

Sudanese Pyramids

Perhaps most people do not know that Sudan has more pyramids than Egypt. These silent and awesome structures occupy the area known as Nubia,¹ which was once home to three ancient city-states of the Kingdom of Kush, namely: Kerma (ca. 2500-1500 B.C.), which was Nubia's first centralized state; Napata (ca. 900-270 B.C.), the second capital of Kush; and Meroë (ca. 270 B.C.-370 A.D.), which later replaced Napata as capital.

Kush held power over a vast area covering much of the Nile Delta as far south as Khartoum, representing the most prosperous period of Nubian civilization. It was strongly influenced culturally, economically, politically and militarily by the powerful pharaonic Egyptian empire to the north. The history of Nubia is thus closely linked to that of ancient Egypt while the regions of Nubia, Sudan and Egypt are considered by some to be the cradle of civilization.

Following the collapse of the Egyptian Empire (referred to as the New Kingdom) around the 11th century, the kings of Napata conquered and unified Egypt from about the late 8th century to ca. 660 B.C., emerging as a great power in the Middle Nile and ruling as pharaohs of the 25th Dynasty. At this time, the kings of Napata revived the burial customs of the pyramid and employed Egyptian artists and architects to design the stunning monuments. This generated an exceptional burst of pyramid-building activity that was sustained throughout the existence of Napata's successor kingdom, Meroë. After the Napatan kingdom gave up Egypt as a result of Assyrian conquest in ca. 670 B.C., the pyramid burial tradition persisted even as Egyptian influence declined.

Like the Egyptians, the Kushites believed in life after death and they built huge graves as an enduring home for the dead, particularly those, like pharaohs, in unique social positions. Preserving this tradition, Kushites continued to build magnificent pyramids for members of royalty about 800 years after Egyptian pyramid-building stopped. Other grandees of the empire, especially priests of high rank might have also been provided a resting place in these pyramids. Over 200 pyramids were eventually constructed in Kush, which are about double the number of pyramids in neighboring Egypt. The first of these

¹ Today, Nubia is a desert region along the Nile, with most of the territory located in northern Sudan and about one-fourth in southern Egypt.

were built at the site of el-Kurru. Later, Napatan pyramids were sited at Nuri on the west bank of the Nile, serving as burial places for up to 21 kings and 52 queens and princes of Napata and Meroë. The oldest and largest pyramid at Nuri is that of the Napatan king and 25th dynasty pharaoh Taharqa.

However, the most extensive Nubian pyramid site is at the ancient city of Meroë, which is located approximately two hundred kilometers north-east of Khartoum, the capital of Northern Sudan, near the banks of the Nile. This relatively unknown city is historically significant because it is home to a few dozen pyramids ranging from approximately 60 to 30 meters in height and spread over a small hill about one quarter square kilometer in size. This location on high ground is a common feature of the entire pyramid fields, as if to make up for their deficiency in size (which may be why they receive little attention) when compared to famous Egyptian pyramids to the north. Also unlike Egypt's pyramids, the pyramids of Meroë are largely free of commercial activity and, constructed from large blocks of sandstone, are angled more steeply (at around 70 degrees). As testimony to Egyptian influence; however, most of these pyramids also have small Egyptian-style temple structures adjoining their base. Interestingly, the pyramid image on the U.S. one dollar bill bears a stronger resemblance to Sudanese pyramids than to Egyptian pyramids.

All of the pyramid tombs of Nubia were plundered in ancient times, but wall reliefs preserved in the tomb chapels reveal that their royal occupants were mummified, covered with jewelry and laid to rest in wooden mummy cases. Research also shows that the underground graves of the Nubian pyramids were richly decorated. At the time of their exploration by archaeologists

in the 19th and 20th centuries, some pyramids were found to contain the remains of bows, quivers of arrows, archers' thumb rings, hieroglyphic inscriptions, horse harnesses, rock art, wooden boxes, furniture, pottery, colored glass and



Image of Pyramid on US Dollar Bill



Sudanese Pyramid

The similarity is striking

metal vessels. These and many other artifacts attest to extensive Meroitic trade with Egypt and the Hellenistic (Greek) world.

The more than 50 ancient pyramids and royal tombs that rise out of the desert sands at Meroë are Sudan's best-preserved pyramids, and, some say, one of Africa's best-kept secrets.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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