who was resident once a year; and although brasscasting was carried out by a stranger family in Sukur for 60-90 years, including a non-skeuomorphic development, this did not lead to adoption by Sukur smiths (Wade 1988: 22); even the case of the Higi/Kapsiki has been moderated by van Beek's researches showing a restricted distribution of brasscasting and a small number of specialists, who he guesses, and he emphasises it is only a guess, may have introduced the craft two or three centuries before his research (2015: 116). Given a more limited range of wares than the Fali, and little evidence offered for centuries of stylistic development, even this tradition may not have been continuous. Extending our range does not change the picture. South of our immediate region of concern, but often bracketed with the Verre in early collections, the Duru or Dii, in common with the Verre had an endogamous smithing group, although theirs explicitly divided into two: *Nang nang* those who had always been smiths, and *Nang dii* whose ancestors intermarried with smiths (Muller 2009: 18). Their full range of wares is not documented but may include the male and female bracelets which signified chiefship (Muller 2002: 27). Significantly for the present argument, Dii smiths are said to have learned to make both brass bracelets and brass-handled daggers and their scabbard from smiths in the Fulani lamidate of Rei Boubu in the mid-nineteenth century, although the industry had disappeared by the time of Muller's research (2006: 136-37). The variation among Verre brass-handled daggers, we suggested previously, suggested they may have been among the longer-standing objects in the brasscasters' repertoire.

While a northern Highlands brasscasting industry, seen in the large, may have extended from Lake Tchad to the River Benue for over a half millennium, it is intermittent in both spatial and temporal terms. Hence, the brasscasting traditions studied and the brasses collected in the twentieth century do not necessarily represent longstanding traditions. This would be consistent with the preponderance of skeuomorphs and the notable absence, or at least rarity, of pieces like the figurative forms Peek illustrated from the Lower Niger Bronze traditions and which also characterize Cross River brasses. As we have seen consistently, the Highlands industries produced objects for beautification and the display of wealth, notably at life cycle events, for members of non-courtly societies. As Peek noted of the Lower Niger Bronzes over a long period, 'these are perhaps the most basic examples of the use of brass and bronze to add significance to everyday objects' (2021: 45). The skeuomorphs were based on paraphernalia in other materials that provided their prototypes and, by virtue of differences in these material cultures, the brass industries of different peoples were also differentiated. Hoes and helmets here, but public aprons or brass bags there, and so on. How far the skeuomorphs strayed from their prototypes varied, but it seems likely that there would be a trajectory of divergence over time as the properties of the brass material became familiar and were explored. Reverting to the Verre now, we noted terms for forms of decoration and ornamentation that could be achieved in brass (and perhaps pottery and gourd decoration, though we lack the comparative vocabulary to demonstrate this) but not, for instance, in iron. And there are suggestions of some divergence from prototypes: for instance, the oversized beads which channel decorative devices from cowry clusters and waist beads and bell domes,

and which may have been an early twentieth-century innovation. Or the brass figures which resemble some wooden prototypes in their proportions and fondness for accoutrements but in little else. We also seem to witness Verre brasses becoming heavier with the increasing availability of raw material, which may also have seen a decline in the use of delicate small crotals and the proliferation of lumpy ornamentation and spiral decoration. If these are all relatively recent innovations, then the assemblage available to us cannot be said to give an impression of centuries-long development. The overwhelming majority of objects remain skeuomorphs of man-made objects with originals in varied materials, including worked versions of iron, clay, wood, horn, and gourd: decorated gourds, horns fashioned into wind instruments with stops and so forth. Insofar as there are natural skeuomorphs, these appear only as ornaments on dagger hilts, crooks or hoes, rather than, say, in a form comparable to the enigmatic leopard skulls of the Lower Niger Bronze industry.

It may be that the evidence of a long tradition is lost to us. The societies of the Highlands did not it seems bury their dead with copper alloy treasures; these were inherited, so archaeology is unlikely to provide us with much additional evidence. If copper alloy was scarce in earlier times, then objects will have been melted down and recast as they fell out of fashion, another way in which evidence may have been lost. Notwithstanding these considerations, the high proportion of skeuomorphs in the assemblages of objects from the Highlands, and the fact of copper alloy being used almost exclusively to add prestige to a pre-existing object range, seem most readily explained by the acceptance that although copper alloy casting has a long history in the region, the traditions of which we have twentieth-century knowledge may not themselves be both longstanding and continuous. Casting in the region was characterized by intermittence that was both spatial and temporal. Depending on a relatively small number of adepts, themselves mobile, casting tended to come and go without putting down the deeper roots a courtly culture might have nurtured.

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