

Foreword

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Traditional archaeological narratives have often marginalized Africa's role in global history, portraying it as a passive recipient of external influences. Challenging this perspective, the priority program "Entangled Africa" (SPP 2143) investigated the continent's internal dynamics, focusing on the movement of people, goods, and ideas, as well as methods of detecting these through archaeological, linguistic, and natural sciences data.

The concept of "entanglement" in archaeology, originally formulated by Ian Hodder, provided the programme's central theoretical framework. Hodder defines entanglement as a network of relationships – between humans and things, things and other things, and among humans themselves – emphasizing how material culture both constrains and enables human action. This approach has been especially productive in African contexts, where it moves beyond diffusionist or colonial models to highlight the complexity and reciprocity inherent in cultural exchanges.

Initially comprising twelve projects including a coordination and a data management project, SPP 2143 began between late 2018 and mid-2020, depend-

ing on institutional and staffing constraints of each project and its host institution. Following a successful interim evaluation, the programme was extended in 2021, with most projects receiving continued funding and a thirteenth project added. Although the original DFG funding framework concluded after six years, the individual project timelines often extended beyond this period due to staggered starts, external circumstances, and continued research engagement.

In African archaeology, the entanglement framework has been used to reinterpret interactions in regions such as Nubia and Egypt, replacing outdated ideas like "Egyptianization" with models that recognize the agency of multiple groups. Researchers including Buzon, Smith, and Simonetti (Buzon – Smith – Simonetti 2016) have emphasized cultural and biological entanglements, while Stockhammer (Stockhammer 2013) has distinguished between relational entanglement (the integration of foreign objects into local practices) and material entanglement (the creation of hybrid objects combining elements from different cultures). These perspectives shaped the guiding questions and comparative approach of SPP 2143.

Research Questions and Approach

The central hypothesis of SPP 2143 was that internal African dynamics played a more significant role in shaping societies in northern Africa than previously acknowledged. To explore this, the program adopted a multi-perspectival approach, integrating material culture, environmental data, and linguistic evidence. It focused on three guiding questions:

- What indicators of supra-regional contacts and networks can be identified? This question addressed objects or materials of non-local origin, innovative technologies, and evidence from texts.

- What forms did these interactions and networks take? Here, the analysis examined mobility patterns, mechanisms of exchange, and the motivations behind interaction.

- What patterns can be identified over time and space? This question considered geography, climate, and social change as factors shaping connectivity across six millennia.

The deliberate temporal and spatial framing of the programme focused on northern hemispheric

Africa from 4,000 BCE to 1,500 CE. This allowed researchers to explore long-term processes such as the Sahara's transformation from habitable zone to barrier, the Sahel's role as an east–west corridor, and

the rise of complex societies. Although the formal framing was broad, many projects concentrated on sub-Saharan regions and extended slightly beyond the initial chronological scope.

Programme Structure and Projects

The Priority Programme “Entangled Africa” (SPP 2143), funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), was conceived to challenge these assumptions by foregrounding Africa's internal dynamics and interregional connections. Established by the DFG Senate in April 2017 and coordinated by the Commission for Archaeology of Non-European Cultures (KAAK) of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) in Bonn, the programme supported a network of research projects reassessing Africa's position in global archaeological and historical discourse.

Initially, twelve projects were approved in 2018 (including a coordination and a data management project). A thirteenth project was added in 2021 after a successful interim evaluation. Although the DFG framework lasted six years, staggered starting dates meant that many projects extended beyond this period.

Projects were based at the following institutions: Humboldt University Berlin, Universities of Potsdam, Leipzig, Münster, Cologne, the Goethe University Frankfurt, the Cairo University, as well as the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (UFZ). Collaboration with African and international partners was central throughout, ensuring reciprocal knowledge exchange. Altogether these 13 projects were included:

- **Project 1 (P01)** – Friederike Jesse: Prehistoric Axes in the Sahara: A Neglected Find Category
- **Project 2 (P02)** – Simone Wolf: Connecting Foodways: Cultural Entanglement and Technological Transmission between the Middle Nile Valley and Central and Eastern Africa during the Early Iron Age
- **Project 3 (P03)** – Angelika Lohwasser: Interregional Linkage Investigations in Northern Kordofan (InterLINK)
- **Project 4 (P04)** – Carlos Magnavita / Zakinet Dangbet: The Lake Chad Region as a Crossroads

- **Project 5 (P05)** – Alexa Höhn: Cultivated Landscapes – Land-use and Cultural Landscape Development in North-hemispheric African Savannas
- **Project 6 (P06)** – Philipp Hoelzmann: ‘De-Greening’ of the Central Sahara: Holocene Environmental Dynamics in the Tibesti Mountains and the Ounianga Basin, Chad (DeGree)
- **Project 7 (P07)** – Iris Gerlach / Brigitta Schütt / Dietrich Raue: Routes of Interaction: Interregional Contacts between the Northern Horn of Africa and the Nile Region
- **Project 8 (P08)** – Ingo Heinrich: ClimCellMed – Climate Dynamics during the Late Holocene Derived from Cell Structure Measurements of Juniper Trees in the Eastern Mediterranean
- **Project 9 (P09)** – Henning Schreiber / Nikolas Gestrich: Connecting the Lower Middle Niger Through Borrowed Words and Shared Objects
- **Project 10 (P10)** – Hans-Peter Wotzka: Boundaries, Frontiers, and Conduits in the Middle to Late Holocene Archaeology and Palaeoecology of the Inner Congo Basin
- **Project 11 (P11)** – Brigitte Mathiak / Eleftheria Paliou: FAIR.rdm: Data Management as a Basis for Meaningful and Fair Use of Archaeological Legacy Data
- **Project 12 (P12)** – Jörg Linstädter: Coordinator Project
- **Project 13 (P13)** – Sonja Magnavita: Tracing Connections: Chemical Analysis of Archaeological Pottery (added in second phase).

Working Groups and Collaboration

To encourage dialogue and comparison across projects, the programme established nine working groups. These groups were organized around thematic, methodological, or regional concerns, allowing researchers to combine their expertise and approach shared problems collectively.

A regional working group focused on Northern Kordofan, highlighting its position as a crucial link between Nubia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Thematic working groups investigated broader questions such as the spread of cultivation systems, comparing the dynamics of savanna economies with those of oasis agriculture, and explored the significance of river systems as drivers of interaction and exchange.

Methodological groups concentrated on building common analytical frameworks. For example, one group developed comparative pottery analysis to enable cross-regional studies, while another coor-

dated the integration of natural science data into archaeological interpretation. Additional groups addressed issues of chronology – supported by the digital platform SPP Explorer – and refined approaches to network analysis in archaeology.

Finally, the programme also supported a special initiative called “Invisible Local Perspectives”, which aimed to highlight the often-overlooked roles of women and minority groups in African prehistory and history as well as in the history of archaeological scholarship itself.

Together, these working groups created a strong foundation for cooperation. They facilitated the development of common standards, encouraged the pooling of resources, and generated comparative perspectives that would not have been possible within the scope of individual projects alone.

Flexibility in Times of Crisis

From the outset, the programme anticipated the political and logistical challenges of fieldwork in Africa. These challenges intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing crises in Tigray, Sudan, and

Mali. Projects adapted by turning to legacy collections, digital repositories, remote sensing, and online collaboration, while maintaining strong partnerships with African colleagues.

Outcomes and Legacy

SPP 2143 produced both empirical findings and scholarly innovations. One important achievement was the use of pXRF analyses, which provided new insights into technological exchange across regions. Researchers also carried out reconstructions of historical travel routes, shedding light on patterns of mobility and interaction. Through environmental modelling, the programme was able to assess the dynamic relationships between humans and their landscapes.

In addition, several projects reinterpreted legacy collections, applying new analytical methods to old-

er materials and thereby generating fresh perspectives on Africa’s past. Another major contribution was the establishment of internationally recognized standards for ceramic studies, which now provide a shared framework for comparative research. Finally, the development of open and sustainable research data management systems set a benchmark for transparency and accessibility in archaeology.

Equally significant was the programme’s impact on research culture. It challenged Eurocentric interpretive frameworks, promoted interdisciplinary and intercontinental cooperation, and built sustainable

infrastructures for open research data. Throughout, it emphasized the co-production of knowledge with African colleagues, ensuring that the perspectives and expertise of local scholars were fully integrated into the research process.

Although the funding cycle has formally ended, the networks, methodologies, and questions generated by SPP 2143 will continue to shape the future of African archaeology.

The Editors

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