

ROYAL ALTAR TUSKS



The brass heads of kings and queen mothers on royal ancestral altars serve as supports for ivory tusks (see fig. 16). The altars of some chiefs also feature tusks. Many of these tusks are carved in relief over their entire surface with figures of kings, queen mothers, warriors, priests, palace officials, foreigners, and other motifs that “serve as historical reminders, reassert the legitimate authority and divinity of the king, and reveal the numinous sources from which his powers derive” (Blackmun 1984a:235). They refer to the achievements of past rulers and the concepts underlying kingship in Benin. Each king commissions a set of carved tusks for the altar he establishes to his father, choosing motifs that reflect the political, economic, and spiritual conditions of his reign.

Like the *ede*, the projection that extends upward from the top of the Oba’s coral-beaded crown (see figs. 2, 14, 47), the tusks rise from the top of the cast brass heads. The tusks thereby complete the image of the Oba’s crowned head, which is the key to the well-being of the kingdom (Blackmun 1984a:31). In addition to their *ede*-like shape, there are many other reasons for choosing elephant tusks as the medium for expressing ideas related to kingship. The tusks symbolize attributes of the elephant, such as physical power, leadership, wisdom, and longevity, all of which are appropriate for the Oba. Because of their hardness, the tusks are considered to be a suitably permanent material on which to carve motifs meant to enlighten future generations. Ivory’s color is also important, its whiteness being reminiscent of the color of chalk (*orhue*), a symbol of ritual purity that is associated with Olokun, the Edo god of the sea. The altar tusks were washed and bleached with citrus juice to remove the remains of sacrifices and to keep them as white as possible. The monetary value of ivory reinforces its association with Olokun, who is the source of extraordinary wealth. Ivory itself was a form of wealth, helping to attract European traders to Benin, thus bringing still more wealth to the kingdom. Trade in ivory was virtually a monopoly of the king, who was entitled to one tusk from every elephant slain in the kingdom. Ivory thus perfectly expresses the king’s leadership qualities, his spiritual properties, particularly his association with Olokun, and his wealth (Blackmun 1984a:31–32).

12. Carved Altar Tusk (view 1)
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin
1888–97

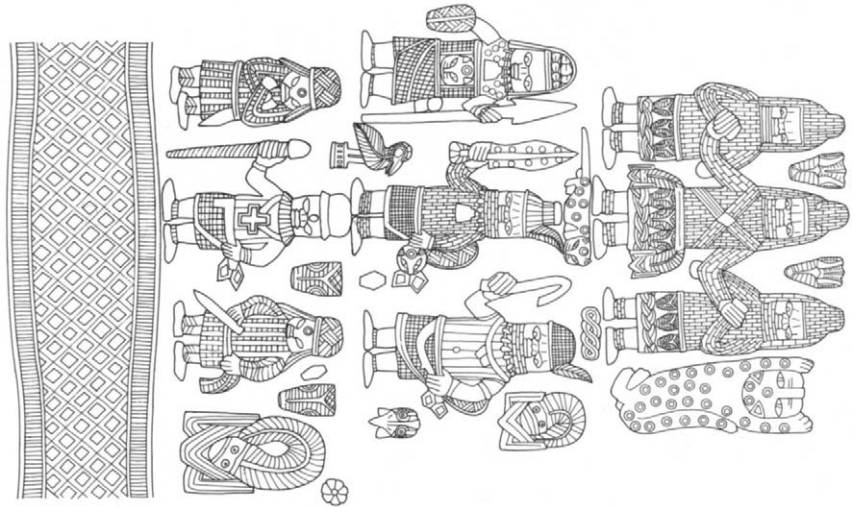


Fig. 21. Drawing of cat. no. 12.
Drawing by Joanne Wood

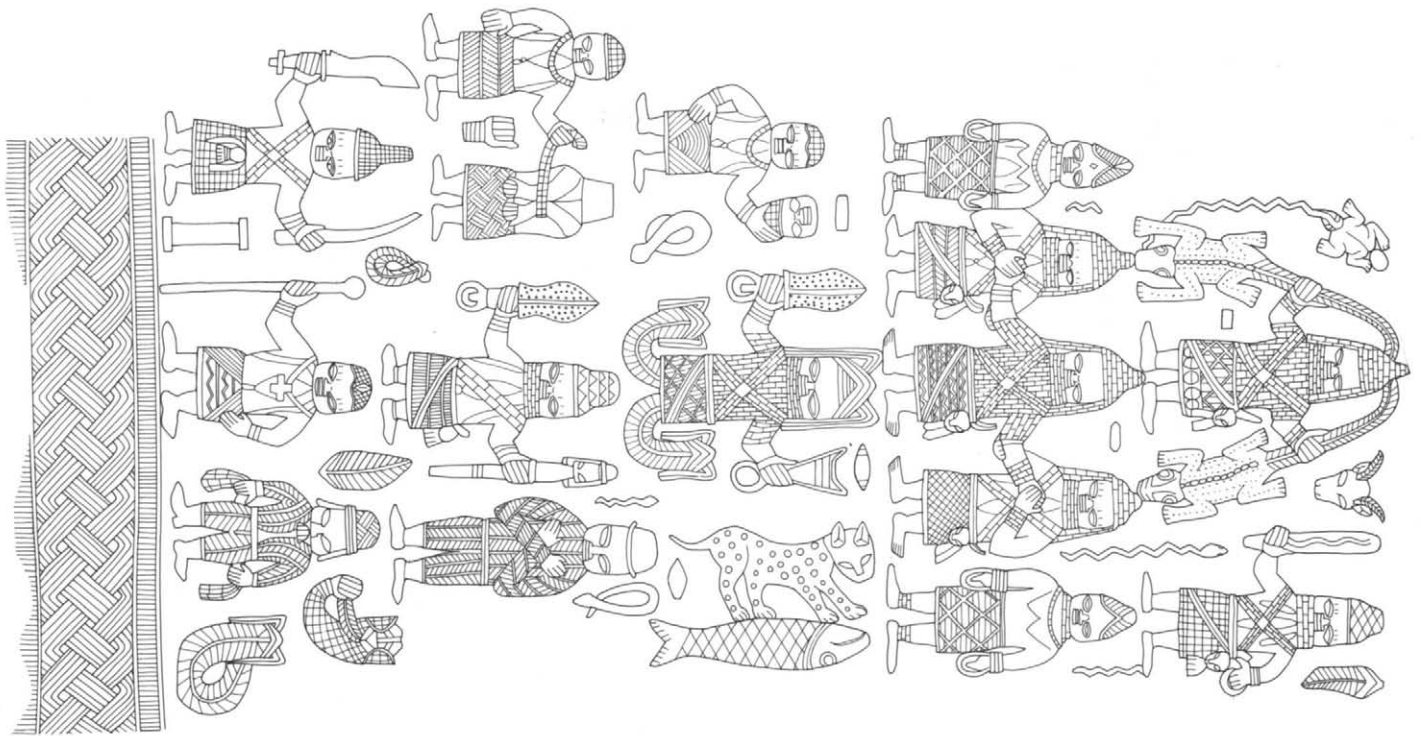


Fig. 22. Drawing of cat. no. 13.
Drawing by Joanne Wood

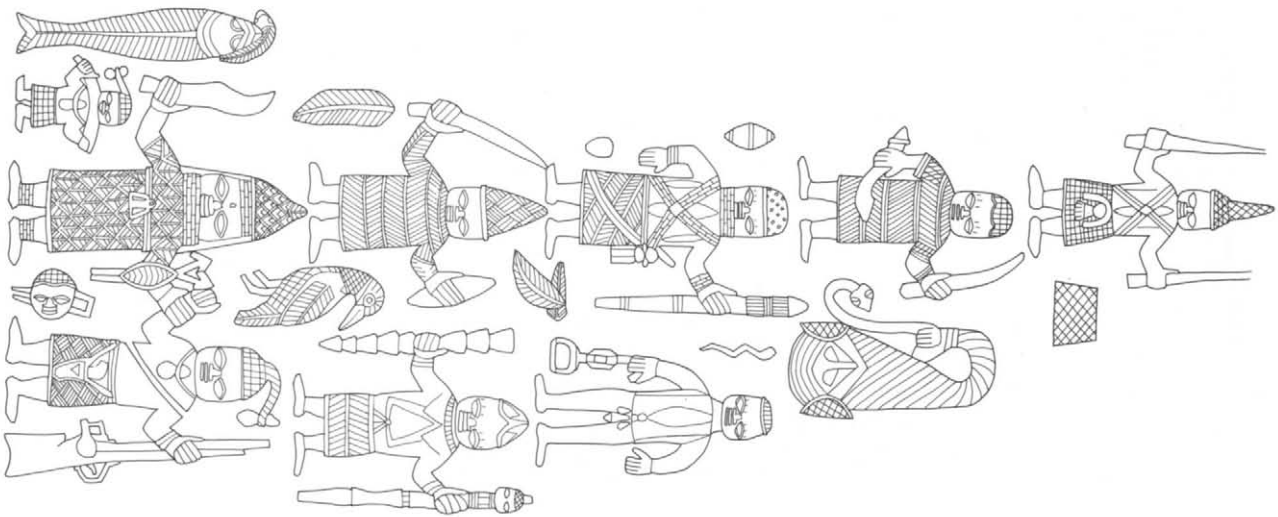
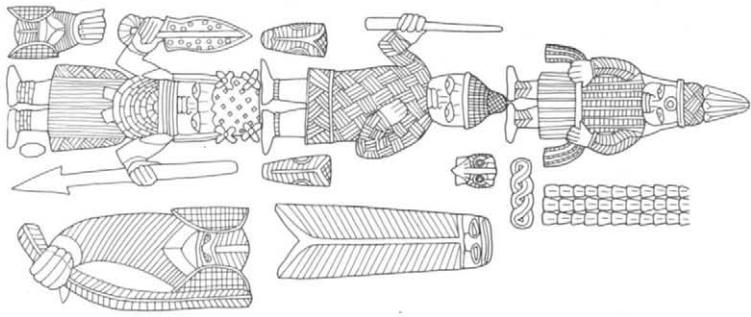




Fig. 23. Cross-wearing figure.
Detail of cat. no. 12

According to its oral traditions, Igbesanmwan, the ivory-carving guild, had its origins in the earliest phases of Benin history, the era of the Ogiso dynasty of kings prior to the founding of the present dynasty around 1300. Oba Ewuare, who reigned in the mid-fifteenth century, is credited with encouraging ivory carving and developing much of the visual code that conveyed concepts of divine kingship in Benin art for the next five hundred years (Egharevba 1960:18; Ben-Amos 1975:171).

Despite the long history of ivory carving in Benin, it is unlikely that carved ivory altar tusks were made before the middle of the eighteenth century. Tusks were noted on the ancestral altars of ordinary, nonroyal people by a Spanish friar who visited Benin in 1651, and also by Dutch merchant David van Nyendael, who saw them on royal altars about 1700, but there is no indication that those tusks were carved (Blackmun 1984a:197–99). The earliest description of figurative carving on tusks is by a French captain, J. F. Landolphe, who visited Benin several times between 1778 and 1787, during the reign of Akengbuda (r. ca. 1750–1804). Landolphe and his companions saw sixty carved tusks on a royal altar and twenty on the ancestral altar of the Ezomo, a member of the Uzama and one of the two supreme war chiefs. Based on this evidence, and on the existing tusks themselves, it has been estimated that the carving of royal altar tusks began about 1750 (Blackmun 1984a:195–212; idem 1991:57–59).

More than 130 of these carved tusks were confiscated from royal altars by the British Punitive Expedition in 1897. At the time of their removal, no attempt was made to record their location or to indicate which tusks belonged together on a particular altar. American art historian Barbara Blackmun has sorted the tusks into groups based upon choice of motifs, carving style, wear, and other factors. She has arranged the groups in a chronological sequence and deciphered the multitude of motifs carved on them (Blackmun 1984a; 1987; 1988; 1991). According to her research, the tusks can be divided into ten groups or sets, seven of which were commissioned for royal altars and the remainder most likely made for altars of such high-ranking chiefs as the Ezomo.

Of the eighteenth-century tusks, two sets were commissioned by Akengbuda probably for royal ancestral altars honoring his father Eresonyen (r. ca. 1735–50) and grandfather Akenzua I (r. ca. 1713–35), and a third for the Ezomo Ekeneza to honor his father, Ezomo Odia. The fourth set is believed to have been commissioned by Oba Obanosa (r. ca. 1804–15) for the altar he erected to his mother, the Iyoba Ose. The fifth group, also attributed to the early nineteenth century, is very unusual and was possibly not made for an ancestral altar at all, but for a royal altar to the hand. The sixth and seventh sets were commissioned during the reign of Oba Osemwende (r. ca. 1815–50), one for the altar of the Oba's father, Obanosa, and the other for the altar of the Ezomo Osifo. The eighth set, commissioned during the reign of Oba Adolo (r. ca. 1850–88), was made to honor Adolo's father, Osemwende,

and to refurbish an existing altar to a previous Oba. The ninth group of royal tusks has been attributed to the reign of Ovonramwen (r. 1888–97). The tenth and final group consists of tusks made between 1921 and 1933 for altars established by Obas Eweka II (r. 1914–33) and Akenzua II (r. 1933–78) for their fathers. The tusks of the last two groups bear the closest resemblance to contemporary ivory carving, including tusks recently commissioned by Oba Erediauwa for the altar honoring his father, Akenzua II, thus fixing them at the late end of the chronological sequence.

The two figurative tusks in the Perls collection belong to the two most recent groups. Blackmun has charted and identified their motifs, and the descriptions that follow are based entirely upon her work (Blackmun 1984a:166–71, 185–92, 551, 563). In both tusks the motifs are frontal and static, and arranged in orderly rows, with the most important motif in the center of the convex side. The rows are to be read from the bottom up. The figures on both tusks are crisply carved with bold, incised lines and display the squat proportions typical of Igbesanmwan carving.

Cat. no. 12 belongs to the group of late-nineteenth-century tusks commissioned by Oba Ovonramwen for the altar of his father, Adolo. The tusk itself is unusually small and includes only six rows of figures between its lozenge-patterned base and thimblelike tip (fig. 21). The motifs depicted on the bottom row are especially characteristic of this set of tusks. In the center is a figure wearing a cross pendant and a shallow-brimmed hat and holding a round-headed staff and a hammer (see fig. 23). Similar figures occur elsewhere in Benin art and have been identified either as a type of palace official called *Ewua*, or as *Ohensa*, the priest of *Osanobua*, the Benin high god (see cat. nos. 15, 16). Both *Ewua* and *Ohensa* are associated with the origin of the present Benin dynasty, and with *Esigie*, the great sixteenth-century Oba. The cross-wearing official is flanked by two slant-eyed figures wearing sixteenth-century Portuguese dress (see fig. 24). Blackmun has demonstrated that rather than representing European merchants, as this motif did when used on eighteenth-century tusks, these late-nineteenth-century versions are interpreted today in Benin as priests wearing charm-covered garments that provide spiritual protection (Blackmun 1988). Their slanted eyes are seen as being closed in prayer, and the circles on their foreheads represent spots of blood or chalk that heighten their spiritual powers. The crossed arms of the figure on the left in this row, although derived from the relaxed posture of some early Benin images of Portuguese traders, is seen in the late-nineteenth-century tusks as a ritual gesture performed by priests of *Ovia*. *Ovia* is a masquerade honoring a village-based river spirit and is concerned with the villagers' paternal ancestors rather than royal ones (Ben-Amos 1980:38, 57; Blackmun 1990:66). *Ovia* worship was introduced into the palace by *Esigie* in the sixteenth century, then banned by Oba *Eresonyen* in the eighteenth century. It regained its



Fig. 24. Priest. Detail of cat. no. 12



Fig. 25. Warrior. Detail of cat. no. 12

popularity and royal sanction during Ovonramwen's reign, as part of the attempt to increase the spiritual resources available to the kingdom at a time when its political, military, and economic resources were waning. The three figures in the bottom row thus refer to various supernatural sources of the Oba's power, some of long standing and some recently acquired.

Row 2 of cat. no. 12 features the *Iyase* who, as head of the Town Chiefs and one of the two most important military chiefs, is a central figure in Benin court life. He is flanked on the right by an unidentified priest whose basketry hat with feather suggests his importance, and on the left by a warrior (fig. 25), dressed like the warriors on many plaques (see cat. no. 36). The warrior is shown with a bird, perhaps as an allusion to Oba Esigie's order to kill the "bird of prophecy" and his subsequent victory over the Ata of Idah (see cat. nos. 89–95). This row thus refers to the triumph of a past Oba and to the military and spiritual support available to all Obas.

Row 3 (fig. 26) depicts a motif found on every type of altar tusk, as well as on other types of objects, such as plaques (see cat. no. 53; fig. 45). It is what Blackmun refers to as the "linked supporting triad," a symmetrical, hieratic vision of the Oba in ceremonial dress with his arms and hands supported by two flanking figures in almost identical garb (Blackmun 1984a:271–76). In life, the Oba is actually supported in this way by the high priests Osa and Osuan at his coronation and at other major palace festivals (see fig. 11). The image incorporates several important aspects of Benin leadership. The number three is often a symbol of the Oba's power to punish enemies and of the occult forces at his disposal. Balancing this fearsome and dominating aspect of kingship is the Oba's need for the support of his people, shown graphically by the flanking subordinates who hold up his arms.

The most prominent position on this tusk, as on many others, is occupied by a figure representing Ozolua the Conqueror, one of Benin's great warrior kings (r. ca. late fifteenth century). He is identified by his long dress of chain mail with hanging panels under the arms, his bead crown and collar, and his charm-laden necklaces (fig. 27). In addition to the altar tusks, Ozolua's image is found frequently on wooden objects carved by the *Omada*, or palace pages (see cat. nos. 123–25). During Ozolua's reign Benin greatly expanded its territory and conquered many neighboring areas, including the Yoruba kingdoms of Owo and Ijebu-Ode (Egharevba 1960:24). Although at the time this tusk was made Benin was shrinking in size and power, the image of Ozolua continued to reaffirm the kingdom's view of itself and its king.

Near the tip of cat. no. 12 is the figure of an *Ooton* (fig. 28), a palace priest whose presence is required at sacrifices to the Oba's head and to his ancestors, both of which are essential to the well-being of the kingdom. Here he is shown surrounded by the heads of sacrificial animals, such as crocodile and fowl. The *Ooton*, seen also

Fig. 26. Oba and two supporters. Detail of cat. no. 12. Drawing by Joanne Wood

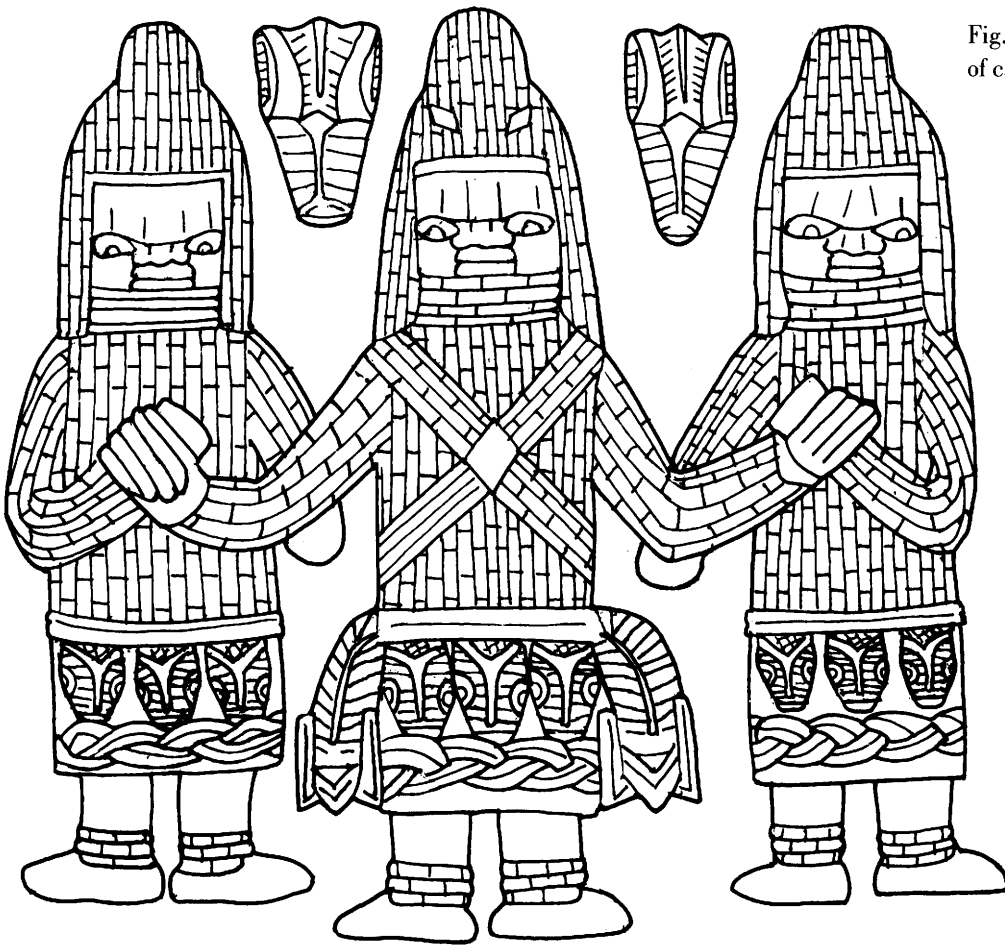


Fig. 27. Ozolua the Conqueror. Detail of cat. no. 12. Drawing by Joanne Wood

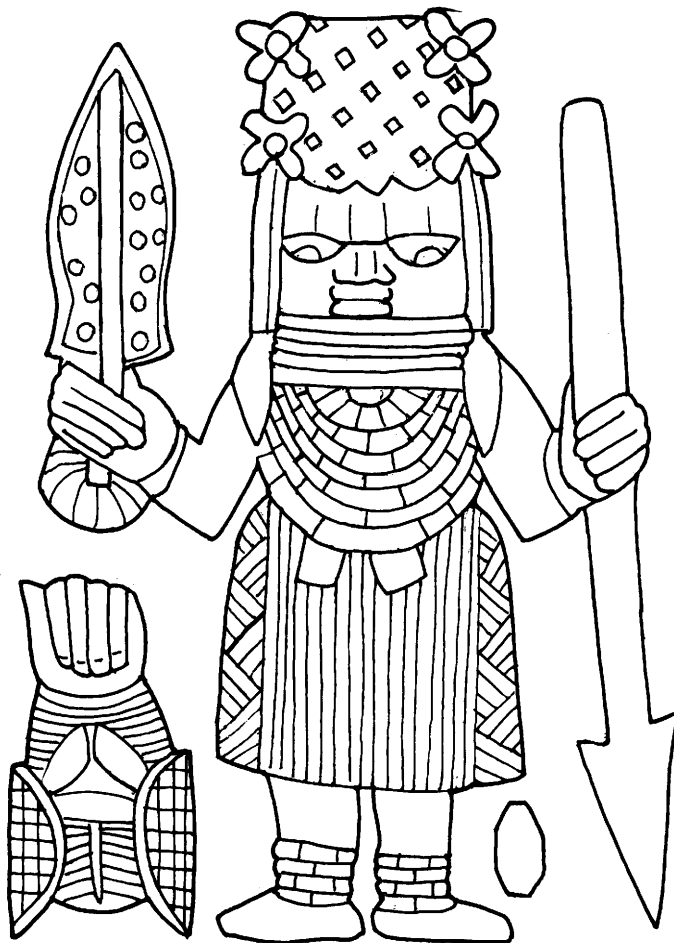




Fig. 28. Ooton, royal priest. Detail of cat. no. 12

in many plaques (see cat. no. 39), is identified by his long dress, coiffure with a projection at the top, and wand for chasing away evil spirits. Above him in the top row is a foreign merchant, distinguishable from the motif of priests in row 1 by his non-slanted eyes.

This tusk commemorating a late-nineteenth-century king, Adolo (r. ca. 1850–88), refers to various aspects of his power, both past and present. Its central figure recalls the triumphs of Oba Ozolua, while other motifs refer to officials who have contributed to Benin's power over the centuries. Balancing these references to the Oba's military strength are images that depict the spiritual aspects of his power. Here again past and present mingle, as some motifs depict priests associated with earlier times, some depict officials whose responsibilities have been constant throughout Benin history, and some represent a type of worship that was especially compelling at the time the tusk was made.

The second tusk in the Perls collection (cat. no. 13) has been attributed to the group of tusks commissioned between 1921 and 1933 by Obas Eweka II and Akenzua II for the altars honoring their fathers (Fagg 1970: pls. 2, 12; Dark 1973: pls. 55, 56, 58). This group of tusks is very similar to those of the previous group, represented by cat. no. 12, in style and choice of motifs. Cat. no. 13 consists of ten rows of figures above a border filled with a guilloche pattern (fig. 22).

Row 1, like that on cat. no. 12, depicts a cross-wearing figure (without a hammer) in the center, flanked by two other priests. The one on the right is similar to those on cat. no. 12. The one on the left has been identified as either Osa or Osuan, the priests of the state gods, Uwen and Ora, who are concerned with rain, sun, air, and the fertility of the soil, all crucial to the well-being of the kingdom. He wears a basketry cap with a tall projection, a collar, and crossed baldrics of beads. He carries an *ada* sword and a magic branch, and an *ekpoki* box for ritual paraphernalia is next to him. As in the first tusk (cat. no. 12), the bottom row represents the various sources of supernatural power at the Oba's disposal.

Row 2 expands upon this theme, illustrating the Oba's occult powers in a specific context (fig. 29). In the center is a chief holding an *eben* sword and a rattle-staff. Blackmun was told that this chief represents the Ihama of Ihogbe, the priest of the royal ancestors, presiding at a human sacrifice. On the right is a priest with crossed arms wearing patterned, spiritually protective clothing; he lacks long hair and a beard, and thus is not entirely based upon the foreign-merchant motif as is the priest below him. On the left is a bound and decapitated victim viewed from the rear, a motif that occurs only on this particular tusk. He is held by an attendant carved on the concave side of the tusk. The victim's head is held by an assistant in row 3 above. While human sacrifice to the royal ancestors has been a feature of Benin religion since the mid-sixteenth century (Ryder 1969:71), it increased dramatically in the late nineteenth century, as the king tried



Fig. 29. Bottom row: Priest of royal ancestors presiding at human sacrifice. Top row: Oba with mudfish legs. Detail of cat. no. 13. Drawing by Joanne Wood

to bolster his declining economic, political, and military power through supernatural means.

Also in row 3 (fig. 29), the Oba is depicted as a figure with mudfish legs, wearing ceremonial garments that include a crown shaped like mudfish barbels. He is holding an *eben* sword and a proclamation staff (*isevberè igho*), one of his insignia of power. This image of the ruler is found frequently in the art of Benin and related areas (see cat. nos. 30, 53, 129–31), and has many levels of meaning. It refers to Oba Ohen (r. ca. early fifteenth century), who is said to have hidden his deformed, crippled legs from his people and was eventually killed for his deception. Ohen's image serves as a warning to rulers not to abuse their subjects' respect. The mudfish-legged figure also refers to the Oba's close association with Olokun, the god of the sea, and the divine nature he derives from it. In row 4, the Oba is shown as part of the linked supporting triad, a motif that also stresses his power coupled with his responsibilities to his people. Above it, in row 5, is another image of the Oba related to

the mudfish-legged king. Although he appears here with human legs, he is holding a crocodile in each hand as a reference to his mastery of the supernatural forces that emanate from Olokun's world. Together these three rows of the tusk present a multilayered image of divine kingship in Benin.

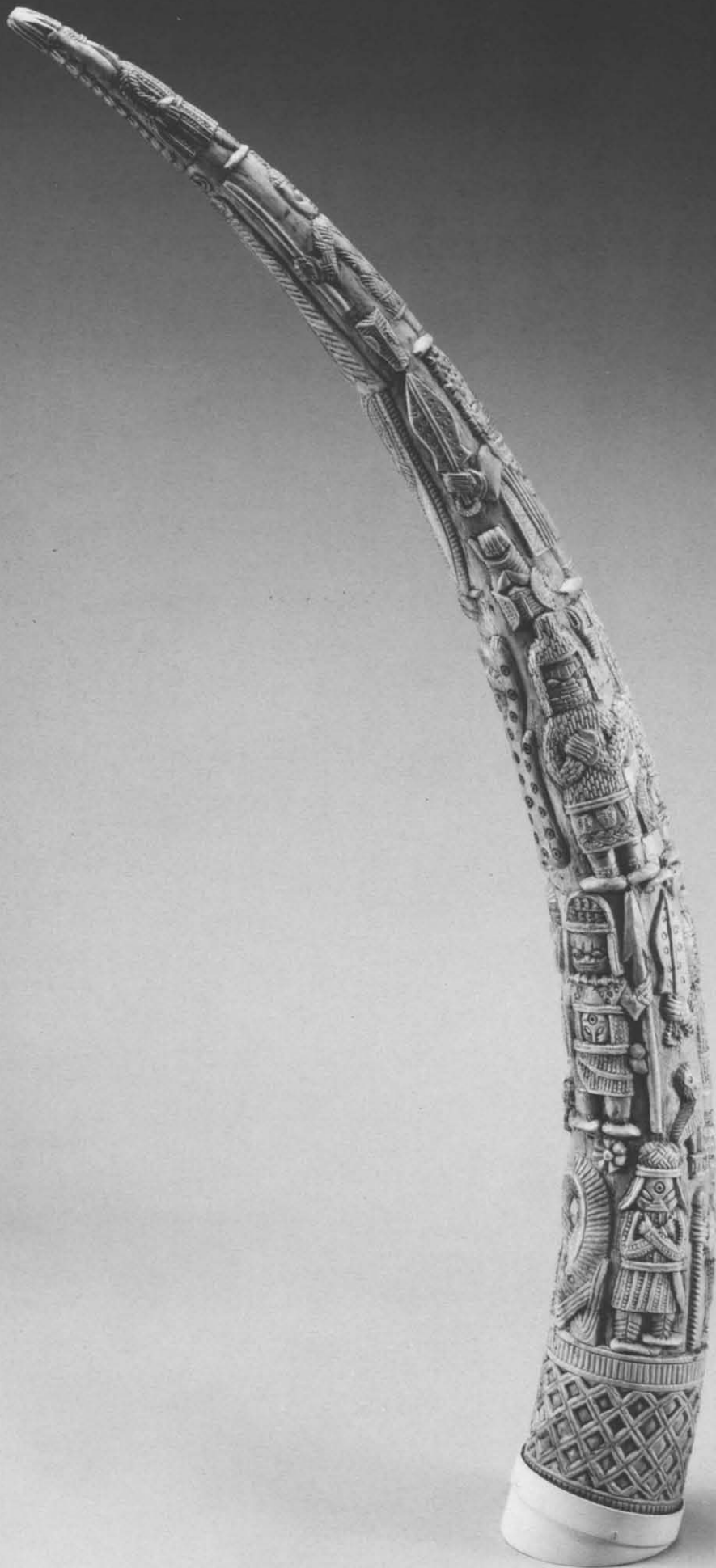
Row 6 portrays Ozolua the Conqueror, who was also depicted in cat. no. 12 (fig. 27). In this instance the victorious Oba is shown with a defeated enemy who holds a gun but whose torso bears a wide diagonal gash, as if Ozolua had slashed him in two with his sword. To the left of Ozolua is a tiny figure of a horn blower, calling the warriors to arms, and to the right is an enemy's severed head. Both motifs reinforce the image of the triumphant Oba.

The figures on rows 7 through 10, like those on rows 1 and 2, emphasize the Oba's spiritual resources. In row 7 is an Ooton, similar to the one on cat. no. 12 (fig. 28). He is wearing his characteristic long gown, but carrying a stone celt instead of a magic branch. Blackmun has interpreted this as a twentieth-century innovation, reflecting the increased popularity in Benin of the Yoruba thunder god, Sango. On the concave side of this row is depicted a woman with a rattle-staff, possibly a priestess of Olokun. A priest holding a rattle-staff appears in row 8, as does a palace page, an *omada*, holding the shackles used to bind a sacrificial victim. Above, in row 9, is another priest and at the very top is the high priest Osuan, with two upraised wands. Osuan's importance in Benin state religion is reflected in his position at the tip of the tusk, where he serves to direct its powers upward to the royal ancestors for whom it was carved.

This tusk, which is larger than cat. no. 12, presents a greater number of images of the Oba and the warriors and priests who serve him. Yet, like cat. no. 12, and carved altar tusks generally, it presents a multifaceted view of Benin kingship: it combines motifs that emphasize the king's military power with those that stress his spiritual aspect; it contrasts the Oba's command of terrifying occult forces with his need to respect the concerns of his subjects; and it merges images of specific kings with those that refer to all rulers past and present. The major difference between this and the previous tusk is the proliferation of priests and the allusions to human sacrifice in cat. no. 13. Both of these features reflect the changes that occurred in Benin at the end of the nineteenth century, the period commemorated in the tusk.

The third tusk (cat. no. 14), unlike the first two in the Perls collection, does not bear figural motifs. Instead it features five bands of guilloche pattern alternating with a motif said to identify all ivory tusks belonging to the king (Roth 1968:96). The guilloche pattern consists of three tightly interlaced bands, each made up of several strands. Interlace patterns are ubiquitous in Benin art and are said to be a hallmark of Igbesamwan, the ivory-carvers' guild (Blackmun, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:61), although they are found on brass objects as well. Nonfigurative tusks, such as cat. no.

14, have been observed on altars dedicated to the queen mother in the Oba's palace (von Sydow 1938: pl. 1; idem 1954: pl. 28B; Nevadomsky 1987:224). Similar tusks were also placed on the altar established in the twentieth century to honor all the Obas prior to Ovonramwen (see fig. 34; Akenzua 1965:249). The thinness of this example suggests that it may not have been located on a royal ancestral altar at all, but rather on an altar to the hand (see cat. no. 33).



12. Carved Altar Tusk (view 2)

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin
1888–97

Ivory; l. (along convex side)

44 in. (111.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.104

References: London, Christie's, 1976a: lot
45; Blackmun 1984a: no. 138

Exhibition: New York, The Center for
African Art, 1990: no. 5



12. Carved Altar Tusk (view 3)



12. Carved Altar Tusk (view 4)



13. Carved Altar Tusk

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

1921–33

Ivory; l. (along convex side)

73¾ in. (187.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.106

References: London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet and Co., 1977b: lot 351; Paris, Drouot Rive Gauche, 1978: lot 47; Blackmun 1984a: no. 137

Exhibitions: Bloomington, Indiana University Art Museum, 1980; Washington, D.C., National Museum of African Art, 1981: no. 62



14. Carved Altar Tusk

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th–19th century

Ivory; l. (along convex side)

37¾ in. (95.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.105