

Surprise origin for Benin bronzes

Slide by Neil Goalby. Available from rsc.li/3MVxw9w

The Benin bronzes are artworks made by the Edo people of West Africa from the 16th to 19th centuries. A new study has shown they were made from melted-down manillas. Manillas are alloy rings that were used as money in West Africa by European slave traders and other merchants. The alloys were mostly made of brass comprising copper and zinc. Some were bronze comprising copper and tin. The scientists investigated manillas recovered from shipwrecks in the Atlantic and found similar trace levels of lead, arsenic, nickel and bismuth. They also found the composition of the copper matched copper ores mined in modern-day Germany.



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The Benin bronzes offer a record of the history of the Kingdom of Benin

Questions

1. What is an alloy?
2. What metals do brass and bronze usually contain?
3. Suggest why examining the amounts of trace metals helped scientists come to conclusions about the Benin Bronzes.