

■ The Selection of Aspalta as King of Kush

Date: c. 600 BCE

Geographic Region: Kush (present-day Sudan and Egypt)

Author: Unknown

Summary Overview

Inscribed on one of the best-known stelae dating from the reign of the Kushite king Aspalta, the Enthronement Stela of Aspalta stands as a key primary source in understanding the government and culture of the northern African kingdom of Kush, also known as Nubia. Aspalta is one of the best-known rulers of Kush, and his reign is associated with turning points in Nubian history, such as the move of the capital from Napata, where he was chosen as king, to Meroë, where Kushite civilization was centered until its decline several centuries later. Although Kush shared some cultural characteristics with neighboring Egypt, which its kings had briefly ruled, Aspalta's stela reveals some uniquely Nubian customs and supports the view of Kush as a fully independent kingdom and realized civilization by the time of Aspalta's reign in the sixth century BCE.

Defining Moment

The Kingdom of Kush was located along the middle Nile River in the ancient region of Nubia, which also sometimes lends its name to the civilizations that arose there. Lying along what is now part of Sudan and southern Egypt, Nubia long served as a thoroughway for trade goods, such as ivory, from sub-Saharan Africa to Egypt and the greater Mediterranean world. The region was also home to its own rich deposits of gold and other valuable minerals, particularly iron. In its early development, Nubian civilization was more African than Egyptian or Mediterranean; historians believe the region was settled by migratory herders from sub-Saharan Africa by about 2400 BCE. This first civilization was based on farming and animal husbandry rather than trade, and Nubians developed a reputation as fierce warriors.

Over time, independent Nubian farming villages coalesced into the kingdom of Kerma. Kerma's leaders were among the first to encourage close ties with the Egyptian civilization to the north, and soon Nubians had begun to engage in profitable long-distance trade

with Egypt. From the mid-seventeenth century BCE to the mid-sixteenth century BCE, Nubian warriors served as mercenaries in the Egyptian army as that civilization sought to repel the Hyksos invasion. This brought Nubians into close contact with Egyptian culture, and from that time onward, Nubia began to undergo a period of Egyptianization. Having secured itself from the Hyksos threat, Egypt then embarked on expansionary efforts under the pharaoh Thutmose I. One of their main targets was Kerma. After several decades of fighting, the Nubian kingdom fell to Egyptian forces, and Nubia remained at least nominally under Egyptian rule for some seven hundred years. During this time, Nubia was directly overseen by a mixture of Egyptian officials and Nubians who had adopted Egyptian customs, and the region took on more and more Egyptian traits, such as the adoption of the Egyptian gods. However, Nubians began to reassert increasing control over their territory around the eleventh century BCE as Egypt's hold on the region weakened. During the eighth century BCE, Nubian kings successfully gained control of Egyptian lands, establishing themselves as the rulers of all of Egypt and Nubia.

Nubian control of Egypt was short-lived, however, as the powerful Assyrians forced the Kushite kings out of Egypt by the mid-seventh century BCE. Nubian leaders retreated to their strongholds and established a more limited kingdom of Kush, with its capital at the city of Napata, a trading center from which the Nubian kings had previously overseen their broader combined lands. Kush reasserted itself as a powerful trading state, and its kings again sought to protect their lands from outside control. One of these kings, Aspalta, assumed the throne in the early sixth century BCE.

Document Information

The text given here comes from one of the significant stelae dating from the time of Aspalta's reign. A stela is

a large stone slab inscribed with images and text commemorating an event, person, or other entity; in the ancient world, stelae often were used as grave markers. Historians believe that the usage of stelae spread to Nubia from nearby Egypt, and artists of those regions typically used similar techniques and styles as Egyptian artists. However, no specific information about this text's authorship or creation survives.

As a relative scarcity of information survives about Aspalta's reign and indeed about Kush in general during that time, the stelae that have been excavated are among the best historical sources for that era. Excavations of materials created under Aspalta began in the 1910s, and this stela was found at the sacred site of Gebel Barkal.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Now the entire army of his majesty was in the town named Napata, in which Dedwen, Who presides over Wawat, is God—he is also the god of Kush—after the death of the Falcon upon his throne. Now then, the trusted commanders from the midst of the army of His Majesty were six men, while the trusted commanders and overseers of fortresses were six men.... Then they said to the entire army, “Come, let us cause our lord to appear, for we are like a herd which has no herdsman!” Thereupon this army was very greatly concerned, saying, “Our lord is here with us, but we do not know him! Would that we might know him, that we might enter in under him and work for him, as It-Tjwy work for Horus, the son of Isis, after he sits upon the throne of his father Osiris! Let us give praise to his two crowns.” Then the army of His Majesty all said with one voice, “Still there is this god Amon-Re, Lord of the Thrones of It-Tjwy, Resident in Napata. He is also a god of Kush. Come, let us go to him. We cannot do a thing without him, but a good fortune comes from the god. He is the god of the kings of Kush since the time of Re. It is he who will guide us. In his hands is the kingship of Kush, which he has given to the son whom he loves....

So the commanders of His Majesty and the officials of the palace went to the Temple of Amon. They found the prophets and the major priests waiting outside the temple. They said to them, “Pray, may this god, Amon-

Re, Resident in Napata, come, to permit that he give us our lord, to revive us, to build the temples of all the gods and goddesses of Kemet, and to present their divine offerings! We cannot do a thing without this god. It is he who guides us. Then the prophets and the major priests entered into the temple, that they might perform every rite of his purification and his censuring. Then the commanders of His Majesty and the officials of the palace entered into the temple and put themselves upon their bellies before this god. They said, “We have come to you, O Amon-Re, Lord of the Thrones of It-Tjwy, Resident in Napata, that you might give to us a lord, to revive us, to build the temples of the gods of Kemet and Rekhyt, and to present divine offerings. That beneficent office is in your hands—may you give it to your son whom you love!”

Then they offered the king's brothers before this god, but he did not take one of them. For a second time there was offered the king's brother, son of Amon, and child of Mut, Lady of Heaven, the Son of Re, Aspalta, living forever. Then this god, Amon-Re, Lord of the Thrones of It-Tjwy, said, “He is your king. It is he who will revive you. It is he who will build every temple of Kemet and Rekhyt. It is he who will present their divine offerings. His father was my son, the Son of Re, Inle-Amon, the triumphant. His mother is the king's sister, king's mother, Kandake of Kush, and Daughter of Re, Nensela, living forever, He is your lord.”

GLOSSARY

Kemet: ancient Egypt

Rekhyt: the lapwing, a symbol of the commoners of ancient Egypt

Wawat: an administrative region in northern Nubia

Document Analysis

The Enthronement Stela of Aspalta describes in great detail the process by which Aspalta was anointed as the ruler of the Kushites in sixth century BCE. This text is divided into three sections, which treat the process sequentially and show the close connections between government and religion in Kushite civilization.

The stela's text opens by setting the scene: "the Falcon upon his throne"—that is, the sitting king—has died, leaving the leadership of Kush unfilled. Members of the army and others who had been part of the king's bureaucracy gathered in the capital, Napata, to choose the king's successor from among his brothers. This group announces its intention to turn the decision over to the god Amon-Re, proclaiming that the rightful king is "here with us, but we do not know him!" Amon-Re, identified as the head god of the Kushites, is named as the best possible entity to select the new king as the king is closely affiliated with the god and his powers; in calling the deceased king Inle-Amon, the "Son of Re," the stela recalls the Egyptian belief that the pharaoh was a direct descendent of divinity and thus semidivine himself.

The Nubian leaders then travel to the temple of Amon-Re in Napata, where they confer with the religious figures associated with that place. The group again declares the greatness of Amon-Re and proclaims their hope that his selection will strengthen the Kushites for the benefit of both citizens and their deities, for "we cannot do a thing without this god." The temple's priests offer prayers and rituals in order to prepare for the god to make his wishes known through an oracle. The Kushite leaders then prostrate themselves before the god and directly ask him to select the new king in order to fulfill a series of purposes—"to revive us, to build the temples . . . and to present divine offerings." Choosing wisely, it is implied, will please both the humans and the gods.

As options, the Kushite leaders presented the deceased king's surviving brothers. Apparently none of these choices pleased the god, for the oracle was silent. Then, the leaders proposed just one brother, Aspalta. It thus seems probable that the commanders had essentially preselected Aspalta as the king, and the ensuing ritual was conducted out of custom or religious sentiment. This suggestion was affirmed by the god, who declared Aspalta the king and attested his ability to fulfill the purposes previously laid out.

Essential Themes

The rule of Aspalta was, historians believe, a long and eventful one. Soon after ascending to the throne, his capital at Napata suffered from an Egyptian raid. Later in his reign, Aspalta is believed to have shifted the Kushite capital from Napata to the southern city of Meroë in order to protect the kingdom from the threat of invasion by the Egyptians or the Persians, who posed a serious concern for Kushite leadership from about 525 BCE onward. This shift in power to Meroë proved a wise decision for the survival of an independent Kush. Meroë was located near rich iron deposits, which eventually allowed the Kushites to become skilled iron workers. Certain cultural and religious functions remained centered at Napata, however, and Aspalta was entombed at the nearby necropolis of Nuri after his death.

Living three generations after the expulsion of the Kushites from Egypt, Aspalta was thus a truly Nubian ruler. Historians often point to the contents of the "selection stela" as evidence of the unique character of Nubian civilization, as opposed to one that was simply a more southerly installment of the better-known ancient Egyptian culture. The stela suggests that the selection of Aspalta as king was done through mutual agreement of leading Kushites, a practice more closely reflective of the traditional African customs of choosing leaders through general tribal consent, for example. At the same time, the stela's language references Egyptian gods, such as Amon-Re, and is written in a script clearly influenced by the Egyptian hieroglyphic style. The stela is, therefore, suggestive of the geographic position of Kush in straddling the quite different African and Mediterranean worlds.

The relative lack of information about Kush over time also makes the details given in the stela extremely suggestive for scholars seeking to establish a deeper understanding of the kingdom's inner workings. Historian Jeremy Pope, for example, has pointed to the repetition of six "trusted commanders" of various governmental units in this text as possible evidence of the division of Kush into six administrative divisions or provinces at this time.

—Vanessa E. Vaughn, MA

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