

BORDERSCAPE is a multidisciplinary project that aims at investigating how the rise of the Egyptian state at the end of the 4th millennium BCE impacted and transformed the social and spatial landscape of the First Nile Cataract region. A revolutionary process such as that of state formation certainly entailed profound changes in the socio-economic structure of Ancient Egypt, which was the earliest territorial polity of human history, more so at its newly established borders.

The region of the First Cataract consists of the area of the Nile Valley stretching roughly 30 km north and south of modern-day Aswan. It is characterised by cataracts, rocky barrages that break the water flow of the river making navigation extremely difficult. The region has served as a natural and cultural, though not always political, border between Egypt and Nubia throughout much of their history. Ethnic affiliations of the local population have changed considerably through time. Evidence suggests that the communities living at the First Cataract before the 4th millennium BCE were part of a network of shared culture which began to diversify considerably during the process of state formation. It is clear that the distinction between an Egyptian and a Nubian identity was linked to the development of the Naqada culture in Upper Egypt throughout the 4th millennium when the creation of an 'Egyptian' identity became instrumental in justifying the rising political power.

The current knowledge on the topic the BORDERSCAPE project wishes to investigate is largely based on information streaming from two, often parallel, research narratives: one centring on the period before the unification of Egypt (c.3085 BCE), the so-called Predynastic Period, the other on the period after, which includes the Early Dynastic Period and the Old Kingdom. The event of the unification is therefore perceived among scholars as a sort of powerful and invisible boundary hard to cross, and this creates a discontinuity in reconstructing a critical moment of the Egyptian past, which instead should be best addressed as a historical continuum. This is the reason why the timeframe considered by the project includes both 4th and 3rd millennia BCE.

The project develops along two lines of research, one applying a spatial perspective, including insights from geospatial analysis, the other focusing on ethnicity and identity, an approach in line with an anthropological perspective.

The first research objective is to reconstruct the ancient settlement landscape. Through the analysis of sites' morphology (shape, size, function), and location in the landscape, the project intends to recover patterns of development and growth, with the expectation to provide information on when, how, and why changes happened.

The second research objective is to reconstruct the use of the natural landscape, for settlement, economic, and religious/ritualistic purposes, with the goal to define patterns of land use, identify sites interconnectedness and possible pathways, so to detect moments of discontinuity.

With the third research objective the project seeks to investigate the social landscape. The research will focus on the group affiliation of the local population, the possible differences in ethnicity (or better, in the ethnicity displayed) between the regional centre Elephantine and its hinterland, and the way the dynastic centralised power coped with identity fluidity and population mobility, in comparison to pre-dynastic times.

Another pivotal goal is to comprehend how the changes occurring in Egypt, and specifically at its southern frontier affected the socio-political dynamics in Nubia, as well as the interplay between the two neighbours.

A multidisciplinary dataset, managed through a GIS-informed relational database, which will include environmental, archaeological, artistic, textual, and bioarchaeological data, considered within a historical (Egyptological) framework, will be at the base of both lines of investigation. The methodological approach will combine the investigation of those datasets with the use of new methods of analysis and interpretation of remote sensed and spaceborne data, including digital elevation models, implemented by topographical and cartographical information. New data will be acquired from geoarchaeological fieldwork in selected areas north of the First Cataract, through the collaboration with the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project, directed by the principal investigator of the BORDERSCAPE project.

The project's outcome is two-fold: to build a new theoretical model on how this earliest example of borderscape worked and was shaped by the rising centralised power; and to create an open access Web-GIS, which will be made freely available online to benefit the wider community of the public audience, thanks to the bilateral cooperation between Norway and Poland.