



African History (with a focus on the Kingdom of Benin):

Knowledge take-aways

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Power in the Kingdom of Benin:

- The Kingdom of Benin seems to have enjoyed a 'golden age' during the 1400s and 1500s, as trade flourished and wealth increased. This golden age did not rely on a trade in slaves.
- The Kingdom of Benin was known for producing many plaques and bronzes. These were symbolic, and offer insight into the ideas and beliefs of the Obas of Benin.
- The Obas held significant power, although they ruled with the help of chiefs.
- The Obas lived in lavish palaces, which were extravagantly decorated with bronzes and plaques to illustrate past glories.
- The Oba's mother played an important role in the Kingdom of Benin: she held both real and symbolic power.
- Trade with other African kingdoms and with outside powers such as Portugal helped Benin to establish its power.

Key terms: pre-colonial, Oba, trade, militaristic, ritual, chief, sacrifice.

Ordinary life in the Kingdom of Benin:

- Ordinary people were deeply religious, and believed in multiple gods.
- Human sacrifice was a feature of religious belief.
- Animals had important symbolic power for the people of Benin.
- Skilled workers (like artists) enjoyed real prestige and status.

Key terms: guild, prestige, culture, sacrifice.

Benin and the slave trade: A case study:

- Although some African kingdoms did participate in the trans-Atlantic slave trade from an early stage, the Kingdom of Benin helps to show that this was not a universal story.

- Benin partly relied on the slave trade to re-establish its power and wealth after a period of economic decline.
- Often, slaves were prisoners seized by the Obas of Benin during wars with other African kingdoms.
- Slaves from Benin were traded with European powers like Portugal, in exchange for things like weapons.
- Slaves faced horrific conditions, both on the Middle Passage and on the plantations to which they were often sent in the Americas.
- Some slaves were able to earn their freedom. Some became actively involved in the abolitionist movement, although continued to face prejudice and hardship.

Key terms: slave, captive, trans-Atlantic, branding, slave auction, scramble, abolitionist, prejudice.

Early-modern Africa:

- During the 'early modern' period, Africa was very well-connected, with different African kingdoms trading and communicating in sophisticated ways.
- African rulers also established links with Europe and Asia, and there was a trade in goods, ideas and people (in the form of slaves).
- The Kingdoms of Mali, Benin and Asante became wealthy through trade in things like gold, ivory and salt.
- The influence of Islam in Africa was widespread and varied, impacting on belief, lifestyles, art, architecture and learning.
- When powerful European countries began colonising parts of Africa, Islam played a key role in African resistance to this take-over as Muslim leaders called for Africans to resist European rule.

Key terms: trade, export, import, merchant, Islam, Mecca, Moors, mosque, Swahili.

Colonisation and the 'invention of Africa':

- In the second half of the nineteenth century, the 'scramble for Africa' saw European powers begin competing for control of African colonies.
- The colonisation of Africa was accompanied by (or perhaps caused) new ideas about African genetic inferiority and 'backwardness'.
- Britain seized control of places like Benin through force and brutality.
- During the Benin Expedition of 1897 (also known as the 'Benin Massacre') cultural products like the Benin Bronzes were looted.
- Debate continues over whether the Benin Bronzes (seized during the Benin Expedition of 1897) ought to be returned to Africa.

Key terms: colonise, massacre, abolitionist, massacre, looting, Benin Bronzes.

Suggested reading:

- Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (2019).
- Toby Green, *African Kingdoms: A Guide to the Kingdoms of Songhay, Kongo, Benin, Oyo and Dahomey c.1400-c.1800* (e-book available online: <https://africakingdoms.co.uk/online-e-book/>).
- John Parker and Richard Rathbone, *African History: A Very Short Introduction* (2007).
- Peter Roese and Dmitri Bondarenko, *A Popular History of Benin: The Rise and Fall of a Mighty Forest Kingdom* (2003).
- Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin* (1992).