

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Volume 25

2021

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Front cover. Cattle and two goats\gazelle from Site GRD-14 in the Wadi Gorgod (photo Hamad Mohamed Hamdeen).

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# After ‘InBetween’: Disentangling cultural contacts across Nubia during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC

Aaron M. de Souza

The InBetween Project, funded by the European Commission’s Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship programme,<sup>1</sup> set out to address problems with the existing system of bounded cultural boxes that in many ways constrain research on ancient Nubia, and to lay some initial groundwork for finding new approaches to understanding the ancient Nubian cultural landscape. The project took as its case-study the so-called Middle Nubian cultures (i.e. Pan-Grave, C-Group, and Kerma), which were all active during a short but intensely multicultural period in the region, c. 1850–1550 BC. On the timeline of Pharaonic Egypt, this period is roughly contemporary with the late Middle Kingdom through to the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty. Through research leading up to the *InBetween Project*, the author became increasingly aware of the difficulties in defining boundaries between cultural traditions using the existing cultural divisions that were established during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These difficulties in turn precipitated the need to review those divisions, to question their validity, and to explore possibilities for alternative approaches. In the end, the project went beyond questioning the boundaries between Nubian cultures and communities and extended to the more fundamental dichotomy that separates ‘Egyptian’ from ‘Nubian’.

The starting hypothesis for the InBetween Project was a seemingly simple one, namely that ancient Nubian cultures and communities were more interconnected than the existing cultural divisions imply. To investigate this, the project focused primarily on sites and assemblages that would be described as ‘culturally mixed’ according to existing definitions, i.e. contexts that incorporate objects and/or practices from two or more of the Middle Nubian cultures. The overall aims were to assess what types of objects and practices could and did occur together, how objects crossed spatial and perceived cultural boundaries, and to consider the social processes that resulted in such mixed assemblages. By its nature, the project was dependant almost entirely on material culture owing to the lack of texts written by the Nubian communities themselves during the period under investigation. Rare exceptions include a sealing bearing the title ‘Ruler of Kush’ (von Pilgrim 2015), as well as rock inscriptions naming possible Nubian rulers (Davies 2014, 35–36; Cooper 2018, *passim*), but this of course is not sufficient evidence for creating hypotheses relating to the cultures and communities in their broadest sense. Nevertheless, Egyptian accounts were, by necessity, incorporated where available and relevant (e.g. de Souza 2020a). Besides considering how objects that are supposedly of different traditions might end up in the same contexts, the project also looked for interconnections through material technologies, based on the hypothesis that technological and cultural heritage might be interrelated.

The focus on material culture drew upon the author’s first-hand experience of working with objects in the field and in museums, where he studied Nubian-style material culture from cemetery and settlement sites ranging from the Nile Delta to the 4<sup>th</sup> Cataract and into the Eastern Desert. For the *InBetween Project*, that existing dataset was further augmented through intensive documentation and re-analysis of entire cemetery assemblages excavated by the Scandinavian Joint Expedition to Sudanese Nubia (the SJE), now held by the Museum Gustavianum at Uppsala University. Ceramics being by far the most abundant type of object from all of these sites, pottery making technologies were intensively analysed using reflectance transformation imaging (de Souza and Trognitz 2021) and ceramic petrography<sup>2</sup> in order to observe traces

<sup>1</sup> Grant Agreement No. 796050.

<sup>2</sup> Petrographic analysis of ceramic samples from the SJE collection was undertaken in collaboration between the author and Dr Mary F. Ownby. Publication was in preparation at the time of writing.

of pottery production processes that would otherwise be imperceptible to the unaided eye. Theoretical models were explored and, in the case of cultural entanglement (Stockhammer 2013), their applicability was reviewed (de Souza 2020b).

The culmination of the project was the two-day workshop, '(De)Constructing Nubia: Towards a new perception of the Nubian cultural landscape during the mid-second millennium BCE', which was held online and hosted by the then Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences on 8-9<sup>th</sup> September 2020. Twelve researchers were invited to share their own current research with an international audience and to discuss how they are addressing any difficulties of working with the existing cultural framework (Web ÖAW). The second day was an opportunity for the speakers and a number of invited participants to intensively discuss the challenges that need to be faced and how they might be best addressed. To the author's knowledge, this workshop was the first instance in which a group of researchers actively working on Nubian archaeology of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC collectively discussed these issues. Unsurprisingly, the unanimous consensus was that the existing frameworks, ontologies, and vocabularies do not adequately represent the complexity and diversity of the ancient Nubian archaeological record and that a new approach is needed. At the same time, it was acknowledged that finding such a new approach is not an easy task and that it must be a collective effort. The problems were not solved at the workshop (indeed that was never the intention), and a summary volume from the workshop was in preparation at the time of writing.

Though no concrete new alternatives or vocabularies were found on the day, the workshop and the *InBetween* project as a whole highlighted the complex issues that need to be addressed. Those issues and some possible alternative approaches will be briefly outlined below, but first it is worth considering how the existing framework of cultural divisions came to exist in the first place and how it continues to constrain ongoing research over one hundred years since its introduction.

### **Making the Middle Nubian cultures**

The first systematic excavation and documentation of ancient Middle Nubian remains occurred in what is now modern Egypt, when Petrie unexpectedly uncovered burials of what he described as 'a barbaric people' at the site of Diospolis Parva (Petrie 1901, 45-49). Following culture-historical paradigms, Petrie identified these burials as evidence for a 'new' culture due to the distinctively un-Egyptian assemblages and he named it the 'Pan-Grave culture' after their shallow, circular, 'pan-shaped' grave pits. A few years later, Petrie encountered the same distinctive material culture at Rifeh, also in Egypt, but this time deposited in deep rectangular shaft graves (Petrie 1907, 20-21). Nevertheless, and in spite of the differences in burial practices, Petrie continued to apply the name 'Pan-Grave' due to the similarities in material culture, and the name stuck.

In 1907, the raising of the water level behind the first Aswan Dam prompted the Archaeological Survey of Nubia (ASN), as a result of which Reisner defined the sequence of Nubian cultures that remains in use to the present day (Reisner 1908, 12-20; 1910, 313-342). Reisner posited that his groups succeeded one another in a clearly defined sequence, as indicated by their alphabetic designations (i.e. A-Group, B-Group, C-Group etc.), and each was defined by distinctive material culture types. Reisner did not include Petrie's Pan-Grave culture in his sequence and instead proposed that the Pan-Grave was a late branch of his own C-Group that had been 'forced by poverty northward... into Egypt' (Reisner 1910, 347). Upon taking over the ASN, Firth followed Reisner's sequence as well as the assumption that the Pan-Grave culture was 'the latest type of C-Group burial' and that the occasional proximity to Egyptian cemeteries indicates 'that the late state of that race [i.e. the C-Group/Pan-Grave] was that of dependence or servitude' (Firth 1915, 16).

Reisner's well-known excavations at Kerma need no extended discussion, but his description and

definition of the Kerma culture expanded the number of Middle Nubian cultural units (Reisner 1923, 3-18). Although apparently a 'new' culture, it was not the first time that Kerma-style material had been documented. The very first 'Pan-Grave' burial that Petrie reported (Abadiyeh Grave E2) comprised objects that correspond to Reisner's definition for Kerma (Petrie 1901, 45, pl. xxxviii), as did the famous *rishi* burial that Petrie excavated at Qurneh (Petrie 1909, 6-10, pl. xxvii). Firth had also documented pottery vessels that fit the newly defined Kerma culture during the 1909-1910 ASN season (Firth 1927, fig. 1). It is interesting to note that Firth's report was published in 1927 – after the publication of Reisner's excavations at Kerma – but the word 'Kerma' does not appear in his volume.

The construction of the Aswan High Dam and the UNESCO salvage missions of the early 1960s mark the next major turning point in Nubian archaeology, and the point at which the cultural labels initiated by Petrie, Reisner and Firth would become firmly fixed in the literature. The masses of new data gathered by the international missions permitted a refinement of the cultural frameworks. Internal sequences for the Prehistoric and A-Group cultures (Nordström 1972; Williams 1986; 1989), the C-Group (Bietak 1968, 92-116; Williams 1983, 1-22; Säve-Söderbergh 1989, 6-140), and Kerma (Gratien 1978) would be devised, but the broad definitions of the groups themselves were largely unaltered. At the same time, however, the wealth of new data also began to expose weaknesses in the Nubian cultural sequence. Reisner's B-Group was entirely disproven (Smith 1966), and many of the excavated sites displayed complex mixtures of material culture that did not fit any particular cultural 'box'. Nevertheless, even these mixed sites were invariably forced to fit into one of the cultural boxes. In such cases, the evidence for the less well-represented culture was sometimes dismissed as inconsequential (e.g. Säve-Söderbergh 1989, 181) and any perceived 'decline' in the Nubian cultures was interpreted as a result of external cultural pressure (Bietak 1968, 113-117. See contra: de Souza 2013, 109-126; 2018, 233-242). While these collective efforts progressed understandings of ancient Nubian cultures, the UNESCO missions and their outcomes crystallised the cultural divisions into their familiar form. By the end of the 1980s, the cultural sequence initiated by Petrie and Reisner had become fixed in the structure and vocabulary of Nubian archaeology, and it remains so to this day.

### **Between the boundaries**

The term 'Middle Nubian cultures' is generally understood as encompassing three cultural entities – Pan-Grave, C-Group and Kerma – each of which was defined by sets of object types and practices and their associated distributions, which are detailed in numerous other published sources (Reisner 1923; Bietak 1966; 1968; Säve-Söderbergh 1989; Gratien 1978; 1986; de Souza 2019). These typologies were based entirely on mortuary data due to the simple fact that cemeteries are by far more numerous, better preserved, and more visible in the landscape than settlements. The term 'Nubian settlements' here refers to habitation sites that were not established or inhabited as a result of Pharaonic interventions in the region, such as fortresses and so-called 'temple towns' (for general introductions see Spencer 2019; Bestock 2021). These small Nubian habitation sites are usually poorly preserved and hence were only briefly published or left entirely unpublished owing to their ephemeral nature.<sup>3</sup> The available dataset is thus inherently uneven and skewed toward the mortuary sphere. This imbalance is further compounded by typologically-defined cultural labels, which are themselves inherently problematic. The labels were devised in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from an entirely etic perspective and hence they almost certainly bear no relation to the ancient communities that they are intended to describe. The labels also imply the existence of clearly defined

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, the author was lead investigator of the *Living Nubia* project, which focused on these small, 'indigenous' Nubian habitation sites of the mid-second millennium BC, funded by the Austrian Science Fund's Lise Meitner Programme (Project M3026). <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/oeai/forschung/praehistorie-wana-archaeologie/archaeologie-in-aegypten-und-sudan/nubisches-leben>. Last accessed 21 May 2021.

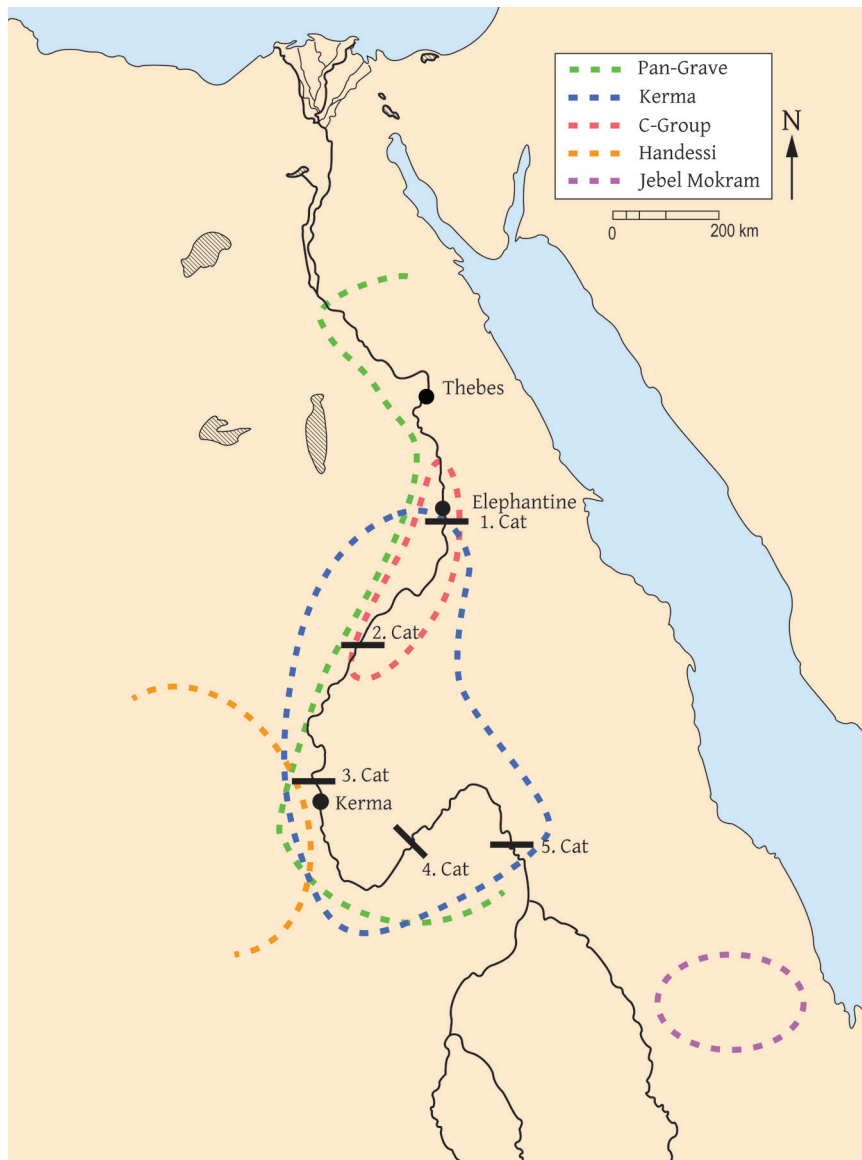


Figure 1. Schematic map showing general distributions of cultures studied as part of the *InBetween Project*.

and bounded cultural units that are entirely distinct from one another. In other words, the cultures were defined by what made them appear different from one another based on a modern, European, culture-historical perspective.

There is also a geographic bias in the data in that the definitions for the cultures were based entirely on evidence from the Nile Valley. Moreover, it was assumed that each of the Middle Nubian cultures were largely restricted to particular regions. The C-Group was thought to be concentrated in 'Lower Nubia' between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Cataracts. Kerma was mostly in 'Upper Nubia' centred upon the site of Kerma itself, but during its Classic phase its control extended north of the Second Cataract and Kushite-led coalitions conducted periodic raids in Egyptian territory (Davies 2003; 2005, 49-51; de Souza 2020, 334-336). The Pan-Grave culture was long assumed to have come from the Eastern Desert (Bietak 1966, 61-78; contra see Liszka 2015; de Souza 2019, Liszka and de Souza 2021) even though it was defined using evidence from sites exclusively in the Nile Valley from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cataract northward into Middle Egypt. These assumed geographic divisions did not take into account that the distributions of objects and contexts for the three groups frequently overlap, and sometimes evidence for multiple cultures occurs at a single site or even within a single burial context. In short, it is impossible and inadvisable to place hard geographic

boundaries on where a ‘culture’ should be expected to be found. Figure 1 gives a broad indication of the densest concentrations of evidence for the various cultural entities according to existing definitions. The zones overlap, the broken lines reflect how fluid the limits are, and in the case of the Pan-Grave and Handessi, the open circles indicate that the distributions likely extend beyond these core regions.

In addition to geographic overlaps, *cultural* overlaps are also evident at sites documented by the SJE concession, the assemblages from which were re-studied during a research trip to Uppsala University as part of the *InBetween* Project. At the centre of SJE Site 170, which Säve-Söderbergh described as a “*Pan-Grave cemetery with one Kerma grave*”, was a diversely equipped grave, No. 37 (Figure 2a) that contained ‘Classic Kerma’ beakers along with a small handmade bowl that fits existing definitions for the Pan-Grave pottery tradition (Figure 2m), an Egyptian-style jar (Figure 2l), 17 scarab seals and scarabs often bearing inscription in Egyptian hieroglyphs (Figure 2e-k; Säve-Söderbergh 1989, 195, pls 42-43, 101), a calcite kohl pot (Figure 2d; Säve-Söderbergh 1989, pl. 52.7), a bronze razor (Figure 2c; Säve-Söderbergh 1989, pl. 55.7), as well as numerous beads and other objects. This grave is the ‘one Kerma grave’ in Säve-Söderbergh’s



Figure 2. Selected items from SJE Site 170, Grave 37. Objects that remain in Sudan could not be studied by the author. Images not to scale – only for representative purposes. (a) Photograph of the grave during excavation (b) bone plaques (c) bronze ‘razor’ (d) calcite kohl vessel (e)–(k) scarabs and scaraboids (l) wheel-made jar (m) hand-made pottery vessels. Image credits: (a) SJE Archives, Museum Gustavianum; (b), (l), (m) © A. Grubner; (c)–(k) adapted from Säve-Söderbergh 1989.

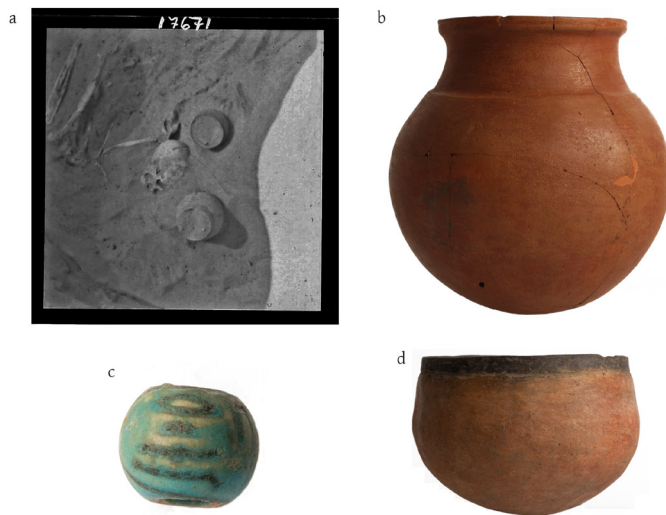


Figure 3. Objects from SJE Site 410, Grave 7. (a) Photograph of the grave during excavation (b) handmade, red-slipped burnished jar (c) faience bead bearing the cartouche of Senwosret I (d) handmade black-topped red bowl. Images not to scale – only for representative purposes.

attribution, presumably due to the presence of the Kerma beakers. Other large cemeteries comprise burials attributed to the C-Group, Pan-Grave and Egyptian cultures. For example, SJE Site 95 comprises a complex mix of burials attributed by the excavators to the A-Group, C-Group, and Pan-Grave cultures, as well as a relative abundance of objects that would be classified as 'Egyptian' in style (Nordström 1972, 160-162; Säve-Söderbergh 1989, 181-185). Säve-Söderbergh described SJE Site 95 as a Pan-Grave cemetery '[a]part from the A-Group graves', and he seemingly dismisses the occurrence of 'Classic Kerma' style beakers, noting that these "do not change the picture" (Säve-Söderbergh 1989, 181). Another mixed context is the near-intact Grave 7 at SJE Site 410 (Figure 3), which was equipped with a polished red-ware jar well known from

sites associated with the Kerma culture, a black-topped red-ware bowl that morphologically fits with the Pan-Grave pottery tradition, and a faience bead inscribed with the name of the Pharaoh Senwosret I (Säve-Söderbergh 1989, 252). None of the above contexts can be easily sorted into one or another cultural 'box', but instead they are representative of the interconnectedness of the ancient Nubian socio-cultural landscape. Of course, one must take into account that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cataract region, where all of these sites are located, was a hub of cultural convergence, but even these few examples make it clear that the existing cultural divisions cannot and should not be directly applied to all archaeological contexts and situations.

The existing system's focus on the Nile Valley also does not adequately account for interconnections with communities that lived outside of it. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was only the Pan-Grave Culture that was directly connected with regions outside the Nile Valley, based on the questionable assumption that it was the archaeological manifestation of the *Medjay* from ancient Egyptian texts and hence that the culture originated in the Eastern Desert (Säve-Söderbergh 1941; Bietak 1966, 61-78). The numerous problems associated with this link have been detailed in recent years (Liszka 2012; 2015; de Souza 2019, 9-10; Liszka and de Souza 2021), but at the same time there is mounting evidence for some form of interconnection with the Eastern Desert regions via the so-called Gash Group and the Jebel Mokram Group (Manzo 2017a, 33-54). To the west of the Nile there is the so-called Handessi Horizon of the Wadi Howar (Jesse 2004, 105-106; 2006; Jesse *et al.* 2004), which displays certain stylistic, technological, and cultural similarities with cultures in the Nile Valley. For example, matting impressions on the exterior of some Handessi vessels (Jesse *et al.* 2004, fig. 15) may be traces of the vessel forming process and are similar to vessel forming processes employed by the Kerma and Pan-Grave ceramic traditions (de Souza and Trognitz 2021).

In addition to geographic overlaps, the Pan-Grave, C-Group, and Kerma cultures overlap temporally and all three are attested in the Nile Valley between at least c. 1750–1550 BC. Based on current definitions, the Pan-Grave culture does not seem to occur outside of that timeframe, but evidence for the C-Group and Kerma cultures both extend back to the late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, roughly contemporary with the late Old Kingdom of Pharaonic Egypt. This discrepancy makes it seem that evidence for the Pan-Grave



culture appears and disappears rather suddenly in the archaeological record, but this does not take into account the possibility of interconnections between riverine and desert communities before what we know as ‘Pan-Grave’ became archaeologically recognisable in the Nile Valley. The divisions also hinder any considerations of cultural continuity and interconnection between and across the imposed cultural boundaries. Obvious similarities include the use of skulls of livestock animals in burials of all Middle Nubian cultures (Bangsgaard 2010; 2013), and in particular the deposition of these skulls in curving rows surrounding graves at cemeteries attributed to the Pan-Grave and Kerma cultures (e.g. Säve-Söderbergh 1989, pls 83, 87; Chaix *et al.* 2012, 196-197). There are also striking similarities between the material traditions of Early Kerma culture and the early C-Group (Edwards 2004, 77-78; Raue 2019a; Honegger 2021), and a more fluid understanding of these intercultural relationships would likely lead to more accurate perceptions of the ancient Nubian cultural landscape.

### **Terminological problems**

It has already been stated above that the cultural labels themselves are problematic, but even the seemingly more neutral term ‘Middle Nubian’ brings certain implications. Not only is it unclear exactly what the period is in the middle of, the term ‘Middle Nubian’ also implies that the history of the region has a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. The term ‘Bronze Age’ has sometimes been applied within the framework of Nubian archaeology, but this also transposes a conceptual and chronological paradigm devised for European archaeology and applies it to a region and to a dataset for which it is largely irrelevant. All of these issues stem from the absence of a secure absolute chronological framework for ancient Nubia generally, but especially for the Middle Nubian period, for which relative chronologies are closely tied to typological sequences of Egyptian(-style) material culture.

Modern political borders and their associated adjectives also bring certain implications, in particular the often tacit presumption that Nubian archaeology and the archaeology of Sudan are one and the same. In fact, the region between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Cataracts – i.e. ancient ‘Lower Nubia’, or Wawat to the ancient Egyptians – is located almost entirely within the borders of what is now modern Egypt. As noted earlier, the first excavation of ancient Middle Nubian remains occurred in Egypt when Petrie first described ‘pan-graves’ at Diospolis Parva. Not only that, the entire dataset on which Reisner’s Nubian cultural sequence was originally based was excavated from sites that are now also located in modern Egypt. It is perhaps easy to overlook these fundamental points given that the focus of recent Nubian archaeological activity has shifted southwards to Sudan and regions that were not flooded by the construction of the Aswan High Dam.

The anachronism of the words ‘Nubia’ and ‘Nubian’ in the context of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC must also be acknowledged (Edwards 2004, 1; Raue 2019b, 3-5; Williams and Emberling 2021, 2-3), but this issue is somewhat more difficult to overcome. Ancient terms such as Kush or Wawat are likely to be loan-words from local languages that the ancient Egyptians encountered in ancient Nubia, but ultimately they are words that have come to us via Egyptian sources. Moreover, it is not entirely clear what these ancient toponyms exactly refer to in terms of geography. More neutral geographic divisions are sometimes used – e.g. Middle Nile, Nile Basin, Greater Nile etc. – but each of those divisions also sets varying parameters that apply to some situations and contexts more than others. In the absence of any other single identifier, the use of the word ‘Nubia’ will surely continue unchanged for the foreseeable future. Until then, scholars should, at the very least, clearly state the geographic parameters for their research and for their chosen ontologies.

The ‘Nubian’ versus ‘Egyptian’ dichotomy must also be addressed. As has been stressed throughout, the study of ancient Nubia from a cultural perspective is not simply the study of the Nile Valley south of the

First Cataract and the surrounding deserts. Cultural remains described as 'Nubian' have been found across a vast swathe of land covering much of modern Egypt and northern Sudan. These sites occur with relative frequency north of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cataract (Raue 2018, 291-316; 2019a, 567-588; de Souza 2019, 56-70, 141-142), and 'Nubian-style' pottery is a common component in Egyptian settlements and temple complexes (e.g. Wegner 2007; Aston 2012; Ayers and Moeller 2012; Raue 2012; Bourriau and Giuliani 2016; de Souza 2019, 98-113; 2020a). Cemeteries and burials attributed to one or another Nubian culture (according to existing definitions) have been documented as far north as Deir Rifeh and possibly even further from Predynastic times onwards. Nubians are frequently depicted in Egyptian art and referenced in texts, and in many ways Nubians were an inherent part of the ancient Egyptian social landscape (Raue 2019a). Correspondingly, there was always an Egyptian presence in what is generally perceived as 'Lower Nubia'/Wawat (i.e. lands between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Cataracts), again dating from at least Predynastic times onwards. In short, the cultural spheres of 'Nubia' and 'Egypt' overlap spatially and chronologically to such an extent that it is difficult to speak of one without some reference to the other (de Souza 2020a, 333-335).

This in turn raises a more fundamental issue that underpins this broader debate and that needs to be more directly confronted, namely the division between 'Egyptology' as an academic discipline and the study of ancient Nubia. This is not an easy issue to address, but the simultaneously stark but unclear division between the disciplines does little to foster a fuller integration of the study of these deeply interconnected regions and their histories. The dichotomy is, by and large, a product of Egyptology's European, colonial origins that effectively divorced Egypt from its context on the African continent (Köhler 2020; Manzo 2020b). Such a strong division is entirely false and inaccurate, and the reality is far more complex, but yet the division persists. The study of Nubian material culture found in Egypt is just as much a part of Egyptology as the study of an Egyptian temple in Sudan is an aspect of Nubian archaeology. It is also essential to remember that many researchers working with Nubian history and archaeology (myself included) received their foundational training in academically Egyptological environments. Additionally, academic discourse surrounding ancient Nubia during the Pharaonic period is more often than not embedded in Egyptological conferences and publications, further reinforcing the old image of ancient Egyptian and Egyptological dominance.

### **Ways forward**

The easy solution to all of these problems would be to discard the ill-fitting labels and replace them with something that better fits the data, but of course this is not as easy or straightforward as it sounds. From a scientific perspective, organising things into groups and categories facilitates scholarly discourse and makes it easier to compare and contrast data. Some form of categorisation is therefore essential, but simply replacing old labels with new labels will not necessarily solve the problem and it may only create new problems for future generations of scholars.

Perhaps the best solution in the short term is to move away from typology-based definitions of groups and cultures. The existing typologies were instrumental in identifying distribution patterns in the archaeological record, but the problem arose when those patterns were interpreted as being representative of bounded cultural units that are defined by typological differences. This type of classification based on difference should now be put aside in favour of more complex and nuanced approaches that draw attention to interconnections.

Current and recent projects have already taken steps in this direction. The Munich University Attab to Ferka Survey Project, directed by Julia Budka, is investigating cultural encounters and interactions with the landscape on a regional scale (Budka 2019). Claudia Näser has identified what she describes as 'burial communities' at Cemetery S/SA at Aniba, which is a step away from bounded cultural divisions and toward

local and situational realities (Näser 2017). Andrea Manzo's work in the Kassala region is highlighting the complex networks that existed between riverine, desert, and coastal communities extending from the Nile Valley into the Horn of Africa (Manzo 2017a; 2017b; 2020a). His work is geographically balanced by Friederike Jesse's work in the Wadi Howar that shows equally complex relational networks extending into the western desert regions (Jesse 2004; 2006; Jesse *et al* 2004). Julien Cooper's work on Nubian languages adds an extra layer of linguistic complexity to the already complex archaeological record (Cooper 2020a; 2020b), and he has also argued that Kerma Nubians actively chose not to use Egyptian hieroglyphs (Cooper 2018, 158-159). Stuart Tyson Smith and Michele Buzon are also unravelling the 'entangled' communities buried at Tombos during the Egyptian New Kingdom (Buzon 2008; Smith and Buzon 2015). Elizabeth Minor is reversing the 'Egyptianisation' narrative as it relates to the Kerma culture and in so doing has returned a greater degree of agency to Nubian communities as expressed through their material culture (Minor 2012; 2018). In the religious sphere, Solange Ashby's work has highlighted the long history of Nubians (and in particular Nubian women) in what is generally perceived as Egyptian cult and religious practice (Ashby 2018; 2019).

Collectively, all of this and other research is gradually breaking down the hard divisions that have dominated the discipline for a century, but at the same time the field is still restricted by the old cultural labels. Problematic as they are, the divisions do make it easier to compare assemblages and objects between sites and regions. For example, a more comprehensive exploration of the 'Pan-Grave' ceramic tradition has enabled this author and Maria Gatto to break down the idea of a single Pan-Grave culture and to question the limits of what defines 'Pan-Grave' (Gatto 2014; de Souza 2019). The same approach and questions may be applied to other ancient Nubian cultures. Ultimately it seems that the concept of groups itself is not the problem, but rather how those groups are constructed and interpreted. Bounded, immutable cultural groups must of course be avoided, as should typologically-defined divisions of the past.

One possible way to more deeply investigate cultural interconnections is to shift the focus from typologies to ancient cultural practice as a window into inter- and intracultural relations. Rather than focusing on difference, intensive analyses of how things were made and used could reveal underlying networks of practice that would otherwise be obscured by typological divisions. The basic principle is that socio-cultural patterns might be reflected in habitus – i.e. the conscious and unconscious practice and performance of culture (Bourdieu 1977, 72-95; Jenkins 2008, 79) – and that these patterns might be revealed by shifting the focus from what things look like to how things were done. In relation to material culture, these 'ways of doing' – known as *chaînes opératoire* (Gosselain 2012; Roux 2016; Gosselain 2018) – describe the ways in which objects were produced and used within their given socio-cultural context. The InBetween Project undertook practice-based investigations on an object-scale to analyse ceramic technologies. Reflectance transformation imaging (RTI) revealed otherwise invisible traces of pottery making processes that suggest shared technologies between the Pan-Grave and Kerma ceramic traditions (de Souza and Trognitz 2021), which, as noted above, may also be compared with Handessi potting traditions. Ceramic petrography of Middle Nubian pottery conducted as part of the *InBetween* project has also offered new insights into paste recipes and firing technologies that may be connected with mobility and varied interactions with the landscape (see Note 2). Practice can also be observed in modes of living and in burial customs, for example Näser's 'burial communities' based on the concept of Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998), and Budka's ongoing investigations of archaeological manifestation of human interaction with the landscape (see above).

We should also reconsider the way in which Nubian history and archaeology is taught at universities, and consider whether it should be reframed as a standalone discipline or integrated with African Studies

rather than being embedded within Egyptology. Doing so would give greater prominence to Nubia's position as a cultural bridge between Egypt and Africa, but equally the connections with Egypt cannot and should not be forgotten. As has been stressed throughout this paper, the history of the wider region is inextricably interconnected, and these complex entanglements are the essence of the issue.

Whatever directions the field takes in the future, there was unanimous agreement among the participants in the (De)Constructing Nubia workshop that any change must be the result of a collective effort. There is not, nor should there be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to understanding the complex and interconnected cultural landscape of the region because there was no single 'Nubia', nor was there a single way of being 'Nubian'. In order to better understand those complex interconnections, our approach must be correspondingly complex and interconnected.



### Acknowledgements

The *InBetween Project* received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 796050. The project was hosted by the Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology (now the Austrian Archaeological Institute) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Sincere thanks to Dr Julien Cooper for his feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

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