

CHAPTER 11

Lejja Iron Smelting Site, Igboland, South Eastern Nigeria

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This Iron smelting site of Lejja was discovered 1980. Subsequent investigations at the site discovered revealed a huge concentration of slag blocks with a cylindrical shape. Preliminary test pit excavations were carried out in 1980, yielding a number of different finds. Furthermore, some slag blocks were also found eroding from nearby hills, suggesting that smelting activities were widespread and extended beyond the Lejja.

Introduction

There are 17 known major iron smelting/smithing sites in Igboland (Fig. 1) and of these, 13 have been investigated by archaeologists. At present the earliest dating for this technology in Igboland comes from the site of Opi, dated to 2,305 BP (520 BC). In three of the iron working sites discovered in Igboland, Lejja, Opi and Aku, extensive debris has been found, clearly indicating the remains of once flourishing iron making industry. At these sites (Fig. 1), cylindrical blocks of iron slag with an average weight of between 34 and 57 kg were discovered (Okafor, 1993). Each slag block measures about 0.3 m³ and the diameters range between 31 and 56 cm while the length of the blocks ranges between 22 and 36 cm (Anozie, 1979).

The ubiquity of iron smelting sites in Igboland could be partly explained by the abundance of iron ore in the area. There are many residual hills on the Nsukka plateau and according to Ofomata (1983:3), "The summits of these hills, especially where they are flat-topped as well as on the ridges, are covered by iron-stone concretions which render them more resistant. These iron stone concretions are a result of absolute deposition of iron oxides from weathering of the sandstone where the area is of relatively high iron content." These iron stone concretions are abundant in the Nsukka area and in addition, there is a copious amount of iron stone visible on land almost everywhere. These iron stones which were identified as haematite (Okafor, 1984) are of the type of ore most commonly used for smelting in Igboland. Their presence must have influenced the extensive iron working industries which are scattered all over Igboland. In addition, the presence of hard wood such as the oil bean, which served as fuel for smelting, may also have contributed to the reasons why smelting thrived for over 2,500 years in the area (Eze-Uzomaka, 2000).

At Opi as well as in Lejja, blocks of iron slag can be seen on the ground in many parts of the town. The cylindrical blocks of slag which are found at Opi are very