The Kingdom of Benin: A Legacy of Art and Power

Learning objective: To understand the social structure and cultural achievements of the Kingdom of Benin.

Read the passage carefully, then answer the questions below to test your understanding of this historical civilisation.

Ellie the elephant loves uncovering the secrets of the past, and one of her favourite places to explore is the history of the Kingdom of Benin. Located in modern-day Nigeria, the Kingdom of Benin was a powerful West African state that flourished for centuries. At the heart of the kingdom was the Oba, the king, who was seen as a divine leader. The capital city was a marvel of planning, protected by massive earthworks and walls that stretched for miles. Inside, the Oba's palace was decorated with intricate brass and bronze plaques that recorded the history of the royal family and the kingdom's victories. These plaques were created by highly skilled craftsmen who held a special place in society. The kingdom grew wealthy through trade, exchanging goods like textiles and ivory for items from across the seas. Unlike some empires, Benin was known for its organised government and its ability to manage resources effectively. Today, the art produced by the Benin people is recognised globally for its beauty and technical skill, serving as a permanent record of a sophisticated and thriving society.

Word bank: Oba · bronze · craftsmen · civilisation · tribute · earthworks

1. According to the text, who was the divine leader at the heart of the Kingdom of Benin? (1 mark)

2. What materials were used to create the plaques that decorated the palace walls? (1 mark)

3. Why do you think the people of Benin built massive earthworks and walls around their capital city? (2 marks)

4. What does the existence of highly skilled craftsmen tell us about the society in Benin? (2 marks)

5. Why is it important for historians to study the bronze plaques found in the Kingdom of Benin? Justify your answer. (3 marks)

Draw: Draw a scene from the Kingdom of Benin, showing the grand palace walls and a craftsman working on a detailed brass plaque.

Extension challenge: Research the 'Benin Bronzes' and write a short paragraph explaining why they are considered significant historical artefacts today.