

PROLOGUE · C-8

The Benin Empire: A City Larger Than Lisbon, By a Portuguese Captain's Own Account

c. 1180 CE – 1897 CE

CONTRIBUTION · SECULAR & POLITICAL



A Learn More reference document — full narrative, sourcing, and context beyond the timeline card.

I. Not Discovered. Visited.

The Benin Empire (also called the Edo Empire), centered on Benin City in what is now southern Nigeria, traces its ruling Oba dynasty to Eweka I in the 13th century, with the city of Ubinu — later Benin City — established by 1180. By the time Portuguese explorers reached it around 1485, it was already a mature state with a documented dynastic history stretching back some three hundred years. It was not discovered. It was visited.

II. Urban Planning and Engineering

Benin City was laid out on a fractal, planned design: eleven administrative divisions, each a smaller replica of the Oba's court, containing organized compounds of houses, workshops, and public buildings. The city and surrounding kingdom were also encircled by an extensive system of earthwork walls and moats, built up over successive Obas' reigns, particularly under Oba Ewuare (r. c. 1440–1473). Estimates of the total combined length of these earthworks vary significantly by source; the exact aggregate figure should be verified against a specific academic source (e.g., archaeologist Patrick Darling's published surveys) before being cited as a specific number.

Contemporary European visitors did not describe a primitive settlement. A Portuguese ship captain's account, compiled in Dutch geographer Olfert Dapper's 1668 description of Africa, recorded that “Great Benin, where the king resides, is larger than Lisbon; all the streets run straight and as far as the eye can see... The city is wealthy and industrious. It is so well governed that theft is unknown and the people live in such security that they have no doors to their houses.” This is a European eyewitness account, not an African claim requiring outside verification.

III. Metallurgy and the Bronzes

Benin's court artisans, working in a dedicated guild system under royal patronage, produced thousands of cast bronze and brass plaques, commemorative heads, and ivory carvings depicting Obas, court life, and historical events — collectively known today as the Benin Bronzes. This was lost-wax casting at a level of technical sophistication that stunned European collectors when the works began reaching Europe. Nearly all surviving pieces in Western museums today left Benin the same way: looted by a British force that burned Benin City in 1897 and shipped the royal collection abroad. Their ongoing repatriation is a live, unresolved issue — appropriate for a future Living Record entry under ERA VII, not this Prologue entry.

NC LOCAL LENS

This entry is continental in scope (West Africa) and has no documentable Fayetteville/Cumberland County connection for the pre-1452/early-contact period covered here. Per project standard, no local lens is forced.

Sources & Citations (Chicago, Notes-Bibliography)

1. “The Walls of Benin: Four Times Longer Than The Great Wall of China!” Ancient Origins. March 22, 2023.
<https://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-africa/walls-benin-0016222>.
2. “Benin Empire.” New World Encyclopedia. Accessed August 2026.
https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Benin_Empire.

3. "The Benin Empire." Right for Education. Accessed August 2026. <https://rightforeducation.org/2017/10/11/the-benin-empire/>.
4. "Saylor.org's Ancient Civilizations of the World/Benin and the Forest Kingdoms." Wikibooks. Accessed August 2026.

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