

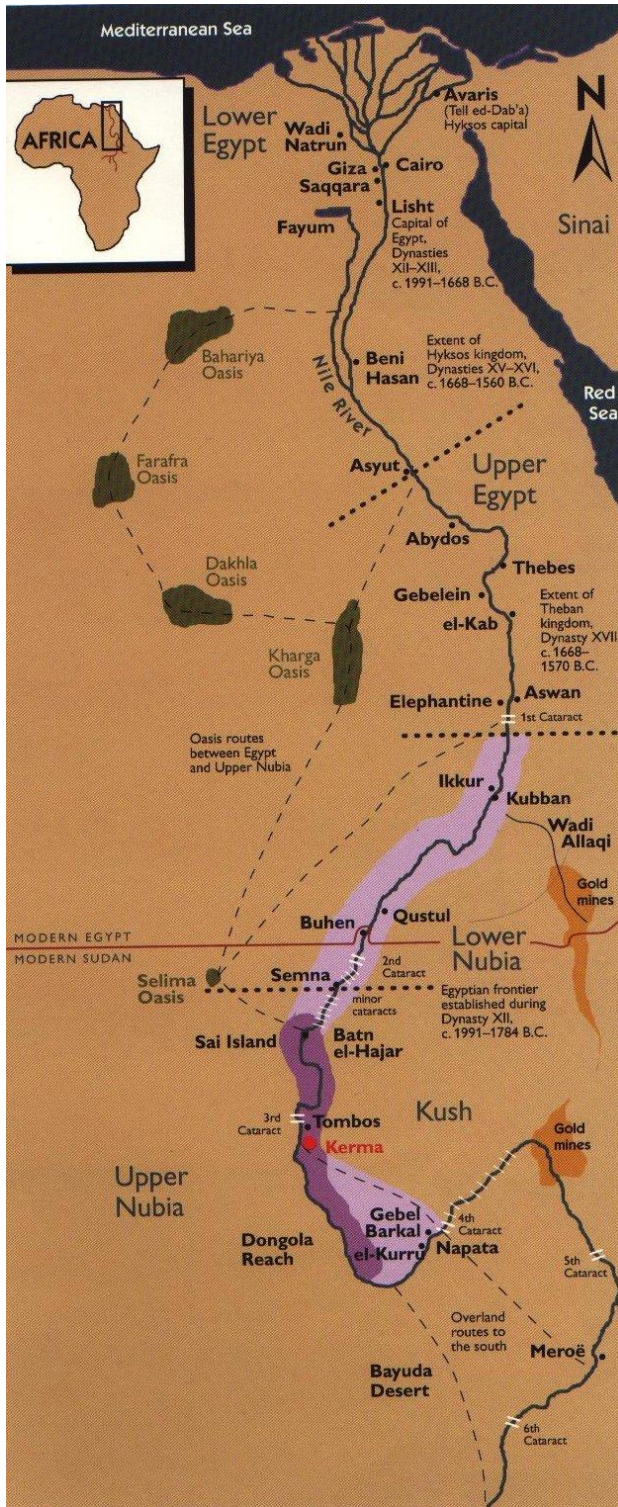
**Kerma:  
Tenochtitlan  
of  
Ancient  
Nubia?**



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## Kerma

The ancient city of Kerma, located above the 3<sup>rd</sup> cataract of the Nile River in modern Sudan, was well positioned to dominate the area and the trade that flowed to and



through it. Located just south of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cataract, where the river valley spread out, providing a greater amount of arable land, Kerma was possessed of the resources to support a substantial number of people and exert control over the Nile trade and trade with sub-Saharan Africa. Over the approximately 1,000 years (c. 2500-1500 BC) of its existence, the rulers of Kerma controlled an increasingly large area of Nubia, eventually controlling an area stretching from the 1<sup>st</sup> cataract at Aswan to the 4<sup>th</sup> cataract at Napata and Gebel Barkal (center of a later Kingdom of Kush) during the Egyptian Second Intermediate Period (c. 1800-1550 BC).<sup>1</sup> Their domination of this large area may have been dependent on a system of conquest and tribute similar to that of the Aztecs of central

Map of Egypt & Nubia from *Kerma and the Kingdom of Kush* by Timothy Kendall, p. xvi. (dark is Kerma heartland, light is maximum extent of Kerma expansion)

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Mexico several millennia later, as may be deduced from the burial practices of the later rulers of the expanding state of Kerma.

From the time of the late Old Kingdom in Egypt (c. 2300 BC) there was evidence of a powerful kingdom to the south of Egypt, known at that time as Yam. Trade between the two was carried on sporadically by men such as Harkhuf, who, during the reigns of pharaohs Mernere and Pepi II, led four expeditions to Yam, returning with “all kinds of beautiful and rare gifts,” including, on his fourth expedition a “pygmy of the god’s dances from the land of the horizon-dwellers,” i.e. a dancing dwarf, which greatly excited the young Pepi II.<sup>2</sup> After the Egyptian First Intermediate Period (c. 2160-2055) a new entity emerges to the south in the same region, south of Wawat, known now as Kush (sometimes including the epithet “the vile”), which was sometimes a military opponent and sometimes a trading partner. These two entities, Yam and Kush, are likely the same, as they are located in the same region of Upper Nubia and may be associated with the site of Kerma, which had been settled around 2500 BC after the abandonment of much older settlements in the vicinity of what became the Kerma cemetery due to changes in the Nile channel, and was a major center throughout this period.<sup>3</sup>

The kingdom of Kush remained a military opponent of the Theban pharaohs throughout the Middle Kingdom, Second Intermediate Period and beginning of the New Kingdom, despite repeated military expeditions by Amenemhet I, Sesostris I, Sesostris III, Kamose, Ahmose, and Thutmose I, among others. As far back as the reign of Pepi II the Egyptians had campaigned against the minor kingdoms of the south in an effort to regain direct control of Upper Nubia as recorded in the tomb inscriptions of Pepi-Nakht of Elephantine. His mission was to “hack up Wawat and Irthet ... I slew a great number

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there consisting of chiefs' children and excellent commanders ... I brought a great number of them to the court as living prisoners."<sup>4</sup> This was likely done in an attempt to regain Egyptian control of access to the gold mines and other resources located in the region, but it resulted in the eventual weakening of these minor kingdoms and their absorption first into the sphere of the Egyptian pharaohs and then into the sphere of the kings of Kerma. Sesostri III twice sought to establish his southern boundary at Semnah, just south of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cataract. His boundary stela from year eight of his reign states:

Southern boundary, made in year 8, ... in order to prevent that any Negro should cross it, by water or by land, with a ship, (or) any herds of the Negroes; except a Negro who shall come to do trading in Iken, or with a commission. Every good thing shall be done with them, but without allowing a ship of the Negroes to pass Heh, going downstream, forever.<sup>5</sup>

In a subsequent campaign in his 16<sup>th</sup> year, he establishes a fort named "Repulse of the Troglodytes" at Semneh (ancient Heh), he goes on to relate how "I captured their women, I carried off their subjects, went forth to their wells, smote their bulls; I reaped their grain and set fire thereto."<sup>6</sup> At this point the Egyptians were penetrating close to the central territory of the Kerma kingdom itself, perhaps even attacking the city of Kerma, as may be indicated by early burned levels at the site.<sup>7</sup>

The Second Intermediate Period in Egypt was the period known as Classic Kerma in the south. The weakening of Egyptian central authority and the fragmentation of the state allowed the rulers at Kerma to expand their authority northward to encompass all of the Nile Valley in Nubia up to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cataract. A number of finds from the fortress of Buhen, near the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cataract, indicate that the fortress was taken by force, as evidenced by a burn level, and reoccupied by people using Kerma style pottery. A stela found at the site also indicate the willingness of officers to switch sides and serve the Kerma king.

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An uninscribed stela portraying a figure wearing the crown of Upper Egypt and carrying a mace and the bow of Nubia was also found there. This figure is felt to be a representation of the Kerma king attempting to present himself as the ruler of all of southern Egypt.<sup>8</sup>



Sandstone stela found at Buhen and believed to bear the image of a king of Kush resident at Kerma. (c. 1700-1570 BC)  
Kendall, p. 33.

The power of the king of Kerma had become such that Kamose (c.1555-1550 BC) of Dynasty XVII at Thebes lamented that “One prince sitteth in Avaris and another in Nubia, and there sit I together with an Asiatic and a negro! Each possesseth his slice of Egypt and divideth the land with me.”<sup>9</sup> He also claims to have captured an emissary from the Hyksos

king Apophis at Avaris to the ruler of Kush at Kerma.<sup>10</sup> However, he, like many of his predecessors and successors, had Nubian bowmen of Kush in his army, which he was about to use against both Kerma and the Hyksos, beginning a campaign which ultimately resulted in the destruction of both opponents of the Theban dynasty.

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The expansion of the rule of the king of Kerma, both northwards towards the 1<sup>st</sup> Cataract and southwards towards the 4<sup>th</sup> Cataract resulted in a number of changes at Kerma itself. One of these changes was to the burial practices, especially those of the rulers. The earliest burials at Kerma contain a single body and few personal possessions and appear to be uniformly small and simple. Burials became more elaborate with succeeding generations, eventually featuring burials of food and whole animals, both slaughtered and buried alive, and pets. Occasionally, a second human would be killed and buried with the tomb occupant. Towards the end of the Early Kerma Period (c. 2500 – 2050 BC) a greater distinction arose in size and elaboration of tombs, indicating a concentration of wealth and power in the hands of an elite. The earliest burials identified as “royal” differ little from other tombs except for their greater size. In the succeeding Middle Kerma Period (c. 2050 – 1750 BC) the practice of sacrificing humans with the burial became more widespread, usually consisting of women, sometimes children, but rarely men.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, in the Classic Kerma Period (c. 1750 – 1570 BC), the practice of human sacrifice appeared even in graves in humble outlying settlements such as Mirgissa. According to Adams “Many relatively small and humble graves contained one or two sacrificed retainers, while the largest of the royal tombs may have had four hundred.”<sup>12</sup>

The adoption of the practice of human sacrifice at a time of territorial expansion is reminiscent of the practices common in other ancient cultures, such as Early Dynastic Egypt (c. 3000) BC where a number of early pharaohs, especially with Aha and Djer;<sup>13</sup> Early Dynastic Sumer, where Wooley found a number of tombs at Ur (c. 2500 BC) that contained many sacrificial victims, including one termed the “Great Death Pit”;<sup>14</sup> and

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Shang China (c. 1600 BC), where the number of sacrificial victims buried in tombs and temple foundations sometimes ran into the hundreds.<sup>15</sup>

The persistence of this practice over several centuries, despite close contact with Egypt, where the practice had been long abandoned, with the substitution of miniature figurines and shabtis for real humans accompanying the deceased to the grave despite the adoption of other elements of Egyptian burial practice, like preservation of the body and use of a coffin,<sup>16</sup> is reminiscent of the Aztecs of Mesoamerica, whose offerings of human sacrifices led them to greater and greater territorial expansion accompanied by bigger and bigger human sacrifices. Like Kerma, the Aztecs sought to control resources and trade, but their need for sacrificial victims led them to sometimes deliberately not conquer a city, so as to be able to continue to fight them and acquire more sacrificial victims; 30 to 400 people per year sacrificed in Aztec cities, while 20,000 were sacrificed at dedication of the great temple at Tenochtitlan in c. 1500 AD, the whole manpower of three mountain tribes.<sup>17</sup> As the victims buried at Kerma are primarily viewed as being servants, mostly being women and children, with occasional male guards, it is possible they are primarily prisoners taken from other tribes or kingdoms due to conquest or raiding. Important people associated with the king were often interred at a later date in tombs excavated out of the royal burial mound, themselves accompanied by human sacrifices.<sup>18</sup> The sacrifice of such large numbers of human victims also argues for the victims not being of the people who are doing the sacrificing. Tomb K X, for example, contained the remains of 322 sacrificial victims for one royal burial.<sup>19</sup> With even minor graves containing one or more victims, the toll per year could easily equal those for an Aztec city. Forty to one hundred or more people per year being taken out of the native

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population for sacrifice could easily result in cultural collapse due to lack of people to perform labor,<sup>20</sup> or revolt, either by the main population group being sacrificed or by

subjected groups seeing a weakness.

As previously noted, not all the people of the Kerma Culture appear to have been entirely loyal to the king at Kerma. Despite the fact that kings of Kush were mentioned in what are termed “Execration Texts” or ritual curses of enemies, two of these by name, Awa’wa/Awa’a and his son, Utatreses and Egyptians were entering the service of the king of Kush, such as Ka, who “washed my feet in the waters of Kush in the suite of King Nedjeh,”<sup>21</sup> Nubians using Kerma style pottery continued to be used in the service of the Theban pharaohs. A substantial find of Kerma ware pottery at Ballas from the reigns of Kamose and Ahmose I strongly suggests that certain Kerma Culture leaders were willing to fight on behalf of the enemy of the king of Kerma.<sup>22</sup> This despite the fact that Kamose was about to attack the king of Kush, prior to launching an offensive against the Hyksos at Avaris.

The hostility between the rulers of Kerma and their expanded realm and the Theban dynasties of the Second Intermediate Period seems to have lead to a great decline in the amount of precious objects in use in the Theban kingdom. Despite rumors of rich



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Dynasty XVII burials in ancient texts, only very modest funerary assemblages have been recovered from the period before Kamose and Ahmose. It is only with the burials of Kamose and Ahhotep, mother of Ahmose (and Kamose?) that the extravagant use of gold burial equipment can be attested.<sup>23</sup> The northward expansion of the influence of Kerma resulted in Thebes being cut off from the gold fields of Lower Nubia. At the same time, contact appears to have flourished between Kerma and the Hyksos at Avaris, mostly by the oasis routes through the western desert.<sup>24</sup> This, along with the threat of having a hostile neighbor to the south while campaigning in the north, led to the series of campaigns that culminated with Thutmose I returning to Thebes with “that wretched Nubian Troglodyte [possibly a king of Kerma] being hanged head downward at the prow” of his ship<sup>25</sup> and Thutmose III establishing forts as far south as the 4<sup>th</sup> Cataract and Gebel Barkal, overthrowing ‘Kush the wretched.’ The last kings of Kerma were forced to abandon the burial site and practices of their predecessors and adopt less elaborate and visible burials nearer the river and the town, less vulnerable to attack and plunder.<sup>26</sup>

The end of the Kingdom of Kerma marked the beginning of a period of Egyptian domination of Upper Nubia that was to last until after the reign of Rameses XI in 1069 BC, and the end of the practice of human sacrifice with burials, perhaps because the elites were gone or because there was no remaining wealth to support such a practice. During the succeeding period, a new Kingdom of Kush arose centered around Napata and Gebel Barkal, which did not continue the practice of human sacrifice.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Timothy Kendall. *Kerma and the Kingdom of Kush 2500-1500 B. C.: The Archaeological Discovery of an Ancient Nubian Empire*. xvi, 39.
- <sup>2</sup> “The Autobiography of Harkhuf.” In Miriam Lichtheim (trans.) *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Vol. 1, 25-27.
- <sup>3</sup> Kendall. 38.
- <sup>4</sup> Inscriptions of Pepi-Nakht: First Nubian Expedition. In James H. Breasted (trans.) *Records of Ancient Egypt*. Vol. 1 [358].
- <sup>5</sup> The First Semneh Stela. In James H. Breasted (trans.) *Records of Ancient Egypt*. Vol. 1 [652].
- <sup>6</sup> The Second Semneh Stela: Plundering of Nubia. In James H. Breasted (trans.) *Records of Ancient Egypt*. Vol. 1 [658].
- <sup>7</sup> William Y. Adams. “The First Colonial Empire: Egypt in Nubia, 3200-1200 B. C.,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984): 49, Kendall, 41.
- <sup>8</sup> Kendall. 32-33.
- <sup>9</sup> “The War of Kamose.” In Adolf Erman (trans.) *The Ancient Egyptians: A Sourcebook of Their Writings*. 52.
- <sup>10</sup> Kendall, 30.
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 40, 59-62.
- <sup>12</sup> William Y. Adams. *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*. 198-199.
- <sup>13</sup> Kathryn A. Bard. “The Emergence of the Egyptian State (c. 3200-2686 BC).” In Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. 71-72.
- <sup>14</sup> Michael Roaf. *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*. 92.
- <sup>15</sup> Edward L. Farmer, et al. *Comparative History of Civilizations in Asia: Volume 1 10,000 B.C. to 1850*. 31.
- <sup>16</sup> Kendall, 62.
- <sup>17</sup> Cottie Burland. *The Aztecs: Gods and Fate in Ancient Mexico*. 67.
- <sup>18</sup> Kendall, 66-69.
- <sup>19</sup> Kendall, 66.

## Endnotes

- <sup>20</sup> Charles Bonnet. "Excavations at the Nubian Royal Town of Kerma: 1975-91." *Antiquity* 66 (1992): 623.
- <sup>21</sup> Kendall, 28-29.
- <sup>22</sup> Janine Bourriau. "The Second Intermediate Period (c. 1650-1550 BC)." In Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. 211.
- <sup>23</sup> Betsy M. Bryan. "The 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Before the Amarna Period (c. 1550-1352 BC)." In Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. 221.
- <sup>24</sup> Bourriau, 201.
- <sup>25</sup> Inscription of Ahmose, Son of Ebana. In James H. Breasted (trans.) *Records of Ancient Egypt*. Vol. 2 [80].

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