

St Austin's R.C. Primary School - History

Topic: Benin

Year: 6

What is the Kingdom of Benin?

The Kingdom of Benin rose to become a powerful empire in the 16th Century but was destroyed when it was invaded by British forces.

It began as a small group of villages that joined together to improve trading and security. The people worked hard as farmers and craftsmen so that the kingdom had high quality goods to trade with foreigners.

The Obas were very powerful and were treated like gods. During their rule the Benin Kingdom expanded beyond its boundaries.

Over time there were arguments about who would be the next Oba and this led to civil wars. British troops invaded and gained control. In the 1960s it became a part of independent Nigeria.

Location

Benin City is the location of the ancient kingdom of Benin. It is located in Nigeria, which is in the west of Africa. The Ancient kingdom of Benin is **NOT** located in the modern city of Benin. This is a different country in Africa.



Key individuals

- **Ogiso Igodo** – the first king (or 'Ogiso') of Benin, under whom, the smaller villages joined together to form a kingdom
- **Ogiso Owodo** – the last of the Ogiso kings, banished from the kingdom with his family for bad conduct around 1130 AD
- **Oba Eweke** – the first of the new dynasty of kings called the Obas, crowned around 1180 AD
- **Oba Oguole** – had the Benin City Wall built around 1283 AD
- **Oba Ewuare** – expanded the kingdom greatly and set up trading links with Portugal in 1514 AD
- **Oba Ovonramwen** – the last king of Benin, exiled by British troops after their invasion in 1897 AD.

Timeline

900 AD- 1460 A huge earthen moat was constructed around the kingdom, stretching 16,000 km long.

1440 AD Benin expands its territory under the rule of Oba Ewuare the Great.

1485 AD The Portuguese visit Edo and Ubinu.

900 AD Lots of villages join together and make a kingdom known as **Igodomigodo**, ruled by the **Ogiso**.

1190 AD The Oba royal family take over from the Ogiso and begin to rule over the kingdom. They are treated like Gods.

1470 AD Oba Ewuare renames the kingdom as Edo, with its main city known as Ubinu (Benin in Portuguese).

1514 AD Oba Esigie sets up trading links with the Portuguese and other European visitors.

1700 AD A series of civil wars with Benin lead to the kingdom declining in power.

1807 AD Britain passes a law abolishing the slave trade, which further weakens the kingdom.

1897 AD Benin City (in modern day Nigeria) is destroyed by British troops and comes under Britain's control.

Key vocabulary

Trade – exchanging goods

Oba – the Yoruba word meaning ‘king’

Empire – lots of countries or states, all ruled by one monarch or single state

Cowrie shells – a sea shell which Europeans used as a kind of money to trade with African leaders

Yoruba – the name of the group of people who lived within the area of the holy city of Ife

Ife – the holy city nearby the kingdom of Benin, ruled by the Yoruba people

Edo – the name of the group of people who lived within the ancient kingdom of Benin

Eweka – the first Oba of the kingdom of Benin. He came to power in AD 1180

Benin City – the modern city located in Nigeria. It used to be called Edo and Igodomigodo before that

Ogiso – the Edo word meaning ‘Kings of the sky’

Life in Benin

- Sources that tell us about life in Benin Kingdom focus on powerful and rich people but little is known about ordinary men, women and children.
- Historians believe the most people were farmers, growing crops like yams and plantains and working hard to clear vast areas of communal land.
- Many people had two or three different jobs and might also have been part of one of the guilds of craftsmen, producing high quality goods for the royal court or for trading with foreign visitors.
- Alternatively, people became warriors, entertainers or builders, who were required to make their mud homes and the defensive walls around the kingdom.
- As well as looking after families, women would have been responsible for making domestic ceramic objects like cooking pots.
- Storytellers were very important and kept the kingdom’s history and mythology alive by telling stories aloud by the fire every evening.
- Children did not go to school but would have learned each day from the storytellers.
- The people of Benin had many stories involving gods and magic and they believed that non-human objects had spirits or souls, a belief known as ‘animism’.