THE WEALTH OF AFRICA: USING THESE RESOURCES

This educational resource consists of 16 sets of resources on African civilisations, countries and themes.

Each set of resources includes:

• Teachers’ notes
• Students’ worksheets
• A presentation

Download the resources free at www.britishmuseum.org/schools

Teachers’ notes

These are intended to provide background material for teachers, but can also be referred to by students who want more contextual information.

Students’ worksheets

These are stand-alone worksheets which can be downloaded as classroom resources or viewed on the interactive whiteboard. They are self-contained, with tasks and questions and a limited number of sources in which the language has been slightly amended to make them more accessible to the likely reading ages of the students. They are also designed to be used independently of the teacher, e.g. for homework.

If teachers do not wish to spend more than one or two lessons on The kingdom of Kush, then the sheets will prove ideal for small project work, with groups of students taking one sheet, finding interesting and relevant information, and reporting back to the rest of the class. A specimen lesson plan along these lines is given below.

Presentation

This provides a simpler and more visual introduction to the civilisation. It contains some of the images and sources found in the other sections, and can be shown on the whiteboard or used at home to give an overview of the main topics covered.

Your feedback

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LESSON SCHEME: KUSH IN AN HOUR

Aim
To discover how advanced Kushite civilisation was.

Starter: Impressions of the kingdom of Kush
Scroll quickly through the images in the presentation, and get feedback from students on their first impressions. (10 minutes)

Research
Divide the class into groups with one group per resource sheet. Each group has to look at the question at the top of the sheet, and decide on the answer by studying the sources. The group should note 5–10 relevant facts that it can feed back to the rest of the class as evidence of its answer. (20 minutes)

Feedback
Each group feeds back its findings, opinion and evidence to the rest of the class, who could take notes. (15 minutes)

Discussion
Students could debate the question of how well organised the kingdom was, how artistic, and to what extent it had its own culture, recognisably different from Egypt. (15 minutes)

Homework
e.g. The ambassador for the kingdom of Kush defends his country – pick and explain five details that show how advanced Kush was at this time, or look at the presentation if not already done in class, or do further research into one of the topics to find more information.
KUSH c. 2500–c. 1500 BC AND c. 800 BC–c. AD 350: TEACHERS’ NOTES

Introduction
The kingdoms of Kush have tended to be overshadowed by their more famous neighbour to the north – Egypt – but research in the past thirty years has revealed that in modern-day Sudan, and the southern part of Egypt as far north as the 1st Cataract of the Nile, there lie the remains of a civilisation that was every bit as impressive and powerful, and that their destinies were very much entwined.

The history of Kush can be divided into two distinct phases – The kingdom of Kerma, which lasted from around 2500 to 1500 BC; and the kingdom of Kush, based around the cities of Napata and Meroe, from the 9th century BC to the 4th century AD. In between these periods, the area was colonised by Egypt which brought about a recognisable break between the two Kushite kingdoms. Most of the focus of this section is on the earlier kingdom.

Why study Kush?
Too often the only ancient African civilisation studied in schools is Egypt, and then the emphasis is on its Mediterranean rather than its African roots. Kush offers an alternative, a genuinely African civilisation, contemporary with Egypt, Greece and Rome, whose culture and military power rivalled that of the others to the extent that for a century it took over and ruled Egypt. Similar climatic and historical circumstances ensure that a large amount of evidence remains, and more is being uncovered every year as Sudan becomes an archaeological hot spot, so that Kush is fast becoming an accessible civilisation with art and discoveries to rival those of Egypt.

For History students following the English National Curriculum, Kush could sit in Key Stage 2 as an alternative to, or comparison with, ancient Egypt. It could also fit into Key Stage 3 as an example of the greatness of Africa’s past to contradict the beliefs of some slave traders and colonial Europeans that the continent’s past was simply ‘darkness’.

In terms of the wealth of Africa, Kush represents, along with Egypt, one of the apogees of African civilisation. In terms of trade, Kush had a vital role to play as the middleman between the Mediterranean trade which flowed through Egypt and the produce of the interior of the continent. Among these products was gold, which was mined to the east of Kush, and which was a mainstay of the economies of Kush and Egypt, and subsequently further afield.

Location
The geography of Kush is not very different from that of Egypt, though geologically its basis is sandstone rather than limestone. Most of the country is, and was, sandy or rocky desert with extreme temperatures, both hot and cold. The exception in terms of terrain is the narrow strip alongside the River Nile, which provides some fertile land after the annual flooding, though on a lesser scale than in Egypt. There are also some large, fertile basins, and Kerma and Napata were situated near two of these.

One of the significant features of the Nile, and one that affected the location of the capitals, and which had an impact on trade, transport, defence and a variety of other factors, is the presence of cataracts at certain points of the river which are impassable in boats.

Given the dryness of most of the kingdom, the building of wells was of great importance, as were the reservoirs (hafirs) that were constructed at certain points which enabled a pastoral economy to prosper.
History

The history of Kush was almost inevitably bound up with Egypt, its closest neighbour. The River Nile, which linked the two states, was a corridor enabling contact between the two, as well as access for Kush to the Mediterranean. During the Egyptian 25th Dynasty, when Kushite kings ruled Egypt, close political union was possible, and Kushite involvement in Middle Eastern politics, most notably the protection of Jerusalem from the Assyrians in 701 BC, could take place.

The greater fame of Egypt today, and the fact that the history of Kush has only recently begun to be uncovered in any great detail, can lead to a belief that Egypt was the superior civilisation on whom Kush depended. A closer look at the history of the two suggests that this picture is not necessarily accurate.

Kingdom of Kerma

Kerma was the centre of the first Kushite kingdom. It had been inhabited since the Stone Age, but the main period of its power dates from about 2500 BC. Excavations are slowly revealing a city that was focused upon religious worship, and it appears that religion may have played an important part in the exercise of kingship too. The striking mud-brick ruin in the centre of the city, known as the Western Deffufa, is now thought to have been a temple, and the central part of the city seems to have been home only to a small elite of priests and officials, with outer suburbs for ordinary people. The presence of numerous bakeries in the centre is puzzling. Possibly they were there to prepare bread for offerings.

A number of locations for the storage of goods have been found in this area which may again represent offerings, or may be part of a centralised system whereby surplus produce was brought to the city to be redistributed among those who were not farmers. Alternatively, they could have been storage areas for trade with Egypt, or both.

Egyptian rule

Between 1500 and 1070 BC, Egypt was in control of Kush, and pharaohs ruled the area through a viceroy. Egyptian influence in religion, art and architecture became strong. When Kush regained its independence it did not break with this tradition, and the worship of Amun continued, although given a Kushite flavour with the god portrayed as a ram or as a man with a ram’s head.

Napata

In the vacuum left by the Egyptians’ departure, an independent family of rulers developed in the area around el-Kurru near Napata. This marked the beginnings of the second kingdom, the Kingdom of Kush.

About 780 BC this kingdom came to be based at Napata, near the Temple of Amun at Jebel Barkal which had been constructed during the Egyptian occupation. Since the Kushite court was used to moving around, Napata was not so much the capital as the spiritual centre of the kingdom.

Between 747 and 656 BC the tables were turned when King Piye (Piankhy) of Kush invaded Egypt and established a line of Kushite pharaohs, known to Egyptians as the 25th Dynasty. One of the most famous of these Nubian pharaohs, who contributed to the defence and prestige of both kingdoms, was Taharqo (Tahaqa or Tirhaka – the Biblical name). Although he defeated attempts by the Assyrians to invade Egypt, his successor Tamwetamani was later forced back to Kush, which marked the end of the period of direct Kushite control over Egypt. In 593 BC Napata was sacked, possibly by the Egyptians, and again in 23 BC by the Romans.
Meroe

Between the 4th century BC and the 4th century AD, Meroe was the centre of the Kushite kingdom. Here, a system of writing was developed. Meroe had a number of ruling queens – perhaps not surprising since the position of the queen mother had been important from the time of the Kushite occupation of Egypt. The erection of pyramids over royal tombs, as at Napata, continued to be in fashion. After the takeover of Egypt by Rome in the 1st century BC there were clashes between the Romans and Kushites. One of these led to the theft of the head from a statue of Augustus which was buried under the threshold to one of the temples in Meroe so Kushites could walk over the head of the Roman emperor. This head can now be seen in the British Museum.

Meroe became locally famous for its iron and metalworking industry. A large number of furnaces have been discovered which testify to this. The iron was fashioned into axes and hoes for farming, and spears and arrows for war.

Economy

Kush appears to have been mainly an agricultural economy, with trade bringing in revenue for the elite. Most of the population was engaged in agriculture – a process made easier with the flooding of the Nile which enabled the irrigation of fields – and in pastoralism which was aided by the construction and maintenance of large reservoirs (hafirs) providing a seasonal source of fresh water for animals. Elaborate wells were also dug.

It has been suggested that Kush operated a redistributive economy, perhaps like Egypt, in which surplus produce was paid to the state in taxes and was then redistributed among the elite and artisans who lived in the towns. This is backed up by the absence of any money, and no evidence of a fixed means of exchange that would have suggested a market economy. Furthermore, large storage facilities have been discovered around the central area in Kerma, and at the Napatan site of Sanam Abu Dom, upstream from Jebel Barkal, believed to have been a royal residence, where produce was presumably brought.

Trade was an important aspect of the Kushite economy, and appears to have been centrally regulated. Kush was the conduit for goods to and from Egypt, notably gold, ivory, slaves, hides and aromatic woods from the interior of the continent, in exchange for manufactured items from the Mediterranean.

It was originally thought that Kush may not have directly controlled the gold mines and fields to the east of the kingdom, but that it did dominate the movement of that mineral into Egypt and thus was able to reap the benefits. However, it is known that Kushite craftsmen used gold for jewellery and decoration, and recent archaeological discoveries have suggested that the goldfields may have been directly administered by the Kushite government, at least during the Meroitic period.
Burials

In Kerma, a large necropolis is being slowly uncovered with apparently hundreds of graves dating throughout the whole period of the city’s power. Most of them are just simple circular pits with one or two bodies, and some accompanying grave goods, suggesting a belief in the afterlife. The body was usually laid in a foetal position upon an animal hide, facing east. It is believed that where there are two or more bodies in a single grave, one or more of the accompanying ones were probably sacrifices.

The larger graves are more fascinating. The largest contained over 400 bodies, most in a main corridor near to the principal burial. These are thought to have been retainers, or maybe slaves or prisoners who were sacrificed to serve their (presumably) royal master in the afterlife. The archaeologist who first uncovered this grave, Reisner, noted that several of the skeletons were found in positions of apparent distress, suggesting they had been buried alive. Even more chilling are the smaller-scale ‘family’ burials where it appears that the wife and children may have been buried at the same time as the deceased.

Around many of these mounds, which were marked with pebbles, dozens if not hundreds of cattle skulls were buried, as well as inverted bowls, suggesting elaborate funerary rituals as well as emphasising the importance of cattle as symbolic of wealth and status.

Sources

Almost all the evidence for Kush is archaeological. The Swiss team, first directed by C Bonnet and now by M Honneger, has been excavating Kerma for 35 years and has built up a picture of what the city was like. A team from the British Museum has also made valuable contributions to understanding Kerma-period sites near the 4th Cataract, as well as the 25th Dynasty site at Kawa, and sites in the Northern Dongola Reach. Another team is working on a late Meroitic site near the 5th Cataract. Elsewhere in Sudan, many archaeological sites are being discovered, showing that the civilisation was widespread as well as long-lasting. However, the inability so far to decipher the Meroitic script remains a bar to further understanding of the later period.
REFERENCES


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For teachers

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