

The Benin Bronzes



Resource for teachers

Source: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/benin-bronzes>

You can read this resource if you like, then print out the last page as a writing challenge for your students.

What are they?

The 'Benin Bronzes' (made of brass and bronze) are a group of sculptures which include elaborately decorated cast relief plaques, commemorative heads, animal and human figures, items of royal regalia, and personal ornaments. They were created from at least the 1500s onwards in the West African Kingdom of Benin, by a specialist guild working for the royal court of the Oba (king) in Benin City. The Kingdom also supported guilds working in other materials such as ivory, wood, leather, coral/red stone and textiles, and the term 'Benin Bronzes' is sometimes used to refer to historic objects produced using these other materials.

Many pieces were commissioned specifically for the ancestral altars of past Obas and Queen Mothers. They were also used in other rituals to honour the ancestors and to validate the accession of a new Oba. Among the most well-known of the Benin Bronzes are the cast brass plaques which once decorated the Benin Royal Palace. These provide an important historical record of the Kingdom of Benin, including both its dynastic and social history, and offer insights into its relationships with neighbouring kingdoms, states and societies. The Benin Bronzes sit within a wider landscape of early West African cast brass traditions, dating back into the medieval period, including from the Kingdom of Ife and from Igbo-Ukwu.

One narrative represented on the brass plaques and forming the subject matter of some sculptures is the Kingdom of Benin's early relationships with Europeans. Trade, diplomatic and missionary contacts between Benin and Portugal developed from the late 1400s. These early connections included exchange visits between the capitals and the courts of Benin and Portugal as the two powers negotiated their new relationship. Later, Portuguese mercenaries fought alongside Edo soldiers in military campaigns that saw the expansion of the Benin Empire; this support is commemorated in figurative brass sculptures.

Over 900 objects from the historic Kingdom of Benin are currently cared for by the British Museum. More than 100 can be seen in a rotating display within the Museum's [Africa galleries](#). Objects from the Kingdom of Benin are lent around the world. The British Museum also houses an important range of archival documentation and photographs relating to the objects from the Kingdom of Benin and their collection histories.

Where are they from?

The Benin Bronzes come from Benin City, the historic capital of the Kingdom of Benin, a major city state in West Africa from the medieval period. Benin City was incorporated into the British Empire from 1897 to 1960 and is now located within the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Modern Benin City (in Edo State) is the home of the current ruler of the Kingdom of Benin, His Royal Majesty Oba Ewuare II. Many of the rituals and ceremonies associated with the historic Kingdom of Benin continue to be performed today.



[Cast brass](#)

[relief plaque](#) showing the Oba (king) sacrificing leopards as part of an annual ceremony to strengthen his mystical powers and to ensure the well-being of the Edo people (c. 1500s–

1600s). Looted during the British Expedition to Benin City in 1897. Donated to the Museum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in 1898.

How did the objects come to the British Museum?

By the end of the 1800s, the Nigerian coast and its trade were largely dominated by the British. It is in the context of this aggressive expansion of colonial power that the Benin Bronzes came to the British Museum.

During the second half of the 1800s, the balance of power between West African kingdoms such as Benin, and the European nations they traded with, shifted towards European control. In the late 1800s, industrialised European nations supported by new military technologies began to exert greater power across the African continent. This political and commercial movement developed into the territorial land-grab known as the 'Scramble for Africa'.

This period of West African history was also significantly shaped by the devastating effects of the transatlantic slave trade. This vast traffic in enslaved people supplied labour to the plantations in the Americas, including British-controlled colonies. African kingdoms including the Benin Kingdom, played a role in capturing and selling enslaved people to feed this European-led trade although the precise nature and extent of this exploitation remains debated. While by the late 1800s this trade had been largely abolished, its increasing scale and barbarity in the preceding centuries had a massive impact on the economic potential of West African societies.

The desire to further extend British power and influence in the region ultimately led to a clash with the Kingdom of Benin. The gradual expansion by the British into territory neighbouring the kingdom and an increasing reluctance to accept Benin's trading conditions created an atmosphere of distrust and animosity. In January 1897 an allegedly peaceful but clearly provocative British trade mission was attacked on its way to Benin City, leading to the deaths of seven British delegates and 230 of the mission's African carriers. This incident triggered the launch of a large-scale retaliatory military expedition by the British against the Kingdom of Benin. In February 1897 Benin City was captured by British forces.

Benin suffered a bloody and devastating occupation. No exact figure can be given for the number of Benin's population who were killed in the conquest of the city. However, oral and written accounts suggest that there were many casualties during the sustained fighting. The occupation of Benin City saw widespread destruction and pillage by British forces. Along with other buildings, the Oba's palace was burned and partly destroyed. Its shrines and associated compounds were looted by British forces, and thousands of objects of ceremonial and ritual value were taken to the UK as official 'spoils of war' or distributed among members of the expedition according to their rank. These included objects removed from royal ancestral shrines, among which were commemorative brass heads of former Obas and associated carved ivory tusks. The looted objects also included more than 900 brass relief

plaques, probably dating between 1500–mid-1600s, found in a storage room within the palace. Having previously decorated pillars in the palace compounds, many of these plaques present a vivid depiction of Benin court life and ritual, while others record important trade relationships or commemorate successful military campaigns. Following the occupation, the Oba was captured and sent into exile, while several Benin chiefs were executed. Justified as legitimate military action against a 'barbarous' kingdom, this brutal colonial episode effectively marked the end of the independent Kingdom of Benin. Following the interregnum of 1897–1914 a new Oba, Eweka II, was installed. Despite subsequent administrative and political upheavals many of Benin's customs, rituals and titles have survived and thrive today.

In the autumn of 1897, the British Museum displayed 304 Benin plaques on loan from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and subsequently petitioned successfully to receive 203 of these as a donation. Most of the remaining plaques were sold to UK and German museums and to private dealers, while a few were retained by the Foreign Office. Other early collections were purchased or donated to the Museum by members of the Benin expedition.

The British Museum collection only grew to its current size following the acquisition of major private collections, such as that of Harry Beasley in 1944, William Oldman in 1949 and Sir Henry Wellcome in 1954. In 1950 and 1951 the Museum deaccessioned 29 of the Benin plaques in the collection. At the time these objects were understood as 'duplicates' of other plaques retained in the collection, something which further research has shown to be incorrect. Some of these were subsequently sold, exchanged or donated to the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria (25 in number). These plaques were later accessioned into the collections of newly established museums in Lagos and Benin City. In 1954 one plaque was sold to the colonial government of the Gold Coast and was later incorporated into the collections of the National Museum in Accra. A further eight plaques were sold to or exchanged with private dealers and collectors between 1952 and 1972.

In addition to objects that can be traced directly to the 1897 expedition, the Museum cares for objects from or associated with Benin City that sit outside the context of the expedition, including brass castings, carved ivories, contemporary artworks, textiles, casts and replicas, and archaeological finds.



[British soldiers](#)

[sitting in one of the compounds of the palace in Benin City](#) with objects looted during the military expedition in 1897. Photograph taken by the Principal Medical Officer for the expedition, Dr Robert Allman.

What has been requested?

In October 2021 the British Museum received a written request for the return of 'Nigerian antiquities' from the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, Nigeria.

In addition, representatives of the Benin Royal Palace have made various public statements asking for the Benin collections to be returned, most recently at the Benin Dialogue Group meeting hosted by the Museum in October 2021.

These requests are framed within the context of longstanding dialogues with the Museum, including during the visit of the then Director of the British Museum to the Benin Royal Court in August 2018.

Status of discussions

The Museum has positive relationships with the Royal Palace in Benin City and with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria (NCMM).

The Museum's then Director, Hartwig Fischer, visited Nigeria in August 2018. He met with senior Museum colleagues in Lagos and Benin City and had an audience with His Royal Majesty Oba Ewuare II which included discussion of new opportunities for sharing and displaying objects from the Kingdom of Benin. During that visit His Royal Majesty Oba Ewuare II repeated his request for Benin collections to be returned. He also acknowledged, however, that the objects serve as 'cultural ambassadors' for Benin culture when displayed internationally.

Following the written request in October 2021 for the repatriation of Nigerian antiquities from the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Museum asked for some points of clarification. In July 2022 Nigeria's then Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, visited the Museum and was welcomed by staff in the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. He was able to provide the necessary clarifications in a friendly and courteous meeting. Since this visit there have been significant changes at a federal level in Nigeria with the election of a new President in May 2023 and the appointment of a different Minister of Information and Culture. The Museum remains open to discussion with partners in Nigeria.



[Pair of carved ivory arm-cuffs](#) inlaid with copper depicting repeating images of the Oba (king) in beaded regalia swinging crocodiles above his head, 1700s. Looted by (Sir) Ralph Moor during the British Expedition to Benin City in 1897.

The British Museum's position

The British Museum has excellent long-term working relationships with Nigerian colleagues and institutions, particularly through the [Africa Programme\(Opens in new window\)](#) which has provided an important framework for colleagues to share skills and expertise. Since 2010 colleagues from across Nigeria have participated in the Museum's prestigious [International Training Programme](#). The Museum is also participating in a major new collaborative project with Nigerian partners, the [MOWAA Archaeology Project](#), focused around pre-construction archaeological excavations and knowledge exchange programmes in Benin City. These enduring partnerships have enabled the Museum to engage in sustained and open dialogues concerning the Benin collections as well as wider conversations around Nigerian heritage and culture.

The Museum remains actively engaged with Nigerian institutions concerning the Benin Bronzes, including pursuing and supporting new initiatives developed in collaboration with Nigerian partners and colleagues.

The British Museum is also a founding member of the Benin Dialogue Group, a collaborative working group bringing together museum directors and delegates from Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom with key representatives from Nigeria,

including the NCMM, the Benin Royal Palace and Edo State government. A central objective for the Group is to establish new museums in Benin City to facilitate permanent displays of objects from the Kingdom of Benin, including significant collections of works currently in UK and European museums.

All members of the Benin Dialogue Group have contributed data and images to the [Digital Benin\(Opens in new window\)](#) initiative. This platform currently provides access to a database of more than 5,000 objects, as well as historical photographs and archival material, focusing on the historic collections from the Kingdom of Benin distributed across 136 institutions in 20 countries worldwide. The Museum has made a major contribution to this project and has provided archival documentation that helps to digitally reconnect objects that were looted from Benin City in 1897.

The Museum continues to pursue a thorough and open investigation of Benin collection histories – and to participate in the wider contemporary dialogues within which these collections are positioned. This includes fully acknowledging and understanding the colonial history which provided the key context for the development of the Benin collection at the British Museum. All of the records for objects found in or associated with the Kingdom of Benin and/or Benin City (including those made post-1897 and contemporary art) are available for viewing via the Museum's public database, Collection online: [Benin City](#).

Writing Challenge: Returning the Benin Bronzes?

Do you think the British Museum should return the Benin Bronzes? Read these points, watch Matthew Wainwright's video, then write two letters:

1. From the Nigerian government to the British Museum, asking them to return the bronzes
2. From the British Museum, replying to the Nigerian government.

1. What are the Benin Bronzes?

- The Benin Bronzes are a group of sculptures made from brass and bronze.
- They include decorated plaques, heads, figures, royal items, and ornaments.
- They were made in the Kingdom of Benin (now in Nigeria) from the 1500s onwards.
- These items were created by skilled artists for the royal court of the Oba (king) in Benin City.
- The bronzes were used to honour ancestors and decorate the royal palace.

2. Why they should be returned

- The Benin Bronzes were taken by British soldiers during a military expedition in 1897.
- The British forces looted the Oba's palace and took thousands of valuable objects.
- These items are important to the people of Benin and their cultural heritage.
- Returning the bronzes would help restore the history and pride of the Benin people.

3. What the British Museum says

- The British Museum has many of the Benin Bronzes and displays them in their galleries.
- The museum has good relationships with Nigerian institutions and works on projects with them.
- They are part of the Benin Dialogue Group, which aims to establish new museums in Benin City.
- The museum accepts the history of the bronzes, and it is open to discussions about them.