

Ellie's Benin Kingdom Investigation

Learning objective: To understand the social structure, trade, and artistic achievements of the Kingdom of Benin (c. 900–1897).

Ellie the elephant has travelled back in time to the bustling city of Benin. She has gathered historical clues but needs your help to categorize them. Look at the items in the word bank and sort them into two columns: 'Daily Life and Trade' or 'The Oba and Art'. Once sorted, answer the investigation questions to demonstrate your deeper understanding of this sophisticated West African civilisation.

Word bank: Brass plaques · Cowrie shells · The Oba (King) · Pepper and palm oil · Intricate ivory carvings · Bronze casting guilds · Marketplace trade · Royal palace

1. Explain why the Oba was considered the most important person in Benin society. How did his role influence the art created by the guilds? (3 marks)

2. Compare and contrast the use of cowrie shells in Benin with the use of coins in modern Britain. Why was a standard currency important for trade? (3 marks)

3. The people of Benin were master metalworkers. Justify why the creation of brass plaques was a significant way to 'record' history, even without written books. (3 marks)

4. What might happen if the trade routes for pepper and ivory were suddenly blocked? How would this affect the wealth of the kingdom? (2 marks)

5. Evaluate the importance of the bronze casting guilds. Why did the Oba provide them with special status in the city? (2 marks)

6. If you were an archaeologist discovering a Benin brass plaque today, what specific details would you look for to learn about the society of that time? (2 marks)

Draw: Draw a scene of a busy market in the Benin Kingdom. Include a trader holding a bag of cowrie shells and an artist displaying a finished brass plaque. Remember to show the tall, defensive walls of the city in the background.



Extension challenge: Imagine you are a royal messenger in the Kingdom of Benin. Write a short journal entry (100 words) describing the sights, sounds, and smells of the Oba's palace courtyard. Use rich, descriptive language to bring the history to life!