



BENIN CIVILIZATION



Modern Nigeria (Africa)

Timeline

400	900	1180	1283	1440	1451	1700	1897
Yoruba people use iron tools to clear land.	Benin Kingdom created	The dynasty of the 'Oba' began.	Oba Oguole builds the Benin City wall	Oba Ewuare expanded the kingdom	Oba Ewuare sets up trade with Portuguese visitors	A period of decline due to civil wars and end of the slave trade in Europe	Benin City is destroyed by British troops.

Key Vocabulary

animists	They believed that non-human objects and animals had spirits and souls.
Benin City walls	Built between around 800-1500, they were built of earth and stretched for over 1000km.
brass	From 900, they were smelting of copper and zinc ores and casting brass to produce fine metal work.
cowrie shell	Sea snail shells used as a form of money for trade networks in Africa.
elders	It is thought that the Edo people first lived in villages governed by the eldest family members.
Igodomigodo	For reasons of trade of security, villagers came together to form a larger settlement with this name.
oracle	To solve their problems, people consulted an oracle.
oral culture	People did not write down their history but passed it on through stories, art and their legends.
sacrifice	An offering to gods (often food or animal) but sometimes even gruesome human sacrifices!
yam	The main crop of the Benin civilization was the yam (sweet potato). Also, okra, beans and peppers.

DID YOU KNOW?

European visitors could not believe the quality of the artwork, metal work and ivory carvings and it completely changed the way Britain viewed Western Africa. The art gave an insight into their history.

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

Traditions

Although no written histories exist, the people of Benin had a rich oral tradition of histories, myths and legends. Children would not go to school but would learn through storytellers at night by the fire. Contact with Europeans means that encounters with the Edo, descriptions of Benin City and of the Obas are recorded in European and colonial history. In addition, treasures of wood, ivory and metal made their way into Europe through trade or plunder and astounded observers with their high degree of artistry and craftsmanship.

Life in Benin

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 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.

FAMOUS FIGURES

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.

Oba Eweke

The first of a new dynasty of kings called the Obas, crowned around 1180.

Oba Oguole

The king who had the Benin City Wall built around 1283.

Oba Ewuare

He expanded the kingdom greatly and set up trading links with Portugal in 1514.

Oba Ovonramwen

This was the last king of Benin, exiled by British troops after their invasion in 1897.