

THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The wealth of Africa The kingdom of Benin

Teachers' notes



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THE WEALTH OF AFRICA: USING THESE RESOURCES

This educational resource consists of 16 sets of resources on African civilisations.

Each set of resources includes:

- Teachers' notes
- Students' worksheets
- A presentation

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Teachers' notes

These are intended to provide background material for teachers, but can also be referred to by students who want more contextual information.

Students' worksheets

These are stand-alone worksheets which can be downloaded as classroom resources or viewed on the interactive whiteboard. They are self-contained, with tasks and questions and a limited number of sources in which the language has been slightly amended to make them more accessible to the likely reading ages of the students. They are also designed to be used independently of the teacher, e.g. for homework.

If teachers do not wish to spend more than one or two lessons on Benin, then the sheets will prove ideal for small project work, with groups of students taking one sheet, finding interesting and relevant information, and reporting back to the rest of the class. A specimen lesson plan along these lines is given below.

Presentation

This provides a simpler and more visual introduction to the civilisation. It contains some of the images and sources found in the other sections, and can be shown on the whiteboard or used at home to give an overview of the main topics covered.

Your feedback

Please help the British Museum improve its educational resources for schools and teachers by giving your feedback. The first 250 teachers or tutors to complete the online survey before 12.00 on 1 September 2011 will receive a printed set of illustrations of African civilisations by artist Tayo Fatunla. Visit www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica to complete the survey and for terms and conditions.

LESSON SCHEME: THE KINGDOM OF BENIN IN AN HOUR

Aim

To decide how advanced the Benin civilisation was.

Starter: Impressions of the kingdom of Benin

Scroll quickly through the images on the Young in the presentation, and get feedback from students on their first impressions, especially on how advanced they consider the civilisation to have been. (10 minutes)

Research

Divide the class into groups with one group per resource sheet. Each group has to look at the question at the top of the sheet, and decide on the answer by studying the sources. The group should note 5–10 relevant facts that it can feed back to the rest of the class as evidence of its answer. (20 minutes)

Feedback

Each group feeds back its findings, opinion and evidence to the rest of the class, who could take notes. (15 minutes)

Discussion

The central question of 'advanced' can be debated; i.e. which aspects reveal the kingdom of Benin to have been a developed civilisation; etc. (15 minutes)

Homework

e.g. The ambassador for the kingdom of Benin defends his country – pick and explain five details that show how advanced kingdom of Benin was at this time, or look at the presentation, if not already done in class, or do further research into one of the topics to find more information.

THE KINGDOM OF BENIN, c. 1440–1700: TEACHERS' NOTES

Introduction

The kingdom of Benin was well known to European traders and merchants during the 16th and 17th centuries, when it became wealthy partly due to trading in slaves. The relationship between Benin and the European traders on the coast changed during the 18th and 19th centuries, as European governments increased their control of areas of the coast. In 1897, a British punitive expedition invaded Benin City to avenge the murder of a British consul. They reported being met by the sight of dozens of human sacrifices, and blood strewn over the palace of the ruler, the Oba. The booty from the attack on Benin included carved ivory tusks, coral jewellery and hundreds of bronze statues and plaques. Many of these objects were auctioned off to cover the costs of the expedition. The plaques were most sought after and were bought by museums across Europe and America – you can see the plaques at the British Museum, in Chicago, Vienna, Paris and a large collection can be viewed in Berlin.

The arrival and the reception of the bronze plaques caused a sensation in Europe. Scholars struggled to understand how African craftsmen could have made such works of art, putting forward some wild theories to explain them. Quickly, however, research showed that the Benin bronzes were entirely West African creations without European influence, and they transformed European understanding of African history.

Why study the kingdom of Benin?

To research and understand a society that produced such stunning works of art is perhaps reason enough for studying the kingdom of Benin, as is consideration of the contradiction between such creativity on the one hand, and the practice of human sacrifice, the acquisition and selling of human captives, and the exceptionally warlike inclinations of the kingdom on the other.

For schools following Key Stage 3 History in the English National Curriculum, this section could be a case study to complement study of the slave trade. To get an idea of what an African state was like at the time of the slave trade will help to challenge preconceptions about Africa in the 16th–18th centuries. It is also significant because contact with the Europeans seems to have affected the kingdom of Benin, increasing its appetite for taking slaves, precipitating its decline.

The kingdom of Benin can be seen both as a society corrupted by the European demand for slaves and one that willingly satisfied this demand as a further and more lucrative outlet for its commercial ambitions. Consideration of this will help pupils realise that those affected by the slave trade were not just the captives themselves, but whole societies.

Geography

Located wholly within what is now Nigeria, the kingdom of Benin at its zenith stretched from Lagos in the west to beyond the River Niger in the east, an area that equates to about a fifth of modern-day Nigeria. Inland from the fertile coastal belt there is tropical forest, beyond which lies a narrow strip of grassland savannah which is suitable for agriculture. A European traveller who visited in the 1720s described the many villages, carefully cultivated fields, and the production of three or four harvests a year (Des Marchais, quoted in Gayibor 1986:16):

Myth

According to the kingdom of Benin's mythology, their land is the cradle of the world which was founded by the first king, the youngest son of Osanobua the Supreme God. When the Supreme God sent his children to the world, the earth was all water and void, and he gave them the option to choose their heart's desires. One of his children chose wealth, one chose knowledge, and another chose medicine or mystical knowledge. The youngest child had nothing apparently to choose and looking around, he saw a snail shell which was found to contain sand. On the instructions of a divine bird, the youngest son upturned the snail shell in an area which became land – the kingdom of Benin. The youngest son became the owner of the land, which made him powerful and wealthy, and on the request of his elder brothers, he had to share portions of it with them for their settlement.

Origins

The history of Benin as a unified kingdom is believed to have begun in the 12th or 13th centuries AD. According to belief, the local Edo chiefs tired of fighting among themselves and decided to invite the Ife chief, Oduduwa, to become their leader. He sent his son, who had a child, Eweka, by the daughter of a local chief. This child became the first king (Oba) of Benin. This tale might, however, hide the fact that Benin was invaded by the kingdom of Ife.

Oba Ewuare

The most famous Oba was Ewuare, who ruled between about 1440 and 1480. Before Ewuare took over there was a state of near anarchy in Benin with conflict between the Oba and the Uzama, the traditional council of chiefs, which even resulted in two of the royal sons being exiled. Ewuare came to power by murdering the Oba, his brother, not an unusual occurrence in a society in which the rules of succession were blurred. He inherited a city which had been partly destroyed in the turmoil, and set about rebuilding it. He increased his own power through a series of reforms designed to weaken the influence of the Uzama.

The Uzama was responsible for choosing the next Oba, so Ewuare established the principle of succession by primogeniture, and underlined the point by making the crown prince an automatic member of the Uzama. He also created new types of chiefs – the palace chiefs and the town chiefs – and ensured that they competed against each other for influence, rather than against him. He finished the huge walls, moats and earthworks that surrounded Benin City, said by some to be 30 feet high and stretch for 1,200km. He also greatly increased the territory of the kingdom, and his son Ozolua carried on his work bringing the empire to its furthest limits.

Though the Oba had full and supreme power, he was still expected to take the advice of the Uzama, and also to consult with both the town and palace chiefs. The Queen Mother was also raised to a position of prominence. She had her own domain and fiefs, and she was the political and spiritual protector of the Oba. In accordance with the power dynamics of the period, she functioned as a member of the town chiefs.

Ewuare allowed his newly created chiefs the right to collect tribute – paid twice-yearly in palm oil, yams and other foodstuffs. He divided Benin City into two areas separated by a wide avenue – on one side the palace, on the other the town. He began the period of the warrior kings in which Benin expanded militarily.

Oba Ozolua

Ozolua ascended the throne around 1483 and was a great warrior king who 'fought many desperate battles and waged war upon war.' Benin tradition still remembers him as an able strategist who 'would sometimes march against the enemy with very few soldiers in order that he might feel the weight and seriousness of the fight.' It is said that each time he prayed, he would always pray to his ancestors to give him war.

Oba Esigie

Ozolua's son Esigie established close links with the Portuguese when they arrived in the 1500s, and it is said he learnt to read and speak their language. He established a royal monopoly over trade with Europeans in pepper and ivory. Yet he kept his distance regarding the Portuguese demands for slaves, forbidding the export of male captives from the kingdom. Nevertheless, he allowed women captives to be exported, and was not averse to making war in order to capture people for later sale. Under Esigie there was a flourishing of arts and crafts, and many of the famous palace bronzes date from his reign.

Decline

Benin began to decline during the 17th century. From about 1600, the Obas stopped leading their troops into battle and became more symbolic figures. Several hundred years later, in the years prior to the British Punitive Expedition in 1897, royal influence in Benin was increasingly under threat from rival forces, both internal and external, who wanted economic power and control of the important trading monopolies. Some scholars say that the insatiable demand of Europeans for slaves caused the Obas to overreach themselves both in terms of external aggression and internal repression, and in the selling of their own people into slavery. Nevertheless, the court and palace remained the political and spiritual centre of the kingdom.

British Punitive Expedition 1897

This episode has to be seen in the context of the spread of British control over the whole of what is now Nigeria at the start of the colonial period – the kingdom of Benin was just one of the targets. The initial problem arose out of the decision by a British consul, Phillips, to visit the Oba with a small armed group, against the advice of the British Governor, other Nigerian chiefs, and repeated warnings, threats and pleas by the Oba himself. Phillips persisted and he and his group were killed. A punitive expedition was then sent, which arrested and deposed the Oba and put an end to five centuries of the kingdom's history, with the British Army looting and destroying the capital city.

Economy

Farming was the main economic activity at village level, and large family units were encouraged to provide an effective labour force. Polygamy was practised, and it may have arisen because of the need to increase the number of hands for farm labour.

All land for farming or residence purposes was communal and held by the Oba on behalf of the people. This probably explains the origin of the payment of tribute by each village to the Oba through his representatives – usually town or palace chiefs. Generally, the payment of tribute was one aspect of the economic support for both the local and central government in the kingdom of Benin. After farming, the manufacture of palm oil was undoubtedly the most important industry.

The production of cloth was widespread, and cotton growing and weaving were practised extensively throughout the kingdom. Samuel Brun, visiting in about 1614, noted that the kingdom of Benin made 'very beautiful cloths, which are exported far and wide and sold'. Weaving was generally done by women in their spare time. Their cloth was not only for personal use, but for long-distance trade with other African societies, thousands of such cloths being shipped annually by the middle of the 17th century. This may have given women greater status in Benin society.

Trade

The kingdom of Benin had had contact with the Mediterranean for at least 1,500 years before the Europeans arrived on the coast of West Africa. The kingdom's commercial and foreign relations were well established. Copper bracelet money (called manillas) as well as cowrie shells and other currencies were used.

These manillas were part of an international trading relationship. They were mass produced in Europe at this time and were sent to Benin in exchange for slaves. These manillas were often melted down and used in the production of bronze and brass goods, including the bronze plaques, and the finished works might then be exported back to Europe.

In 1553, an English merchant, Thomas Wyndham, was received by the Oba, who conducted trading negotiations with him in person, a practice common in the 16th century and confirmed by Portuguese reports. Trade with Europe was considerable. Just one Dutch ship, the *Olyphant*, delivered 88,235 lbs of ivory and 1,337 lbs of pepper from the kingdom of Benin to the Netherlands in 1630.

Enslavement

Enslavement was practised in the kingdom of Benin long before the Europeans arrived. The possession of a large number of slaves was a sign of the social status and prestige of a man or chief in the society. Enslaved people were used as the labour force in the domestic economy, in wars of conquests or expansion, for human sacrifices, and by the Oba in the maintenance and expansion of the guild system. New villages composed entirely of slaves were set up by the Obas and chiefs to increase farming productivity.

During the 16th century, the Obas imposed a ban on the sale of Benin male captives to Europeans, though the ban did not extend to women. Male captives won in conquest could, however, be sold, and this encouraged the warlike tendencies of the kingdom. In the 17th century, the Obas lost the monopoly of the kingdom's trade with Europe, and the chiefs rescinded the ban on selling male captives for the transatlantic trade.

Crafts

The basis of the craft guild system was that each guild was created to supply the needs of the Oba. For instance, the guild of blacksmiths and ironsmiths supplied the weapons of war and other implements, while the guild of bronze-casters and carvers supplied all objects required by the palace. Also practising were the guilds of doctors, leather-workers, drummers, leopard hunters, dancers and carpenters. In return for their services, each guild was given a monopoly in its particular trade or craft.

Copper, which was needed for the making of brass and bronze, had to be imported from mines in central Africa or acquired in trade. Many of the goods that were made were used in the export economy.

Ceremonies

The palace was the focus of public ceremonies which followed the different stages of the farming calendar. These ceremonies had the benefit of confirming the Oba as the focus of affairs of the kingdom, and of celebrating his power and importance in all aspects of daily life.

Many people from different sections of society, including chiefs and officials, craft guilds or representatives of local communities, played a part in the ritual pageantry. Craftsmen produced splendid costumes and ritual materials for the king and chiefs, and farmers supplied food for the feasts.

Human sacrifice, usually of criminals or prisoners of war, was practised. This was partly linked to the religious practice of vodun (voodoo). The bodies of young women found at the bottom of a well, dressed in jewels and finery, are evidence of the importance of such rituals.

Benin City

Before its destruction, Benin City possessed an extensive network of wide streets. A complex city wall system with a moat and nine gates protected the city from intruders. The palace compound itself occupied a large part of the city.

The city was divided into the palace where the Oba and the palace chiefs lived, the town where the town chiefs and the artisans lived, and outside the walls where the Uzama had to live in villages.

Palace grounds also encompassed the private living quarters of the king, various reception courts, the quarters of the three palace societies, and the royal harem. Around the 17th century the wooden pillars supporting the roof of the galleries were decorated with the famous bronze plaques. In the 19th century the pillars were made of clay, and bore reliefs worked directly into the material. Doors and beams in the royal precinct were in some cases covered with hand-embossed sheet brass, or decorated with inlaid mirrors.

The defensive fortification of Benin City included over 10,000km of earth boundaries, and was probably constructed between about AD 800 and 1500. The Guinness Book of World Records describes the walls as the world's second largest man-made structure after China's Great Wall in terms of length, and the series of earthen ramparts as the most extensive earthwork in the world.

Dutch writer Olfert Dapper described Benin City at its height:

'When you go into it you enter a great broad street, which is not paved, and seems to be seven or eight times greater than Warmoes Street in Amsterdam. This street is straight, and does not bend at any point. It is thought to be 4 miles long.

At the gate where I went in on horseback, I saw a very big wall, very thick and made of earth, with a very deep and broad ditch outside it... And outside this gate there is also a big suburb. Inside the gate, and along the great street just mentioned, you see many other great streets on either side, and these are also straight and do not bend... The houses in this town stand in good order, one close evenly placed with its neighbour, just as the houses in Holland stand... They have square rooms, sheltered by a roof that is open in the middle, where the rain, wind and light come in. The people sleep and eat in these rooms, but they have other rooms for cooking and for different purposes... The king's court is very great. It is built around many square-shaped yards. These yards have surrounding galleries where sentries are always placed. I myself went into the court far enough to pass through four great yards like this, and yet wherever I looked I could still see gate after gate which opened into other yards.'

Military

The Oba was the supreme military commander of the army and took responsibility for leading the soldiers to war personally. He was thus entitled to receive the largest share of tribute and fines, and of plunder taken in war. This made him the richest member of the state, and gave him the most followers and the most captives. He needed these to maintain status, and so he was virtually obliged to take an active role.

Warriors used a variety of weapons such as bows and poisoned arrows, spears, iron swords, assegais and the crossbow. The variety of weapons used for war made it possible to compose the warriors into divisions of swordsmen, archers, spearmen and crossbowmen. There was no cavalry in the army since the tsetse fly made it virtually impossible to breed horses.

The army was divided into regiments, companies and platoons, and training was thorough, especially in battlefield tactics. There were almost as many sieges as pitched battles.

The use of firearms by the Portuguese mercenaries who accompanied Esigie to the war with Idah in about 1515 had a decisive effect on the outcome of the war, and so the Obas began importing guns in great quantities. They had to pay for them with captives, which meant further wars were needed, and so the cycle continued.

Sources

Unlike some African civilisations, quite a lot is known about the kingdom of Benin at its height, since this period coincided with the arrival of the Europeans who gave accounts of what they saw. The objects that were produced also reveal a considerable amount about matters such as crafts, weapons, clothing, court ritual, etc.

Two of the most quoted written accounts – those of Dapper and Equiano – need to be treated with caution. Dapper never visited the kingdom, and the much-used illustrations in his book are based on the accounts of European travellers, but he was credited with extensive research and reading of first-hand accounts from travellers. Equiano may never have lived in Benin, and, therefore his reports may also be based on other people's accounts.

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