

# The Benin Punitive Expedition

Benin's first contact with European visitors was with the Portuguese who arrived in 1489. The Portuguese helped Benin win battles with other African countries by giving Benin soldiers and guns, and in return the Portuguese took slaves and items to trade.

The word 'Benin' itself comes from the Portuguese. They couldn't say Ubinu which was the name given to the centre of the city and so the word was changed into Benin or Beny. This is also why the Edo people are sometimes called Bini.

The first British ships reached Benin in 1553 and they were joined by the Dutch about forty years later. At first they came to trade (sell goods) but soon the two countries were also buying slaves to work for them. By the 19th century the British were the most powerful European country in Africa. The Benin obas (kings) had seen how the British had taken over other African countries and did not want Britain to control them as well. The British thought that Benin did need controlling. In 1863, a British man, Sir Richard Burton, visited Benin and said that the Edo people performed evil human sacrifices.

In late 1896 another British man, James Robert Phillips, invaded Benin City with a team including over 250 African soldiers, to try and capture Oba Ovonramwen. The Benin army heard about Phillips and sent out a team to stop him at the village of Ugbine on 4th January 1897 where fighting broke out. Only two British officers survived the attack. This event is known as 'The Ugbine Disaster' or 'The Benin Massacre' because so many people died.

After the Benin Massacre the British attacked Benin in an operation called the 'Benin Punitive Expedition' in February 1897 and the city of Benin was completely destroyed. Treasures from the Oba's palace were stolen, thousands of people were killed and buildings were smashed and burned to the ground. The items which were stolen were removed from Benin and many ended up in private collections belonging to British and other Europeans. Many Benin art treasures are kept today in the British Museum.

After the Benin Punitive Expedition the Kingdom of Benin did not exist in the same way it had before. It became part of the Niger Coast Protectorate, which is now modern day Nigeria.

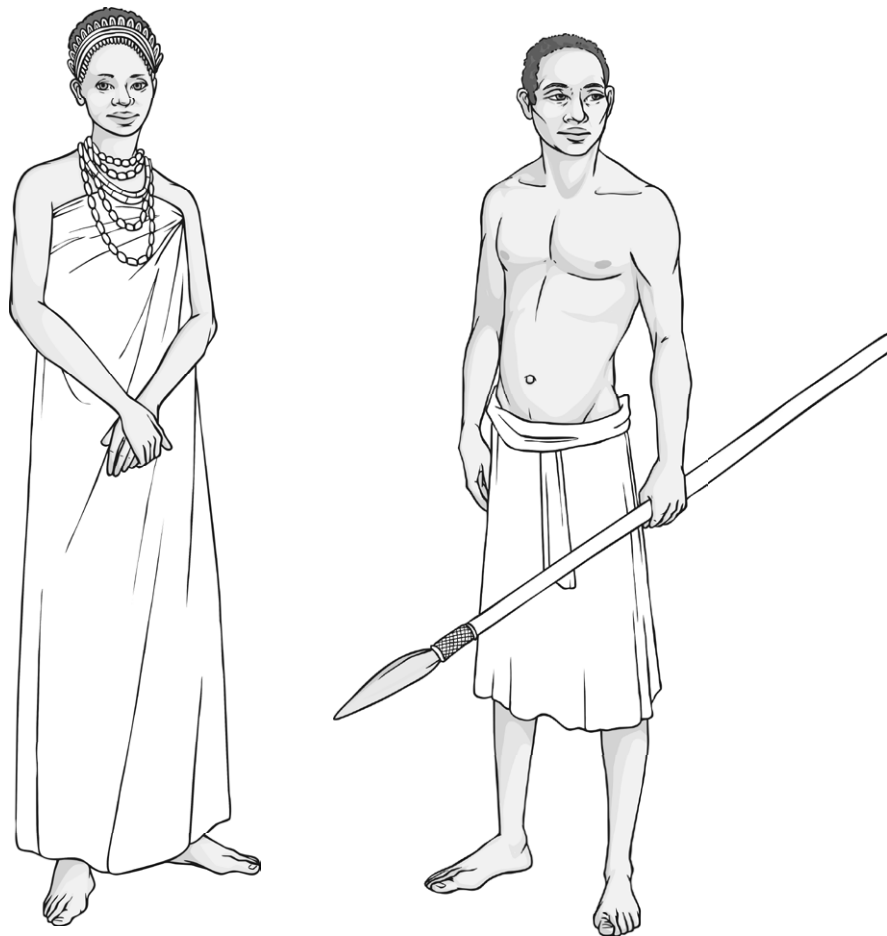


# The Benin Punitive Expedition



**Read the information about the Kingdom of Benin then answer the questions in detail.**

1. When did the Portuguese first arrive in Benin?
2. What did the Portuguese get from Benin?
3. What are the Edo people sometimes known as?
4. When did the British arrive in Benin?
5. What did Sir Richard Burton think of human sacrifice?
6. Where did the Benin army defeat James Robert Phillips and his team?
7. Do you think it was right for the British to steal art treasures from Benin during the Punitive Expedition? Explain your answer.





# The Benin Punitive Expedition

Benin's first contact with European visitors was with the Portuguese who arrived in 1489. For many years the two nations had a good relationship and they traded goods and even fought wars together. The Portuguese were able to help Benin become a major power in Africa as they supplied guns, which gave the people of Benin a great advantage over the spears and swords of their neighbours. In return the Portuguese took many of the slaves who were captured in the wars and they sold items like animal skins, which they had got from Benin. The captain of a Portuguese ship, Lourenco Pinto spoke very highly of 'great Benin' in 1691.

'Great Benin, where the King resides, is larger than Lisbon, all the streets run straight and as far as the eyes can see. The houses are large, especially that of the king which is richly decorated and has fine columns. 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 door to their houses'.

The word 'Benin' itself comes from the Portuguese. It is believed that they struggled to say Ubinu which was the name given to the centre of the city and so the word was changed into Benin or Beny. This also explains why the Edo people are sometimes referred to as Bini.

The first British ships reached Benin in 1553 and they were joined by the Dutch about forty years later. At first they came to trade but soon the two countries became major powers in the African slave trade, buying slaves to work for them in Africa and overseas. Native Edo people from Benin however were not allowed to be sent into slavery and although the Edo people used slaves captured in battle, selling slaves was very unpopular.

By the 19th century the British were the main power across Africa and they were keen to gain more control. The Benin obas had seen how the British had taken over other African countries and, unsurprisingly, they were keen to make sure that Benin did not come under British control as well. The British people in charge argued that Benin needed controlling and that the people needed civilising (changing to become more advanced). In 1863 Sir Richard Burton, who was a British consul, visited Benin. He spoke about the evil of human sacrifice and accused the Oba of interfering with the trade outside his kingdom. In 1892 Captain Henry L. Gallwey, another British consul, visited Oba Ovonramwen in Benin to try and agree how the nations could work together. However, the meeting was unsuccessful and Gallwey described the Oba as being unreasonable. In late 1896, after more arguments about trade, vice consul James Robert Phillips asked if he could invade Benin City and send the Oba Ovonramwen away. He did not wait for an answer before gathering a team including 250 African soldiers and entering the city. The Benin army heard about Phillips and sent out a team to stop him at the village of Ugbin on 4th January 1897 where fighting broke out. Only two British officers survived the attack. This event is known as 'The Ugbin Disaster' or 'The Benin Massacre' because so many people lost their lives.

After the Benin Massacre the British attacked Benin in an operation called the 'Benin Punitive Expedition'. The city of Benin was completely destroyed in this mission, which lasted for 8 days in February 1897. Treasures from the Oba's palace were stolen, thousands of people were killed and the palace and much of the city was smashed and burned to the ground. Oba Ovonramwen surrendered and was exiled (sent away) to Calabar where he lived until his death in 1914. The items, which were stolen, were removed from Benin and many ended up in private collections belonging to British and other Europeans. Many Benin art treasures are kept today in the British Museum, London.

After the Benin Punitive Expedition the Kingdom of Benin did not exist in the same way it had before. It became part of the Niger Coast Protectorate, which was in what is now modern day Nigeria.

# The Benin Punitive Expedition



**Read the information about the Kingdom of Benin then answer the questions in detail.**

1. Who were the first Europeans in Benin and when did they arrive?
2. In what ways did Benin and Portugal help each other?
3. Find 3 positive things Lourenco Pinto said about Benin.
4. Why did the Portuguese rename Ubinu as Benin?
5. When did the British arrive in Benin?
6. What did Sir Richard Burton think of human sacrifice?
7. Why did James Robert Phillips invade Benin City?
8. Why was the Benin Massacre so-called?
9. Do you think it was right for the British to steal art treasures from Benin? Explain your answer.
10. Use a dictionary or your own knowledge to help you write a definition of the following words:  
export, civilise, Edo, punitive.

## **Extra Challenge:**

If the British had not launched the Benin Punitive Expedition, do you think the Benin Empire would still exist? How might the course of history have been different?



# The Benin Punitive Expedition

Benin's first contact with European visitors was with the Portuguese who arrived in 1489. For many years mutually amicable relations thrived between the two nations, who traded and even fought wars together. The Portuguese were able to help Benin establish itself as a major power in Africa as they supplied guns, which gave the people of Benin a great advantage over the spears and swords of their neighbours. In return the Portuguese took many of the slaves who were captured in the wars to work in its colonies. They also exported and sold items, which they had traded. The Portuguese sent missionaries to Africa to try and convert the people to Christianity but the people of Benin were reluctant to abandon their traditional beliefs. The captain of a Portuguese ship, Lourenco Pinto, spoke very favourably of 'great Benin' in 1691.

*'Great Benin, where the King resides, is larger than Lisbon, all the streets run straight and as far as the eyes can see. The houses are large, especially that of the king, which is richly decorated and has fine columns. 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 door to their houses'.*

The word 'Benin' itself comes from the Portuguese. It is believed that they struggled to pronounce Ubinu which was the name given to the administrative centre of the city and so the word mutated into Benin or Beny. This also explains why the Edo people are sometimes referred to as Bini.

The first British ships reached Benin in 1553 and they were joined by the Dutch about forty years later. Initially seeking items to trade the two countries quickly established themselves as major powers in the African slave trade, buying slaves to work in their colonies in Africa and overseas. Native Edo people from Benin were not allowed to be sent into slavery and although the Edo people used slaves captured in battle, selling slaves was very unpopular.

By the 19th century the British were the dominant presence across Africa and they were keen to extend their power further and gain more control. The Benin Obas had seen how the British had taken over other African countries and, unsurprisingly, they were keen to ensure that Benin did not meet the same fate. The British powers argued that Benin needed controlling and that the people needed civilising. In 1863 Sir Richard Burton, who was a British consul, visited Benin. He spoke about the evil of human sacrifice and accused the Oba of interfering with the trade outside his kingdom. In 1892 Captain Henry L. Gallwey, another British consul, visited Oba Ovonramwen in Benin to try and agree how the nations could work together. However, the meeting was unsuccessful and Gallwey described the Oba as being unreasonable. In late 1896, after more trade disagreements, vice consul James Robert Phillips requested permission to invade Benin City and send the Oba Ovonramwen away. He did not wait for an answer before gathering a team including 250 African soldiers and entering the city. Officials in Benin City heard about Phillips' mission and sent out a team to stop them. They were confronted at the village of Ugbine on 4th January 1897 and fighting broke out. Only two British officers survived. This encounter is known as 'The Ugbine Disaster' or 'The Benin Massacre' because so many people lost their lives.

The Benin Massacre sparked a full-scale British attack on Benin, which was named the 'Benin Punitive Expedition'. The city of Benin was completely destroyed in this operation, which lasted for 8 days in February 1897. Treasures from the Oba's palace were seized, thousands of people were killed and the palace and much of the city was smashed and burned to the ground. Oba Ovonramwen surrendered and was exiled (sent away) to Calabar where he lived until his death in 1914. The items, which were seized, were removed from Benin and many ended up in private collections belonging to British and other European officials. Many Benin art treasures are housed today in the British Museum, London.

After the Benin Punitive Expedition the Kingdom of Benin ceased to exist in the same way it had before. It became part of the Niger Coast Protectorate, which was located in what is now modern day Nigeria.

# The Benin Punitive Expedition



**Read the information about the Kingdom of Benin then answer the questions in detail.**

1. Who were the first Europeans in Benin and when did they arrive?
2. In what ways was the relationship between Benin and Portugal mutually amicable?
3. Why do you think Europeans like Lourenco Pinto were surprised to find Benin 'wealthy and industrious'?
4. Where does the word Benin come from?
5. When did the British arrive in Benin and what did they hope to gain from Africa?
6. Why do you think part of the west coast of Africa became known as 'The Slave Coast'?
7. Why did Britain want to control Benin?
8. What happened at the village of Ugbine in January 1897?
9. Punitive means 'to punish'. What was Benin being punished for?
10. Do you think it was right for the British to steal art treasures from Benin? Explain your answer.
11. Use a dictionary or your own knowledge to help you write a definition for the following words: colony, export, civilise, Edo, massacre.
12. Can you create a timeline showing the history of Benin from 1300 - 1897 using the information from this text and your own knowledge and research?

## **Extra Challenge:**

If the British had not launched the Benin Punitive Expedition, do you think the Benin Empire would still exist? How might the course of history have been different?