

**FOCUS 1 THE JEWISH COMMUNITY AT ELEPHANTINE**Propylaeum-DOK (2022), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeumdok.00005571>

Verena Lepper

**O**PPPOSITE the city of Syene (modern Aswan), on the east bank of the Nile, lies the island of Elephantine (fig. 17). In the fifth century BC, when Egypt was under Persian rule (Dynasty 27), an Aramaeo-Jewish Diaspora community lived on the island. This famous so-called 'Jewish colony' of Elephantine has been the subject of numerous studies, especially in the fields of Jewish studies. The existence of a Jewish Diaspora in Egypt was already attested in biblical sources (Jeremiah 41:16ff; Jeremiah 42 and 43; Jeremiah 44:1ff; cf. 2 Kings 25:22–26).

A sensational discovery of fifth-century documents on papyri and ostraca found on the island confirmed the presence of Jews even at Egypt's southern border. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century several pieces from this papyrus discovery have made their way through various dealers to Europe, including today's papyrus collection of the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.<sup>1</sup> The texts of this find are all written in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the western Persian empire and therefore also of Egypt. They explain in detail the life of the Aramaic-speaking Jewish community, stationed on the border between Egypt and Nubia as a 'military colony'. A temple

to Yahweh, which must have originated before the start of Persian rule, is attested in this township. The Aramaic papyri from Elephantine were all written over a period of less than one hundred years. Many texts are precisely dated, some in accordance with the Babylonian Jewish calendar, some with the Egyptian calendar, and most of them more specifically providing the regnal year of the current Persian ruler. The uniqueness of these texts in terms of their historical importance can therefore hardly be underestimated. The oldest document to bear its own date is from year 27 of Darius I (494 BC), while the latest dates from the year 5 of Amyrtaeus (399 BC), the first post-Persian ruler of Egypt (Dynasty 28).<sup>2</sup>

The Aramaic texts of the Diaspora community of Elephantine were mainly written by its members. They are contemporary with the events they describe, without there being – as is common in biblical texts – any major time lapse, textual corruption or even later editorial intervention. Today these documents on papyri and ostraca are scattered all over the world, in various museums. They reveal aspects of political, economic and religious life, as well as family and community life. They can be grouped as follows:

- The communal archives of Jedaniah, leader of the community. Letters report on, for example, the destruction of the Jewish temple at Elephantine by Egyptians.
- The private family archives of the temple official Ananiah, who was married to an Egyptian slave woman. The archive consists mainly of legal contracts.
- The private family archives of Mibtahiah, aunt of Jedaniah. These documents cover a period of three generations or about sixty years, and also reflect private law.
- Numerous letters of an administrative and private character.
- Lists and catalogues of persons or goods (often on ostraca, rather than papyrus).
- Literary and historical works: the *Story of Ahikar* and the so-called Behistun Inscription of Darius I.<sup>3</sup>

These documents are the oldest non-biblical evidence of any Jewish community in Egypt.

**17 Elephantine Island**

View from the south of the archaeological site where the Aramaic papyri were found.







**18 Aramaic document with seal from the Ananjah Archive**

Found 1906 on Elephantine Island, Egypt. 13 December 456 BC  
Papyrus. 56 × 29 cm  
Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen  
zu Berlin. P Berlin 13491

The subject of this originally sealed document is a loan agreement concerning silver. The woman Jehohen borrows the sum of 4 shekels from Meshullam, son of Zaccur, with an interest rate of 5% per month. The writer is Nathan, the son of Ananjah. The seal of the document is made of clay and is stamped with Egyptian hieroglyphs. [VL]

