There is little written evidence for the earliest Benin society. This makes it hard to know what life was like, particularly for ordinary people. Much of the evidence that does exist tells us about the Ogiso or Oba as he was the most important person of his time.

We have to use traditional stories and the few artefacts that exist to make assumptions about the life of ordinary people.

Each family had its own home with a space, a bit like a garden. The house would have been built from materials found in the rainforest - wood, leaves and other natural materials. Families also had a plot of land that they farmed, growing crops and raising animals for meat. The Edo people lived together in villages as this was the best way to protect themselves from attacks form other Edo groups or wild animals.

Children did not go to school but learned from storytellers who kept the Kingdom’s history and mythology alive.

It makes sense to believe that there were also farmers, warriors, builders and entertainers as part of the Kingdom. Farmers would have grown crops on land that had been cleared in the rainforest as well as hunting for meat and fish which they either ate themselves or sold to others.

We know from evidence in other countries that Benin was famous for its craft workers and that the intricate jewellery and ivory products were a strong source of trade. Specialists in a craft, ivory carvers for example, lived and worked together. These groups were called Guilds and were checked by the Ogiso who wanted to ensure that all goods were made to the highest quality.

Across the city, there were more than 40 guilds, each performing a particular duty or mastering a certain skill. Communities had guilds that were not involved in craft or trade. There was a guild for doctors, one for drummers and also some for acrobats and dancers. Children often learned skills from the members of their family and trades passed down from ‘father to son’.

Trade was an important part of everyday life in Benin and made the Kingdom the powerful dynasty it became in later years. Local markets were held weekly in the forest. To start with traders and their customers would barter, swapping goods rather than paying for them. Later on, traders accepted cowrie shells as a form of payment. Due to a story that tells how the second Ogiso wore a crown of cowrie shells, we believe that cowrie shells were highly valued.

The rainforests would have been rich in goods such as spices and elephants’ ivory, items which would have been much sought-after commodities. It is likely that communities from across Africa traded with Benin for centuries. The people of Benin had an interesting way of trading with others. For example, trading never happened in the villages. A place away from the villagers’ homes was chosen and traders met with examples of their goods. Trading may have taken several days or even weeks. If a visiting trader stole from the Benin traders, then all negotiations would stop until the thieves had apologised and returned either the goods themselves or the value of the goods. This was not just the ceasing of negotiations with the thieves- the Benin traders refused to negotiate with anyone! This sense of justice and forgiveness was also shown to the citizens of Benin themselves who were forgiven if they stole from their neighbours but apologised and returned the goods.

The Ogiso ruled Benin’s trade, deciding what should be traded and demanding the profits for themselves.