

3 The Kingdom of Benin

Introduction

The Kingdom of Benin was founded in the rainforests of West Africa in around 900. It grew from a collection of farming settlements to become a wealthy trading nation, with a very large and busy city – Benin City – at its heart. However, by 1897, the Kingdom of Benin had been forced to become part of the British Empire and ceased to exist. You are going to find out how and why the Kingdom of Benin rose and fell, how historical objects tell the story of the Kingdom of Benin, and how Benin City was far ahead of European cities at the time. Here is a map of the Kingdom of Benin and a timeline to get you started.

Fact

Today, the land that was once the Kingdom of Benin is in the country of Nigeria. The Kingdom of Benin should not be confused with the modern country of Benin.

Later on...



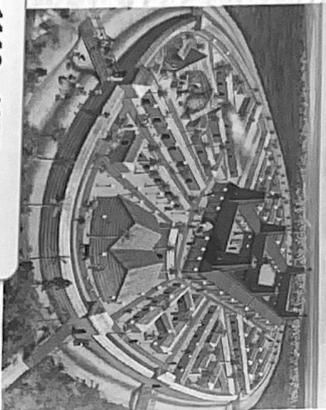
Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960. It is a democratic country, but the role of leader of the Kingdom of Benin or 'oba' remains. The current oba, Eweka II, was crowned in 2016. He has an important and powerful role in Nigerian politics.

GROUP 3.1

How do I say?

When you start to learn about the history of another country, it can be difficult to know how to pronounce the names of people and places. Here is a handy guide to help you correctly say ten of the names you'll come across in this chapter. You emphasise the sound in bold.

Benin: **ben een**
 oba: **o ba**
 Ogisio: **oh gi so**
 Eweka: **eh weh ka**
 Ewuare: **eh war ee**
 Ozolua: **oh zool a**
 Esigie: **eh see geh**
 Ohogbua: **oh ugg bwah**
 Ehengbuda: **eh he boodah**
 Ovonramwen: **ov oh ram eh**



c1440–c1480
 The Kingdom of Benin is ruled by Oba Ewuare I. He expands the kingdom by conquering neighbouring lands, and transforms the capital – Benin City – into a very large and busy city.

c1480–c1504
 The Kingdom of Benin is ruled by Oba Ozolua. He expands the kingdom further, by conquering neighbouring lands.

c1280
 Craftspeople from the Kingdom of Benin who work with metals ask the people of Ife for help to develop their skills. Later they start to use imported metals, such as brass and bronze.

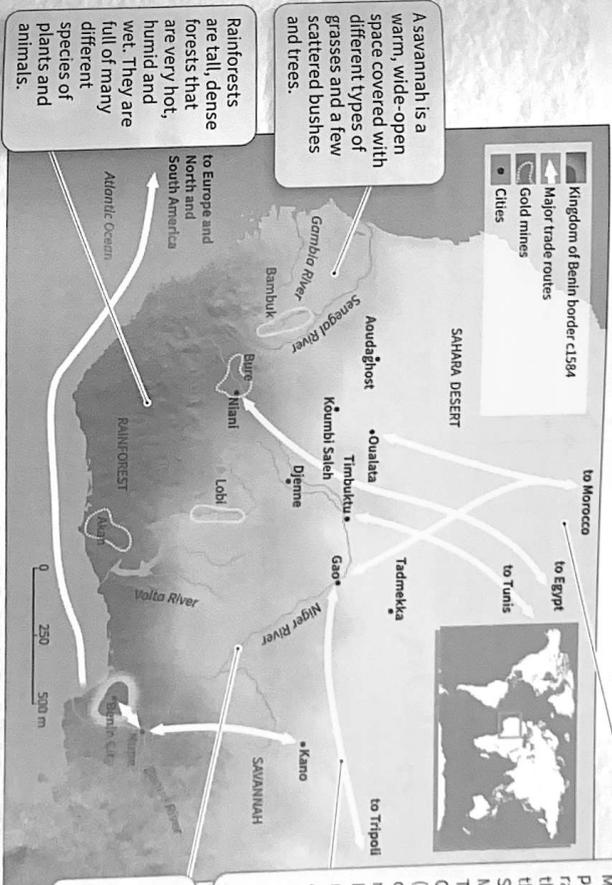


1486
 The Portuguese begin trading with the Kingdom of Benin.

900
 Farming settlements to the west of the Niger River merge together and eventually form Benin City. The Ogiso family rules the city which, over time, comes to be known as the Kingdom of Benin.

1100s
 The power of the Ogiso family declines and, in around 1200, Eweka becomes oba (ruler) of the Kingdom of Benin.

MAP A A map of West Africa and the Kingdom of Benin. Today, the borders of most countries are clearly defined: you know if you stand here you're in one country and if you stand there you're in another country, but we cannot be so certain about the position of borders, cities and trade routes during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries in West Africa. Nevertheless, this map should help you understand where the Kingdom of Benin was located, and where some of the key events you will learn about in this chapter took place.



A savannah is a warm, wide-open space covered with different types of grasses and a few scattered bushes and trees.

Rainforests are tall, dense forests that are very hot, humid and wet. They are full of many different species of plants and animals.

The Sahara Desert is the third largest desert in the world. In summer it is the one of hottest regions in the world during the day, but the air becomes much cooler at night.

Major trade routes passed through the rainforest, across the savannah and then across the Sahara Desert to Morocco, Tunis and Tripoli, and on to China and Persia (a large kingdom centred in what is now modern-day Iran). A new trade route across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe and North and South America was also established.

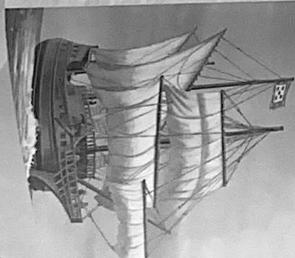
The Niger River is the main river in West Africa and provides water for drinking and farming.

c1504–c1550
 The Kingdom of Benin is ruled by Oba Esigie. He sends a representative to Portugal, and expands the kingdom even further by conquering neighbouring lands.

c1578–c1606
 The Kingdom of Benin is ruled by Oba Ehengbuda, who is considered the last great warrior oba. He finds it hard to put down rebellions against his rule.

c1550–c1578
 The Kingdom of Benin is ruled by Oba Ohogbua. He promotes trade with the Portuguese and, by conquering neighbouring lands, he expands the kingdom to its fullest extent.

From 1606
 The Kingdom of Benin gradually decreases in size as more and more of the conquered people within the kingdom seek their independence.



1897
 The British invade Benin City. Oba Ovonramwen is forced to leave, and the Kingdom of Benin is forced to become part of the British Empire.

How and why did the Kingdom of Benin rise and fall?

GROUP 3.2

Today, you can visit Benin City in south-west Nigeria and see the walls that Oba Ewuare I built in the second half of the fifteenth century to protect the city. But the Kingdom of Benin itself – once a wealthy trading nation that produced stunning sculptures made from brass and bronze – no longer exists. When was the Kingdom of Benin established? How did the obas (leaders) of Benin build such a powerful kingdom? And why did the Kingdom of Benin cease to exist in 1897?

Objectives

- Identify the main reasons why the Kingdom of Benin became so powerful.
- Investigate why the Kingdom of Benin expanded in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.
- Explore the factors leading to the fall of the Kingdom of Benin at the end of the nineteenth century.

3.1A The rise of the Kingdom of Benin

Benin City

The story of the Kingdom of Benin begins in 900, when the Edo people established farming settlements near the Niger River. For protection and trade, the settlements merged and went on to form Benin City. The city was ruled over by the Ogiso family and, in time, came to be referred to as the Kingdom of Benin.

By around 1100, the Ogiso family had lost control of the Kingdom of Benin: the last Ogiso ruler, Owodo, was removed from power and ordered to leave Benin City. He was replaced by an administrator called Evian.

► **INTERPRETATION A** Oral history is history passed down from generation to generation through songs and the spoken word. This is a description of Evian written down in 1970, from an oral account given by Chief Egharevba.

[He was a] good citizen, because he was generally good and kind, helpful, merciful, sympathetic, and generous. He was very active, fearless, keen [stable], careful and sensible from his youth. He often appeared and acted as a spectator in all affairs of the land and did everything with the spirit of patriotism [devotion to his country]... As a patriot [someone who supported his country], Evian was always ready to tackle any emergency in Benin, just to make the land remain peaceful without fear and harm.

As Evian neared the end of his life, he named his son as his heir.

However, this angered the people of Benin because Evian did not have royal blood and so he could not pass on his power to his children. They asked a neighbouring royal family from Ife for help, and a prince from Ife, called Oranmiyan, arrived and became the first oba (ruler) of the Kingdom of Benin.

► SOURCE B

This brass figure was made between 1550 and 1650, and is believed to be Prince Oranmiyan. Edo oral accounts suggest that no one in Benin had ever seen a horse before Oranmiyan arrived.



Meanwhile...

LATE 1100s

Before sending his son to Benin City, Oranmiyan's father decided to test the people of Benin. He put lice in the hair of one of his servants, sent the servant to Benin City, and asked that the lice be returned to him in three years. When the servant returned, the lice were thriving and Oranmiyan's father concluded that a kingdom that could look after the lice could also look after his son.

Oranmiyan married an Edo woman and they had a son called Eweka.

Not everyone in Benin accepted Oranmiyan as oba, because he did not speak the Edo language and was not familiar with Edo traditions. He came to believe that Benin should be ruled by someone who was born in the city, so he stepped down from the throne in favour of his son Eweka in around 1200. In this way, Eweka I has come to be known as the first true oba of the Kingdom of Benin.

► **INTERPRETATION C** This is a description of Oranmiyan's decision and its consequences written down in 1970, from an oral account given by Chief Egharevba.

Oranmiyan had lived in Benin for only a few years when he discovered that the country was 'a land of vexation [frustration]' and that 'only a child born, trained and educated in the art and mysteries of the land could reign over the people'. Accordingly he had his son Eweka, born to him in Benin... to be installed as oba in his place, while he himself left Benin for Ife. Throughout his residence in Benin, and during the reign of his son Eweka as well as those of his two successors, there was no resistance against the establishment of a [foreign family to rule.]

Metal casting

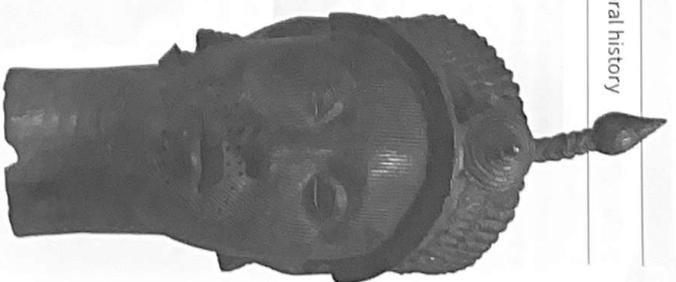
The royal family in Ife had a passion for sculptures made from metal. When Oranmiyan arrived in Benin, he brought the sophisticated art of metal casting with him. Craftspersons in Benin became skilled in making sculptures from brass and bronze that celebrated the oba's achievements, demonstrated the kingdom's wealth, and helped future generations remember their history.

Key Words

oba oral history

► SOURCE D

An almost life-sized sculpture of a head, made from brass. It was made in Ife in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, and is believed to be a likeness of a member of Ife's royal family.



Later on...

1897

In 1897, the British invaded Benin City and stole thousands of sculptures made from brass and bronze, including **Source D** which is now displayed in the British Museum in London. There is currently a debate about whether the sculptures should be returned to Nigeria, and a museum is being built there to house them.

Over to You

- 1 Write a sentence or two to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of each of the following people:
 - a Owodo
 - b Evian
 - c Oranmiyan
 - d Eweka I
- 2 Why has Eweka I come to be known as the first true oba of the Kingdom of Benin?
- 3 a Look at **Source D** and describe what you see.
b Why did metal casting become an important part of the culture of the Kingdom of Benin?

3.3 What was so mighty about Benin City?

GROUP 3.3

Benin City was the capital of the Kingdom of Benin, and it was founded over one thousand years ago when farming settlements joined together for protection and for trade. Europeans visiting the city marvelled at what they saw: a well-built and well-organised city, with beautiful architecture and an impressive 16,000 kilometres of walls to protect it from invasion and divide it into administrative districts. What was so mighty about Benin City in the seventeenth century? Why were European visitors surprised when they visited? And what was life like for people living in the city?

Objectives

- Identify the key features of Benin City.
- Investigate European impressions of Benin City.
- Explain what life was like for people living in Benin City in the seventeenth century.

3.3A Mighty Benin City

Oba Ewuare I rebuilt Benin City in the second half of the fifteenth century, after it had been devastated by fighting. By the seventeenth century it was a wealthy city at the heart of a powerful kingdom.

Benin City was home to at least 68 different craft guilds. These were groups of artisans, skilled workers who made the same thing by hand, set prices and established rules to make sure goods were well made. The most famous artisans were the brass casters, who worked with brass and bronze to create the sculptures that have come to be known as the Benin Bronzes. There were also craft guilds for bead makers, ivory carvers, wood carvers and weavers, as well as guilds for cattle keepers, butchers, doctors and acrobats.

The city had 16,000 kilometres of walls. It is estimated that it would have taken the Edo people of the Kingdom of Benin 150 million hours to construct the walls. That's a lot of digging!

Thirty main streets radiated out from the Oba's Palace. These wide streets had underground drainage and grass down the centre for animals to feed on.

INTERPRETATION A An artist's impression of Benin City towards the end of the fifteenth century.

Key Words

craft guilds artisans

Many people lived in villages on the outskirts of Benin City, in houses made from wood, mud and palm leaves.

Benin City was one of the first cities in the world to have street lamps. Installed in the 1500s, they were fuelled by palm oil and helped people travel around the city safely at night.

Fact

The street lamps in Benin City were installed over 200 years before oil lamps were used in Britain and about 300 years before London was lit with street lamps.

The Oba's Palace was right at the centre of Benin City. It was richly decorated, with tall turrets topped with sculptures of birds with outstretched wings.

The city was carefully planned using symmetrical mathematical patterns.

Family houses were divided into three sections. The husband lived in the central part, looking towards the road. The wives, children and young women lived on the left, and the young men lived on the right.

Over to You

- 1 Write three sentences describing your first impressions of Benin City.
- 2 What does the layout of Benin City suggest about the architects that designed and built it?
- 3 Artisans had special status in Benin City. Why do you think this was?

3.3C Life in seventeenth-century Benin City

GROUP 3.4

The oba

The oba was the most powerful person in Benin City. The oba's power came from two sources. He had political power because he was a descendant of Eweka I, the first true oba of the Kingdom of Benin. He led a council of chiefs, who carried out his orders. He also had religious power. The people of Benin worshipped many gods and believed the oba was a descendant of Osanobua, the god who created the world. They also believed he received power from Ollokun, the god of the sea.

This blend of political and religious power meant there were many complex rules and ceremonies regulating contact with the oba in the Kingdom of Benin. The laws detailed who the oba could speak to, how he dressed and when he could leave the palace. Anyone who suggested the oba ate, washed or slept could be punished by death, and everyone, even the oba's closest advisors, had to show him the utmost respect at all times. Historians called these sumptuary laws, and they were common to many royal courts around the world at this time.

▼ SOURCE H An English trader, Captain Thomas Wyrndham, visited Benin City in 1558. Here, he describes how people interacted with the oba.

[W]hen the noblemen are in his [the Oba's] presence, they never look him in the face, but sit cowering... upon their buttocks with their elbows upon their knees and their hands before their faces, not looking up until the king command them... likewise when they depart they turn not their backs toward him but goe creeping backward with like reverence [respect].

Connections

In England throughout much of the seventeenth century, monarchs also believed their power came from God. They believed in an idea called the divine right of kings: monarchs were chosen by God and could not, as a result, be held accountable by anyone on earth including Parliament. This meant they were above the law. For example, King Charles I (reigned 1626–1649) was a committed believer in the divine right of kings. This belief was partly responsible for the English Civil War, which took place between 1642 and 1651.

▼ SOURCE I This plaque is one of the Benin Bronzes stolen from the Oba's Palace by the British in 1897, and it is currently in the British Museum. It shows a procession, with the oba at the centre. Attendants shade the oba from the sun with their shields as a mark of respect.

The oba is bigger than the other figures on the plaque, showing that he is more powerful. He is also wearing rich clothing, including a crown and a collar around his neck. In comparison, his attendants are dressed more plainly.



Religion

The people of the Kingdom of Benin believed in two worlds: the human world and the invisible world of the gods. While the world of the gods was underground, what happened there affected what happened in the human world, and so it was important to pay tribute to the gods regularly. People kept shrines, made offerings, and held religious ceremonies so that the gods helped them and looked after their families. For example, each year warriors would perform an acrobatic dance suspended from trees to honour Ogun, the god of medicine and magic, to protect them during wars. During this ritual, some people were killed as a sacrifice (skeletons have been found that confirm this).

▼ SOURCE J This brass bell was rung during religious ceremonies to summon the gods. Soldiers also wore similar bells around their necks to give them courage, to scare the enemy and to signal victory. It is believed this bell was stolen by the British from the Oba's Palace in 1897, and the Horniman Museum in London has agreed to return ownership of it to Nigeria.



Women in Benin City

We don't know very much about the life of the majority of women in Benin City in the seventeenth century. We do know they were only allowed to join the weavers' guild, spinning yarn or making cloth. We know they were forbidden to touch the metal or tools used by the brass casters. We also know that they most likely spent much of their time looking after their children, husbands and homes. But we don't know very much more.

However, we do know about the lives of a handful of highly respected women who lived in Benin City over the centuries, including Emotan. Emotan worked in a market in Benin City. She didn't have any children of her own, but looked after many orphans and helped them learn a trade. She also played an important role in helping Ewuare I overthrow his brother Oba Uwalifikun and take the throne in 1440. After her death, Oba Ewuare I planted a sacred tree by her grave close to the market. He also ordered everyone who received high honours in the Kingdom of Benin and all funeral processions to visit her grave and pay their respects. The tree lived for over 300 years.

We also know that the oba's mother – the Iyoba – was a powerful advisor, with the same status as a senior chief. She was thought to have magical powers that could be used to control the oba. So, to stop this from happening, she was forbidden from seeing her son after he became oba. Instead, the oba had sculptures on display to remind him of his mother.

INTERPRETATION K

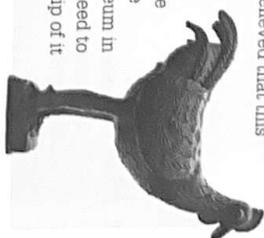
A photograph of the life-sized bronze statue of Emotan that was installed on the site of her grave in 1954. It is still visited as a mark of respect.



Key Word

tribute

▼ SOURCE L A brass sculpture of a cockerel in Benin, statues of cockerels were made to honour an Iyoba when she died. It is believed that this sculpture was stolen by the British from the Oba's Palace in 1897, and the Horniman Museum in London has agreed to return ownership of it to Nigeria.



Later on...

1800s

The Kingdom of Dahomey is another kingdom in West Africa. When French soldiers tried to colonise the kingdom in the nineteenth century, they were faced with resistance like none they had ever known before. The fiercest opposition came from the Agojie, a group of around 6,000 female soldiers. In 2022, a Hollywood film was made about these Dahomey warriors called *The Woman King*.

Over to You

- 1 Where did the oba's power come from?
- 2 Which god did the warriors from the Kingdom of Benin pay tribute to and why?
- 3 a How useful is **Source J** to a historian studying warfare in the Kingdom of Benin?
b Explain how other women were treated in seventeenth-century Benin City.

3.1C The fall of the Kingdom of Benin

The Kingdom of Benin gradually declines
After Oba Eghuagbuda died in around 1606, the Kingdom of Benin gradually decreased in size as more and more of the conquered people within the kingdom sought their independence.

Little is known about the obas of the seventeenth century, because they appear less often in the kingdom's oral accounts and in European written sources. What we do know is that from the 1530s to the early 1700s, Benin chose not to sell enslaved people. Instead, it focused on selling cloth. However, the amount of money European traders were willing to pay for the cloth decreased, and the economy of the Kingdom of Benin consequently struggled.

In the eighteenth century, the obas reversed their decision not to sell enslaved people and, as a result, the Kingdom of Benin's fortunes began to improve. However, the kingdom was never again as wealthy and powerful as it had been in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries under the five warrior obas. European traders in enslaved Africans had now established trading posts along the coast of West Africa and paid less for enslaved people than they had in the past.

INTERPRETATION 1

An extract from *African Kingdoms: A Guide to the Kingdoms of Songhay, Kongo, Benin, Oyo and Dahomey c.1400–c.1800*, written by historian Toby Green in 2015.



The Benin which was conquered by the British military in 1897 had been through many transformations since the rise of the kingdom in the 12th century, the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century, and the Golden Age of the 16th century; its transformations were testament to the power of Edo and its people to innovate new directions in their circumstances, and also to the increasing power of the outside world in its relationship with one of the most important West African kingdoms.

GROUP 3.5

British colonisation of the Kingdom of Benin

As the British Empire grew, so too did its interest in Africa. Britain had been trading with the Kingdom of Benin since the late seventeenth century. The trade in enslaved people had stopped by the early nineteenth century, but Benin continued to trade its many natural resources. Although the British controlled much of the kingdom's coastline by the mid-nineteenth century, Benin continued to have control over trade that took place within its border.

Fact

In Britain, it became illegal to trade in enslaved people after the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was passed in 1807. However, it was many years before all enslaved people in British colonies were freed.

In 1884, leaders from Europe met to discuss how to control Africa. Their meeting is known as the Berlin Conference, and it led to Western powers dividing up Africa. Without any thought about the impact of their actions on the kingdoms, cultures and peoples of Africa, countries like Britain, France and Germany 'scrambled' for territory. They were keen to exploit Africa's natural resources to support their own industrial growth. Officials from the USA were also present, acting as observers and hoping to gain greater international influence.

In 1892, British representatives visited Benin City and claimed they had convinced Oba Ovonoramen to sign a treaty that handed control of the Kingdom of Benin to the British. However, Benin's officials refused to follow the terms of the treaty, angering the British government.

Fact

Africa is rich in natural resources, including gold, diamonds, palm oil, petroleum and rubber.

The looting of Benin City

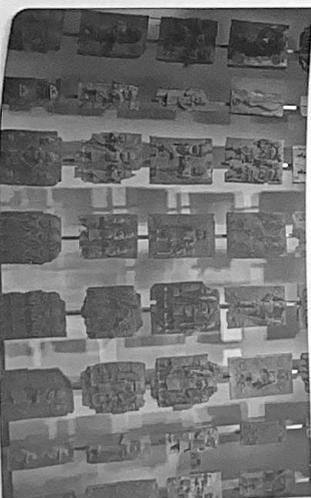
In January 1897, a group of British representatives travelled to Benin City to enforce the treaty they believed was signed in 1892. The people of Benin responded by killing almost everyone.

The British used the attack as justification to invade Benin City in February 1897.

The British overran the Oba's Palace, stole thousands of treasures and set the palace on fire. They also destroyed many places of worship. Oba Ovonoramen was forced to leave, and the Kingdom of Benin is forced to become part of the British Empire.



By the autumn of 1897, a lot of the stolen objects were on display in the British Museum in London, where many remain to this day. Others were given as gifts to Queen Victoria.



Later on...

TODAY

Some of the original walls of Benin City, built in the fifteenth century, can still be seen today. The Oba's Palace was rebuilt after the British burned it to the ground, and you can also visit it today. The city still has a vibrant network of craftspeople working with brass and bronze. The current oba – Eware II – also has an important and powerful role in Nigerian politics.

Over to You

1 a Review the story of the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Benin on pages 54–59. Then copy and complete the following line graph, plotting significant events in the kingdom's history. Think about moments when the kingdom was strong and successful, and moments when the kingdom was weak and about to collapse.



b Using your graph, decide when you think the Kingdom of Benin was at its strongest. Write a paragraph to explain your decision.

Causation

- Make notes on how each of the following led to the fall of the Kingdom of Benin:
 - the Kingdom of Benin's involvement in the trade in enslaved people from the sixteenth century
 - the Berlin Conference
 - the British invasion of Benin City
- Write a narrative account analysing the key events that led to the fall of the Kingdom of Benin.