

Unit 12: Benin, West Africa

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Non-European Study option

900 - 1300 (and later periods)

Period Overview

Although Benin Kingdom began to develop during the period 900-1300 CE, it reached its height during the later years of 1300-1700 CE. Currently found in the nation of Nigeria (not the modern-day country of Benin), the kingdom was centred on the City of Benin, and dates back to some of the earliest Ogiso Kings some 2000 years ago. The various villages and tribes of the region began to form a single kingdom that worked as a community, including trading with those from other areas. In the later period up to the 18th Century the kingdom traded with countries in Europe, including a part in the slave trade. The kingdom was eventually destroyed in the Victorian period and led to it later becoming under British rule in West Africa.

Life in Benin

As most of the sources that tell us about life in Benin Kingdom focus on powerful and rich people, little is known about ordinary men, women and children. Historians believe the most people were farmers, growing crops like yams and plantains and working hard to clear vast areas of communal land. Many people had two or three different jobs and might also have been part of one of the guilds of craftsmen, producing high quality goods for the royal court or for trading with foreign visitors. Alternatively, people became warriors, entertainers or builders, who were required to make their mud homes and the defensive walls around the kingdom. As well as looking after families, women would have been responsible for making domestic ceramic objects like cooking pots. Storytellers were very important and kept the kingdom's history and mythology alive by telling stories aloud by the fire every evening. Children did not go to school but would have learned each day from the storytellers. The people of Benin had many stories involving gods and magic and they believed that non-human objects had spirits or souls, a belief known as 'animism'.

Changing Times

Benin kingdom began as a group of small villages situated in the rainforests of West Africa. Around 900 CE, some of the villages decided to join together and came under the rule of a dynasty of kings called the Ogisos. The people built an impressive earthen moat around the kingdom boundaries and worked hard as farmers and craftsmen to ensure that the kingdom had high quality goods to trade with foreigners.

After 1180 CE, a new line of kings called the Obas began to rule. They were very powerful and people treated them like gods. Under their rule, Benin Kingdom began to expand and flourish. The Obas established a mighty army and gained control of large areas of land. Benin Kingdom became very wealthy after the Obas set up links with Europe to trade goods and slaves.

A series of civil wars and the abolition of the trade slave caused Benin to steadily decrease in both wealth and power after 1700 CE. As European countries began racing the colonise Africa, Benin had a series of disputes with Britain and this led to a group of British officials being killed by Benin warriors. In retaliation, Britain launched a punitive expedition and destroyed Benin City in 1897 CE by burning down buildings and looted works of art. They exiled the Oba and brought Benin under British rule.

Possible Enquiry Questions

- What is the difference between tribes and kingdoms?
- How do we know about periods of history without primary written sources?
- What were the first kings of Benin like?
- How did Benin grow from tiny villages into a powerful Empire?
- Why was the Benin wall so important?
- What did Benin have to offer foreign traders?
- Why and how was Benin Kingdom destroyed?
- Should original art from Benin Kingdom be returned to Nigeria?

Key Individuals

- **Ogiso Igodo** – The first king (or 'Ogiso') of Benin, under whom the smaller villages joined together to form a Kingdom.
- **Ogiso Owodo** – the last of the Ogiso kings, banished from the Kingdom with his family for bad conduct around 1130 CE.
- **Oba Eweke** – the first of a new dynasty of kings called the Obas, crowned around 1180 CE.
- **Oba Oguole** - had the Benin City Wall built around 1283 CE.
- **Oba Ewuare** – expanded the kingdom greatly and set up trading links with Portugal in 1514 CE.
- **Oba Ovonramwen** – the last king of Benin, exiled by British troops after their invasion in 1897 CE.



Brass plaque, possibly dating from 1500-1600¹²

What did the Benin Kingdom ever do for us?

When European visitors discovered Benin Kingdom's sophisticated artwork, including metal work and ivory carvings, they could not believe that a people that they had considered to be 'primitive' could have produced them. The discovery caused Britain to completely re-evaluate its view of West African civilization. The rich heritage of art and crafts from Benin Kingdom teaches us a lot about what it was like there. Many pieces are available to view at the British Museum, including the famous 'bronze' plaques.

Big Concepts

Benin Kingdom grew from a series of tribal villages to a **powerful empire**, providing a good study for the factors that can cause kingdoms can to flourish and decline over time, including the value of **trade links** and the effects of **colonisation**.

This topic also provides opportunities to consider how we know about periods of history with no primary written sources, allowing pupils to evaluate the **reliability** of different types of evidence.

Places to Visit:

A handful of museums have artefacts from Benin Kingdom, including the famous Benin bronze plaques.

Possible places to visit include:

- [The British Museum](#), London
- [The Horniman Museum](#), London

Alternatively, other museums offer information about the slave trade and African culture.

- [International Slavery Museum](#), Liverpool

Timeline of Key Events:

Early Period: 900-1300 CE
Golden Age: 1300-1700 CE
Period of Decline: 1700-1897 CE

All dates shown are approximate.

- 900 CE** Benin Kingdom is first established when small villages join together in a conglomerate.
- 900-1400 CE** An enormous earthen moat is built around the Kingdom boundaries.
- 1180 CE** The first dynasty of Ogiso kings ends and the Obas began their rule.
- 1440 CE** Benin begins to expand and thrive under the rule of Oba Ewuare the Great.
- 1514 CE** Oba Esigie sets up trading links with Portuguese and other European visitors.
- 1700 CE** Benin Kingdom enters a period of decline due to a series of civil wars and the abolition of the slave trade with Europe.
- 1897 CE** Benin City is destroyed by British troops and Benin comes under Britain's control.

Broader Context

- Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in Britain (410-1066 CE)
- Vikings invade Britain (793-1066 CE)
- Baghdad becomes the World's largest city, (800 CE)
- Ghana Empire is established (830 CE)
- Battle of Hastings in Britain (1066 CE)
- Baghdad destroyed by the Monguls (1258 CE)
- Columbus arrives in America (1492 CE)
- British Tudor Period (1485-1600 CE)
- Abolition of the Slave Trade (1807 CE)

Further Information:

Benin planning and resources (KS2 History):

<http://www.ks2history.com/#lbenin-lesson-plans/c1fe6>

Benin Bronzes (BBC): <http://bit.do/bbcbenin>

Kingdom of Benin (Mr Donn): <http://bit.do/donnbenin>

Art of Benin (British Museum): <http://bit.do/BMbenin>

Kingdom of Benin (F. Nimmons) <http://bit.do/KS2Benin>

¹²Benin Plaque image [<http://bit.do/plaque>] by Wmpearl is provided copyright-free and accessed from Wikimedia Commons.