

# Kandake: Nubian Women Rulers

Subjects: [Archaeology](#)

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Kandake is the Meroitic word for “queen”; however, it does not necessarily signify a sole ruling monarch. The role of kandake is not only the female counterpart of the king but a complementary dual player in Kushite rulership. In comparison to ancient Egyptian queens, Nubian female rulers are underrepresented in the field of Egyptology. Iconographic and funerary evidence in the archaeological record shows that these women held power and status equal to Nubian and Egyptian kings and could be considered a model for sole female rulership in the ancient world.

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## 1. Introduction

Nubia refers to the region in the middle Nile valley between the first and the fourth cataracts of the Nile, located in modern-day southern Egypt and northern Sudan <sup>[1]</sup>; Kush was a kingdom of political power that existed alongside Pharaonic Egypt. There are three defining periods of Kushite rule: Kerma (2700-1500 BCE), Napata (800-300 BCE) and Meroe (50 BCE-100 CE) <sup>[1]</sup>. During the Meroitic kingdom, Egyptian hieroglyphs from the Kerma and Napatan periods were replaced with indigenous Meroitic script, revealing the titles *kandake* and *qore* <sup>[1]</sup>. Kandake is the Meroitic word for queen, translated to “Mother of the King”, “Wife of the King” or “Sister of the King”. Qore translates to “king”, a title that was used regardless of gender <sup>[1]</sup>. At least seven Kushite queens held the title kandake, three of whom (Amanirenus, Amanishakheto and Amanitore) held the titles kandake and qore; signifying that they ruled as both queen and king <sup>[1]</sup>. Thus, demonstrating sole female rulership in Kush. Since the Meroitic script is not yet translated beyond names and titles, scholars rely heavily on texts from the Napatan period <sup>[2]</sup>. This renders limitations in the research of the kandake, as scholarship relies heavily on iconography, which is subject to perception. Little evidence remains from the Kerma period, however, Napatan cemeteries contain important iconography and grave goods that give insight into the power and position held by the royal women of Nubia <sup>[2]</sup>. Furthermore, since Egyptology is a heavily colonised discipline, the focus on its African origins is often omitted in modern research <sup>[1]</sup>. Compared to the wealth of knowledge surrounding Egyptian queens, Kushite royal women remain underrepresented and overlooked as an influence of divine rulership in the ancient world.

## 2. Representations of the Kandake

Greco-Roman author, Strabo first acknowledged the presence of the kandake during the conflict between Rome and Meroe, circa 25-20 BCE. He described the Kushite queen as “Candace, queen of the Ethiopians in our time, a masculine woman, and who had lost an eye (Strab. 17.1.54). He further recognises “Candace”, the female ruler of Napata and her role in battle by “attack[ing] the garrison army of many thousand men” (Strab. 17.1.54). Candace is

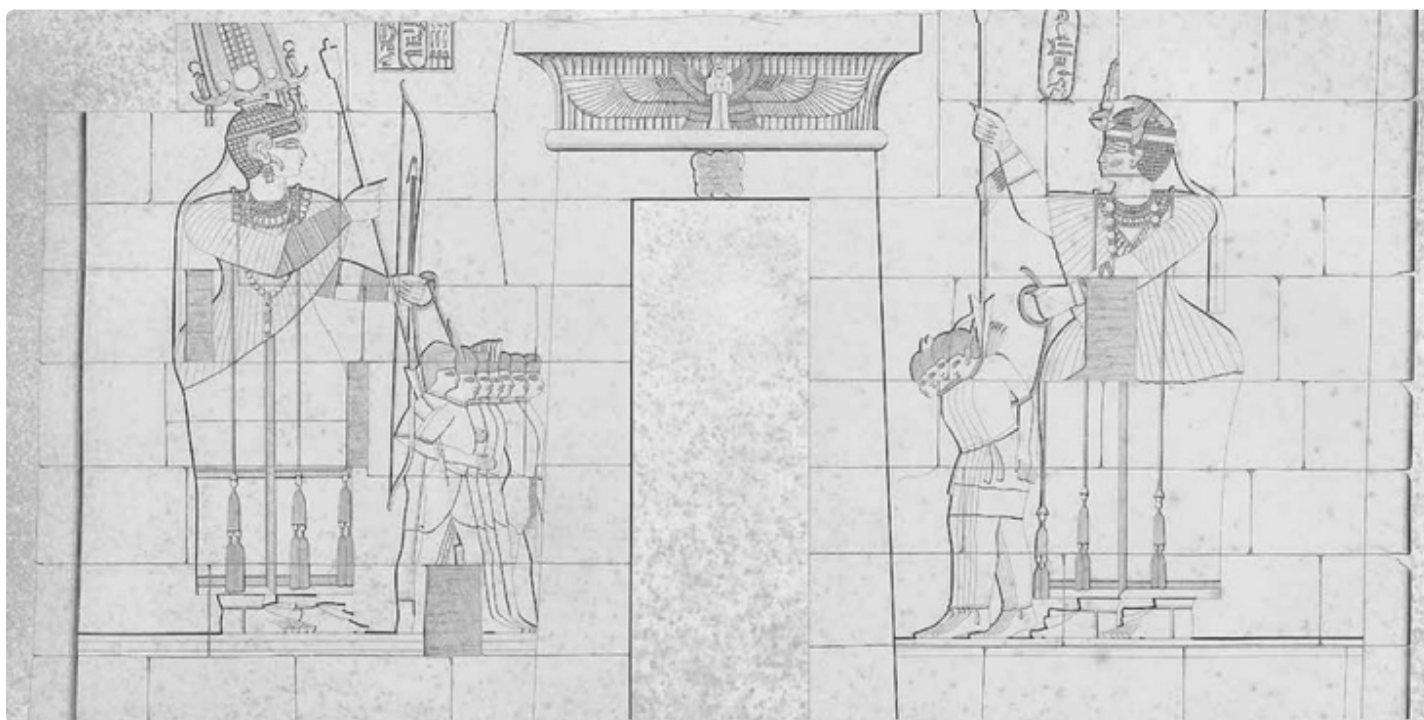
the Latin translation of the title kandake, which scholars believe to be the Nubian queen Amanirenus <sup>[1][2]</sup>. However, since there is no Meroitic textual record or funerary evidence, it remains inconclusive whether she or other Kushite queens participated in warfare during their reign <sup>[3]</sup>. Although Strabo's construction of the Kandake as fearsome or exotic, the imagery found on Meroitic funerary reliefs affirms their authoritative and martial roles from a Nubian perspective.

In Meroitic iconography, the kandakes were depicted as equal representations to those of the kings. These representations are evident in the funerary stelae of some queens who depicted worshipping a deity without the presence of a king <sup>[2]</sup>. The stele of Kandake, Amanishakheto from the temple of Amun in Naqa, 1BCE, shows her standing at an equal height to the deities depicted, indicating her power and position, as seen in similar stele representations of Egyptian kings.

In the pylon of her pyramid at Begrawiyah North 6, Meroe, Amanishakheto is presented smiting male enemies; a role typically reserved for kings <sup>[2]</sup>. She is adorned in Nubian royal garb, complete with a headpiece and presented as broad-hipped and full-figured; a typical representation of Napatan queens that extended well into to Meroitic period <sup>[1][2]</sup>. On the right side of the pylon, she towers above seven male enemies bound by rope and holding a bow and a spear; on the left, she spears four male enemies tied at the neck. Similarly, in the pylon of the Lion Temple in Naqa (**Figure 1**), the kandake Aminitore is depicted smiting male enemies alongside her male counterpart, Natakamani, with whom she co-ruled. The image portrays both king and queen of equal stature and in an equal position of power, exemplifying duality and affirming the elevation of the queen's position to match the king's <sup>[3]</sup>. Although this motif is depicted in Egyptian iconography, Egyptian queens are only shown smiting female enemies; Hatshepsut is an exception <sup>[1]</sup>. The representation of the kandake in Nubian iconography indicates the eminent power and position held by royal women in Kush (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 1.** Pylon at The Lion Temple in Naqa, Amanitore and Natakamani smite enemies. Credit: TrackHD. License: CC BY-SA 4.0.



**Figure 2.** Recreation of the pyramid of Amanishakheto in Meroe, Amanishakheto smites enemies. Credit: KR Lepsius. License: Public Domain.

### 3. Funerary Evidence and Proximity to the King

Unlike Egyptian queens, Kushite queens held status and power that was not separated from the sovereign <sup>[4]</sup>. The greatest source of evidence confirming this is found in the cemeteries of El Kurru and Nuri. The location of a tomb in proximity to the king's burial space indicated the status of the individual interred. In contrast to Egyptian queens in the New Kingdom period, whose tombs were separated from the kings in the Valley of the Queens, Napatan royal women were buried in their own pyramids with their status indicated by the close proximity to the king's tomb <sup>[2][4]</sup>. The quality of grave goods and jewellery buried with them are further indicators.

El Kurru is the oldest royal Kushite cemetery containing the ancestral tombs of the Nubian pharaohs of the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty, with six pyramids designated to royal women of that period <sup>[4]</sup>. The king's tomb is located in the centre of the necropolis, and the kandake are buried in two locations, north and south of the king <sup>[4]</sup>. There is limited inscriptional evidence indicating the status of the women; however, the size of their pyramids and the location of their tombs to the king are key indicators of their power and royal position <sup>[4]</sup>.

At the necropolis in Nuri, the kings' mothers were buried in the largest groups of tombs in the cemetery. Taharqa's pyramid (Nu. 1) occupies the western plateau's highest point, with the king's mothers buried in the southern section. The wives and sisters of the kings are also found in Nuri; however, no other members of the male royal line were buried there <sup>[4]</sup>. Though there is a limited inscriptional record at these sites, archaeological evidence is the greatest indication of the status of Kushite royal women; the proximity of the queen's tomb in relation to the king confirms her status (**Figure 3**).





**Figure 3.** Amanishakheto worships deities, Temple of Amun in Naqa, 1st century BCE. Munich, Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst. Credit: Khruner. License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

## 4. Royal Cultic Practices

Kushite queens actively participated in royal cultic practice, a role that was previously reserved for the king as “lord of the ritual” [4]. The most important role of the kandake was to legitimise the king, acting as a mediator between the King, his successors, and the gods [2] and it is thought that the coronation would not go ahead in her absence [1][4].

Four citations describing this event can be found as supporting evidence: the lunette of Aspelta’s Election Stela, Temple B 300 at Geba Barkal, the remaining two texts are partially recorded 1) on the wall of court 502 in Temple B 500 at Gebel Barkal and 2) Temple of Sanam in the shrine of Aspelta. Their respective texts include speeches that require a woman from the royal line to request the office of rulership from the god Amun. [4] In Napatan royal stelae, the king's mother or wife is always present. The lunette of Aspelta’s Election Stela (Cairo JE 48866) presents the Queen Mother as a central figure in Aspelta’s coronation. She acts as a priestess in the cult of the sistra, performing before the king and the gods Amun and his wife Mut. The script before the Queen Mother indicates her requesting the office of rulership for her son, Aspelta, from the god Amun [4].

Royal Kushite women were named “Sistrum Players”; assisting the king in shaking the sistrum was preliminary to ritual. The coronation stela of Taharqa of the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty (**Figure 4**) contains inscriptions of the queen's journey and presence at the coronation. To the left, his mother, Abalo, stands behind Taharqa, shaking the sistrum, exhibiting the queen as not just the female counterpart of the king, but as an active participant in ritual practices. Egyptologists [4] argue that the complementarity of kingship and queenship is a critical element of Nubian rulership, reflecting the mortal representation of the Egyptian gods Horus and his mother Isis [2]. The Queen Mother represents the ancestral connections with the past and the wife or sister of the king represents the future royal line. Thus, through matrilineal succession, the kandake's main role was legitimising the king's royal line.



**Figure 4.** Taharqa followed by his mother Abalo, Room C, Gebel Barkal. Public Domain.

## 5. Conclusion

There is little scholarship surrounding the kandakes of Kush compared to the queens of Pharaonic Egypt. Modern Egyptologists argue that this could be due to limited indigenous sources and the presence of colonialism and imperialism in Egyptology <sup>[1]</sup>. Kandakes participated in key ceremonial roles and held ancestral ties that were critical to legitimising the king through matrilineal succession. In some instances, funerary evidence, textual evidence and iconography in the archaeological record indicate the power and position of these women were equal to that of the Nubian king, and rivalling the Egyptian king. Further exploration into their role as sole rulers could exhibit a model for the sole rulership of women in the ancient world.

## References

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