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Art, Loot and Empire: The Benin Bronzes

Paul Dixon and Linda Buckley:

PAUL DIXON Some of the finest bronze sculpture in the world was made in Africa. But most of this is now in European museums, such as the British Museum. How did it get here? These works were made in the West African kingdom of Benin, situated in what is now Nigeria.

The kingdom of Benin has ancient origins but begun to consolidate and develop with Benin City as its centre from the 13th century. Great moats were built around the city, and a tradition of casting in copper alloys began to flourish.

Most of the Benin artworks in museums today date from the 16th and 17th centuries. Although actually cast in brass, these sculptures made in Benin are collectively known as the Benin Bronzes. Made using the highly skilled lost wax method, these works are exquisitely detailed.

Many of them are in the form of plaques which depict characters and events from Benin history. They were originally displayed in the royal palace. There are also freestanding sculptures, including commemorative heads of kings and queens.

Would the ordinary people of Benin have known about the Benin Bronzes? We put this question to Dr Linda Buckley, a retired Open University Associate Lecturer who's done extensive research on Benin art and on how it ended up in Europe.

LINDA BUCKLEY: They would be known to members of the court, which would be the chiefs. And I think there must have been knowledge in the city that these things existed. But a lot of them were for private religious ceremonies, rather than being displayed in public.

I think bronze casting in Benin was a well-known art, and I believe that there were more brass foundries and casters than just the royal ones.

PAUL DIXON To find out how the Benin Bronzes have come to be in Europe, we need to go back to the 19th century. Britain had been trading in various commodities with Benin as an

independent kingdom long before this. But in the 19th century, although the king, or Oba, of Benin maintained tight control on exports, the trade relationship developed.

LINDA BUCKLEY: It was extremely well-developed in some ways. If you go right back to the 15th century, there had been the European trade with Portugal. But then, what was important after that? The most important trade after that was probably the slave trade in which Britain was very heavily involved.

But then after that, after the abolition of slavery, at the beginning of the 19th century, the next stage really was what you could call exploitation of the local, natural resources and in particular palm oil, which was required in Britain really for the follow on from the Industrial Revolution with the need to grease machinery, literally keep the oars of industry turning. But also used for things like soap and foodstuffs, as it still is.

PAUL DIXON In 1885, a British protectorate had been declared over the coast of Nigeria. Seven years later, in 1892, in an effort to improve trade relations with Benin, Captain Henry Galway, the new vice-consul for the Benin river section of the British protectorate, travelled inland to Benin City to sign a treaty with the Oba in order to bring Benin too under British protection. What kind of man was Galway?

LINDA BUCKLEY: Oh, I think he was terribly arrogant. He turned up at the Oba's palace and really demanded to see the Oba now. Very impatient. I think that's something that comes through from the document that we've got. Just impatient, arrogant. It goes without saying, racist, feeling superior.

He was captain in the British army, which is really quite a low rank. And he goes marching up to the Oba's palace and demands to see the Oba. No idea of the protocol involved in that.

Keeps calling the chiefs liars and that he's been deceived and kept waiting far too long, and he doesn't hang about, far too important for all this. And he's really treating the Oba with contempt.

Put that in context. The Oba was the king of a very large and important kingdom. The Oba was in charge of trade. It has always been the Oba's prerogative to control the trade. So for this young man, I think he was in his 30s at the time, just going and talking like that to the Oba was really quite outrageous, in my view.

PAUL DIXON But did the Oba actually sign this treaty?

LINDA BUCKLEY: I really don't think that he did. If he did, it was with great reluctance. The document talks about how his big men, his chiefs, might have signed it on his behalf, but he was reluctant to touch the pen.

And if you think about it, the whole idea of signing a treaty, actually signing something, signing a document, even having a document, something on paper, is really quite alien to a culture which records its history in different ways.

I mean, the Bronzes, for instance, are historical documents in their own right. The modern Nigerian sources that I've looked at recently all say that he almost certainly didn't sign.

PAUL DIXON Whether the Oba of Benin signed the treaty or not, trade continued to be tightly controlled by him. This led to frustration among British traders, industrialists, and officials. And by 1896, some were calling for armed intervention.

On the 2nd of January 1897 the acting consul general of the protectorate, James Phillips, set off for Benin City with a large party of men. Now, the consul general at the time and Philip's superior was a man called Ralph Moor.

LINDA BUCKLEY: Ralph Moor was the, I think it became the consul general in the mid-1890s, which meant that he was the senior government representative, at least in Nigeria. He was not a gentleman in the Victorian sense, in that he entered the Royal Irish Constabulary by exam.

He didn't have a background of public school, Oxbridge educated, Sandhurst, which was the typical background for colonial administrators at the time. But I think he was probably from a reasonably lowly background and perhaps out of his comfort zone a bit with these people of a higher social status.

I think it's interesting that he's got this background in the Royal Irish Constabulary, because working in Ireland, an Englishman working in Ireland in that capacity in the 1880s in what was really a militaristic police force, would have really given him a certain mindset when going off to West Africa.

You can link this in with the stuff that you do on Ireland in the course as well. But it is the time of demand for land reform, rise of nationalism, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, demands for home rule.

All of these things are going on. They're getting particularly strong by the 1880s. And I think the idea of the British Constabulary, which is really what the RIC was at the time, was to really repress these ideas quite brutally at times.

So, with that sort of background and the use of arms and prejudice against the people that he's supposed to be keeping in control, really set him up for his time in West Africa.

PAUL DIXON Reports at the time claimed that Philips and his party were unarmed, or at least only lightly armed. We asked Linda if she thought this was true.

LINDA BUCKLEY: No, I don't. Not really. This is something I've been thinking about quite recently as well.

What had happened was that in November of 1896, when Moor was actually on leave in London, Phillips had written to the foreign office, requesting permission to visit the Oba-- "visit" the Oba-- to remind him of the terms of the treaty that he had or hadn't signed earlier with Galway.

Because the Oba was increasingly reluctant to trade, and that was upsetting the British government. It was also upsetting particularly the big businessmen in Liverpool where the palm oil was taken into.

And I think there was a bit of a fear that British industry was going to literally grind to a halt if they couldn't get this palm oil. Such an important commodity for them to get.

Anyway, Phillips had written to London and said that he wanted to take an armed expedition, which included some cannon, a Maxim gun which had fairly recently been invented, a rocket apparatus, he says.

Altogether, 400 soldiers and a Fife and Drum band, which I rather like. Quite what he wanted to do with that, I don't know.

Now, he set out on his expedition with 400 bearers who might have been thinly disguised as bearers rather than in their full uniform. I think that he actually took all these armaments with him, even though they were concealed in the baggage.

Phillip set out. A part of the way was by boat, and then the last bit was trekking through the bush, the jungle, which is pretty arduous going. I don't think that he would have gone without all these armaments if he would then have to come back, collect them, and then go back and have an armed raid.

So, I think that his plan was to approach ostensibly unarmed, and then if any attacks occurred on him to whip out all these guns and whatever and bring out the dangerous weapon of the Fife and Drum band. And go on and dethrone the Oba, which was his clearly stated purpose of this expedition.

He was asked by one particular group of chiefs not to approach Benin at that particular time, because the Oba was involved in important ritual, religious services and whatever. So he was asked to wait, but he didn't. He went on.

But a group of Bini soldiers then attacked the expedition. I think there were eight white men and 400 Africans with them. And they were attacked.

I think Phillips might have been quite naive. He was doing this without the authority of London. He seems to have something of a brainstorm to just go ahead and think that he could approach like this.

And so, he was killed. All the white men were killed, except two who managed to get back to the coast, get back to the headquarters of the British colony.

The African soldiers, I think probably some of them were killed. I expect a lot of them just melted away into the bush, which would have been much easier for Africans to do, being used to the climate, the territory, and all the rest of it. And they could easily have just sort of dissipated into the bush. So that was the end of Phillips and the people that were with him.

PAUL DIXON But that was by no means the end of the matter. The British authorities responded very quickly and dispatched a force of 1,200 Marines which began an advance on Benin City on the 10th of February. This was called the punitive expedition. Did the Benin people, also referred to as the Bini, stand much of a chance against this British force?

LINDA BUCKLEY: No. There's a Hilaire Belloc poem from the time. "Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun, and they have not". So, they were really outgunned. They were probably not outnumbered.

I think again it's a note of the arrogance of the British that they thought they could make do with quite a small force. But they thought they could do this with a fairly low number of troops, because they expected the Bini just to give up and run away. In fact, they did put up a very good fight. But they just weren't going to win.

PAUL DIXON After this fierce battle, Benin City was taken and much of it destroyed by fire. The Oba was deposed, some of his chiefs were executed, and Benin came under British rule. It was during the conquest and looting of the city that the Benin artworks were found by the British troops.

They were subsequently packed up and taken back to England as war booty, and then sold off to pay for the punitive expedition. It was sold to museums and private collectors. So that's how they ended up in the European museums, like the British Museum, and museums in Germany and France. News of the punitive expedition soon appeared in the British press.

LINDA BUCKLEY: Reaction came very swiftly. Within a week, there were newspaper articles appearing, loads of them, really decrying this expedition and really stirring up a kind of storm of moral panic. And I suppose giving justification for the punitive expedition to go ahead in February. This will be straight after the Phillips massacre.

I've got here an extract from The Daily Telegraph of January the 12th, 1897. And it uses words like "a powerful theocracy of fetish priests", "famous for its human sacrifice".

And it says that "The King of Benin, this tyrant, would not allow his own people to crack palm kernels and sell gum or collect rubber." "That he turned back British subjects who endeavoured to open up trade and that the produce of his country for outside commerce was lost."

So, you've got on the one hand, the wickedness of the people of Benin, particularly the Oba, and on the other hand, what was regarded as a civilizing mission of bringing trade to Benin. And how detrimental it is that the Oba won't allow this trade to go ahead.

And it's this double-sided thing. I mean, really, it's all about palm oil. Yet another war over oil. We're familiar with them. Different sort of oil a century ago, but even so. There we go.

And similarly, when the punitive expedition reached Benin-- I think there's an extract from one of the sources in the documents that you've got. And this one is The Sheffield Independent, Wednesday the 24th of February 1897.

So again, it's very soon after the incident. I think within a week or so of the incident. This one talks about "The King of Benin has at last been sharply made to understand that you cannot treat peaceful white men as he treats his wretched subjects and his capital is now in British hands".

And it goes on about how the British had used the smartest tactics and the most sterling pluck. And it stirs the heart of the British. The work is being quickly and well done.

And I love this phrase-- well, I don't love it. I think it's horrific. This writer says, "The King of Benin by all accounts is the greatest scoundrel unhung". So that really gives you a flavour of what they were thinking about with all of that.

I think during the actual attack on Benin, the British set fire to quite a small number of houses. Then the fire simply got out of control. And before then, there had been great earthworks, big walls around the city, which were said to be on the same sort of scale as the Great Wall of China. Probably not the same sort of length, but that sort of massive ramparts.

Those caught fire and were destroyed, and I think they're probably completely gone by now. Which weren't destroyed then would have been cleared by now for urban development and whatever. So, it really was the end of the city.

The chiefs were captured. There was some sort of show trial. Most of them were hung.

And this chap, Moor, that we spoke about earlier-- I've got a note of it, yes. One of the chiefs committed suicide in his cell. He was waiting for his trial and he couldn't bear the humiliation.

And I'm quoting here. "Major Ralph Moor determined to show the Natives the power of the white man, so he ordered the man's corpse to be hung in front of the ruined palace. Some of the officers and soldiers of the Niger Coast Protectorate further desecrated the corpse by using it as target practice". And this is the man that's bringing civilization.

PAUL DIXON The British press portrayed Benin and its people, the Bini, as barbaric, which led to great puzzlement among academics when the artworks arrived in England. How could such sophisticated art have been produced by such barbarous people, they wondered. One of the things British journalists and writers focused on was the practice of human sacrifice in Benin.

LINDA BUCKLEY: There was human sacrifice. An anthropologist writing in the 1950s, RE Bradbury who wrote an excellent book on Benin, maintains that human sacrifice was part of the traditional religion.

But what happened was that the 12 worst criminals who were due for execution were chosen. They were executed, and then their bodies were displayed on the crucifixion trees. They were not-- crucifixion was not the method of execution. So, it was probably public execution and then display of the bodies afterwards.

And we might feel absolutely appalled by this, and quite right too. But there had been public executions in Britain until 1868. Went on in the United States until 1936, and in France, using the guillotine, until 1939.

PAUL DIXON The Benin Bronzes are now displayed in the British Museum and other museums in Britain and Europe, including France and Germany. They were firstly displayed as anthropological or ethnological artefacts. But more recently, they've been treated and presented more as artworks. But how should they be properly understood?

LINDA BUCKLEY: Probably, I think they can only really be understood in the context of Edo ritual and Edo religion, which is to do with worshipping the head specifically of the father.

So, when a man dies, it is particularly his head that is worshipped, which might explain why there are so many representations of heads that we will get in this collection.

There is also a belief in reincarnation whereby when a man dies, or even a woman dies, the next child born in the family is a reincarnation of that particular individual.

So, you get names which means things like mother has returned or the brave warrior has come back to the house. Those sorts of names are still used an awful lot amongst both the Yoruba and I believe the Edo as well.

So, I mean, I believe that they're art in the fact, the way that they're made and they're beautiful and you can admire them and go look at them and say wow. They're certainly all that associated with art. But if you want me to start defining what is art for, I'm afraid we'll have to leave that to another day.

PAUL DIXON So whether we can fully appreciate or understand the Benin Bronzes while they remain outside of their original context remains an open question. But many argue that since they were taken from Benin as war booty, they should now be returned to Benin. This is an issue that will no doubt continue to be hotly debated.

In the meantime, if you'd like to know more about the Benin Bronzes, what they mean, how they were made, and how they ended up in Europe, go to the Open University website and follow the links to the module A111, Discovering the Arts and Humanities.