



Kush and Aksum

The Big Idea

The kingdoms of Kush and Aksum, which arose south of Egypt, developed advanced civilizations with large trading networks.

Main Ideas

- The geography of early Nubia helped civilization develop there.
- Kush and Egypt traded, but they also fought.
- Later Kush became a trading power with a unique culture.
- Both internal and external factors led to the decline of Kush and Aksum.

Key Terms and People

Piankhi
trade network
merchants
exports
imports
Queen Shanakhdakheto
Aksum
King Ezana

If YOU were there . . .

You live along the Nile River, where it moves quickly through swift rapids. A few years ago, armies from the powerful kingdom of Egypt took over your country. Some Egyptians have moved here. They bring new customs, and many people are imitating them. Now your sister has a new baby and wants to give it an Egyptian name! This upsets many people in your family.

How do you feel about following Egyptian customs?

The Geography of Early Nubia

South of Egypt, a group of people settled in the region we now call Nubia. These Africans established the first great kingdom in the interior of Africa. We know this kingdom by the name the Egyptians gave it—Kush. The development of Kushite society was greatly influenced by the geography of Nubia, especially the role played by the Nile River.

The Land of Nubia Today desert covers much of Nubia, but in ancient times the region was more fertile than it is now. Rain flooded the Nile every year, providing a rich layer of silt to nearby lands. The kingdom of Kush developed in this fertile area.

Ancient Nubia was rich in minerals such as gold, copper, and stone. These resources played a major role in the area's history and contributed to its wealth.

Early Civilization in Nubia Like all early civilizations, the people of Nubia depended on agriculture for their food. Fortunately for them, the Nile's floods allowed the Nubians to plant both summer and winter crops. Among the crops they grew were wheat, barley, and other grains. Besides farmland, the banks of the Nile also provided grazing land for livestock. As a result, farming villages thrived all along the Nile by 3500 BC.

Over time some farmers grew richer than others. These farmers became village leaders. Sometime around 2000 BC, one of these leaders took control of other villages and made himself king of the region. His new kingdom was called Kush.

The kings of Kush ruled from their capital at Kerma (KAR-muh). This city was located on the Nile just south of the third cataract. Because the Nile's cataracts made parts of the river hard to pass through, they were natural barriers against invaders. For many years the cataracts kept Kush safe from the more powerful Egyptian kingdom to the north.

As time passed, Kushite society grew more complex. Besides farmers and herders, some Kushites became priests and artisans. Early Kush was influenced by cultures to the south. Later, Egypt played a greater role in Kush's history.

Reading Check

Find Main Ideas

How did geography help civilization grow in Nubia?

Kush and Egypt

Kush and Egypt were neighbors. Sometimes the neighbors lived in peace with each other and helped each other prosper. For example, Kush became a major supplier of both slaves and raw materials to Egypt. The Kushites sent materials such as gold, copper, and stone to Egypt. The slaves were forced to be domestic servants and soldiers in pharaoh's army. The

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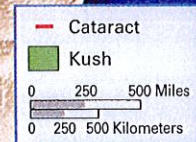
Ancient Kush

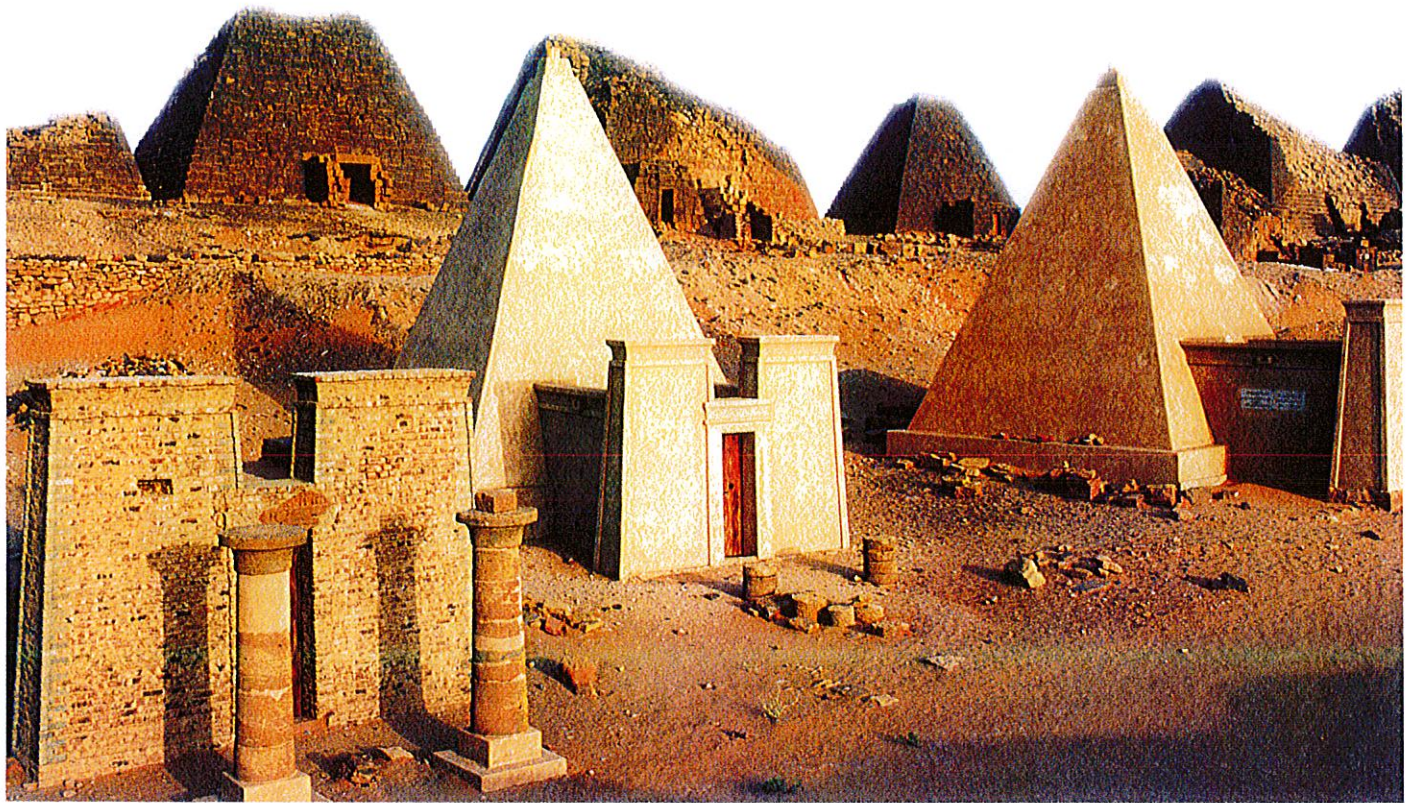


This photo shows one of the Nile's cataracts, or rapids. In ancient times, most river boats could not sail past the shallow rapids.

Interpret Maps

1. **Location** Where is Kush in relation to Egypt?
2. **Place** What geography features bordered Kush to the east and west?





The ruins of ancient Kushite pyramids stand behind those reconstructed to look the way they did when originally built.

Kushites also sent the Egyptians ebony, a type of dark, heavy wood, and ivory, the hard white material that makes up elephant tusks.

Egypt's Conquest of Kush Relations between Kush and Egypt were not always peaceful, however. As Kush grew wealthy from trade, its army grew stronger as well. Egypt's rulers soon feared that Kush would grow even more powerful and attack Egypt.

To prevent such an attack from occurring, the pharaoh Thutmose I sent an army to take control of Kush around 1500 BC. The pharaoh's army conquered all of Nubia north of the Fifth Cataract. As a result, Kush became part of Egypt.

After his army's victory, the pharaoh destroyed Kerma, the Kushite capital. Later pharaohs—including Ramses the Great—built huge temples in what had been Kushite territory.

Effects of the Conquest Kush remained an Egyptian territory for about 450 years. During that time, Egypt's influence over Kush grew tremendously. Many Egyptians settled in Kush. Egyptian became the language of the region. Many Kushites used Egyptian names and wore Egyptian-style clothing. They also adopted Egyptian religious practices.

A Change in Power During the mid-1000s BC, the New Kingdom in Egypt was ending. As the power of Egypt's pharaohs declined, Kushite leaders regained control of Kush. Kush once again became independent.

We know almost nothing about the history of the Kushites from the time they gained independence until 200 years later. Kush is not mentioned in any historical records that describe those centuries.

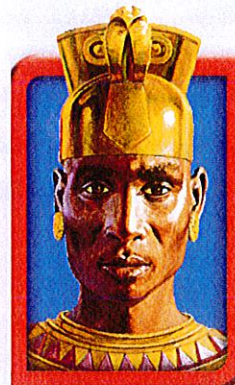
Piankhi (PYAN-kee)

(c. 751 BC–716 BC)

Also known as Piye, Piankhi was among Kush's most successful military leaders. A fierce warrior on the battlefield, the king was also deeply religious. Piankhi's belief that he had the support of the gods fueled his passion for war against Egypt. His courage inspired his troops on the battlefield. Piankhi loved his horses and was buried with eight of his best steeds.

Draw Conclusions

How did Piankhi's belief that he was supported by the gods affect his plans for Egypt?



The Conquest of Egypt By around 850 BC, Kush had regained its strength. It was once again as strong as it had been before it had been conquered by Egypt. Because the Egyptians had captured and destroyed the city of Kerma, the kings of Kush ruled from the city of Napata. Built by the Egyptians, Napata was on the Nile, about 100 miles southeast of Kerma.

As Kush grew stronger, Egypt was further weakened. A series of inept pharaohs left Egypt open to attack. In the 700s BC a Kushite king, Kashta, seized on Egypt's weakness and attacked it. By about 751 BC he had conquered Upper Egypt. He then established relations with Lower Egypt.

After Kashta died, his son **Piankhi** (PYAN-kee) continued to attack Egypt. The armies of Kush captured many cities, including Egypt's ancient capital. Piankhi fought the Egyptians because he believed that the gods wanted him to rule all of Egypt. By the time he died in about 716 BC, Piankhi had accomplished this task. His kingdom extended north from Napata to the Nile Delta.

The Kushite Dynasty After Piankhi died, his brother Shabaka (SHAB-uh-kuh) took control of the kingdom. Shabaka then declared himself pharaoh. This declaration began the 25th Dynasty, or the Kushite Dynasty, in Egypt.

Shabaka and later rulers of his dynasty believed that they were heirs of the great pharaohs of Egypt's past. They tried to restore old Egyptian cultural practices and renew faded traditions. Some of these practices and traditions had been abandoned during Egypt's period of weakness. For example, Shabaka was buried in a pyramid. The Egyptians had stopped building pyramids for their rulers centuries before.

The Kushite rulers of Egypt built new temples to Egyptian gods and restored old temples. They also worked to preserve Egyptian writings. As a result, Egyptian culture thrived during the 25th Dynasty.

Reading Check
Analyze Effects
How did internal
problems in Egypt
benefit Kush?

The End of Kushite Rule in Egypt The Kushite Dynasty remained strong in Egypt for about 40 years. In the 670s BC, however, the powerful army of the Assyrians from Mesopotamia invaded Egypt. The Assyrians' iron weapons were better than the Kushites' bronze weapons. Although the Kushites were skilled archers, they could not stop the invaders. The Kushites were steadily pushed southward. In just ten years, the Assyrians had driven the Kushite forces completely out of Egypt.

Later Kush

After losing control of Egypt, the people of Kush devoted themselves to agriculture and trade, hoping to make their country rich again. Within a few centuries, the Nubian kingdom of Kush had indeed become prosperous and powerful once more.

Kush's Iron Industry The economic center of Kush during this period was at Meroë (MER-oh-wee), the kingdom's new capital. Meroë's location on the east bank of the Nile helped Kush's economy to grow. Large deposits of gold could be found nearby, as could forests of ebony and other wood. More importantly, the area around Meroë was full of rich iron ore deposits.

In this location, the Kushites developed Africa's first iron industry. Iron ore and wood for furnaces were easily available, so the iron industry grew quickly.

The Expansion of Trade In time, Meroë became the center of a large **trade network**, a system of people in different lands who trade goods. The Kushites sent goods down the Nile to Egypt. From there, Egyptian and Greek **merchants**, or traders, carried goods to ports on the Mediterranean and Red seas and to southern Africa. These goods may have eventually reached India, and perhaps China.

Kush's **exports**—items sent out to other regions—included gold, pottery, iron tools, slaves, and ivory. Kushite merchants also traded leopard skins, ostrich feathers, and elephants. In return, the Kushites received **imports**—goods brought in from other regions—such as luxury items and inventions from Egypt, Asia, and other lands along the Mediterranean Sea. Producing and exporting goods in exchange for importing other goods encourages economic growth. In this case, acquiring new resources from other regions had a positive effect on the Kushite economy. People in Kush had access to resources they would otherwise not have had because of their trade networks.

Kushite Culture As Kushite trade grew, merchants came into contact with people from other cultures. As a result, the people of Kush combined customs from other cultures with their own unique Kushite culture.

The most obvious influence on Kushite culture and religious tradition was Egypt. Many buildings in Meroë, especially temples, resembled those in Egypt. Many people in Kush worshipped Egyptian gods and wore Egyptian clothing. Kushite rulers used the title *pharaoh* and were buried in pyramids.

Many elements of Kushite culture were not borrowed. Kushite houses and daily life were unique. One Greek geographer noted some Kushite differences.

“The houses in the cities are formed by interweaving split pieces of palm wood or of bricks. . . . They hunt elephants, lions, and panthers. There are also serpents . . . and there are many other kinds of wild animals.”

—Strabo, *The Geographies*

Queens seem to have been more important in Kush than in Egypt. A few powerful queens ruled the dynasty. In addition to Egyptian gods, the people of Kush worshipped their own gods and built pyramids. They believed in the afterlife and mummified their dead, just as the Egyptians did.

The Kushites also developed their own written language, Meroitic. They made stone carvings to commemorate important buildings and events, just like in Egypt. Meroitic is similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics, but historians are not yet able to understand most of it.

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Kush's Trade Network

Ancient Kush was at the center of a large trading network with connections to Europe, Africa, and Asia. Kush's location and production of iron goods helped make it a rich trading center.



Goods from the Mediterranean came to Kush through trade with Egypt.

Mediterranean Sea

EGYPT

Giza

Luxor

Nubian Desert

KUSH

Meroë



Caravans from the south brought goods like leopard skins and ostrich eggs to Kush.

Red Sea



At ports on the Red Sea, merchants traded Kush's goods for luxury items like silk and glass.



In Meroë, workers made iron tools and weapons, jewelry, pottery, and other goods.

Academic Vocabulary
authority power
or influence

Reading Check
Contrast How do archaeologists and historians know that Kushite culture was unlike Egyptian culture?

New Discoveries Archaeologists have uncovered evidence that helps us understand Kushite society. They study artifacts, or what people have made or used, to provide a more complete picture of Kushite society. Historians also help us learn about Kushite society and how the Kush economy functioned. By studying the written record left behind on Egyptian pottery, buildings, and other artifacts, historians have also discovered information about the people who lived in Kush. For example, artifacts and written records have helped us understand the accomplishments of Kushite rulers such as Kashta. Both historians and archaeologists help us draw conclusions about the past.

Women in Kushite Society The women of Kush were expected to be active in their society. They worked in the fields, raised children, cooked, and performed other household tasks.

Some Kushite women rose to positions of **authority**. Some served as co-rulers with their husbands or sons. A few women ruled the empire alone. Historians believe that the first woman to rule Kush was **Queen Shanakh-dakheto** (shah-nakh-dah-KEE-toh). She ruled from 170 BC to 150 BC.

The Decline of Kush

Kush gradually declined in power. A series of problems within the kingdom weakened its economy. One problem was that Kush's cattle were allowed to overgraze. When cows ate all the grass, wind blew the soil away, causing farmers to produce less food.

In addition, ironmakers used up the forests near Meroë. As wood became scarce, furnaces shut down. Kush produced fewer weapons and trade goods.

The Influence of Aksum Kush was also weakened by a loss of trade. Foreign merchants set up new trade routes that went around Kush. One such trade route bypassed Kush in favor of **Aksum** (AHK-soom), a kingdom located along the Red Sea in what is today Ethiopia and Eritrea. This location made it easy to transport goods over water, and Aksum became a major trading power in the first two centuries AD as a result.

Traders from inland Africa brought goods like gold and ivory to Aksum. From there, the items were shipped to markets as far away as India. In return for their goods, the people of Aksum received cloth, spices, and other products. Because Aksum was a thriving trade center, people from various cultures gathered there. As these people met and mingled to trade goods, they also traded ideas and beliefs.

One of the beliefs brought to Aksum by traders was Christianity. Christian teachings quickly took hold in Aksum, and many people converted. In the late AD 300s, Aksum's most famous ruler, **King Ezana** (AY-zah-nah), made Christianity the kingdom's official religion.

By the AD 300s, Kush had lost much of its wealth and military might. The king of Aksum took advantage of his former trade rival's weakness. In about AD 350 the Aksumite army destroyed Meroë and took over Kush. About two hundred years later, the Nubians also converted to Christianity. The last influences of Kush had disappeared.

Reading Check
Summarize What factors led to the decline of Kush?

The Decline of Aksum Although Aksum itself was never conquered, its major ports were taken by other peoples. As a result, the kingdom became isolated from other lands. Cut off from their allies and their trade, the people of Aksum retreated to the mountains of northern Ethiopia.

Summary The people of Kush and Aksum controlled powerful trading networks. As Kush declined, Aksum grew into an important trade center.

Lesson 5 Assessment

Review Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. **Recall** On which river did Kush develop?

b. **Evaluate** How did Nubia's natural resources influence the early history of Kush?
- a. **Identify** Who was Piankhi, and why was he important to the history of Kush?

b. **Analyze** What were some elements of Egyptian culture that became popular in Kush?

c. **Draw Conclusions** Why is the 25th Dynasty significant in the history of both Egypt and Kush?
- a. **Describe** What advantages did the location of Meroë offer to the Kushites?

b. **Compare** How were Kushite and Egyptian cultures similar?

- a. **Identify** Who conquered Kush in the AD 300s?

b. **Evaluate** What was the impact of new trading routes on Kush?

c. **Identify** What was the first kingdom in Africa to become Christian? Which ruler was responsible for its conversion?

Critical Thinking

- Organize Information** Create a table like this one. Using your notes, list an effect for each cause.

Cause	Effect
Thutmose I invades Kush.	
Power of Egyptian pharaohs declines.	
Piankhi attacks Egypt.	