



# **(DE)CONSTRUCTING NUBIA**

## **TOWARDS A NEW PERCEPTION OF THE NUBIAN SOCIAL LANDSCAPE DURING THE MID-SECOND MILLENNIUM BCE**



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# WORKSHOP AIMS

After over a century of scholarship and research, it is now accepted that existing frameworks for the ancient Nubian historical narrative is problematic. A way forward needs to be sought that reflects the diverse, complex, and interconnected socio-cultural landscape of ancient Nubia, and that is applicable not only for contacts between Egypt and Nubia, but for connections between and within Nubian populations themselves.

The *(De)Constructing Nubia* workshop critically reviews our current understanding of the so-called Middle Nubian Traditions (i.e. C-Group, Pan-Grave, and Kerma) and searches for ways of reconfiguring out-dated culture-historical frameworks to better reflect the diverse evidence from the historical and archaeological records.

By bringing together a group of specialists working on sites and material from Egypt and Sudan dating to the mid Second Millennium BCE, the workshop sets out to intensively discuss how material culture, historical data, and linguistic evidence from mortuary and settlement contexts can address the following key questions:

- What are the problems with the existing culture-historical framework for the Middle Nubian groups? and what, if any, are the advantages?
- How far can patterns in material culture / language groups be correlated with cultural groups and regions identified in the historical (i.e. Egyptian) records?
- How are encounters between and within Nubian groups reflected in the archaeological record?
- How should we integrate evidence from desert regions and the Nile Valley?
- What models can be proposed that better reflect the complexity of the archaeological and historical records?



# AT A GLANCE

## DAY ONE

### *Session 1: Material / Culture*

Exploring the links between objects, culture, and identity

### *Session 2: Pots and People*

Pottery as a tool for examining encounters and exchanges between groups

### *Session 3: Regionality*

Inter- and Intra-cultural variation across space

### *Session 4: Transcending Taxonomy*

Moving beyond the 'traditional' culture-historical frameworks

## DAY TWO

A day of intensive discussions for the core workshop participants.

# DURING THE WORKSHOP

The workshop will take place using Zoom.

Time is very limited, so please ensure that you join the workshop punctually. Guests are advised to sign in at least five minutes before the scheduled start-time.

Guest viewers will be muted during the event, but questions and points of discussion may be submitted in writing using the Chat and "Q&A" functions in Zoom. Questions will be read out live by the host to the relevant speaker(s), but time constraints may limit how many questions can be addressed.

Guests are *not permitted* to record the workshop.

We look forward to a day of respectful and inclusive discussion!



# SCHEDULE

**NOTE: All times are in Central European Time (CET)**

## **DAY ONE – Tuesday, 8 September 2020**

13:00 Welcome & Opening remarks  
Barbara Horejs, Director, OREA & Aaron de Souza

### **Session 1: Material / Culture**

13:10 Aaron de Souza  
*(De)Constructing Nubia: Why do we need to do this?*

13:25 Laurel Bestock & Christian Knoblauch  
*Nubian Material Culture from Uronarti Fortress: Problems and Possibilities*

13:40 Julien Cooper  
*Fuzzy boundaries or hard borders? Cultural groupings in Ancient Nubia from the view of linguistic evidence*

13:55 Question Time

14:10 Break (10 Minutes)

### **Session 2: Pots and People**

14:20 Claudia Näser  
*Which is it? Do or don't let pottery be your guide? And what if there is no pottery?*

14:35 Marie-Kristin Schröder  
*Nubian people in Upper Egypt. A View from Elephantine & Hierakonpolis in the 1st half of the 2nd Millennium BCE*

14:50 Julia Budka  
*Nubian-style pottery in the New Kingdom town of Sai*

15:05 Question Time

15:20 Break (10 Minutes)



# SCHEDULE (CONT.)

## Session 3: Regionality

- 15:30 Aaron de Souza  
*Everywhere but Nowhere: On ubiquity and variation in the Pan-Grave tradition*
- 15:45 Andrea Manzo  
*Paths to Complexity in Eastern Sudan and Beyond. Some preliminary remarks*
- 16:00 Elizabeth Minor  
*Exploring Regionality in the Kerma Kingdom through a Comparison of Material Culture Sequences at Kerma and Es-Selim R4*
- 16:15 Question Time
- 16:30 Break (10 Minutes)

## Session 4: Transcending Taxonomy

- 16:40 Maria Carmela Gatto  
*Pan-Grave who? Funerary evidence from Aswan and Toshka in the frame of current taxonomic issues and future agendas.*
- 16:55 Kate Liszka  
*Egyptian vs. Nubian. A false dichotomy?*
- 17:10 Questions and General Discussion
- 17:55 Closing Remarks
- 18:00 End of Day One

## DAY TWO – Wednesday, 9 September 2020

Day Two of the workshop is set aside for intensive discussions between the core participants to address the key issues and seek new ways forward.



# MATERIAL / CULTURE

**Aaron de Souza**

Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology, Austrian Academy of Sciences

## *(De)Constructing Nubia: Why do we need to do this?*

For over a century, our understanding of Nubian history and archaeology has been heavily influenced by culture-historical models in which distinct, clearly delineated cultural groups bounced off one other like billiard balls. Not only were we told that the Nubian groups did not mix, we also inherited a historical narrative that was dominated by Egypt, whose civilisation and culture was so alluring in its superiority that Nubians had no choice but to “Egyptianise”. We now know that this is not the case. The ancient Nubian socio-cultural landscape was extremely complex and diverse in its own right, and the old culture-historical models no longer fit the growing body of evidence from the archaeological and historical records.

The *(De)Constructing Nubia* workshop forms part of the MSCA-funded *InBetween Project*, which sets itself the task of revising how we understand the so-called Middle Nubian Cultures. The overall aim is to deconstruct the existing framework from within and from a Nubia-focussed perspective, and then to subsequently reconstruct a new model or models that encourage new and more nuanced interpretations. This opening paper lays the groundwork for the workshop by introducing *InBetween*, raising key questions that should be addressed, and highlighting issues that should be considered when searching for the way forward.



# MATERIAL / CULTURE

**Laurel Bestock**  
Brown University

**Christian Knoblauch**  
Swansea University

## *Nubian Material Culture from Uronarti Fortress: Problems and Possibilities*

In contrast to previous work at Uronarti fortress that found little evidence for cultural interaction, new work by the Uronarti Regional Archaeological Projects has recorded significant quantities of Nubian pottery, both in the dumps from the previous work, as well as in-situ.

The paper provides a first overview of the different “Nubian” pottery traditions present at the site drawing attention to their chronological and spatial patterning in the local archaeological record. The second part of the paper explores theoretical and methodological problems and possibilities arising from attempts to link these traditions to distinct peoples and places.



# MATERIAL / CULTURE

**Julien Cooper**

United International College, Zhuhai

*Fuzzy boundaries or hard borders?*

*Cultural groupings in Ancient Nubia from the view of linguistic evidence*

The region of Sudan and Nubia is, and always has been, a witness to a complicated nexus of linguistic groupings, frequently exhibiting episodes of language shifts, migrations, and language death. From the Nilo-Saharan languages, of which Meroitic is the most relevant ancient exemplar, to the Afroasiatic languages like Beja and other Cushitic languages, the Middle Nile region in the Second Millennium BCE was certainly not homogeneous linguistically. There are also linguistic enigmas like the unknown languages of Lower Nubia, the possible linguistic correlates of A- and C-Group peoples.

This paper describes the evidence that can be used to produce basic linguistic groupings in historical Nubia and critiques the issue as to whether these linguistic blocs correlate to specific material cultures and their boundaries. A salient problem here is establishing the geographic boundaries of cultural groups and specific social dynamics that produced their distribution. For instance, how would the movements of nomadic peoples and diasporas manifest on the linguistic map of Nubia? Did the growing Kerma polity affect the linguistic makeup of the Middle Nile? Does homogeneity in the regional archaeological record demonstrate concordant similarities in linguistic identity?

With a focus on pragmatic arguments from the archaeological record and the use of later linguistic evidence, this paper aims to reflect on what we can say about the Middle Nile region and what the limits of our evidence are.





# POTS AND PEOPLE

**Claudia Näser**

University College, London

*Which is it: Do or don't let pottery be your guide? And what if there is no pottery?*

In a 2001 paper, Janine Bourriau said that she „let pottery be [her] guide“ through Late Middle Kingdom to Early New Kingdom chronology and regional variation. The phrase stuck with me, as it neatly summarizes the potential of the pottery in question, but also advertises the strong belief of the pottery specialist in this potential. This confidence had, and continues to have, a difficult time in Middle Nubian contexts, where pottery turned out to not be such a clear guide for dating and establishing regional variation, provenance, and ethnicity of its producers and consumers.

While there has been uneasiness about these limitations for a while now, archaeologists working in the region have not yet been able to trace and effectively counter these difficulties both in methodological and pragmatic, fieldwork-oriented terms. Building on examples from Shalfak, the Fourth Cataract and Mograt, I will offer my view on potential steps forward. I will discuss whether our conceptualization of Middle Nile valley societies is perhaps over-ethnicised, and whether and how a shift in focus may effect change.



# POTS AND PEOPLE

**Marie-Kristin Schröder**

Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Cairo

*Nubian people in Upper Egypt.*

*A View from Elephantine & Hierakonpolis in the 1st half of the 2nd Millennium BCE*

The well-known presence of Middle Nubian sites and material culture in Egypt and Egyptian contexts has been extensively addressed, but studies on Nubian pottery from recent and past excavations continue to expand our knowledge about past Nubian societies. Within the ceramic assemblage of the Egyptian settlement at Elephantine Island, different Nubian pottery traditions and inter-regional connections can be traced through the definition of fabrics, shapes and decorative patterns. The correlation of the ceramics at Elephantine with the assemblages of various cemeteries, such as Hierakonpolis (HK27C), Kerma and Aniba cemetery N, provides a more thorough insight into Nubian but also Egyptian pottery traditions.

At Elephantine Island, the majority of the Nubian assemblage is of domestic character, but a small percentage represents the characteristic fine wares of the Middle Nubian cultures known from the cemeteries. Through detailed ceramic studies and a quantified contextualisation of the material, the intra- and inter-cultural entanglements emerge.

One of the key questions of the workshop is the reflection of encounters between Nubian groups in the archaeological record. At Elephantine, a number of sherds has been identified as so-called 'Hybrid'-vessels. These combine characteristic features of two different pottery traditions in one vessel, e. g. from the so-called C-Group and Pan-Grave pottery tradition. Furthermore, Egyptian hemispherical bowls are influenced by Nubian decorations, e. g. the criss-cross pattern of the Pan-Grave pottery. Piece by piece, Nubian craftsmanship and society in Nubia and Egypt can be traced and a reconstruction attempted.



# POTS AND PEOPLE

**Julia Budka**

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich

## *Nubian-style pottery in the New Kingdom town of Sai Island*

Both Egyptian (wheel-made) and Nubian (hand-made) pottery traditions are attested from New Kingdom sites located in Nubia and this also holds true for Sai Island. At Sai, a Nubian component is traceable at all sectors recently excavated by the ERC project AcrossBorders in the New Kingdom town. Hand-made cooking pots and storage vessels, as well as fine wares (black-topped cups and beakers) are attested in considerable numbers. The Nubian assemblage at Sai is comparable to findings at other Upper Nubian sites established in the early 18th Dynasty, like Sesebi. The Nubian-style pottery shows relations to the Kerma pottery tradition but includes features which are different from the Third Cataract Kerma corpus.

In some cases, locally produced Nile clay pottery vessels found in the New Kingdom town of Sai have been modelled on Egyptian types, but with a 'Nubian' influence regarding the surface treatment, production technique or decoration. Such hybrid pots may be viewed as evidence of 'material entanglement', well traceable at urban centres of New Kingdom Nubia.

The presentation will present the archaeological findings of Nubian-style pottery in the New Kingdom town of Sai (stratigraphy, find contexts, quantities, types and wares) and will focus on the question of whether these ceramics can be associated with specific cultural groups. The contribution summarises results as outcomes of the ERC project AcrossBorders and offers an outlook based on a new approach followed in the ERC project DiverseNile.



# REGIONALITY

**Aaron de Souza**

Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology, Austrian Academy of Sciences

*Everywhere but nowhere:*

*On ubiquity and variation in the Pan-Grave tradition.*

Excavate a late Middle Kingdom or Second Intermediate Period site in Egypt or Sudan and chances are you'll find something that could be identified as "Pan-Grave". The stuff is everywhere, in tombs and temples, towns and fortresses, at sites from the Fourth Cataract to the Nile Delta and into the deserts on both sides of the Nile. Inevitably with this expansive distribution comes regional variation. No two Pan-Grave sites or assemblages are the same, not even those within walking distance of one another! In essence, the so-called Pan-Grave tradition is defined by variation and this raises two key questions: how and why does this variation exist? and, if the tradition is defined by variation, can it really be considered a tradition at all?

This discussion presents an image of the so-called Pan-Grave tradition as a living example of "InBetween-ness," existing and moving between cultures, spaces, and times, and largely following the same broad traditions but expressing their identity differently according to their environments. The paper offers an image of Pan-Grave communities as influential participants in a complex social network, in which their ubiquity enabled them to simultaneously assist and exploit the culturally-varied communities they encountered. These varied encounters are viewed as a major factor behind the regional variability, but also as a potential trigger for identity negotiations among themselves and the people with whom they came into contact.



# REGIONALITY

**Andrea Manzo**

University of Naples, L'Orientale

## *Paths to Complexity in Eastern Sudan and Beyond. Some preliminary remarks*

Recent investigations conducted by the Italian Archaeological Expedition to the Eastern Sudan are providing new insights into the way in which social relations and networks were established and reproduced in the region from the mid-3rd to the mid-2nd millennium BCE. A special focus will be put on the role that the site of Mahal Teglinos near the modern city of Kassala had in those dynamics.

The evidence on the issue and its interpretation will be reviewed also in the light of the first results of the systematic programs of archaeometric analysis, which are in progress. Moreover, some possible relations between the patterns possibly resulting from the archaeological evidence and some passages of the available textual sources dating to the same phase will be proposed. Finally, the utility of considering the specific and original paths to complexity emerging in marginal areas also for the study of the states rooted in the Nile Valley will be suggested.



# REGIONALITY

**Elizabeth Minor**  
Wellesley College

## *Exploring Regionality in the Kerma Kingdom through a Comparison of Material Culture Sequences at Kerma and Es-Selim R4*

Reisner's Kerma excavations of 1913-1915 provide a key foundation for the culture-historical framework of the Kerma Kingdom. As later proved by Bonnet's continued work at Kerma and Gratien's work at Sai, Reisner's inherent racist biases had resulted in a flipped chronology, where he saw a "miscegenation" of Egyptian material culture types into "denigrated" forms. Instead, a millennium of innovations at the capital of Kerma is evident in the creative design of pottery types and art in many media. As an urban religious capital of the expansive kingdom, the city and necropolis at the site of Kerma provide an unbroken sequence of cultural developments - but the question remains as to how regional centers throughout the Dongola Reach, and beyond, negotiated their relationships with the Kerma 'core'.

The multi-period Kerma settlement site Es-Selim R4 (ESR4) holds enormous potential to provide new data about regional relationships within the Kerma Kingdom. Our preliminary work in 2019 and our survey season in 2020 found evidence for at least three site components with ceramic types ranging from Kerma Moyen to Kerma Classique. One locus of occupation was likely a ceramic production area, due to its high concentration of pot sherds and reddened brick walls. Other finds speak to regional trade relationships, including marl ware sherds and a large ivory bead. Located at the confluence of Nile palaeochannels, ESR4 residents were ideally situated to actively participate in trade with others in the densely populated Northern Dongola Reach. Future research goals focus on producing a local material culture sequence for this regional community, which can link with and add to understanding of the larger Kerma Kingdom.



# TRANSCENDING TAXONOMY

**Maria Carmela Gatto**  
University of Leicester

*Pan-Grave who? Funerary evidence from Aswan and Toshka in the frame of current taxonomic issues and future agendas.*

This presentation concerns three cemeteries of the so-called Pan-Grave culture recently found in the west bank north of Aswan by the Aswan-Kom Ombo Project. Two of them have been partially investigated, a third one will be the focus of a systematic excavation as soon as feasible. The cemetery in Toshka was found in the 1960s by the Pennsylvania-Yale Nubian Salvage Expedition directed by William K. Simpson.

Together they cover the whole chronological frame of the Pan-Grave culture, from the early 13th Dynasty to the late 17th Dynasty. Their locations mark the beginning and the end of one of the desert routes connecting from the west the First Cataract region with the Toshka region and farther south with the Second Cataract.

The analysis of the material culture and the funerary rituality provide valuable insights on what defines those communities and on how they relate to the wider Middle Nubian world. Current taxonomy is criticized, highlighting the need for a new theoretical approach with the aim to set the base for a future agenda.



# TRANSCENDING TAXONOMY

**Kate Liszka**

California State University, San Bernardino

## *Egyptian vs. Nubian: a False Dichotomy?*

Divide. Differentiate. Draw lines. Tell me, is this evidence Egyptian or Nubian? Our field has actively worked to uphold divisions of ethnic identity to classify the people of the past. We assume that ethnicity meant as much to them as it does to us today, but it probably didn't. We assume that most patterns we define typically represents an ethnic distinction, when it could point to something else. Theoretically, we all know that there are multiple types of identity that each individual expresses. We also know that people of the past had a much stronger connection to their hometowns and extended families than their national identity. They were multicultural, complex individuals making thousands of choices for hundreds of reasons. Even the Egyptian government put more emphasis on categorizing people by the hometown or family affiliation than the general larger region.

I would like to argue that we reconsider "ethnicity" as the primary type of identity that causes difference in the ancient record. For example, are imitation wares more driven by economic or social considerations than whether or not a Nubian knows how an Egyptian's pottery wheel works? Or, were the Pan-Grave peoples actually an ethnic group? Maybe, but this needs to be proven rather than assumed. We should consider the possibility that their graves are different for other reasons, such as religious expression or economic way of life. Dividing these ancient people into "Egyptian" and "Nubian" is so ingrained in scholars that it has become an unconscious bias. We first need to review the categories, and prove that they were caused by "ethnic" difference.





Please be informed that this event may be recorded for documentary purposes.  
Your registration and participation confirms your agreement.

**ORGANIZER:**

Aaron de Souza, OREA  
Hollandstraße 11–13  
1020 Vienna, Austria

**CONTACT AND REGISTRATION:**

For enquiries and registration for Day One, please contact:  
Aaron de Souza  
aaron.desouza@oeaw.ac.at  
RSVP: Sunday 6 September, 2020

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