



ELEPHANTINE

ELEPHANTINE (Greek version of ancient Egyptian *Ibw* “the country of the elephants,” Aram. *Yb*), the largest island in the Nile, opposite Syene (ancient Egyptian *Swn* “market,” modern *Aswān*). The island was always the administrative center of the southernmost province of Egypt, controlling the first cataract and the main frontier post en route to Nubia, but during the Achaemenid occupation (525-402, 342-332 B.C.E.) the military garrison (Aram. *haila*) increased in importance. The *rab haila* “commander of the army” had military jurisdiction over Upper Egypt as far as Memphis, though he lived in Syene. Syene was a port of call for contingents of the various ethnic elements of the empire (Persians, Phoenicians, Chorasmians, Medians, Assyrians, and Babylonians), with chapels for their divinities and the administrative seat of the Achaemenid civilian governor (*fratarak*).

In Syene a number of tombs of Semitic peoples have been excavated (Kornfeld). Under the Achaemenids a Jewish military colony (Aram. *haila yhwdaya*) was established in the city of Elephantine, with a temple (Aram. *agura* < Assyro-Babylonian) to Yaho (Vincent; Porten, 1968a; idem, 1968b; Grelot; Dandamayev; Bickerman; Bresciani, 1968).

Documents pertaining to the fortress and the Jewish military colony are written in Aramaic on papyrus and ostraca (here designated AP and numbered as in Cowley); the oldest is dated to 495 B.C.E. (AP 1). They were found mainly in the residential quarter of Elephantine. They reveal that Jews of the *haila* received monthly salaries, partly in cash and partly in kind (cereals and oil; AP 11).



According to AP 30 and 31, the temple of Yaho predated the conquest by Cambyses in 525 B.C.E. and was destroyed around 410, so completely that archeological excavation has so far brought no trace to light (Bresciani, 1968, pp. 367-68; idem, 1992, pp. 978-98; Porten, 1968b, pp. 379-80). The origin of this Jewish colony is problematic, though it is now generally accepted that it was part of the large-scale immigration into Egypt that began under Necho in the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty. During the Achaemenid period settlements of Jews, as well as other peoples, multiplied throughout the Nile valley. Certainly the Jews of Elephantine in particular revealed characteristics not consonant with orthodox monotheism: They venerated the temple of Yaho on the island (members of the colony who had moved to Migdol in the Delta sent “greetings to the temple of Yaho in Elephantine”; Bresciani, 1960); because of living close to and at times intermarrying with Egyptians, they assimilated beliefs and customs leading to a religious syncretism somewhat characteristic of the nonmonotheistic Judaism before the exile (Yaho had an associate, Anath-Yaho); they were also apparently ignorant of the deuteronomic reforms and the paschal rules (Vincent, pp. 562 ff.). These characteristics seem to prove that some Jewish settlers in Egypt left Judea (and Samaria?) before Joshua’s reforms and some may have come to Egypt directly from exile in Babylonia after Cyrus’ edict permitting reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This conclusion could explain the fact that, at the beginning of the 5th century B.C.E., some Jewish settlers spoke and wrote only Aramaic.

Certainly the settlers on Elephantine believed that they had the right to practice their own cult in the temple of Yaho, which had been built legally, undoubtedly during the period between the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem (586 B.C.E.) and its reconstruction after Cyrus’ edict, in 538 B.C.E. (Bresciani, 1992, pp. 90-91). The destruction of the temple of Yaho on the island was total. Everything was burned or stolen by Egyptian marauders, with the support of the Persian governor Vidranga and his son Nefaina, head of the garrison at Syene, while Arsames (see ARŠĀMA), the satrap, was at Susa in 411-408 B.C.E. Although no architectural traces are left, there are texts revealing that the Elephantine *agura* had five porticos of stone blocks on stone columns, as well as hinged bronze portals and a cedar roof; the cult objects included gold and silver basins. Of the various possible causes for the conflict between Egyptians and Jews were the proximity of the Jewish quarter to the temple area of Khnum and the influence of religious authorities in Jerusalem, who wanted to eliminate the heterodox temple at Elephantine (Bresciani, 1992, pp. 97-98). In fact, they subsequently permitted the Jewish colony only an



altar for incense and offerings.

The latest surviving Aramaic document from the Jewish colony on Elephantine is dated after the end of the first Persian domination in Egypt (ca. 404 B.C.E.); it is a letter sent to Elephantine from Memphis in the first year (390 B.C.E.) of Nefertiti (Twenty-Ninth Dynasty).

The Aramaic documents found on Elephantine throw light not only on the life, society, and laws of the Jewish military colony but also on the Egyptian environment in which it operated, as well as on its relations with Persian authorities in Egypt. It is important that among the papyri of Elephantine there are examples of literary texts intended for readers of Aramaic: a translation of Darius I's great cuneiform inscription at Bisotūn (q.v.) and a translation of the Akkadian "Romance of the wise Ahiqar" (minister of the Assyrians Sennacherib and Esarhaddon; Cowley, pp. 204-48). Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni were able to recover from the latter the erased text of an Aramaic customs register of sea trade for the year 475 B.C.E. (C3.7). Another fragmentary text may be the Aramaic version of an Egyptian story about a man called Bar Punesh (AP 71; Grelot, pp. 427-32; cf. Bresciani, 1990, p. 825 n. 2).

No other Jewish colonies as stable as that of Elephantine were established until the Ptolemaic period, when, in 154 B.C.E., the refugee Onias obtained permission to found a new temple in the territory of Heliopolis, in the country of Bubastis (Leontopolis, now Tell Yahūdīya "the hill of the Jews"). It remained active until its destruction in 71 C.E.; it can be identified with "the altar in the center of the land of Egypt" in "the city of the sun" (Heliopolis; Isaiah 19:18-20; Bresciani, 1986, p. 45).

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