

The Kingdom of Benin The kingdom of Benin extended westward, eventually gaining control of the Lagos area by deploying its fleet of war canoes on the inland lagoon routes. Known for its bronze and copper artistry, Benin wielded substantial military might, beginning in the sixteenth century, until in the eighteenth century its dominance was broken by the kingdoms of Dahomey and Oyo. During their heyday, Benin's kings controlled the use of copper in all forms, so that the metal was primarily employed to adorn the king's palace and to embellish royal regalia.

Art visually enhanced royal authority and power, often in the form of commemorative images cast from copper alloy. A guild of casters created images that memorialized a king's victory over a forceful opponent or the wealth and power of the royal court through its figurative representation of trade relations. For example, the copper alloy plaque shown here features a majestic warrior, possibly the *oba* (king) himself, accompanied by musicians, a page, and a number of smaller figures that represent the Portuguese trading partners with Benin at the time. Seventeenth-century Dutch observers described plaques such as the one shown here of cast copper, which displays war exploits, lining the galleries of Benin's royal palace.