

Nubian Queens in the Nile Valley and Afro-Asiatic Cultural History

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Introduction

The "Kandakes/Candaces" of Meroë (Meroitic *Kdi-go* meaning "great woman") have inspired more curiosity or legend than systematic cultural-historical study since they entered world history through Strabo's account of the "one-eyed Candace" in 23 BCE in his *Geography*. Biblical references not only to a "Candace" (New Testament, Acts 8:26)¹, but also to the account of the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon in Jerusalem (Book of Chronicles 2, 9) have served to add adventure and romance to the "legendary queens" of the East. The fabled Al-Kahina, "Queen of the Berbers," who staved off the Arab invasion of the Maghrib from 693-98 CE when she was killed defending her homeland, is the subject of such legend for her cunning and military prowess that she has multiple identities depending upon the source. She is variously referred to as the "Queen of the Aures" [Mountains] among the Berbers, the "Queen of Ifriqiya and the Maghrib" among the Arabs, a "Berber Deborah" in Jewish accounts, and sponsor of the "last heroic resistance to the Arabs" by French scholars. So diverse are the accounts of her exploits that she is now a subject of historiographical analysis (Julien 1952; Roth 1982; Hannoum 1996). Add to these the legends and historical traditions from North Africa, across the Sahel and West Africa, of women who founded cities, led migrations, or conquered kingdoms. Among these, for example, can be counted the Queens of Songhai, Amina of Katsina (15th century) and Bazao-Turunku; Queen Asbyte of the Garamantes ;

¹ . "And behold, a eunuch, a Minister of Candace the Queen of the Ethiopians..." (New Testament, Acts, 8:26), p. 119, Holy Bible, Revised Standard Edition, 1974.

Alyssa Dido(n), the Phoenician princess and founder of the city of Carthage (c. 980 BCE); the Tuareg leader Nugaymath al-Tarqiyya (the "star of the Tuareg archers" in Arabic) who led an Almoravid siege of Valencia (Norris 1982, 20); Queen Zobeida founder of the city of Tauris in Arabia in 800 AD (Jones 1996, 20-21). In modern times, past patterns continued with the Ashanti Queen Mother Yaa Asantewa who led several successful battles against British colonialism in 1900-01 (Aidoo 1981, 75). Oral traditions of women as powerful figures or clever strategists in their roles as queens, as warrior queens, or as romantic figures have had great appeal in times past, and continue to do so in this present era of feminist or humanist interest in the subject. This paper offers a brief historical review of selected Afro-Asiatic queens, with a focus on the Nubian queens. The paper offers some possible cultural-historical patterns and, more importantly, it raises questions for further study.

SURVEY OF AFRO-ASIATIC RULING QUEENS

Regnant queens—those ruling in their own right-- including women from kingdoms in Arabia and Southwest Asia, the northern tier of Africa, the Nile Valley (the Blue as well as White Niles) constitute a remarkable chapter in world history. For about 1500 years, from the 10th century BCE to about the 5th century CE, an impressive number of ruling queens reigned. Among the Afro-Asiatic states of southwest Asia and northeast Africa, it was generally the less hegemonic states where ruling queens have prevailed (Fluehr-Lobban 1988). Hegemonic states include large-scale empires with major urban centers, extensive external trade, military, and conquest relations with surrounding peoples, such as the Egyptian, Syrian, Babylonian, Greek or Roman empires.

While Pharaonic Egypt boasts several regnant queens, of whom Hatshepsut and Cleopatra VII are the most famous, this record contrasts dramatically with the much longer Meroitic list of ruling queens. During 3000+ years of history seven Egyptian queens are known to have ruled in their own right

that is, they were more than merely queen-consorts or queen-mothers (Adams 1994). By comparison, Meroë claims at least ten regnant queens during the 500 year period between 260 BCE and 320 CE, and no fewer than six during the 140 period between 60 BC and 80 AD ²(3) (Ibid, 5 and 9). Beyond this remarkable difference, the Meroitic queens were portrayed as women, often alone or in the forefront of their own stelae and sculptures, dressed in women's regal clothing, while Hatshepsut, the best known of the Egyptian female pharaohs, had herself portrayed as male to garner acceptance, and to refer to herself as "king" (there being no word in Egyptian for "ruling queen."). Leclant observed that "the entourages of Kushites frequently included their mothers, wives, sisters...This was no so in Egypt proper..." (Leclant 1976, 283).

Both Ethiopian and Yemeneis claim the Queen of Sheba, who is known as Balqis in the Qur'an and in Arabic literature since the Himyarite kingdom of Saba ruled both areas (Jones 1996, 11-12). Her legend has overwhelmed all others in Jewish, Christian and Islamic discourse. Less well-known are the many queens who ruled in Arabia and in Ethiopia probably since her time. In one area of Arabia there were no fewer than five regnant queens who ruled from Adummatu in the north (the contemporary city of al-Jawf) in one remarkable century from 744-633 BCE. An early study of Arabian queens by Nadia Abbott (1941) numbered at least two dozen regnant queens (some with notable military exploits) from the 10th to the 4th centuries BCE. Recent studies (Mernissi 1993; Jones 1997) are devoted to 'the forgotten queens of Arabia' and Arabia as a land "of Battle Queens." Aisha, the youngest wife of the Prophet Muhammad, for example, distinguished herself in the famous "Battle of the Camel" in 656 CE/34 AH, where her troops seized Basra but were eventually defeated by 'Ali in his drive for succession as *khalifa* (Jones, 1997: 19).

Ethiopia's long dynastic history was nonetheless non-hegemonic limited primarily to the highlands. According to its own accounting, this history extends over four millennia from 4470 BCE to 1973, the year of the overthrow the last Menelik emperor, Haile Selassie. *The Chronological Table of the Sovereigns of Ethiopia* (requested by C.F. Rey and conveyed to him by the Ras Tafari Haile Selassie in 1922) establishes the royal mythology and was translated as the "Ethiopian King of Kings" (Rey 1927, 262). This official Chronicle of the Ethiopian monarchy of dynastic succession descends from Menelik I (957 BC, lunar calendar) includes six regnant queens referred to as *Kandake*, comprising what appears to be a *Kandake* line. The first is Nicauta *Kandake* (730-681 BC), with five subsequent *Kandake*-line queens ruling between 332 BC to 50 AD. Twenty-one queens are recorded as sole regent in the kingdom of Ethiopia until the 9th century CE, and several of these played critical roles in Ethiopian history. ³ The conquest of Meroë by the Axumite King Ezana may well provide the historical fiction for the Ethiopian dynastic claim to the Nubian *Kandakes* as well as their kings, however the claim is noteworthy for it incorporates these regnant queens as culturally compatible. Makeda, identified as the Queen of Sheba in the *Kebra Negast* is also identified as *candace*, or "queen mother" (Kobishchanov 1979, 199).

These "*Kandakes*" could be derived from the Meroitic tradition, or be a later invention. A convergence or confusion of the Meroitic queens with the Ethiopian queens as *kendake* has been noted by Vantini (1981, 34). The political ascendance of Axum overwhelming and absorbing Meroë after its decline could provide the historical moment for the beginning of this fiction, however the legitimacy of regnant queens known as *kendake* in both traditions is notable.

² According to Adams (1994, 7-9), citing Hintze and Dunham's chronologies, the Meroitic regnant queens include: Bartare (260-250 BC); Shanakdakhete (c. 160-150 BC); Amanishakhete (c. 41-at least 23 BC when she is mentioned by Strabo as the "one-eyed" *Candace*); Nawidemak (Pyramid Bar. 6 at Jebel Barkal); Amanirenas (Pyramid Bar. 4 at Jebel Barkal); Amanitare, co-regent with Natakamani; Amanikhatashan (62-85 AD

³ The *Kandakes* during this period include: Nikwala *Kandake* (332-325 BCE); Akwanis *Kandake* III (315-305 BCE); Nikosis *Kandake* IV (232-222 BCE); Nocotnis *Kandake* V (25-20 BCE); Garsemot *Kandake* (50 AD). Menelik Dynasty Kings having considerable similarity in name and time period to Nubian kings are also present in the official Chronology, including Kashta Hanyon (752-740 BCE), Tsawi Terhak Warada Nagash (681-675), Tomadyon Piyankihi III and Piyankihi IV (659-643 and 609-568 BCE, respectively), among others.

Three of the Ethiopian queens were central to significant turning points in dynastic history : 1) Makeda [Queen of Saba, hence "Sheba"] who founded the Menelik dynasty that ruled until the overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974; 2) Queen Ahywa (regal name Sofya), who made Christianity the official religion of the Ethiopian kingdom in 332 A.D.; and 3) Gudit, the Jewish queen who founded the rival Zagwe dynasty, 933-1253 CE until the Amhara Solomonic line was restored (Quirin 1992, 12-19). After Gudit, there were no other official regnant queens in the list of sovereigns. However, the Empress of Ethiopia at the time of Abyssinia's defense against Italian colonial ambitions in the 1930's was Queen Zaudita, the daughter of Menelik II. The Ras Tafari Haile Selassie was a more remote first cousin of the emperor and the son of the soldier and diplomat, Ras Makonnen. The power and symbolism of the Menelik line that Zaudita represented was expressed in her shared rulership of Ethiopia as Empress, with Ras Tafari Haile Selassie as Regent (Rey 1927, 244).

In Mesopotamia and its successor states in Syria-Palestine, there are also cases of female rulers remembered in world history, such as Queen Sammu-ramat (Semiramis), Assyrian queen of the early 8th century BCE (Boulding 1992, 196), and Zenobia Septima, the last of the queens in the Bedouin warrior tradition, who was the ruler of Syria from 250-275 CE and in battle against the Romans is said to have exhorted her armies to greater bravery (Ibid, p. 264).

Some Suggested Cultural-Historical Patterns:

The following cultural-historic patterns are suggested as possible points for further study and comparative analysis of regnant queens in northeast Africa, including Nubia, and southwest Asia

Matrilineal succession of regents (descent traced through a feminine line, mother to offspring)

Matrilineality and regnant queens associated with non-hegemonic states

Queen mothers and other high ranking women associated with matrilineal succession

c) brother-sister co-regency a feature of matrilineal succession

2) Feminine Origin Myths, Foundresses of Cities and Dynasties

3) Warrior Queens; Women at the Battlefield; "Lady of Victory" Tradition

1. Matrilineality—descent and inheritance traced through women-- has been a controversial subject in anthropology due to the fear that recognizing descent in the female line could lead to the false conclusion that female rule or matriarchy was the prevalent social system. This incorrect equating of matrilineality with matriarchy, made by Bachofen and his disciples has long been resolved, but it has left a legacy of suspicion about study of historical or contemporary matrilineal societies (Fluehr-Lobban 1979).

In Ethiopia the historical queens, such as Makeda, were presented as sole rulers in the *Kebrä Nagast*, but it is likely that they were co-rulers of the state, side by side with their sons or brothers (Kobishchanov 1979, 199). In this case Makeda would have been co-regent with her son Menelik.

There is a strong correlation between the reckoning of matrilineal descent and the presence of historically-attested regnant queens. This is confirmed for Kushitic-Meroitic civilization and for the Nubian Christian kingdoms in the Sudan until the coming of Islam (Adams 1994; Vantini 1981, 175), and may well have continued past the penetration of Islam in certain Sudanic kingdoms. In Kush-Meroë, all queens and kings had to be born to a queen, usually the ruler's sister; they believed their father was the god Amun; therefore each regent was part divine and part human with the queen providing the human link (Haynes 1992, 25). Flowing from this fact is the very high ranking of the Queen Mother, an attested fact for Kush-Meroë, which is underscored, for example, in the importance attached to the presence of Taharqa's mother at his coronation. One of the inscriptions of

Taharqa tells how he delayed his coronation until his mother could travel from Napata to Memphis to witness the ceremony (Adams 1994, 13). The queen mothers had royal titles - Taharqa's mother was "God's wife of Amun," and the mother of Tanutamun, the last king of the 25th dynasty, was known as "Mistress of Kush." In biographies and texts of the ruling kings, the importance of the queen mother can be deduced as "one of the most important figures in the Kushite state" (Ibid).

According to Adams, this exalted role of the Kushite queen mother, with no counterpart in Egypt, is clearly associated with the rule of matrilineal descent where the mother was also semi-divine progenitress, whereas the mother of the Egyptian Pharaoh was merely mortal since his succession and divinity came from his father. It is in the queen mothers that the source of the Candace tradition can be located (Ibid, 14).

In the Nubian Christian period (6-9th centuries CE) the queens and queen mothers were active in state government and were still referred to by the title "Kandake" (Vantini 1981, 115). The law of succession for the kingdoms of Alwa and Dongola was matrilineal, and considerable intermarriage between the kingdoms took place. As late as 1290 AD King Shemamum, fearing retribution for failing to deliver the *baqt* presents, noted that he feared for his mother, his sister, and maternal aunt who were held hostage at the Mamluk sultan's palace, so he sent great presents so that they would be freed in Cairo, "for it is the tradition that the Nubian kings be directed by women [in state affairs], according to the Arab chronicler Ibn `Abd al-Zahir, (Ibid, 182). In 1600 Leo Africanus wrote in his travels to Nubia that "they are governed by women, and they call their Queen Gaua. Their principal city is Dangala consisting of about ten thousand households..." (Johannes Leo 1969, 11).

Matrilineal succession was the rule for Ethiopia, by legend beginning with Makeda/Sheba to whom it may have diffused through contact with

Jewish custom ⁴, or perhaps it was an ancient greater Nile Valley custom that Ethiopia shared with Nubia, and in part with Pharaonic Egypt.

Co-Regency as a function of Matrilineal Descent

Another aspect of matrilineal succession is a related emphasis on the maternally-related males, as bothers or uncles. In matrilineal kingdoms this can manifest itself as co-regency. The custom of the joint regency of brother and sister is an ancient pattern well known in Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia. The 10th century Yemenite traveler Al-Hamdani in describing his travels to the Zinj, the Abyssinians, the Beja, the Nuba, Ifriqiya al-Qarawan, Numidia, and Ghana commented in his *Kitab Sifat al-Jazira* that these lands are subject to the rule of a king and a queen, and that they are kindred from a common mother (quoted in Norris 1982, 6-7). In Meroë the regent had to be born of a queen who was usually the ruler's sister. According to Kitchen, (1986, 150), at least two of Taharqa's five wives were his sisters. Other brother-sister marriages in the royal family of Napata included Alara and Kasaqa, Kashta and Pebatma, and Piankhy and three of his five wives (Ibid). One of the well-known Meroitic queens, Amanitare was portrayed with a co-regent King Natakamani who were husband and wife and may have been brother and sister (Adams 1994, 8). The co-regents were portrayed iconographically as parallel and symmetrical at Naqa and Amara with neither presented as sole ruler (Eide, Hägg, Pierce, and Török, 1998: 898). King Natakamani holds the title *gore*, while Queen Amanitare is *ktke* (kendake) translated as "royal sister" or "wife of the king" (Ibid).

⁴ Legal and customary Jewish identity is defined as birth to a Jewish mother (Cohen, 1985). That matrilineal descent may have been in effect in ancient Israel can be suggested by reference to the Old Testament Book of Kings, with its king list. There, of the 21 kings listed, there are no fewer than 14 whose mother is named in his lineage, either alone or together with the father's name (Kings II. 1-25). Perhaps as Jews lost their kingdom and became exiles, the retention of matriliney as a conservative link to the past became one of the many distinctive identities that Jews maintained to differentiate themselves as minorities within dominant Christian and later Muslim communities. Jewish matriliney as a living as well as an historical case merits study on its own, but it is also valuable to view broader matrilineal patterns that may have existed in Syria-Palestine, among the Canaanites and especially within the non-hegemonic states.

The Russian scholar Kobishkhanov in analyzing the story of Makeda in the Ethiopian *Kebra Nagast* ("Book of Kings") sees her more as a co-regent with her son Menelik, noting that "ancient Ethiopian queens were co-regents with their sons or brothers, the queen being able to eclipse her co-ruler son only if he were very young" (Kobishkhanov 1979, p. 199). Also according to the *Kebra Nagast* Makeda/Sheba modified strict female succession and rule, where only females reign, to one of male regency through females. She transmitted the throne to her son and decreed that "from now on in Ethiopia men will reign and women will not reign." Religious texts being a guide but not precise history, after Makeda's decree there were 12 queens listed as sovereigns in the official state Chronicle, not including Zaudita who reigned as empress in the 20th century (Rey 1927).

The possibility that co-regency as a function of matrilineal succession is a broader African cultural pattern is suggested by its presence in cases as distinct as the Shilluk, where brother-sister marriage was practiced in the royal line, and in Sudanese in post-Islamic kingdoms or sultanates. The Funj Sultanates of Sinnar, the first of the Islamic kingdoms of the Sudan, practiced matrilineal descent, possibly derived from the Nubian holy men who, with Blue Nile peoples, comprised the first Unsab lineage of Sinnar (Spaulding 1985). This continued through the Amara Dunqas line until 1720 CE. The Sultanate of Darfur had a pattern of brother-sister rule which lasted from the Middle Ages until its defeat at British hands in 1916 (Theobald 1965). The title of the ruling sister during the Middle Ages was "Iya Bassi" who, after her brother, was above all other male officials and all women (Mohamed 2002).

For the documented cases described where there is a historical pattern of ruling queens and matrilineal succession few were hegemonic states with large empires to defend. Elsewhere I have written that matrilineality can survive early state formation but tends to disappear after a threshold of empire building where endemic warfare is a major characteristic of the state (Fluehr-Lobban 1988). On a global scale matrilineality declined in the face of the modern nation-state, and it was especially

assaulted by European colonialism. It is possible that matrilineality did not hold up well in the face of the ancient hegemonic states either, which explains why it is not as apparent in the great city-states and empires of Mesopotamia, and is only weakly represented in Pharaonic Egypt. It is telling that the rival but smaller states of Nubia expressed stronger patterns of matrilineality, which may provide one explanation of why the presentation of the few female pharaohs of Egypt is so different from the imposing, womanly figures that were struck as images of the Kandakes.

2. Feminine Origin Myths, Foundresses of Cities and Dynasties

It has been already mentioned that Makeda was the founder of the Menelik dynasty in Ethiopia in the 9th century BCE and that Gudit founded the rival Zagwe Jewish dynasty in the 10th century CE. As the history of Kush-Meroë becomes better known in the future, especially after the Meroitic script can be read and analyzed, perhaps some queens may be acknowledged as founders of dynasties.

"Al-Kahina", the Berber warrior queen, effectively founded the first Arab dynasty by sending her two sons to fight with the Arabs before her own imminent defeat and execution; the sons were then accepted and became the founders of the confederation of the Berbers (Norris 1982,52). The origin myth of the matrilineal al-Haggar Tuareg is based upon the mythical Queen Tin-Hinan and her female companion Takama, either her sister or her vassal, each of whom became an ancestress of the respective noble camel-breeding and vassal goat-breeding branches of the Tuareg (Keenan 1972, 348). An exploration of Nubian origin myths, given their matrilineal tendencies, might yield interesting comparative data regarding foundresses of regal lines or of cities.

3. Warrior Queens; Women at the Battlefield; "Lady of Victory" Tradition

If we think of ancient queens as regents capable of raising and commanding armies, the idea of women as warriors or warrior-queens is as credible as warrior kings. In this light they emerge as regents who may or may not have actually participated in battle, like their male counterparts. There are accounts of women as battlefield combatants and as leaders of troops, and there are queens who are portrayed, symbolically, as warrior regents smiting enemies. Queen Shanakdakhete, the first acknowledged Meroitic queen occupying the throne alone (ca. 170-150 BCE) is shown wearing the helmet crown of the regent in her mortuary chapel (Eide, Hägg, Pierce, and Török 1996, 661), and as captor of a bound group of four enemies (reproduced in Yarbrough 1992, 96). Queen Amanishakhete is represented on the pylon of her funerary cult chapel in Bejarawiyya North "as a triumphant warrior spearing her enemies and wearing a royal costume which associates her with the Nubian warrior and hunter deities" (Eide, Hägg, Pierce, and Török, vol. II, 1996, 724). A wall painting in Meroë of Queen Amanirenas (40-10 BCE) shows her with bow, arrows, and spear holding by one hand a tethered group of seven captives (reproduced in Yarbrough 1992, 96). Bas reliefs at Naqa show Queen Amanitäre and King Natakamani represented armed with two swords smiting enemies, with pet lions attacking or terrorizing enemies (Ibid, 97).

Of course, the best recorded case of a Meroitic queen directly confronting an enemy on the battlefield is that of the 'one-eyed Candace,' thought to be Amanirenas, who personally commanded her generals to attack the Roman town of Syene (Aswan) in 25 BCE, and, after the Roman retaliatory sacking of Napata, negotiated a peace treaty favorable to Meroë (Strabo's account in Eide, Hägg, Pierce, and Török, vol. III, 1998, 830-32). In the face of such a record it seems obvious that Meroitic queens were warrior queens and they have been acknowledged as such (Wenig 1978; Boulding 1976; Török 1990). Since the Nubians have been famous for their bowmanship (*Ta Seti*), it is credible to imagine that Nubian women might be skilled with a bow and arrow. Ballana culture cemeteries apparently contain graves of women buried with spearheads and archer thumb guards (Wenig 1978, p. 306). Archaeologists have

attributed male gender to graves containing such artifacts. Comparable graves of the Scythian women buried with spears, lances, bows and arrows were originally sexed as male, but were subsequently determined by physical analysis to be female (Conkey 1993).

b) Lady of Victory Cult

The "Lady of Victory" cult is recorded in multiple geographical areas in southwest Asia among the Arabs and Arab-influenced peoples after the coming of Islam, and it may be that it is a more ancient Bedouin tradition. Its first account appears as Hind al-Hunud, an enemy of Muhammad who opposed the Prophet on the battlefield brandishing a sword exhorting her men folk to bravery (Boulding 1992, 265). In later versions some women of high social standing (in other accounts a virgin) would be placed within a portable *qubbah* or sacred enclosure, and with her attendants they would travel to the battlefield in sight of the warriors, singing songs of encouragement (Daumas 1971, 37-38). The "Lady of Victory", her hair flowing and her body partly exposed, embodied an appeal to valor and passion (Mernissi, p. 111). The famous Sudanese heroine of the Shayqiya resistance to the 1821 Turco-Egyptian invasion, Mihera Bint Abboud, was renowned for her poetry and valor. As the men hesitated in the face of the large armies of the invaders, the virgin Mihera mounted her camel, and, dressed in men's clothing, she exclaimed to the men, "Here we are, our clothes are for you!" and the desired exhortation of male bravery was achieved. Her poetry describing this incident remains alive in northern Sudanese folk traditions where she is revered as a patriot and hero to her people (Muhammad 1996). Sultan 'Ali Dinar's sister and co-regent Taja exhorted him in "Lady of Victory" style while attempting to preserve the Sultanate of Darfur from British takeover in 1916 (Muhammad 2002).

As late as 1915 in a battle between Ibn Saud and Ibn Rashid in the feudal struggle over what would become the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a woman, breasts bared and hair flowing loose, rode along the front lines in "Lady of Victory" fashion, exhorting warriors to victory (Jones 1996, 21).

Concluding Remarks:

Nubian queens provide suggestive evidence to be viewed as regents that are a part of possible larger cultural-historical patterns in southwest Asia and northern Africa. Some suggested cultural concomitants, along with other important roles for women, can be found in these regions where regnant queens, co-regents, and warrior queens have existed. These include:

- 1) greater prominence of regent queens in non-hegemonic states,
- 2) matrilineality as the rule of succession or significant feature validating the rule of succession for the regency,
- 3) prominent roles for other noble women, for example, Queen mothers
- 4) brother-sister co-regency as an aspect of matrilineal succession, especially for Sudanic-Ethiopian kingdoms,
- 5) myths and legends of women as founders of societies or cities,
- 6) a possible cultural continuity in the living tradition in Arab-influenced regions of a "Lady of Victory" cult where women exhort men in battle, either representing a diffusion of an Arab custom or a continuation of pre-Islamic practice.

These suggested cultural patterns for Afro-Asiatic queens would include other factors that will be elucidated with further research. Free of various historical biases, existing sources can be more objectively assessed, while other archaeological and historical records might be uncovered to shed light upon these remarkable women as they win their place in world history.

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