The Forgotten Female Figurines of Elephantine

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Abstract

In spite of renewed scholarly interest in the religion of Judeans living on the island of Elephantine during the Persian period, only one recent study has addressed the religious significance of the fired clay female figurines discovered there. The present article seeks to place these objects back on the research agenda. After summarizing the history of research, it also makes a new appraisal of the role of these objects in the religious life of Elephantine Judeans. Two factors prompt this reevaluation: first, newly found examples of the same figurine types; and second, Bob Becking’s recent research on Elephantine Aramaic texts attesting the phenomenon of “lending deities.”

Keywords


The interest of Elephantine to the study of early Judaism is patent. In the fifth century BCE, during the same era that Ezra the Scribe reportedly read “the book of the law of Moses” to the Judean community in Jerusalem (Neh 8), another Judean community was living on an island at the southernmost border

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of Egypt. They, too, worshipped the deity named Yhwh—or as they referred to him, YHW. But they did not (yet) know of Moses’s instruction. As such, their religious practice provides a unique window into a form of Judean religion untouched by the Bible or its protocols. Elephantine thus offers a control case for specialists in early Judaism and an important, if vexatious, datum for historians of Israelite religion.

For these reasons among others, the study of Judean religion at Elephantine is presently experiencing an upsurge. Several recent monographs review the key Aramaic documents recovered from the island, including new texts published only in the past few years (Rohrmoser 2014; Granerød 2016; Siljanen 2017; Folmer, forthcoming). Two large-scale research projects seek to situate Elephantine Judean religion in its ancient contexts; they have received substantial funding and promise to change the field. In spite of all this renewed and deepened attention, however, only one recent study has explored a matter bearing upon that which makes Elephantine most interesting for research on Israelite religion and early Judaism (Rohrmoser 2014: 305–28). I speak of the fired clay figurines unearthed on the island—“the forgotten female figurines of Elephantine.”

Elephantine Judeans did not adhere to Mosaic law. Their noncompliance—and so also their interest for the history of Israelite religion—is nowhere clearer than in their apparent veneration of a goddess. Several Aramaic texts suggest that Judeans revered one or more female deities. Most famously, for example, a list of donations drawn up by the Judean priest Yedoniah dedicates silver to

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2 On this judgment about torah-knowledge at Elephantine, see Grabbe 2013. On the advent of paschal instruction resembling Moses’s in Elephantine, see Kratz 2009, 2011; but also Kottsieper 2002 and Becking 2016.


4 New Egyptian Aramaic texts include Lozachmeur 2006; Röllig 2013; Dušek and Mynářová 2013.

5 These projects are, first: “Elephantine im Kontext,” funded by the German Research Foundation/Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for €383,000 and led by R. G. Kratz (Göttingen), B. U. Schipper (Berlin) and B. Becking (Utrecht), which runs from 2014–2018. The second is a grant from the European Research Council in the amount of €1.5 million for V. Lepper (Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung) and entitled “Localizing 4000 Years of Cultural History: Texts and Scripts from Elephantine Island in Egypt,” which will run from 2018–2020.

6 For more on the original excavation of the island, see Kuckertz 2015; Pilgrim 2011; also Silberman 1989. For a definition of such figurines, see de Hulster 2017: 73–8.
Anat-bethel (l’ntytb’l’), a compound name featuring Anat as its first element (TADAE C3.15:128). Similarly and strikingly, a Judean man named Menaḥem swears an affidavit by Anat-Yhw (’ntyhw; TADAE B7 3:3.). Amherst Papyrus 63 exhorts its readers to “bow down to Anat” (COS 1:99; Porten 2002: 464). But these textual data remain limited in extent and disputed in meaning (Lemonnyer 1920; Vincent 1937: 622–53; van der Toorn 1992). It stands to reason therefore that the study of Elephantine Judean religion would benefit from revisiting a different line of evidence: namely, the material evidence of fired clay female figurines, which also suggest a type of goddess veneration by their insular users. The first goal of the present article is to place these objects back on the research agenda. To this end, it performs a brief summary of previous research. The second goal is to make a new appraisal of the possible role of these objects in the religious life of Judeans on Elephantine.

1 A (Brief) History of Previous Research

Since their discovery in 1907, few scholarly entries on the religion of Elephantine Judeans have considered the import of these figurines. Excepting the daily log of the original German excavators (Müller 1980) and their published excavation report (Honroth et al. 1910), the only scholars to address the figurines are Hedwig Anneler (1912: 84–5), Albert Vincent (1937: 677–80), and Angela Rohrmoser (2014: 315–28). The following section surveys each of these sources and describes how each adjudicates the religious meaning of the clay objects. As will be seen, three issues have bedeviled investigation of the forgotten

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7 References to TADAE throughout the present study abbreviate Porten and Yardeni 1986–1999.  
8 Though dating to the end of the fourth century, Amherst Papyrus 63 derives “from a community historically related to the Jews and the Arameans that served as soldiers in Southern Egypt in the 5th century BCE” (van der Toorn 2016b: 670). For more on the discovery and interpretation of Amherst Papyrus 63, see Newberry 1899; Nims and Steiner 1983; Vleeming and Wesselius 1982; 1985; Kottsieper 1988.  
9 For suggestions that the use of figurines might complement rather than compete with torah-compliance, see de Hulster 2017; Frevel 2013.  
10 While research on the actual figurines has languished, much speculation has taken place about possible cult statuary in the Judean temple at Elephantine (Cornell 2016; Granerød 2016: 109–12; Rohrmoser 2014: 186–98; Athas 2003: 315; Knauf 2002).  
11 Kraeling mentions the figurines but reprises Vincent’s discussion (1953: 68). The Egyptologist Geraldine Pinch (now Harris) cites the Elephantine artefacts in a list of “fertility figurines” and dates them to the New Kingdom/Third Intermediate Period (1993: 233). Elizabeth Waraksa also discusses the female figurines (2009: 17 n. 87; 29 n. 143; 30 n. 144).
These three uncertainties intersect: if one cannot be sure to which ethnicity the persons belonged who used these figurines, one also cannot be sure which goddess these users called upon by them, and vice versa. The significance of the figurines for Judean religion has remained basically indeterminate, perhaps contributing to their being forgotten.

1.1 Daily Log

The lead excavator Otto Rubensohn notes in his daily log that on Sunday, January 13, 1907, the team uncovered several figurines: one clay sculpture in four examples recovered from the island’s “Aramaic quarter” (Müller 1980: 83; on this “quarter,” Rohrmoser 2014: 85–103). Two of the figurines were completely preserved and red in color; all of them depict a naked woman lying on her back with arms outstretched alongside her body. A smaller figure of indeterminate gender lies alongside the naked woman to her right, reaching only to the height of her upper thigh. Of note, Rubensohn thought, were the three studs (Zapfen) above the head of one of the naked women, which looked as if she were standing in front of a cross, or bore a kind of gloriole (Honroth et al. 1910: 31). Rubensohn also documented a fifth clay object of a similar general motif, except that the latter was more truly a plaque, and on it, a naked woman stands between two pillars in a shrine.13 She is also headless due to breakage, and her child, this time to her left, is a naked girl with a distinctive high headdress. About this tableau of naked woman and child, Rubensohn asks: “Sind das aramäische Götter? Astarte?” (Müller 1980: 84). But the excavation log offers no further reflection on the objects’ significance.

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12 P. R. S. Moorey alleges that Egyptian “female terracotta images are not goddesses” (2003: 37). He is correct in a limited sense—the figurines did not straightforwardly depict a goddess; rather, “the figurines represent generic females, and not canonical images of deities,” perhaps “to protect the goddess being called upon from the very affliction she was being asked to combat … only at a particular moment of the ritual … did the figurine become the required deity” (Waraksa 2009: 169).

13 Waraksa cautions that “the figurine form of a woman lying on a bed [is] sometimes erroneously referred to as a ‘plaque,’ connoting a display function for the object that is not evident in the archaeological or textual record” (2009: 26). So, too, the women-on-a-bed figurines are not to be confused with the so-called ‘Astarte plaques’ (2009: 26 n. 133). On the latter, see Albright 1939; Riis 1949; 1960; Tadmor 1979; Nishiyama and Yoshizawa 1997: 73–9; Jackson 2006; and Moorey 2002.
Excavation Report

The published excavation report gives more detail about the findspot of the female clay figurines. They were extricated from debris lying in and around two houses of the Aramaic quarter (houses m and n; Honroth et al. 1910: 30). The excavators describe the clay figurines as resembling a well-known Egyptian type, the so-called “concubine of the dead.”\footnote{They cite several examples of this same general design found at Naukratis (Erman 1905: 165; Sieglin and Schreiber 1908: 1: 234; Petrie 1886–88: 1: 2, 58). But note Waraksa: “the concubine theory—and its terminology—has now largely been abandoned” (2009: 13–4).} However, in the excavators’

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image1.png}
\caption{The Elephantine shrine plaque (ÄM 2156).}
\end{figure}
judgment, the findspot of these figurines weighs against their mortuary function. None of the female clay figurines from Elephantine (or Naukratis) were recovered from funerary contexts. Instead they were found in or nearby to temples or homes. In view of these contexts, the excavators speculate that the naked woman represents either a human worshipper—a woman seeking pregnancy—or a goddess. But they decline to identify which goddess she could be, given the figurines’ lack of distinguishing attributes (Honroth et al. 1910: 31).

The excavation report dedicates more attention to the shrine plaque. If there could be doubt whether the reclining woman on the other figurines is human or divine, the report is certain that the woman and child between two pillars are divine. The authors were tempted to say that the goddess of this plaque is the same as the women of the other clay figurines, especially because the objects all come from the same place, but they demur, since the headdress of the smaller figure on the shrine plaque recollects art from the Levant rather than Egypt (Honroth et al. 1910: 31). No more could be said of the woman and child between two pillars than that they are probably “a pair of oriental goddesses,” an identification made more likely by their location in the island’s Aramaic quarter (Honroth et al. 1910: 31). The goddess name Astarte, raised conjecturally by the excavation log in connection with this plaque, is absent here.

1.3 Anneler and Vincent

Hedwig Anneler’s 1912 volume, *Zur Geschichte der Juden von Elephantine*, features one chapter on the religion of “the Jews” at Elephantine. After surveying the colonists’ worship of the deity Yhw as shown by theophoric names and documentary references, Anneler transitions to considering the colonists’ “other gods.” This she pursues through examination of other theophoric names, as well as the “great name-list” of *TADAE C3.15* (83). In the context of the donation list, Anneler introduces the shrine plaque and the woman-on-a-bed figurines, noting with Rubensohn the “oriental” character of the former. Anneler writes: “Diese Figuren orientalischen Charakters könnten sehr wohl Bilder der uns in den Papyri entgegentretenden Gottheiten sein”—but she does not identify which deities from the papyri the plaque might portray, nor suggest what practical purpose these figurines served (85). Like Anneler, Albert Vincent toggles from the famous donation list to the female figurines. The final two chapters of his book explore the goddess Anat and the god Ashimbethel at Elephantine, and the final four-page section of his chapter on Ashimbethel then raises the matter of “les idoles” exhumed from Elephantine (1937: 677). Despite the associative logic of this presentation, Vincent advises that the shrine plaque does not permit its goddess and child to be named. He suggests
that the woman-on-bed figurines may have had a mortuary or ex voto function, but makes no claim about what Judeans might have done with the shrine plaque.

1.4 **Rohrmoser**

Angela Rohrmoser treats the female figurines under the heading, “domestic cult” (Hauskulte), i.e., the form of “Judeo-Aramean” religion pertaining to family life, including offerings to household gods, care for the dead, and fertility.\(^{15}\) After a lengthy section on the wooden figurines recovered from Elephantine, Rohrmoser addresses the shrine plaque (2014: 315–28). She provides a general overview of the naked goddess motif in ancient Near Eastern iconography. Of more importance to her interpretation, however, are the very close analogies to the Elephantine shrine plaque she cites from the 11th c. Gaza region and from Memphis, Egypt, possibly from the 7th c. BCE. Rohrmoser remarks on the culturally mixed iconography of all these shrine plaque exemplars: their façade and Hathor capitals look Egyptian, while the shape of the two figures—especially the headdress of the child—appears Levantine (2014: 316, following Honroth et al. 1910: 32 and Anneler 1912: 85). Rohrmoser follows Amihai Mazar’s prior conclusion that the cultural derivation of the shrine plaques is Phoenician—whether Phoenicians resident in Gaza or expatriated to Memphis—and on this basis she proposes that the Elephantine shrine plaque may not have belonged to a member of the Judean community, but rather to a Phoenician soldier stationed on the island.\(^{16}\) While Mazar relates the other shrine plaques to “cult practices [of] Astarte” (Mazar 1985: 14), Rohrmoser does not. She raises the possibility that the woman and child of the plaque depict the god(esse)s AnatYHW, Anatbetel, and/or Ashimbethel known from Aramaic papyri, but she rules out verification. As to their function, Rohrmoser tentatively supposes a magical ritual of fertility or initiation; she observes that the broken condition of the plaques and their location in waste debris indicate that their function was one-time only, after which their users disposed of them (2014: 325; also 327; cf. Waraksa 2009: 168–75).

In sum, the (brief) history of research on the forgotten female figurines from Elephantine shows a few persistent difficulties: first, uncertainty obtains, about both the users of the objects as well as their use itself. Their relevance

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\(^{15}\) Rohrmoser follows van Hoonacker 1915 in identifying the Aramaic-speakers of Elephantine and Syene as “Judeo-Aramean.” She argues they did not clearly distinguish between one another (2014: 6–8, 70–82). But cf. van der Toorn 2016a.

\(^{16}\) For evidence that Phoenicians at Elephantine were not soldiers, see Becking 2017b.
to Judean religion at Elephantine thus hangs in basic question. Relatedly, the identity of the goddess whom the figurines might depict also remains uncertain—although and notably, all of the authors reviewed above express interest in relating the goddess of the shrine plaque with the goddess(es) named in textual materials recovered from the island, especially the famous donation list *TADAE* C3.15.

2 A New Appraisal

Several factors demand a new appraisal of the significance of the forgotten female figurines for Judean religion at Elephantine. The first and most important is further material finds: examples of figurines in both types have been found which no prior treatment of the Elephantine objects includes. These material finds hold important implications for determining the users of the female figurines from Elephantine—ruling out some users in the case of the woman-on-bed figurines and relativizing the issue of users in the case of the shrine plaque. The material finds may also contribute to our understanding of the iconography of the shrine plaque by limiting the range of goddesses it could have evoked. The other factor that prompts reevaluation comes from the textual data (although—to note—not *TADAE* C3.15). Recent research by Bob Becking suggests a relativization in another direction—not of the goddess iconography but of the goddess’s identity itself within a multicultural environment like that of Elephantine (Becking 2017a; see also Johnson 1999).

2.1 Material Finds

Materially, the number of woman-on-bed figurines recovered from Elephantine now exceeds those known to the previously cited authors, as the publication of the Clermont-Ganneau and Clédat archives makes clear (Delange 2012). In their section on clay materials, Pascale Ballet and Christiane Lyon-Caen list sixteen examples of the woman-on-bed motif. They date these woman-on-bed examples to the 20th or 21st Egyptian dynasties (12th–10th centuries BCE), including, retroactively, the figurines that Rubensohn had discovered in the initial excavations on Elephantine (Ballet and Lyon-Caen 2012: 349–51). Kopp cites thirty-two fragments of figurines made from the same woman-on-bed design and dates them to the same period as Ballet and Lyon-Caen (2005: 89). The repertoire of woman-on-bed figurines from wider Egypt is, of course, abundant (Pinch 1993; Waraksa 2009). This dating of the Elephantine objects to the 20th or 21st dynasties indicates, then, that even by the earliest estimates
of their arrival, Judeans would not have been their users. The woman-on-bed figurines are consequently irrelevant to the profile of Judean religion. This is a major, if negative, development for the study of the forgotten figurines relative to the history of research.

The shrine plaque that Rubensohn discovered remains, on the other hand, unique—at Elephantine. But in addition to Mazar’s 1985 catalogue of similar “pottery plaques depicting goddesses standing in temple facades,” the Elephantine shrine plaque has now been joined by many other Egyptian examples of similar design. Donald Bailey’s Catalogue of the Terracottas in the British Museum lists three mold-made shrine plaques picturing nude females; he dates them to the Late Period or early Ptolemaic era (2008: 41–2). Ross Thomas, building on Bailey’s work, records numerous other examples of “[t]erracotta figure-plaques depicting nude female figures in shrines,” indeed dividing these figurines into several sub-types (Thomas 2015: 36; cf. Cornelius 2004). Thomas notes that these objects representing “women standing in the entrance to an Egyptian chapel” are distinct from the figurines featuring the woman-on-bed motif; shrine plaques date to a later period, namely, the Saite, Persian, and Hellenistic (600–275 B.C.E.), and reflect influence from the “Astarte plaques” of the Levant (Thomas 2015: 55). In terms of users, these comparative data enable us to place the Elephantine shrine plaque in the same period as to have been used by Judeans, Arameans, or other inhabitants of the island in or nearby to the 5th century B.C.E.—the era of Ezra the Scribe, as it were.

So much for the meaning of the material finds for the users of the forgotten figurines. As it turns out, the woman-on-bed figurines are too early to have been used by Elephantine Judeans. The shrine plaque, by contrast, dates to the time of Judean habitation of the island, although no other characteristics certainly connect the plaque to their religious practice as opposed to others. The shrine plaque dates to the right time that Judeans could have used it, but the Persian garrison on Elephantine was deeply multicultural; users of the plaque could have belonged to any of the more than ten ethnic groups that were present on the island: Persians, Judeans, Arameans, Medes, Khwarezmians, Caspians, Bactrians, Carians, Phoenicians, Lybians, Arabians, and, of course,

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17 The earliest reckoning of Judean arrival in Egypt is MacLaurin, who argues that they were Hebrews who remained after the exodus event (1968), but this now seems credulous (Rohrmoser 2014: 74; also Siljanen 2017: 47–8). For a recent case for a pre-Persian date of arrival, see Fitzpatrick-McKinley 2016; cf. Grelot 1972: 33–48.

Figure 2  Unprovenanced Egyptian shrine plaque (ÄM 12464).© SMB ÄGYPTISCHES MUSEUM UND PAPYRUSAMMLUNG.
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDRA STEIS

the local Egyptians (Becking, forthcoming; cf. Porten and Lund 2002: 439–41). So, too, with regard to the identity of the goddess on the shrine plaque, many or most of the peoples residing on the island venerated a goddess, and so in principle the shrine plaque could have evoked any one of them. Perhaps the design of the plaque makes it more probable that its user(s) were of Syrian or Levantine derivation rather than, say, Anatolian or Central Asian. But in such a cosmopolitan environment, even this is impossible to claim with confidence.

In spite of this abiding uncertainty, which also afflicted past treatments of the Elephantine figurines, comparison of the Elephantine plaque with other Egyptian shrine plaques may relativize the question of the object’s users—in a way that revives its relevance to the character of Judean religion there. The first thing that such comparison reveals is the transferability of goddess iconography. Because the woman on some shrine plaques wears a Hathor-headdress, scholars have identified these figurines as, in Thomas’s articulation, “representations of, or votive offerings in honour of, Hathor (Isis, Aphrodite, Astarte or Anuket) (2015: 65). The meaning of Thomas’s parenthesis is this: though visually telegraphing the Egyptian goddess Hathor, the woman could have received any number of names applied to “equivalent deities” worshipped across the Egypto-Levantine cultural realm (Thomas 2015: 56). In other words, the same nude female image was likely transferable to various goddesses depending on regional cults and practices. Elizabeth Waraksa writes similarly:

Uninscribed female figurines such as those from the Mut Precinct, which we have seen were produced en masse to standardized forms, could have served as any one of the numerous goddesses summoned in magico-medical spells (Isis, Mut, Selqet, etc.) depending on the nature of the threat and/or the locale where the rite was being performed (2009: 147; cf. also Redford 2017: 144)

The same image of a goddess standing on the mold-made shrine plaque could have served as an icon for various goddesses, depending on who the users of the object were. This means that even if it could be determined that a Phoenician, for instance, manufactured the figurine or was once its user, this would not rule out that other religionists on the island of Elephantine identified their own goddess from its image. Whoever made it and used it, it could also have been used by Judeans. Indeed, given its findspot in a domestic context in the so-called Aramaic quarter during the period of Judean habitation on the

20 See also the following works on Elephantine onomastica: Silverman 1969; 1970; Porten 2002; 2003a.
21 Cf. the issue in LeMon and Strawn 2013: 104–12, depending on Bonfiglio 2016.
island, it is probable that a Judean would have laid eyes on this object. It is hard to think that in such a scenario they would not have given it some religious interpretation. These facts do not certify that Judeans would have seen a goddess of their own in the woman on the plaque—but they keep this possibility open.

A second consideration that arises from comparison of the Elephantine shrine plaque with other, similar exemplars does not address the object’s users so much as the range of goddesses it may have been thought to represent. Comparison with other artefacts raises the possibility that the Elephantine shrine plaque is a miniature. That is: some scholars understand the architectural façade within which nude female figurines stand as referring to (a) real temple(s). Mazar for example argues that Phoenicians resident in Memphis manufactured many of the shrine plaques in his catalogue—and that these plaques reflect in miniature the local cult of Astarte (1985: 14). Thomas lists out several possibilities for what kind of real-life Egyptian temples the shrine plaques may suggest (2015: 56). The point is, the iconography of these objects likely evoked actual temple buildings and cult statuary. Karel van der Toorn writes that “[r]eplicas of cult images as well as miniature shrines kept the memory of the real images and the real shrines alive and kindled the devotion of those who possessed them” (2002: 58; cf. Margueron 2006).

It is possible, then, that if the pillared shrine depicted on the Elephantine plaque corresponded to a real-life temple, this temple could have been anywhere in the Persian empire: perhaps a homesick Syro-Anatolian used the Elephantine plaque exactly because his real temple at home was inaccessible and remote. But some research suggests that temple miniatures served the religious needs of people who worshipped in those very same temples: indeed that domestic religion “ran parallel” to the official cult (Routledge 2006; Strawn 2015: 95–8). The Tel Qasile shrine plaque, for example, was found inside a real temple—the same edifice that it apparently miniaturizes (Bunimowitz 1990: 213–5; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 101; but cf. Ziffer 2010: 61 and de Hulster 2017: 79). If this realistic character holds true for the Elephantine plaque, then its façade could evoke any one of seven local temples, three on the island and four in Syene across the river: on Elephantine, the temples of Khnum, Sati, and YHw, and in Syene, the temples of Nabu, Banit, Bethel, and the Queen of Heaven (Porten 1968: 164–5). The design of the plaque itself may suggest that it signals a Syro-Levantine temple rather than an Egyptian, but of course this is impossible to establish. In any case, considering the plaque as a miniature could narrow the range of goddesses it represents to one of the following worshipped within these seven local temples: Sati, Anuket, Anatbethel (?)
Banit, and the Queen of Heaven. On these grounds, the shrine plaque has a not insubstantial chance of referring to a goddess who received worship from Judeans.

2.2 **Textual Research**

The other factor prompting reevaluation of the Elephantine shrine plaque comes from the textual data (though not *TADAE* C3.15). Bob Becking has written recently about the phenomenon of “lending deities”: occasions when members of one ethnic group invoke deities worshipped by another group. Becking’s first example from Elephantine is a group-internal communication and his second is group-external. In *TADAE* D7.30 (Dupont-Sommer 1944; Lozachmeur 2006: 410–2), a Judean man greets his brother with a salutation involving the Babylonian deities Bel, Nabu, Shamash, and Nergal. Becking argues that this greeting should not be taken as evidence of syncretism—or of conversion. Instead, use of Babylonian deity names in a message between Judeans shows a sort of casual indifference to ethnic particularity: “the four gods mentioned are not specifically presented as Babylonian deities” (2017a: 38). The deity names function rather as indices for divinity in general. A similar phenomenon appears in the Sayings of Aḥiqar, in which divine names have probably been emptied of ethnic particularity so as to serve within an international wisdom document. These and other examples suggest “awareness among various groups in Elephantine and Syene that despite the differences in naming the divine, all groups accepted the existence of the divine world that could be invoked by using either the general terms or specific names” (Becking 2017a: 34).

Becking’s second example is *TADAE* B2:2 (Sayce and Cowley 1906: 36–7; Fitzmyer and Kaufman 1992: 72). This juridical document settles a dispute

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**Notes:**

22 Granerød conjectures that the Queen of Heaven may have been the consort of the (male) deity Bethel and so perhaps also identified with Anat (2016: 256).

23 The ethnic identity of the sending party (*Yrhw*) is disputed (Porten 1968: 160; 2003b: 463; also Ginsberg 1969 and Grelot 1972: 88), but see Becking’s argument that both sender and recipient are Judean (2017a: 32–34). Becking observes, an extended great uncle of Abraham’s bears the name Jerah in the Bible (Gen 10:26 // 1 Chr 1:20), and the straightforward meaning of Aramaic “brother” is biological, though it also can refer to non-kin comrades. Becking’s argument about the “lending” of deities probably stands regardless of *Yrhw*’s ethnicity.

24 For similar observations about the deities of Aḥiqar, see Niehr 2007: 23; Kratz 2016: 50–4; Granerød 2016: 308–20. Kratz summarizes the message of Aḥiqar as such: “fear the gods and the king!” This kind of generic interpretation is preferable to scholarship that locates Aḥiqar and its gods to one ethnic enclave (Lindenberger 1982; Weigl 2010: 73–9).
between two property owners on Elephantine, a Khwarezmian named Dar-
gamana and a Judean named Mahseiah. Both men had laid claim to a piece
of land adjacent to Dargamana’s home (see TADAE B2:3). Their dispute came
before a court—presided over by a Persian judge—which required of Mah-
seiah that he swear by a god that the land belonged to him, or else suffer
divinely wrought harm. Mahseiah swore by his Judean deity, Yhw. What inter-
est Becking is that the oath satisfied Dargamana; the Khwarezmian respected
the force of the affidavit—and the deity who enforced it—and renounced his
claim to the land. “The text does not imply that Dargamana converted to Juda-
ism—or [to] its predecessor. The text confirms the acceptance of a deity of
someone else as an observing witness to a human agreement” (Becking 2017a:
42; cf. Granerød 2016: 46).

Becking acknowledges that it is difficult to build a thesis from only two
cases—but many more could be found that would demonstrate his closing
point. “They can be understood as examples of both the mutual acceptance
of both the variety and the unity of the divine in Elephantine” (2017a: 43). In
other words, diverse peoples at Elephantine, including Judeans, recognized
the reality and power of the divine world, to which they all shared access. They
also respected that this access took place under different names belonging to
particular religious traditions.25

One further textual example reinforces Becking’s argument and draws it
more directly towards the topic at hand, of possible Judean goddess worship.
In TADAE B2.8 (Sayce and Cowley 1906: 42; Fitzmyer and Kaufman 1992: 75), a
couple undergoing divorce determines how to split their assets. The husband,
an Egyptian named Pi, relinquishes his title to any property claimed by his ex-
wife, a Judean woman named Mibtahiah. She had earlier taken an oath that
several goods belonged to her. Notably, she swore by Sati—an Egyptian god-
dess. But why? Some scholars have answered in terms of Mibtahiah’s conver-
sion to Egyptian religion (Halévy 1907: 111). But Becking’s argument pulls in a
different direction: not that Mibtahiah had converted—and nor that she swore
pragmatically and inauthentically (so Porten 1968: 153). Instead, Mibtahiah
swore by a divine power whose ability to harm perjurers she respected. She
used the name Sati for this power, perhaps out of deference to her husband’s
religious convictions, but not because she doubted its efficacy.

This brings us back to the Elephantine shrine plaque. The preceding three
arguments do not establish that Judeans used the shrine plaque or saw in it
a representation of a goddess whom they venerated. But the first argument

25 Becking elsewhere writes that “the inscriptions from Elephantine give us ... insight into a
pre-final and obviously liberal phase in the construction of Jewish identity” (2008: 189).
above relativizes the question of the figurine’s users. Even if the manufacturers of the object were not Judean, Judeans may still have seen and interpreted it religiously; indeed it is difficult to think that they did not, given its findspot in the quarter where they lived. The second argument narrows the range of possible goddesses that the plaque could depict. If the shrine plaque miniaturizes one of several local temples, then the chances that the goddess it portrays received worship from Judeans are not insubstantial. Finally, Becking’s argument from textual data effects a relativization in a different direction—not of the goddess iconography but of the goddess’s identity.26 That is to say: even if other evidences could prove that the users of the shrine plaque used it to invoke the goddess Sati, it appears that in Elephantine, Judeans might still have respected her religious power. In such a multicultural place, they may well have honored their neighbor’s use of this object, even under a non-Judean deity name, as an efficacious point of access to the divine world they shared in common.

3 Conclusion

Interest in the religion of Judeans living on the island of Elephantine is rising. During the same time that forms of early Judaism centered on Mosaic torah were emerging—exemplified by the story of Ezra the Scribe reading the book of the law—a quite alternative strain of Yhw(h) worship subsisted in Persian Egypt; its innocence of Moses’s instruction is clearest in the Elephantine Judeans’ apparent practice of goddess veneration. Although scholars have subjected the textual evidence for such veneration to searching investigation, the material testimony of fired clay female figurines from Elephantine has rarely been consulted. The present article calls for more scholarly attention to these objects; to guide and situate further discussion, it provided a brief history of previous research on them. It also made a new appraisal of the possible significance of these figurines for Elephantine Judean religion. On the one hand, new material finds indicate that the woman-on-bed figurines are too old for Judeans to have used them. On the other hand, comparison with other shrine plaques contemporary with the plaque recovered from Elephantine suggests that Judeans could have understood the Elephantine example as an object

26 This result is consonant but not identical with the recent judgment of Susan Redford concerning shrine plaques found at Mendes: “whoever was being represented on the plaque, whether Isis, Cybele, Astarte, Hathor, or even Aphrodite, it may not have been of real consequence to those seeking the benefits of fertility” (2017: 145).
capable of invoking a locally-worshipped goddess—even if non-Judeans produced it or were its primary users. The present article also applied Bob Becking’s insight from the study of Elephantine texts to the shrine plaque: whether it was their own or their neighbors’, Elephantine Judeans would likely have treated a deity name or a deity image as a real means of contact with divine powers whose activity might affect them and their neighbors alike.

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