

Ancient West African Cities: Benin City and Jenne-Jeno

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This is a lesson intended for a 9th grade African History course at San Francisco University High School. The goal is to introduce students to several early African societies in West Africa. It is intended to fit one 75-minute class period. Ultimately I would like to develop this into a unit covering ancient cities of the African continent more broadly.

This lesson will expose students to artifacts, architecture, art and written sources in order to develop the skills of document and artifact analysis and provide information about the existence and diversity of early urban African communities.

Students will work in small groups to examine a collection of visual and written documents related to an urban community. They should ask questions, make inferences and draw conclusions about the nature and characteristics of each ancient city.

Generalized Lesson Plan (to be modified according to specific classroom environments):

- Divide students into small groups
- Hand out or share electronically the following with each group:
 - Sets of documents on either Benin City or Jenne-Jeno
 - Handout #1: Questions for Analysis
- Appoint at least one scribe and let students know that they will all be responsible for reporting their conclusions to the class.
- Students should have time (10 min) to consider the documents individually before opening discussion with their group.
- After 15-30 min of group discussion, students should make a list (based on Handout #1) of what they have observed/learned, and what they would still like to know about each city.
- Groups will present their findings with one another. As they present, I will project the documents for the entire class.
- Ideally these cities can be mapped digitally or manually by the class as student groups discuss each. (I do this on a map of the continent throughout the course as we discuss different regions, communities, and historical events).

Additional Resources for Teachers:

Benin City/Edo: 11th to 19th c., Southern Nigeria

- “The Story of Cities #5: Benin City, the mighty medieval capital now lost without a trace.” *UK Guardian*, 18 March 2016. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/mar/18/story-of-cities-5-benin-city-edo-nigeria-mighty-medieval-capital-lost-without-trace>
- BBC Bitesize, “The Kingdom of Benin.” Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z3n7mp3>
- “Benin and Its Royal Court.” *Ancient Civilizations*. Philadelphia: Independence Hall Association. Online: <http://www.ushistory.org/civ/7c.asp>

- Bortolot, Alexander Ives. "Origins and Empire: The Benin, Owo, and Ijebu Kingdoms." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/beni_2/hd_beni_2.htm (October 2003).
- "Kingdom of Benin," developed to accompany the National Curriculum of England. Online: <http://www.kingdomofbenin.com/>.

Jenne-Jeno: 300 BCE – 15th c., Niger Flood Plain

- World Heritage site: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/116>
- McIntosh, Roderick J. and Susan Keech McIntosh. "Jenne-Jeno, an ancient African city." Houston: Rice University Department of Anthropology. Online: <http://anthropology.rice.edu/Content.aspx?id=500>
- McIntosh, Roderick J. and Susan Keech McIntosh. "Early urban configurations on the Middle Niger: Clustered cities and landscapes of power". In Smith, Monica L. *The Social Construction of Ancient Cities*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books. pp. 103–120.
- Cotter, Holland. "Imperiled Legacy for African Art." *New York Times*, 2 August 2012.
- <https://prezi.com/ibsenvryz1mh/jenne-jeno-an-ancient-african-city/>

Other Ancient Africa Cities: (Materials to be developed in the future).

Aksum: 100 – 940 CE, Tigray Plateau, Northern Ethiopia

Timbuktu: 5th – 16th c., Mali

Lalibela: 12th – 14th c., North Central Ethiopia

Great Zimbabwe: 11th – 15th c., Zimbabwe lowveld

GENERAL RESOURCES:

Discussion of Cities/Urban communities:

Blier, Suzanne Preston. "[The African Urban Past: Historical Perspectives on the Metropolis](#)".

African Metropolitan Architecture by David Adjaye. London: Thames and Hudson, 2012. 14-19.

Hansen, Mogens Herman. "Cities, States, City-States and City-State Cultures." *Polis: An Introduction to the Ancient Greek City-State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 7-16.

McIntosh, Roderick J. "Different Cities: Jenne-Jeno and African Urbanism." Cambridge University Press, 2015. Cambridge Books Online. Cambridge University Press. 364-380.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781139035606.022>

**See concluding paragraph for discussion of diversity of ancient African cities.

Evaluating Sources:

Rampolla, Mary Lynn. "Chapter 2: Working with Sources." *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. 8th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015. 8-16. See also:

- 2b-1 "Tips for Writers: Questions for Evaluating Text-Based Primary Sources," 13.
- 2b-2 "Tips for Writers: Questions for Evaluating Nonwritten Primary Sources," 14.

Student Handout 1: Questions for Analysis of Documents:

For visual material:

- Observe: What do you think the source is showing? Look carefully at specific details. Do you notice smaller elements of the source that are interesting?
- Reflect:
 - What is the origin of the source?
 - If artwork, what is the medium?
 - What might you deduce or infer from details that you see in the source?
 - What is the symbolism or meaning of various elements of the image?
 - What can you surmise about economic activities, social or political organization, and religious life of people associated with this society?
- Question:
 - What do you wonder after seeing the source (who what, where, why, when and how)?
 - How does it fit or clash with the other sources and other knowledge that you have?

For written material:

- Observe:
 - What information is communicated? Consider both the overall significance and specific details.
- Reflect:
 - What is the origin of the source? Are there any obvious biases in the perspective presented?
 - What might you deduce or infer?
 - What does it tell you about the human society?
 - What can you surmise about economic activities, social or political organization, and religious life of people associated with this society?
- Question:
 - What do you wonder after reading the source (who what, where, why, when and how)?
 - How does it fit or clash with the other sources and other knowledge that you have?

Additional questions for consideration:

What is the nature/size of the city?

Who lived there?

Why did it exist? What resources or other factors led to the emergence of an urban society?

What are our sources for information about this society?