

# Cultural diversity in the Attab to Ferka region in Sudan: the 2023 season of the DiverseNile project



Figure 1: Excavation at cemetery GiE 003 in progress.

The ERC DiverseNile project uses multidisciplinary methods to investigate a region in the Middle Nile (modern Sudan, ancient Nubia). The project introduces a novel approach to exploring human-landscape encounters in a peripheral borderscape, shaped by humans, human activities, technologies, materiality and animals.

Our 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. 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 in the Attab to Ferka region in northern Sudan, hold great potential for achieving a more realistic understanding of the complex social dynamics and cultural interactions in the Bronze Age.

Just before the outbreak of the terrible conflict in Sudan in April, we conducted our archaeological excavation season in January to March 2023. We focused on Bronze Age sites (occupied ca. 2000–1300 BCE) in Ginis and Attab. Our choice for excavations included two settlement sites and one cemetery. Thanks to the wonderful support of the local authorities and our gang of Sudanese workmen, the 2023 season was a great success. In the current situation, we are concerned about the risks the people and the cultural heritage of Sudan face.

## The Kerma cemetery GiE 003 and its relevance: an update

We started excavating a large Kerma cemetery, labelled GiE 003, in Ginis East in 2022. With fresh fieldwork in 2023, a total of five trenches were excavated at the site, yielding 58 burial

pits. All trenches had eroded circular tumuli structures at the surface, which were covered with pottery sherds and human bones, clearly indicating ancient looting. Despite this clear evidence of grave disturbance, some of the graves still yielded in situ remains of skeletons. In one case, two complete ivory fly amulets were found at the neck of an individual, together with remains of a faience necklace.

The oldest burials were unearthed in the southern part of the cemetery, Trenches 2 and 5. Whereas Trench 2 only yielded circular pits associated with the Middle Kerma Period (ca. 2000–1750 BCE), Trench 5 also comprised so-called Pan-Grave style burials (the nomadic Pan-Grave tradition being dated to ca. 1800–1500 BCE). The burials in Trenches 1, 3 and 4 are all associated with the Classic Kerma Period (ca. 1750–1500 BCE). It therefore seems likely that Trench 5 shows a transition between the Middle Kerma and the Classic Kerma period, probably between 1800–1700 BCE.

Within Trench 5, the important Tomb 50 was found. This large, shallow circular pit is associated with Pan-Grave-style material culture. The grave contained the remains of a wooden bed frame, of a contracted burial, several goat offerings and a considerable number of intact pottery vessels comprising black-topped fine wares as well as incised and impressed decorated vessels.

The findings of Pan-Grave material at GiE 003 are significant because evidence

for this cultural horizon south of the Second Cataract was only known from the Fourth Cataract. Our discovery stresses that Pan-Grave people were part of the social structure in the Attab to Ferka region and that the established cultural categories simply do not fit the archaeological evidence.

In summary, GiE 003 is a provincial cemetery in the Kerma kingdom's northern reaches, with evidence of continuous use from Middle Kerma to Classic Kerma times and an intriguing presence of the Pan-Grave tradition. It finds close parallels in the Batn el-Haggar, but also nearby at Sai and Ferka and ultimately also shows unparalleled local features. These local peculiarities seem to reflect the community's cultural contacts, which varied throughout the Kerma empire towards Egypt and the Eastern desert.

## Combining mudbricks with drystone architecture: site AtW 002

At site AtW 002, Structure 1 is a rectangular building made of mudbricks and stones located on the steep slope of a rocky outcrop in the district of Foshu, the region of Ounet, probably on a former island.

In 2023, we conducted cleaning and excavation of Structure 1, measuring 6.5 x 3.5 m. The building seems to have been divided into at least three parts, presumably with an open courtyard in the centre where the main hearth area/fireplace was found.



Figure 2: Excavating Structure 1 at AtW 002.

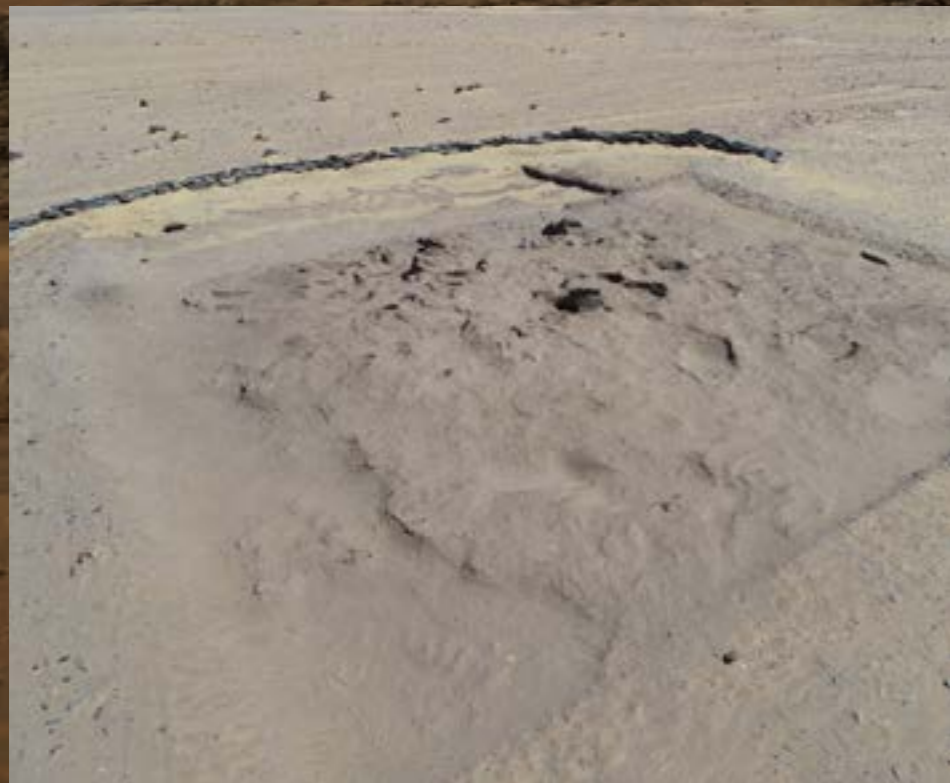


Figure 3: Drone photograph of site AtW 001 at the end of the season.

Structure 1 can be dated through the ceramics to the early eighteenth Dynasty. The pottery is mostly Egyptian in style but also includes Kerma-style ceramics and represents typical settlement pottery. The total set of material culture also comprised a considerable number of grindstones and several other stone tools like pounders and quartz. This finds repertoire, as well as the site's location near drystone walls and ancient and modern gold working sites, suggests a connection to early New Kingdom gold working. Maybe AtW 002 was a control post for trade and gold transport. It was probably inhabited by a mix of both Kerma Nubians and colonialists from Egypt.

### The settlement site AtW 001 and its relevance: an update

In 2022, we conducted the first test excavations at another settlement site in Attab West, which might be related to gold exploitation, at AtW 001. The 2023 excavation was carried out over four weeks and followed on directly from the test excavation conducted in 2022. Excavations were, at times, challenging due to the high winds. To prevent damage to the archaeology as we were excavating, a low boundary wall was built along the north and north-east of the trench.

During excavations, it became apparent that the main archaeological feature in the trench was a midden made up of several layers of archaeological debris. This included a large amount of pottery, animal bones and mudbrick material.

Pottery is the most common type of material culture found at AtW 001. Interestingly, the number of Nubian wares in the various fill horizons was

high, accounting for an average 20 per cent of the ceramics. Most of the sherds from AtW 001 are wheel-made Nile clay variants. There are also rare imports from the Levante and Egypt. The cooking pots show a notable mixture of Nubian and Egyptian styles—Egyptian wheel-made cooking pots are used side by side with Nubian-style products. One extraordinary example is a cooking pot combining a Nubian surface treatment with the Egyptian production technique in Nile clay. Apart from ceramics, the finds included some grindstones and stone tools like pounders, testifying to grinding and crushing activities.

Environmental remains from AtW 001 comprise botanical material as well as lots of faunal remains. Apart from charcoal and some wood, fruit trees like the doum and the date palms, well known from New Kingdom Sai and Amara West, are attested to by nuts and seeds (partly as charred pieces). The faunal remains are mostly vertebrates (predominantly livestock animals such as sheep, goat and donkey), but molluscs are also present.

The functional analysis of AtW 001 must await the complete assessment of the faunal material. However, with many donkey and goat/sheep bones, the site might well 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 lack of significant architectural remains suggests that AtW 001 was linked to a nearby settlement or temporary, possibly seasonal, structures. The abundance of material culture at the site suggests it was well connected to both larger centres like

Sai and smaller domestic sites (like AtW 002, see Figure 2).

### Outlook

Our excavations in 2023 provided important new data on the function, use and dating of several Bronze Age sites. Especially Cemetery GiE 003, with its mixed material culture of Middle Kerma, Pan-Grave and Classic Kerma illustrates cultural encounters between various Nubian groups in the region. Day-to-day evidence of these cultural encounters is visible at sites like AtW 002, where both Egyptian and Nubian ceramics were found, rectangular and circular buildings appear side by side, and mudbricks were used jointly with drystone architecture.

The detailed assessment of domestic sites like AtW 001 and AtW 002 has the potential to help us better understand the networks of rural communities in the Middle Nile Valley and their relation to more central sites like Sai, all embedded in the framework of a changing land and riverscape.

The 2023 season confirmed our earlier assumption of the MUAFS area and especially Attab and Ginis (as well as Kosha) being used for gold exploitation, starting well before the Egyptian New Kingdom. The connections to nomadic people traceable by the Pan-Grave burials at GiE 003 are highly significant in this respect, suggesting an involvement of the local mixed community in gold mining in the Eastern desert.

## 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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