



# Plaque fragment representing a Portuguese soldier

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Plaque fragment representing a Portuguese soldier

**Born:** 1550 - 1650

**Object Type:** Relief

**Materials:** Bronze

**Measurements:** h. 295 x w. 175 x d. 23 mm

**Accession Number:** 234

**Historic Period:** 16th century - late, 17th century - early, Middle period

**Production Place:** Africa, Benin City, Nigeria

**Cultural Group:** Edo

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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Plaques of this width were placed on the two narrow sides of the stout wood pillars on which the palace roofs were raised. The dimensions of these can be calculated from the two typical plaque sizes. One the same width as the present example, together with a wider one with side flanges, would accommodate a pillar of some eight by fifteen inches in section.

Portuguese influence at Benin from about 1485 coincided with a time of great political and artistic development. The production of plaques flourished during the period of Portuguese contact and may have been inspired by books with illustrations. Since they came from across the sea, the Portuguese became associated with, or even generated, some of the complex of ideas linked up with Olokun, ruler of the seas and provider of earthly wealth through overseas trade in bronze manillas, coral beads and cloth, which were exchanged for pepper, ivory and slaves.

By the beginning of the Middle Period (about 1550), Portuguese soldiers had become a kind of lay figure in art, who did honour to the Oba by their presence. They are depicted either full face or in profile, with straight hair, beard and moustache, aquiline nose and a helmet - perhaps officer types; infantrymen wear sixteenth-century uniform and are beardless, usually with weapons such as matchlock guns or crossbows.

Representations of Portuguese figures were often accompanied by Olokun symbols such as the quatrefoil (*ebe ame* 'river leaf') as shown here; these were used by Olokun priestesses in curing rites.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 154.

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## Provenance

Benin City was the principal settlement of the Edo Kingdom of Benin, situated in the south of Nigeria. In February 1897 the city was attacked by British military, ending the ruling indigenous administration, and the Oba (King) Ovonramwen Nogbaisi (reigned 1888-1897) was exiled. The city was destroyed along with its Royal Palaces. The royal regalia and important religious and memorial sculptures that survived the raid, were looted by the combined forces of British Royal Marines and other colonial forces. The Oba's son, Aiguobasinwin Ovonramwen, Eweka II (reigned 1914-1933) returned to Benin City in 1914, restored the city and Palace complex and the Oba dynasty continues today as a regional and cultural administration in Edo state, Nigeria.

The number of artefacts taken in 1897 is believed to be around 2,500, which were shipped to the UK by the British Admiralty. About 40% of the objects were accessioned to the British Museum (700 works) and other works were given to individual military personnel. The remainder were sold at auction by the Admiralty to pay for the expedition, for example, at Stevens Auction Rooms, 38 King Street, London, May 25, 1897, followed by several sales at William Downing Webster, Bicester, between 1898 and 1900. The artefacts are now dispersed across museum collections, notably in Europe and the USA.

Formerly in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Dorset (illustrated in the catalogue of 1900) and bought from W.D.Webster in 1898. Items from the Pitt Rivers museum were sold on the open art market throughout the 1960's and 1970's.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from John Hewett in 1971.

Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

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