

The question of seasonal markets in Bronze Age Attab, Sudan

Recent research in the archaeology of Sudan integrates postcolonial theories and addresses both ancient Egypt and ancient Africa with new approaches towards the study of technology, networks, and trade (Budka and Lemos, 2024).

This is exemplified by the ERC DiverseNile project and its multidisciplinary approach to investigating a region in the Middle Nile (modern Sudan, ancient Nubia) between Attab and Ferka. The primary objective of the project is to reconstruct contact space biographies beyond established cultural categories, enabling new insights into the ancient dynamics of social spaces.

Within the DiverseNile project, we consider landscapes as shaped by humans, human activities, technologies, materiality and animals. The project explores individual life cycles of all cohabiting actors and addresses essential unanswered questions—for example, on cultural identity, social stratification and gender, herding and farming activities, trade and manufacturing—regarding the occupants of the hinterland of Egyptian urban sites such as Sai and Amara West. How these occupants were in contact with the major administrative sites and trade hubs is essential for any theory on cultural encounters in the region.

Trade and marking places in Bronze Age Nubia

During the Middle and New Kingdom, several fortresses and so-called temple towns were erected by the Egyptian state in colonised Nubia. New Kingdom temple towns, such as Sai and Amara West, were multifunctional sites, serving as administrative and religious centres and meeting points for different people carrying out transactions and trade (Moreno García, 2021). The general role of temple towns as trade hubs is well established and reflected in the material culture of the sites. But how much do we know of inter-site transactions and trade of marketplaces in the hinterland of temple towns? Here, the general bias in Egyptian and Sudanese archaeology towards centralised sites has left unanswered questions and prevents us from fully understanding contact spaces along the Nile.

The former focus of research on centralised sites like New Kingdom temple towns has also resulted in a limited understanding of resource management in Bronze Age Sudan. Complex dynamics and changing patterns are indirectly traceable through archaeological evidence. Since many essential raw materials and other resources are found in desert regions, there is a clear need to look beyond the Nile Valley and consider the contribution of groups living and working in the desert, especially in relation to permanent and seasonal occupants of the settlements along the river.

Given their proliferation during the New Kingdom in Nubia, it is especially important to look beyond urban centres with their temples, harbours and large-scale storage facilities. This is where the DiverseNile project steps in and adds much food for thought based on evidence from the MUAFS concession, which is the hinterland of the temple town of Sai in the Eighteenth Dynasty and of the temple town of Amara West in the Ramesside period.



Figure 1: Excavation of site AtW 001 in progress.

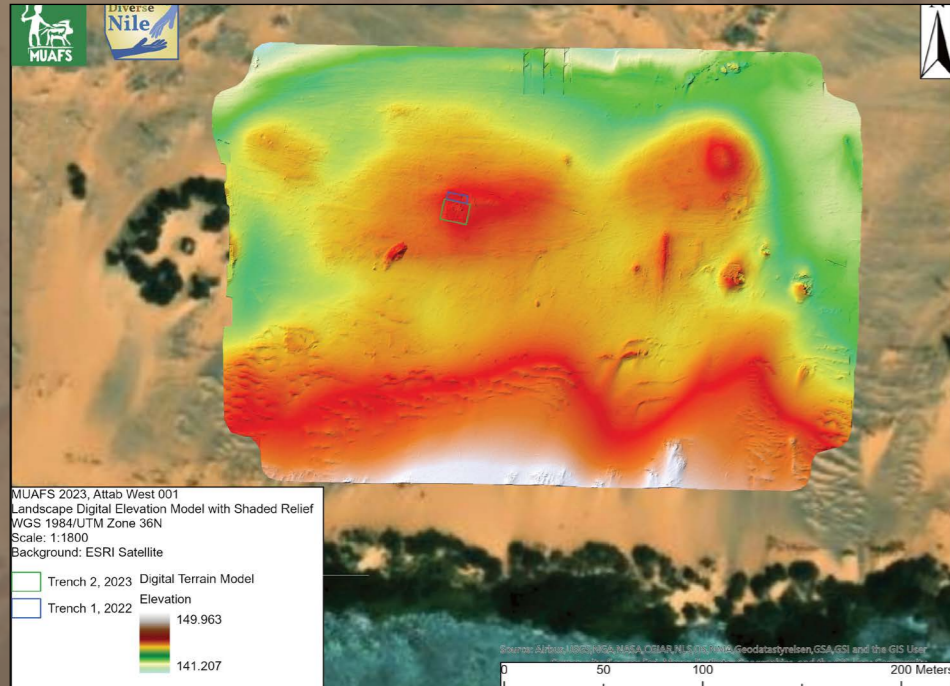


Figure 2: A digital elevation model (DEM) of the landscape directly surrounding the site of AtW 001. Model: K. Rose, © DiverseNile Project.

A seasonal marketplace?

In 2022 and 2023, we conducted excavations at a rural settlement site in Attab West, AtW 001, which could be related to gold exploitation. Our first interpretation of the site, presumably located on a former island, was as a control post for trade, gold transport and possibly for communication between hinterland communities and the newly established Egyptian centre on Sai Island. The finds from AtW 001 included grindstones, stone tools such as pounders, and quartz flakes, testifying to grinding and crushing activities, presumably connected with gold working.

Based on the results from our excavation in 2023, we can go a bit further and suggest that the site might have been linked to seasonal traffic/routes into the desert, possibly in connection with the provision of transport animals and livestock for gold working expeditions. The presence of large quantities of animal bones and pottery vessels, including typical zir-vessels, traditionally used to hold water (or other commodities), support this interpretation. Furthermore, the ceramics from AtW 001 are very similar to the corpus from the city of Sai, with the majority of local or regional production but with some imports from Egypt and the Levant. The presence

of imported amphorae and Marl clay vessels is significant, and the quantity, similar to that of the temple town of Sai, suggests a close relation between the sites or at least a re-distribution of vessels into the hinterland. The cooking pots from AtW 001 show a notable mixture of Nubian and Egyptian styles—Egyptian wheel-made cooking pots are used alongside Nubian-style products. One extraordinary example is a Nile clay cooking pot combining a Nubian surface treatment with an Egyptian production technique.

The lack of significant architectural remains suggests that AtW 001 was linked to a nearby settlement or temporary, possibly seasonal structures. Another possibility is that the site's open spaces were intended to serve travellers and supervise trade. This would also explain the large number of simple storage pits on the site.

With its mix of material culture, including large amounts of Nubian ceramics as well as in-between vessels (combining both the Egyptian and the Nubian tradition), the site at Attab West could well have functioned as a seasonal market and meeting place for various groups, including mobile communities. When we talk about the exchange of commodities, the importance of semi-nomadic and nomadic groups is sometimes neglected in archaeology. Furthermore, the location of AtW 001 on a former island and the past riverscape both need to be considered; maybe the site was only accessible during certain periods, increasing the likelihood of either short-term or seasonal use. To fully assess this, the site's immediate surroundings still need to be investigated further, especially for the presence of other Bronze Age sites. The possible correlation between what seems to be a sudden abandonment of the site and changes in the waterscape caused by increased aridity (and the possible drying up of the Nile channels around AtW 001) also needs to be investigated.

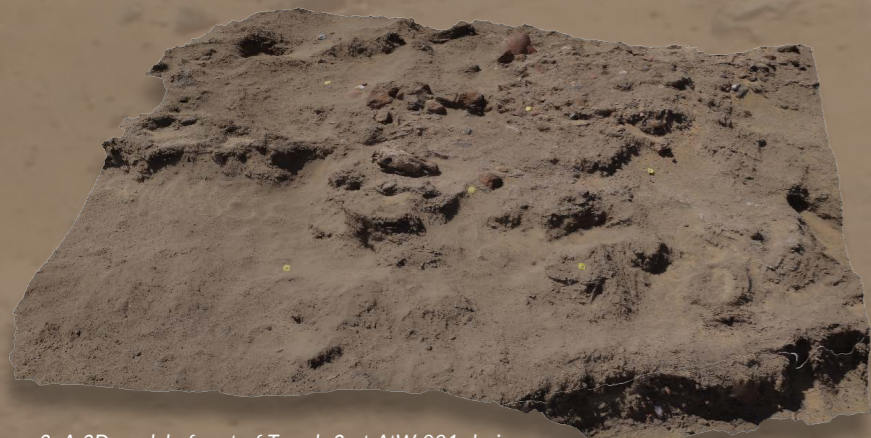


Figure 3: A 3D model of part of Trench 2 at AtW 001 during excavation. Model: C. Ward, © DiverseNile Project.



Figure 4: Detail of results at the presumed marketplace AtW 001: note the pits, large ceramic vessels and animal bones.

Relevance and outlook

The detailed assessment of sites like AtW 001 has the potential to help us better understand the networks of rural communities in the Middle Nile Valley and their relation to more centralised sites, such as Sai, amongst a changing land- and riverscape. The region of Attab, comparable to other areas of the Middle Nile, was intensively used for gold exploitation during the Bronze Age, making infrastructure such as trading points and seasonal markets like AtW 001 necessary for the gold working business and trade routes to Egypt and elsewhere.

So-called marginal regions in ancient Sudan, such as Attab, hold considerable potential for understanding trade networks in their entirety, as well as the dynamics of contact spaces on different regional levels. Importantly, trade and exchange are always embedded in their historical framework. Therefore, we need an approach that considers the macro picture while also taking into account what was happening on a local scale in different regions.

References

Budka, J. and Lemos, R. (eds.) (2024) *Landscape and resource management in Bronze Age Nubia: Archaeological perspectives on the exploitation of natural resources and the circulation of commodities in the Middle Nile*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (Contributions to the Archaeology of Egypt, Nubia and the Levant, 17).

Moreno García, J.C. (2021) 'Markets, transactions, and ancient Egypt: new venues for research in a comparative perspective', in Moreno García, J.C. (ed.) *Markets and exchanges in pre-modern and traditional societies*. Oxford; Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, pp. 189–229.

Overall, regional studies, such as the DiverseNile project in the Attab to Ferka region in northern Sudan, have great potential for reaching a more realistic understanding of the complex social dynamics and cultural interactions during the Bronze Age, in particular for tracing trading patterns and meeting points outside of main urban centres. The latter will contribute to assessing general social dynamics reflected in settlement patterns and the location of cemeteries and rock art stations in relation to resource management and raw material procurement.

To conclude, Bronze Age Nubia is an excellent case study for exploring state-built meeting points and trade centres like Sai and other temple towns, as well as seasonal and short-term markets such as AtW 001. These different types of markets and, most importantly, the diverse communities involved in them are likely to be key to understanding the complexity of trade, exchange and market systems in Bronze Age Egypt and Nubia.

PROJECT NAME
DiverseNile

PROJECT SUMMARY

The multidisciplinary ERC Consolidator Grant project DiverseNile explores a crucial part of northern Sudan as a case study to reconstruct Bronze Age biographies (c. 1750–1200 BCE) beyond the present cultural categories 'Egyptian' and 'Nubian'. The main hypothesis that is addressed by interdisciplinary methods is that degrees of cultural diversity become archaeologically more visible in the peripheral zones of urban sites.

PROJECT PARTNERS

DiverseNile is based at the Faculty for the Study of Culture 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, the UK and beyond.

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Julia Budka studied Egyptology and Classical Archaeology in Vienna. Professor of 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).

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