reviewed by William Hart

It is many years since there has been a major addition to the literature on the ancient stone sculptures of Sierra Leone and Guinea. Fred Lamp’s new book bids to be such a publication. It is comprehensive in the topics it covers; places the stone sculptures in their historical context; gives a detailed formal and iconographical analysis of a wide range of the sculptures, drawing upon early documents and his own ethnographical fieldwork; provides a map of their geographical distribution; and offers a possible interpretation of the sculptures as memorial art for the dead.

In one respect the book fully lives up to a reader’s expectations. It is beautifully illustrated, with more than 60 of the color photographs being images of stone figures, the majority (one guesses) from Lamp’s personal archive. There are photographs of less well known but stylistically related heads and figures in wood and terra cotta, including photographs of Sapi-Portuguese ivories and others from Lamp’s field research in Sierra Leone in the 1960s and 1970s.

The section “Dating Analysis of Comparable Materials” recycles material from his article “Ancient Wood Figures from Sierra Leone: Implications for Historical Reconstruction” (Lamp 1990), but adds something new with a report on the carbon-dating of a wooden figure in the style of the "ponta" acquired more recently by Yale University Art Gallery. The date obtained, between 928–996 CE, is the earliest yet recorded for an Upper Guinea wooden sculpture and is important evidence that the stylistically related stone figures could be from the tenth century or even earlier (pp. 22–32).

In fixing their terminus ad quem, however, Lamp is on shakier ground. The evidence he cites that stone carving was still being practiced among the Sapi peoples of sixteenth-century Sierra Leone is thin at best: A single stone figure holding what may or may not be an imported European tankard (p. 72); a couple of sentences in sixteenth-century European sources which, but most probably do not, refer to stone sculptures (pp. 81–82); and comparisons with the Sapi-Portuguese ivories (1490–1530) which, although they clearly emerge from a common sculptural tradition with the stone figures, cannot be shown to be contemporary with them (p. 74). Significantly, the former seem most likely to have been made around the Scarcies delta or the Sierra Leone estuary—areas where stone sculptures have never been found.

Why is Lamp, despite the paucity of evidence, so wedded to the view that stone sculptures were still being made by the sixteenth-century Sapi? It seems that he, like others before him (Yves Person [196] and Walter Rodney [1967]), is captivated by reports of the catastrophe that overtook the coastal peoples in mid-century, when an invading force of Manding origin, the Mani, overthrew the existing Sapi elites and replaced them with Mani overlords. True, there is no actual evidence that this “Mani invasion” was responsible for ending Sapi stone carving, but Lamp is nevertheless “inclined to assume” that this was the case, whether it was due to the predatory behavior of the new rulers causing a loss of morale among the Sapi population in general or by their disrupting existing structures of artistic patronage (p. 70).

The main part of Lamp’s text is largely a restatement of the arguments set out in his article “House of Stones; Memorial Art of Fifteenth-Century Sierra Leone” (Lamp 1983). Its most distinctive and controversial claim—that the Temne prior to the sixteenth century inhabited southeastern Sierra Leone up to and even beyond the Moa river and therefore that their practice of commemorating their dead by placing unsculpted stones in a shrine um-boro-mu-sar (“the house of stones”) might shed some light on the meaning of the ancient stone figures found in that area—is repeated here, albeit in a more tentative and watered-down form.1

Christopher Fyfe and I, in our 1993 review of the literature on the Upper Guinea stone figures, criticized Lamp’s 1983 discussion for muddling an earlier Temne presence in southwestern Sierra Leone, about which there is no dispute, with their presence east of the Sewa river, in southeastern Sierra Leone (the area where the coastal-type stone figures are typically found) for which there is only the flimsiest of evidence.2

Rather than rethreshing old straw, however, let me turn to the question of the areas in which stone figures are found, on which Lamp’s new publication promises to offer fresh information. He has, he says, scoured museums across Europe and America searching for figures with well-documented find-spots. Of the approximately 2,000 stone figures in his archive, he found only 3 with a specific and credible place of excavation and only 98 overall with even a vague collection site. He provides a map of their distribution indicating their style (coastal, central, inland, and miscellaneous) and the degree of specificity/credibility of their excavation/collection data (pp. 44–46, 93–94).

How reliable is this? There is a superficial logic in deriving a distribution map from the find-spots of individual figures, but it is a flawed logic. As Lamp himself admits, stone figures are easily portable objects and single examples may have been collected far from their place of origin. A more serious objection, however, is that in concentrating on single figures with documented find-spots he ignores the larger numbers of figures in museums which are known collectively to have been found in certain broadly defined areas of the Sierra Leone hinterland, even though individually their find-spots are unrecorded. For example, the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel holds the largest collection of Sierra Leone stone figures outside of the British Museum. With one exception, their individual find-spots are unknown. However, for the more than twenty examples in its 1901 Crisinel collection we have the testimony of Hans Ryff, Crisinel’s fellow countryman and colleague, that the figures were found between the Sewa and Waanje rivers between 20 and 60 kilometers inland (Rütimeyer 1901: 197); and for the sixteen figures collected before 1908 by the English missionary Greenwood, the latter’s report that they were all collected in a small district to the south of the town of Bo (Rütimeyer 1908: 170). These are provenances as specific as many of the figures in Lamp’s list, but because they are not attached to individual figures, they do not appear on his map. This has the curious and presumably unintended consequence that, of the so-called coastal style figures identified on the map, only half were collected near to the coast.

Yet even that is misleading. The largest concentration of “coastal style” figures is, according to Lamp’s map, on Sherbro Island. But of the ten figures supposed to have been collected on Sherbro Island, not one stands up to critical scrutiny. Four of them now in the musée du Quay Branly (71.1902.28.1-4), were donated by M. Lecesne, director of the Compagnie Française de l’Afrique Occidentale (CFAO) in Paris. Lecesne, who had never been in Africa, obtained them from the same collector, Crisinel, as the stone figures acquired by the Basel museum in 1901 (Rütimeyer 1901: 198). Neither Lecesne nor Crisinel reported that they were collected on Sherbro Island. That seems to have been an invention of Henri Néel, whose

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article on West African stone figures was published in 1913 (Néel 1913). Possibly Néel was misled by the toponym “Sherbro,” which in the late nineteenth century was applied not just to the island of that name, but also to “British Sherbro” or Sherbro District, which included the adjacent mainland coast and its immediate hinterland as far south as the Liberian border. Two of Lamp’s other supposed “Sherbro Island” sculptures (British Museum AF1893.1114.1-2) were purchased from Captain Charles Soden. Soden, an Irishman, who was seconded 1890–91 as inspector of the Sierra Leone Frontier Police in British Sherbro, had earlier loaned these and other objects to the Dublin Museum.1 In the Dublin loan registers there is no mention of Sherbro Island, although other items in the loan are variously described by him as from “British Sherbro” and “Mendi District.” So we don’t know what grounds, if any, the British Museum had for registering the two sculptures as “found at Sherbroo [sic] Island.” “Found at Sherbro Island,” in any case, may well have been the museum hedging its bets on whether they were found on Sherbro Island as opposed to on the adjacent mainland. The Sherbro Island provenances of Lamp’s remaining four figures are equally problematic.

Why might we be sceptical about stone figures being found on Sherbro Island? Firstly, because there were European traders active on the island from the 1860s onwards, and yet, according to Hans Ryff, the existence of such figures was unknown to them until the 1890s, when they began setting up trading depots on the mainland (Rütimeyer 1901: 196). Thomas Joshua Aldridge, one of those traders, explicitly linked the finding of the stone figures to the presence on the mainland of soapstone from which they were made (Aldridge 1901: 163). And therein is the second, more compelling reason for questioning the Sherbro Island provenance of stone figures. For the island is not a rocky outcrop off the coast of Sierra Leone. It is basically a sandbank: in geomorphological terms, a holocene twin-barrier sand beach-ridge plain; and has no deposits of soapstone (Anthony 1991). Had Fred Lamp, walked over sand the length of the island from Tisana in the west to Bonthe in the east, as I had to do in Easter Week 1970, the implausibility of Sherbro Island being a site for the production of stone figures would have been readily apparent.

If, in some cases, Lamp has been too meekly accepting of the find-spots for stone figures recorded in museum registers, in others he has been strangely resistant to including in his list of well-provenanced stone figures examples whose find-spots are contestable. Here I must introduce a personal note. In our 1993 review of the literature on the Upper Guinea stone sculptures, Christopher Fyfe and I commented that Lamp and others had ignored detailed information about the find-spots of individual stone figures in the registers of the Sierra Leone National Museum (Hart and Fyfe 1993: 86). Lamp wrote to me at the time (I still have his letter) admitting that he hadn’t closely examined the Sierra Leone registers, but that he thought we were giving them too much credibility, as the information in them was largely the unreliable testimony of “Malian traders.” In reply I said that the information we had in mind wasn’t from Malinke traders but from H.H. Jackson, the area superintendent of the Mines Department in Sefidu, Kono district, who had an arrangement with the Sierra Leone Monuments and Relics Commission to record where licensed alluvial diamond diggers came upon stone-age tools and stone sculptures in the course of their work.2 There are a dozen stone figures in the registers for which Jackson provided detailed information as to the site of excavation and the depth in the ground at which they were found. None of these are included in Lamp’s distribution map, and in this new publication, in referring to the registers of the Sierra Leone National Museum, he repeats his earlier canard about their information being unreliable because provided by “traders” (p. 93). Jackson isn’t mentioned.

Here and elsewhere in Ancestors in Search of Descendants, it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that Lamp has a problem accepting criticism and learning from it. As indicated earlier, this new publication revisits the main theme of his 1983 article: the historical occupation by the Tenne of southeastern Sierra Leone, for which the evidence remains scanty or nonexistent;3 their supposed influence on—he backs off now from saying their involvement in—the carving of the ancient stone figures; and his reiteration of Walter Rodney’s thesis that it was the “Mani invasion” in the mid-sixteenth century that brought the era of stone-carving in Sierra Leone to an end. Each of these positions has come in for criticism since he embraced them in 1983, and it is hard to think of any serious scholar who accepts the first of them, but Lamp rehearses the same arguments and in virtually the same form of words, as if there were no need to look afresh at the evidence.

Lamp had a choice to make when he decided to go into print again about the Upper Guinea stone sculptures. Given his long history of involvement with the material, he could have written a magisterial, current-state-of-the-field contribution to our knowledge of the sculptures. That would have meant giving space to views other than his own, appreciating that in the larger scheme of things there are gains to be had from having one’s views challenged and in the process sharpened up. Instead he has opted for an approach over-narrowly concerned with vindicating whatever means his own past opinions about the stone sculptures. As a natural human response to criticism that is understandable, but it means that Ancestors in Search of Descendants, for all its parade of research and scholarship, is a missed opportunity.

William Hart retired in 2009 from teaching philosophy at the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland. He is the author of Continuity and Discontinuity in the Art History of Sierra Leone and of many articles on the traditional arts of the Upper Guinea coast. He is a consulting editor of African Arts. wa.hart@ulster.ac.uk

Notes
1 Contrary “It is not my contention here that the presence of the Tenne in [southern Sierra Leone] in antiquity indicates their direct involvement in the carving of the ancient stone figures” (p. 80) with his earlier claim, “The Tenne and Ballom … were the carvers of ritual objects, of which only the ivories and the stone figures remain today” (Lamp 1983: 234).
2 There is an otherwise puzzling survival of this muddle in the title of Lamp’s section Historical Occupation of Southwestern Sierra Leone; despite there being no reference to south-western Sierra Leone in that section.
3 Dublin Museum Loan Register, Loan 263, 19 January 1892.
4 Lamp, personal communication, September 21, 1993.
6 One significant new source of evidence cited by him is Dwyer (2005), but Dwyer’s central thesis, that Mende spread as a lingua franca among speakers of other preexisting indigenous languages, lends no support to the claim that the Tenne were ever in south-eastern Sierra Leone.

References cited