

Benin: an African kingdom





Ivory Salt cellar showing European traders and their ship
Benin, Nigeria
17th century AD

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Objects from the Royal Palace

Until the late 19th century, one of the major powers in West Africa was the kingdom of Benin in what is now southwest Nigeria. When European merchant ships began to visit West Africa from the 15th century onwards, Benin came to control the trade between the inland peoples and the Europeans on the coast. When the British tried to expand their own trade in the 19th century, the Benin people killed their envoys. So in 1897 the British sent an armed expedition which captured the king of Benin, destroyed his palace and took away large quantities of sculpture and regalia, including works in wood, ivory and especially brass.

Some of these things came from royal altars for the king's ancestors, but among them were a large number of cast brass plaques made to decorate the wooden pillars of the palace. These had been left in the palace storerooms while part of the palace was being rebuilt. As it later emerged, most of them were probably made between about 1550 – 1650, the people and scenes that they show are so many and varied that they give a vivid picture of the court and kingdom of that time.

Many of the plaques and other objects from Benin city were taken to Europe, where a large number of them were later given to or bought by The British Museum. When the son of the deposed king revived the Benin monarchy in 1914, now under British rule, he did his best to restore the palace and continue the ancient traditions of the Benin monarchy. Because these traditions are followed in the modern city of Benin, it is still possible to recognise many of the scenes cast in brass by Benin artists about five hundred years ago.

As decorations for the halls of the king's palace, the plaques were designed to proclaim and glorify the prestige of the king, his status and achievements, so they give an informative but very one-sided view of the kingdom of Benin. They do not show how the ordinary people lived in the villages outside the city as farmers, growing their yams and vegetables in gardens cleared from the tropical forest. Nor do they show how most of the townspeople lived, employed in crafts such as the making of the brass plaques themselves. And most striking of all, there are no women or children shown in the plaques, which means that more than half of the people of the king's court are not shown.

The image of the Oba (king of Benin) appears on many plaques. To understand these images we need to know about royal regalia and the role of the king in Benin society. The Oba is shown wearing a crown and tunic woven of red coral beads, which only the king and some of his supporters could wear. The coral for these beads was rare and valuable, traded from as far away as the Mediterranean. It is an appropriate symbol for the king because the prosperity of Benin city and the power of its kings depended largely on long-distance trade.

Long before Europeans began to sail their ships around the West African coasts, goods were being carried from the shores of the Mediterranean across the Sahara to the great trading centres of the West African savannas, such as Timbuktu, and onwards into forest regions such as Benin. Travelling the other way, the most valuable product of West Africa which reached Europe and Asia during the Middle Ages was gold. This was mined in the regions far to the west of Benin, but it was the search for the source of this wealth which first encouraged the Europeans to sail south and east around the West African coasts. In trying to find a way around the Sahara trade routes which the Africans controlled, the Portuguese arrived in the coastal territories of Benin in 1489. Thus began regular contact between the two countries which lasted 400 years.

Many of the brass plaques from the king's palace show images of Portuguese men and they seem to have been made during the 16th and 17th centuries as their costumes show. Although Benin had no gold to offer, they supplied the Portuguese with pepper, ivory, leopard skins and people, who were taken as slaves to work elsewhere in Africa and in the Portuguese colonies in Brazil. Many of these people were captives taken in the wars in which the Benin people conquered their neighbours far and wide and made them part of the kingdom, or they were sent by the conquered local chiefs as tribute to the king.

In fact, the trade with the Portuguese probably encouraged the growth of brass casting in Benin at this time. Although West Africans invented the smelting of copper and zinc ores and the casting of brass at least as long ago as the 10th century, they themselves did not produce enough metal to supply the casting industry of Benin city, which gave such splendour to the king's palace. The Portuguese found a ready market for brass ingots, often made in the form of bracelets called 'manillas'.

These were made in the Low Countries (modern Holland), traded throughout West Africa as a kind of currency, and melted down by the brass workers of Benin.



Brass manilla (bracelet)
Europe
probably 19th century AD

The figure above shows a Portuguese soldier. He wears a typical 16th century European costume, with steel helmet and sword, and he carries a flintlock gun. Guns were new to the people of West Africa when the Portuguese arrived. So Africans traded them from Europeans and learnt to make them for themselves, to help them in their wars against other peoples who still only had hand weapons or bows and arrows. Sometimes the king of Benin even employed Portuguese soldiers, like this man, to fight as mercenaries in his wars.



Brass figure of a Portuguese soldier holding a musket
Benin, Nigeria
17th century AD

One reason why the rulers of Benin conquered their neighbours was to control the supply of goods which could be traded to the Europeans on the coast. The king himself was in charge of trading slaves, ivory and other important goods, so that all the profit went to support his court and government. Other merchants could only trade with the king's permission. The Europeans themselves were seldom allowed to travel inland or visit Benin city, to avoid them trading without the authority of the king.

The plaques show how the people of Benin perceived the Portuguese traders and their soldiers, with their pointed noses, thin faces and beards and strange clothes. Their presence on the decorations of the king's palace shows how the Portuguese were regarded as symbols of the king's wealth and power, to which their trade contributed so much.



Brass plaque of a European
Benin, Nigeria
16th century AD

Overseas trade was one reason why the king's power was associated with

water, the ocean and the river trade routes by which the European goods came to Benin. It is said that an ancient king of Benin once defeated the sea-god Olokun in a wrestling match on the beach and took from him the coral which the kings have used for their regalia ever since. Mudfish are often shown on plaques because they hop in and out of the water in the coastal mangrove swamps, and are at home on land as well as in the sea, in the same way that the king has authority over both domains.

An other important symbol on plaques are leopards. These show that the king is also master of the tropical forest which covered most of Benin until recent times. The leopard is king of the forest, just as the Oba of Benin is king of the city and villages where his people live. The king used to keep leopards, which were paraded on important occasions like mascots, and he sometimes killed them as sacrifices to his gods. The figure below shows one of the King's hunters, whose work was to capture live leopards for him.

So when we see various animals on plaques, they are there for more than just decoration. Throughout West Africa people tell stories and proverbs about all kinds of creatures, wild and domestic, and many of them have characters which reveal important human qualities, in these cases usually those of the king. So crocodiles, the 'policeman of the waters', when shown on a plaque probably stand for the king's authority to punish wrongdoers, whilst the python was the king of snakes, and the messenger of the god Olokun.



Bronze figure of a huntsman
Lower Niger, Nigeria
16th-18th century AD

To take another example, a certain bird, a kind of fish eagle, is said to prophesy the future, predicting good or bad fortune, depending on its cry. The story goes that it once warned the Benin king Esige not to go ahead with a war against the Ibo people. The king ignored the warning and defeated the Ibo in battle, thus proving that he was powerful enough to overcome the prophecy.

When Esige returned from the battle in triumph, one of his attendants carried a staff with a model of the bird, which was struck to show what the king thought of its prophecies. Thus the bird of the prophecy shows that the king is above the normal dangers of bad omens.



Brass plaque of the Oba holding leopards and wearing a mud-fish belt
Benin, Nigeria
16th century AD

The king was the most important person in the government of the kingdom, and treated by his subjects with great respect according to complicated rules. But his power depended on many other chiefs and officials who governed the city and the surrounding villages.

In the city itself there were two kinds of chiefs. The palace chiefs, like the king himself, inherited their positions as the senior representatives of their clans. The town chiefs are responsible for the administration of the provinces of the kingdom and were appointed in recognition of their personal abilities and achievements.

They represented their people rather than the interests of the king. When town chiefs were shown on plaques they could be identified by their ceremonial costume of pangolin scales. The pangolin (or 'scaly anteater') is the only animal which is invulnerable to the king of the forest, the leopard, because it can roll itself up into a scaly ball. That is why the leopard hunters wear pangolin-skin helmets, and the town chiefs wear tunics of cloth 'scales' to show that they are protected from being dominated by the king. Another key figure in the royal court was the mother of the Oba.

Queen Idia, mother of Oba Esigie, king of Benin from the late fifteenth to the early sixteenth century, played a key role in her son's military campaigns against the Igala people, which may have been over control of the Niger waterway. Benin finally won these wars and made the Igala king a vassal of the Oba.

A brass head representing Queen Idia was made to be placed in her altar following her death. It is said that Oba Esigie instituted the title of Queen Mother and established the tradition of casting heads of this type in honour of her military and ritual powers. Such heads were placed in altars in the palace and in the Queen Mother's residence.



Commemorative head of a Queen Mother
Benin, Nigeria
early 16th century AD

Sacrifices were only a part of a yearly cycle of public ceremonies held in and around the palace, which involved people at all levels of the kingdom. The ceremonies followed the working year, ensuring success in the farming from clearing the forest to harvest, but they also celebrated and strengthened the power of the king and the good order of the kingdom.

A great number of people played their own parts in the ritual pageantry, as chiefs and officials, craft guilds or representatives of local communities. Even more were involved as craftworkers producing splendid costumes and ritual paraphernalia for the king and chiefs, like those shown in many of the plaques, or as farmers supplying food for the feasts. Many of the plaques probably represent events or characters from these annual ceremonies, some of which the king of Benin still carries out today.

The one below seems to show a procession, with a king or chief flanked by attendants who shade him from the sun with their shields. They are dressed in fine cloth worked in elaborate patterns, whose colourful appearance we can only now imagine. Smaller figures, whose size as well as their scanty clothing shows their lesser importance, carry a ceremonial sword and the kind of circular box used to present gifts. But, as with so many of the Benin plaques, exactly what this scene was meant to show is now difficult to interpret.



Brass plaque showing the Oba of Benin with attendants
Benin, Nigeria
16th century AD

Finally, we can take a look at the king's palace itself. In the 16th Century, when the Portuguese first came to Benin city, they were greatly impressed by its size and grandeur, which compared well with any city in Portugal at the time. They were particularly surprised at the size of the palace, which comprised about a third of the whole city.

An 18th century Dutch engraving, based on eyewitness accounts, helps us to understand the plaque shown below. In the middle is one of the tall towers on the wood-shingled palace roof, decorated with a gigantic brass python. Above the snake are the feet of a bird and although the rest of the bird has been broken off we know from the Dutch engraving that it stood with out-stretched wings on the top of the tower, looking rather like the bird of prophecy.

The posts upholding the roof are decorated with miniature copies of brass plaques like the ones illustrated in this leaflet. At the base of the posts, on what may be steps into the building or perhaps an altar, are two leopards, probably representing the brass or ivory models of leopards which adorned the palace.



The men standing in front of the building include two armed soldiers, no doubt palace servants who also formed part of the king's army. The young men next to them would be pages, possibly the sons of provincial chiefs sent to serve the king. They were only allowed to dress in the kind of clothes and regalia worn by other palace officials when they were fully initiated as adults.

Plaque showing figures in front of the Oba's palace Benin, Nigeria early 16th century AD

Benin at the British Museum

The pictures in this leaflet show just a small selection of the hundreds of objects from Benin now in the British Museum and other museums around the world. The British Museum Sainsbury Africa Gallery, gallery 25, includes artefacts from Benin with more than 60 of the brass plaques on display in the gallery.

For further information on The British Museum schools education programme please visit the learning section of our website at www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk