



Cultural diversity in the Middle Nile: New approaches towards 'contact space biographies'

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Figure 2: Drone photo of the working area of DiverseNile.

The relations and cultural encounters between ancient Egypt and Nubia (modern Sudan) have an extremely long and diverse history with many challenges interpreting the evidence. Various interactions and mutual influences are attested for these regions along the Nile, as well as aggression, imperialism and dominance. During the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1070 BCE) Egypt defeated the African Kerma Kingdom with its heartland at the Third Cataract, ‘colonised’ Nubia, installed an Egyptian administration, several Egyptian temples as well as towns, hence Egyptian culture appears as dominating factor.

The concept of ‘Egyptianisation’ describing the cultural situation in Nubia during the New Kingdom, well established in earlier discussions, but taking a one-dimensional view of culture, was challenged recently with an alternative model based on the notion of ‘cultural entanglement’ (especially by Paul van Pelt, building on Philipp Stockhammer). Ongoing excavation work on New Kingdom central sites in Nubia has expanded the material basis of the debate.

In order to address the actual diversity of ancient groups in the Nile Valley a new approach focusing on the periphery and hinterland of the main centres is needed, considering both landscape and people in an integrative method. This is where my new ERC Consolidator Grant project *DiverseNile* will step in. The main objective of *DiverseNile* is to reconstruct Middle Nile landscape biographies beyond established cultural categories, enabling new insights into ancient dynamics of social spaces.

The project will commence in 2020 and is planned as 5 years of interdisciplinary archaeological research with a large set of scientific analyses and fieldwork in Sudan. *DiverseNile* is undertaken within the framework of my Munich University Attab to Ferka Survey Project (MUAFS) with its concession in an almost unknown stretch along the river Nile between Attab and Ferka in northern Sudan (Nubia). This region, situated just south of the Dal Cataract, can be regarded as ‘periphery’ to two of the main

Egyptian centres of the region, to Amara West and Sai Island (Fig. 1).

Within *DiverseNile*, we comprehend landscapes as shaped by humans, human activities, technologies, materiality as well as animals. The new project will consider the individual life cycles of all cohabiting actors and address essential open questions – cultural identity, social stratification and gender, herding and farming activities, trade and manufacturing – regarding the occupants in the hinterland of Egyptian state-built foundations like Sai and Amara West. This is of particular relevance to recognise the social complexity of possible groups. The nature of the coexistence of ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Nubian’ groups and how the occupants of these peripheral regions were in contact with the major administrative sites are essential for any theory about cultural entanglement and encounters. Our integrated aim of reconstructing ‘contact space biographies’ will result in a completely revised and differentiated picture of the Middle Nile as social space being home to diverse groups and actors rather than as static landscape.

With novel research questions and new archaeological fieldwork in the area between Attab and Ferka, the project intends at filling the considerable gap of investigations at sites in the periphery of the major settlements within Egyptology and Nubian studies. The Attab to Ferka region is also a natural borderscape, situated close to a Nile cataract and the natural frontier of the rocky outcrop of the Batn el-Haggar (Fig. 2).

The objective is to document the complexity of interconnected cultures in the Middle Nile, which was inhabited by various groups communicating with each other, refiguring, changing and developing throughout time. This will change our present understanding of Bronze Age Nubia, especially regarding social dynamics.

The major goal is to evaluate the specific living conditions in the Middle Nile ‘contact space’ from Attab to Ferka in



Figure 1: Location of MUAFS concession in the Middle Nile, modern Sudan.

direct comparison with the urban centres of Amara West and Sai, and to reconstruct biographies based on material and textual evidence. The new concept of ‘Biography of the landscape’ in conjunction with the ‘contact space’ model aims to investigate whether degrees of cultural diversity and entanglement relate to the peripheral location of the sites, which may also be influenced by the general landscape.

The well-established categorisation of sites as ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Nubian’ will be challenged with our bottom-up approach focusing on individual sites and applying a new concept of studying intercultural encounters using the model of ‘contact spaces’, adapted for cultural borderscapes and expanded with the biography approach. I will specify the question of cultural encounters by means of the distribution of the sites and their duration, settlement infrastructures, diet, material culture, burial customs and religious practices as well as social structures. Aspects of acceptance, appropriation and ignorance/rejection of cultural symbols including not only ‘Egyptian’ characteristics but also phenomena relating to the most prominent indigenous groups of the region, the so-called Kerma culture and the C-Group



will be addressed. Complex refigurations of Nubian cultures have recently been tackled by ceramic studies and the analysis of funerary remains, and our case studies allow a comparison of 'provincial' Kerma settlement remains with the capital of the Kushite Kingdom, Kerma itself.

Besides the state-of-the-art archaeological fieldwork including 3D documentation and GIS applications, we will conduct various aspects of archaeometry. Especially the analysis of the material culture is undertaken from a multi-perspective level with scientific analyses focusing on technology and provenience studies (e.g. petrography and instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis). Geoarchaeological applications like rock and soil sampling will complement geomorphological studies of ancient water courses (including core drillings and geoelectric prospection) and isotope analysis of the soil, water, human, faunal and botanical samples in order to reconstruct the past landscape and patterns of mobility. By combining the rich archaeological data with recent theoretical developments in archaeology (e.g. on cultural entanglement), cultural anthropology and the natural sciences (e.g. isotope analysis and residue analysis), we will make major advances in understanding the conditions for living in a cultural and natural border landscape.

Within the MUAFS concession, our first assessment of a revised dating of archaeological sites from the Bronze Age and a possible complex character of these sites, suggesting cultural intermingling, conducted in 2019, needs to be studied in detail by means of excavation of the individual sites and a complete survey of the region (Fig. 3). The distribution of the sites is highly interesting, especially for questions of cultural diversity. New Kingdom sites are clustered within the southwestern part of the research area and there are almost no 'Egyptian' sites in the close neighbourhood of the Dal Cataract. It seems likely that we have to consider two aspects influencing the variability of sites in the Attab to Ferka region: 1) a former bias in interpretation; 2) an actual unevenness of sites, most likely reflecting diverse social/

cultural groups and environmental factors, thus illustrating the varied use of the landscape as a complex social space.

DiverseNile will serve as a showcase study for a landscape approach discussing 'contact spaces' with multiple cultural encounters in an almost unknown area of the Middle Nile, consciously avoiding the implicit bias of previous core-periphery models or the elite emulation model. With our new archaeological and scientific evidence we will move the current understanding of Bronze Age Middle Nile groups to a new level, first of all because of the combined assessment of villages and cemeteries. The novel concept will also allow highlighting fluid perceptions of what was considered as centre and as periphery. The results will therefore illustrate the proper dynamics of Bronze Age Egypt and Nubia within a larger cultural framework. Our present comprehension of categorisations of sites as 'Nubian' or 'Egyptian' during the New Kingdom will be significantly revised by this new approach capitalising on the concept of the dynamics of cultural encounters. The field-related outcome will thus be a fresh understanding of processes labelled previously as 'Egyptianisation' and more recently as 'cultural entanglement'. Our bottom-up research will add here important data from non-elite contexts and illustrate the connectivity, complexity and social

diversity within life worlds along the Nile in the presently unidentified periphery of main sites.

DiverseNile will function as a boost for both Egyptian and Nubian archaeology, because it not only focuses on ordinary life beyond the centres, but also addresses subjects of wide impact like cultural encounters and the dynamics of past societies in newly defined spaces. Since possible refigurations of Nubian cultures have until now mostly been addressed for Lower Nubia based on funerary remains, our work will represent a necessary change of perspectives. In addition, the project introduces the 'contact space' model in combination with 'Biography of the Landscape' – a new design of great applicability for Nubia with its long history as cultural and natural border zone. Our case study can be expanded to other periods of Nubian history, but also to any other 'contact space' in peripheries, e.g. in the Roman Empire and ancient China.

To sum up, the envisaged application of the 'Biography of the Landscape' approach within the framework of borderscapes will have an impact on archaeology in general, especially on studies of other frontier regions in various parts of the world, including maybe border studies beyond archaeology. Five exciting years for archaeology in the Middle Nile are ahead of us!



Figure 3: Example of site in the desert to be uncovered by means of excavations.



SUMMARY

The multidisciplinary ERC Consolidator Grant project DiverseNile will explore a crucial part of northern Sudan as a case study to reconstruct Bronze Age biographies (c. 1650–1200 BCE) beyond the present categories ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Nubian’. The main hypothesis is that degrees of cultural diversity become archaeologically more visible in the peripheral zones of the central sites.

PROJECT LEAD PROFILES

Julia Budka studied Egyptology and Classical Archaeology in Vienna. Professor for Egyptian Archaeology and Art History at LMU Munich since 2015, Budka has been working on international archaeological excavations in Egypt and in Sudan since 1997. DiverseNile is her second ERC project with archaeological fieldwork in Sudan after AcrossBorders (ERC-2012-StG).

PROJECT PARTNERS

DiverseNile is based at the Faculty of Cultural Studies at LMU Munich, Germany, taking advantage of the faculty’s strong profile in archaeology around the world and building on experience gained during the ERC AcrossBorders Project. Collaboration partners include groups from Austria, UK, and beyond.

CONTACT DETAILS

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