

LOST KINGDOMS OF AFRICA



A VIEWER'S GUIDE

Athenä

Questions to Consider

1. Dwindling resources on the fringe of the Sahara helped drive the decline of Nubia. In your opinion, to what extent has access to resources contributed to the 21st-century crisis in neighboring Darfur? What other factors do you think fuel the conflict?
2. What similarities do you find between Ethiopia's traditional belief in a divinely ordained emperor and the European tradition of monarchy? What differences do you see?
3. Why do you think the European elites who previously ruled present-day Zimbabwe promoted the idea that non-Africans built Great Zimbabwe? Why do Zimbabweans invest the site with such spiritual significance?
4. What makes Benin's bronze plaques powerful as art, apart from their history? Why do you think the British invaders took them?

NUBIA

THE RISE AND FALL OF MEROË

How the thriving Kushite capital became an ancient Rust Belt

S ometime around 600 BCE, the ancient Kushites moved their capital to Meroë, a city built on iron. A far cry from the artisan blacksmiths featured in Episode 1 of the series, the metalworks of the city's heyday must have banged, clattered, and smoked on a vast scale. In fact, British archaeologists excavating the place discovered slag heaps so huge that they nicknamed it (somewhat hyperbolically) “the Birmingham of Africa.” But if the iron industry propelled Meroë to prominence for a while, it also helped to destroy the kingdom.

Driven south out of Napata, probably by Egyptian military incursions, the ancient Kushites settled on an “island”—actually, a large area almost completely circumscribed by the Nile, Blue Nile, and Atbara Rivers. The



Kushite pyramids at Meroë in modern Sudan

site afforded not only relative safety, but also adequate tropical rainfall to support crops and plains where cattle could graze. Most important, the wooded hills yielded iron ore and plenty of trees for the charcoal needed to smelt it.

The Kushites exploited these resources to the limit. Iron plowshares and hoes tilled the soil on sorghum and millet farms. Iron-tipped spears and arrows equipped hunting parties that ventured south for elephants and leopards. Iron swords and daggers made excellent weapons, while iron axe blades felled trees to produce charcoal, which in turn created more iron.

With its plentiful resources, Meroë grew into a military and economic powerhouse. Over the last several centuries before the Common Era, the kingdom established trade with Egypt and later with Egypt's Greek and Roman occupiers, providing ivory, ostrich feathers, and other products considered exotic in Mediterranean cultures. With easy access to Red Sea ports, the Meroites took advantage of trade routes on the Indian Ocean. Their monarchs built magnificent temples and pyramid tombs for themselves, inscribed with Egyptian-like hieroglyphics that still defy translation.

Then, in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, things started to go sour. For

generations, the Meroites had felled trees to feed their ironworks; eventually, they deforested the land, exposing the hills to erosion and stripping the topsoil. Once-fertile farms yielded less and less food. And without trees, the Meroites couldn't produce charcoal to fuel their iron-smelting furnaces. Nomadic tribes capitalized on this weakness and launched ever more successful raids on the capital. The kings built smaller and smaller pyramids.

As the wealth of Meroë waned, the rival kingdom of Aksum to the east rose. Aksum eventually took over Meroë's economically vital Red Sea ports. By 350 CE, when the Aksumite king Ezana marched his armies into Meroë, he found the capital already in complete decline—the victim of its own overconsumption.

CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE SAHARA

As Gus Casely-Hayford notes, the relentless creep of the Sahara Desert certainly contributed to the downfall of the Nubian civilization. The climate change that created the Sahara began many millennia ago and might continue in the future.

Between 8000 and 4000 BCE, what we now know as the largest desert in the world was a very different place: a vast, grassy prairie dotted with lakes and filled with game. At that time, Earth's orbit was closest to the sun in late July (today this occurs in early January), and the northern hemisphere received more summer sunlight than it does now. This pulled the trade winds of the equator northwards and brought heavy rainfall to the Sahara. Then about 9,000 years ago, Earth's orbit shifted and its axial tilt began to decrease slightly. Although the gradual change in angle amounted to less than one degree, it slowly wrought profound effects on the climate.

As the northern hemisphere received less and less summer sun, the annual monsoon rains moved farther and farther south. The Saharan prairies withered, the lakes dried up, and the grasses and scrub gave way to wind-blown sand. Climatologists now believe that the lack of vegetation triggered a biological and atmospheric feedback loop that abruptly accelerated desertification around 3500 BCE. As the plants died off, the animals migrated south and east—and so did the humans.

Although deforestation, overgrazing, and droughts pushed the Sahara south during the latter part of the 20th century, improved farming techniques and other factors have halted the desert's advance along the southern fringe over the last few decades.

ETHIOPIA

ETHIOPIA'S DIVINE EMPEROR

Haile Selassie I and the Rastafari movement

Among Ethiopia's kings—who, according to tradition explored by Gus Casely-Hayford, descend directly from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba—Haile Selassie I stands out. More than a million people around the globe worship the late emperor not merely as a ruler ordained by God, but as a living god himself.

Those believers call themselves Rastafarians, a term that explicitly evokes Haile Selassie. (“Ras” means “prince,” and “Tafari” refers to Tafari Makonnen, the emperor's precoronation name.) Most Americans know the religion through ska and reggae music, especially the songs of the late Bob Marley. In fact, Rastafari comprises a complex ideology that reaches back to Ethiopia to draw upon Judeo-Christian traditions and combine them with 20th-century black liberation.

It's no coincidence that the rise of Rastafari in the Americas paralleled the rise of Haile Selassie in Africa. After becoming regent and heir to the Ethiopian throne in 1917, Ras Tafari quickly came to symbolize African independence and freedom worldwide. He shepherded his country into the League of Nations and toured European capitals—a historic first for an Ethiopian ruler. Crowned emperor in 1930, he took the name Haile Selassie (which means “Might of the Trinity”) and launched much-needed social and economic reforms. He defended Ethiopia against the Italian invasion in 1935, led the resistance in exile, and returned in triumph after Allied forces liberated the country in 1941.

Meanwhile, across the ocean in Jamaica, the descendants of former slaves looked to the young, charismatic Ethiopian emperor as the embodiment of all the possibilities denied to them. There, writer and political organizer Marcus Garvey began preaching a doctrine of racial redemption and aggressively asserting political, economic, social, and cultural liberation. These ideas, combined with Afro-Caribbean folk practices and Ethiopia's centuries-long indigenous Judeo-Christian tradition, produced the Rastafari movement.

Rastafari posits Ethiopia as the Promised Land, or heaven—a pure African nation never colonized by Europeans. Blacks of the African diaspora are the reincarnation of the Chosen People, displaced from their ancient homeland of Zion and exploited by white powers known collectively as Babylon. Someday, they



Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia

will return to their homeland, turn the tables on their white oppressors, and reclaim their true African identity and culture. Until then, they suffer as sojourners.

As the only black African to lead an independent nation on the continent, Haile Selassie was the Rastafarians' divine messiah and the fulfillment of a biblical prophecy: "Princes come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God" (Psalms 68:31). But he also faced earthbound political realities. A series of new constitutions greatly constrained the power of the Ethiopian parliament, and the emperor assumed sole authority. However, his well-intentioned reforms went awry: famine and unemployment continued to plague the country. In 1974, the army deposed Haile Selassie and imprisoned him in his palace in Addis Ababa. He died a year later at age 83, ostensibly of natural causes.

The emperor's death did nothing to slow the Rastafari movement. It continues to grow and morph around the world. Some of its adherents also belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; others identify only with local or regional Rastafari communities. Still others claim no allegiance at all, preferring to think of Rastafari as a theologically inspired social and cultural worldview rather than as a religion in the traditional sense. Whatever their affiliation, Rastafarians have given new form to the Ethiopian tradition explored in this series and have spread it throughout the world.

COFFEE'S ETHIOPIAN ORIGINS

The next time you order a skinny mocha latte—venti, with extra foam and cinnamon—remember the goats of Ethiopia. According to some etymologists, our word "coffee" comes to us via Arabic from Kaffa, the highland kingdom in Ethiopia where the plant was first cultivated in the 9th century. Legend has it that a goat herder named

Kaldi noticed his animals getting louder and friskier after eating red berries from a particular bush. He followed his goats' lead and sampled the berries himself. Sure enough, he felt more energetic and alert.

Thinking these miraculous berries must be a gift from God, Kaldi reported his discovery to the local monastery. But a holy man came to a completely different conclusion; he proclaimed the tiny red berries to be the work of the devil and threw them into the fire. However, the aroma of the roasting fruit inspired him to pour hot water over the beans. Drinking the resultant brew, the monks found they could pray more fervently, long into the night. Seeing how the bean contributed to the service of God, the Sufi monks made it part of their worship routine.

Whether you believe the legend or not, the fact is that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church did ban coffee for a time, and imams imposed similar bans on the Muslim faithful. But authorities from both religious traditions eventually gave in to the drink's popularity—a boon to office productivity ever since.



Coffee beans ripening

GREAT ZIMBABWE

A CITY OF MANY MYSTERIES

Archaeologists still speculate about Great Zimbabwe

“Zimbabwe” comes from the old Shona phrase *dzimba dzemabwe*, or “houses of stone”—an understated description of the massive complex situated on rocky hills and valleys along the Limpopo River in the present-day nation of Zimbabwe. Almost everything else about this site remains a mystery, from why the ancient Africans built it, to why they abandoned it.

Artifacts unearthed at Great Zimbabwe indicate that it served as an important outpost for the gold trade. However, the nearest gold mines lie a good 25 miles away. Miners probably brought ore to the city, where craftsmen turned it into beads, jewelry, and other negotiable objects, trading them in turn for stoneware, glass, and porcelain from as far afield as India and China. The residents of Great Zimbabwe apparently acted as middlemen in the trade.

Their wealth also came from cattle. Excavations at the city have turned up thousands of bones, mostly of relatively young cattle that had not reached full weight. These animals thrived in the lush grasslands nearby and gave the ancient denizens a plentiful source of protein. Analysis of the bones suggests that royalty and the elite classes enjoyed the best cuts of meat from the youngest cattle, while commoners mostly ate adult livestock. This differentiation was a mark of people’s social status and emphasized the importance of cattle to the culture.

At its height during the 13th and 14th centuries, Great Zimbabwe could have supported as many as 20,000 people—a sprawling metropolis for that time. But it declined fairly rapidly and was deserted during the 15th

century. No one knows precisely why. Theories include political upheaval, overmining, extended drought, and environmental degradation. The abundant cattle overgrazed the grasslands, while their masters depleted necessary resources, such as firewood. The most likely answer seems to be a combination of these factors, as well as a shift in the trade routes northwards, depriving Great Zimbabwe of an essential source of income.

MORE THAN A GAME

When Gus Casely-Hayford happens upon some South Africans playing *moruba* and recognizes it as the West African game *oware*, he identifies a leisure-time tradition that unites all of sub-Saharan Africa. Far more than a mere board game, *moruba* and other *mancala* games have sharpened the minds and honed the strategic thinking of old and young people alike for centuries. Like chess, it serves as a kind of nonviolent surrogate for war and requires the same kind of moves and countermoves for victory.



Owale board game

The specific rules for mancala games around Africa are endlessly varied, but always involve distributing pebbles or seeds among holes carved out of a wooden playing surface or dug out of the ground. Players move their stones counterclockwise around the board, either “capturing” or “killing” their opponents’ stones. The player with the most stones at the end wins. *Owale*, a version popular in Namibia, uses as many as 64 holes (four rows of 16); consequently, it’s normally contested outdoors with teams of players. *Owale* operates on similar principles, but uses only 12 holes.

In keeping with the game's warlike associations, traditionally only men played, but women sometimes join the action today. Unlike chess, which enforces a strict code of silence for spectators, African mancala culture encourages lively kibitzing. Onlookers cheer on their friends and suggest moves, making the game as much about bonding as about strategizing.

WEST AFRICA

WHERE THE STREETS STRETCHED FOREVER . . .

The kingdom of Benin's bloody fall from splendor

The magnificent Benin bronzes changed perceptions of African civilizations and inspired many artists of the modern era, including Pablo Picasso. But this impact came with a high price. Despite the kingdom's rich culture and long history, its contact with the West eventually resulted in the sack of its capital city, the loss of sovereignty, and colonization.

Portuguese sailors first made contact with Benin in 1485, opening the door for trade with other European nations. A 15th-century Dutch traveler described the kingdom's capital in almost breathless prose. "[Y]ou enter a great broad street, not paved, which seems to be seven or eight times broader than the Warmoes street in Amsterdam; it goes straight in and never bends." Off this main drag ran many avenues so long, "you cannot see to the end of them." Later visitors described the royal palace as a vast complex with countless galleries and ministerial apartments. Dozens upon dozens of gables, covered in bronze and stamped with elaborate artwork, supported the roof. In addition to its architectural accomplishments, the kingdom had its own currency and police force.

At first, Benin profited greatly from trade with the Old World. Europeans

brought cloth, guns, metals, and spices; in exchange, Benin provided palm oil, ivory—and slaves. Slavery was not a new concept to the Bini; like other African peoples, they enslaved captives taken in war. Intra-African slavery followed two models: the first, wherein slaves were segregated from the free population and supervised by an overseer, closely mirrored the European and American forms. In the second type, called lineage slavery, slaves worked alongside a single family unit, and their progeny had hope of gaining freedom within a few generations.

Benin's involvement in the European slave trade started small. At first, they dealt only female slaves to the Europeans—never their own citizens. But as the demand for slaves grew in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Bini constantly sought to increase their supply through warfare with their neighbors. These were no mere skirmishes; at its height, the kingdom could marshal up to 100,000 warriors. Such military prowess paid dividends: in the heyday of the trade, Benin sold 3,000 slaves a year.

When the slave trade collapsed in the 19th century, Benin was forced to rely on its other commodities, including palm oil and rubber. In 1892, the Bini signed what they believed was a trade agreement with the British. However, Britain interpreted it as a relinquishment of Benin's sovereignty. In January 1897, a small party led by consul James Philips entered Bini territory, despite warnings from the *oba* (king). The result was bloody—Bini warriors killed almost every member of the group.

Great Britain's retribution was swift and brutal. After a public outcry, troops were sent into Benin in 1897. The great city was looted, and the *oba* was deposed and exiled. In this way, the formerly glorious kingdom came to a decidedly inglorious end.

FINDERS, KEEPERS?

Questions persist about who owns cultural properties

The British Museum's Benin bronzes, shown in the fourth episode, have sparked an international controversy about where they rightfully belong. It's part of a larger, centuries-long debate among politicians, legal experts, archaeologists, scholars, and museum curators over the true ownership of antiquities.



Benin bronze plaque

After the deaths of several British envoys in 1897, British forces launched a punitive mission that devastated the kingdom of Benin. The troops took thousands of the magnificent castings and other pieces of art from the royal palace. The British Museum acquired most of them, but some eventually landed in European and American museums, as well as the hands of private collectors. Since 1950, the British Museum has sold several of the bronzes back to Nigeria (the nation that now comprises most of what was once the kingdom of Benin). Still, the Nigerian government has formally petitioned for the return of *all* of Benin's antiquities.

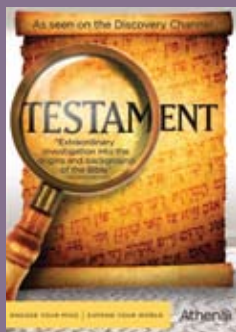
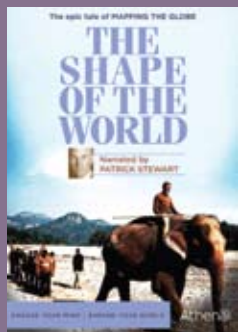
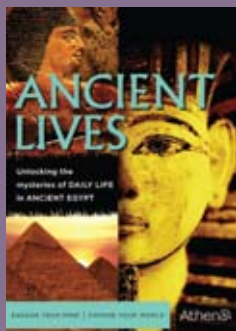
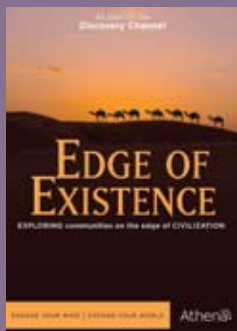
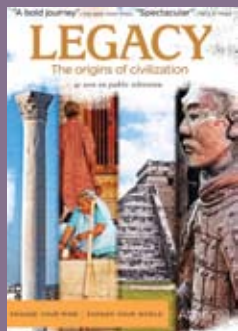
In addition to laws in individual nations, a welter of international conventions and agreements have attempted to codify the ownership of “cultural property”—the legal term for artwork, relics, writings,

antiquities, and other precious but hard-to-value objects. However, most of these laws and international agreements have proved practically unenforceable.

Aside from the legal and political issues, cases such as the Benin bronzes raise larger questions: Can any nation claim to “own” a piece of art? Or does it belong to all humanity? Who can best preserve it—the country of origin, or a custodian nation? (Consider the Taliban's destruction of Buddhist sculptures in Afghanistan in the early 21st century. Would removing them have amounted to cultural piracy, or protection for future generations? Then think of the number of artworks destroyed by the Allied bombings of Germany in World War II. Is it wise to concentrate so much art in a single location?) How can art and artifacts become better available to scholars for study, or to the public for education and enjoyment? Does an object need to remain in its original context to be fully appreciated? Or should it go to a place where the greatest number of people can view it and learn from it?

Such questions provide museumgoers with much to ponder, besides the beauty and historical significance of the ancient objects on display.

ALSO ON DVD



Athena
athenalearning.com

Visit our website for more extras that take the educational experience beyond the screen.

athenalearning.com