

NUBIA: ANCIENT KINGDOMS OF AFRICA

March 11-June 12, 2011

Teacher Resource Packet



Hathor-headed Crystal Pendant

Gold and rock crystal, H. 5.4 cm, D. 3.3 cm, El-Kurru, 750–720 BC (Napatan Period, reign of Piye).

Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition: 21.321

Photography © 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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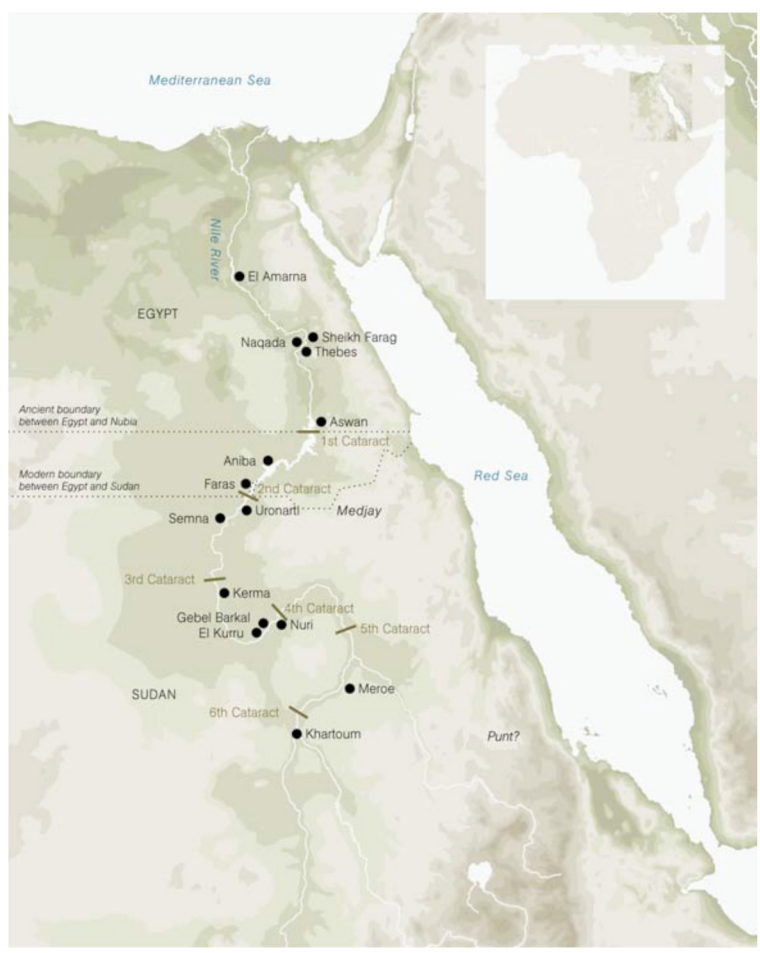
Introduction:

Nubia: Ancient Kingdoms of Africa explores the remarkable and distinctive traditions that defined Nubia from the rise of its first kingdoms (ca. 3100 BC) to the emergence of a powerful Kushite dynasty that conquered Egypt and fought against the Assyrian empire, before retreating to its homeland (900–350 BC).

The exhibition features an array of objects, from portrait statues of Nubian kings, to military weapons and Egyptian representations of their rivals to the south, presenting an unparalleled overview—the first in New York in over three decades—of these little-understood African kingdoms.

This “Teacher Resource Packet” provides background information for the exhibition, as well as a discussion of and viewing guide for a small selection of objects on display. A number of in-class activities associated with ISAW’s *Nubia: Ancient Kingdoms of Africa* are also included.

Historical Information

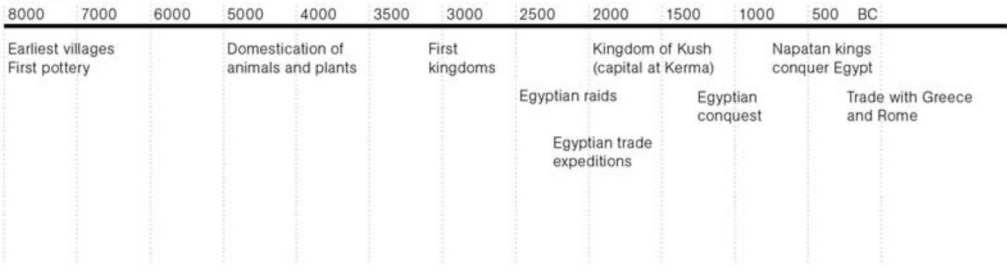


Archaeological investigation of Ancient Nubia, the area along the Nile River in southern Egypt and northern Sudan, began in the first decades of the twentieth century. Nubia, like America, is a name that conceals a diversity of cultures and histories even as it expresses a coherent tradition.

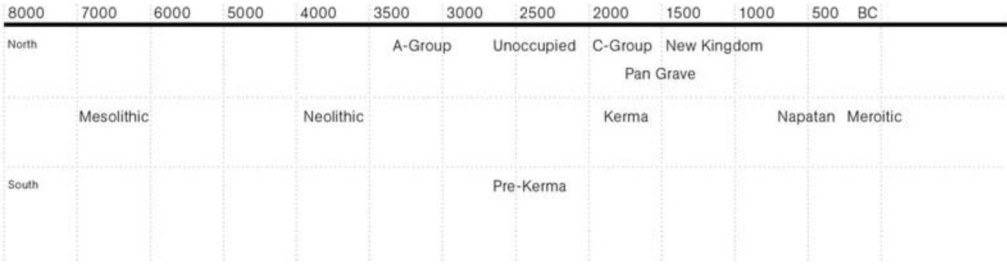
The term Nubia itself is a relatively late designation that reflects the ideas of foreigners rather than indigenous conceptions, as it first appears in the historical record in the 3rd century BC.

TIMELINE OF ANCIENT NUBIA

Major Events



Archaeological Periods



In many ways, the history of Nubia has been defined by that of its northern neighbor, Egypt. Nubia and Egypt were political rivals and trade partners for millennia. At the same time that the first kings ruled Upper Egypt (ca. 3100 BC), the elite of Lower Nubia amassed wealth expressed in a distinctive craft tradition. As Egypt expanded southward, depopulating Lower Nubia in the process, it encountered a new Nubian region known as Kush to the south. The Egyptians built massive fortresses along the Nile to protect themselves against the rising power of Kush, based in its capital city Kerma. But as the Egyptian state collapsed in the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1650–1550 BC), the Kushites captured the fortresses and assembled wide-ranging alliances to raid the Egyptian capital at Thebes.

The Egyptian state reasserted its power under a series of strong military leaders who succeeded in conquering most of Kush during the New Kingdom, establishing temples to their state god Amun along the Nubian Nile, and co-opting local leaders to extract massive tributes of Nubian goods: locally mined gold as well as products from further south—ivory, exotic animals, resins, and tropical woods including ebony. When the New Kingdom collapsed around 1070 BC, a dark age settled over Nubia about which we are only beginning to learn. As monuments were rebuilt, a Nubian dynasty, called the Napatan dynasty, modeling itself on Egyptian rulers and rituals began to bury its kings and queens in pyramids, and great leaders such as Piye and Taharqo captured Egypt as

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restorers of its traditions. Thus, the political and economic history of Egypt and Nubia are intertwined.

Egypt has overshadowed Nubia in other ways—our understanding of Nubia has long depended in part on Egyptian texts and works of art, because of the late development of indigenous Nubian writing. Although Egyptian representations of Nubians are inclined to portray Nubians as stereotyped enemies, our ability to tell the story from a Nubian perspective is developing, and this exhibition provides an opportunity to look at Nubian civilization on its own terms through the close examination of Nubian cultural production throughout its storied history.

Exhibition:

Several artistic traditions that were specific to the Nubian aesthetic are highlighted in the exhibition. Early ceramics that illustrate distinctive Nubian traditions included the use of techniques such as burnishing, blackening, geometric decoration, and imitation of natural forms. A full array of shapes illustrates the sophisticated typology of their eggshell-thin ceramic ware.

Production of faience—a greenish glazed material whose manufacture was introduced from Egypt—illustrates the ways that art can be affected by political history, as some of the faience material features Egyptianizing themes, while other examples show uniquely Nubian aesthetic traditions. This type of Faience, often referred to as “Egyptian faience,” is a non-clay ceramic composed of mostly crushed quartz or sand. Faience owes its bright blue-green luster to a glaze composed of copper pigments. Domestic ores seem to have provided the bulk of the minerals necessary for faience production in the region, and, thusly, faience proved to be a less costly alternative to the use of lapis lazuli, a relatively rare semi-precious stone that had to be imported from south-central Asia.

Additional objects, mostly from later phases of Nubian history, present aspects of Nubia’s relationship with Egypt. The distinctive synthesis of indigenous and Egyptian artistic traditions in the Napatan period can be seen through royal portrait statues, military weapons, and funerary objects employed to decorate elite Nubian tombs.

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Pitcher in the Form of a Hippopotamus
Fired clay, H. 20.5 cm, Kerma, Cemetery, 1700–1550 BC (Classic Kerma Period).
Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition:
21.11804
Photography © 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

This pitcher is one of a group of vessels with spouts in the form of animals' heads found in the Kerma cemetery. While the excavator called them “teapots,” and it is certain that they were used for pouring liquids, we do not know whether they were used in domestic or ritual contexts, or both.

As a very large animal that could be extremely dangerous when it or its young were threatened and quite destructive of fields when hungry, the hippopotamus was a potent symbol in the Nile Valley. Successful hunts by boat and harpoon were frequently portrayed in tombs of kings and officials in Egypt. And hippos were associated with the deities Seth (anger, evil, chaos) and Taweret (protector of women and infants).

Questions for discussion:

How do you think this pitcher was used and why?

Why do you think animals were sometimes represented on ceramic vessels?

Why were hippos so important to the ancient cultures of Africa?

Do you think ceramics such as the one above were important and/or valuable objects in Ancient Nubia? Why or why not?

What other animals are represented throughout this exhibition? What is your favorite and why?

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Winged Scarab Amulet
Faience, H. 8.1 cm, W. 7.3, D. 0.7 cm
El-Kurru, Pyramid 53 (Tomb of Queen Tabiry), 750–720 BC (Napatan Period, Reign of Piye)
Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition: 24.713
Photography © 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Scarabs, also called dung beetles, are common in North Africa, where they roll animal dung into balls that protect the beetles' eggs. The ancient kingdoms of Africa, including both Egypt and Nubia, associated this activity with the movement of the sun across the sky, propelled by an invisible scarab beetle. Thus, the insect was a symbol of the sun god, Re. Since the beetles seemed to emerge from balls of dung, they were considered self-creating and thus also associated with creation itself. In fact, due to this seemingly magical self-creation, the Egyptian word for scarab translates as “to come into being.”

It was believed that an amulet functioned to bring good luck or protection to its owner. These dung beetle shaped amulets were often used in a funerary context—placed upon the chest of the deceased at burial to symbolize rebirth.

Questions for discussion:

Describe the object. Of what material does it appear to be made?

What is the object representing?

Describe what you see in terms of how the object is represented. Would you describe this object as naturalistic, stylized, abstracted, etc.?

How was this object used? What function do you think it served in Nubian/Egyptian society?

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Statue of King Senkamanisken
Granite gneiss, H. 147.8 cm, W. 50.1 cm, Gebel Barkal, 640–620 BC
(Napatan Period, reign of Senkamanisken).
Harvard University—Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition: 23.731
Photography © 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

This statue of king Senkamanisken would have been set up in the Great Amun Temple at Gebel Barkal. Like other royal Kushite statues, it is modeled on Egyptian styles, such as the stiff, idealized representation of the human body with the left foot stepping forward, but with distinctive Nubian iconography including the tight cap crown with double uraeus-serpent (instead of the single uraeus on Egyptian statues). Three ram's head amulets are suspended on a cord around the king's neck and over his shoulders.

Representations of the dead, whether in wall paintings, relief sculpture or three-dimensional sculpture, such as this statue of king Senkamanisken, were believed to have housed the spirit of the dead, called the *ka*, in the afterlife. Thus, this and the many other representations of the dead inside their tombs should be served as a sort of temple or new home for the spirit of the dead, whose human body had met its demise.

Questions for discussion:

How is Senkamanisken depicted? Describe his body and pose.

Do you think this is an accurate portrait of the king or an idealized representation? Why?

What was the function of a statue like this?

As mentioned, this representation is modeled on Egyptian styles, but includes certain Nubian iconography. What is particularly "Egyptian" about this work? Why did Egypt's artistic traditions play such an important role in the cultural production of Ancient Nubia?

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Serpentinite, H. 18 cm, W. 6.7 cm, Nuri, tomb of Senkamanisken, 640–620 BC (Napatan Period).

Harvard University—Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition: 21.11845

Photography © 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Shawabtis were figures intended to serve on behalf of the king in the afterlife. In Egyptian belief, Osiris, the god of the underworld, could require the dead to perform manual labor, so elite burials would be supplied with shawabti figures, often holding tools, to work on behalf of the tomb owner.

Although all the pyramid tombs of the Napatan kings had been disturbed and mostly looted, the tomb of Senkamanisken still contained over 1100 shawabti figures, some made of faience and others of stone. Senkamanisken included more than enough shawabtis in his tomb to ensure an eternity of relaxation for himself in the afterlife.

The inscription on the shawabtis, adapted from the book of the dead, is a variant of this spell:

May the Osiris, the good god, Lord of the Two Lands, Senkamanisken, true of voice, be illuminated. He says: “Oh, this shawabti, if the Osiris king Senkamanisken, true of voice, is assigned to do any type of work that is done there in the necropolis, to irrigate the land and to transport sand from east to west and back, (you shall say), ‘Behold! Here I am!’”

Questions for discussion:

Describe the object. Of what material does it appear to be made?

When the deceased was called upon to do labor, the inscribed spell magically animated the shawabti, who would then answer the call to work instead of the deceased. Knowing what function these objects served in the afterlife, why do you think so many shawabtis were buried with king Senkamanisken?

What other inscribed spells or prayers can be found throughout the exhibition?
Compare and contrast these inscriptions.

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Objects from the Tomb of Aspelta
Gold and silver, Nuri, Pyramid 8 (Tomb of Aspelta), 600–580
bc (Napatan Period)
Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition:
21.11739, 21.339a-b
Photography © 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The collapse of part of the roof in King Aspelta's pyramid tomb at Nuri (in modern Sudan on the southeast side of the Nile) protected these precious objects from looting. The gold and silver vessels give us some idea of the wealth that would originally have been in the tomb.

The cylinder sheaths (see above, the two gold cylinders at right) are enigmatic objects that were found in a number of the royal Napatan tombs. Various functions have been proposed for them—papyrus document-holders, fan handles—but none of the proposals fits the characteristics of these objects. The upper parts of these cylinders depict symbols of Egyptian and Nubian royalty: papyrus, uraeus-serpents, and rams' heads symbolizing the ram-headed state god Amun.

The inscription on the spouted silver vessel (seen above, vessel at left) suggests that it was used in a royal ritual that involved drinking milk for purification of the body and/or spirit:

"Hail to you, O beautiful liquid, O good produce which averts every evil on behalf of the son of Re, Senkamanisken, given life. May you drive away every evil and ward off every abomination. He has suckled upon this vessel, his mouth being the mouth of the calf at its milk between the legs of his mother. His purification is the purification of Horus and vice versa. His purification is the purification of Duenanwy and vice versa."

Questions for discussion:

These precious objects were included in King Aspelta's pyramid tomb. What do you think makes these objects particularly valuable? Of what material are the objects made?

The cylinder sheaths are mysterious objects, as mentioned, whose function is debated. How do you think they were used?

Try to locate the inscription on the spouted silver vessel. What might be the significance of such an inscription? When time allows, try to learn more about the Nubian deities and important political figures that are mentioned in the inscription, such as Re, Senkamanisken, Horus and Duenanwy.

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In the Classroom:

Social Studies Activity

As discussed above, throughout their millennia of co-existence, the Egyptian and Nubian kingdoms were constantly in conflict, both over territory/trade and language/culture. Using the resources at your disposal, research other societies that throughout their history that were constantly engaged in battles or political/cultural struggles, such as ancient Sparta and Athens during the Peloponnesian War.

What effect can this long-standing type of conflict have on the nation's people, economy, cultural production, aesthetic and futures?

Writing Activity

The Ancient Nubians believed in many creative and fascinating legends or pieces of folklore to describe the origins of natural workings of the planet, such as the aforementioned story associated with scarabs/dung beetles. Write an "origins story" of your own, incorporating animals, mythical Nubian gods, or other figures, to describe how a certain natural phenomenon came about.

Art Activity

Include image of 21.321 along with the info/description it has on the ISAW website at <http://www.nyu.edu/isaw/exhibitions/nubia/highlights.html>.

In many of the anthropomorphic representations found in the exhibition, such as the Hathor-Headed Crystal Pendant seen above, features of various animals were incorporated with the representations of deceased monarchs to represent different facets of their role in society.

Draw a representation of yourself incorporating features of different animals you believe represent something about who you are. Then, write a short description for each animal whose features you incorporated along with a description of how and why you believe they reflect something about who you are.

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Supplemental Resources:

Adams, William Y. Nubia: Corridor to Africa. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

O'Connor, David. Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa. Philadelphia: University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 1993.

Smith, Stuart Tyson. Wretched Kush: Ethnic Identities and Boundaries in Egypt's Nubian Empire. London: Routledge, 2003.

Török, Lászió. The Kingdom of Kush: Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997.

Welsby, Derek A. The Kingdom of Kush: The Napatan and Meroitic Empires. London: British Museum Press, 1996.

Internet Resources:

Nubia: Ancient Kingdoms of Africa: www.nyu.edu/isaw/exhibitions/nubia/

The Metropolitan Museum of New York:

Sudan, 8000-2000 BCE: www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/?period=02®ion=afs

Sudan, 2000-1000 BCE: www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/?period=03®ion=afs

Sudan, 1000 BCE – 1 CE: www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/?period=04®ion=afs

Sudan, 1-500 CE: www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/?period=05®ion=afs The

Museum of Fine Arts Boston:

Nubia: www.mfa.org/search/collections?keyword=packageid:26155

Nubia: Ancient Kingdoms of Africa is curated by Geoff Emberling and was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Supplemental material was lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art especially for the ISAW presentation. This exhibition was made possible through the support of the Leon Levy Foundation.

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