

THE FORTIFIED PHARAONIC TOWN ON SAI ISLAND: NEW RESULTS FROM CURRENT FIELDWORK (2013-2014)

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Sai Island, as one of the most important New Kingdom sites in Upper Nubia, is the focus of a new project. Funded by the European Research Council, AcrossBorders aims to provide new insights on the lifestyle and the living conditions in New Kingdom Nubia, thanks to fresh fieldwork and multi-layered research on Sai Island¹.

Since 2013, AcrossBorders has been investigating the New Kingdom fortified town on Sai. Two new excavation areas within the town, labelled as SAVI East and SAVI West, were opened and these have added important knowledge concerning the general layout of the town, its evolution and changing character. The present paper summarizes results of the fieldwork conducted both at SAVI East and SAVI West in 2013 and 2014.

Sai Island in Upper Nubia

The large island of Sai lies just south of the Batn el-Hagar in a prominent position and with direct access to gold ores.² The Pharaonic town was set up on the eastern edge of the large island, overlooking the river in a good strategic position. The town has the typical shape of an Egyptian walled settlement of the New Kingdom. It is commonly assumed that the eastern part collapsed into the Nile (see below).³ Because a statue of the king Ahmose Nebpehtyra was found at the site in the 20th century AD, most scholars associate this ruler with the foundation of the Pharaonic town.⁴ Sai might have functioned as a 'bridgehead' (Davies 2005, 51) for the Egyptians during their campaigns in the early 18th Dynasty against Kerma.⁵ Previous research at the Pharaonic site has concentrated on the temple

and its surroundings⁶, the southern sector⁷ and remains along the northern enclosure wall⁸. Well known facts are that Thutmose III founded the sandstone temple (Temple A) with the viceroy of Kush Nehy being responsible for these building activities, obviously conducted in several phases.⁹

Recent Fieldwork on Sai

Since 2012, AcrossBorders is working in the town area on Sai Island. The environmental setting of the Pharaonic town is one of key interest for AcrossBorders – we aim to reconstruct the landscape of the New Kingdom and to understand the associated geology in detail.¹⁰

In 2014, a geological survey was conducted by Erich Draganits (Draganits 2014, 20-22). His research focused on two essential questions: (1) the appearance of the sandstone cliff during the 18th Dynasty; (2) possible locations for a harbour or a landing place. According to Draganits, from the geoarchaeological point of view there has been no severe erosion in the eastern part of the island. This is mainly based on the observation of the low incision rate of the Nile (Draganits 2014, 22). The existence of a broad Nile terrace east of the Pharaonic site and the presence of Nubian sandstone without indications for slope failure below the town are additional arguments for this assumption. It is therefore likely that the eastern town wall once ran along the clifftop, thus further towards the west than previously thought. The previous reconstruction of the width of the town of up to 140m has to be modified and is now thought to have been at least 20m less wide.¹¹

To date, no clear harbour location has been confirmed for the period of the New Kingdom. However,

¹ See Budka 2013; Budka 2014a; Budka 2014b; Budka 2015.

² Cf. Vercoutter 1986, 8; Geus 2004, 114; Klemm and Klemm 2013, 568-570; Budka 2014b, 56.

³ Geus 2004, 115, fig. 89 (based on the reconstruction by Azim 1975, 94, pl. II); Budka 2014b, 60.

⁴ Cf. Budka 2011, 23-24; Gabolde 2012, 118-120; Budka and Doyen 2013, 170-171, 182.

⁵ Vercoutter 1973, 7-38; see also Morkot 2013, 913; Budka 2014b, 56.

⁶ Azim and Carlotti 2012, 11-63.

⁷ Azim 1975; Budka and Doyen 2013, 170-171.

⁸ Doyen 2009, 17-20; Budka and Doyen 2013, 171-182; Doyen 2014, 367-375.

⁹ Cf. Azim and Carlotti 2012, 39, 45; Davies 2014, 7-8.

¹⁰ For previous studies on the geology of the island in prehistoric time see Geus 1996, 1170-1171, fig. 5; Van Peer *et al.* 2003, 187-193.

¹¹ See Budka 2014b, 60, 78, fig. 2.

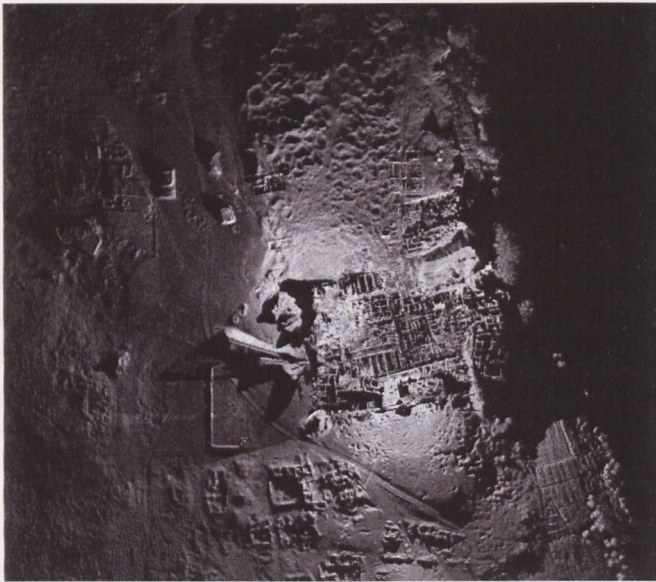


Plate 1. Results of a long-range scan of the Pharaonic town of Sai, 2014. © Robert Kalasek, TU Vienna.

the nature of the soil and the adjacent cliff suggest that there was perhaps a simple landing stage, sheltered by the steep sandstone cliff, just below the area SAV1 East.¹²

In connection with environmental studies and the creation of digital landscape models of Sai Island, a 3D laser scanning campaign of all of the town area was realised in 2014 (February 3-10, 2014). The work was carried out by Robert Kalasek scientifically assisted by Ingrid Adenstedt, using an Image Laser Scanner Riegler VZ-1000. A Nikon D200 camera with a 14mm lens was mounted on the scanner in order to record the texture. The main objective was that of achieving a complete geometric documentation of the remaining walls and floors of the southern part of the New Kingdom town. This was realized from 155 different scan positions, from which 360 degree scans were taken each time. In addition to the standing remains of the Pharaonic town to the south, the newly excavated trenches (SAV1 East and SAV1 West, see below) and sector SAV1 North were scanned and geo-referenced as well. In order to collect data for the topographic understanding of the surroundings, four long-range scans (range: 1.2km) from elevated points were also undertaken (Plate 1). In addition, the 3D laser scan resulted in very high quality elevation models of the Pharaonic town and in detailed plans of different sectors.

¹² Coring in transects was conducted and soil samples were taken in 2015 by Sayantani Neogi; the analysis is still in progress.

The next step of AcrossBorders involved the opening of excavation areas in order to achieve a better understanding of the inner structure of the town. In 2013, work began at a new excavation area just north of the temple, SAV1 East. The excavations were complemented in 2014 by a sector towards the west, SAV1 West (Plate 2).

SAV1 East (Plate 3)

SAV1 East was opened as a new excavation area in 2013, 30-50m north of the Temple A at the eastern edge of the town. The new squares are located above promising anomalies visible on the geophysical survey map,¹³ which appeared to be the outline of an orthogonal building. The structure is aligned with Temple A and the main north-south road, following the orientation of the buildings in the southern part of the town (SAV1) and suggesting an 18th Dynasty date (Budka 2013, 80-81).

The earliest remains in SAV1 East were discovered in the southern part of the new squares. Based on ceramics and the stratigraphy, they are contemporaneous with the workshop-like structures and storage facilities excavated by Azim in the zone between Temple A and SAV1 East (Azim and Carlotti 2012, 34-36). The remains predate Thutmose III and probably originate from the earliest phase of Egyptian occupation in this area, thus from the time of Ahmose or Amenhotep I (Budka 2014b, 62).

In the northern part of SAV1 East regular outlines filled with sand were revealed just below the surface. These are the negative outlines visible as anomalies on the magnetometer survey map. The Pharaonic building material, once forming the walls, has been almost completely hacked away, destruction events that can be associated with Medieval and Ottoman times. Excavations in 2013 and 2014 confirmed the orthogonal plan, alignment and date of a large structure labelled Building A.¹⁴ Pottery found in undisturbed sections of the foundation trench, allows dating the building to the mid-18th Dynasty, the Thutmoside era. Building A is thus contemporaneous with Temple A and the residential quarter in the southern part of the town.

¹³ The magnetometer survey was conducted in 2011 by Sophie Hay and Nicolas Crabb, British School at Rome and the University of Southampton; see Doyen 2014, 370, pl. 2.

¹⁴ See in more detail Budka 2013, 78-87; Budka 2014a, 28-37; Budka 2014b, 62-63.

The parts of Building A excavated to date permit a tentative reconstruction (Budka 2014a, 32, fig. 8): a roofed, narrow room or corridor towards the north with a mud floor; a large central courtyard (12.4 x 16.2m) probably flanked by a lateral room or corridor towards the east; a series of small entrance rooms in the western part, with partial remains of schist pavements.¹⁵ Of particular interest is a storage installation set in the central courtyard (Budka 2014a, 31, fig. 7). In the survey picture, this structure (feature 15) is visible as an amorphous pit; originally thought to be of an intrusive nature, it became clear in 2014 that feature 15 is a cellar set into the courtyard of Building A, undoubtedly belonging to an earlier phase.¹⁶

The most important results from work at SAV1 East are the following: The earliest remains date back to the time span between Ahmose Nebpehtyra and Thutmose I (Budka 2014b, 62). The outline of Building A confirmed the magnetometer image. Datable to the mid-18th Dynasty, it is possibly linked to the contemporaneous Temple A and connected with storage. Building A provides a parallel to SAF2, the so-called governor's residence in the southern part of the Pharaonic town.¹⁷ The orthogonal outline of the eastern part of the town thus extended much further towards the north than previously thought.

SAV1 West (Figure 1)

To understand the structure of the Pharaonic town on Sai, the outline of its enclosure wall is of great importance. Prior to 2013, sections of the enclosure wall were documented in the south and in the north. Azim succeeded in tracing the outline of the western outline of the wall through the presence of traces of mud bricks on the surface and the location of the city gate (Azim 1975, 120-122, pl. 14). With a view to confirming the reconstructed western edge of the town, a new site, SAV1 West was opened in line with the western town gate in 2014. The objective was to ascertain the date, the nature of the structure and stratigraphic position of the town wall.

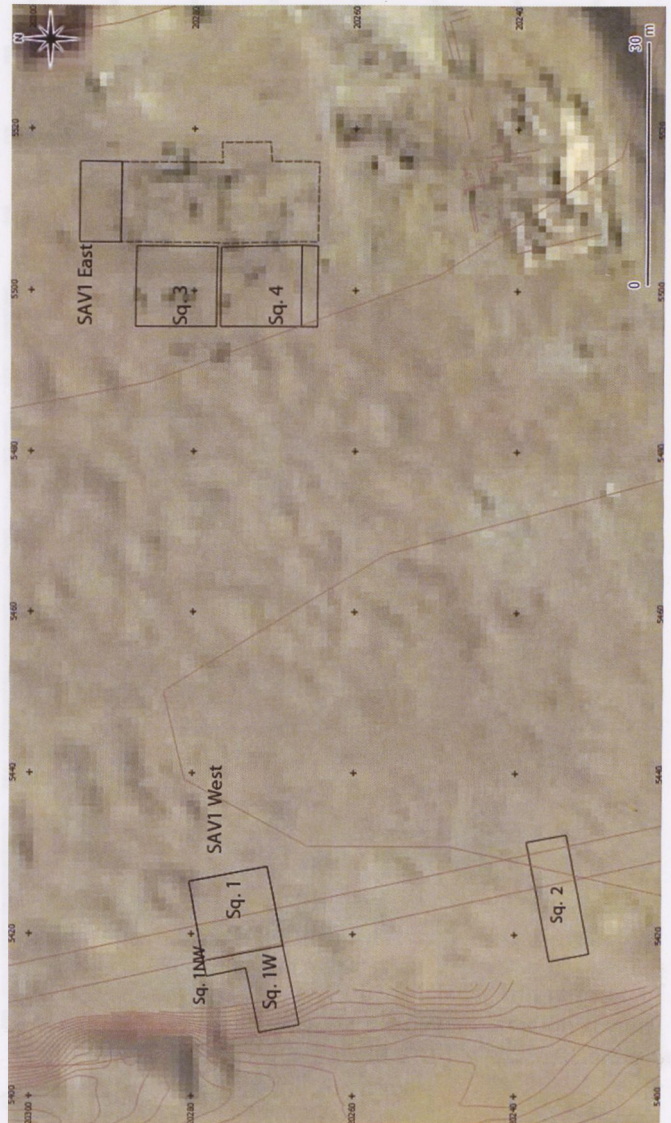


Plate 2. Location of new excavation areas SAV1 East and SAV1 West with squares excavated in 2014 highlighted. © AcrossBorders, Martin Fera.



Plate 3. Elevated view of excavation area SAV1 East, looking towards the Southeast.

¹⁵ Schist slabs with mud-plaster and traces of whitewash; other examples on Sai have been documented in the warehouse area in the southern part of SAV1 (Azim 1975, 112, pl. 10).

¹⁶ Feature 15 was completely excavated in 2015 and will be published elsewhere.

¹⁷ Cf. Azim 1975, 98, pl. 4. For these parallels see Budka 2014b, 62-63; Budka 2017.

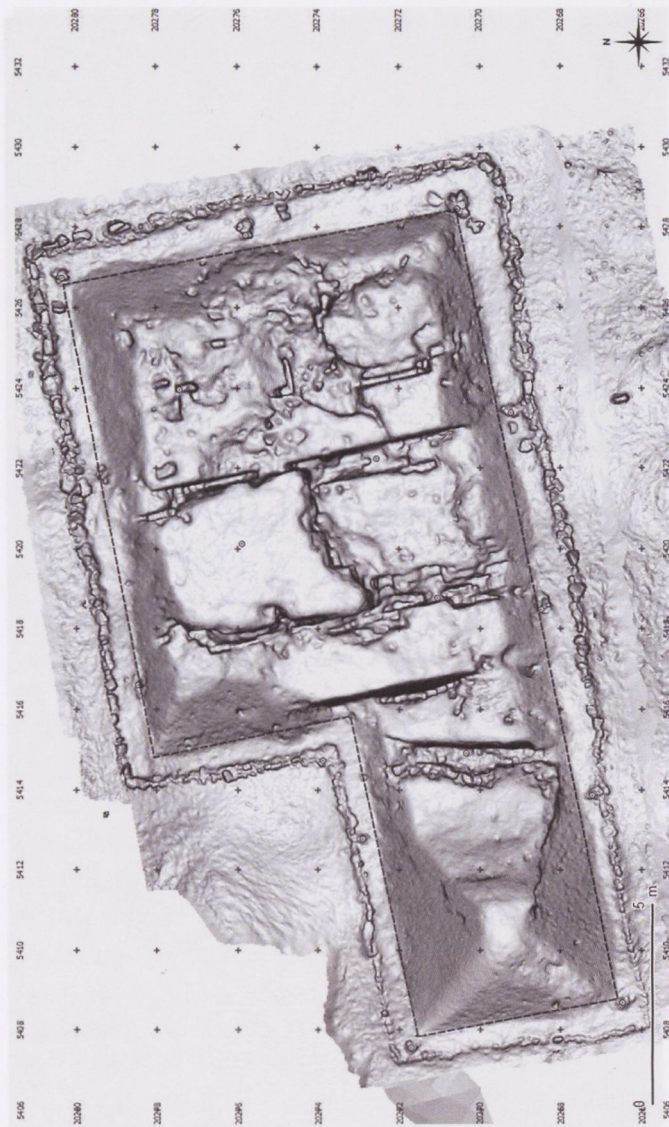


Figure 1. Plan of excavated area in Square 1, SAV1 West, status 2014. © AcrossBorders, Martin Fera.

Opening two squares in SAV1 West, we managed to trace the enclosure wall, which was in parts totally dismantled in later times. Large pits cut into the enclosure wall are filled with mostly Christian pottery. Similar holes have been dug into the brick work of the enclosure wall at SAV1 North (Doyen 2009, 17-20). As was already observed by Azim in the 1970s, the Sai fortification suffered from several periods of destruction as well as restoration phases (Azim 1975, 122). This is now confirmed by work at SAV1 West: Outside of the town enclosure, Post-New Kingdom structures have been documented. Based on numerous ashy deposits and the large volume of doum palm fruit and humus remains, these later structures were possibly temporary

shelters or animal pens. They appear to post-date the Christian destruction of the enclosure wall and might belong to the Ottoman period.

The 18th Dynasty town wall with a thickness of 4.3-4.5m follows precisely the outline previously assumed by our French colleagues (Geus 2004, 115, fig. 89); (Figure 2). No tower was found along the section examined.¹⁸ On the inner side of the town enclosure, a small 'wall street' running along the temenos was documented. This lane was observed also in the north and south on Sai Island and finds parallels in other Egyptian fortified towns.¹⁹ Stratigraphic deposits preserved in the street area will be tested to determine whether this was indeed a public space along the town wall, or merely the space at the rear of houses where domestic waste was discarded. Adjacent to the small lane, there is a series of small mud brick structures with several phases of use. According to the ceramics, we can establish a New Kingdom occupation from the mid-18th Dynasty to the early 19th Dynasty.

The remains of 18th Dynasty structures along the enclosure wall in SAV1 West are very similar to those found in SAV1 North.²⁰ Both areas are characterised by simple domestic buildings of small dimensions with oven installations, cellars and storage bins. Other than in SAV1 North, no remains datable to the early 18th Dynasty (Ahmose to Thutmose I) were discovered at SAV1 West. The earliest building phase is connected with the foundation of the town enclosure, datable to Thutmose III.

The Material Culture of Pharaonic Sai

One of our main objectives is to evaluate the life style on Sai according to the material culture, combining several methods and archaeometric analyses with the archaeological data. A complex mixture of Nubian and Egyptian elements can be observed suggesting an entanglement of the Nubian and Egyptian cultures.²¹ Pottery, small finds, tools and various types of equipment are currently being analysed in detail and related to their associated finds, architecture and past human activities.²² The functional, economic and social sig-

¹⁸ Cf. Azim 1975, 98, pl. 4, 120 (southern wall); Doyen 2009, 18 (northern wall); Budka and Doyen 2013, 178.

¹⁹ Cf. Budka and Doyen 2013, 179 (with a parallel at Buhen).

²⁰ See Budka and Doyen 2013, 171-177.

²¹ Cf. Budka and Doyen 2013, 198; Budka 2014b, 68-69.

²² Cf. the seminal publications by Kemp and Stevens 2010 and 2011, *passim*.

nificance of these finds will be assessed as best as possible.

Objects of Egyptian type and style dominate the material assemblage at Sai, reflecting observations made at other Egyptian Nubian towns²³ and sites located in Egypt proper. However, there are also some differences with the New Kingdom Egyptian sites. For example, moulds for small faience objects, very commonly attested at Egyptian sites, are completely missing. Clearly there was no faience production on Sai Island during the New Kingdom (Budka and Doyen 2013, 188).

The corpus of finds from both excavation areas (SAV1 East and SAV1 West) is extremely rich and comprises numerous pottery sherds and vessels, as well as a large number of stone tools, mostly pounders and grinding stones. The pounders consist of simple natural stones, used as found, mostly of quartz (white, yellow, red or brown outside, whitish inside). Other materials found are also locally available and comprise siliceous shale (greenish), sandstone (white, yellow, red), quartzite, flint and silicified wood. SAV1W 254 shows clear traces of red pigment, most likely red ochre, illustrating its function as a crushing tool connected to paint production (Plate 4).²⁴ Here it is worth mentioning a group of pottery sherds from SAV1 West evidently used as some kind of painting palette, since the vessels all show traces of pigments on their interior, mostly yellow, blue and some red. The forms are mostly flat based simple dishes (Plate 5) and so-called flower pots. The latter are well known as painters' pots from tomb contexts in New Kingdom Egypt.²⁵ Because all of these painters' pots were found in the eastern half of Square 1, the paint production at SAV1 West was probably carried out in one of the small mud brick structures on the inner side of the town enclosure. Further excavations will hopefully permit a more precise reconstruction of this production process.

Other finds from both SAV1 West and SAV1 East include faience objects, clay figurines and re-used sherds which mirror the corpus documented from SAV1 North (Budka and Doyen 2013, 181-188). Among the highlights of the 2014 season were a fragment of a mid-18th Dynasty stela from SAV1 West (Budka 2014b, 66-67, 85, fig. 11) and fragments of Nun-bowls.

²³ See Millard 1979; Smith 2003, 101; Budka and Doyen 2013, 182-188.

²⁴ Observation by Silvia Prell, who studied the macrolithics from SAV1 West in 2015.

²⁵ See e.g. Brack and Brack 1977, 80.

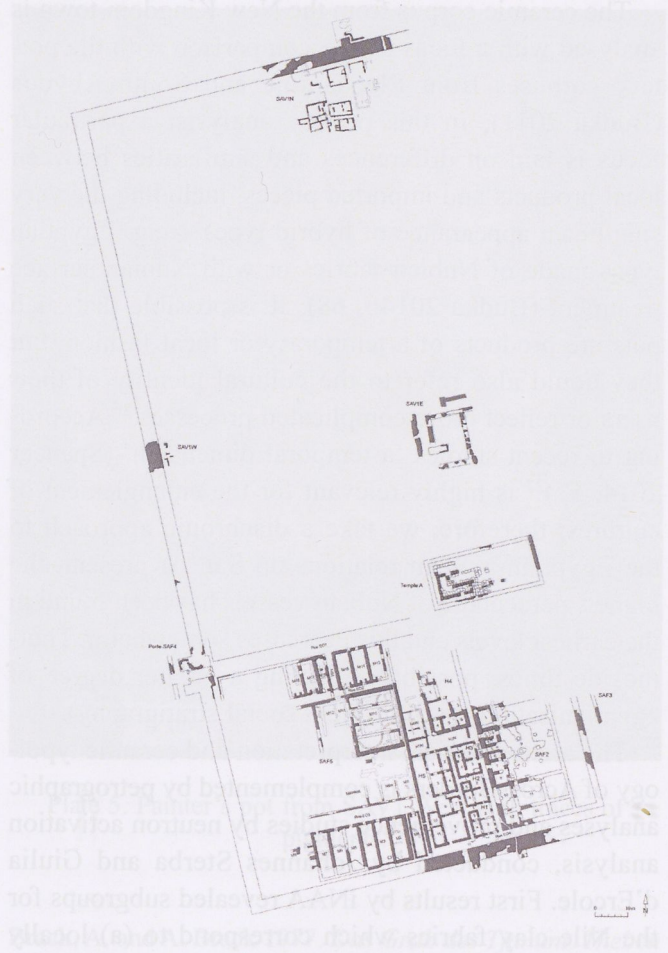


Figure 2. The Pharaonic town of Sai Island with remains of the mid-18th Dynasty including the new excavation sectors SAV1 West and SAV1 East, status 2014. © AcrossBorders Ingrid Adenstedt.



Plate 4. Pounder SAV1W 254 with traces of red pigment. © AcrossBorders, photo: Silvia Prell.

The ceramic corpus from the New Kingdom town is analysed with a focus on the comparison with the pottery corpuses from Elephantine and South Abydos (Budka 2011). In this pottery analysis, a particular focus is laid on differences and similarities between local products and imported pieces, including the very significant appearance of hybrid types – e.g. Egyptian types made of Nubian fabrics or with Nubian surface treatment (Budka 2014b, 68). It is possible that such pots are products of a temporary or local fashion, but they could also refer to the cultural identity of their users or reflect more complicated processes.²⁶ According to recent studies ‘a temporal dimension’ (Spencer 2014, 57)²⁷ is highly relevant for the entanglement of cultures; therefore, we take a diachronic approach to the Egyptian-Nubian relations on Sai. At present, the highest percentage of Nubian vessels has been found in the earliest levels and this decreases somewhat in Thutmoseid times, possibly reflecting a greater degree of egyptianisation (or a different social stratigraphy).

The archaeological interpretation and ceramic typology of AcrossBorders is complemented by petrographic analyses and provenience studies by neutron activation analysis, conducted by Johannes Sterba and Giulia d’Ercole. First results by iNAA revealed subgroups for the Nile clay fabrics which correspond to (a) locally produced Nubian style vessels, (b) locally made Egyptian style vessels and (c) imported Egyptian style vessels (Budka 2014b, 69). Again, there appears to be a chronological factor affecting these groups – direct imports from Egypt appear to be most common during the early and mid-18th Dynasty.

In the forthcoming years, a detailed comparison between the material found in the New Kingdom town and in the contemporaneous cemeteries of Sai Island will be undertaken. The corpus of finds from the mortuary contexts is dominated by Egyptian style objects. Some of them carry Egyptian names and titles – but even if funerary objects reflect contemporaneous Egyptian styles, those individuals with Egyptian names and titles might nonetheless have been of Nubian origin (cf. Minault-Gout and Thill 2012, 415). In this respect, human skeletal material holds much potential and its study is essential to answer questions relating to identities and migration, as was illustrated by studies at Tombos (Buzon 2008, 165-182; Smith and Buzon 2014, 431-442). AcrossBorders will resume work in the large

New Kingdom cemetery SAC 5²⁸ and isotope analysis of the human remains is planned. In combining the evidence from the town and the cemeteries there we hope, during the next few years, to be able to trace the origins of the occupants of Sai and their living conditions.

Summary and Outlook

Reconstructing life on Pharaonic Sai has made considerable progress in recent years and there is new information for the complex evolution of the Pharaonic town thanks to AcrossBorders’ application of diverse methods and extended fieldwork in the town. It is now possible to connect the material remains with the changing character of the site during the New Kingdom. In the early 18th Dynasty Sai was probably not much more than a simple landing place and supply station for the Egyptians, possibly with a continuing strong presence of Kerma people (Budka 2014b, 70-71). Ahmose and his troops may have set up a small camp on Sai Island with several storage installations. Nothing indicates that the Egyptians were already involved on Sai on a permanent basis with large scale building activities.²⁹ Excavations at SAVI East and SAVI West have confirmed that this changed in Thutmoseid times: the walled settlement was set up during the time of Thutmose III and the site became an important administrative centre of Kush (Budka 2014b, 71). The reigns of Thutmose III and his successor were clearly the heydays of Sai Island in Pharaonic times, as reflected in the good state of preservation of the sites. Activities in the town can be traced until the early 19th Dynasty, but the layout of the settlement remains unclear. Major aspects of the diachronic history of Sai have become clearer, but at present it is still not possible to reconstruct details of all the phases of the Pharaonic town on Sai. Our current knowledge is restricted to well-attested activities during the mid-18th Dynasty.

The first seasons of fieldwork of AcrossBorders also allow us to posit some thoughts about the specific lifestyle within the New Kingdom town. Other than drawing artificial border lines between Egyptians and Nubians and their respective lifestyles, the objectives of forthcoming research should be to reconstruct

²⁸ For this cemetery see Minault-Gout and Thill 2012, *passim*. AcrossBorders started its fieldwork in SAC5 in 2015.

²⁹ However, a sanctuary or *hwt-k3* to house the royal statues of Ahmose and Amenhotep I must have been set up at the site; cf. Budka 2015, 69.

²⁶ Cf. Smith 2002; see also Budka 2014b, 68-69.

²⁷ See also Smith 2014, 3; Pappa 2013, 36-37.

diachronic social, economic and cultural identities at the local level. Such identities were changing, interacting and merging with each other, and the research should focus on a more direct approach to different aspects of life than accepting the stereotype perspective derived primarily from textual references (cf. van Pelt 2013, 523-550; Budka 2014b, 70).

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Plate 5. Painter's pot from SAVI West with traces of pigments.

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