Chapter 10: The Kingdom of Kush

Learning Target: I can explain how location influenced the Kingdom of Kush.

Introduction

The African kingdom of Kush was located on the Nile River, to the south of Egypt. The civilization of Kush thrived from about 2000 B.C.E. to 350 C.E.

Kush and Egypt maintained a close relationship throughout much of Kush's long history. The two civilizations struggled for power and conquest.

Signs of the two kingdoms' contact can be found in pictures on the walls of some Egyptian tombs and temples. A good example is the tomb of Hatshepsut, Egypt's first female pharaoh. Many painted scenes of Egyptian life decorate the walls. However, upon closer examination, not everyone in the paintings is Egyptian. Some people in these images look slightly different with darker skin and curly hair. These people are Kushites (KUH-shites).

In some scenes, the Kushites appear to be bearing gifts, while in others, they seem to be armed with bows and arrows. As these images suggest, Egypt and Kush had a complicated relationship. Occasionally it was peaceful, but it was often chaotic and violent. Sometimes these civilizations would even capture and enslave one another.
In this lesson, you will investigate the relationship between Egypt and Kush, as well as the influence of each culture on the other. The city of Meroë became an important center for trade and Kushite culture. You will also discover how the location of Kush influenced its history and how Kush created its own unique civilization.

Section 1 - The Egyptianization of Kush

Aside from Egypt, Kush was the greatest ancient civilization in Africa. Similar to its neighbor to the north, Kush grew up around the fertile banks of the Nile River. Kush was known for its rich gold mines. In fact, another name for Kush is Nubia, which comes from nub, the Egyptian word for gold.

Egypt's location and natural resources made it a significant trading hub, or center, that linked central and southern Africa to Egypt. Pharaohs sent expeditions on ships south along the Nile to buy, or sometimes steal, goods. Egyptians traded grain and linen for Kush's gold, ivory, leather, and timber. Egyptians also bought slaves.

At times, Egypt raided Kush or took control of some of its lands. During the New Kingdom (about 1600–1100 B.C.E.), at the height of Egypt's power, Egypt conquered Kush and forced its people to pay tribute in the form of gifts. The pharaoh appointed a governor to ensure the annual tribute was paid. The Kushites presented the governor with gold, cattle, ivory, ebony, ostrich feathers, and slaves.

While under Egyptian rule, Kushite society became Egyptianized, or more like Egypt. For example, Kushites spoke and wrote in Egyptian. Additionally, they
worshipped Egyptian gods and wore Egyptian-style clothes. Kush's archers fought in Egypt's army, and its royal princes were sent to Egypt for education. Kushite rulers also built pyramids, although they were smaller than Egypt's structures.

Around 1100 B.C.E., Egypt's New Kingdom collapsed, and Kush regained its independence. However, Egyptian culture persisted. In about 900 B.C.E., a new line of Kushite kings was established, but even these kings continued to follow Egyptian traditions.

Section 2 - Kush Conquers Egypt

After the collapse of the New Kingdom, Egypt fell into political chaos. At least ten Egyptian kingdoms competed for power, making Egypt weak and unstable from the constant fighting.

In the mid-700s B.C.E., Kush took advantage of Egypt's vulnerability when Kushite armies invaded Egypt. In about 730 B.C.E., the kings in northern Egypt surrendered to Piye, king of Kush.

After his conquest of Egypt, Piye declared himself pharaoh. One of his titles was “Uniter of the Two Lands.” The kingdom of Kush now extended 1,500 miles. It reached from the Kushite city of Meroë (MER-oh-ee), located on the southern Nile River, to the Mediterranean Sea.

In Egypt, Piye and his family became the 25th dynasty, or line of rulers. Kushite pharaohs, traditionally referred to as “black pharaohs” by historians, reigned over Egypt for nearly a century.

Instead of destroying Egypt, the Kushite pharaohs wanted to revive its past glory. They built magnificent new temples and pyramids in both Egypt and Kush. One of the most
beautiful was the temple at Jebel Barkal, which was modeled after the temple built by Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II at Abu Simbel.

By the 670s B.C.E., the Assyrians, who had created a powerful empire in Mesopotamia, started attacking Egypt. In 671 B.C.E., an Assyrian king invaded Egypt. For many years, the Kushites tried to defend themselves, but the Assyrians’ advanced iron weaponry drove the Kushites out of Egypt. By the mid-650s B.C.E., the last of the Kushite pharaohs had fled to Kush.

Section 3 - The Kush Capital of Meroë

A new dynasty in Kush followed the Kushite pharaohs who had ruled Egypt. About 590 B.C.E., Egypt invaded Kush again, destroying its capital city, Napata (NAP-uh-tuh). The Kushites named Meroë their new capital because it was 300 miles south of Napata, safely out of Egypt’s reach.

Meroë’s location helped Kush remain a crucial center of trade. Traders used the Nile, the Red Sea, and overland routes to transport their goods. Because most of these routes led traders through Kush, Kushites traded with many lands. Some of these lands were nearby, such as other African kingdoms and Arabia. But Kush also traded with such distant lands as Rome (on the peninsula of Italy), India, and possibly even China.

The large, wealthy city of Meroë became the center of a Kushite civilization that lasted for nearly 1,000 years. At its height, the city thrived as a great center of industry as well as culture. It became especially well known for producing iron. Because of their superior
knowledge of iron technology, the Assyrians had triumphed over the Kushites in Egypt. The
Kushites were now determined to equal the military might of the Assyrians.

Meroë had all the requirements to produce iron, including a rich supply of iron deposits.
It also had plenty of forests that provided the wood needed to make charcoal. The charcoal
was used to heat the iron deposits. Once the hot iron separated from the rock, it was cooled
in the Nile's waters.

Ironworkers in Kush made a variety of objects. They crafted weapons such as spears,
arrow, and swords. They also created tools to make farming faster and easier, including
axes, for quickly clearing forests, and hoes, for loosening soil.

Section 4 - Kush Return to Its African Roots

After its separation from Egypt, Kush returned to its African roots. Artwork,
clothing, and buildings no longer imitated Egyptian styles. For example, Kushites
worshipped an African lion-god rather than Egyptian gods. They also wrote and spoke a
native language called Meroitic (mer-uh-wid-ik), after Meroë, which had its own alphabet.

Kushite art and architecture flourished. Artisans made beautiful pottery, cloth, and gold
and silver jewelry. Rulers built grand palaces, temples, and pyramids.

Additionally, Kush revived the African practice of female leadership. Powerful kandakes,
or queen mothers, ruled Meroë. Considered goddesses, they usually co-ruled alongside
their sons or husbands.

One of the greatest kandakes was Queen Amanirenas, who defended Kush against the
powerful Romans in 24 B.C.E. The Romans had conquered Egypt while expanding their
vast empire and later demanded tribute from Kush. Queen Amanirenas and her son, Prince
Akinidad, led an attack that destroyed several Roman forts on Kush's borders and continued the war with Rome.

After three years of fierce fighting, Rome signed a peace treaty with Kush. Kush no longer had to pay tribute to Rome. Under Amanirenas, Kush had defeated the most powerful empire in the world.

The kingdom of Kush survived for nearly 400 more years. In 350 C.E., Kush fell to invaders from the African country of Ethiopia.

**Lesson Summary**

In this lesson, you learned about the African kingdom of Kush. Kush had a complicated relationship with ancient Egypt, its neighbor to the north.

**The Egyptianization of Kush** Kush's location on the Nile River and its natural resources made it a trade center. During the New Kingdom period, Egypt conquered Kush and Kushites adopted Egyptian ways.

**Kush Conquers Egypt** Under the rule of King Piye, Kush conquered Egypt. Kushite pharaohs ruled Egypt for nearly a century, building new temples and pyramids in both Egypt and Kush. Then the Assyrians forced the Kushites to leave Egypt.

**The Kush Capital of Meroë** Meroë became the capital of Kush about 590 B.C.E. It was the center of Kushite industry, such as ironwork, and trade for nearly 1,000 years.

**Kush Returns to Its African Roots** Kush returned to its African culture and revived the African practice of powerful women leaders, called kandakes. Kandake Amanirenas stopped Rome's attempt to take control of Kush.