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The Kingdom of Benin

The Kingdom of Benin prospered from the 1200s to the 1800s C.E. in western Africa, in what is now Nigeria.

GRADES

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Bas-relief of an Oba

Once rulers, oba still hold prestigious positions in Benin as government advisors. Here, a bas-relief of an Oba in ceremonial dress and weapons, which decorated the palace of the obas.

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ENCYCLOPEDIC ENTRY VOCABULARY

The historical kingdom of Benin was established in the forested region of West Africa in the 1200s C.E. According to history, the Edo people of southern Nigeria founded Benin. They no longer wanted to be ruled by their kings, known as the *ogisos*. They asked a prince from Ife, an important West African kingdom, to take control. The first oba, or king, in Benin was Eweka. He was the son of the prince from Ife.

The kingdom reached its greatest power and size under Oba Ewuare the Great. He expanded the kingdom and improved the capital, present-day Benin City; the city was defined by massive walls. The height of power for Benin's monarchs began during this period. To honor the powerful *obas*, the people of Benin participated in many rituals that expressed their devotion and loyalty, including human sacrifices.

Artists of the Benin Kingdom were well known for working in many materials, particularly brass, wood, and ivory. They were famous for their bas-relief sculptures, particularly plaques, and life-size head sculptures. The plaques typically portrayed historical events, and the heads were often naturalistic and life size. Artisans also carved many different ivory objects, including masks and, for their European trade partners, salt cellars.

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The success of Benin was fueled by its lively trade. Tradesmen and artisans from Benin developed relationships with the Portuguese, who sought after the kingdom's artwork, gold, ivory, and pepper. In the early modern era, Benin was also heavily involved in the West African slave trade. They would capture men, women, and children from rival peoples and sell them into slavery to European and American buyers. This trade provided a significant source of wealth for the kingdom.



Benin began to lose power during the 1800s, as royal family members fought for power and control of the throne. Civil wars broke out, dealing a significant blow to both Benin's administration as well as its economy. In its weakened state, Benin struggled to resist foreign interference in its trading network, particularly by the British. A desire for control over West African trade and territory ultimately led to a British invasion of Benin in 1897. Benin City was burned by the British, who then made the kingdom part of British Nigeria (which became Nigeria after the country gained independence in 1960). After that time, the kingdom no longer played a governing role in West Africa. However, even today, the *oba* still serves in Benin City as a government advisor.

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