

The kingdom of Benin, in West Africa began in the 900s when the Edo people settled in the rainforests. It was one of the largest and richest empires in West Africa.

Key Terms
Oba – The King of Benin
Empire – A group of states or countries ruled by a single government.
Trade – the action of buying and selling goods
Guild – a medieval association of craftsmen or merchants
Invasion – a country entering another country with armed forces.
Source – a piece of evidence that informs our study of a particular period of topic.
Interpretation – An interpretation is an individual reflecting on an historical event, person or period.
Provenance – The origins of a piece of evidence.
Chronology – The order in which a series of events happened.

Key Individuals
Oba – King of Benin

James Phillips – Leader of the British Trade Group in 1897

Life in Benin
Benin was a large and varied kingdom. Some people lived in villages and small towns, but most people lived and worked in Benin City. The most important person in the kingdom was the king, known as the Oba. Hundreds of men and women lived at the royal court, and devoted their lives to looking after the Oba and his family. Some people at court had very special jobs, working as acrobats, sorcerers or leopard hunters.

Most people in the countryside worked as farmers but there were also potters and blacksmiths. They made simple pots, weapons and tools for the villagers. Many people in Benin lived in villages in the rainforest. They cleared away the trees to grow vegetables and they built their houses from mud, wood and palm leaves. Benin was famous for its craft workers. Specialists in a craft (like ivory-carvers) formed groups called guilds. All the members of a guild lived and worked together. There were more than 40 guilds in Benin City and each guild had to perform a special duty for the Oba. Not all the guilds were for craft workers. Doctors, drummers, acrobats and dancers had their own guilds too. Men from all over the kingdom served the Oba as soldiers. Warriors went into battle armed with swords, spears and crossbows, and by the 1600s they had guns as well. Some brave boys trained as hunters. They started their training very young and the bravest of all became elephant hunters. The people of Benin traded with merchants from Europe and with other African kingdoms. Instead of using money they exchanged goods.

British Invasion
By the 1800s, the Kingdom of Benin began to lose power and the Obas struggled to rule their people.

Benin was also under threat from Britain. The British wanted to gain control of Benin so they could get rich by selling its palm oil and rubber. The Oba tried to stop all contact with Britain and end trade agreements, but the British insisted on their right to trade.

In 1897, a group of British officials tried to visit Benin. They were told not to visit but they decided to visit anyway. As they approached the borders of Benin, a group of warriors drove them back and several British men were killed.

This attack made the British furious. They sent over a thousand soldiers to invade Benin. Benin City was burnt to the ground and the kingdom of Benin became part of the British Empire.

Benin Bronzes & Art
The people of Benin made many different kinds of art. Village craft workers made simple pots, weapons and tools. They carved masks for ceremonies and they moulded sculptures of gods out of mud. Metal workers in Benin made beautiful plaques, masks and statues for the Oba. These are often called 'Benin Bronzes', however most are actually made of brass rather than bronze.

In Benin City, craft workers were organised into groups known as guilds. There were guilds for wood carvers, ivory carvers, leather workers, blacksmiths and weavers. Most important of all was the brass casters' guild. They were only allowed to work for the Oba (king).

The most precious materials were brass, coral and ivory. People believed that brass had the power to drive away evil. It was so special that it could only be used in the royal court. The palace walls were covered with plaques made from brass and it was used to make figures and heads for the royal altars. Coral was also thought to have magical powers. It was seen as a gift from Olokun, god of the sea. Chiefs were allowed to wear coral necklaces, bracelets and anklets, but only the Oba could dress completely in coral. His people believed that when he wore his coral suit all his curses would come true! Ivory was seen as a symbol of purity and strength. Carved ivory tusks stood by the Oba's throne and ivory bracelets and pendants were worn by the Oba and important chiefs.