

AFRICAN KINGDOMS OPINION PIECE

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The launch of OCR's new option on African Kingdoms at A Level is a great opportunity for teachers and for students.

For the first time, school learners will have the opportunity to develop detailed knowledge about some of the most important kingdoms in precolonial Africa, and can learn of their achievements through a course which will be fully resourced and supported.



Above: Bronze casting from the kingdom of Benin, c. 16th century, British museum

As a historian of precolonial Africa, I was delighted when OCR approached me to be the lead consultant for the new option. As someone who teaches precolonial African history at university, I have long been aware how much students gain from studying this subject. It is something which is an enormous privilege to teach, because it is a real case of being able to do what all teachers love to do, which is to help open young people's minds. In general, students enter the classroom with little knowledge in this area, and one of the first things I always do in one of my first-year courses is to ask them how much knowledge they think we have on precolonial Africa. Most often, the answer comes back that we know very little, and so at the end of the course I ask them the question again: it's wonderful to see how far their ideas have changed in a term or two, and how much there is to know, appreciate and learn from when we look at the distant African past.

Structure of OCR African Kingdoms option

The new OCR option is structured around four key kingdoms in precolonial Africa: Benin, Dahomey/Oyo, Kongo, and Songhay. Each left major marks on world history in the era between around 1500 and 1800, and one of the fascinating things which students will learn is the range of cultural, economic and social transformations which occurred in these kingdoms in this period. There is a range of sources available to deepen knowledge here, which often go far beyond traditional materials: for the kingdom of Benin, London-based students can take a study trip to the Africa Rooms in the British Museum and learn about the Benin Bronzes, extraordinary bronze carvings from the Kingdom of Benin which date back to the 16th century and offer powerful

art historical sources of the culture and history of Benin, including the early encounters with Portuguese traders; for the kingdom of Kongo, all students can search online for the remarkable paintings of Kongolese Ambassadors to the Dutch in Brazil painted by the Dutch artist Albert Eckhout in the 1640s; and for Songhay, students can examine the amazing recovered funerary inscriptions uncovered by the Brazilian historian P F de Moraes Farias from the deserts of Mali, and reproduced in full in his book on the subject.

Sources to be made available

These sort of visual sources are readily available to all, and will add to the variety of materials which OCR will make available to resource teachers of this new option. I will be developing an e-textbook over the coming year which will go live between this November and April 2015, while I will also record a series of lecture podcasts aimed as a guide to assist teachers in navigating the textbook and the important themes in the study of these African Kingdoms. Resource lists will be developed in tandem with leading publishers and journals to facilitate background knowledge, along with delivery guides and sample lesson elements which will be put together by OCR's experienced development teams. It's also very timely that October 2015 will also see an important exhibition on West Africa launched at the British Library – West Africa: Cultures of the Word – which will act as an exciting study visit option for many of the first A Level groups to help develop their interest in the topic. More resources will also be developed for future years, including a book I am writing on some of these kingdoms for Penguin which is provisionally scheduled to appear in 2017.



Above: Portrait of an ambassador of the King of Kongo in Brazil, Albert Eckhout, c. 1648

Why study precolonial African history?

Studying precolonial African history is something which is entirely new to the A Level history options, but it's my belief that it could become a real benchmark of the syllabus. Studying the distant African past enhances our abilities as historians by questioning our methods and approaches to history. Historical traditions in Africa are as much oral as written, and as much discernible through material as written cultures, and this brings in a welcome element of interdisciplinarity to the study skills set which students can take on with them to university. We also learn an enormous amount about the emergence of world cultures through looking at the African past, learning about the interactions between Africa and both Islamic cultures to the North and East and Christian cultures in the Atlantic world,

and how culturally mixed the frameworks which produced modernity really were. This is something that helps us to understand not only how Africa came to be as it is today, but also the heritage which we all share in the mixed societies of the present.

That's why the new OCR option is something that I really believe in, and want to help to develop as much as possible. When the next cohort of first year undergraduates comes into my classroom and tells me that, actually, we know much more about precolonial African history than people used to think, I'll know that we've done a good job.

For more information on OCR's new A Level History qualification, please visit www.ocr.org.uk/alevelhistorya.



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