

# Unearthing unknown archaeological sites in the Attab to Ferka region in Sudan: the 2022 season of the DiverseNile project

The ERC DiverseNile project investigates a region in the Middle Nile (modern Sudan, ancient Nubia) with multidisciplinary methods. The project's primary objective is to reconstruct contact space biographies during the Bronze Age beyond established cultural categories, allowing for new insights into the ancient dynamics of social spaces.



Drone aerial photo of landscape

DiverseNile is undertaken within the framework of the 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). The fact that both settlements and cemeteries in the MUAFS concession can be considered is crucial.

After two years of the COVID-19 pandemic with no fieldwork in Sudan but a focus on remote sensing, we were back in the field in January 2022 and March to April 2022. Our first excavation season of the DiverseNile project was a great success, thanks to the wonderful support of the local authorities and our gang of Sudanese workmen. We focused on what was classified as Bronze Age sites in the districts of Ginis and Attab.

## Progress in addressing the Kerma culture

The most prominent civilisation of Bronze Age Sudan is the so-called Kerma culture, with its capital Kerma at the Third Cataract. Despite much progress in the last decades, identifying and contextualising the remains of the Kerma culture north of the Third Cataract remains a major challenge in Middle Nile archaeology. Previous studies have focused on major centres like Sai and cemeteries in the Batn el-Haggar region. In recent years, the problems associated with a rudimentary understanding of Nubian cultures and a biased view of Nubian-Egyptian relations have been increasingly addressed. Regional studies, such as the DiverseNile project, hold great potential for achieving a more realistic understanding of the complex social dynamics and cultural interactions in the Bronze Age.

## The Kerma cemetery GiE 003 and its relevance

The Kerma cemetery, labelled GiE 003, in Ginis East, on the outskirts of Attab East, comprised an estimated 150 tombs

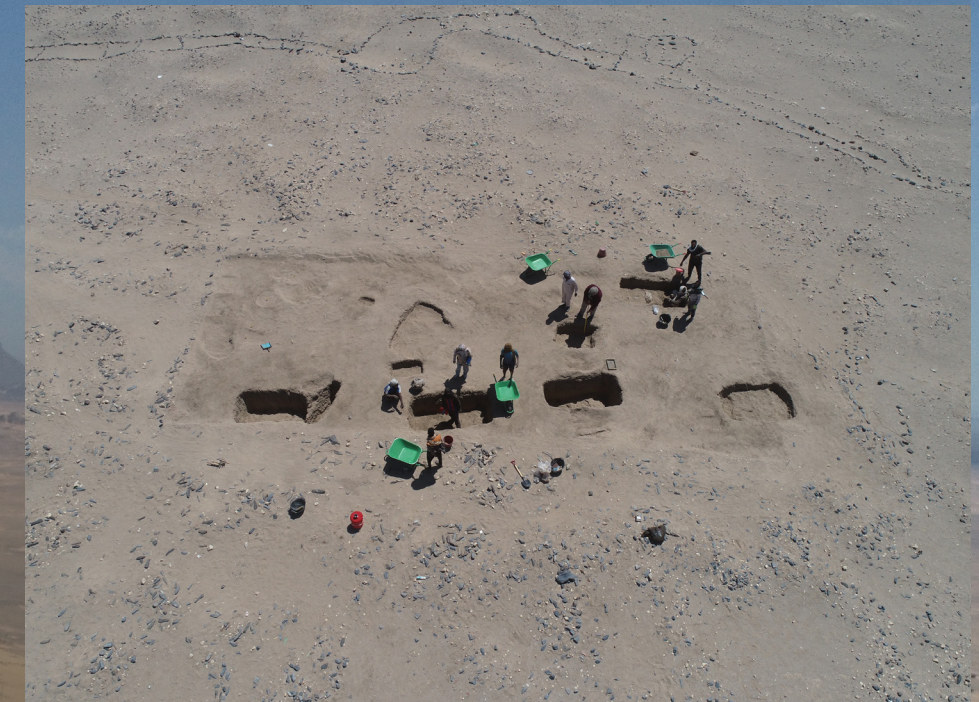


Figure 1: Excavation at cemetery GiE 003 in progress.

in an area of c. 200 x 100m. In March 2022, two trenches were opened at the site. Both trenches had eroded circular tumuli structures on their surfaces, which were covered with pottery sherds and human bones, clearly indicating ancient looting. Despite the antiquity of the plunder, some of the Kerma burials unearthed were well preserved and could be dated by the finds. A total of 28 pits were excavated (Figure 1).

The most important result of the excavation is the dating of the southern trench, Trench 2, to the Middle Kerma Period (c. 2000–1750 BCE) and of the northern trench, Trench 1, to the Classical Kerma Period (c. 1750–1500 BCE). This spatial development is especially remarkable, given that there were no notable differences in the surface structures.

None of the 28 tombs excavated in GiE 003 were found intact, but some of the burial assemblages in Trench 1 were partially well preserved. Feature 20 in Trench 1 is the burial with the richest and best-preserved burial equipment. It yielded a contracted burial still in place on a wooden funerary bed. A goat/sheep



Figure 2: Ceramic vessel with stone lid found in one of the Kerma tombs.

offering and three pottery vessels were found below the foot end of the bed. The complete set of a red-burnished Kerma pot with a stone lid found in situ on top of the vessel (Figure 2) is remarkable.

In general, funerary practices reflecting social practices can be addressed by means of the rich finds in GiE 003, including funerary beds, animal offerings,





Figure 3: The mound that forms site AtW 001 with its surface covered by pottery and schist pieces.

amulets and ceramics. This previously unknown Kerma cemetery compares well to the cemetery at Ukma in the north. There are very close parallels as well as notable differences and what appear to be local variations. Our results open new avenues for future research on Kerma communities north of the Third Cataract, shifting the focus away from cultural and chronological classification and toward aspects of the social relationships among Middle Nile groups.

In this respect, comparing evidence from tumuli cemeteries such as GiE 003 with that of other Kerma period tombs such as so-called dome graves is an urgent task for the near future. Patterns of distribution and the proximity of these Kerma cemeteries to potential gold working sites must be investigated.

### Settlement site AtW 001 and its relevance

Gold working sites are traceable in the entire MUAFS concession areas, at both the east and the west bank of the Nile. In 2022, we conducted first test excavations at a settlement site in Attab West which might be related to gold exploitation.

During the survey conducted in January 2022, an extremely interesting site at Attab West was noted, with loads of early New Kingdom potsherds, scatters of local schist pieces on the surface and evidence of quartz crushing. This site, AtW 001, is a small, almost circular mound (Figure 3). Unfortunately, the new electricity line runs through the site and seems to have destroyed part of it.

We excavated one trench at the site, measuring c. 10 x 4 m at the northern side of the mound. No traces of architecture were found but fills, which can be identified as domestic rubbish deposits. During excavation, loads of ashy deposits, plant remains, animal bones and lots of pottery sherds, as well as debris from fires and other everyday activities, were unearthed. The ceramics are nicely datable to the New Kingdom, more precisely to the early Eighteenth Dynasty to Thutmoside times. Interestingly, the number of Nubian wares in the various horizons of fill was high, accounting for ca. 30 per cent of the ceramics in Kerma style. The lower fills only had very little ceramics inside, and the Nubian wares were more common than Egyptian-style wheel-made pots.



### Drone aerial photo of landscape



At least two phases of activity in the New Kingdom period are traceable, an early phase and a slightly later one which can be dated to Thutmose III. Remains of collapsed mud bricks and overfired sherds indicate the former existence of buildings and also possible ovens or kilns, but no standing remains of architecture have been identified up to now. There were several homogenous deposits of silt, partly showing some ash. The ashy spots of the earliest phase are directly on top of the natural alluvium, suggesting that we either have an open courtyard or maybe part of the periphery of a domestic site. Apart from ceramics, the finds included some grindstones and stone tools like pounders, testifying to some grinding and crushing activities. However, many questions about this site are still open, and AtW 001 needs to be excavated on a larger scale soon.

### Outlook

The first long excavation season of the DiverseNile project in the MUAFS concession area in northern Sudan was very successful. Our excavations at Ginis East and Attab West provided

important new data on the character of the sites (both domestic and mortuary) and their dating. The rich finds in GiE 003 allow comparing this previously unknown Kerma cemetery to the famous cemetery of Ukma in the north. This opens new paths for future research about the Kerma culture in the hinterland of Sai Island and aspects of the social hierarchy of these peripheral communities. The excavations at AtW 001 find close parallels in the hinterland of Amara West and support the need to intensify excavation work on the west bank between Amara and Ferka. Assessing the function and duration of use of this settlement site will considerably impact our aims of addressing seasonal sites as well as sites connected with gold working in the Attab to Ferka region.

Excavations at both sites described here will continue in our next fieldwork season. They allow us to address local communities from the Middle Kerma period to New Kingdom times and aspects of their social practices as well as burial customs. These are important steps towards establishing Middle Nile contact space biographies beyond cultural classifications.



### 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 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).

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