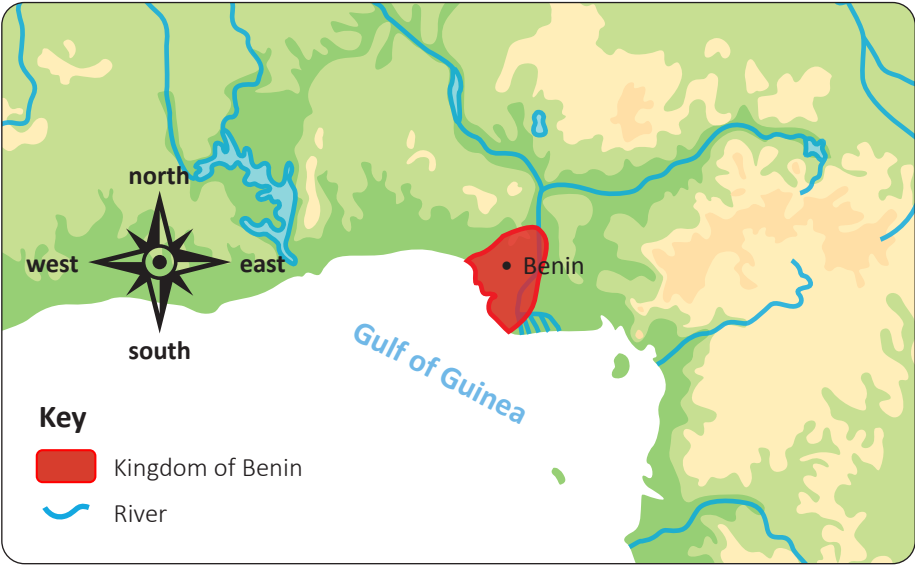


Kingdom of Benin

Introduction

The ancient Kingdom of Benin existed on the coast of West Africa from the AD 900–1897. Most people lived in Benin City, which was surrounded by villages, farms and rainforests. It was similar to an ancient Greek city state.



Evidence of Benin

No evidence of written language exists. Archaeologists and historians have learned about Benin’s history through artefacts, traditional stories passed down by word of mouth and written accounts from European traders who travelled to Benin.

Founding of Benin AD 900–1300

The Edo people moved into the rainforests of western Africa in cAD 900. They lived in small settlements governed by an elder, but the settlements joined together over time and became the Igodomigodo Kingdom. The people of Igodomigodo worked as farmers and craftspeople to make goods that could be traded with other kingdoms. Kings called *ogisos* ruled and were worshipped as gods. However, in 1100, the Edo people banished the last *ogiso*, Owodo, for misrule and asked the neighbouring kingdom, Ife, to lead them. The King of Ife sent his son, Prince Oranmiyan, to restore peace to the Edo people. The Kingdom of Benin was founded, and Prince Oranmiyan’s son, Eweka, became the first *oba* (king).

Benin creation myth

The Edo people passed down myths about the founding of Benin from generation to generation.

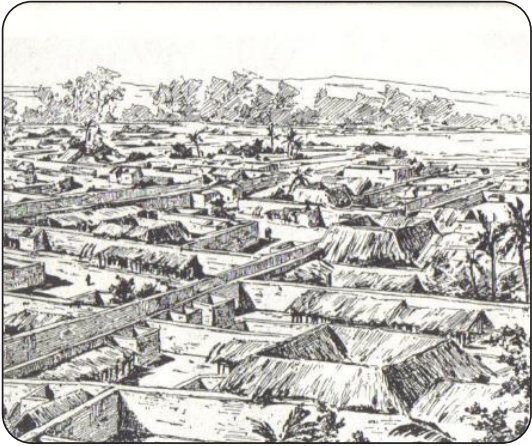
One myth states that the great god, Osanobua, sent his four sons to rule different parts of the Earth. Before they left heaven, each son took a gift. One took wealth, another took knowledge, and the third took wisdom. Nothing was left for the fourth son, but a tropical bird encouraged him to take an old snail shell filled with sand. When the sons reached Earth, they found water and sky but no land. The fourth son knew what to do. He poured the sand out of the snail shell onto the water, and dry land formed where people could live. Osanobua was so impressed he made his fourth son the *oba* of Benin. From then on, the *obas* of Benin were treated like gods because people believed they were descended from Osanobua.



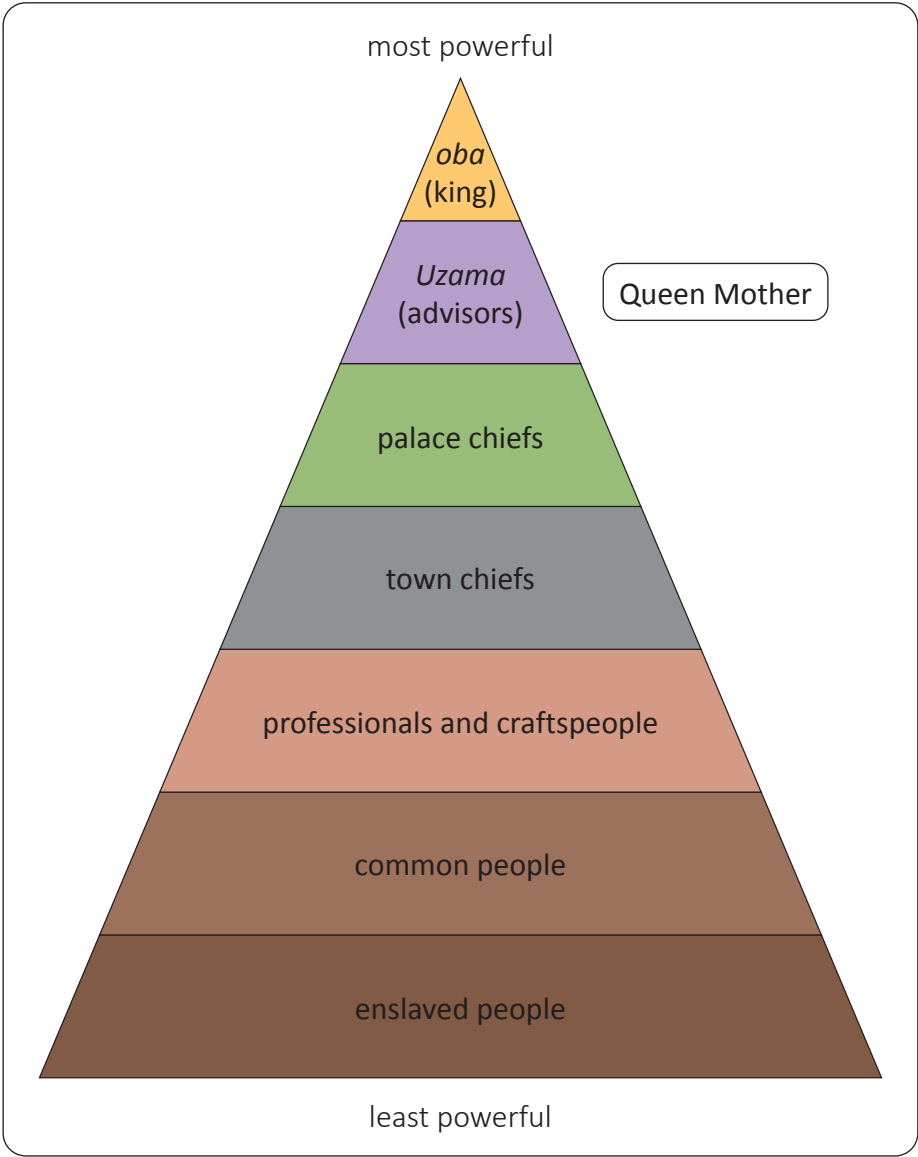
Benin City

During the 1400s, Benin City grew and was fortified with moats, massive earth walls and wooden gates protected by soldiers and magic charms. The king’s court was in the centre, and wide, straight roads radiated out at right angles.

A Portuguese ship’s captain called Lourenco Pinto described Benin City in 1691: ‘Great Benin, where the king resides, is larger than Lisbon (the capital city of Portugal); all the streets run straight and as far as the eye can see. The houses are large, especially that of the king, which is richly decorated and has fine columns. The city is wealthy and industrious. It is so well governed that theft is unknown, and the people live in such security that they have no doors to their houses.’



Hierarchy



Obas

The *oba* owned the whole kingdom and lived in a palace surrounded by hundreds of men and women who looked after him and his family. The palace contained elaborate towers topped with sculptures of birds, and huge brass pythons protected the palace and scared away intruders. The *oba* led religious ceremonies and decided when to go to war. He even rode into battle. He was revered by his people and treated as a god. No one was allowed to look directly at him without his permission, and people had to approach him on their knees. The Queen Mother was very important to the *oba* and gave him political advice. Her status was equal to the *Uzama* and she had her own residence and staff. During the nine-day *Igue* festival, the *oba*’s powers were renewed, and he blessed the people while parading through the streets with leopards and musicians.

Trade

The growth and success of Benin grew from its trade. As the kingdom was on the coast, traders came to Benin on boats from across the seas, including Europeans. The first European traders arrived in the 15th century. They bought spices, such as peppercorns, and the *oba* allowed them to purchase ivory tourist souvenirs, such as this carved salt cellar depicting Portuguese traders.

Benin gained great wealth and power through its trade with European powers, especially Portugal. The Portuguese wanted artwork, gold, ivory and pepper from Benin. They also traded for enslaved Africans. In return, Benin obtained metals, such as iron, bronze, copper and brass. They also obtained jewellery, guns and other weapons. Benin's traders travelled inland to trade these foreign goods with other African civilisations.



Everyday life

Everyone in the Kingdom of Benin had roles depending on their age and gender. Girls ran errands for their mothers and learned the skills needed to run the household; boys maintained and repaired village structures. Men worked a trade or profession and protected the village; women carried out the household chores of cooking, cleaning, weaving and farming. Some women worked as royal attendants. Married women ensured their households ran smoothly, and older men became the village elders.



ivory female figure representing one of the royal attendants

Religion

The people of Benin held many beliefs about gods and goddesses, humans, spirits and animals. They worshipped many gods and goddesses, who they believed controlled their world, including Osun (the goddess of medicine and magic), Olokun (the god of wealth) and Osanobua (the god who created the world). They told stories about their gods and goddesses and held religious ceremonies to honour them.

Ancestors

When someone died, they were buried in their courtyard, and an altar was built where offerings were made. People believed that a person's spirit lived in their head, so they made memorial heads of deceased family members to keep them close.

In the palace, the *obas'* altars held brass memorial heads, ivory elephant tusks to symbolise immortality, rattle staffs that were shaken to show respect and bells to scare away evil spirits and summon good ones. Stone axes represented the *obas'* magical powers.

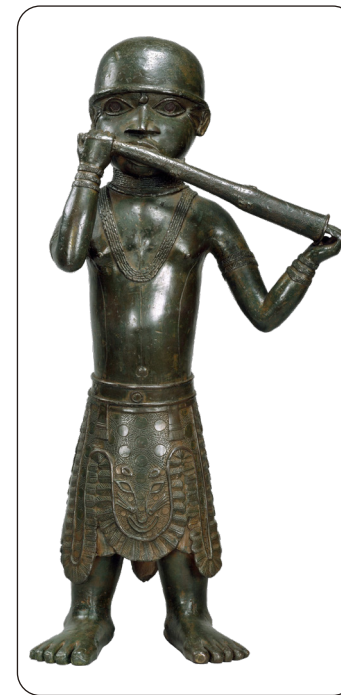


two ancestral altars in the *oba's* palace

Art

Benin Kingdom was well-known for its artisans. During the early years of Benin, a guild system was developed. Guilds were groups of craftspeople who specialised in the same craft. Benin City had more than 40 different guilds. There were guilds for physicians, diviners, ironsmiths, brass casters, carvers, carpenters and clothmakers. All the members of each guild lived and worked in the same area of the city.

The most impressive guilds were those of the brass casters and ivory carvers. Brass was such a precious material to Benin's people, who believed that it could drive away evil, that it was only allowed in the *oba's* royal court. Ivory objects symbolised purity and immortality, which were also reserved for the *oba*. His palace was filled with thousands of ivory sculptures and brass plaques. These pieces are still treasured today and displayed in different museums around the world. They are known as the 'Benin Bronzes.'



Benin bronze horn player

Rituals

Crops, cows, goats and chickens were sacrificed to create harmony between the spirit world and the real world. Human sacrifice was rare but was carried out to protect the whole kingdom. The people sacrificed were criminals, enslaved people or prisoners of war.



brass plaque showing the *oba's* butchers sacrificing a cow

Decline

During the 1800s, members of the royal family fought one another for power and control over the kingdom. Their disputes led to civil wars, which caused the kingdom's wealth and influence over other West African lands to decline.

At this time, European countries were racing to colonise parts of Africa in the 'Scramble for Africa.' European countries had seen the natural resources available in Africa and wanted to bring them under their control.

In 1897, while the royal family of Benin was fighting amongst themselves, Britain invaded. An army of thousands of British soldiers took all the royal treasures from Benin City then burned it to the ground. The Kingdom of Benin became part of the British Empire and the treasures were sold into private collections or to museums around the world, where many remain today. The site of the Kingdom of Benin is now part of modern-day Nigeria.



members of the British Army surrounded by Benin treasures, 1897