

# KING FOR A DAY

## KUSH, NUBIA, AND THE THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD

### A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

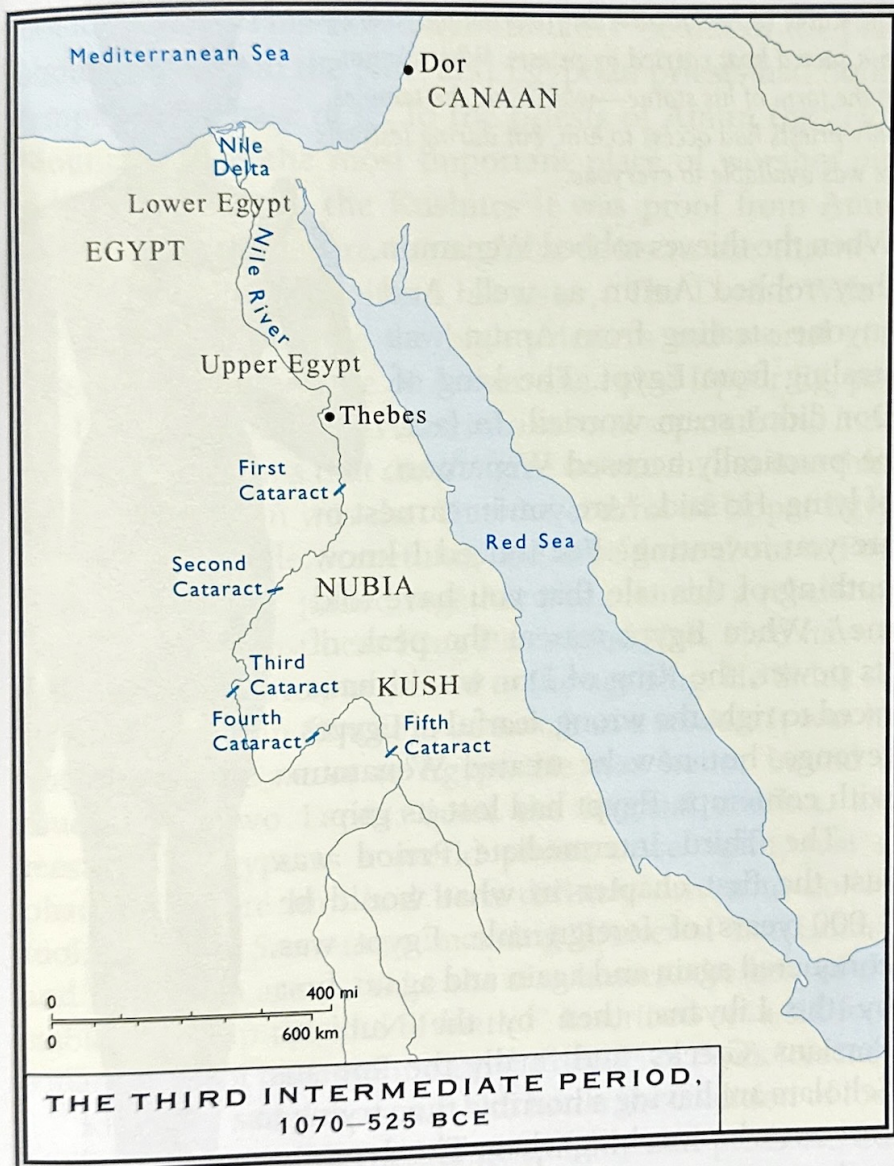
*Ethiopia* is the Greek word for Nubia. It means “Land of the Burnt Faces.” People who live close to the equator have darker skin than those who live farther away. The Nubians lived closer to the equator than the Egyptians. The Greeks called them *Ethiopes* or “Burnt-Faced Ones.” To the Greeks, Ethiopia was the area that is now northern Sudan and the Upper Nile Basin. In the Old Testament Nubia is called Kush. In the New Testament, which was written in Greek, Nubia is called Ethiopia.

If you had asked Egyptians 3,000 years ago for directions to Nubia, they would have looked at you quizzically. Huh? Nubia? What’s that? It would be more than 1,000 years (about 20 CE) before the Greek geographer Strabo named the area in southern Egypt and northern Sudan “Nubia,” after the nomadic people, the Nuba, who roamed there. Before that the Egyptians called it *Ta-Seti*, which means “The Land of the Bow,” because its archers were so skilled. But the ancients knew it as the Kingdom of Kush. During the Middle Kingdom, Kush was not much more than a southern outpost of Egypt, but gold can change even the most rugged land. And Kush had gold mines. By the first millennium BCE, Kush had grown into a country strong enough to save a troubled Egypt. And Egypt was in trouble again. It was entering another intermediate period—a time without strong central kingship.

King Piye of Kush must have shaken his head sadly as he watched Egypt break up into small clumps of power. There was very little violence among the different groups (King Piye did not like bloodshed), so that wasn’t what was bothering Piye. It was the weakening of Egypt that worried him. Four centuries earlier, at the end of the New Kingdom, the Two Lands had indeed split into two lands.

The priests of Amun at the temple of Karnak in Thebes became so powerful that they ruled Upper Egypt (which is the southern part of the country). The pharaoh held on as best he could to Lower Egypt (which is the northern part of the country). In its weakened state, Egypt was vulnerable. We know from *The Tale of Wenamun* that Egypt had lost respect in the ancient world. The story makes it clear that Egypt no longer made foreign rulers tremble.





The high priests of the temple Karnak sent the priest Wenamun on a journey “to fetch timber.” Wenamun was to trade silver and gold for wood needed to build a ship for the god Amun—a ship he would use to sail across the sky. Not long after he left Egypt, Wenamun was robbed. The silver and gold disappeared in Dor, on the coast of what is now Israel. Wenamun complained to the King of Dor, “I have been robbed in your harbor. But you are the prince of this land and you are its controller. Search for my money, for indeed the money belongs to Amun, King of the Gods.” Wenamun warned the king that he was Amun’s ambassador.

66 *The Tale of Wenamun*, about 1070 BCE



*The statue of Amun traveled from temple to temple in a sacred boat carried by priests. When Amun—in the form of his statue—was inside the temples, only priests had access to him, but during festivals he was available to everyone.*

When the thieves robbed Wenamun, they robbed Amun as well. And anyone stealing from Amun was stealing from Egypt. The king of Dor didn't seem worried. In fact, he practically accused Wenamun of lying. He said, "Are you in earnest or are you inventing? For indeed I know nothing of this tale that you have told me." When Egypt was at the peak of its power, the King of Dor would have raced to right the wrong, fearful of Egypt's revenge, but now he treated Wenamun with contempt. Egypt had lost its grip.

The Third Intermediate Period was just the first chapter in what would be 1,000 years of foreign rule. Egypt was conquered again and again and again, first by the Libyans, then by the Nubians, Persians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. Scholars are having a horrible time trying to sort out who was king when. The dynasties no longer represented one king taking the throne at the death of another. Now kingships overlapped, with every major community claiming that its prince was the legitimate heir to the throne. It must have been all the quarreling that drove King Piye in Kush to take action.

Shortly after he took the throne of Kush, in the middle of the eighth century BCE, King Piye sent his sister north to take control of Upper Egypt. Kush had a close connection with the priests of Amun at Karnak because of a rock. Not just any rock, but an outcropping on a mountaintop shaped like the head of a cobra. The cobra was the Egyptian sym-



#### PRINCESS, ANYONE?

Another sign of Egypt's decline was the sudden willingness to marry off Egyptian princesses. There was a time when pharaohs wouldn't consider marrying off their daughters to foreign rulers. In the 10th century BCE, Solomon, the king of Israel, married the daughter of an Egyptian king, breaking that tradition.



bol for royalty. This isolated mountain rose out of the plain about a mile from the Nile, and Egyptian priests had built a temple at the base of it. To the priests of Amun the “Holy Mountain” was the most important place of worship outside of Karnak. To the Kushites it was proof from Amun himself that they were the rightful heirs to the throne of Egypt. King Piye appointed his sister, “The Divine Wife of the God.” She became the high priestess and mortal goddess at Karnak. As wife of Amun, she ruled Upper Egypt.

Lower Egypt was divided into several separate and independent kingdoms that didn’t agree on much, but one thing they did agree on was that Kushite control of Upper Egypt was not acceptable. Something had to be done about it. Four Northern “kings” joined together and planned a rebellion.

You can almost hear King Piye’s loud sigh. He’d have to go north himself to put an end to the uprising. He didn’t see the advance as an invasion; he saw it as a rescue. It was his duty to restore *ma’at* to Egypt. He was honor bound to reunite the Two Lands, quiet the internal conflict, and reestablish Egypt as a world power once again, just as pharaohs before him had been divinely driven to do. He took the name *Sema-tawy*, meaning “Uniter of Two Lands,” and rallied his army. “Yoke the war horses, the best of the stable; draw up the line of battle!” Inscribed on a six-foot, square block of pink granite are the details of Piye’s “rescue.”

King Piye sent forces north to battle the coalition of four kings, instructing his men to go quickly and press on, but when they arrived at Thebes and the temple of Karnak, they were to purify themselves. Piye told them, “you shall enter the water, you shall bathe in the river, you shall dress in fine linen, unstring the bow, loosen the arrow.” Karnak was Amun’s temple, after all, and since Amun had sent them, they must pay their respects.

Grim and determined, Piye’s army marched north. On the Nile “they found many ships coming upstream bearing soldiers, sailors, and commanders, every valiant man of the Northland, equipped with weapons of war.” The army from Kush crushed them. They “made a great slaughter. . . . [Egyptian] troops and their ships were captured. . . .” The

#### CARING FOR WEAPONS

If soldiers were not using their bows, the bows had to be unstrung or the taut bowstring would stretch and quickly become useless. It took two men to string a soldier’s bow.

“ Stela of Piye, about 747–716 BCE

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*This scene painted on the front panel of a chest is symbolic of the king triumphant over the forces of chaos. Here the larger-than-life hero stands alone defending Egypt against the Nubians.*

two enemies clashed on land as well as on water. Kushite soldiers chased the armies of Egypt and slayed them in their own neighborhoods, laying siege to cities and sending captives back to Kush. And still they pushed northward, doing battle as they went.

King Piye wanted to join his army, but first he had to keep his promise to attend the Festival of Opet. No king of Egypt could afford to ignore the rituals of the Opet Festival because they confirmed a king's right to rule. If Piye expected the people to accept him as the divine king of Egypt, his place was at Karnak. This was the most important festival of the year. For the farmers whose fields were flooded, and had little to do until the waters receded, the festival was a month-long street party, with food and music and carefree days. For the king, it had a more serious side.

During the second month of the flood season, the great god Amun (well, actually just the god's statue, but that was basically the same thing to the Egyptians) left his sanctuary at Karnak and spent a month in southern Opet, which is modern-day Luxor. *Opet* means "secret chamber." The secret rooms deep in the temple at Luxor were believed to sit on the mound of creation, the holiest of places. Every year Amun would travel the mile from Karnak to the shrines





there. It was the only time Amun left his temple at Karnak.

The priests of Karnak carried Amun—in the form of his statue sitting in his sacred boat—on their shoulders in a parade through the streets. The procession was led by high priests wearing panther-skin capes, burning resin, scattering sand, and waving fans. A man in front played the tambourine. Until the late New Kingdom the priests carried the boat the entire way to the temple at Luxor, but by Piye's time the journey was made by

river. The priests placed Amun, still in his sacred boat, in the center of an elaborately decorated barge waiting on the Nile. The gold used to decorate the barge alone weighed four and a half tons. Getting the barge to move was no easy task. An army of men grabbed ropes tied to the barge. To the beat of tambourines, songs, and trumpets' blare, they dragged the floating temple. Both banks of the river were lined with spectators shouting encouragement. Along the procession route Egyptians slaughtered and cooked oxen, baked bread, and served fruit to the crowds. While they feasted, they were entertained by musicians, dancers, and acrobats. It was a 28-day party, lasting until Amun traveled back to Thebes and disappeared into the depths of the temple of Karnak to be taken care of by priests.

Piye threatened his enemies that on the day Amun returned to Karnak, he planned to “make the Northland taste the taste of my fingers.” Ancient threats lose a little in the translation, but that must have been a very fierce oath because “every heart was heavy with fear of him.” Piye laid siege to towns and used battering rams against their walls. He built a tower “to elevate the archers while shooting, and the slingers while slinging stones.” And when it was over, and Piye had succeeded, he inscribed on his “victory stela,”

### PRIESTS HOLD THE PURSE STRINGS

From the Middle Kingdom on, the highest positions at the temple of Karnak were passed down from father to son rather than appointed by the king. As the priests became more powerful and more independent, they established their own dynasties, controlling Upper Egypt and claiming to be Egypt's protector. The Amun priesthood owned two-thirds of all the land in Egypt belonging to temples, along with 90 percent of all ships and 80 percent of all businesses. The priests had a tight hold on Egypt's economy.

66 Stela of Piye, about 747–716 BCE



66 Stela of Piye, about 747–716 BCE

### PYRAMIDS POPPING UP

Piye was the first king to build pyramids in Kush. Piye's uncle, who followed Piye to the throne, loved to build pyramids so much that Kush ended up having more pyramids than Egypt.

as the Stela of Piye is known, what bothered him more than anything else “It is more grievous in my heart that my horses have suffered hunger, than any evil deed...” The stela shows Piye was a compassionate man. He forgave his enemies, treating the now defeated kings with generosity by appointing them governors of their lands.

King Piye had no desire to remain in Egypt. Kush was his home. He had fulfilled his holy obligation to Amun and reunited the Two Lands. Now he could return to the kingdom of Kush and rule from there. When he died he was buried in his homeland just north of the Holy Mountain. His pyramid was modest, with an underground chamber at the base of a stairway. In a nearby tomb his love for his horses is clear. There, standing and facing east, his team of four chariot horses waits, ready to journey with their master to the afterlife.



Model soldiers are ready to join their general in the afterlife. The general's tomb contained two wooden models of 40-men units, a group of Egyptian spearmen, and this model of Nubian archers.