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The wealth of Africa The kingdom of Benin

Students' worksheets



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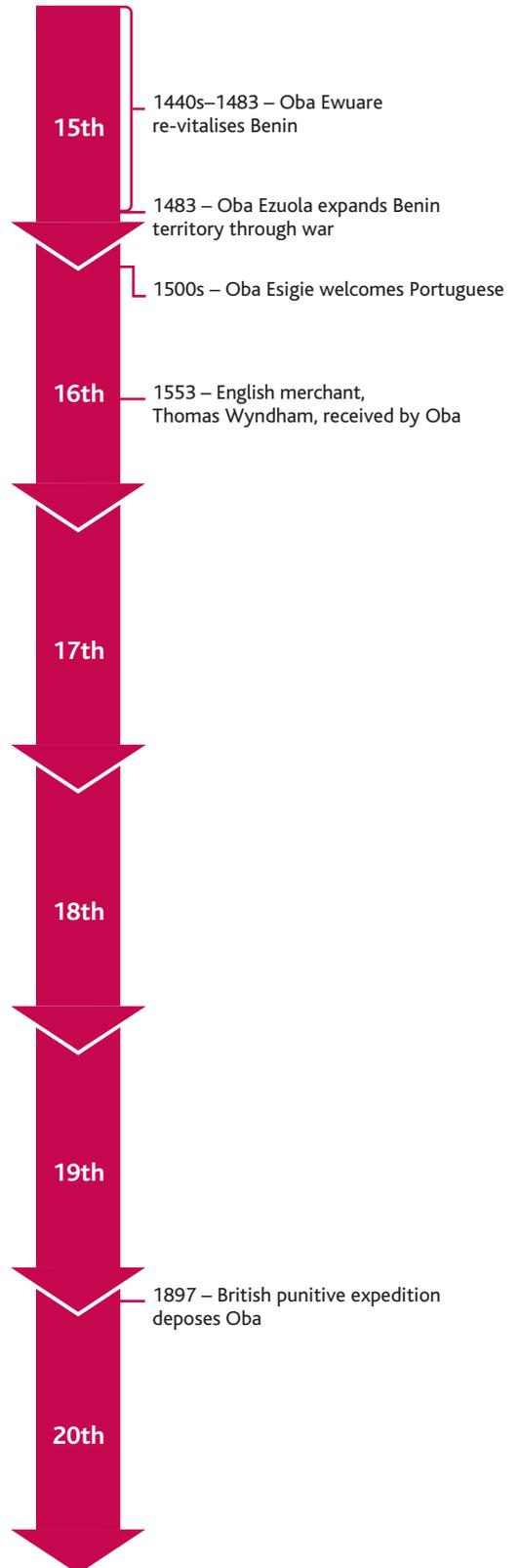
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KINGDOM OF BENIN



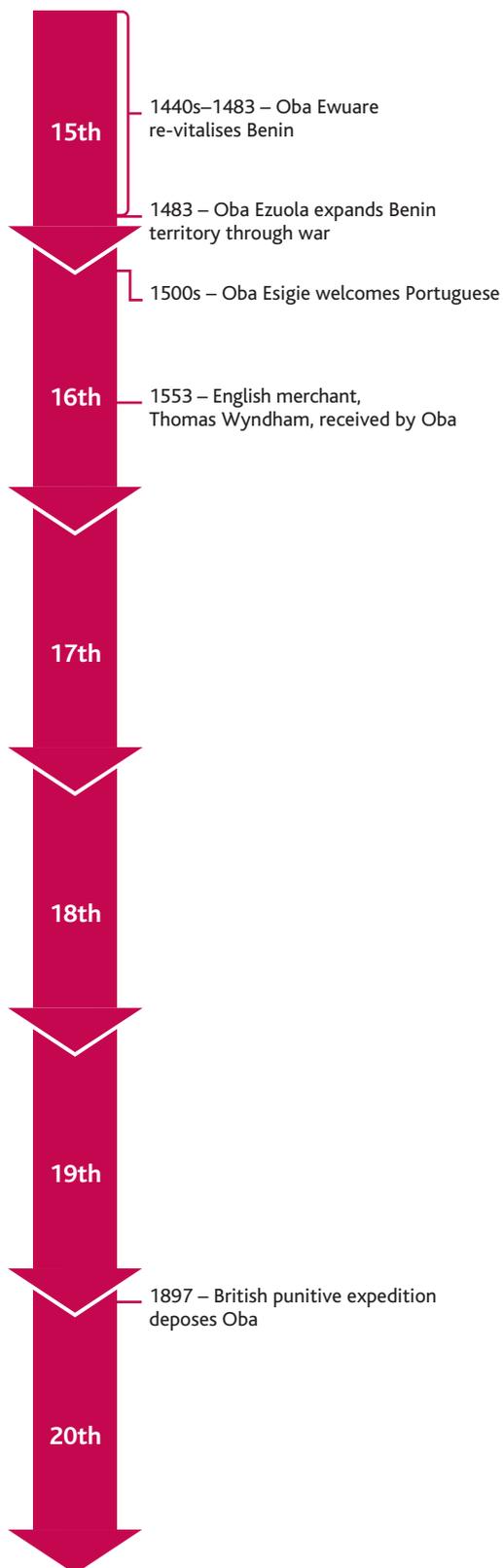
Century AD



KINGDOM OF BENIN



Century AD



SHEET 1: HOW SKILFUL WERE THE CRAFTSMEN OF THE KINGDOM OF BENIN?

When British troops brought back objects like these after their invasion of Benin in 1897, many in Europe could not believe that Africans were capable of creating such astonishing works of art.

Source 1

A method of casting in which a wax model is encased in a heat-resistant material, such as clay, that is hardened and then heated to melt and drain away the wax, producing a mould into which molten material, like bronze or brass, is poured.

British Museum

Questions

1. What different materials did Benin craftsmen use?
2. Which object on this page would have needed the most skill to produce?
3. What can you learn about Benin society from each of these objects?



Source 2: Bronze ceremonial bell
British Museum



Source 3: Wooden keg stopper covered in brass
British Museum



Source 4: Ivory salt cellar
British Museum



Source 5: Bronze tusk stand
British Museum



Source 6: Wooden chest
British Museum



Source 7: Bronze horseman
British Museum

SHEET 2: HOW DID THE OBA SHOW HIS POWER?

In Benin society the king, or Oba, was all-powerful. Study the objects and text, and see how he managed to persuade people to obey him. Look at what animals he is linked to, and how he is shown in the plaques.

Source 1

All land for farming purposes or residence was communal and held by the Oba on behalf of the people. This probably explains the origin of the payment of tribute by each village to the Oba through his representative, the local chief.

Osadolor 2001: 84

Source 3

Leo Africanus, in the early 16th century, recorded that [the Oba] is served with such high reverence... [that on] his death his chief favourites count it the greatest point of honour to be buried with him.

Graham 1965: 327

Source 4

The king himself was in charge of trading slaves, ivory and other important goods, so that all the profit went to support his court and government. Other merchants could only trade with the king's permission.

British Museum

Questions

1. How would the objects on this page convince people that the Oba was powerful?
2. In what other ways did he show his power?
3. Do these sources prove that the Oba was powerful?



Source 2: Ivory armband worn by Oba – in it he has mudfish legs
British Museum



Source 5: Royal stool in shape of a bronze catfish
British Museum



Source 6: Ivory
Oba hip mask
British Museum



Source 7: Oba with
leopards and mudfish
British Museum



Source 8: Oba
with attendants
British Museum

SHEET 3: WHAT WAS THE CITY OF BENIN LIKE?

Only a few Europeans actually saw Benin City in its heyday, yet enough is known from remaining evidence to realise that the length of the walls was enormous.

Source 1

The king's palace or court is a square, and is as large as the town of Haarlem and entirely surrounded by a special wall, like that which encircles the town. It is divided into many magnificent palaces, houses, and apartments of the courtiers, and comprises beautiful and long square galleries, about as large as the Exchange at Amsterdam, but one larger than another, resting on wooden pillars, from top to bottom covered with cast copper, on which are engraved the pictures of their war exploits and battles...

Dutch writer Olfert Dapper on Benin City, based on descriptions he had heard from European travellers, in Dapper 1668: 486

Source 2

The defensive fortification of Benin City, the capital, consisted of ramparts and moats, enclosing 4,000km² of community lands. In total, the Benin wall system contained over 10,000km of earth boundaries. They are the world's second largest man-made structure after China's Great Wall, in terms of length, and the series of earthen ramparts are the most extensive earthwork in the world.

Wysinger 2008

Source 3

[It] hath thirty very strait and broad streets, each a hundred and twenty feet wide... [and] the houses stand built in rows, in good order close by one another, as here in Europe.

Dapper on Benin City, quoted in Graham 1965: 324

Source 4

Benin City was at least four miles large. The streets were exceptionally long and broad, in which continual markets are kept. The houses that were in use were large and handsome, with clay walls, and their architecture was 'passable'.

Sir Richard Burton's description of Benin when he visited in 1862, quoted in Graham 1965: 324



Source 5: A description of Benin City, based on 17th-century traveller's reports, in Dapper 1668: opposite 486

Task

Make a travel guide to Benin City in the 17th century. Include details about the houses, streets, walls, people, etc. Include diagrams and pictures.

Questions

1. Which of these sources is the most helpful in describing Benin City?
2. How much does it matter that Olfert Dapper (source 1, 3 and 5) hadn't been to Benin?

SHEET 4: HOW DID THE KINGDOM OF BENIN BECOME SO WEALTHY?

It was a combination of factors that caused Benin to become such an important kingdom in the 15th and 16th centuries. Its geographical situation helped as it linked the coast with the trans-Saharan trade routes.

Source 1

The rise of Benin... is closely connected with the European demand for slaves... The profits from the trade with the Europeans gave the rulers and merchants of Benin an incentive and also, in the form of firearms, the means, to extend their rule.

Graham 1965: 318

Source 2

One method used successfully to expand Benin domination of the east-west trading system was the founding of the Olokun cult. Olokun, as the god of wealth, provided a religious excuse for the pursuit of commercial profit. The Olokun priests were usually relatives of the Oba.

Sargent 1986: 411

Source 4

17th-century chroniclers mention Benin's export of dyed cotton cloth, jasper stones, leopard skins, blue coral, pepper, and ivory, as well as women slaves.

Graham 1965: 321

Source 5

The development of specialised craft production in the palace not only provided exchange goods but also created a need for raw materials. Leather, copper and other items were imported in increasing quantities. To provide export goods, increased production of salt, gold, camwood, ivory, beads, cloth and metal implements was demanded.

Sargent 1986: 412

Source 6

Benin traded with Europeans to obtain guns, powder, metals, salt and cloth in exchange for palm oil, ivory, cloth, beads, pepper and slaves. Except for slaves, the other exports do not seem to have come from local sources. Apparently one of the keys to Benin's wealth was its location at a junction of east-west and north-south trade.

Shillington 2005: 133



Source 3: Cowrie shells
British Museum

Used as an exchange item both within the country and in trade with the Europeans

Questions

1. What different things helped Benin become rich?
2. Which do you think was the most important factor Benin?

Task

You are writing for an English trade magazine at the time of Queen Elizabeth I (about 1600). Tell your readers what are the five best buys they should get from Benin. Inform them how they could pay for these purchases, and what else they might need to take with them to Benin to get the goods.

SHEET 5: HOW DID THE KINGDOM OF BENIN BECOME SO POWERFUL?

Benin became the strongest state in the region through war and conquest. These sources may give some clues as to why the army was able to win so many victories.

Source 1

Dutch sources have pointed out that the Oba could mobilise 20,000 soldiers in a day, and raise an army of 80,000 to 180,000 men.

Wysinger 2008

Source 3

The common protection was a big shield, made from hide, wood, and basketwork. Helmets were worn by senior officers (chiefs) as well as highly decorated warriors. They were made of padded basketwork or hard crocodile skin and wood. The body armour (which consisted of a top and a bottom reaching down to the knees) was made of quilted ponchos covered with leopard skins, firm enough to prevent the penetration of an arrow or spear.

Plankensteiner 2007: 78

Source 4

From the 17th century European traders, led by the Dutch, began to sell firearms in large quantities. These played a crucial role, and Benin's soldiers learnt much from Europeans, particularly the Portuguese. Gunpowder assured victory on the battlefield, although the use of firearms by Benin warriors was restricted by the Oba to mainly war and regimental commanders.

Plankensteiner 2007: 77

Source 5

They all carried charms for protective purposes. Some used the symbol of 'the sun and moon', which meant that just as the sun and the moon always reach their destinations in the evening and return the next day, so would the warrior return safely from his campaign. Each warrior wore a quadrangular bell. The clanging of hundreds of these bells, accompanied by blasts by the military hornblowers, increased the psychological impact of the army's approach as they entered enemy territory, and gave them courage.

Plankensteiner 2007: 78



Source 2: Iron and brass sword
British Museum



Source 6: Soldier with shield
British Museum



Source 7: Wooden crossbow
British Museum

Questions

1. What factors can you identify that helped Benin to become powerful?
2. What does source 4 tell you about how that changed when European traders arrived in Benin?

SHEET 6: HOW USEFUL IS EQUIANO'S ACCOUNT OF THE KINGDOM OF BENIN?

Very little is known about everyday life in the villages of Benin. One of the few sources are the memoirs of the abolitionist campaigner, Olaudah Equiano, who was himself formerly enslaved in the Americas, published in 1789. Unfortunately, there are doubts about the reliability of his account. According to him he was only 11 when he was taken from Benin as a captive, and so his memory of those days might not be reliable. There is also evidence that he was born in the Americas, and based his book on accounts he had heard from others.

Source 1

The chief men decided disputes and punished crimes. The proceedings were generally short; and in most cases the law of retaliation prevailed.

Equiano 1789: 20

Source 2

Our buildings are made for convenience rather than show. Each master of a family has a large square piece of ground, surrounded with a moat or fence, or enclosed with a wall made of red earth, which, when dry, is as hard as brick. Within this are his houses to accommodate his family and slaves.

Equiano 1789: 22

Source 3

Our women of distinction wear many golden ornaments on their arms and legs. When our women are not employed with the men in farming, their usual occupation is spinning and weaving cotton, which they afterwards dye, and make it into garments. They also make earthen vessels, of which we have many kinds.

Equiano 1789: 22

Source 5

We have also markets, at which I have been frequently with my mother. These are sometimes visited by stout mahogany-coloured men from the south west of us. They generally bring us firearms, gunpowder, hats, beads, and dried fish. These articles they barter with us for perfumed woods and earth, and our salt of wood ashes.

Equiano 1789: 23

Source 6

They always carry slaves through our land; but they have to give a strict account of how they got them before they are allowed to pass. Sometimes indeed we sold slaves to them, but they were only prisoners of war, or such among us as had been convicted of kidnapping or adultery, and some other crimes, which we considered serious.

Equiano 1789: 23



Source 4: Title page of Equiano's book
© Lewisham Heritage

Questions

1. What are the five most useful things you can learn from Equiano about life in the kingdom of Benin?
2. How much does it matter that Equiano may never have been in Benin?
3. How could you check the accuracy of this information?

SHEET 7: TO WHAT EXTENT DID THE KINGDOM OF BENIN PRACTISE ENSLAVEMENT?

Source 1

The rise of Benin... is closely connected with the European demand for slaves... The profits from the trade with the Europeans gave the rulers and merchants of Benin an incentive and also, in the form of firearms, the means, to extend their rule.

Graham 1965: 318

Source 2

Benin is usually at war with its neighbours and takes many captives, whom we buy at twelve or fifteen brass bracelets each.

Duarte Pereira, a Portuguese merchant, quoted in Graham 1965: 319

Source 3

The possession of a large number of slaves was an index of the social status and prestige of a man or chief in the society. This explains why the institution of slavery had its own place in the structure of the state.

Osadolor 2001: 86

Source 4

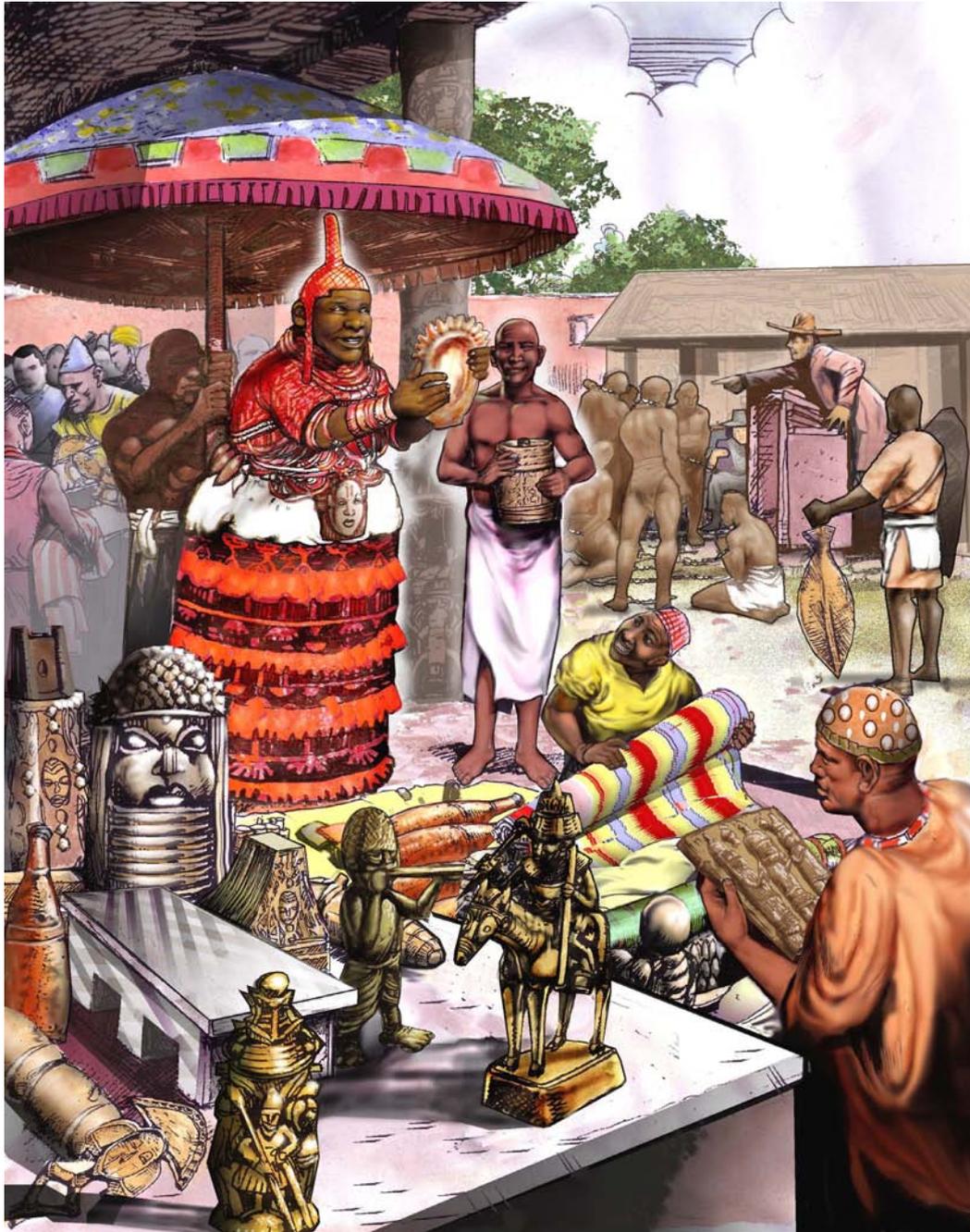
Slavery was neither an economic necessity nor a vital part of the entire political and social life of society... even after the rise of Benin as a large kingdom, its involvement in slavery was limited.

Ohadike 1964: 42

Questions

1. What do sources 1 and 2 say about the kingdom of Benin and enslavement?
2. What other explanation for enslavement does source 3 give?
3. Does source 4 agree with the others?
4. Why might there be differences of opinion between these sources?

**SHEET 8: THE OBA INSPECTS THE WORK OF THE
CRAFT GUILDS**



Source 1: Illustration by Tayo Fatunla

Questions

1. Which objects are being shown to the Oba?
2. How can you tell that the Oba is powerful?

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The CarAf Centre

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