

ADVENTURESS

ARCHAEOLOGY

“The Mother of All Issues” Issue



Trigger Warnings

WARNING: In this issue, one or more articles discuss the history of hate crimes against marginalized communities. It may contain triggering language and content.

Warning: In this issue, one or more articles, contain images of human remains, which some viewers may find disturbing. Proceed with caution.

MATRILINEAL LEGACIES IN ANCIENT SUDAN: UNCOVERING THE POWER OF MOTHERS IN ANCIENT NUBIA

BY JENAIL MARSHALL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENAIL MARSHALL ,
DEBORA HEARD, JALOVE MOORE, & MZAZI
TAOGA



Image by, Jenail Marshall

Image: Jenail in front of the Meroe pyramids.

"The steep-sided pyramids of Meroë (4th century BCE–4th century CE), where Kandakes like Amanishakheto were buried. Their sharp angles distinguish them from Egyptian pyramids, an architectural declaration of Nubian independence."

The Hidden Power of Nubian Women

The Kingdom of Kush, an ancient Nubian civilization located in what is now Sudan, offers a fascinating lens through which to explore the role of women in history. As an archaeologist working in the Nile Valley in Sudan, I am continually struck by the profound connections between the past and the present, particularly when it comes to the enduring legacy of motherhood and the central role of women in African societies. In honor of Mother's Day, I want to delve into how the archaeological record reveals the critical role of women in Kush and how these ancient traditions resonate with broader African and diasporic cultures, where communal child-rearing, matriarchy, and matrilineal inheritance have deep roots.

The Kingdom of Kush (c. 2500 BCE–350 CE), centered along the Nile in modern-day Sudan, presents a striking contrast to its contemporaries in Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Eurocentric ideas about ancient societies often frame powerful women as exceptions, Cleopatra's "seduction," Boudica's "revolt." But Kushite queens were not outliers; they were sovereigns and not just caregivers, but the architects of dynasties. Through archaeology, inscriptions, and art, we uncover a society where matrilineal succession (the transmission of power through maternal lines) shaped the politics, religion, and cultural identity of the kingdom.

It's important to note that, while Kush was matrilineal, it may not have been a full matriarchy. Women held key roles, including becoming rulers themselves in some cases, but men still occupied many leadership positions. This distinction helps us better understand the nuances of Nubian society.

This legacy challenges dominant narratives of ancient history, which often marginalize women's roles. By examining the Kandakes (Queens or Queen Mothers) of Kush, royal burials, and iconography, we reveal how Kushite women wielded authority comparable to kings. Their influence extended beyond antiquity, leaving traces in modern African and diasporic cultures. As Sudan grapples with contemporary struggles, the resilience of its women, from ancient rulers to today's revolutionaries, demands recognition.

The Kandakes: Sudan's Original Girl Bosses

Evidence of ruling queens exists from the Meroitic Period, where they held the title Qore (ruler) and governed as sovereign monarchs. At least nine ruling queens are known from their tombs at Meroë, dating between (c. 200 BCE – 300 CE). These queens, including Amanirenas and Amanishakheto, left behind monumental stelae, temple reliefs, and rich grave goods that attest to their rule.

The prominence of the Kandakes is evident in the various titles ascribed to them, King's Mother, King's Wife, Great King's Wife, King's Daughter, and King's Sister. The most compelling evidence of Kush's matrilineal system comes from its ruling queens, the Kandakes, who often governed as sovereigns rather than regents. Amanirenas (c. 40 BCE–10 BCE) exemplifies this tradition. Facing the expansionist ambitions of Rome under Emperor Augustus, she led her armies in battle and negotiated peace as an equal, a feat unparalleled in contemporary Mediterranean societies. Historical accounts describe her as a warrior queen, a title reflecting both her military prowess and political acumen.



Above: Fuller figured woman

Amanishakheto, Amanitore, and Nawidemak likewise left enduring marks through inscriptions, temple reliefs, and monumental architecture. Their reigns suggest a system where royal legitimacy flowed through maternal bloodlines. Unlike Egypt, where kingship passed from father to son, Kushite rulers often derived their authority from their mothers or sisters. The queen mother held veto power over succession, ensuring only those of royal maternal lineage could ascend the throne. This challenges long-held assumptions about male dominance in ancient governance and sheds light on an African tradition of female-led dynasties.

Burial Clues: Tombs, Temples, and Texts

The archaeological evidence from Kush provides a wealth of information about the roles and status of noble women. Royal burials offer eloquent testimony to their centrality. Excavations at key Kushite sites, El-Kurru, Nuri, and Meroë, reveal that queens were interred with regalia such as golden jewelry, ceremonial weapons, and inscriptions proclaiming their divine status. The presence of such items in their tombs indicates that these women were not merely part of the royal family but were themselves rulers or held significant power within the kingdom.

At El-Kurru, early Kushite queens rested in pyramids adorned with symbols of sovereignty, while at Meroë, Kandakes were buried beneath steep-sided pyramids inscribed with titles like "Mother of the King." These epithets emphasize the belief that royal blood and legitimacy hinged on the mother's lineage. Comparisons with Egypt are revealing. While Egyptian queens like Nefertiti and Hatshepsut achieved prominence, their burials rarely equaled those of pharaohs. In Nubia, however, women's tombs received equal, if not greater, attention, reflecting a societal ethos that venerated maternal authority. The discovery of a queen mother's tomb at Nuri, surrounded by ritual objects, suggests she played a priestly role in securing dynastic continuity. Such findings dismantle the assumption that ancient power structures were universally patriarchal.

Additionally, textual sources, particularly from the Napatan Period (c. 750 BCE–300 BCE), provide further evidence of the roles of royal women. Inscriptions in Egyptian hieroglyphs describe queens' involvement in coronation ceremonies and other important events. However, the Meroitic script, used in later periods, remains largely undeciphered, limiting our understanding of royal women's roles during that time. Classical writers like Strabo also mention the Kandakes, describing them as powerful rulers who defied Roman invaders. While these accounts must be treated with caution, they provide additional evidence of the prominence of royal women in Kush.

The Role of Royal Women in Succession and Coronation

One of the most significant roles of royal women in Kush was their involvement in the succession system. The title Kandake, often academically translated as "queen mother," suggests these women were central to the transmission of power. In the Napatan Period, the "Mother of the King" was often depicted in coronation scenes, playing a key role in legitimizing the new king's rule. The presence of royal women in these ceremonies underscores their importance in the ideology of kingship and suggests they were seen as essential to the continuity of the dynasty.

There are various theories about the succession system in Kush, including patrilineal, matrilineal, and collateral systems. While the exact nature of the system remains unclear, it is evident that royal women were deeply involved in the process. The title Kandake may have referred to the mother of the king, who played a key role in ensuring her son's succession. In some cases, Kandakes ruled as regents for underage kings or even as sovereign rulers themselves.

Art and Iconography: Mothers as Divine and Political Forces

Artistic representations further illuminate the prominence of women. Temple reliefs and stelae from this period frequently depict queens standing alongside kings or alone in powerful poses.

Notably, the bodily representations of these women diverged significantly from other ancient societies by emphasizing fuller-figured depictions of queens as symbols of power and fertility. In contrast, neighboring civilizations, much like Westernized depictions of beauty today, favored slimmer or more delicate feminine forms. In Nubian art, queens like Amanishakheto and Amanitore were depicted with broad shoulders, rounded abdomens, and pronounced hips, reflecting local ideals linking physical abundance with royal authority and divine favor. This stands in stark contrast to the slender, youthful figures favored in Egyptian New Kingdom art (e.g., Nefertiti) or the pale, petite forms idealized in Mesopotamian and Greco-Roman portrayals of women.

This Nubian aesthetic celebrated maternal and warrior qualities, with queens often shown wearing thick crowns, wielding bows, or smiting enemies, blending beauty with overt political and religious agency. Meanwhile, societies like Egypt associated elite femininity with graceful elongation (seen in tomb paintings), and Classical Greece later prized balanced proportions (e.g., Aphrodite statues). The Kushite approach thus uniquely fused culturally specific ideals of strength and fertility into their royal iconography, rejecting external norms to assert a distinctly Nubian identity and women as active shapers of history.



Left: "A ceremonial collar depicting solar motifs, linking the Kandake to Amun's divine power. Such regalia underscored her role as both spiritual and military leader."

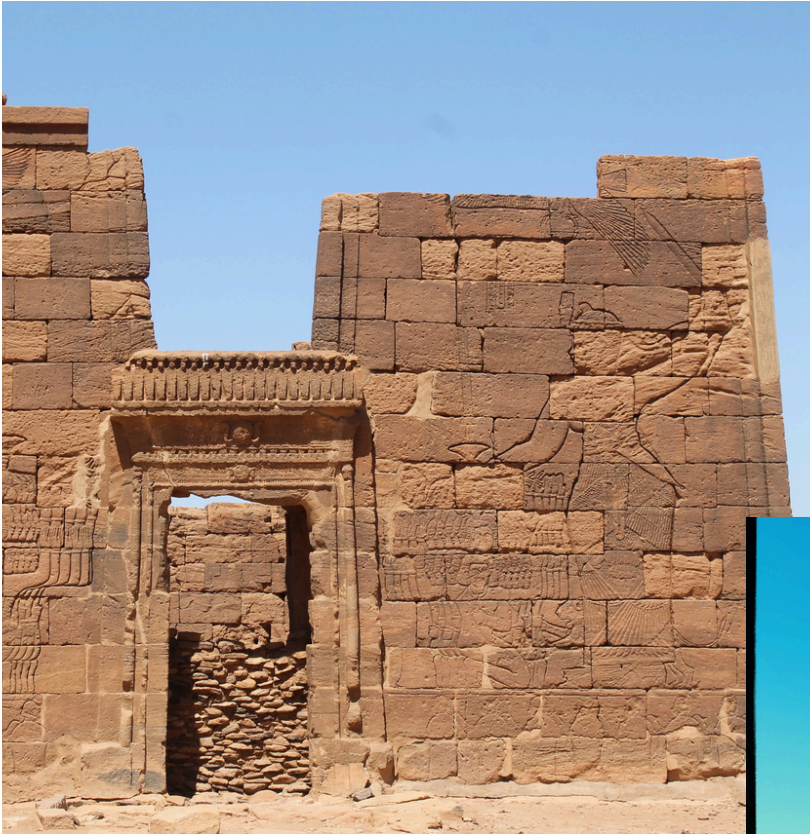
Right: "Seal rings bearing images of Nubian gods like Apedemak. These were not just jewelry but tools of statecraft, used to legitimize royal decrees."



"The exquisite gold and glass jewelry of Queen Amanishakheto (1st century BCE), stolen by Italian doctor that became an explorer and smuggler, Giuseppe Ferlini in 1834, symbolizes Kushite wealth and craftsmanship. These treasures, buried in her pyramid at Meroë, reflect a tradition where royal women adorned themselves not merely as ornaments but as embodiments of divine and political authority."

Right: "This intricate gold necklace, inlaid with fused glass, adorned a ruler who negotiated with Rome as an equal. Its survival challenges colonial narratives that dismissed Kushite sophistication."

Image by, Jenail Marshall



"Amanitore and King Natakamani subdue foes beneath the paws of lions, symbols of Apedemak. The queen's equal stature in the scene defies patriarchal tropes of 'king and consort.'"

Left: Lion Temple at Naqa
Below: Jenail in the field at Nuri

A striking example is the Meroitic stelae, where inscriptions label queens as "Daughters of Amun," asserting their divine right to rule. Reliefs of Kandake Amanishakheto show her clad in armor, wielding a sword, a visual declaration of her dual role as military leader and sovereign. Murals at the Temple of Amun at Jebel Barkal depict queens performing priestly rites alongside kings, portraying them as equals in scale and symbolism.

Legacies and Continuities: From Ancient Kush to Contemporary Africa and the African Diaspora

The concept of matrilineal inheritance and female leadership is not unique to ancient Sudan. Many African societies have maintained similar traditions into the modern era.

The Akan of Ghana continue to practice matrilineal succession, where a king's heir is determined through his mother's family rather than his father's. The Yorùbá and Igbo societies also emphasize female leadership in political and spiritual roles, ensuring women maintain positions of influence.

These traditions have shaped African diasporic cultural dynamics as well. Due to the forced separation of families during the transatlantic slave trade, Black women became the primary keepers of family lineage and heritage. Even today, in many Black households, mothers and grandmothers anchor family structures, a resilience rooted in ancestral traditions.

This enduring cultural thread serves as a reminder that African women have historically been the backbone of their societies, both in leadership and lineage.



Image by, Jenail Marshall

Honoring the Legacy of Mothers in Archaeology and Beyond

As we celebrate Mother's Day, it is important to reflect on the critical role mothers have played in shaping history. The archaeological record of Kush provides a powerful reminder of the importance of women as rulers, mothers, and lineage keepers. Their legacy challenges us to rethink our assumptions about power, lineage, and the role of women in society.

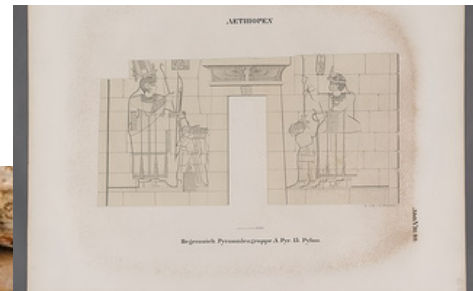
For me, as a mother and an archaeologist, the story of the Kandakes is a source of inspiration. It reminds me that women have always been leaders, warriors, and keepers of lineage, even in societies largely forgotten by history. Their legacy is a testament to the enduring strength and resilience of women, qualities still evident in African and African diasporic communities today.

In a world where women's contributions are often overlooked, the story of the Kandakes serves as a powerful reminder to honor and celebrate the role of mothers in all aspects of life.

Image by, Jenail Marshall



"Kandake Amanitore (1st century CE) smiting enemies at the Lion Temple of Naqa. Unlike Egyptian queens who were rarely shown in combat, Nubian women wielded weapons openly, a visual manifesto of matriarchal power."



19th-Century Copy of Relief:
"A European artist's reproduction of Amanitore's victory smiting her enemies."



Image by, Jenail Marshall

Queen Khennuwa's Tomb:

"The subterranean burial of Queen Khennuwa (4th century BCE), reopened in 2016 after almost a century of being buried. Her pyramid's hidden chambers suggest her priestly role in dynastic rituals, erased by early 20th-century excavators."

"Columns depicting Hathor at Jebel Barkal. While Egypt's Hatshepsut linked herself to Mut/Sekhmet, Kushite queens worshipped Hathor as a nurturer-warrior, rejecting the dichotomy between femininity and power."

Hathor Columns at Mut Temple



Image by: Jenail Marshall

"Hatshepsut's legacy was erased by male successors; Kush's Kandakes faced no such damnatio memoriae. Their uninterrupted reign reveals a society that revered women's authority."



To study Kush from an anti-colonial perspective is to confront a fundamental truth: power may have always been gendered, but not always patriarchal

Whether in archaeology or at home, mothers shape the future, just as the Kandakes shaped the history of Kush. Their legacy reminds us that the strength of a community lies in the strength of its women and that the bonds of motherhood and lineage are timeless and universal.

Sudanese Women at the Forefront of Change: Why We Must Remember Sudan's Past and Present

As we celebrate powerful mothers in antiquity, we cannot ignore the strength of Sudanese women today. Modern Sudan echoes this legacy. In the ongoing struggle for democracy, women have been at the forefront of resistance, just as they were in ancient times. During the 2018–2019 revolution, women constituted 70% of protesters, their leadership evoking the Kandakes of ancient Kush. One iconic image from that movement is of Alaa Salah, a young Sudanese woman dressed in a traditional white toub, standing atop a car, leading chants for freedom, an image eerily reminiscent of ancient Nubian queens rallying their people.

Yet, despite their critical role in shaping Sudan's past and present, Sudanese women continue to face oppression, violence, and exclusion from political processes. As Sudan remains embroiled in war and conflict, we must not forget the women fighting for their nation's future, just as their ancestors did thousands of years ago.

A Call to Remember and Act

The story of women in ancient Kush is not a relic but a living testament. Archaeology reveals a world where mothers built dynasties and, as rulers, commanded armies, challenging Eurocentric narratives of antiquity. Today, as the world's attention remains fixated on conflicts deemed geopolitically significant to Western powers, Sudan's devastating proxy war continues largely unnoticed. The violence, which has displaced millions and left countless dead, is not merely an internal matter but a crisis exacerbated by external actors and global indifference. The silence surrounding Sudan's suffering is symptomatic of a broader pattern in which African conflicts are either misrepresented or ignored altogether.

Western media often frames Africa as a continent of perpetual chaos, reinforcing narratives of dysfunction rather than acknowledging the historical and structural forces—colonial legacies, economic exploitation, and global political interests—that fuel these crises. In Sudan's case, the erasure of its war from international discourse is not just neglect, but a manifestation of anti-Black racism and African xenophobia. When conflicts arise in Africa, they are treated as inevitable rather than as urgent humanitarian disasters demanding intervention and accountability.

This selective blindness enables the ongoing suffering of millions. Sudan's war is interconnected with international policies, arms trades, and foreign powers vying for influence in the region. The same nations that speak of human rights and democracy have, in many cases, either contributed to the instability or failed to act meaningfully. The lack of sustained media coverage allows these atrocities to continue in the shadows, leaving Sudanese civilians to bear the cost of global apathy.

It is imperative that even as archaeologists, we challenge this erasure. We must push for comprehensive, ethical reporting that contextualizes and humanizes suffering rather than sensationalizing it. Sudan's crisis is not inevitable, nor should it be forgotten. We must amplify Sudanese voices, demand accountability from global institutions, and insist that African lives matter in international discourse. The world cannot afford to look away any longer.

Even today, as Sudanese women navigate war and displacement, their struggles and triumphs mirror those of their foremothers.

To study Kush from an anti-colonial perspective is to confront a fundamental truth: power may have always been gendered, but not always patriarchal. As we excavate these histories and work with local communities in Sudan, we must also amplify the voices of Sudanese women today because their past is key to understanding their present.

Sudan's story is still being written. We must not look away.

By, Jenail Marshall



Image by Jenail Marshall





"This collage honors the legacy of Black women in archaeology who wouldn't be where they are today without the caregivers, mentors, and community of women in their lives. Inspired by the proverb 'It takes a village to raise a child,' it highlights their role in nurturing knowledge, preserving history, and shaping future generations. Through personal photos, this tribute celebrates their resilience, interconnectedness, and enduring impact."



Previous Images: Women of Al-Widay (near 4th Cataract, before submerged by the reservoir of the Merowe Dam)

Top: Women of Al-Widay (near 4th Cataract, before submerged by the reservoir of the Merowe Dam)

Bottom Right: Excavation of cemetery at Al-Widay, including a mother and baby

Left: Women of Al-Widay



Left: Jenail Marshall with her mother
Below: Debora's great-aunt Mae teaching her how to make the family stew that her mother (my great-grandmother) and her grandmother (her great-grand grandmother) made and passed down



Above: Debora Heard's grandmother and her sisters - the week before she made a transition. Aunt Alice, Aunt Ann, and Aunt Mae, they all helped to raise her. When it pertained to Debora, they were the Council of Elders.



Left: Debora and her Great-Great Aunt, born 1901
Above: Jenail's daughter and mother

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More to Read

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What to Watch:

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Tunes by Black Musicians showing love Mothers:

The Intruders – I'll Always Love my Mama

Candi Staton – Mama

Yasiin Bey – Umi Says

Yasiin Bey – Kijani (live)

Bill Withers – Grandma's Hands

Prince Nico Mbarga – Sweet Mother

Christy Essien-Igbokwe – Seun Rere

Hajir Mohmd Hassan – Sudanya