

## A Visit to Old Oyo

By J. D. Clarke

**E**ARLY in the last century, Afonja, who is said to have been a member of the family of the Alafin of Oyo, was the most important Yoruba chief in Ilorin. He invited the aid of Mallam Alimi of Sokoto in a rebellion against the Alafin but later found, as other rebel generals have done, that it was difficult to rid himself of his Hausa and Fulani allies, who eventually murdered him. The Alafin of Oyo raised a large army in 1837, and, with the assistance of Borgu, attempted to drive the strangers out of Ilorin. He carried the war right inside the walls of the town where, however, a sudden reverse occurred which ended in the crushing defeat of the Oyo-Borgu army. Later the town of Oyo, commonly known as Katunga, about 50 miles north-west of Ilorin, was sacked. Various insignia of the Alafin, and 100 brass posts were carried away and melted down for ammunition. The town was deserted and has never been reoccupied. The Alafin and many of his people, after a time, settled far to the south at the present Oyo.

Since the discovery of the carved stone figures at Esie (Ilorin Province) in 1934, I have wanted to visit Old Oyo. Johnson in his *History of the Yoruba*, mentions that outside the old town there is a great burial place, Bara, where all the chiefs and notabilities have been buried for centuries, and it seemed that there might be some connection between that fact, and the amazing collection of figures at Esie; 765 of them, all having the impression of being individual portraits rather than merely conventional figures.

The opportunity occurred at the end of December, 1937, when my wife and I took ten days' local leave and trekked to the site of Old Oyo. We left the Ilorin-Kaiama road at Onire, and did a couple of stages on horseback, stopping at Paiye and Budo Okangi. At the end of the third stage we found ourselves at Oke Majiro, in the heart of the old town.

Approaching from the south-east, the path wound round and entered the site from the west. All the way it had led through undulating orchard bush, dotted here and there with small hamlets, but, as we neared Old Oyo we were struck by the increasingly fine scenery. There were great granite outcrops which had split up into tremendous boulders perched on top of one another, or leaning over precariously. By climbing one of the hills we saw that the old capital of Yorubaland lay on ground which sloped to the south-east, and was bounded on the north and west by lines of the boulder-strewn hills, and on the east by the small River Yeke. Commander Clapperton,

R.N., who visited the city in 1825, some ten years before its destruction, describes how he first saw the city lying beneath him as he approached it from the south "surrounded and studded with green shady trees, forming a belt around the base of a rocky mountain of about three miles in length, as beautiful a view as I ever saw." He says the city "is built on the sloping side and round the base of a small range of granite hills, which, as it were, form the citadel of the town; they are formed of stupendous blocks of gray granite of the softest kind, some of which are seen hanging from the summits, in the most frightful manner, while others, resting on very small bases, appear as if the least touch would send them down into the valley beneath. A belt of thick wood runs round the walls, which are built of clay, and about twenty feet high, and surrounded by a dry ditch. There are ten gates in the walls, which are about fifteen miles in circumference, of an oval shape, about four miles in diameter one way, and six miles the other, the south end leaning against the rocky hills, and forming an inaccessible barrier in that quarter. The King's houses and those of his women occupy about a square mile, and are on the south side of the hills, having two large parks, one in front, and another facing the north. They are all built of clay, and have thatched roofs, similar to those nearer the coast. The posts supporting the verandahs and the doors of the king's and caboceers' houses are generally carved in bas-relief, with figures representing the boa killing an antelope or a hog, or with processions of warriors attended by drummers. The latter are by no means meanly executed, conveying the expression and attitude of the principal man in the groups with a lofty air, and the drummer well pleased with his own music, or rather deafening noise. There are seven different markets, which are held every evening; being generally opened about three or four o'clock." Even allowing for his exuberant language, it is evident that what he calls "the capital of Yourriba" was no mean city. There is a saying that the hills of Old Qyq numbered sixteen. Certainly its hills, the home of lion, leopards and many baboons, are a striking feature, but sixteen is a favourite number with the Yoruba, and no one can now put a name to more than three or four of the more prominent features.

The wealth of vegetation throughout the old town is also remarkable. The trees were much larger and closer than in the bush through which we came, and there was a considerable improvement in the type of tree. In place of the scrubby, stunted, orchard bush, with here and there a few poor locust bean and balsam, there was a variety of hardwoods such as *Afromorsia*, *Tamarind*, *Azelia*, *Pterocarpus*, *Terminalia* and many fine locust bean, shea butter and baobab trees.

The rocky hills, full of caves and shelters, and the thick growth of trees provide an ideal refuge for birds and animals of many kinds. There are game birds of all sizes, from rock partridge to greater bustard, and everywhere

there were spoor and droppings of the larger animals. A native hunter told me that he expected to get Roan, Bushbuck, Bed-flanked Duiker and Hartebeeste in the neighbourhood. Old Qyq would be a splendid centre for a Nigerian National Park.

We camped under the shelf of rock which is Oke Majiro, for four days, and had a great time searching a part of the town around it for signs of its old inhabitants. A hunter told us that he had not seen or heard of any carved stone figures. Then I learnt that Bara, instead of being outside Qyq, as Johnson says, is three days' march to the north, so that the visit to the old burial ground would have to be deferred to some other occasion. We walked about the extensive site of the old town, or rather among what appears to have been a group of towns enclosed within the ring of hills and walls. We found mounds marking the positions of houses and compounds: large mounds, many of them thirty feet wide at their base, and from six to ten feet high, showing that the walls of some of the houses must have been of great thickness. There were many level open spaces, presumably the areas occupied by the less permanent houses of poorer men, on which there were still plentiful signs of human habitation in the shape of innumerable pieces of broken pottery. On the morning following our arrival, our guide took me to the large and still comparatively treeless expanse in front of the wall of what was said to be the Alafin's compound. I was told that this was the great market, "the market of all the world": Clapperton calls it "the king's park."<sup>1</sup> Some fifty yards from the wall, and slightly to the west of the main gate which is marked by charred stumps of old carved posts I noticed a mound also surrounded by a ring of old posts. I put a couple of labourers on to it and before lunch they produced a collection of little pots perforated with small holes similar to the rather larger roasting pots used at the present day. These were of crude workmanship and were full of earth and cowries. This mound may have been a shrine to the spirit of the market place.<sup>2</sup> This initial success, for which the labourers were rewarded, soon led to other discoveries. The same evening a large and well shaped waterpot was brought in from a house site nearby, which produced many smaller pots during the next few days. The pots from this site and the fragments which we picked up everywhere on the surface were of a much finer type than the pottery made nowadays, delicate and more elaborately decorated. One specimen is of a reddish type common further North to-day. A couple of pieces of broken pot which we found had been pierced for use as earthenware cymbals in dancing, as I am told is done in some places to-day.

<sup>1</sup>Commander Clapperton mentions that there were several "fetish houses" in the park before the king's house, and refers to "the two very romantic and large blocks of granite," the Oke Akesan which can be seen there to-day.

<sup>2</sup>See previous footnote.

On the following day, I selected the site of one of what I was told were the *ika-obirin*, or harems, of the Alafin, as a likely spot for a search. My guide told me that in the old days the chief of all Yorubaland had 70 such houses and 2,000 wives: I imagine that tradition has added a nought to each of these figures. The remains of two of these compounds which I saw were square, the old wall mounds measuring fifty-five feet along each side. The one in which we did some digging had ten posts on the inner side of the mound. This harem produced a little pot of an uncommon shape containing beads, some iron implements, a tiny bone comb, shells of many species and a small brass bell of local manufacture. It had been buried in one corner under a larger inverted pot.

Clapperton says that "the people of Katunga are fond of ornamenting their doors and the posts which support their verandahs with carvings; and *they have also statues or figures of men and women standing in their courtyards.*" I wish that the gallant Commander had thought of describing the statues, even if it had only been to tell us whether they were of wood or stone. He might have saved a lot of discussion about the source of the Esie figures.

All the old posts which we had seen during the first two days had been so often scorched by bush fires that nothing remained but the heart wood. It is a striking testimony to the durability of the timber (said to be *Ayan*, *Prosopis oblonga*) that it has resisted the ants and elements for over a hundred years. On the evening of the second day, we were surprised to find six posts beside the wall of the Alafin's compound which still retained recognisable relief carving. They were eleven inches thick, and were remarkable in that they had been much more carefully trimmed to a regular diameter before carving than most of the carved posts one sees nowadays.

The results of our digging, when packed in grass for transport to Ilorin, made up two good headloads. They have been placed in the museum at Ilorin Middle School, until a public museum has been established in one of the Yoruba provinces.

It is worth pointing out that more than half of the sites which we examined produced something. Even a blind search in a piece of open ground, where there was nothing but a quantity of pottery fragments, brought to light a pot containing a number of stones polished flat on two sides, and whitened with lime on one; possibly an offering to Shango, the lightning spirit. It is clear that anyone with more time and labour would make many more interesting discoveries.

I suggest that a survey of the walls and compounds should be made soon, before all trace of them is lost, and while there are still men living whose grandparents actually lived in the old town. The fourth generation will have forgotten most of the traditions of the place. The present Alafin, who still sends a party annually to perform ceremonies in the city of his forefathers, might arrange for this to be done as a tribute to history and to his ancestors.