

The Kingdom of Benin: Power, Art, and Trade

Learning objective: To analyse the significance of the Kingdom of Benin, evaluating its sophisticated societal structure, artistic achievements, and the nature of its trade relationships during the 13th to 19th centuries.

Use your knowledge of West African history to answer the questions below. Think carefully about the evidence historians use to understand this powerful civilisation.

Ellie the elephant has been researching the Kingdom of Benin, a powerful forest state in modern-day Nigeria. Famous for its intricate bronze plaques, massive defensive walls, and the leadership of the Oba, the kingdom was a hub of global trade and artistic innovation. Ellie wants to know how you would interpret the legacy of this remarkable society.

Word bank: Oba · Benin City · Bronze · Craftsmen · Trade · Guilds · Earthworks · Coral

1. The Oba was the political and spiritual leader of Benin. Explain why the control of trade, particularly in ivory and pepper, was essential for maintaining the Oba's power and influence. (2 marks)

2. The Benin Bronzes are not just decorative; they are historical records. Justify why historians view these artworks as a 'library' of information regarding the kingdom's social hierarchy. (3 marks)

3. Compare and contrast the defensive strategies of the Kingdom of Benin (such as the Iya earthworks) with other civilisations you have studied. Why were these structures significant for the city's growth? (3 marks)

4. What might have happened to the social structure of Benin if the specialised craft guilds had been unable to secure the raw materials needed for their bronze casting? (2 marks)

5. Describe the relationship between the Kingdom of Benin and European traders. How did this exchange of goods, such as coral and textiles, alter the visual identity of the royal court? (2 marks)

Draw: Sketch a scene showing a bustling market in 16th-century Benin City. Include details of the architectural style and the items being traded, such as textiles, beads, or bronze goods.



Extension challenge: Imagine you are an explorer arriving at the gates of Benin City in the 1500s. Write a diary entry describing your initial impressions of the city's scale, the organisation of the streets, and the prestige of the Oba's palace. Use at least five words from the word bank.