

The Kingdom and Civilization of Kush in Northeast Africa

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INTRODUCTION

"Kush" was the name given by the ancient Egyptians to the land that lay to the south, along the middle course of the Nile (the stretch between the junction of the Blue and White Niles [modern Khartoum] and the First Cataract at Aswan). The same region was later known as "Aethiopia" to Greeks and Romans, and as "Nubia" to medieval Arabs. By whatever name, the region has had a long and at times a glorious history, though it is much less well known to the modern world than is that of Egypt. The present essay will focus on a particular phase in the history of Kush, when it was the center of a distinctive, indigenous empire and civilization (circa 760 BCE—320 CE).

Geography

It is important to notice that there is no modern nation that corresponds to either Kush, Aethiopia, or to Nubia. The region thus designated lies partly within the modern Arab Republic of Egypt and partly within the Republic of Sudan, but does not comprise a majority of the territory of either country.

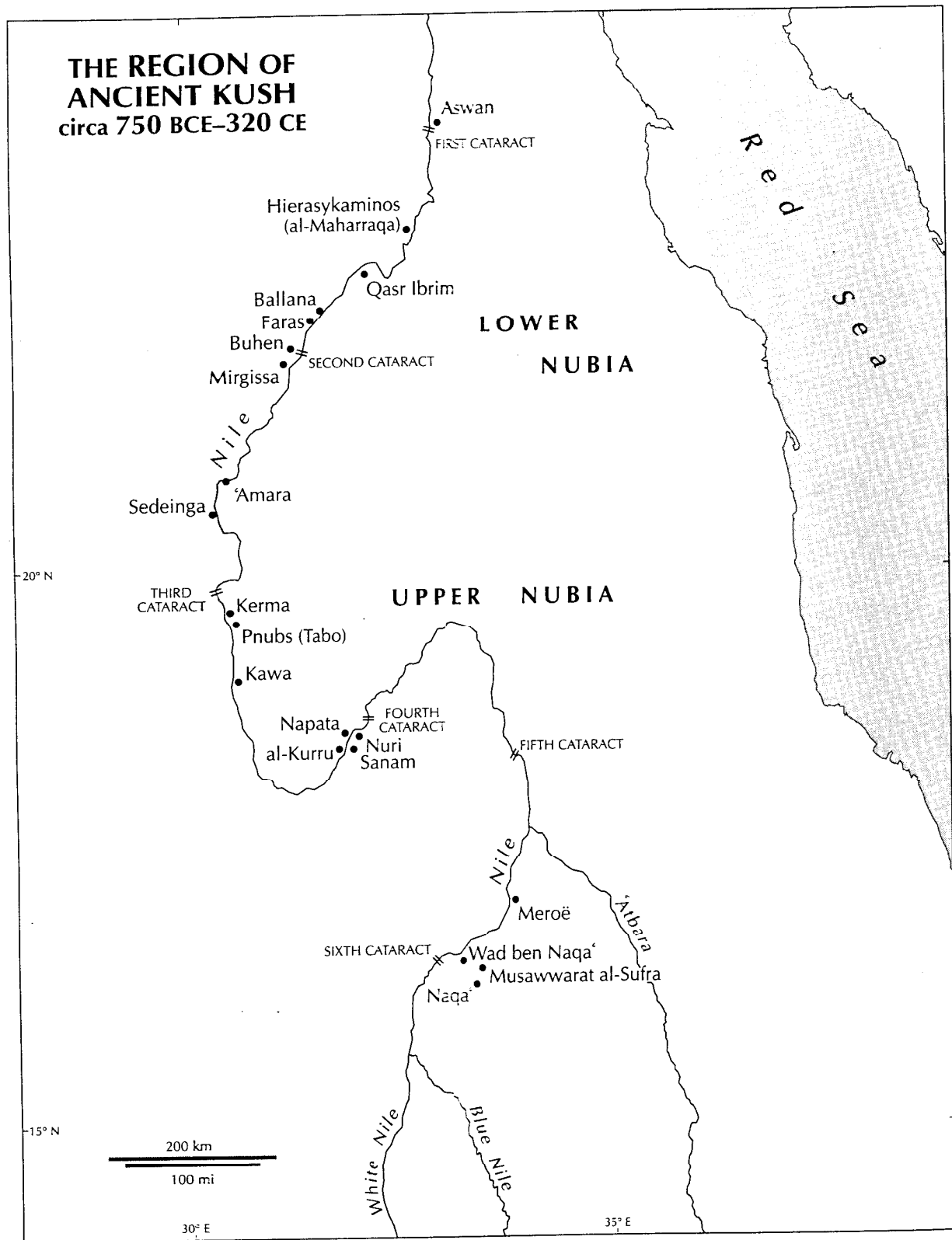
If Egypt is "the gift of the Nile," so also is most of the land of Kush, for here too the river cuts its way across a lifeless desert, and there is

no other source of water or of livelihood. In Kush, however, the river's gift is a poorer one. Instead of the fairly broad and more or less continuous floodplain that borders the Nile in Egypt, there are only small and disconnected patches of alluvium along many stretches of the river; elsewhere it runs directly between stark granite hills or sandbanks. Only in the far south of Kush is there sufficient rainfall to support a sparse growth of savanna grass and a scattering of acacia trees on the plains adjoining the river. Throughout the region, river navigation is impeded at a number of points by the well-known Nile cataracts.

For these and other reasons, the land of Kush was seldom attractive to the Egyptians as a place for settlement, though they long treated it as a sphere of influence from which to obtain gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, slaves, and other African exotica. The native inhabitants were, and still are, peoples of African origin and language. In most other respects, however, they became assimilated to the successive civilizations of Egypt and the Mediterranean world.

Sources of Information

For the history and the culture of ancient Kush, information is much scantier than in the case of Egypt. There is almost no historical record left by the people themselves, except for a few royal



proclamations by some of the more notable kings; these do not furnish anything like the connected record that we have for most eras in Egyptian history. For the brief period during which Kush ruled Egypt and fought Assyria, in the Twenty-fifth Dynasty (760–656), there are also the annals of the Assyrian kings and the reconstruction of events by Hebrew scribes in several passages in the Bible. For the later phases of Kushite history there is the testimony of a number of Greek and Roman annalists, who wrote glowingly but rather inaccurately of the mysterious "Kingdom of the Aethiopians." None of the classical authors had actually visited the region in person.

In Kush as in Egypt, the scanty written record of history is supplemented by a wealth of archaeological data. Systematic archaeology has thus far been mainly confined to the most northerly part of Kush—the region inundated and destroyed by the successive dams built at Aswan since 1898. In advance of the rising waters, ar-

chaeologists carried out extensive surveys and excavations, with the result that we have a remarkably full and rich picture of everyday life and culture in the northern province. Elsewhere excavation has been largely confined to royal monuments and cemeteries, so that we can say much more about the life and activities of the rulers than of the commoners, and sometimes more about how people died than about how they lived.

It has been conventional practice among scholars to divide the history of the Kushite civilization into two phases, called Napatan and Meroitic after the successive capital cities of Napata and Meroë. There is a great deal of debate, however, about when (or even whether) the principal royal residence was actually transferred from one city to the other. For purposes of the present essay, the dividing line between the two eras will be more or less arbitrarily fixed at 315, marking the death of Nastasen—the last Kushite ruler who was unquestionably buried at Napata.

Kush in History and Fable

Objective information about the history and peoples of Kush has always been scanty, but there has been no shortage of fable. The mysterious lands of the Middle and Upper Nile have excited the imagination of outsiders, either positively or negatively, since very early times.

The earliest image of Kush of which we have any historical record was a negative one. The southerners were the "inferior other" against whom ancient Egyptians chose to measure their own superiority; hence they commonly appended hieroglyphic characters to the name of Kush that have been variously translated as "miserable," "wretched," or "abominable." For Egyptians, "wretched Kush" clearly had the same symbolic meaning as had "darkest Africa" for Europeans and Americans of the Victorian era.

This contemptuous attitude was passed on, after a lapse of millennia, from the Egyptians to the Egyptologists who deciphered their texts and revived their traditions. In older Egyptological literature, the civilization of Kush is commonly dismissed as an inferior and barbarous copy of the Egyptian, while the Kushites themselves are described as racially inferior.

At nearly the opposite extreme was the attitude of classical Greeks and Romans. In the words of Homer,

the "Aethiopians" were the justest of men and beloved of the gods, whereas Herodotus was the first of many authors to put forth the idea that Kush was the fountainhead of Egyptian civilization. Both Herodotus and Strabo presented fabulous descriptions of the Kushite capital city of Meroë, and "Aethiopian" romances were a popular genre of late classical literature. For understandable reasons, this perspective has been enthusiastically championed by modern African and African American nationalists, who cite Homer and Herodotus (rather than their Egyptian predecessors) as authoritative historical sources.

The great archaeological campaigns of the 1960s, occasioned by the building of the Aswan High Dam, brought to Kush for the first time, in addition to Egyptologists and classicists, a group of historical and archaeological scholars with other backgrounds neither in Egyptology nor in the classics. From their labors, there has gradually arisen the new discipline of Nubiology, whose perspective is essentially particularistic, seeing Kush neither as a pale reflection of Egypt nor as a metaphor for African glory, but simply as a land whose people and culture are deserving of interest in their own right.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Indigenous Substratum

Although they fell under Egyptian influence as early as 3000, the peoples of Kush for many centuries remained in what was essentially a Neolithic state of cultural development. They lived in small and rather impermanent villages scattered here and there along the banks of the Nile and supported themselves by a combination of cereal cultivation and animal husbandry. They had no highly developed arts of their own save that of pottery making, though over time they became increasingly accustomed to receiving luxury goods of bronze, faience, and glass from their Egyptian neighbors. Those goods, along with locally made as well as imported pottery, were regularly buried with the dead. Skeletal evidence shows that these earliest Kushites were Negroid in physical type, as indeed were all their descendants down to modern times.

The settlements and graves of the earliest historical era in Kush give little evidence of social-class differentiation or of political centralization. It appears as if the people, as with most Neolithic peoples, were living in autonomous and basically democratic villages. About 2400, however, there is evidence that a group of powerful, hereditary chieftains emerged at the settlement of Kerma, near the Third Cataract. They entered into a kind of trading contract with Egyptian rulers and merchants, as suppliers of gold, ivory, and slaves, and through this connection they were able gradually to increase their wealth and power at the expense of their subjects. By about 1600 Kerma was a major urban center with workshops, commercial magazines, granaries, residential areas, and imposing mud-brick temples. The Kerma chieftains were now buried under enormous brick tumuli and were accompanied by vast quantities of buried wealth as well as by literally hundreds of sacrificed retainers.

Although it depended heavily on trade with pharaonic Egypt, the civilization of Kerma retained to the end a strongly indigenous, non-Egyptian character. Manufactures, houses, temples, and tombs were not copied from Egyptian models, but reflected the logical outgrowth of older, local traditions. The Kerma monarchy set the style for centralized impe-

rial rule in Kush, which was to be revived centuries later when the kingdom of Kush emerged by about 900.

The Egyptian Overlay

Egyptian hieroglyphic texts from the earliest dynasties make it clear that the pharaohs always regarded Kush as a legitimate Egyptian sphere of influence. There are records of plundering expeditions into the southern country in the Early Dynastic period, and of more peaceful trading expeditions in the Sixth Dynasty. For a time in the Fourth Dynasty, and again in the Fifth, an Egyptian colony was maintained at Buhen, near the Second Cataract, though it does not seem to have been a part of a more general program of territorial annexation.

In the Twelfth Dynasty, the pharaohs established a chain of massive brick fortresses along a forty-mile (64-kilometer) stretch of the Nile, upstream from the Second Cataract. Occupied until the end of the Thirteenth Dynasty, these fortresses were apparently meant to protect the increasingly important trade route to Kerma at points especially vulnerable to attack. A stela of Pharaoh Sesostris (Senwosret) III (circa 1836-1815) proclaimed that the fortresses were now the southern boundary of Egypt, and that no cargoes could pass farther north except to trade at the fort of Mirgissa. Despite this proclaimed "annexation" of the most northern part of Kush, it appears that the interest of the pharaohs was purely in protecting their trade. They seem to have made little effort to subjugate or assimilate the native population, and indeed the Nubian village sites from this time show no more evidence of Egyptian cultural influence than do those of earlier centuries.

The period between about 1540 and 1075 was Egypt's great imperial age. The pharaohs now established direct control over Kush as far upstream as the Fourth Cataract, overthrowing the indigenous Kerma monarchy and replacing it with a comprehensive and purely Egyptian bureaucratic administration. Administrative town sites, complete with Egyptian temples, were built at a number of key points. The most imposing of them was at Napata, just below the Fourth Cataract, where the conquerors established a great temple to Amun, the Egyptian state god.

In the five centuries of colonial rule, the natives of Kush took up the worship of the Egyptian gods as well as Egyptian styles of dress, housing, and burial practice. By the eleventh century the process of acculturation was sufficiently complete that native Kushites occupied important positions as provincial governors and princes in the Egyptian state bureaucracy.

After about 1075 the pharaonic state entered one of its periodic declines. Under these disturbed conditions, the whole colonial enterprise in Kush seems to have been given up, and most of the Egyptian towns were abandoned. At Napata, however, the worship of Amun, perhaps under the guidance of Egyptian priests, was maintained. It was to provide the legitimizing basis for the foundation of an indigenous Kushite dynasty and kingdom some centuries later.

THE NAPATAN PHASE

Obscure Beginnings

What happened in Kush immediately after the Egyptian departure is not known, for there are neither textual nor archaeological records. In time, however, a family of local chieftains rose to power in the Napata area, probably with the backing of the local priests of Amun. We do not know their names or anything about their origins; our only surviving record of rulers before Alara is a group of large earthen tumulus graves in the cemetery of al-Kurru, just downriver from Napata (see "The History of Ancient Egypt" earlier in this volume). These remains are not Egyptian in style; rather they are reminiscent of the much earlier tombs of the Kerma rulers.

The Years of Glory

The Kushites abruptly reappeared on the stage of history with the accession of a certain Kashta, who may have been the sixth or seventh of the Napatan chieftains in the eighth century. At some point in his reign he was invited by the priests of Amun to travel north to Thebes, the old imperial capital and the center of Amun worship in southern Egypt. At Thebes, Kashta was invested by the priests with some of the traditional titles and protocols of the pharaoh, and his daughter was adopted as the "divine adora-

trice of Amun." The circumstances connected with this extraordinary turn of events are obscure, for Kashta soon returned to his native land, and his name has survived only in a few fragmentary hieroglyphic texts.

Under Piye (a name formerly read Piankhy), the successor of Kashta, the story was repeated, and this time the circumstances are much clearer. Political equilibrium in Thebes was threatened by a leader from the western Delta, and the priests of Amun had not the resources to defend their realm. They invited Piye, who evidently commanded a considerable military force, to come to their defense. The Napatan chieftain proceeded to Thebes, was crowned as pharaoh, and then turned his full attention against the would-be attackers of Thebes. In a long campaign, Piye subdued one after another of the cities and the rival dynasts of Lower Egypt and asserted his sovereignty over the whole country. The Napatans were to reign for about a century as the pharaohs of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty (circa 760–656), often designated by historians as the "Ethiopian" dynasty.

After his triumphant campaign, Piye returned to his native land and apparently never again set foot in Egypt. He was buried alongside his ancestors in the family cemetery at al-Kurru. As a mark of his pharaonic status, his choice for his funerary monument was not an earthen tumulus but a stone pyramid, thereby setting the style for more than a thousand years of Kushite royal tombs that were to follow.

Kashta and Piye were the only pharaohs of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty who ruled from Kush itself. Piye's successors became preoccupied with an attempt to restore Egypt's traditional hegemony in Palestine and Syria, which obliged them to establish their main base of operations in Lower Egypt. The effort was a rash one, for it brought the Kushite pharaohs into conflict with the rising power of Assyria and ultimately led to their undoing. The situation came to a head under Taharqa (circa 690–664), the fifth pharaoh of the dynasty. It was his misfortune to reap the harvest of his predecessors' foolhardy ambitions in Asia, and the latter years of his reign were filled with a continuing series of abortive campaigns and rearguard actions against the advancing Assyrian might. In 667–666 an Assyrian army entered and subjugated Lower Egypt, leav-

ing only the region to the south of Thebes still in the hands of the Kushite pharaohs. The final blow was postponed until after the death of Taharqa, but about 663 an Assyrian army finally dislodged his successor Tantamani (or Tanutamun) from Upper Egypt, and the Twenty-fifth Dynasty came to an end.

Although Taharqa was the least successful military commander among the Kushite rulers, he was the greatest of builders. At Thebes itself he adorned the Great Temple of Amun at Karnak with new processional ways and commissioned several other buildings in the vicinity. Within his native country, he commissioned wholly new temples of Egyptian style, dedicated to the familiar Egyptian gods, at Sanam, Kawa, and Pnubs (Tabo). Smaller temples of mud brick were also built at several points in the northern province of Kush. (For an illustration of a portrait statue of Taharqa, see "The History of Ancient Egypt: An Overview," earlier in this volume.)

Although the "Ethiopian" pharaohs reigned mainly from Egypt, all of them retired to Napata in their last years and were buried there. Kashta, Piye, and their two immediate successors were interred in the old family cemetery at al-Kurru. Taharqa, however, chose a new burial site at Nuri, about sixteen miles (twenty-five kilometers) upriver from al-Kurru and on the opposite bank. This is the only one of the Kushite royal cemeteries that is located on the left bank of the Nile; its choice may have been dictated by the fact that all of the great royal cemeteries of Egypt itself are located on the left bank. After Taharqa, the Nuri cemetery was to serve as the burial place of at least eighteen other Napatan rulers as well as fifty or more of their queens.

After the Fall

The expulsion from Egypt did not spell the end of the Kushite dynasty in its homeland. On the contrary, the successors of Taharqa and Tantamani (Tanutamun) continued to rule over a united Kush for another thousand years, claiming until the end the titles and the style of the pharaoh.

Nevertheless, the connected history of Kush ends with Tantamani's expulsion from Egypt. The region thereafter was no longer of interest to Egyptian, Assyrian, or Hebrew chroniclers,

and only five of the twenty later rulers at Napata have left any record of themselves, other than the names inscribed in their respective pyramids. Their texts, like all the Napatan royal annals, are in Egyptian hieroglyphs, which depart increasingly from the classical language with the passage of time.

The later Napatan texts are hardly more than brief flashes of light in the darkness of history. They mostly record military campaigns against obscure foes—presumably nomads from the desert flanks of Kush—or else coronation activities. The style of the language is formalized and repetitive, suggesting that the scribes copied freely from their predecessors.

Only one event of later Napatan times is recorded both in Egyptian and in Greek texts. About 593 Pharaoh Psamtik (Psammetichus) II led a military expedition against Kush, but neither the *casus belli* nor the geographical details of the campaign is specified in the annals of Psamtik or in Herodotus. Apart from this one record we are ignorant of the relations between pharaonic Egypt and Kush during their last centuries of contact. There is evidence to suggest that the whole northern part of Kush in Lower Nubia was depopulated, or nearly so, during this time, so that there was, in effect, an unoccupied buffer zone between the two powers.

The Napatan Achievement

It is fair to say that the genius of the Napatan rulers was military and political rather than cultural. They evidently commanded a more effective fighting force than anything found within Egypt itself, and they successfully reunified the northern country after a long period of disunity and internal strife. It was no mean political achievement that they were able to win the support of the priests of Amun and to gain acceptance as legitimate pharaohs among a people who had so long despised them. The great conquest stela of Piye, recounting his triumphs in Egypt, is a masterpiece both of literature and of propaganda. As James Henry Breasted wrote,

This remarkable literary monument is the clearest and most rational account of a military expedition which has survived from ancient Egypt. It displays literary skill and an appreciation of dramatic situations which is notable, while the vivacious touches

found here and there quite relieve it of the arid tone usual in such hieroglyphic documents. The imagination endues the personages appearing here more easily with life than those of any other similar historical narrative of Egypt; and the humane Pi-ankhi [Piye] especially, the lover of horses, remains a *man* far removed from the conventional companion and equal of the gods who inevitably occupies the exalted throne of the pharaohs in all such records. (*A History of Egypt* [1909], p. 545)

The text of the stela makes it clear that Piye based his claim to the pharaonic throne on personal righteousness rather than dynastic descent.

Otherwise, the cultural achievements of the Napatan era were relatively modest. The sole builder of importance among the early Kushite rulers was Taharqa, and his buildings, though impressive in number, were all in the traditional Egyptian style of their times. The Napatans were restorers and revitalizers of an older tradition, rather than innovators.

Because archaeological investigation of the Napatans has been very limited, little can be said about the lives or the culture of the ordinary folk. There were certainly extensive town sites surrounding all of the major temples, but they have not been investigated in any detail. It can be inferred from the surface remains that the majority of construction was in mud brick. Apart from the towns, there must surely have been a large number of smaller farming villages, as always along this part of the Nile.

Some evidence regarding social conditions is afforded by two nonroyal cemeteries, at Meroë and at Sanam. In both places there were graves of three types: vaulted chamber graves with stairway entrances, in which the bodies were mummified and placed in coffins; rectangular pit graves containing extended burials, accompanied by exclusively Egyptian-type goods and pottery; and oval graves containing contracted burials, accompanied by both Egyptian-made and locally made pottery. The chamber graves are clearly those of a nobility or upper class, while the humbler graves seem to give evidence of a population divided between an egyptianizing and a "native" or nonegyptianizing element.

THE MEROITIC PHASE

The Rise of Meroë

Called by Herodotus the "city of the Ethiopians," Meroë is situated on the right bank of the Nile about 300 miles (480 kilometers) upriver from Napata. The overland distance between the two cities is only about 150 miles (240 kilometers), for they are situated respectively at the upper and lower ends of the Great Nile Bend. Evidence suggests that most traffic between the two places did not follow the river but took the shorter Bayuda Road across the intervening desert.

Meroë is situated in a different ecological zone from any of the earlier and more northerly Kushite cities, for it receives about three inches (75 millimeters) of annual rainfall—enough to support a sparse growth of savanna grasses and to create occasional runoff in the normally dry desert wadis. Meroë, unlike Napata, had an inhabited hinterland where pastoral nomads could graze their flocks, and where catch-crops of millet could be grown along the watercourses in autumn after the short rainy season. It is believed that these environmental advantages played a considerable part in the rise of Meroë to predominance among the cities of Kush.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the founding of Meroë goes back almost to the beginning of the Napatan period. Aspalta (circa 593–568 BCE) is the first king whose name has been found in the ruins of the city, and Talakhmani (circa 435–431) is reported to have died there, though he was buried at Nuri. A stela of Amani-nete-yerike (circa 431–405) contains the first mention of Meroë by name. From this time onward, it seems evident that the Kushite rulers reigned at least part of the time at Meroë instead of at Napata, though they continued to be buried in the old Nuri cemetery until after the death of Nastasen (335–315). Thereafter most of the rulers were buried at Meroë, first in the South Cemetery (which already had long been in use as a private cemetery) and later in the North Cemetery.

There has been much debate over when the capital of Kush was "transferred" from Napata to Meroë, some authors opting for a date as early as the sixth century and others preferring a date

Pyramids and Dynasties

In a purely quantitative sense, the rulers of Kush were the greatest pyramid builders in history. While Egyptian royal pyramids were built only during the Fourth to the Thirteenth dynasties, the Kushite rulers were buried under pyramids throughout the entire history of their kingdom. Altogether there are at least three hundred pyramids attributable to the kings, queens, and nobles of Kush.

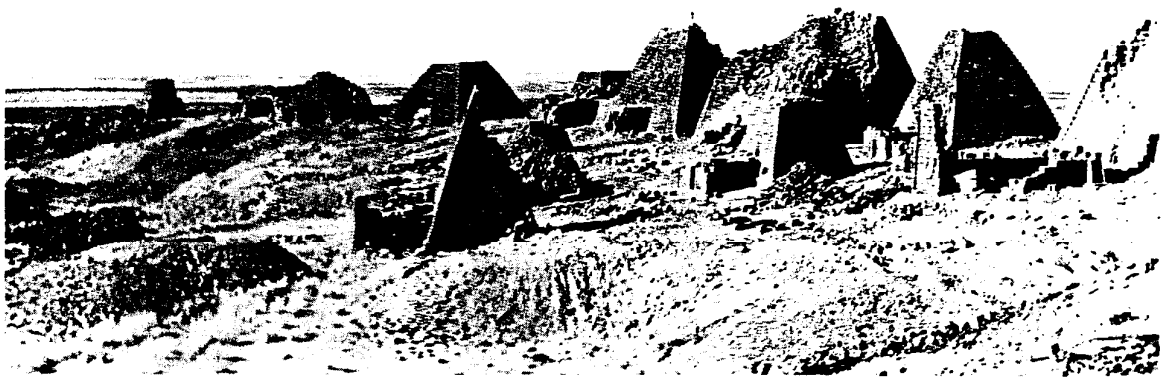
The Kushite royal pyramid was a much smaller affair than was that of Egyptian rulers, with more steeply sloping sides. The largest pyramid, that of Taharqa at Nuri, measures about ninety-five feet (almost 30 meters) on a side. From Taharqa's time onward, the pyramid became consistently smaller with each passing generation, and the last of the pyramids, built in the fourth century CE, measures only twenty-three feet (about 7 meters) on a side. The pyramids were nearly always adjoined by a mortuary chapel on the east side, adorned, in the case of the Meroitic examples, with reliefs and hieroglyphic texts. It is mainly in these texts that we learn the names of the tomb owners.

The Kushite royal pyramids are clustered in five cemeteries: al-Kurru, Nuri, and Jebel Barkal near Napata, and the North and South cemeteries of Meroë. A sixth cemetery, the West Cemetery at Meroë, contains the pyramids of nobles and their wives, but not of royalty. The chronological relationships among the five royal cemeteries are somewhat problematic. Nuri undoubtedly succeeded al-Kurru at Napata, and the South Cemetery undoubtedly succeeded the North

at Meroë, but it is not clear whether there was any overlap in time between the Napatan group on the one hand and the Meroë group on the other. Moreover, the chronological position of the small Jebel Barkal cemetery has been the subject of continual debate; it is clearly much later in time than either of the other royal cemeteries near Napata.

The great majority of Kushite rulers are known by name only from inscriptions in their tombs and from no other source. These texts rarely give any secure chronological information, nor do they indicate the relationship of the ruler to his predecessor. Hence the pyramids themselves are our only real clue to the chronology of the rulers. Archaeologists have devised a chronological ordering of the pyramids mainly on the basis of size and stylistic features and of their positioning in the cemeteries.

Obviously such evidence is problematic and lends itself to varied interpretations. Should we envision one single Kushite dynasty from beginning to end, or a succession of dynasties, as might be expected in the course of a thousand-year history? Were there, at times, contemporary and rival dynasties at Napata and at Meroë? All of these theories have had and continue to have their champions. The general tendency among scholars has been to adopt a kind of "law of parsimony," that is, to envision as few dynasties as possible, and to arrange all of the pyramids into a single chronological succession. Whether this order corresponds to any kind of historical reality is, for the time being, anybody's guess.



The royal pyramids of Meroë, circa 250 BCE–350 CE. FRITZ HINTZE AND URSULA HINTZE, *ALTE KULTUREN IM SUDAN* (1967)

The Kingdom and Civilization of Kush

near the end of the fourth century. It seems better to assume, however, that Kush, like Egypt, had a peripatetic court, and the "capital" was wherever the ruler happened to be at any moment. In all probability there were substantial royal residences both at Meroë and at Napata (and possibly also at Kawa, upriver from the Third Cataract) from the sixth century onward. There can be little doubt, though, that the importance of Meroë increased as that of Napata declined, and that after the fourth century the rulers preferred to spend the bulk of their time in the southern city and to be buried there.

The Archaeological Record

While our knowledge of the Napatan era comes more from texts than from archaeology, in the Meroitic era the reverse is overwhelmingly true, because the Meroitic rulers, after the third century, began leaving their royal inscriptions in the indigenous Meroitic language, which is not yet understood. Thus, we can recognize the names of the rulers, but can discover little about their activities. On the other hand there has been extensive excavation in the city ruins at Meroë and at several other sites in its vicinity, as well as in Lower Nubia, the most northerly province of Kush, which was heavily resettled in late Meroitic times.

The Royal Enclosure at Meroë was excavated over a period of several seasons in the early years of the twentieth century. It was a stoutly walled compound enclosing two large palace buildings, audience chambers, magazines, domestic quarters for the palace staff, and a little prostyle temple decorated with brightly colored paintings of the king and queen and various officials. A late and very unexpected addition to the royal architectural complex was a Roman-style bath, with an elaborate system of channels to bring in water from a nearby well. Adjoining the royal enclosure was another compound containing a huge temple of Amun, comparable in size to the great temples at Napata and Thebes. At least seven other temples and shrines have been located within the urban area at Meroë. About two miles (3.2 kilometers) east of the city, on an elevated terrace and against a backdrop of low desert hills, were the serried rows of pyramids marking the North and South royal cemeteries.

The city ruins of Meroë cover an area up to a mile square (not quite three square kilometers); so far only the temples and the royal quarter have been excavated. From the surface remains, it is evident that much of the construction here was in red (burned) brick. It was probably employed as facing over a mud-brick core, as was found to be the case in a number of the excavated buildings. This feature, not found in any of the more northerly Kushite sites, was made necessary or at least desirable by the occasional rainfall at Meroë. Extensive heaps of iron slag, and the remains of a number of furnaces, have shown that iron smelting was a major industry at Meroë.

Forty miles (64 kilometers) upriver from Meroë are the ruins of Wad ban Naqa, where there was another enormous brick palace as well as small temples. Thirty miles (48 kilometers) inland from Meroë, in the region known as the Butana, are the extraordinary sites of Naqa and Musawwarat al-Sufra. At Naqa, which is largely unexcavated, there are remains of at least seven stone temples as well as a very large town site. Musawwarat al-Sufra is distinguished by a vast, labyrinthine complex of enclosures and ramps, beautifully built of dressed stone but mostly without carved decoration. There are also at least three temples at the site. Both Musawwarat al-Sufra and Naqa were built along dry desert wadis and were supplied with water during most of the year by large, artificially dug catchment basins (*hafirs*). Similar basins, presumed to be of Meroitic date, have been found at many other points in the surrounding Butana savanna, and in at least several cases there are town-site remains nearby.

Downriver from the Meroë region, there are almost no identifiable Meroitic sites until Napata is reached, suggesting that communication between the two places was mainly via the Bayuda Road instead of along the river. There are a number of recognizable Meroitic temple buildings at the old Napatan religious centers of Napata, Kawa, and Pnubs (Tabo). But the most abundant evidence of Meroitic building activity in terms of towns and houses, and indeed of Meroitic occupation in general, is to be found in the far northern province of Kush (Lower Nubia)—where evidence of Napatan activity is almost wholly lacking. The northern province will be discussed separately in a later section.



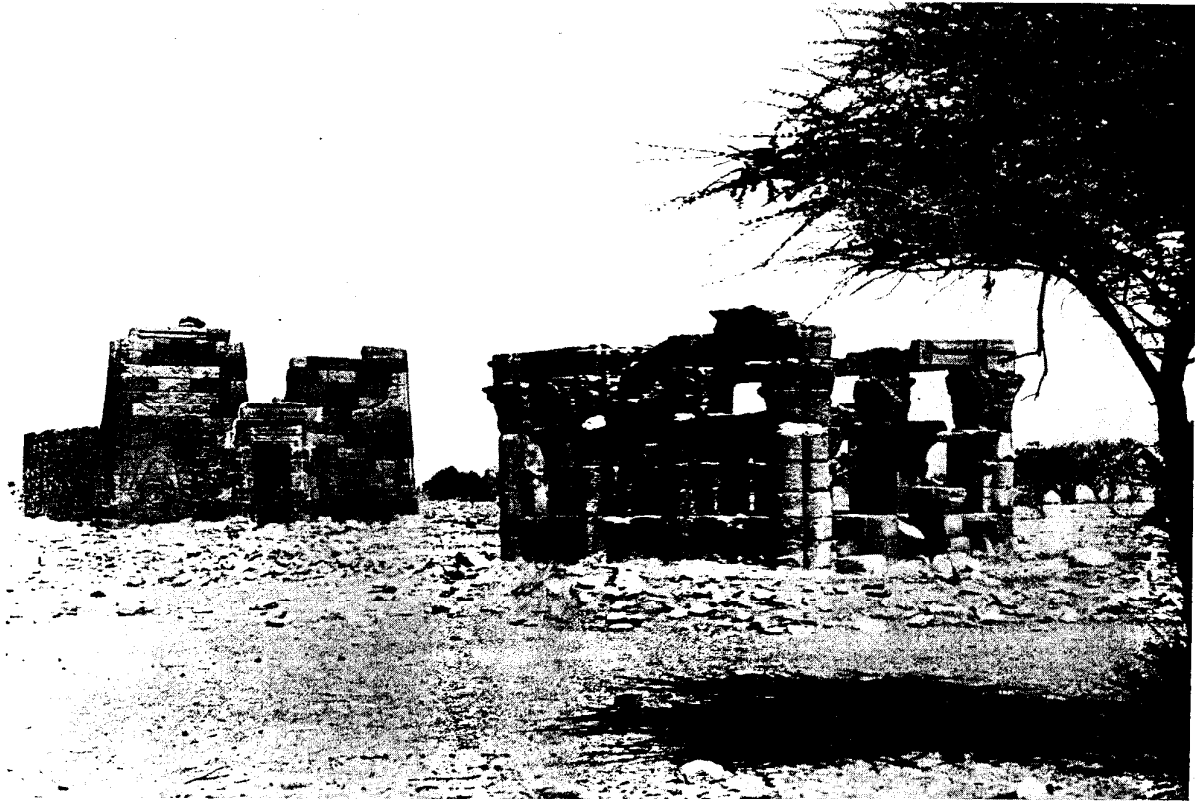
Stela of King Amanikhabale with a fragment of Meroitic writing, from the Amun Temple, Meroë. Because scholars have yet to decipher the Meroitic language, only the names of rulers, and not their activities, can be interpreted. FRITZ HINTZE AND URSULA HINTZE, *ALTE KULTUREN IM SUDAN* (1967)

Meroitic Religion

Many of the Meroitic temples that can be definitely identified were commissioned by a single pair of rulers, Natakamani and Amanitore, a brother and sister who reigned jointly between about 12 BCE and 12 CE. Their names are associated with at least a dozen monuments that they either built or rebuilt. Their temples are much smaller than those of Napatan times, and consist typically of a single large room entered through a massive pylon gate. The walls, as in all earlier temples, are covered with carved reliefs that carry on the immemorial Egyptian tradition, showing the king and queen in procession with

the familiar gods Amun, Osiris, and Isis, or else smiting foreign enemies. But while the iconography is unmistakably Egyptian, the depiction of the figures is much more robust than in Egyptian or Napatan art and the rulers are shown with unmistakably African features.

Amun seems to have remained the principal state deity of Kush, as he was earlier in pharaonic Egypt. For many centuries the Napatan and Meroitic rulers were always chosen and crowned by the priests of Amun at Napata. Continuing also in importance were the familiar deities Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, and the jackal god Anubis, all of whom were associated with a highly developed mortuary cult. In late Meroitic times,



The Lion Temple and "Roman Kiosk" Temple, Naqa. FRITZ HINTZE AND URSULA HINTZE, *ALTE KULTUREN IM SUDAN* (1967)

Isis seems to have increased significantly in importance, perhaps reflecting the great popularity of the Isis cult that spread through the Greco-Roman world. A purely indigenous deity, who appears frequently on Meroitic royal monuments, is the lion god Apedemak, who may have been a special tutelary of the royal family and of the south.

Funerary religion continued to be as important in Kush as it was in Egypt. The royal tombs, though smaller in size than those of Napatan times, were still elaborate affairs with above-ground pyramids and decorated chapels, and with one or more underground chambers decorated with painted mortuary scenes and texts from the *Book of the Dead*. The royal corpse was usually laid out on a bed, accompanied by an abundance of material wealth and usually with sacrificed animal and human retainers. The more prosperous commoners were often buried

in a vaulted chamber tomb surmounted by a small mud-brick pyramid or mastaba and were accompanied by an abundance of decorated pottery, bronze vessels, and ornaments, as well as sometimes weapons and implements. A common feature that was found alongside many of the royal and noble tomb superstructures was a stone offering table (libation tray), usually adorned with the figures of Isis and Nephthys or Anubis and bearing an inscription giving the names and titles of the deceased. Ordinary folk were interred in plain rectangular pit graves, but even these usually included a considerable abundance of pottery, ornaments, and other luxury goods.

Polity and Economy

We have little direct information about the political organization of the Meroitic state. There has been a persistent tradition, surviving since classi-



Relief of King Natakamani in the Lion Temple at Naqa, south exterior wall, first century CE. FRITZ HINTZE AND URSULA HINTZE, *ALTE KULTUREN IM SUDAN* (1967)

cal times, that the royal succession was matrilineal, but the evidence for this view is not very substantial. There can be no doubt, however, that the queen mother was a person of major importance at the royal court. On the monuments she is often depicted in a position directly alongside her ruling son.

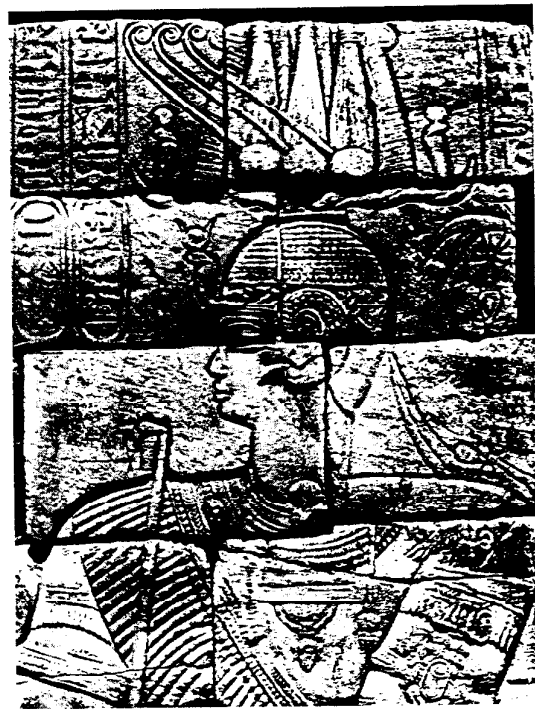
The funerary inscriptions of nobles, insofar as they can be deciphered, seem to give evidence of a fairly complex bureaucracy. Many individuals list a succession of positions that they held, probably reflecting their climb up the bureaucratic ladder. Because the titles are in the untranslated Meroitic language, however, the functions associated with the different offices remain very unclear. Whether there were separate civil and ecclesiastical bureaucracies has not been determined.

The economic prosperity of the northern Kushite province rested unquestionably on a reviving trade with Ptolemaic and then with Roman Egypt. By contrast, the economic basis of the

Kushite state in the more southerly part of the empire remains a matter of debate. The "inland" cities of Musawwarat al-Sufra and Naqa, away from the banks of the Nile, and the numerous *hafirs* in the surrounding steppe land, indicate a considerable extension of agriculture into regions that are no longer fertile. In addition, Strabo and other classical authors asserted that many of the subjects of Meroë were nomadic pastoralists. It may be therefore that state-organized control of agriculture and pastoralism provided a sufficient economic foundation for the later Kushite state.

Foreign Relations

In the second century of Ptolemaic rule, Egypt began claiming sovereignty over the most northerly part of Kush, between the First and Second cataracts. This region, though long regarded as politically integral with the rest of Kush, had been nearly depopulated for many centuries. There is some evidence of disputed sovereignty



Relief of King Arnekhamani (235–218 BCE) from the Lion Temple at Musawwarat al-Sufra; south exterior wall, circa 200 BCE. FRITZ HINTZE AND URSULA HINTZE, *ALTE KULTUREN IM SUDAN* (1967)

Meroitic Art

The artistic and architectural works of the Napatans were clearly and rather closely derived from contemporary Egyptian models and at best represent a regional variant of a well-known tradition. To a great extent, the same could be said of Meroitic monumental art. Meroitic decorative artists, however, achieved a whole new artistic canon, involving exuberant combinations of Egyptian, Hellenistic, and indigenous motifs in seemingly endless variations.

Meroitic decorative art was applied mainly to vessels: of bronze, silver, glass, but above all, of pottery. At least a dozen different pottery wares were made, the finest of which were almost eggshell-thin and were made from very fine, light-colored clays. There were three major traditions of pottery decoration. Most popular were designs in dark brown and terracotta, executed on a white, cream, or light buff background. Animals, birds, crocodiles, and snakes; active human figures and caricature heads; a wide variety

of floral designs; and intricate, precisely executed geometric patterns all combined into repeating or alternating friezes, of which there might be several on the same vessel.

Somewhat less common were designs executed in black and cream on a dark red background. Decoration in this tradition was generally rather sparing; there was seldom more than one decorative frieze per vessel. A third tradition was fairly closely modeled on contemporary pottery made at Aswan, in Egypt, and involved decoration in black on a pink background. The main designs were vine-wreath friezes, appearing in innumerable variants, and occasional animals represented usually in dynamic poses. Except for the latter tradition, Meroitic decorative art has no close counterparts in Egypt or elsewhere and represents one of the unique artistic achievements of the people of Kush.

between the Ptolemaic and Kushite rulers, but eventually an accommodation was reached, and the whole region was designated as an estate of the goddess Isis.

The Romans, who became masters of Egypt in 30 BCE, were not satisfied with this arrangement, and they induced the rulers of Kush to sign a treaty that, in effect, made them tributary to Rome. The Kushites soon rebelled, however, and launched an attack on the Egyptian frontier outpost of Aswan, provoking a Roman counterattack that penetrated into Kush all the way to Napata. Immediately afterward a formal treaty was signed that fixed the frontier between Roman Egypt and the dominions of Kush at Hierasykaminos (now al-Maharraqa), about seventy miles (110 kilometers) south of the First Cataract. Thereafter peace prevailed between Rome and Meroë until the final end of the Kushite state, and numerous diplomatic and commercial missions passed back and forth between the two powers. It was as a result of these contacts that the reputation of Meroë became well known to Strabo, Pliny, and other writers of the later Roman era.

THE NORTHERN PROVINCE

Depopulation and Resettlement

The most northerly part of Kush, often referred to as Lower Nubia in modern literature, was for a good many centuries the most culturally advanced part of the country. As the centers of power shifted southward, first to Napata and then to Meroë, the northern region seems to have become largely depopulated. Then, probably in the first century CE, there was a very rapid resettlement. The reasons for both the depopulation and the resettlement are poorly understood. A decline in the average level of the Nile flood has been suggested as a reason for abandonment, and the introduction of the *saqiya* (ox-driven waterwheel), overcoming the problem of the diminished Nile, as a reason for the resettlement.

The Nature of Meroitic Settlement

The Meroitic reoccupation of the north is marked not so much by temples and royal monuments as by a string of prosperous farming villages, and especially of small local cemeteries,

along both banks of the Nile. Altogether more than sixty such archaeological sites have been discovered and excavated in the region between the Roman frontier at al-Maharraqa and the Second Cataract. In each town site there were a few stoutly built, two-story houses of mud brick, presumably the residences of the local elite, and a larger number of rather insubstantial mud-brick dwellings, which were probably the homes of the humbler folk. The cemeteries also reflect a considerable gradation of wealth, but with less clear evidence of class differentiation. Even the poorest of tombs were well supplied with decorated pottery and other kinds of luxury goods. In general, both the town sites and the tombs give evidence of a higher level of material prosperity than was enjoyed in northern Kush at any other time before the twentieth century. The export of cotton goods to Roman Egypt is believed to have been a major factor contributing to the prosperity of the north, for cotton was not yet grown in Egypt.

The Political Situation

While the bulk of the northern population consisted of village dwellers, there were major administrative and probably commercial centers at Qasr Ibrim, Jebel Adda, and Faras. At least at Qasr Ibrim there was a substantial stone temple. In general, however, the absence both of architectural monuments and of royal inscriptions throughout the northern province of Kush is remarkable. Generally absent too is the god Apedemak, who figures so prominently on royal monuments in the south.

In the partially translated funerary biographies of officials who were buried in the north, it is possible to recognize a number of bureaucratic titles. The highest, apparently the *pqr*, is believed to have resided at Napata. Under him were two *peste*, who may have been stationed at Faras and at Qasr Ibrim, and a *pelmeš*, who may have been a military commander. The whole system of administration gives the impression of a more secular and less theocratic organization than was generally characteristic of Kush. Possibly it was inspired by the example of neighboring Egypt under Roman rule.

THE END OF THE KUSHITE STATE

The circumstances attending the decline and fall of Kushite sovereignty are obscure. In the third century CE, Meroë came into conflict with the rising power of Axum, in the Abyssinian highlands, and there are Ethiopic stelae commemorating at least two Axumite invasions of Meroë itself. Of the Axumite stelae, one is in Sabaeen; one trilingual is in Sabaeen, Greek, and Ge'ez (old Ethiopic); and the remainder are written in Ge'ez. Moreover, the second of the stelae in Ge'ez, datable to around 350, indicates that a barbarian people from west of the Nile, the Noba, had already overrun most of the territories of Kush. While archaeological evidence suggests some continuity of occupation in the crumbling remains of Meroë, it is certain that the place was never again a center of major political or religious importance after the early fourth century. Literate civilization and monarchical power were for all practical purposes extinguished along the Middle Nile for a period of two centuries or longer.

The situation in the northern province was a bit different. Here, after the fall of Meroë, a line of fairly powerful local monarchs took power, and a prosperous trade with Roman Egypt continued. The post-Meroitic rulers built no stone monuments, reverted to the use of earthen tumuli, and their very few royal inscriptions that have survived are in ungrammatical Greek rather than in Meroitic. The royal crowns that were buried with the deceased kings, however, still included representations of Horus and of the uraeus, which were part of the Kushite royal insignia. It appears that Isis now became the principal deity of the ordinary people, and when the Roman governor of Upper Egypt attempted to suppress her worship at the frontier temple at Philae in 453, the people of Kush attacked and forced him to rescind his decision.

When Christian missionaries entered the Middle Nile region in the sixth century, they found three well-established kingdoms within what had been the territories of Kush: Nobadia in the north, Makouria in the Middle Nile region, and Alwa in the south. All three kingdoms were rapidly converted to Christianity, laying the foun-

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dations for an entirely new and distinct civilization, not derived from Kushite antecedents, which flourished along the Middle Nile throughout the Middle Ages.

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