

REVIEW ARTICLE

The History and Archaeology of the Kingdom of Benin

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Received: 30 June 2025 Accepted: 21 July 2025 Published: 09 September 2025

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Abstract

This paper explores the deep and complex history of the Kingdom of Benin, tracing its political, cultural, and artistic evolution from the 11th century CE to the aftermath of the British Punitive Expedition of 1897. Drawing on oral traditions, European travel accounts, and over a century of archaeological investigation, the study reconstructs Benin's development as a highly centralized, cosmopolitan polity whose architectural and artistic achievements rivaled those of contemporaneous global civilizations. It situates Benin within regional and transcontinental networks of trade, religion, and diplomacy, while critically examining how European contact—initially commercial and later imperial—reshaped the kingdom's internal dynamics and precipitated its eventual conquest. Special emphasis is placed on the role of archaeology in illuminating Benin's material history, from the pioneering excavations of Astley Goodwin and Frank Willett to the transformative work of Graham Connah and the recent Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) Archaeology Project. These investigations reveal not only technological sophistication and artistic excellence, but also the resilience of Edo cultural memory in the face of colonial erasure. Monumental earthworks, stratified architectural remains, and finely crafted bronzes serve as material anchors for understanding Benin's urban complexity and ritual landscapes. The paper further engages with the contemporary discourse of heritage justice, particularly the restitution of looted Benin artifacts and the ethical re-centering of African voices in the interpretation and stewardship of cultural heritage. By foregrounding local epistemologies, colonial legacies, and global restitution efforts, the study argues that the history and archaeology of Benin are inseparable from broader struggles over historical representation, reparative justice, and the future of African heritage. Benin thus emerges not only as a historical marvel but also as a critical site in the global movement to decolonize museums, restore dignity to African civilizations, and reimagine archaeology as a tool for justice.

1. Introduction

From its origins in the 11th century CE to its decline after the British Punitive Expedition of 1897, Benin commanded a strategic position between the Niger River Delta and the Yoruba kingdoms. This location granted it access to fertile lands, diverse resources, and vital trade routes, both inland and coastal. Benin became a major center of power, economic activity, and renowned artistic production throughout the second half of the millennium¹.

Understanding the history and archaeology of Benin necessitates a multifaceted approach that draw insights

from oral and written records, as well archaeology. Oral traditions, predating the late 19th century, offer a vital lens into Benin's early history as it details the preserving stories of its founding, the mighty Obas (kings), and the kingdom's cultural practices. However, written accounts, particularly European travelogues, provide another layer of information². While sparse in the early centuries, these written records become significantly more numerous following the British Punitive Expedition of 1897, offering diverse but often colonial-biased perspectives³.

Archaeology has played an increasingly crucial role in illuminating Benin's past. Though beginning

Citation: Olanrewaju Lasisi. The History and Archaeology of the Kingdom of Benin. *Annals of Archaeology*. 2025;7(1):28-34.

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tentatively in the mid-20th century, it was the groundbreaking work of Graham Connah in the 1970s that firmly established its potential for unraveling Benin's history. More recently, the Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) Archaeological Project, initiated in 2021, to uncover crucial artifacts, structures, and information about the kingdom's development and social organization, while implementing the construction of the Edo Museum in the excavated palace complex. This paper provides an overview of Benin's history and archaeology through these multifaceted sources.

2. History and Cultural Development

The history of Benin has been explored by different scholars through oral tradition and written sources⁴. Oral traditions recount its foundation by Eweka I, son of Oranmiyan, the legendary prince of Ife. Eweka I established the enduring lineage of Obas (kings). Preceding the Obas were the Ogisos, semi-mythical figures revered for their perceived semi-divine status. Around the 14th century, a new era dawned – the Ogiso dynasty was replaced by a powerful monarchy that centralized power and transformed Benin⁵. This marked a pivotal moment in Benin's history as it transformed into a centralized monarchy with a hierarchical social structure. The Oba wielded political, religious, and economic power, and governed through a system of appointed officials and councils.

Benin's location on the edge of the Niger River Delta propelled it toward becoming a regional center bustling with trade. Merchants ventured to Benin City, the well-planned capital, from neighboring states and as far as Europe. Agricultural production, coupled with the trade of ivory, timber, palm oil, and pepper, formed the backbone of a flourishing economy. Religion permeated Benin society, with a complex belief system centered on various deities, ancestral spirits, and the veneration of nature. These beliefs show strong correlations with broader Yoruba religious practices⁶.

Life in Benin was highly organized, with a clear distinction between the capital city and hundreds of semi-autonomous villages. Village elders, known as the Edion, were key figures, managing land distribution and local governance. Beyond practical affairs, artistic life flourished. Griots preserved history and legend through storytelling, musicians filled celebrations with vibrant energy, and Iwoki held astronomical knowledge tied to traditional spiritual practices⁷.

3. Benin and the Europeans

The 15th century marked the beginning of a

transformative era for Benin, as European powers – first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and later the British – initiated contact, drawn by the kingdom's resources and trade potential. These interactions profoundly shaped Benin's trajectory, as goods, technologies, ideas, and religion flowed between these distant worlds⁸. This exchange was deeply influenced by the context of European exploration, colonial ambition, and the nascent transatlantic slave trade.

The Portuguese, pioneers in African coastal exploration, brought European textiles, firearms, and other manufactured goods that both fascinated and influenced Benin's material culture. In return, they sought valuable commodities like ivory, pepper, and tragically, enslaved people. This trade, while initially small in scale, foreshadowed a much darker future. The Dutch quickly rose as commercial rivals in the region, vying for control of resources and trading routes⁹.

Alongside trade, Portuguese missionaries introduced Christianity into Benin. While some conversions occurred, particularly among sections of the elite, the impact of Christianity remained relatively limited in the early centuries. Traditional religious beliefs, deeply intertwined with social structures and rituals, retained their dominance in society.

As the transatlantic slave trade grew during the 18th century, Benin found itself tragically enmeshed in this brutal system. The insatiable European demand for enslaved labor warped Benin's economy and internal dynamics. While some profited from the slave trade, it destabilized social structures and fueled regional conflicts. Warfare intensified as Benin raided neighboring territories to procure captives for sale to Europeans. Benin's decline culminated violently in the British Punitive Expedition of 1897. Fueled by economic ambitions and a desire to assert dominance, Britain dispatched a force led by Admiral Sir Harry Rawson. Despite facing fierce resistance, the British sacked Benin City, looted the royal palace, and stole countless priceless artifacts. This marked both the downfall of the independent kingdom and the beginning of a protracted debate about cultural restitution that resonates to this day¹⁰. British control brought sweeping change, eroding traditional power structures and imposing colonial rule.

Despite colonialism's devastating impact, the legacy of Benin remains vibrant among the Edo people. Determined efforts are underway to reclaim looted artifacts, revitalize traditional customs, and promote deeper understandings of Benin's past. Museums play

a crucial role in showcasing Benin's heritage, while archaeological work helps piece together a fuller picture of life in the Benin kingdom¹¹.

4. Archaeology in Benin

The exploration of Benin's cultural heritage has inspired several archaeological projects since the mid-20th century, beginning with Astley John Hilary Goodwin's pioneering work in 1954. His efforts, particularly focuses on the thatched cities and the recurrent fires that shaped its landscape¹². Goodwin faced unique challenges posed by the Benin's specific stratigraphy that required the development of innovative excavation techniques and a careful analysis of architectural remains. Goodwin confronted the complex stratigraphical conditions, where traditional cultural patterns and unique environmental factors complicated the creation of a clear chronological pottery sequence. Goodwin also confronted complex subsurface conditions such as the suspended water-tables held up by reticulated clay floors from earlier palace sites. These conditions posed unique challenges for archaeological interpretation, especially with the architecture of steps, altars, and sumps intersecting with the archaeological layers.

In response to Benin City's complex subsurface conditions, Goodwin developed innovative excavation techniques. His use of a paver-face above the surface for locating metal objects, though yielding smaller finds, showcased his commitment to detail and preservation. He also employed a 'microtome approach' for creating vertical sections and meticulously charting the changes within soil, potsherds, and other cultural materials.

Goodwin introduced the architectural layout of Benin kingdom to the forefront of scholarship by describing the unique roofing style designed to protect wall tops and the delicate balance between traditional needs and resources, with walls prioritized over room space. He observed a shift away from traditional materials like timber and palm leaves toward modern corrugated iron and aluminum, highlighting the adaptability of building practices. Religious structures held a particular significance, often incorporating altars and shrines within traditional houses. Goodwin's documentation of roofing styles, wall construction, and the layout of domestic structures provided a deeper understanding of how the people of Benin shaped their living spaces. This pioneering work revealed a deep-rooted tradition and environmental adaptation.

Goodwin's meticulous inspections of traditional houses in Benin underscored the limitations of

relying solely on stratigraphy for age assessment. He advocated for a multifaceted approach that considered existing architecture, environmental factors, and the influence of religious beliefs on Benin's built environment. In his observation, environmental factors and the complex religious beliefs of the aristocracy fundamentally influenced Benin's architecture. Despite inefficiencies, a deeper analysis revealed a traditional pattern that efficiently addressed local difficulties, thus striking a balance between environment and tradition. The construction techniques in Benin reflected this environmental adaptation. Building materials like glossy palm leaf roofs and earth walls, while seemingly inefficient by modern standards, represented solutions tailored to both climate and resource availability. These techniques, coupled with cycles of maintenance and repair, struck a careful balance between tradition and the realities of the environment. Religious practices, such as laying new clay floors after fires, played an essential role in shaping the city's architectural evolution.

Goodwin's excavation findings revealed a recurring pattern after each fire— a meticulous process of clearing potsherds and laying new clay floors over the remnants of carbon and fine debris. This signified a cycle of rebuilding that followed each devastating fire. Building walls were at times substantially thickened, alluding to refurbishments, and in some instances, the new structures mirrored the plans of their predecessors. Notably, the archaeological evidence hinted at the catastrophic impact of the fire that engulfed Benin on February 21, 1897. Goodwin's work underscored the inherent challenges in accurately dating these archaeological layers, given the brief intervals between fires and the unsuitability of carbon-14 dating for such short timeframes. Moreover, the complex stratigraphy of the site, characterized by layers of altars, steps, and walls, posed some puzzles in deciphering the chronological sequence of events and identifying the pottery types accurately. Despite the formidable challenges posed by dating and stratification, his work illuminated the city's architecture and the transformative impact of fires on its evolution.

Subsequent to Goodwin's work, Frank Willett embarked on research that revealed the exquisite artistry encapsulated in Benin bronzes. His meticulous analysis of these artifacts brought to light the sophisticated metallurgical skills of the Benin kingdom and the important cultural narratives they carried. Willett's work significantly elevated

the global appreciation for West African art and fundamentally challenged the Eurocentric biases that had long diminished its significance.

Building upon the archaeological groundwork laid by Goodwin, Willett's scholarship demonstrated that Benin was not only a city of architectural ingenuity but also a center of remarkable artistic accomplishment¹³. Through painstakingly analyzing the bronze sculptures, Willett uncovered their complex casting techniques that showcases the technological prowess of Benin's craftspeople. But beyond their technical brilliance, Willett meticulously decoded the symbolism woven into these artworks. They became windows into Benin's history, mythology, and the very heart of its cultural identity. Willett's work arrived at a crucial juncture in the study of African history and art. By placing Benin bronzes on par with masterpieces of European art, he refuted the colonial narratives that had dismissed African cultures as artistically primitive. His research contributed to a broader shift within scholarship toward a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of global art history.

Graham Connah's excavations between 1961 and 1964 took place at different sites chosen to illuminate different aspects of Benin's past¹⁴. His work at the Benin Museum site, identified as a former palace complex, revealed evidence of earlier structures beneath the later palace. At Clerks' Quarters, four cuttings yielded superimposed occupation phases—late, middle, and early—each with distinct artifact assemblages. Sites such as Ogba Road and Reservation Road uncovered segments of the vast network of earthworks that once surrounded and demarcated Benin's territory.

At the Benin Museum site, Connah found a distribution of pottery forms and decorations, alongside both European and indigenous smoking pipes, illustrating the impact of long-distance trade. Discoveries from Clerks' Quarters, including iron hoes, bronze sheets, and intricate openwork rings, attest to a high level of technological sophistication within Benin society, with the 19th century context of some depositions shedding light on more recent periods of development. Perhaps Connah's greatest contribution lies in challenging the colonial-era narratives that portrayed Benin as a civilization either created through external influence or appearing suddenly with no local antecedents. His meticulous documentation of urban growth patterns, the scale of the earthworks, and the evidence of technological prowess demonstrated that Benin was the product of internal development and innovation.

5. The Monumental Earthworks of Benin

The Kingdom boasts a remarkable feat of ancient engineering: a vast network of earthworks widely recognized as the world's longest¹⁵. The main city wall alone stretches for 15 kilometers, plunging to depths of 20 meters in some places. This is further complemented by a system of inner rings spanning an astounding 16,000 kilometers, encircling over 500 interconnected settlements within a 6,500 square kilometer area. These colossal earth mounds and ditches are a testament to the kingdom's impressive population density, expansionist ambitions, complex social organization, and a centralized authority capable of mobilizing massive labor forces. Scholars like Graham Connah and Patrick Darling have made significant strides in surveying these earthworks, documenting approximately 1,000 kilometers. Despite their efforts, a mere 7.25% of the entire network has been recorded¹⁶. This means roughly 15,000 kilometers remain unexplored. The findings of Graham Connah and Patrick Darling challenged conventional explanations regarding the purpose and origin of the earthworks. They suggested that these monumental structures were constructed during the pre-dynastic or early dynastic settlement period, potentially without direct attribution to a powerful centralized polity. This interpretation challenged the prevailing notion that the earthworks primarily served defensive purposes against external threats or as enclosures for Benin's slave settlements. Debates also arose concerning the timeframe of earthwork construction, construction techniques employed, and their significance in elucidating the state formation processes of pre-dynastic and early dynastic settlements in the ancient kingdom¹⁷. While earlier excavations produced radiocarbon dates ranging from the 13th to the 15th centuries A.D., subsequent research has pushed the origins of the earthworks back to the early 8th century A.D. at Ekhoro Niro, east of Benin¹⁸. Given the scarcity of data, there remains an urgent archaeological and historical imperative to conduct comprehensive surveys, dating of selected earthwork samples, and regional excavations in Benin and its surroundings. This is essential to gain a more accurate understanding and appreciation of the true historical context of pre-colonial Benin.

6. Recent Studies

The most recent work in Benin started Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) Archaeology Project. The project which started in 2021 takes a multidisciplinary approach, seamlessly blending

archaeology, history, art history, and museum studies to illuminate the complex layers of Benin's past. Currently focused on the future site of the Edo Museum of West African Art within the historic Benin palace complex, the project meticulously investigates the city's evolution, exploring its artistic heritage, technological prowess, spiritual practices, and changing urban landscape.

The EMOWAA project's extensive excavations reveal a treasure trove of discoveries that span centuries. From pre-colonial structures, like clay platforms and post holes, to relics of the colonial era, these finds shed light on Benin City's dynamic history. Cowrie shells, used for trade and divination, alongside intricately decorated pottery fragments, underscore the site's economic activity and artistic traditions. Researchers are also uncovering compelling evidence of the kingdom's spiritual life, including ritual sites, deposits, and beautifully carved ivory objects that shed light on religious practices and artistry. Findings like European ceramics, bullets, and even a colonial-era police belt buckle starkly illustrate the changes wrought by early contact and colonialism. Evidence of bronze slags, fired clay, and evidence of ironworking and even glassmaking suggest a technologically complex society with advanced skills and trade networks. The EMOWAA project has significant implications for the present and future. Excavations within the planned museum site provide invaluable training for Nigerian and international archaeologists and students. Artifacts uncovered will form a cornerstone of the museum's collections to ensure Benin's artistic and cultural legacy is sustainably showcased on a global stage. With a focus on preservation and education, the EMOWAA project is ensuring that the discoveries made today will shape understanding and inspire pride for generations to come.

7. Primary Sources

Understanding Benin's history, especially during its colonial interactions, requires consulting a diverse range of primary sources. Early European accounts, like Olfert Dapper's "Description of Africa" (1668) and early Portuguese records, provide valuable, though often biased, perspectives on Benin City's urban grandeur and the awe it inspired in visitors. Later accounts, such as those by explorer Hugh Clapperton, offer 19th-century observations. Scholarly works like Alan F. C. Ryder's "Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897" critically analyze centuries of complex interactions between Benin and European powers. Archaeological investigations, prominently Graham

Connah's "The Archaeology of Benin" and the ongoing EMOWAA Archaeology Project, uncover the tangible remnants of Benin's past. Their analysis of structures, artifacts, and stratigraphy offers a scientific counterpoint to written descriptions. Edo oral traditions, including tales of the Ogiso dynasty, the arrival of Oranmiyan, and other foundational events, preserve the kingdom's self-understanding, social structures, and how historical events were remembered through generations. Historical texts like Jacob Egharevba's "Short History of Benin" provide overviews of the Benin's past, its rulers, and interactions with other nations. Even externally focused records, such as the Guinness Book of World Records' recognition of the Benin Walls, underscore the kingdom's scale and ambition. British colonial documents, especially those surrounding the 1897 Benin Expedition, provide information about this period of conflict and change. However, historians like Philip Igbafe remind us to critically analyze these sources in order to unravel the complex economic and political motivations driving British actions¹⁹.

8. Further Readings

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