

THE BRITISH MUSEUM



The wealth of Africa The kingdom of Benin

Presentation

Supported by



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



The CarAf Centre

www.britishmuseum.org



How much can we learn about Benin from its art?

Front cover image: Carved ivory mask, Benin, 16th century, British Museum.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THIS PICTURE?

The British army brought back objects from Benin, and they can now be seen in museums around the world, including the British Museum.



Source 1: Photograph of the Benin punitive expedition, 1897
British Museum

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Source 2: Bell
British Museum



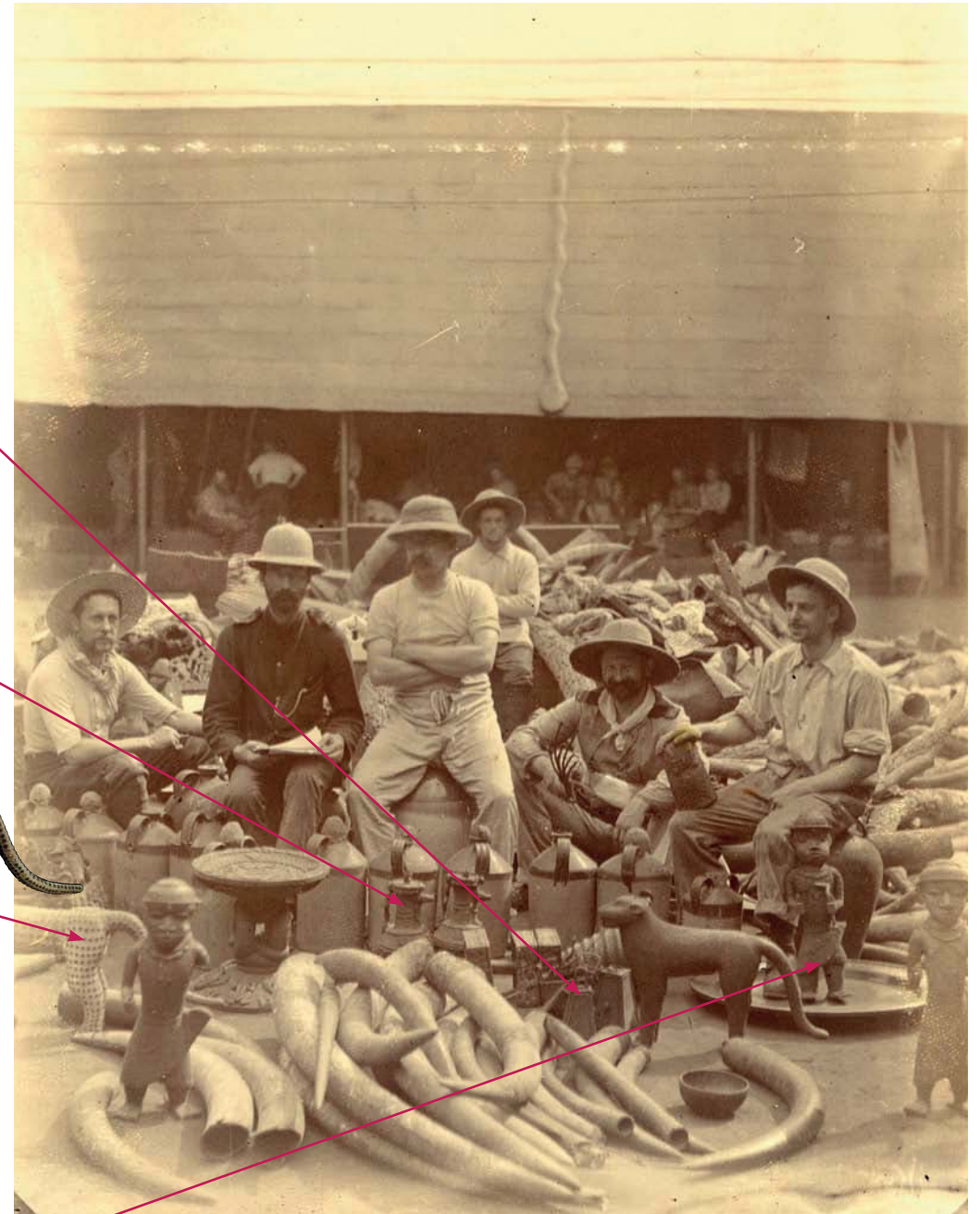
Source 3: Jug
British Museum



Source 4: Leopard
British Museum



Source 5: Man with pipe
British Museum



Source 1: Photograph of the Benin punitive expedition, 1897
British Museum

HOW SKILFUL WERE THE BENIN CRAFTSMEN?

Source 6

Ivory salt-cellar, showing European figures, Benin, 16th century

British Museum



HOW SKILFUL WERE THE BENIN CRAFTSMEN?

Source 7

Bronze tusk stand, Benin, 16th century

British Museum



HOW SKILFUL WERE THE BENIN CRAFTSMEN?

Source 8

Ivory armlet, showing Oba (king)
with Europeans, Benin, 18th century

British Museum



The Oba

Portuguese soldier

HOW SKILFUL WERE THE BENIN CRAFTSMEN?

Source 9: Bronze horseman,
Benin, 16th century
British Museum



HOW SKILFUL WERE THE BENIN CRAFTSMEN?

Source 10

In the palace of the Oba (king) lived guilds of specialists such as leopard hunters, astrologers, drummers and craftspeople who produced brass, ivory, wood sculptures, embroidered textiles and leather fans for the Oba, his chiefs and priests. These skilled artisans lived close together and often married within their guilds.

British Museum

What do these slides tell you about Benin craftsmen?

Source 9: Bronze horseman, Benin, 16th century
British Museum



WHAT DO THE OBJECTS TELL US ABOUT INTERNATIONAL TRADE AT THE TIME?

Benin's best-known works are its 'bronzes' (usually made of brass).

But the metal didn't come from Benin, it came from Europe.

The metal was cast in the form of manillas and other objects, which were then taken to Benin to be exchanged.

They would then be melted down and used to make plaques and other objects.

Some of these were even sold back to the Europeans.



Source 11: Oba with attendants, and Portuguese men in the background, Benin, 16th century
British Museum



Source 12: Manilla, made in Birmingham and traded in West Africa
British Museum

LOCATION

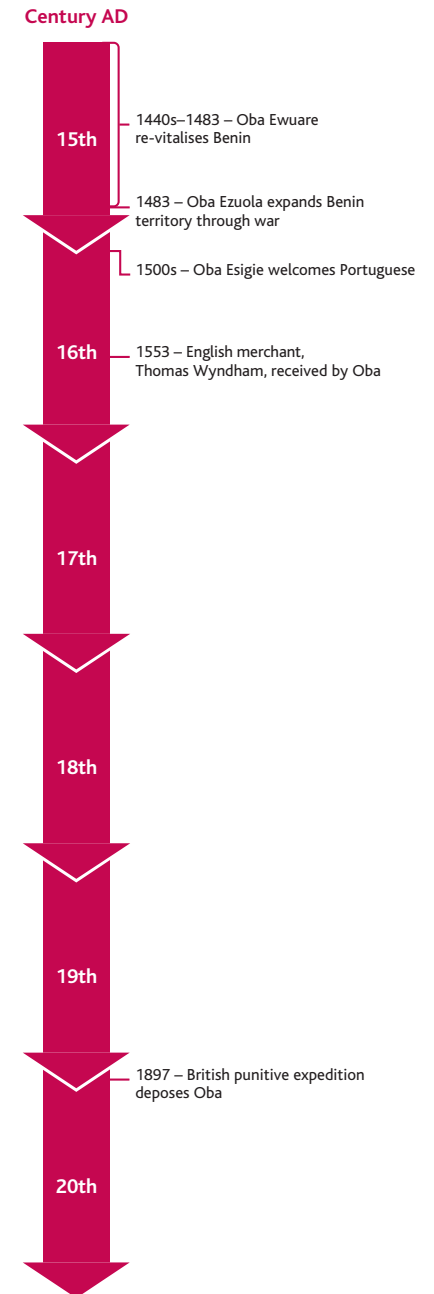
Benin rose to prominence partly due to its strategic position between the north-south and east-west trade routes, which enabled it to become wealthy. Its proximity to the sea also meant that it attracted the attention of European traders.

These traders visiting Benin, in the 15th and 16th century, discovered a society every bit as organised and structured as the great courts of Europe, controlling every aspect of life and not least, foreign trade.

How did it become so powerful?



Approximate extent of the kingdom of Benin in the 16th century



HOW POWERFUL WAS THE
OBA (KING)?

How can you tell which figure
is the Oba?



Source 13: Oba with attendants,
Benin, 16th century
British Museum

HOW POWERFUL WAS THE OBA (KING)?

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The Oba



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**HOW POWERFUL WAS THE
OBA (KING)?**

**How can you tell which figure
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Which ones are his attendants?

The Oba



Source 13: Oba with attendants,
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British Museum

HOW POWERFUL WAS THE OBA (KING)?

How can you tell which figure is the Oba?

Which ones are his attendants?

What does this plaque tell us about the Oba?

The Oba



Source 13: Oba with attendants,
Benin, 16th century
British Museum

THE OBA IN 1897

How similar is this image of the Oba to the one in the bronze plaque?



Source 14: The Oba, 1897
British Museum

THE OBA IN 1897

How similar is this image of the Oba to the one in the bronze plaque?

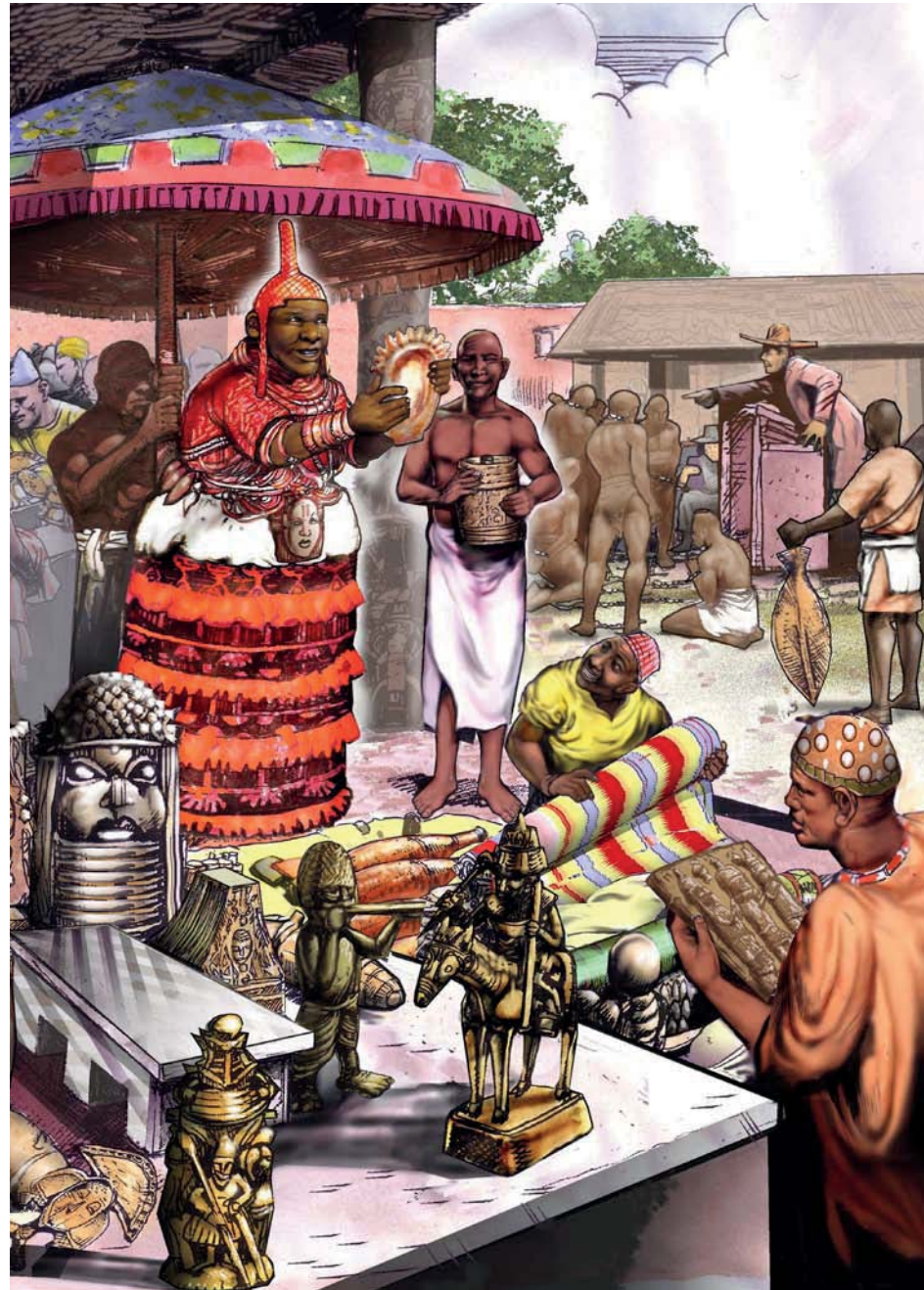
If it is a bit different, that's not surprising. In this picture he is under arrest by the British, and the three 'attendants' are his guards.



Source 14: The Oba, 1897
British Museum

THE OBA INSPECTS THE WORK OF THE CRAFT GUILDS

Can you find...?



The Oba

A mask-pendant

A Portuguese
slave-trader

An executioner

Slaves

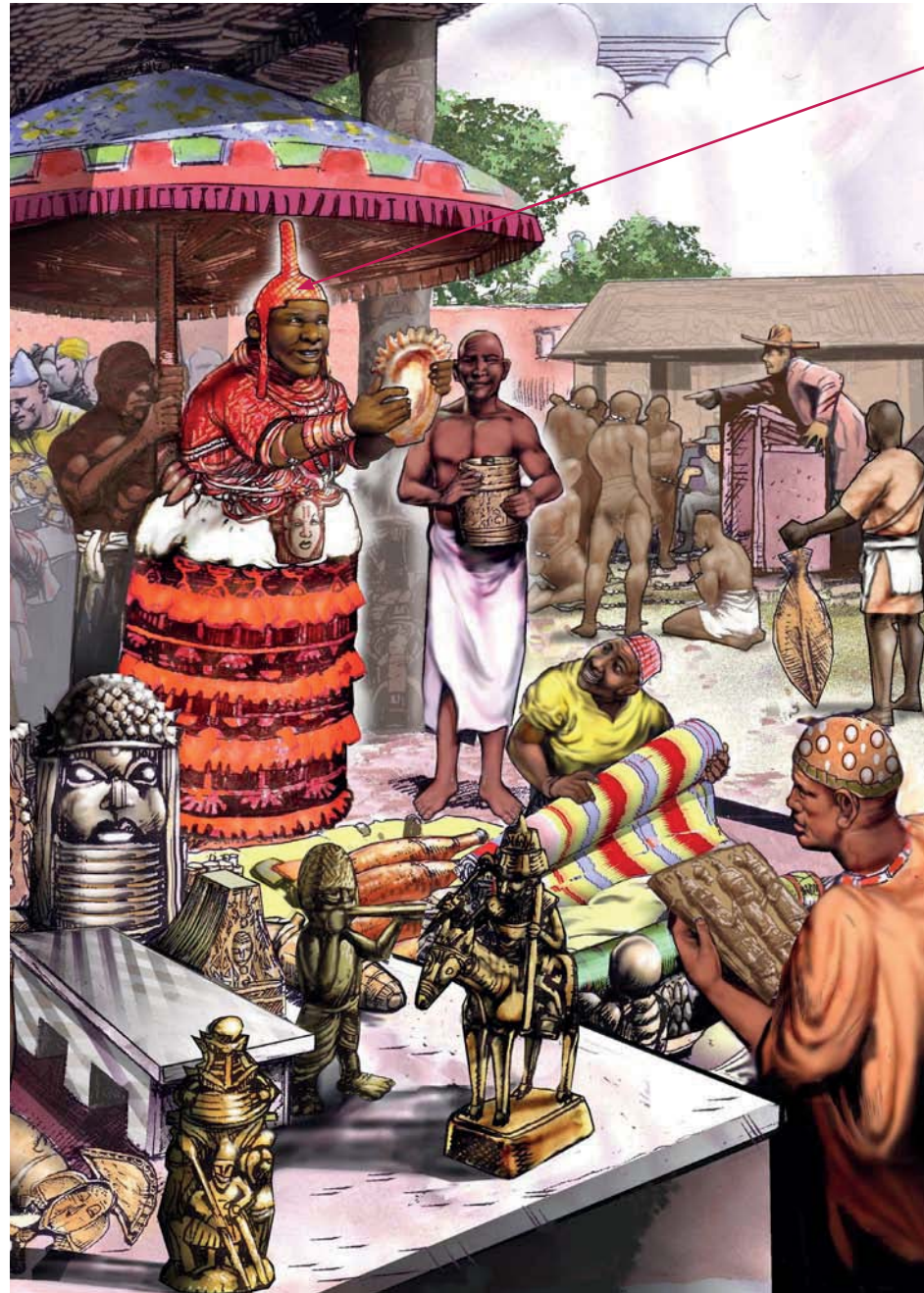
A cloth-maker

A bronze-caster

Source 15: Illustration by
Tayo Fatunla

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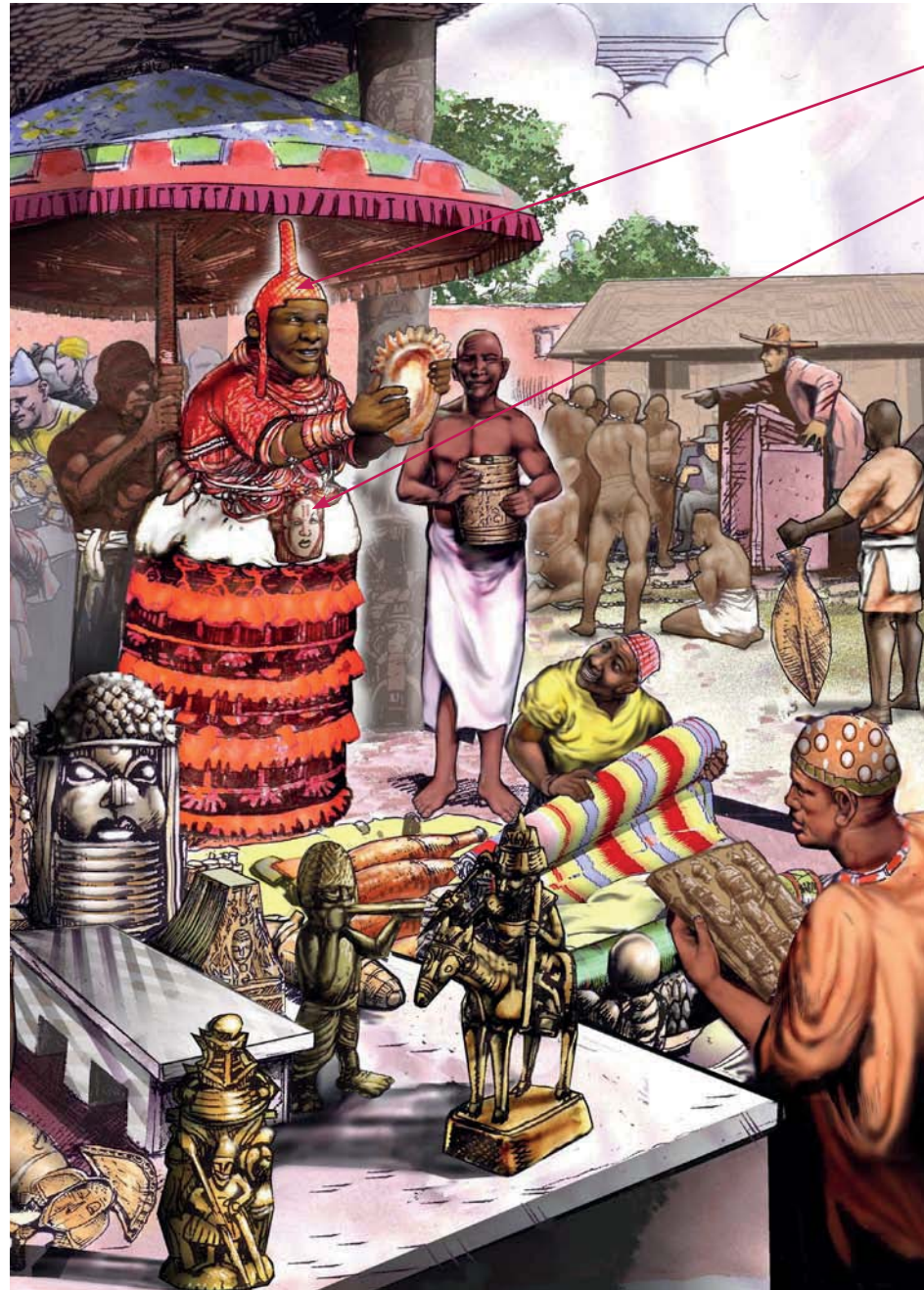
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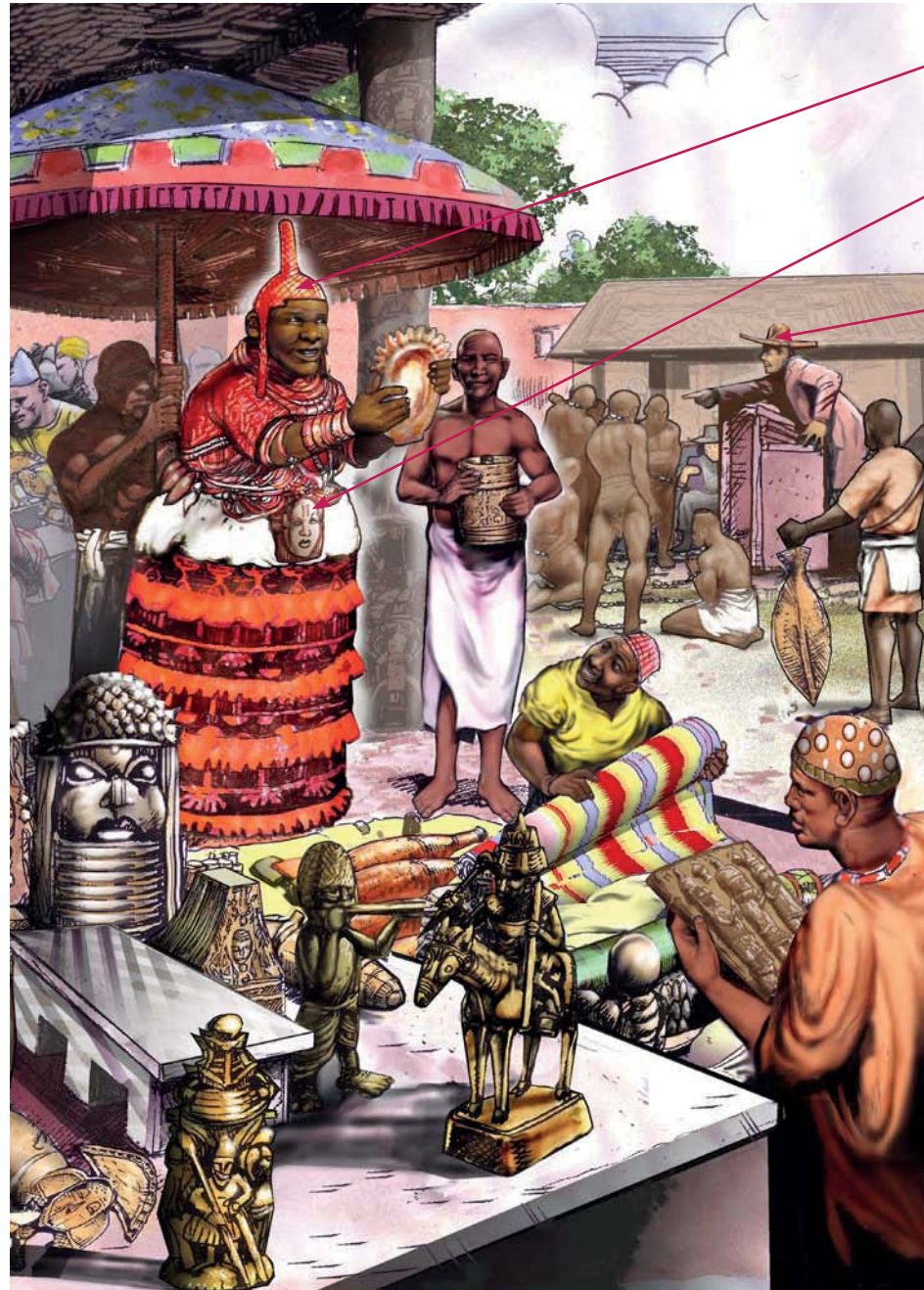
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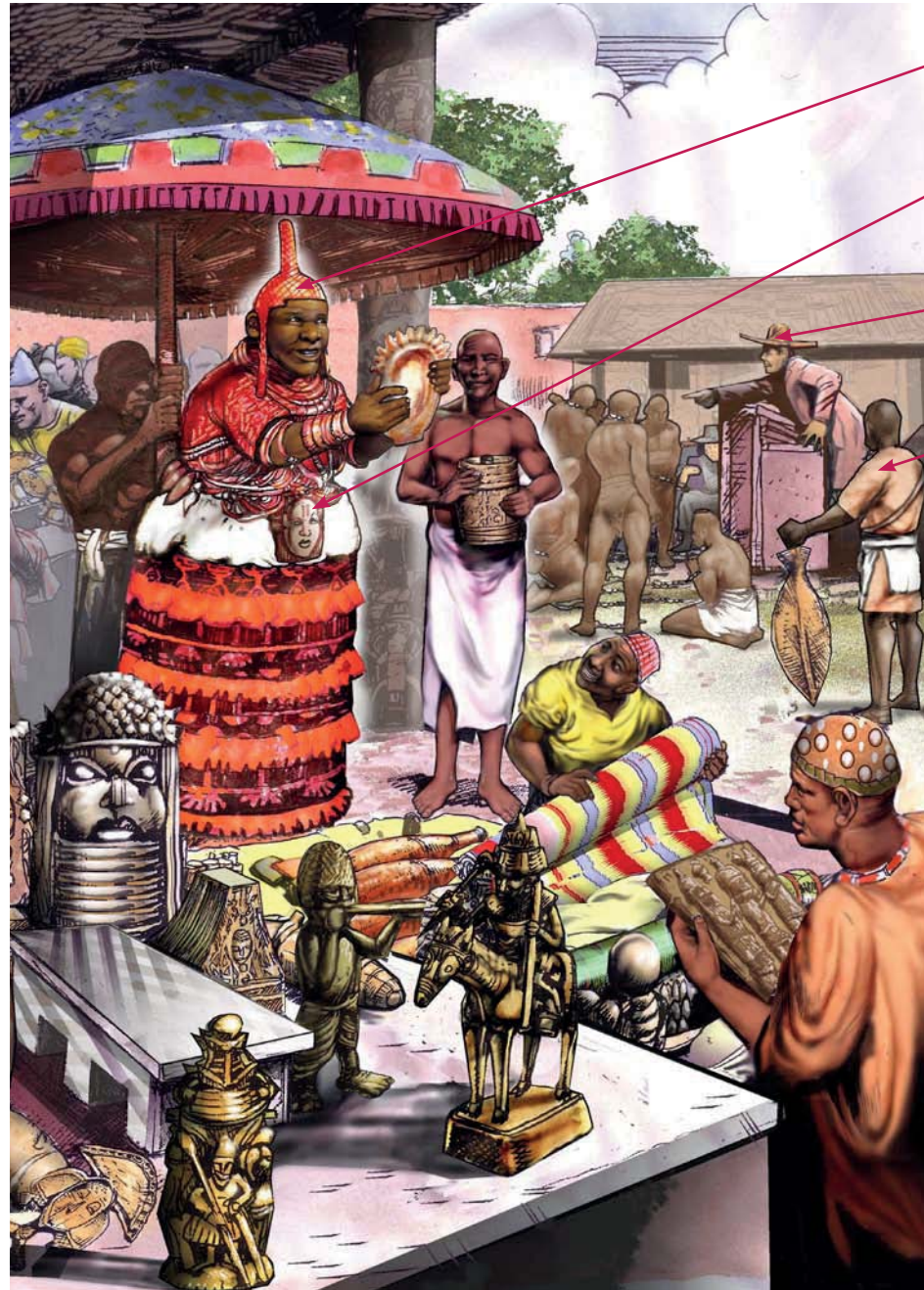
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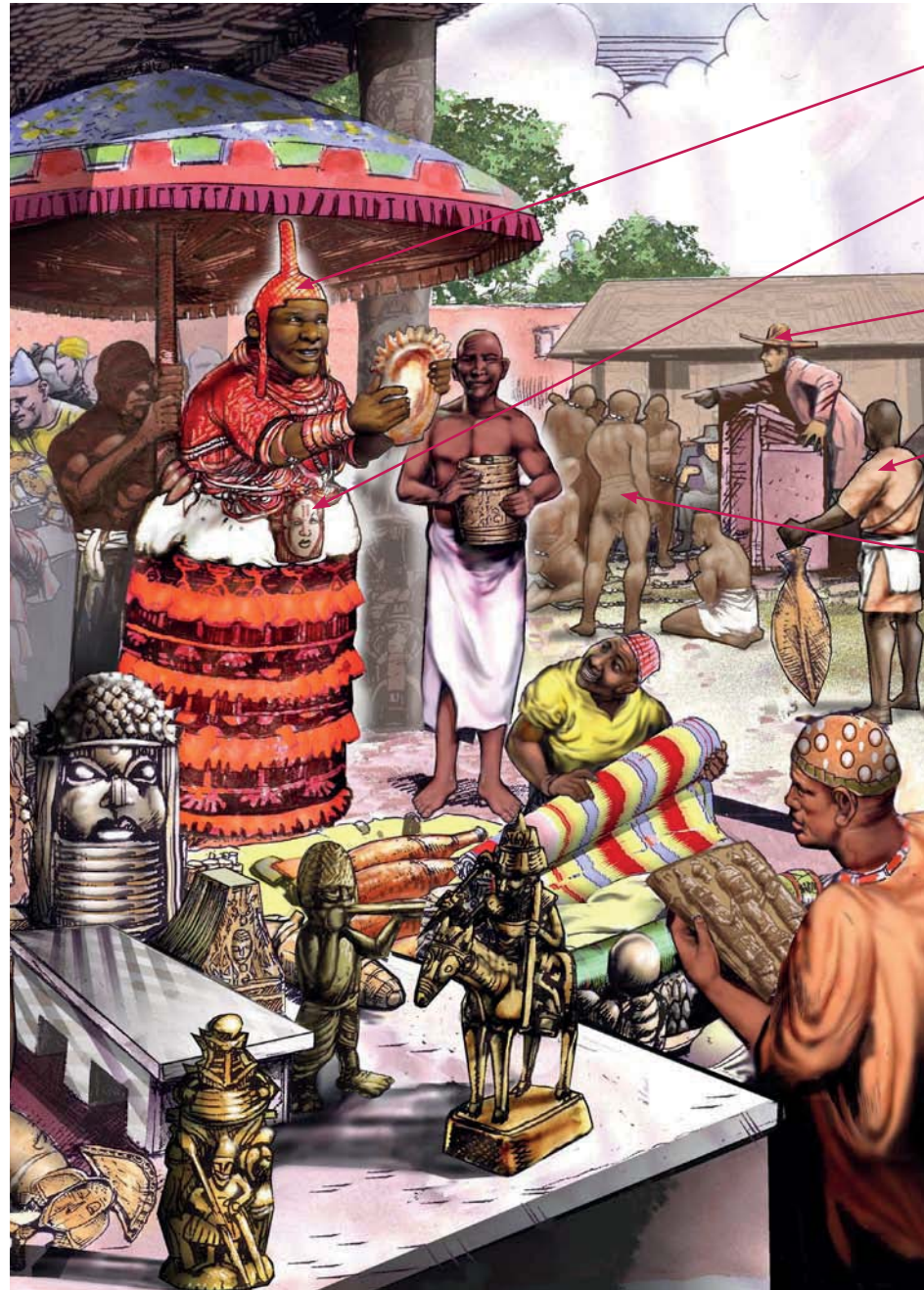
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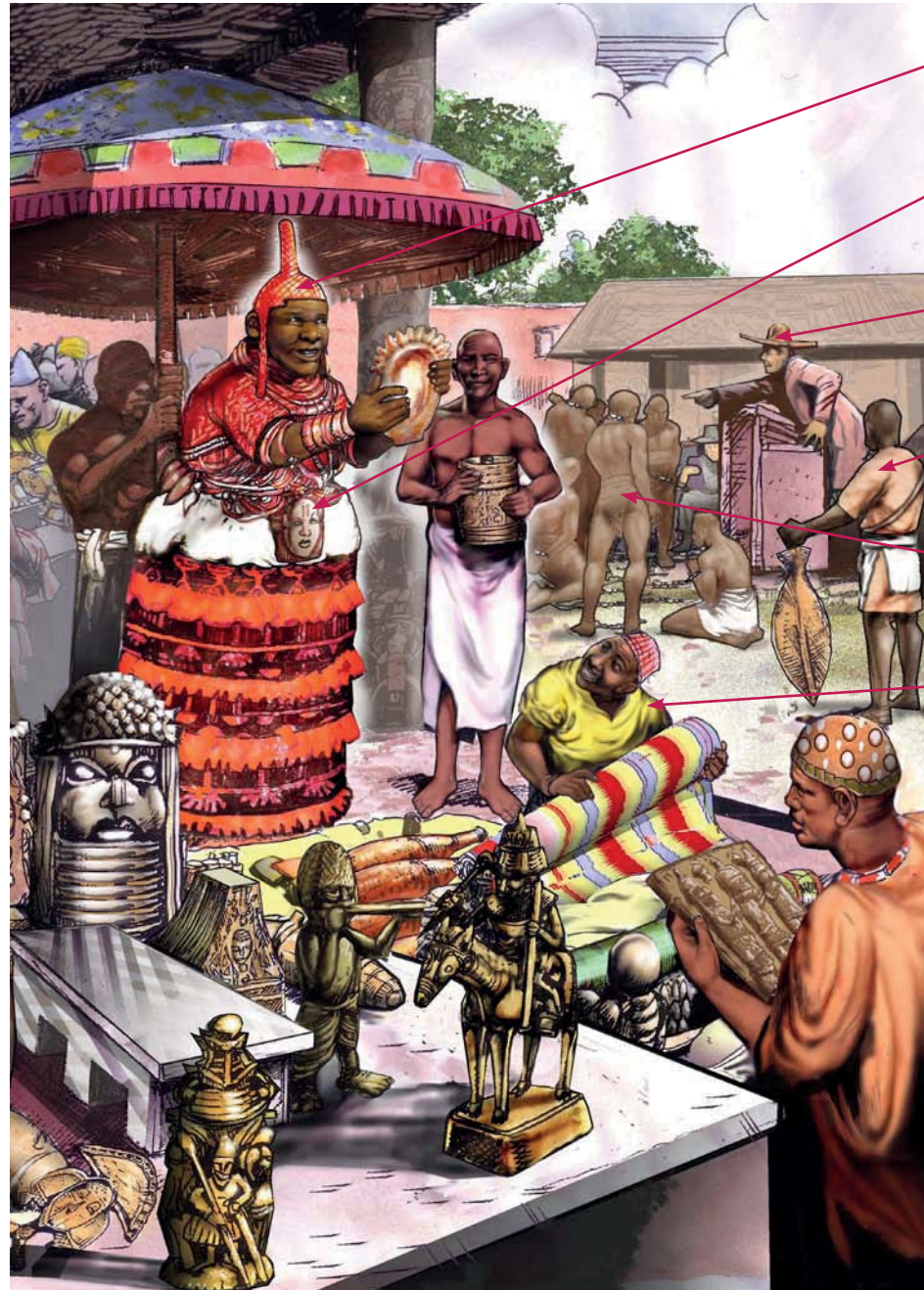
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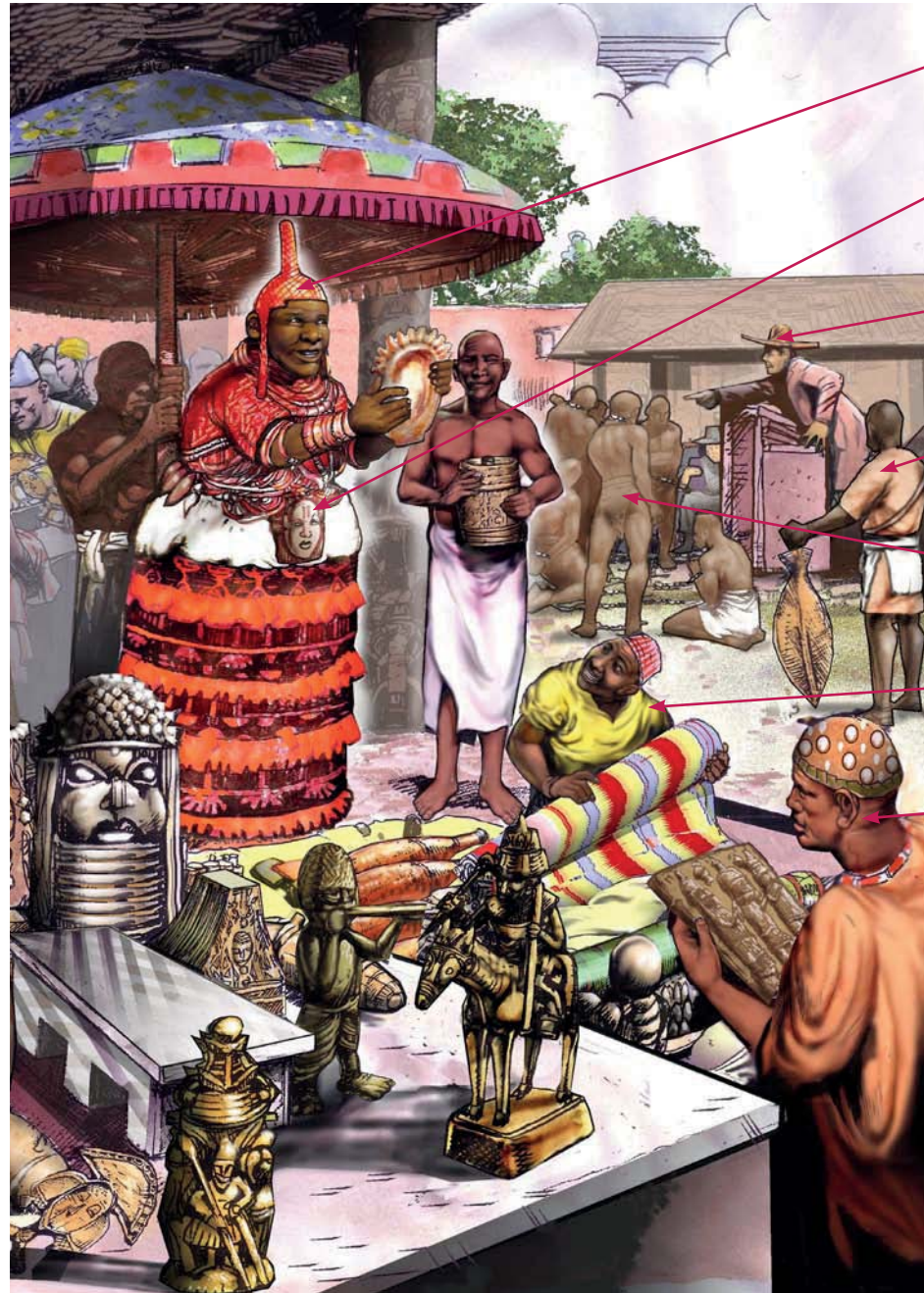
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WAS TRADE A REASON FOR BENIN'S POWER?

Source 16

Benin traded with Europeans to obtain guns, powder, metals, salt and cloth in exchange for palm oil, ivory cloth, beads, pepper and slaves. 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

What goods did Benin import and export?

How did its geographical position help?



Source 17: Portuguese soldier, possibly a mercenary, Benin, 16th century
British Museum

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Source 18

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

How did Europeans help Benin become powerful?



Source 17: Portuguese soldier, possibly a mercenary, Benin, 16th century
British Museum

**WAS MILITARY STRENGTH A
REASON FOR BENIN'S POWER?**

How is this warrior equipped?



Source 19: Warrior, Benin, 16th century
British Museum

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How is this warrior equipped?



Conical helmet

Source 19: Warrior, Benin, 16th century
British Museum

WAS MILITARY STRENGTH A REASON FOR BENIN'S POWER?

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Conical helmet

Surcoat

Source 19: Warrior, Benin, 16th century
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WAS MILITARY STRENGTH A REASON FOR BENIN'S POWER?

Source 20

The use of weapons alone was not the only factor which added to success in warfare. The overall strength of Benin was the result of armies that could be called upon to perform its tasks. Dutch sources have pointed out that the Oba could mobilize 20,000 soldiers in a day, and raise an army of 80,000 to 180,000 men. His authority stretched over many cities, towns, and villages.

Wysinger 2008

How is this warrior equipped?

Source 21

From the 17th century European traders began to sell firearms in large quantities. These played a crucial role. 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

What other strengths did the Benin army have?

Using all the information, why do you think Benin became powerful?



Source 19: Warrior, Benin, 16th century
British Museum

WHAT WAS BENIN CITY LIKE?

Source 22

The defensive fortification of Benin City, the capital, consisted of ramparts and moats, enclosing 4,000 square kilometres of community lands. In total, the Benin wall system contained over 10,000 kilometres 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

How impressive was Benin City?

The picture in source 23 was based on reports from European travellers rather than on first-hand observations. Bearing that in mind, how reliable is the information it gives?



Source 23: Benin City, published by Dutch writer Olfert Dapper in 1668

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BENIN PLAQUES TODAY?

Source 24

It need scarcely be said that at the first sight of these remarkable works of art we were at once astounded at such an unexpected find, and puzzled to account for so highly developed an art among a race so entirely barbarous.

Read and Dalton 1898: 271

Source 25

When I see a Benin Bronze I immediately think of the mastery of technology and art – the welding of the two. I think immediately of a cohesive ancient civilisation. It increases a sense of self esteem because it makes you understand that African society actually produced some great civilisations, established some great cultures.

Nigerian Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka 2009

How are the reactions of these two people towards the bronze plaques from Benin

a) similar?

b) different?

How have these objects changed people's ideas about Africa?



Source 26:
Oba with attendants,
Benin, 16th century
British Museum

Your feedback

Please help the British Museum improve its educational resources for schools and teachers by giving your feedback. The first 250 teachers or tutors to complete the online survey before 12.00 on 1 September 2011 will receive a printed set of illustrations of African civilisations by artist Tayo Fatunla. Visit www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica to complete the survey and for terms and conditions.

Find out more

The British Museum's collection spans over two million years of human history and culture, all under one roof and includes world-famous objects such as the Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon sculptures, and Egyptian mummies.

The Museum's collection of over 200,000 African objects includes material from ancient to contemporary cultures. Highlights on display throughout the Museum include a magnificent brass head of a Yoruba ruler from Ife in Nigeria, vibrant textiles from across the continent, and the Throne of Weapons – a sculpture made out of guns.

For students

Students can experience and engage with the collection in many ways, from taking part in activity sessions at the Museum to using free online resources or playing interactive games in the classroom and at home.

For teachers

Search the Museum's collection online at www.britishmuseum.org for information about objects, including pictures to download or print.

Schools and teachers newsletter

Sign up to the schools and teachers newsletter to receive regular updates on free special exhibitions previews, teacher events and new free resources at www.britishmuseum.org/schools

Ancient Civilizations websites

These award-winning British Museum websites have been specially designed for students in Years 5 and 6. Each site is supported by information and guidance for teachers. www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk

The CarAf Centre

These resources have been produced by the British Museum in collaboration with The CarAf Centre, a community educational support centre and registered charity based in the London Borough of Camden. For more information, visit www.thecarafcentre.org.uk

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