

Settlement Archaeology Research in Egypt & Sudan



The AcrossBorder project:

Tracing daily life in Ancient Egypt & Sudan

Ancient settlements and urban sites offer the keys to more direct understanding of cultures, but they are very challenging in exploration. The ERC Across-Borders project accepts this challenge and focuses on settlement patterns in Egypt and Sudan in the 2nd Millennium BC. Although much progress has been made in recent years, further research addressing general aspects of living conditions and the specific coexistence of Egyptians and Nubians is required.

Egypt and Nubia (modern Northern Sudan) are situated across ancient and modern borders and have diverse environmental and cultural preconditions, with a long history of changing interactions and influences. The architecture and structure of Egyptian towns established in Upper Nubia during the New Kingdom (c. 1539-1077 BCE) are almost unknown as is the case for the social stratification and material culture of these sites. The settlements in Nubia have rich potential not only because of their excellent state of preservation, but especially because Egyptian culture abroad was confronted with a local Nubian tradition. Current topics like integration and acculturation can be tackled with this ancient example – how did the local Nubians react to foreign influences and how did the Egyptians present themselves outside of Egypt?

Sai Island, the prime example for settlement policy of New Kingdom Egypt in Upper Nubia, is the focus of AcrossBorders. The main hypothesis currently being tested is whether the settlement on Sai Island

can be evaluated as an Egyptian microcosm, despite its location outside of Egypt and its specific topographical, environmental and cultural situation. In order to do so, a detailed comparison with two major settlement sites of the 18th Dynasty located in Egypt proper is being undertaken: AcrossBorders also explores the material culture and architectural remains from Abydos and Elephantine to provide direct comparisons for Sai.

Fieldwork in the New Kingdom fortified town of Sai has been conducted by AcrossBorders since 2013. New excavation areas were opened within the town and added important data concerning daily activities, the general layout and growth of the town. Based on the fresh data from AcrossBorders' excavations, the state of knowledge regarding the evolution of the Pharaonic town on Sai Island and its role in the urban landscape of New Kingdom Nubia has much improved. With new archaeological and textual evidence from Sai, three major phases of the town were reconstructed and are relevant to the broader context, allowing a better understanding of the relations of Upper Nubia with Egypt during the New Kingdom. The AcrossBorders project is still ongoing and will provide more data for reconstructing aspects of the urban landscape and settlement patterns in Ancient Egypt & Sudan in the near future.



Settlement Archaeology in Egypt and Sudan Research

Traditionally Egyptian archaeology has focused on stone monuments – pyramids, tombs and temples – with little attention paid to domestic architecture made of unfired mudbrick. The need to explore the domestic settlement sites along the Nile Valley has been addressed only since the 1970s and even today, settlement archaeology in Pharaonic Egypt and Ancient Sudan is still in its infancy. However, much progress has been made in recent times in Egyptian settlement archaeology with ongoing research at sites like Amarna, Elephantine, Abydos and Tell el-Daba/Qantir. Egyptological studies have begun to stress social aspects of domestic architecture as well as the cultural identities of the occupants. Rich potential lies here in a contextual approach with interdisciplinary measures, including aspects of the environment, the landscape and the material culture, as highlighted by Barry Kemp and Anna Stevens with the example of the site of Amarna.

Nevertheless, we are still far from reconstructing the multifaceted lives of occupants in Egypt and Nubia (Sudan) during the 2nd millennium BC. The period of the Egyptian New Kingdom (c. 1539-1077 BC) is considered the “Golden Age” of the pharaohs, with a blooming trade policy and multiple contacts characteristic for an international age. Major achievements and innovations are associated with this period, which is treated prominently in any account of Ancient Egypt. However, the “real story” of Ancient Egypt will remain hidden as long as we do not address the main preconditions of its splendid cultural heritage: the original inhabitants, their biographies and living conditions.

Considering the technical and methodological advances of Egyptian archaeology in the last decades, it is possible to concentrate on settlements, villages and average human beings rather than on mortuary remains of the elite. With the exception of famous towns like Amarna, Elephantine and Qantir, such sites from Pharaonic Egypt are very difficult to trace – mud brick architecture has often not survived because of weathering and wind erosion, digging for fertilizer or other reasons, including the neglect of former excavators. Pharaonic towns may not be accessible, buried below Nile sediments in current agricultural areas or being superimposed by modern Egyptian houses or cities. Here, Pharaonic settlements located in Sudan specifically offer the unique chance to conduct a detailed analysis of domestic life at the junction of Egyptian and Nubian culture. In direct opposition to sites located within the borders of modern Egypt, these sites in Northern Sudan are much better preserved and accessible, but not sufficiently studied. For example, there is still no common understanding regarding the social interconnections and power hierarchies of Egyptians and Nubians in the Pharaonic towns in Upper Nubia. Entanglement, mixture and acculturation with important impact by indigenous Nubian elements are the phenomena currently thought to be most relevant. These new approaches to the social stratification of the sites contrast with the terms of separation and Egyptocentric views of earlier archaeologists.

In the last decade there was a new boom in urban archaeology of North Sudan, with an increase in archaeological fieldwork on settlement sites like



Amara West, Sai, Sesebi, Tombos and Dukki Gel. For this fresh research, modern technical advances have become highly relevant; at most sites the environmental settings are being explored by kite aerial photographs, satellite photos, 3D laser scans, geophysical surveys or georadar, other survey tools and computer applications. Various aspects of archaeometry are conducted by the missions working in the field. Geoarchaeological and interdisciplinary applications like soil sampling, micromorphology and isotope analysis are especially common and the analysis of the material culture is undertaken from a multi-perspective level, including various scientific analyses (e.g. Instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis) and different approaches.

The AcrossBorders project aims to provide new insights on the lifestyle and the living conditions in New Kingdom Nubia, thanks to new fieldwork and multi-layered research on Sai Island. Focusing on the architecture and material culture, as well as investigating how environmental conditions affected daily life, this data-based approach helps reconstruct the regional setting and historical context of the Egyptian town on Sai.

The ongoing archaeological fieldwork in Upper Nubia on sites like Sai and others has much potential for a better understanding of settlement patterns in the region. Eventually, it will be possible to assess the diachronic and regional development of the settlements in the area as well as the local properties of the individual sites at a synchronic level. For example, Sai illustrates the dynamic and situational character of past societies. Rather than drawing artificial border lines between Egyptians and Nubians, AcrossBorders' multi-faceted research illustrates that at the local level social, economic and cultural identities were changing, interacting and merging with each other. With a continued focus on settlement archaeology, we will be able to create a more realistic understanding of Ancient Egypt in the near future, different from the elite-biased and idealised projections deriving only from the mortuary record. This is why settlement archaeology research should be considered as prime task of modern Egyptian archaeology.

Rich potential of settlement archaeology illustrated: Sai Island

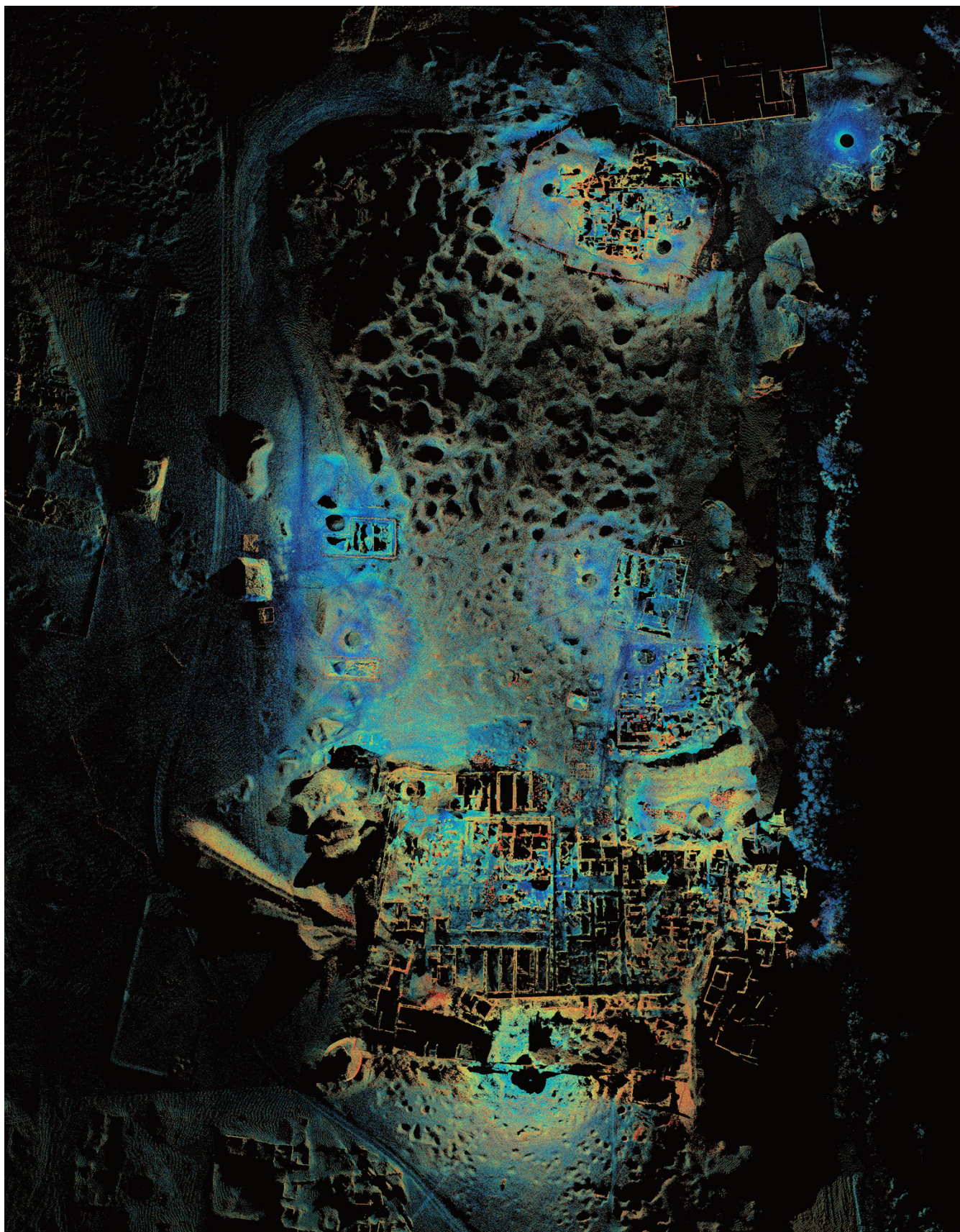
The New Kingdom town of Sai Island has the shape of a fortified settlement with an orthogonal layout in a north-south direction. There are several different sectors enclosed by the town wall, which contrast regarding their layout and dating. Whereas the southern part reflects the orthogonal planning of the town, with building units organised along north-south and east-west axes, other areas show a more diverse plan in earlier levels. From the mid-18th Dynasty, the domestic features in all parts of the fortified town fall into the category of Egyptian-style architecture in Nubia, well attested also in the neighbouring Pharaonic towns like Sesebi and Amara West.

Since 2013, AcrossBorders field work on Sai focused on several sectors within the town (to the East and West), on the landscape and quarry sites and the New Kingdom cemetery SAC5. The new excavation areas within the town added important knowledge concerning its general layout, evolution and changing character and provided a large quantity of finds (small finds, tools and ceramics). Findings of historical significance were also made in the newly discovered Tomb 26 of SAC5. Most important here was the discovery of a capstone for a small mudbrick pyramid of a high official of the Egyptian administration of the 19th Dynasty. Evidence of such elite burials at Sai challenges the present understanding that the neighbouring site, Amara West, took over the role as administrative centre from Sai in the early 19th Dynasty.

Various aspects of archaeometry are conducted within the AcrossBorders project (e.g. Instrumental

Neutron Activation Analysis and Strontium Isotope Analysis). A micromorphological sampling programme provides new information on how daily life activities contributed to the creation and use of space in the town, e.g. the disposal of garbage. Thanks to the detailed analysis of all object types and ceramics, areas for cooking and baking bread as well as storage facilities and traces of stone tool production can be located. The artefacts and ceramics testify furthermore to a cultural fusion from the foundation of the town throughout the New Kingdom. The ceramics in particular indicate that there was a complex, two-way mixture of lifestyles, resulting in great variability and also in hybrid forms that display both Egyptian and Nubian features.

AcrossBorders' geoarchaeological survey activities have confirmed that the Egyptian town on the east bank of the island was founded in a strategic position. Its location was chosen to control the river traffic and to facilitate the landing and loading of ships. From the beginning of the Egyptian occupation, Sai functioned as a control point along the Nile. Furthermore, the natural resources of the area were of great interest for the Egyptians – especially gold and sandstone were easily available in the region of Sai. To conclude, by embedding the New Kingdom town of Sai into its topographic surroundings and assessing its material culture, important new insights in understanding the role and character of the site during the Egyptian empire were gained.



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