

THE PAST GLORY OF ABOMEY, BENIN



In 1625, one of the most spectacular tribal kingdoms was founded in Africa. Formerly known as Dahomey, the kingdom was founded by the Fon people and the surprising number of only 12 kings reigned here until cca 1900. Nowadays, the curious tourists may visit the site of the once magnificent Royal Palaces of Abomey (or Dahomey) in Benin.

The Abomey kingdom gradually developed into a very powerful military and commercial empire. Its significance was mainly gained through selling prisoners of war as slaves to European slave traders. The growing wealth of each succeeding king is demonstrated on the number of grand palaces each one built to prove his authority.

What fascinates today's archeologists and historians is a series of 56 decorative earthen bas-reliefs. The society of the Fon people used no written documents and thus these bas-reliefs functioned as a unique way of recording the times. One may learn about the Fon people's myths, customs, rituals, even famous won battles and the greatness of the kings of Abomey.

The unique structure of the main town is also striking. It was surrounded by a mud wall, which is estimated to have been 6 miles long. A protective ditch was running along these walls. Such elaborate defense system helped the kingdom survive for several centuries.

Throughout the 19th century, the first crisis came. European colonists started claiming more and more African land and gradually, the kingdom was facing severe conflicts with France. Finally, the last desperate gesture of Abomey King Behanzin was his order to destroy the city by fire. He would have rather seen the end of the empire than French dominion over it.

Nowadays, the once great city is on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. It badly suffers, however, due to the disadvantageous environmental factors.

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