Recent discoveries in West Africa have proved how old and extensive the history of this part of Africa is. Archaeologists believe that early peoples from the north moved into West Africa as desertification forced them south to find better farmland. Discoveries in the areas of modern Mali and Nigeria reveal that West Africans developed advanced societies and cities long before outsiders came to the continent.

**West African Iron Age**

Archaeologists’ main source of information about early West African cultures has been from artifacts such as pottery, charcoal, and slag—a waste product of iron smelting. By dating these artifacts, scientists can piece together a picture of life in West Africa as early as 500 B.C.

Unlike cultures to the north, the peoples of Africa south of the Sahara seem to have skipped the Copper and Bronze Ages and moved directly into the Iron Age. Evidence of iron production dating to around 500 B.C. has been found in the area just north of the Niger and Benue rivers. The ability to smelt iron was a major technological achievement of the ancient Nok of sub-Saharan Africa.

**The Nok Culture** West Africa’s earliest known culture was that of the Nok (nahk) people. They lived in what is now Nigeria between 500 B.C. and A.D. 200. Their name came from the village where the first artifacts from their culture were discovered. Nok artifacts have been found in an area stretching for 300 miles between the Niger and Benue rivers. They were the first West African people known to smelt iron. The iron was fashioned into tools for farming and weapons for hunting. Some of the tools and weapons made their way into overland trade routes.

**Nok Sculpture**

Nok artifacts show evidence of a sophisticated culture. Their sculptures are made of terra cotta, a reddish-brown baked clay. Sculptures include animals as well as people. This Nok figure features a classical look called “elongated” style.

Most Nok figurines have these characteristics:

- distinctive features such as bulging eyes, flaring nostrils, and protruding lips
- an elongated style, especially used for the head
- the hand or chin on the knee in some figures
- hairstyle still common in Nigeria

**SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Visual Sources**

**Formulating Historical Questions** What questions would you ask if you could speak with the creator of this sculpture?