

## THE ALTAR OF BENIN

By W. D. HAMBLBY

Assistant Curator of African Ethnology

Approaching the ancient city of Benin, toward the close of the Frederick H. Rawson-Field Museum Ethnological Expedition to West Africa a few years ago, my mind constantly reverted to the changes that have taken place in southern Nigeria since Benin was conquered by British forces in 1897.

How much should I find of the ancient ritual surrounding the court of the ruler, or Obba as he is designated? Would the altar where human sacrifices were offered be in existence?

When I actually saw the altar, which is situated in the shade of a broad verandah in the palace courtyard of the Obba, I was happy to know that twenty years ago Field Museum acquired an excellent collection of antique bronzes and two carved ivory tusks. When troops sacked Benin as a reprisal for the murder of several British subjects on a trade mission, the principal loot consisted of art treasures which found their way to European museums and into the hands of private collectors.

A glance at the altar showed that all ivory tusks had been removed and only a few bronze heads remained. The heads represent persons of note. Wooden staffs, of which a few examples still remain on the altar, were no doubt carried by priests, while the

bronze bells may have been sounded during ceremonials. Bronze plaques are known to have covered the walls of the king's palace, and the designs on these castings, of which the Museum has some excellent examples, relate to beliefs and customs of ancient Benin.

The steps of the altar were sprinkled with blood, which had also been splashed on some of the objects. This use of the blood of sacrifice is a reminder of the days when human victims were clubbed to death before the shrine, where at the present time goats and chickens are immolated. The human victims might be prisoners of war, criminals, or merely domestic slaves, but whatever their status, the object of the death ceremony was the provision of workers for the ghosts of dead kings. Worship of ancestors is fundamental in Negro religion, and the belief prevails that social status is preserved in a world of spirits.

## Botanical Exhibits Praised

Dr. E. P. Phillips, Principal Botanist of the Division of Plant Industry, Pretoria, South Africa, who in 1934 studied herbaria and botanical museums of the United States and Canada, devoted two pages, in a published account of his investigations, to the Department of Botany of Field Museum. He states: "The outstanding botanical museum I saw was that at Field Museum."

## THE SKELETON OF A NORTH AMERICAN FOSSIL RHINOCEROS

By ELMER S. RIGGS

Associate Curator of Paleontology

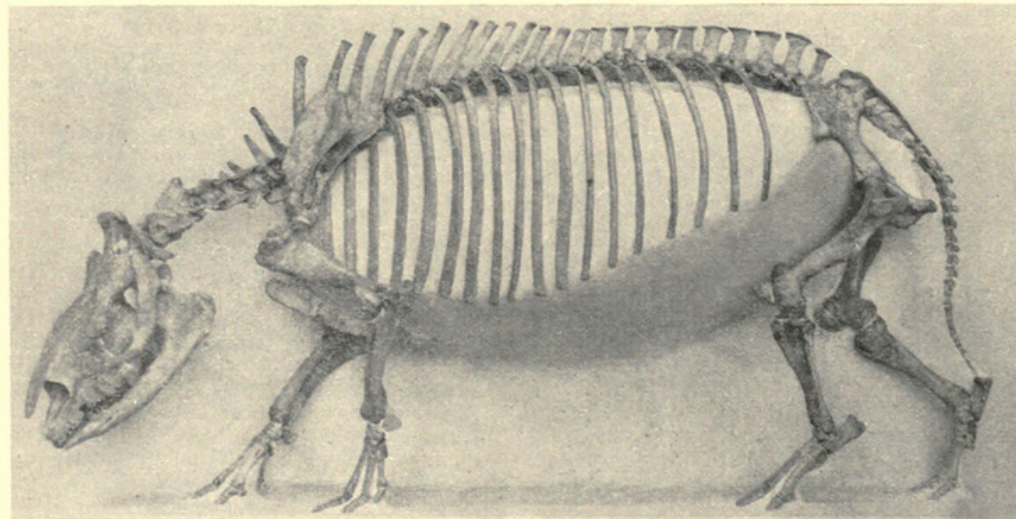
One of the extinct species of rhinoceroses of North America, *Trigonias hypostylus*, is represented by a fine fossil skeleton exhibited in Ernest R. Graham Hall (Hall 38).

The specimen was collected from a famous fossil quarry, in Weld County, Colorado, operated some years ago by the Colorado Museum of Natural History. This place had been, in Oligocene time (thirty million years ago), a shallow lagoon on the open plains. All about it, apparently, was grass and meadow land inhabited by numerous wild animals. Members of this species of rhinoceros, along with other larger and smaller animals, had frequented the lagoon as a drinking-place and many of them had mired and perished there. Later, these skeletons were covered and preserved by sediments washed in by surface water.

The skeletons were recently found intermingled and scattered over a half-acre of ground. Subsequent erosion had again washed them out.

*Trigonias* was a rather small species of rhinoceros which would have stood, in life, about three and one-half feet in height. The body was rather heavy, the legs moderately short. There was no horn on the nose; the tusks and grinding teeth were more simple than those of modern species of the rhinoceros family. There were four toes on the forefoot, three on the hind foot.

The formation in which these animals are preserved is the well-known White River "bad lands," a hardened clay mixed with volcanic ash. Many other species of rhinoceros, both larger and smaller than this one, are known to have lived on the Great Plains of North America at that period.



Skeleton of Extinct American Rhinoceros

In life this animal stood about three and one-half feet in height. It lived in Colorado some thirty million years ago. The mounted skeleton is on exhibition in Ernest R. Graham Hall.

## JANUARY GUIDE-LECTURE TOURS

Conducted tours of exhibits, under the guidance of staff lecturers, are made every afternoon at 3 P.M., except Saturdays, Sundays, and certain holidays. Following is the schedule of subjects and dates for January:

Wednesday, January 1—New Year's holiday, *Museum closed*; Thursday—General Tour; Friday—Races of Mankind.

Week beginning January 6: Monday—Plant and Animal Life of the Past; Tuesday—Trees and Wood Products; Wednesday—Egypt and Its Art; Thursday—General Tour; Friday—Birds of Brilliant Plumage.

Week beginning January 13: Monday—Stone Age of the Old World; Tuesday—Uses of Fibers, Barks and Resins; Wednesday—Asiatic Animal Life; Thursday—General Tour; Friday—Primitive Musical Instruments.

Week beginning January 20: Monday—Amphibians and Reptiles; Tuesday—The Plant Family; Wednesday—Native Philippine Life; Thursday—General Tour; Friday—Pewter and Jade.

Week beginning January 27: Monday—Mexican Archaeology; Tuesday—Systematic Collection of Animals; Wednesday—Indians of Plains and Woodlands; Thursday—General Tour; Friday—Textiles and Looms.

Persons wishing to participate should apply at North Entrance. Tours are free and no gratuities are to be proffered. A new schedule will appear each month in FIELD MUSEUM NEWS. Guide-lecturers' services for special tours by parties of ten or more are available free of charge by arrangement with the Director a week in advance.

## Gifts to the Museum

Following is a list of some of the principal gifts received during the last month:

From Abbé Henri Breuil and Père de Chardin—282 quartzite, flint, and obsidian implements, Ethiopia; from L. H. Riddell—6 mounted prints of reconstructed prehistoric scenes, drawn by Mr. Riddell; from Professor F. J. Hermann—128 herbarium specimens, Michigan; from Miss Alice C. Meyers—a specimen of halloysite and one of Chinese vitrified clay, New Mexico and China; from Chicago Zoological Society—11 snakes, 5 lizards, 1 turtle, and 89 specimens of bird skins and skeletons, including 10 emperor penguins; from Highland Park School—2 warblers and one swift skeleton, Illinois; from Charles Baird—a rail skeleton, Illinois; from Leslie Wheeler—17 specimens of bird skins and skeletons, Ecuador, Panama, Illinois, and Mississippi; from W. R. Whitney—2 bird skeletons, Illinois; from Karl Plath—6 bird skeletons, Illinois; from Rev. H. E. J. Biggs—32 shells (9 species) and 21 beetles (11 species), Iran; from L. C. Childs—a bufflehead duck, Illinois; from R. D. Hildebrand—an eastern wild turkey skin, North Carolina; from Henry Field—428 scorpions, 55 centipedes, 7 spiders, and 530 insects, Iraq; from John G. Shedd Aquarium—400 fishes, Fiji and Hawaii, and an octopus and 8 crustaceans, Hawaii; from Professor H. W. Norris—a shark and 7 samples of shark skin, Florida waters; from Gordon Grant—25 specimens top minnows, California; from Stewart J. Walpole—2 young specimens of a rare shark, Bermuda; from E. F. Vacin—3 large trout, Wyoming.

## NEW MEMBERS

The following persons were elected to membership in Field Museum during the period from November 16 to December 14:

### Life Members

Mrs. Philip S. Rinaldo

### Associate Members

Mrs. David T. Adams, Mrs. Roderick Findlay, Dr. Ben H. Huggins, Clarence H. Kavanagh, Mrs. R. E. Prussing, William P. Sidley, Mrs. Donald P. Welles, H. C. Wright.

### Annual Members

Mrs. Hilda Baird, Mrs. Ronald P. Boardman, Dr. Ralph C. Brown, Amos H. Case, Mrs. Albert J. Deniston, Jr., J. David Dickinson, Stephen J. Fisher, Dr. James W. Ford, George H. Glade, Jr., Miss Rosa B. Greene, Arthur H. Hedley, Dr. Daniel W. Jeffries, Dr. Robert P. Keith, Dr. Richard A. Livendahl, Miss Viola Edna MacLean, Miss Sarah McLean, Charles Herman Metzger, William H. Nelson, R. Shreve Noble, Raymond Osborne, Julius Rosenbaum, Mrs. Irwin S. Rosenfels, Mrs. Fred D. Sadler, William Smale, Dr. C. R. Steinfeldt, C. H. Strawbridge, Mrs. Nathan B. Swift, John R. Topping, Harvey C. Vernon, Henry A. Webster, Andrew Wille.





Riggs, Elmer S. 1936. "The Skeleton of a North American Fossil Rhinoceros." *Field Museum news* 7(1), 4-4.

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