

The Splendour of the Benin Kingdom

Learning objective: To understand the significance, trade, and artistic achievements of the Kingdom of Benin in West Africa.

Read the text carefully with Ellie the elephant, who loves uncovering the secrets of the past. Use the information provided to answer the questions below.

The Kingdom of Benin, located in modern-day Nigeria, was a remarkably prosperous West African civilisation that thrived from the 13th to the 19th century. At the heart of the kingdom was the capital city, also called Benin, which was renowned for its intricate network of earthen walls and moats. The society was governed by a powerful ruler known as the Oba, who lived in a grand palace decorated with magnificent bronze plaques. These plaques were not merely decorative; they acted as a historical record, documenting royal ceremonies, military victories, and daily life. The people of Benin were master metalworkers, highly skilled in the lost-wax casting technique. Beyond their artistry, the kingdom was a significant centre for trade. They exchanged valuable goods such as ivory, textiles, and pepper for items from across the seas. Their sophisticated administrative systems and organised craft guilds demonstrate that the Kingdom of Benin was a place of immense order, wealth, and cultural brilliance, long before colonial powers arrived in the region.

Word bank: Oba · bronze · craftsmanship · prosperous · civilisation · archaeological · trade

1. What are two specific items that the people of the Benin Kingdom traded with others? (Literal) (2 marks)

2. According to the text, what was the primary purpose of the bronze plaques found in the Oba's palace? (Literal) (2 marks)

3. Why might historians consider the existence of 'organised craft guilds' as evidence of a sophisticated society? (Inferential) (3 marks)

4. The text describes the city as having an 'intricate network of earthen walls and moats'. What does this suggest about the priorities of the Benin people regarding their city's safety? (Inferential) (3 marks)

5. Explain why you think the art produced by the Benin Kingdom is considered an important 'historical record'. Justify your answer using evidence from the text. (Evaluative) (4 marks)

Draw: Draw a detailed, artistic bronze plaque depicting a scene from daily life in the Kingdom of Benin, including patterns and figures as described in the text.



Extension challenge: Compare and contrast the Kingdom of Benin with another ancient civilisation you have studied. Justify your answer by identifying one key similarity and one key difference in their social structure or trade practices. What might happen to our understanding of history if these bronze plaques had never been created?