

HISTORY · Y4–Y6

# The Kingdom of Benin

Knowledge Organiser — Y4–Y6

## Key facts and vocabulary

### 1 Where and when

The Kingdom of Benin was located in present-day southern Nigeria. It flourished from roughly the 13th to 19th century CE — at its peak, contemporary with Tudor England.

### 2 The Oba

The king of Benin. Believed to be semi-divine. Had enormous political, spiritual, and military power. The Oba's court was one of the most sophisticated in the world.

### 3 Benin City

The capital city — surrounded by vast earthwork walls (the largest in the world prior to the modern era). The city had organised streets, markets, and a complex system of guilds.

### 4 Bronze casting

Benin craftsmen produced extraordinary bronze (and brass) sculptures using the lost-wax method — a technically demanding process producing highly detailed plaques and figures. The 'Benin Bronzes' record court ceremonies and history.

### 5 Trade

Benin traded with Portuguese merchants from the late 15th century — selling pepper, cloth, ivory, and occasionally enslaved people in exchange for copper, brass, and firearms.

### 6 British invasion 1897

A British military expedition destroyed Benin City and removed thousands of bronze sculptures. These 'Benin Bronzes' were distributed to museums worldwide and are now the subject of ongoing repatriation debates.



# Bronzes — what they tell us

Primary sources from a sophisticated

- Over 3,000 bronze plaques and sculptures were taken from the Royal Palace in 1897.
- They are now in museums worldwide — British Museum (London), Ethnologisches Museum (Berlin), Peabody Museum (Harvard), and others.
- The plaques record: court ceremonies, historical events, the Oba's power, and everyday life.
- They provide detailed evidence of Benin court dress, military equipment, and contact with Europeans.
- **REPATRIATION DEBATE:** Many African nations are requesting the return of objects taken during colonial conquest. Nigeria has formally requested the return of the Benin Bronzes. Some museums have returned items; others have not.
- **WHY IT MATTERS:** the Benin Bronzes challenge the assumption that Africa had no history of sophisticated art and statecraft before European contact.

