Kush and Axum: Empires of East Africa

Kush

On the southern border of ancient Egypt there flourished another great African civilization—Kush. The people of Kush inhabited the land south of Egypt (modern-day North Sudan) where the Nile cataracts and harder earth limited the flooding that made Egypt so fertile. The land there is dryer and less productive, but still capable of supporting a large population. By about 1000 BC, the Kushites, with their capital at Kerma, had unified most of modern-day North Sudan, and established lucrative trade contacts with Egypt, providing the Egyptians with elephant tusks, timber, incense, ebony, slaves, and especially gold. Occasionally the Egyptians invaded and occupied Kush, especially in periods of heightened Egyptian power, so as to extract these resources directly.

Kush came into its own between 1700 and 1500 BC, when Egypt was invaded and conquered by a foreign people called the Hyksos. With a weak Egypt, Kush flourished. However, with the rise of the Egyptian New Kingdom, the kings of which expelled the Hyksos and reinvigorated Egyptian power, Kush declined. In fact, the New Kingdom pharaohs conquered Kush and brought it under Egyptian rule.

But once again, when the Egyptians grew weak, Kush grew strong. With the collapse of the Egyptian New Kingdom, the subservience of Kush to Egypt ended. The capital of Kush was moved south from Kerma to Napata. The kings of Kush invaded Egypt, and by 712 BC, the Kushite kings were the new pharaohs of Egypt—their rule is known as the 25th Dynasty. The Kushites ruled Egypt for fifty-seven years, and this period is considered one of the last golden ages of Egyptian civilization. This Egyptian Renaissance reached its peak under the reign of Taharqa, who built great monuments around Egypt and Kush, even building Egyptian-style pyramids in Kush. Taharqa’s rule, however, was challenged by the Assyrian king Sennacherib. Taharqa was able to save his Jewish allies in Jerusalem from destruction by Sennacherib’s armies, but he was not able to stop an Assyrian invasion of Egypt. The Assyrians forced Taharqa to flee back to Kush, and by 656 BC the Kushites had been driven from Egypt. In their place, the Assyrians set up a new, native Egyptian dynasty to act as their puppets.

Still, the Kingdom of Kush continued to thrive, reestablishing trade contacts with the rulers of Egypt, though the capital of Kush moved south again, from Napata to the city of Meroë. As new, foreign powers occupied Egypt—Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans—the Kushites maintained close relations with them. The Kingdom of Kush began its final decline during the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus, whose armies invaded and weakened the kingdom. However, though the Kushites were accustomed to looking north for enemies, the final power that destroyed their kingdom came instead from the south. Nomads from the desert attacked the kingdom, and finally, in the fourth century AD, Meroë was captured by the Axumite Kingdom.

Axum

The Axumite (also spelled Aksumite) Kingdom emerged around 500 BC in the area of modern-day Ethiopia. This region, on the side of the Red Sea opposite Arabia, is a hot
desert region. However, the Ethiopian highlands, about 5,000 to 15,000 feet above sea level, are cooler and more temperate, and this is where the Axumites settled. The origin of the Axumites is a matter of controversy; they may have descended from Arabian colonists who crossed the Red Sea and settled in Africa, or else they were natives of modern-day Ethiopia. They were divided into many smaller kingdoms until shortly before the time of Christ, when they were unified under the rule of the kings of the city of Axum, thus forming the Axumite Kingdom. They spoke Ge’ez, sometimes called Ethiopic, a Semitic language similar to Hebrew and Arabic.

The Axumites built and controlled the major seaports at the southern entrance of the Red Sea (the Mandab Strait). Because of this strategic location, they gained great wealth from trade between Africa, India, and Arabia over the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The city of Axum and the city of Adulis became the most important centers of this trade. With the rise of Rome, the Axumites became an important intermediary for trade between Rome and India. Christianity probably spread to Axum through these trade routes. Around the time the Roman Empire adopted Christianity, Axumite coins appeared with crosses on them, though scholars debate whether the Axumite rulers really adopted Christianity, or whether this was an attempt to please their Roman trading partners (after all, Axumite coins were used primarily among traders). There are several stories about early Christian missionary activities in Axum. According to the most well known account, an enslaved Roman named Frumentius brought Christianity there in the fourth century and was eventually granted the title of bishop of Ethiopia by the Catholic/Orthodox Church. Nonetheless, it was not until the sixth century that Christianity became deeply engrained in the region.

The Christian missionaries who visited Axum came from Egypt, and were from the Coptic Church. After a major split in the church in 451, these Coptic Christians differed in beliefs from the Orthodox/Catholic Church. The Coptic missionaries were Monophysites (also called Miaphysites), meaning that they believed Christ had only one nature, and were considered heretics within the Roman and Byzantine Empires. Axum was converted to Monophysite Christianity, so its version of Christianity was very different than that of the Roman Empire.

In addition, there are other unique aspects of Christianity in the region. Axumites believed that they were descendants of the Hebrews of the Old Testament: they believed that the Queen of Sheba came from Axum and that she had been impregnated by the Jewish King Solomon, so that her son and successor was a child of Solomon, and all subsequent Axumite kings were from Solomon’s line. The emperors of Ethiopia, even up to the twentieth century, traced their lineage back to King Solomon. Also, the Axumite Church, even to this day, claims to have the Ark of the Covenant, which was supposedly smuggled out of Jerusalem, in its possession. The Kebra Nagast, the Ethiopic national epic written sometime between the sixth and thirteenth centuries, tells a romanticized version of the history of Axum from the time of the Queen of Sheba and her love affair with Solomon and the taking of the Ark to Axum, down to the victories of King Kaleb, who reigned in the sixth century AD.

Indeed, King Kaleb was perhaps the most important Christian king of Axum. During his rule, Axum and Rome cooperated in an invasion of southern Arabia, and Kaleb took control of Yemen as his vassal. He installed a puppet king there, and this king tried to spread his control over all of Arabia, but was stopped at Mecca around the time of the birth of Muhammad. This prevented Arabia from falling completely under Christian rule.
During the early years of Islam, several of Muhammad’s early followers fled to Axum to avoid persecution by the polytheist opponents of Muhammad. Supposedly they were received kindly by the king of Axum. However, with the rise of Islam and the establishment of the powerful Muslim Caliphate so close by, the Axumite Kingdom went into a long, slow decline. It was never conquered by the Muslims (thus, Ethiopia remains a Christian country to this day), but trade routes, especially on the Red Sea, came under the control of the caliphate. By the end of the tenth century, the Axumite Kingdom was no more.

Summary

- Several great ancient civilizations flourished south of Egypt. Among these were Kush and Axum.
- Kush was a kingdom contemporary with ancient Egypt. They traded extensively with Egypt, especially exporting gold.
- In times of Egyptian weakness, Kush grew strong, and between 712 and 656 BC Kush actually ruled Egypt, with the Kushite kings reigning as the 25th Dynasty.
- The Kingdom of Kush declined and eventually disappeared in the fourth century AD.
- The Kingdom of Axum was a major trading empire that flourished after the fourth century AD and grew wealthy from trade between Africa, India, and Arabia over the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.
- The Kingdom of Axum was Christianized between the fourth and sixth centuries, and it adopted Monophysite (or Miaphysite) Christianity, which the Roman Empire and the Catholic/Orthodox Church considered a heresy. The Axumites also had their own very unique religious beliefs.
- Under King Kaleb, the Axumites extended their control over southern Arabia, but later, with the rise of Islam and the Muslim Caliphate, Axum went into a long, slow decline.