



The Lost Kingdom of Benin

The walls of Benin dwarfed the Great Wall of China and the Pyramids of Egypt. Why don't we hear more about it today? Explore one of history's "lost" civilizations in this video about ancient wonders, and the legacy of colonialism.

**0:00**

Spinning globe; illustrations of pyramids, ruins, and ancient monuments moving along a timeline; video narrator Stu appears on screen alongside OER Project and Debunked logos; image of an ancient African statue; illustration showing an archaeological excavation site and Pyramid, a timeline below indicates the years 1897 and 1900; black and white videos of the first automobile and airplane.

From the complex pyramids of the Maya Empire to the labyrinth and palaces made by the Minoans of Crete, many a lost civilization has been unearthed after centuries of obscurity, reshaping our perspective on these ancient cultures. But, what if I told you that one such ancient society was responsible for building one of the largest structures in human history? A structure that was said to have been four times longer than the Great Wall of China and consumed 100 times more material than the pyramids in Egypt. All created by a civilization that you've probably never even heard of.

I'm Stu from Debunked and we've teamed up with the OER project to unearth this ancient mystery. Welcome to the lost Kingdom of Benin. What's so curious about the Kingdom of Benin is exactly how unancient it was at the time of its disappearance, having existed up until only 130 years ago. For perspective, that means this historical kingdom was still in existence at the dawn of the automobile. The Wright brothers made their first flight only shortly after the city's demise. These inventions paved the way for the modern world we live in today and yet shared a period of history with an ancient world.

1:19

Vintage images of Benin City and its people; blueprint showing various architectural elements; Guinness World Records page; statue's head; crowd of Africans waving the British flag; social media content about the Walls of Benin; various publications showing different names for the Walls of Benin.

We even have photographic evidence documenting this mighty medieval lost city and its enormous structures, showing just how closely the timelines of the ancient and modern worlds overlapped. Yet, despite Benin's incredible feats of structural engineering, having existed until relatively recently, and even being recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest earthworks in history, almost nothing of this super-sized settlement still exists today.

So, if this civilization constructed something that rivaled the Great Wall of China, why haven't you heard more about the Kingdom of Benin? Aside from the fact that pre-colonial African histories are often overshadowed by colonial narratives, there's actually a lot of misinformation and misleading claims surrounding the kingdom and its walls. For the purpose of this video, we will refer to the earthworks as the Walls of Benin. Natively they are called Iya or Iyanuwo, but they're also known as the Great Wall of Africa, Benin City Earthworks, Benin Moat, Benin City's Moat System, Benin Iya, and the ancient linear earthworks of Benin and Ishan.

2:33

Clips of online search results for 'Walls of Benin'; side by side screenshots of a circular walled city, titled as the 'Great Walls of Benin'; graphic of a spinning globe that zooms into 'The Kingdom of Benin'; illustrations of brass heads, the text 'EDO', 'IGODOMIGODO', 'OGISO', and 'Kings of the Sky', along with the number 800 on a timeline.

Even its name is hard to pin down. If you search for images of these structures, most of the results will have very little to do with the Walls of Benin. Even this image, which is used countless times to represent Benin's walls. See, this is actually the round city of Baghdad. And with the dawn of AI, inaccurate depictions of this lost city are spreading thick and fast.

So, it's time to set the record straight. To do that, we need to rewind the clock hundreds and hundreds of years, to the 10th century nation where it all started, and explore why they were built, who this civilization was, and what eventually led to its destruction in the modern era. Here in West Africa, we find the ancient kingdom of Igodomigodo, founded by the native Edo people, emerging from several existing autonomous



groups toward the end of the first millennium. Igodomigodo was ruled by the Ogiso Dynasty, meaning kings of the sky, who were initially worshiped as god-like rulers.

3:38

Two figures building a wall on a timeline marked at 700; zoomed in screenshot of text from 'Benin Iya/Sungbo's Eredo'; blue grid map representing the Kingdom of Benin; a king loses their crown next to a sign that reads 'You are leaving the Ogiso Kingdom; character icons of a frustrated figure, a figure holding a large axe, female figure laying on the ground appearing dead.

Archaeological investigations suggest that a wall building custom existed in this region since the 8th century, possibly even earlier.

Throughout their reign, the Ogiso and the early Edo people they ruled over, expanded these walls, developing a society and culture that formed the foundations of what would become the much larger and more prosperous Kingdom of Benin. As such, after a 300-year reign, seeing 31 rulers, the final Ogiso was deposed by his own people and banished from the kingdom. Following a controversial reign marred by ever-worsening economic woes, relatable domestic scandals, he's said to have attempted to execute his own son, and friction with nobility, he killed the wife of a deceased noble. I mean, if anything is going to end your dynasty, that'll do it.

4:33

Blue grid with a yellow outline showing the text 'THE KINGDOM OF BENIN' above a drawing of a map; graphic scene of two figures arguing as a crowned figure is watching and smiling, the crowned figure is then shown with heart eyes looking at a female figure, then the two figures jointly hold a baby; moving timeline with vintage images of Benin overlaid.

The story of exactly how the Oba Monarchy rose to power is highly contested. One historical tradition states that a neighboring Yoruba prince was sent to bring stability back to the region. And while he was busy with that, he also got busy with a native Edo woman who bore him a son, solving the region's problems by becoming the first Oba of Benin. Oba is the Yoruba word meaning king or ruler. In the centuries that followed, the walls continued to grow, marking boundaries, enclosing new settlements, and fortifying them against attack. Way ahead of their time in terms of urban planning, the walls not only defended the kingdom, but organized and crucially connected it, helping the realm grow and prosper. Equally, there are theories that some walls were built to set boundaries that allowed members of differing cultural and political standing to exist side by side, as a statement of unity within the kingdom.

5:32

Screenshots from an academic article about the Walls of Benin; images of laterite; character icon of Oba Oguola with the text '5th Oba of Benin' and map with its outer wall highlighted; character icon of Oba Ewuare with the text '12th Oba of Benin' and map highlighting the outline of a city within; black and white sketch of the landscape of Benin; Portuguese trade in Africa, followed by flags of Netherlands and England indicating Africa trading with those countries.

Evaluations of the walls in 2025 established that the walls are primarily made from laterite, an iron-rich soil that solidifies over time, making it not only an ideal choice for durability, but it also reflects the technological and geological understanding of the Edo builders. In the late 13th century, large expansions to the Benin walls were enacted by Oba Oguola who built the outer city walls for defense. And then later in the middle 15th century, Oba Ewuare built the inner-city walls, including nine enormous city gates.

These were to contain his citizens under his draconian law. Although a harsh ruler, he was dubbed Ewuare the Great, as he is credited with reorganizing the city in a linear style, or grid system. During this same period, the kingdom was first opened up to trading with Europeans, beginning with Portuguese in the late 1400s, and then increasingly with the Dutch and English in the following decades.

6:38

A collage featuring several Benin bronze artifacts; engraving showing a large

By the early modern era, the Kingdom of Benin had developed into a prosperous African nation: gaining territory, expanding its influence, and dominating local trade.



gathering in Benin; diagram illustrating a moat and rampart; a map showing a network of work walls with thick red lines; black and white photos of Benin and its people; diagram illustrating the geographical features of Benin with varying line types.

7:34

Composite image of the wall structure of Benin; clip of a basketball game; rulers comparing the heights 10ft and 65 ft; character icon punching data into a handheld device that displays '10,000 MI'; graphic of a globe with New York and Sydney circled and connected with a dotted line; map of Canada's National Capital Region alongside the map of the Kingdom of Benin; maps of London and New York City; Oba Ozolua with the text 'The Conqueror 15th Oba of Benin' and 1483 on a timeline; graphic of human-like figures in battle.

8:43

Character icon of an armored figure holding weapons overlaid with images of bronze artifacts; figurines of men holding firearms; graphic of human-like figures in battle; a video showing Benin people hard at work in fields; icons of palm tree, rubber tapping, ivory, cloth, and bag of spices; map illustrating Benin with grid-like street patterns and districts highlighted, overlaid with historical images of various crafts.

9:44

Lithograph depicting a ceremony; drawing of Benin city; photo of a Portuguese ivory carving; text from the quote of a Portuguese

The city of Benin was the heart of the kingdom, and in and around this medieval metropolis, stood its famous architecture of moats and ramparts. At this point, the structure had reached its greatest extent, constituting an enormous, towering network of earthen work walls. The walls created an expansive complex of streets, squares, homes, and passageways. Unfolding from its central core and sprawling out into side streets and walled roads that connected the core city to smaller towns and villages that would otherwise have been distant and isolated. Even some outer farmlands and fields at the very edges were bounded by this vast interlocking web of walls.

The walls themselves are varied in size, with an average height of nearly 10 foot, the same as your standard regulation basketball hoop, but in some places, they approached a staggering 65 foot, about the height of a six-story building.

Contemporary research suggests that at their greatest extent, the total length of these massive structures reached an incredible 10,000 miles. Stretched out, that would take you from New York to Sydney in Australia. As they stood, they covered an area of roughly 2,500 square miles. For comparison, that just so happens to be about the size of Canada's entire national capital region. Depending on what part of the world you're watching this from, that may not mean much. So, here's London and New York City, for comparison.

After the reign of Oba Ozolua, also called Ozolua the Conqueror, the moderately-sized kingdom, had transformed into an empire, following a succession of conquests which were said to have involved two hundred battles.

Traditionally, these battles would have been fought with swords, spears, and other blades, with metal shields and padded armor for defense. But by the late 15th century, they were using muskets for warfare. Their trading relationship with the Portuguese saw the Edo armies become one of the earliest African states to adopt firearms. Along with gained territory, trade had flourished extensively in a range of commodities. Not only goods like palm oil, rubber, ivory, cloth, and spices, but enslaved people too. The city itself was divided into districts, and each one was named after the type of trade that worked and lived there. At one point, it was home to around forty guilds, each dedicated to a particular service or craft, ranging from doctors to ivory carvers, and even dancers and acrobats. And let's be honest, if you don't have an acrobat guild, should you really be calling yourself a nation?

Benin's reputation continued to grow, and the city became widely recognized for its wealth, culture, and art. In 1691, a visiting Portuguese ship captain claimed, "Great Benin, where the king resides, is larger than Lisbon; all the streets run straight and as far as



ship captain is overlaid on images of Benin and its people; old blue toned photos of dwellings in Benin; historical images of shrines and sacrificial rituals including an image of a crucifixion.

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." In addition to the royal palace, spacious compounds existed nearby for the kingdom's chiefs, elites, and those close to the Oba, as well as dedicated religious sites reserved for ceremonies and rituals. This brings us on to a more brutal part of kingdom life.

Among its many festivals, the kingdom practiced sacrificial rituals, some of which included human sacrifice. This image is believed to depict a type of crucifixion that was practiced in the culture.

10:50

Zoomed in screenshots of text focusing on human sacrifices from colonial reports; small child standing in front of an earthwork wall; zoomed in shot of an earthwork wall; photo of a crowded market titled 'Oba Market City of Benin (1909)'; composite of two black and white photos of a statue's head and decorative wall; photos of the walls in Benin.

While the degree and frequency to which these ceremonies took place were often exaggerated by colonial reports to serve as propaganda during the forthcoming British invasion, academic reviews of the archeological evidence and eyewitness accounts determined that ritual killings did, in fact, take place at annual ceremonies. But they were infrequent and socially bound, meaning they were limited to slaves or convicts, not indiscriminate killing of their free citizens. Good to know if you were a resident, I guess, less so if you were a tourist.

Back to the lay of the land, from the palatial core of the city, the sprawling earthwork walls marked out large courtyards where markets were held and merchants could trade. There were also factories, workshops, and seemingly comfortable housing. Much of which was multi-roomed and often featured more than one story. The streets even incorporated underground drainage systems, and early street lighting thanks to their abundant resources of palm oil.

11:57

Narrator on screen overlaid are two images of metal hanging oil lamps; gruesome drawings of deaths and killings; image showing a collection of Benin bronzes; multiple close-up views of bronzes; image of bronzes engraved on a wall; text from the quote by Anthropologist Frank Willett overlaid on an image of an altar; a video showing the process Benin people use to create bronzes.

There were certainly far worse places to live in the Middle Ages. I mean, look at what was going on over in Northern Europe. Yikes.

In particular, this civilization was noted for its production of thousands of intricately made bronze artworks, which depicted stories and myths, kings and queens, animals and the natural world. Some of them, dating from the 17th century, even show the bearded gun-toting Portuguese with whom they had been trading. The bronzes adorned many of the city walls, particularly those that were part of, or close to, the royal palace. Their artistry and techniques have been highly praised by academics. The bronzes would stand comparison with anything which ancient Egypt, classical Greece and Rome, or Renaissance Europe had to offer. The ancient techniques used to create these intricate artworks have been passed down through the generations of Edo people for hundreds of years, and these processes are still used in workshops within the city today.

13:04

At the time of the founding of the United States, the Kingdom of Benin had already been thriving for hundreds of years. So, what



Illustration of the Declaration of Independence with portraits of historical figures and the year 1776; engraving of the people and structural details of the Kingdom of Benin; illustration showing the text 'British Slave Trade Act' with an emblem featuring a kneeling enslaved person in chains with text 'Am I not a man and a brother'; several images of the British enslaving the people of Benin.

14:03

Portrait of James Robert Phillips with 1896 on a timeline; photos of ships on water, British men in military style uniforms, African porters in traditional attire; illustrations portraying colonial encounters in Benin; engraving of a royal procession; portrait of Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi with '35th Oba of Benin 1888-1897'; portrait of General Ologbosere with 'Kingdom of Benin 1897'.

actually happened to bring about the end of such a prosperous and monumental society and, not only, cause it to fall, but to become a lost civilization? The British! In Benin's later years, the realm was beset with civil war, internal conflicts within the royal family, and the western abolition of the slave trade. All of which weakened their financial standing. On top of a troubled economy, the kingdom faced increasing pressure from the British, who wanted to get their greedy mitts on the region's vast natural resources, and ultimately sought to take control of Benin. Nevertheless, Benin continued to strongly resist outside influence. The British Empire, however, was not discouraged. Far from it, old chap.

In December of 1896, a British consul called James Robert Phillips set off on a, supposedly, diplomatic mission to Benin, as part of an unarmed delegation of several British envoys, accompanied by a modest entourage of a mere two hundred African porters. Those Brits knew how to pack light. Phillips had previously written to the British Foreign Office requesting permission to mount an armed expedition to forcibly remove the Oba from power, but he left before receiving a response. As the delegation approached Benin, they received word that their entry to the city had been denied. At the time, the kingdom was celebrating the Igwe Festival, a cultural and spiritual event during which no outsiders were allowed in. And yet, despite this injunction, Phillips continued with his mission, taking the delegation's refusal to turn back as a plot to oust the Oba. Good instincts.

Several of the kingdom's generals unilaterally ordered an attack.

15:07

Images of African warriors surrounding British men; portraits of Alan Boisragon and Ralph Locke; African porters chained together; press covers for the Benin Massacre; images of British military forces with weapons, slave trade, and African troops.

On January 4th, 1897, Phillips and the rest of his party were violently ambushed by Edo warriors. Only two British men escaped the attack, both having been shot multiple times. Many of the surviving African porters were taken to Benin and enslaved. The incident was quickly dubbed the Benin Massacre by the press, calling the Edo people savages and murderers. Ironically, the real massacre at the hands of the colonial forces was yet to come. In any case, the ambush had provided the British with the necessary provocation. A little over a month later, a punitive expedition of over 1,200 troops was sent to retaliate. Along with illustrative depictions, incredibly, we also have photos documenting the events that took place.

16:04

Images of the British military, aftermath of a fire, room filled with ivory tusks, looted Benin treasures and artifacts including many bronzes, African warriors and troops, a damaged wall in Benin; Earth satellite zooming into Nigeria; illustration of brass

The British ransacked the city of Benin, burning down buildings, demolishing its fortifications, and looting thousands of treasures, many of which were sold and have since sat in private collections and museums around the world. Scores of people were killed. The Oba was exiled. Chiefs and nobles were promptly trialed on location and executed, and the city of Benin was almost completely destroyed.

One of the only structures to survive the attack was Chief Ogiamien's house, an ancestral home of Edo elites that now remains as one of



head with the text 'Ogiso' and year 1160; images of Chief Ogiamien's house.

17:15

British flag with text 'British Rule' and year 1897 with images of Benin's people and homes overlaid; video footage of British military and royalty in Benin; topographic map of Africa; ethnolinguistic map of Nigeria with group names disappearing; African workers on a British ship; celebration representing Nigeria's Independence Day and year 1960; bronze sculpture of Queen Elizabeth II; aerial photo of a market in modern day Nigeria.

Benin city's only examples of its famous pre-colonial architecture. Said to have originally been built in 1160 by the Ogiso dynasty, the orangey red building featuring fluted earthen walls, offers us a glimpse into ancient African history, and shows us how the rest of the city may have looked.

Eventually, the realm was absorbed into British colonial Nigeria, and the entire region was restructured and reorientated to serve British commercial interests. As a result, this ancient yet sophisticated African civilization disappeared, swept out of common knowledge during the era of colonialism. Nigeria was no more than a conglomeration of tribes, to create order from this myriad variety, Nigeria must draw the different social, governmental, and religions together, and cement the bonds of federation.

Following decades of colonial rule, this African nation gained its independence in 1960 and became modern-day Nigeria. The English left behind a concept of one nation, a common language, English, and a government structure based on the parliamentary system. Today, a vibrant city now sits on top of the former kingdom, simply called Benin City.

18:19

Map showing historical communities and the Iya System of Benin City; aerial footage of modern day Nigeria alongside moats and structural remains of Benin; timeline beginning with the imposition of British rule in 1897 and leading toward independence; images of the Thomas Jefferson building along with a graphic of a landscape with smoke in the air; cartoon icons of a Greenlandic Shark and a Galapagos Giant Tortoise with text 'Live for 250+ Years'; historical photos of the Kingdom of Benin's structures, artifacts, and people; spinning globe.

While progress within the city has seen the remaining earthworks all but lost, visual traces of the moats and walls do still exist. And if you hop on Google Earth now, you'll be able to spot remnants of the wall and its accompanying moat, hidden amongst the city's buildings and roads.

Unlike many so-called lost civilizations, the Kingdom of Benin is such a recent part of modern history, lasting up until nearly 130 years ago, that when the kingdom was being raised to the ground, the Thomas Jefferson building was just being completed. Today, you can even find greenlandic sharks and the odd giant tortoise that were roaming the earth when Benin was in its heyday. That we have a small number of photographs of a lost civilization, taken within the inner city, which show the ward neighborhoods and streets as they actually looked, is obviously extremely rare. And these images offer a glimpse into the old world and the rich heritage of pre-colonial West Africa, something that is often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives.