

Pedestal Head



- *mahen yafe*
- Sierra Leone
- Sapi
- 15th-16th century (or earlier)
- Soapstone
- L.: 24 cm
- INV. 1002-1

Among the ancient stone-carvings found buried in the soil by farmers and diamond-diggers in southern and eastern Sierra Leone, the most varied and detailed in their sculpting are a number of near life-sized pedestal heads set on sturdy columnar necks. Typically the head is tilted backwards with the mouth and chin at the front and the nose and eyes placed further back. In contrast to the smaller *nomoli* sculptures, where the eyeball is emphasised, on the pedestal heads eyes are more usually represented by heavy downcast eyelids. [1] They often show elaborately dressed hair, facial hair (moustache and beard), and ear-

and nose-rings. The latter [2] were worn by chiefs and notables of the Temne and Bullom peoples in Sierra Leone, whom the Portuguese referred to by the general name 'Sapi'; so the likelihood is that the pedestal heads represent chiefs and sub-chiefs of the ethnic groups that preceded the present Mende and Kono peoples in those parts of Sierra Leone where the heads are found.

The pedestal head in the Musée Barbier-Mueller is unusual in that the eyes [3] are more like the eyes represented on *nomoli* sculptures than on most pedestal heads. A form of tattooing seems to run across the cheeks and down the nose. There is a drooping moustache and the hair of the head appears to have been shaved except for a band across the brows and a raised crest at the rear. [4]

The name *mahei-yafei* was given to ancient stone figures found together with brass or other metal rings. In the early years of the twentieth century such figures were used in conjunction with the rings to swear witnesses in chieftain courts. Hence the name 'chief's spirit'. A *mahei-yafei* was not necessarily a pedestal head and a pedestal head was not necessarily a *mahei-yafei*. In any case, the name reflects the use to which such stone sculptures and rings were put in more recent times by the Mende who dug them up, and tells us nothing about their original significance for those who made them.

Editor's note: This head was acquired in 1971 from John Hewett who asked for a very high price. According to him, this price was justified since a head from the first period of the Benin Kingdom would have cost much more although we know of about ten of them, whereas this particularly beautiful and old head in stone was unique.

[1] They are among the most naturalistic sculptures of this area.

[2] As we know from sixteenth-century Portuguese sources.

[3] The eyes are almond-shaped and slightly bulging between well-defined upper and lower lids.

[4] The name often given to these heads of *mahen yafe*, a version of the Mende words *mahei-yafei* or 'chief's spirit', comes from a single unreliable source.

William Hart, *Arts of Africa and Oceania. Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller*, musée Barbier-Mueller & Hazan (eds.), 2007: p. 126.