



# THE KINGDOM OF BENIN KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



## Summary

**The Kingdom of Benin** was a wealthy kingdom that grew in western Africa from 900CE onwards.

Several small tribes settled in the rainforests around **modern day southern Nigeria**.

From these modest beginnings, the Kingdom grew to be a **powerful empire** by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. It controlled a large amount of land, and **traded goods** with other African Kingdoms and beyond.

The Kingdom of Benin was particularly well-known for its **brass, crops, and arts and crafts**.

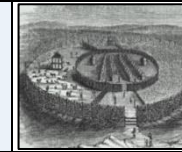
Benin Kingdom was eventually brought under the control of the British Empire from 1897.

Map showing the approximate expanse of the Kingdom of Benin between 1200-1300. It later grew much larger.



## Features of Daily Life

### ARCHITECTURE



The defensive walls of Benin city were built between c800 and 1500 CE. They are built of earth and at over 1000 km in length, are the largest such structure in the world. Benin's rulers lived in large palaces – the Royal Palace of Oba of Benin is a notable example, at the heart of the city of Benin.

### MONARCHIES/ LEADERSHIP



When the Benin Kingdom first began to flourish, 'Ogisos' were the rulers. Ogiso means 'ruler from the sky.' From the reign of Orunmayin, the title 'Oba' was used. Royals were believed to rule by 'divine right' – spreading the idea that it was the will of Osanobua (God) for them to rule over people.

### SOCIAL STRUCTURE



The original Ogisos were thought to have descended from the youngest son of Osanobua and so often ruled completely. Elders were known to rule individual villages. Ogisos had help from a council of elders called the Edionisen.

### RELIGION



The leaders of the Kingdom of Benin were known to host lavish religious ceremonies. The people of Benin were animists: they believed that non-human objects and animals had souls and spirits. They also practised human sacrifice.

### DAILY LIFE – TRADITIONS & MATERIALS



Although there are no written texts from the time, the people of Benin were known to have a rich oral tradition of histories, myths and legends. Treasures made of brass, wood and ivory from Benin even made their way as far as Europe.

### DAILY LIFE - FOOD



The main crop at the time was yam. Other crops that were farmed for foods included palm oil, beans, okra, melons and peppers. People supplemented their diet with bush meat and fish. Yovo Doko is a sweet pastry that originated in the area.

### ART



The Benin Empire made great strides in terms of science, technology, and town-planning, but it is perhaps most-famed for its amazing artworks. Some of the world's most revered brass & ivory pieces are known to have come from this period. Life-sized head sculptures are amongst the most well-known.

## Major Events

### Beginnings



- Generations of people had lived in the rainforest clearings in the area.
- The rich natural resources and ideal climate conditions meant that this was an ideal place for hunting, gathering and agriculture.
- Benin City is thought to have sprung up around 1000 CE, in a forest that could be easily defended.

### Reign of Ogiso Oduwa (917-967)



- From early in Oduwa's reign, village chiefs wanted to go to war with him. They were unhappy that the leadership was passed to him, rather than him being chosen. This damaged the reputation and power of the Ogisos.
- Oduwa did build some valuable trade relations within the kingdom and with other local civilisations.

### Reign of Ogiso Arigbo (1012-1059)



- Ogiso Arigbo is best-known for having been a great merchant. He built strong relationships with other kingdoms and established successful trade routes.
- He also introduced slave workers to the Kingdom, capturing men, women and children from other areas to serve those within the kingdom.

### Orunmayin – The First Oba (c.1170)



The Edo people became dissatisfied with the rule of the Ogisos and Owadu, the last Ogiso, was eventually banished. Fearing their country would fall into chaos, the Edo asked their neighbour, the King of Ife, for help. He sent his youngest son, Prince Oranmiyan, to rule as the first Oba. Under the Obas, the Kingdom expanded.

### British Expedition of 1897



- By the end of the 1800s, the Obas had lost much of their power and struggled to exert control.
- The British wanted to take over Benin, so that they could get rich from its palm oils and rubber.
- The Obas had tried to cut off all contact with Britain, but the British insisted on trading.
- In 1897, the British sent a group of officials to visit Benin. However, warriors drove them back and many men were killed. In retaliation, the British launched the Expedition of 1897, in which they sent around 1,200 soldiers to attack Benin City. They captured the city and burnt much of it to the ground, ending the Kingdom of Benin.

## Top 10 Facts!

1. The Kingdom of Benin is not the same place as the country of Benin today – The Kingdom of Benin was in modern-day Nigeria.
2. At its largest, the empire stretched beyond the River Niger in east.
3. At this time, the empire also extended beyond what is modern-day Ghana in the west.
4. The cowrie shell was used as currency (money).
5. Palaces were decorated with images of Obas with weapons and in ceremonial dress.
6. Benin's success was fuelled by its extensive trade with other kingdoms/ countries.
7. The modern day city of Lagos was founded by the army of the Benin Kingdom.
8. In the middle ages, Benin became heavily involved in the slave trade, capturing rival peoples and selling them to Europeans.
9. In the 1800s, Obas began to lose their power over people, and civil wars broke out.
10. Oba still hold prestigious positions as government advisors.

## Timeline

pre-850CE – Family groups clear rainforests and settle

871-917 – Reign of 27<sup>th</sup> Ogiso Ohuede

917-967 – Reign of Ogiso Oduwa: a chaotic time in the Kingdom.

967-1012– Reign of Ogiso Obioye. Currency reform.

1012-1059 – Ogiso Arigbo establishes slavery. Builds up trade with other kingdoms.

1100s – Struggles for power and the Ogiso's lose control.

c.1170 – Orunmayin of Ife sent to become first Oba.

1897 – British officials try to visit Benin but warriors kill them. British retaliate with destruction of Benin City.

1960: Becomes a part of Nigeria.





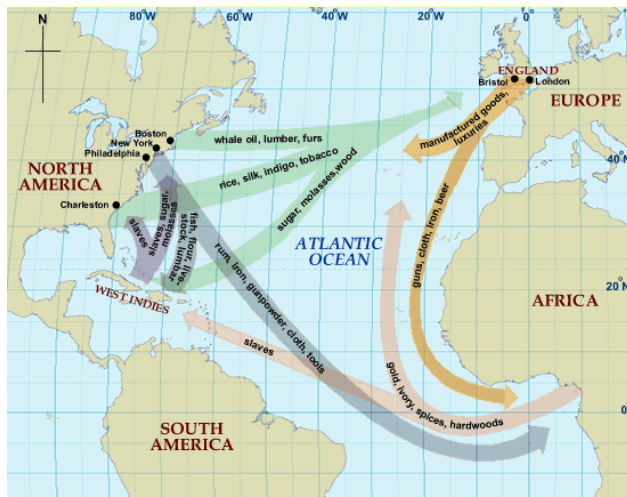
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## Dates to Remember

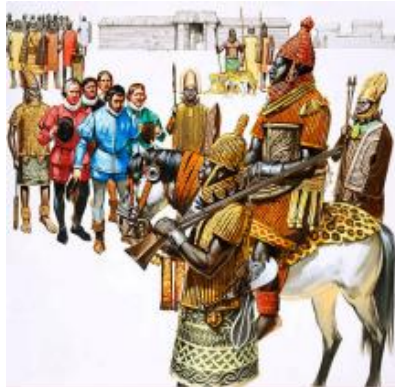
400	900	1180	1283	1440	1451	1700	1897
Yoruba people use iron tools to clear land.	Benin Kingdom created	The dynasty of the 'Oba' began.	Oba Oguole builds the Benin City wall	Oba Ewuare expanded the kingdom	Oba Ewuare sets up trade with Portuguese visitors	A period of decline due to civil wars and end of the slave trade in Europe	Benin City is destroyed by British troops.

## The Transatlantic Slave Trade



## Trade with Benin

In the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, the Portuguese were the first white people to arrive in Benin, before the British. The people of Benin began to trade with them, selling slaves, buying spices and firearms and learning the art of writing and the Christian religion.



## The Benin Expedition of 1897



## Key Vocabulary

Animist	The belief that non-human objects and animals have souls.
Artefact	An object made by a human being, typically one of cultural or historical interest.
Bronze	A yellow or brown mix of copper and tin, sometimes with small amounts of other metals such as lead or zinc.
Casting	The making of an object by pouring molten metal or other material into a mould.
Century	A period of one hundred years.
Cowrie shell	Sea snail shells used as a form of currency.
Descendent	A person related to someone from an earlier generation
Dynasty	The continuation of powerful leaders within the same family over a period of time.
Edo	The original people and founders of the Kingdom of Benin.
Guild	A group of specialist craftsmen
Igodomigodo	The original name for the Kingdom of Benin. This was the first unified city
Ivory	Ivory -a hard creamy-white substance composing the main part of the tusks of an elephant, walrus, or narwhal, often (especially formerly) used to make ornaments and other articles.
Merchant	Someone who buys and sells goods, especially on a large scale or with foreign countries. The Kingdom of Benin traded with
Oba	Ruler. The Obas were all worshiped as gods
Oracle	Someone who was believed to be able to receive messages from the gods and translate them.
Plaque	Ornamental pieces that could be used to decorate important buildings or show important messages.

## The Benin Bronzes



## What came next?

1897: In the Autumn of 1897, 304 Benin plaques were displayed in the British Museum. More were added to the collection in later years.



Benin belonged to the British Empire until 1960. Then it became part of the independent country of Nigeria. Today, the Oba of Benin leads religious ceremonies, but he no longer rules his people.

Ewuare II (born October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1953) was crowned the Oba of Benin on October 20<sup>th</sup> 2016. He is the 40<sup>th</sup> Oba.



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

