

Chapter 3: Early Africa and Egypt: 3-4c Kush and Meroe
Book Title: World Civilizations
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3-4c Kush and Meroe

Up the Nile (which is actually south) from the lush, irrigated ribbon that is Egypt, the river flows across a series of cataracts (rapids) and makes a huge S-turn through what is now one of the harshest deserts in the world. This region—which the pharaohs never brought under their rule despite numerous attempts—is modern southern Egypt and northern Sudan. In ancient terminology it was called Nubia. Here there appeared the flourishing civilization of Kush, an African kingdom that emerged in the fifteenth century B.C.E. and prospered until its overthrow in the fourth century C.E. Its original capital was [Kerma \(One of the earliest capitals of ancient Nubia, or Kush; located in northern Sudan.\)](#); then, when Assyria conquered Egypt around 900 B.C.E., the capital was moved farther south to Napata (nah-PAH-tah), near the fourth cataract of the Nile. Later still it was moved to [Meroe \(\(MEHR-oh-way\) Last capital of the ancient African kingdom of Kush; was the location of extensive iron smelting c. 500 B.C.E.\)](#) (MEHR-oh-way). Archaeologists, who commenced work at Kush only about seventy years ago, have unearthed the extensive ruins of its cities—especially its last capital at Meroe. The Kushites had a written language. Archaeologists have uncovered Kushite script inscribed on many stone monuments, but it remains undeciphered.

Pyramids at Meroe.

Standing from fifty to one hundred feet high, this roofless shrine and its surrounding pyramids are thought to be part of a royal tomb complex in the last of the ancient capitals of the Kushites.



Martin Gray/National Geographic Creative

Kush was at once the partner and the rival of the pharaohs in keeping open the busy maritime trade routes that spanned the eastern Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the western reaches of the Indian Ocean. These routes connected the Mediterranean basin with southern Asia. They became increasingly profitable as the Hellenistic and Roman rulers developed a taste for the gold, spices, and aromatics such as frankincense and myrrh from East Africa, India, and China.

Egypt exercised a dominant influence on the culture and religion of Kush early in its history. When the capital was moved for the second and final time to Meroe, the kingdom cut most of its ties with Egypt and became increasingly African in character. From the sixth century B.C.E., Meroe was a major industrial center whose principal product was iron, thus making it one of the earliest sub-Saharan sites to show evidence of iron making. Archaeologists have discovered numerous iron-smelting furnaces and large mounds of slag, an industrial by-product of iron making. By the third century B.C.E., Meroe was at its height. Its strength derived from its grip on the trade coming downriver from the African interior and on the equally important trade with southern Arabia across the Red Sea. The most valuable commodities were gold and slaves, followed by such exotic luxury wares as animal hides, ostrich feathers, spices, ebony, and ivory, all of which were destined for the Mediterranean region or Arabia.

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