

Benin Bronzes

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In news– Recently, the Smithsonian museum, the world's largest museum, education, and research complex created by the USA has announced that it will return most of its collection of Benin Bronzes to their homeland Nigeria.

What are Benin Bronzes?

- **The 'Benin Bronzes' (made of brass and bronze) are a group of sculptures which include elaborately decorated cast plaques, commemorative heads, animal and human figures,** items of royal regalia, and personal ornaments.
- The Benin Bronzes come from Benin City, the historic capital of the Kingdom of Benin, a major city state in West Africa from the medieval period.
- Benin City became part of the British Empire from 1897 to 1960 and is now located within the Federal Republic of Nigeria.
- They were **created from at least 16th century onwards in the West African Kingdom of Benin,** by specialist guilds working for the **royal court of the Oba (king) in Benin City.**
- The Kingdom also supported guilds working in other materials such as ivory, leather, coral and wood, and **the term 'Benin Bronzes' is sometimes used to refer to historic objects produced using these other materials.**
- Many pieces were commissioned specifically for the ancestral altars of past Obas and Queen Mothers.
- They were also used in other rituals to honour the ancestors and to validate the accession of a new Oba.
- **The most well-known are the cast brass plaques which once decorated the Benin royal palace** and which provide an important historical record of the Kingdom of Benin.
- **The Benin Bronzes are preceded by earlier West African**

cast brass traditions, dating back into the medieval period.

- These artefacts **provide insight into the culture of the Benin Kingdom as well as its relationships with neighbouring states.**
- Some of these pieces also point to the kingdom's relationship with Europeans.
- **These historic pieces all share a common painful past – they were looted by British colonial forces during the infamous raid on Benin City in 1897.**

The Kingdom of Benin-

- The Kingdom of Benin (also known as the Edo Kingdom, or the Benin Empire) was a kingdom in what is now in southwestern Nigeria.
- It has no historical relation to the modern republic of Benin, which was historically known as Dahomey from the 17th century until 1975.
- Its capital was Edo, now known as Benin City in Edo state, Nigeria.
- The Kingdom was “one of the oldest and most developed states in the coastal hinterland of West Africa”.
- It was formed around the 11th century AD, and lasted until it was annexed by the British Empire in 1897.