INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NAS-7
Whose Elephantine?

3 Yishay St.
Abu Tor
Jerusalem, Israel
April 19, 1985

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, New Hampshire, USA

Dear Peter,

When I visited the German-Swiss excavations on Elephantine Island near Aswan, Egypt, I was only vaguely aware of the century-long archaeological controversy connected with the site. I knew that a large and important collection of ancient papyri had been found there at the turn of the century, but I assumed that any rivalries or bitterness arising from that discovery had been long forgotten by scholars today. Elephantine Island didn't seem to be a place conducive to bad feelings. In winter, when I was there, its weather is balmy; its scenery of palm groves and ruins in the middle of the Nile is idyllic; and its relative isolation, 400 miles south of Cairo, makes it a popular tourist spot. But as I later discovered, Elephantine's recent history is as noteworthy for the jealousies and mutual suspicions its antiquities have aroused as it is for its apparent tranquility.

The archaeological controversy on Elephantine Island began innocently enough. In the winter of 1893, a wealthy American businessman and amateur archaeologist, Charles Edwin Wilbour of New York City, arrived in Aswan on his private yacht and stumbled onto an incredible find. When word spread that he was a collector anxious to purchase antiquities, some local women approached him and sold him 9 complete papyrus scrolls. The precise location of the discovery was uncertain, but Wilbour immediately recognized the value of the ancient documents. They were written in Hebrew characters-- not Egyptian hieroglyphics-- and only a few scraps of similar documents had been discovered in Egypt before. Wilbour packed them away on his return to America and apparently intended to make the most of his good fortune by translating and publishing the scrolls himself. He therefore kept the discovery secret and the existence of the 9 scrolls from Elephantine Island was still unknown to the scholarly world when he died suddenly in 1896.

It did not take long, though, for other scrolls acquired by foreigners in Aswan to surface. And the information they contained created a sensation in Europe equalled only by the much later discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The papyri proved to be legal

---

Neil Silberman is an Institute Fellow studying the political and cultural impact of current archaeological research in the Middle East.

documents, written in Aramaic, by the members of a garrison of Jewish mercenary soldiers and traders stationed on Elephantine Island in the 5th century BC. This was the shadowy historical era described in the Biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, from which practically no other Jewish texts had survived. The scrolls were therefore of inestimable value for understanding Hebrew laws and customs of the late Biblical period, and scholars from Britain, France, and Germany soon began a mad scramble up the Nile to obtain more of the precious documents.

The key to additional discoveries was knowledge of the provenance of the earlier papyri, but the antiquities dealers of Aswan were understandably protective of the source of their lucrative merchandise. The documents, they said, were discovered by a work gang building a road near the new railroad station in Aswan; there was no need for the arriving scholars to look anywhere else. This explanation satisfied the French and the British, but the Germans were not deceived. Dr. Otto Rubensohn of the Berlin Museum had taken note of the extensive damage caused to the ruins of Elephantine Island by local inhabitants digging the rich soil for organic fertilizer. Believing that the island, not the mainland, was the source of the ancient papyri, he applied to the Egyptian Antiquities Service for permission to dig there himself.

Since the French director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, Gaston Maspero, had already conducted some brief excavations on Elephantine and had found only a handful of insignificant papyrus fragments, Maspero assumed that no harm would be done by indulging Rubensohn's whim. In 1906, Rubensohn was accordingly granted an excavation concession for the southwestern sector of the island, and in spite of the skepticism of his French and British counterparts, his subsequent excavations unearthed a new hoard of papyrus scrolls, buried near the foundations of an ancient structure, still contained in their original clay jar.

The information contained in these documents hit the scholarly world like a thunderbolt and they captivated the imagination of the general public as well. The earlier scrolls had hinted at the existence of an ancient Jewish place of worship on Elephantine, a temple of the Hebrew God Yahu. But Rubensohn's papyri suddenly turned those hints into a vivid and dramatic story that was connected directly to Biblical personalities.

The newly discovered scrolls revealed that the Jewish colonists at Elephantine, loyal servants of the Persian conquerors of Egypt, had constructed a massive religious edifice, complete with an altar for animal sacrifice. No such sanctuary was known to have existed outside Jerusalem in this period, and even more unexpected was the

fate of this temple, as reported by the ancient documents. In the 14th year of the reign of Darius II (410 BC), when the Persian satrap was temporarily absent from Egypt, a group of Egyptian priests persuaded the governor of Elephantine to order the destruction of the Temple of Yahu. The once magnificent structure was accordingly looted and burned by Egyptian troops, but the members of the Jewish garrison were determined not to be driven away. They appealed to authorities in Jerusalem for permission and funds to rebuild their place of worship, and a copy of this appeal, addressed to the High Priest Johanan and several other Jerusalem notables mentioned in the Book of Nehemiah was among the documents in the clay jar found by the German excavation team.

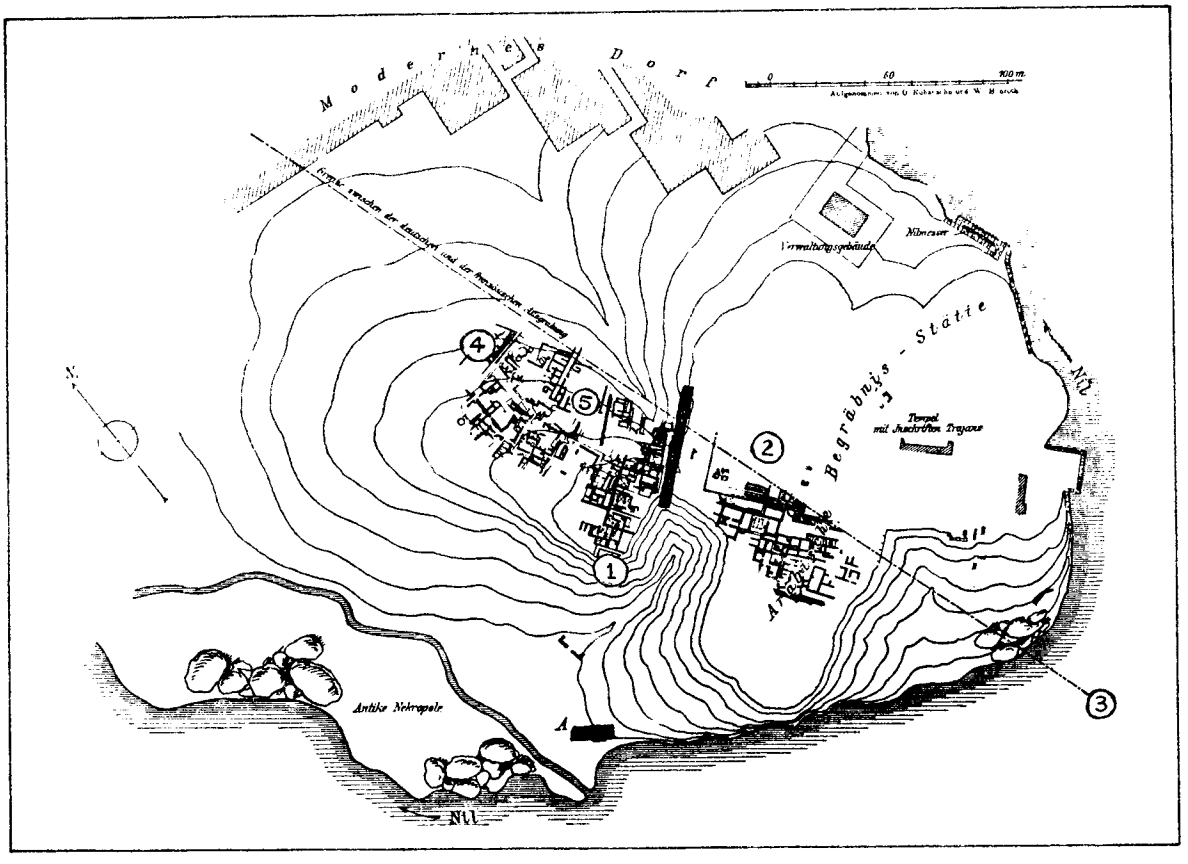
At a time when every archaeological discovery that verified the historical accuracy of the Bible was trumpeted from pulpits and praised by heads-of-state as a source of national pride, the French, who controlled the Egyptian Antiquities Service, recognized that they had missed a great opportunity and now hastened to make up for their mistake. Since the Germans had been granted only the southwestern part of the island, a French expedition headed by the renowned orientalist Charles Clermont-Ganneau, was granted the right to excavate the southeast. The two excavations were separated by a carefully drawn border that ran down the center of the island, across which neither the French nor the German excavators were allowed to encroach. Unfortunately, the remains of the ancient Jewish garrison buildings were not evenly distributed between the two excavation areas, and this fact aroused new and even more intense national bitterness.

The French expedition was, at the start, a papyrus hunt, pure and simple; Clermont-Ganneau instructed his workers to plow through the ruins relentlessly in a single-minded search for documents. If any plans of the ancient structures they uncovered were ever drafted, none have ever been found. Luck, however, did not favor the frantic French efforts. For all their digging, they found only a single tiny scrap of papyrus, and this disappointing yield caused Clermont-Ganneau to change the goal of his dig. On the basis of the information contained in the earlier papyri, he became convinced that he could uncover the ruins of the Temple of Yahu itself.

Since the ancient descriptions praised the temple's elaborate construction, with its stone pillars and gateways, Clermont-Ganneau reasoned that such an impressive structure could not have been totally obliterated and he began to search for archaeological clues. The most promising indications were the foundations of a huge structure built of granite blocks. Unfortunately, they were just across the border, in the area of the German concession, and much to Cler-

mont-Ganneau's frustration and consternation, the Germans showed no interest in digging there.

Otto Rubensohn, the German excavation director, had another theory about the location of the Temple of Yahu. He believed that it had stood about 50 meters to the south of Clermont-Ganneau's proposed site, but he was also quite certain that the structure had been completely destroyed. Thick layers of ruins from the Roman, Byzantine, and Medieval periods covered the entire area of his excavation and Rubensohn believed that the builders of these



Plan of the 1906-1909 Excavations at Elephantine Island

1. Site of papyrus discovery
2. Ruins of Temple of Khnum
3. German-French excavation boundary
4. Clermont-Ganneau's temple site
5. Rubensohn's temple site

later settlements had levelled any remaining traces of the 5th-century-BC sanctuary. And there was another factor that made the search impossible: both the French and German excavations, intended initially to ransack the ruins for papyri, had hopelessly confused the stratification of the site. With haphazard pits dug throughout the entire area and piles of discarded earth lying everywhere, any attempt to identify the structures of the ancient Jewish garrison by means of the pottery they contained would be a failure. The previously distinct archaeological levels were irredeemably mixed up.

By 1910, Elephantine Island was abandoned by both the French and German archaeologists who gave up the search for more papyri--and for the remains of Yahu's temple-- with mutual recriminations and disgust. A brief excavation by the Pontifical Biblical Institute in 1918, likewise proved fruitless and it was only in the late 1940's that a new archaeological hope was born.

The nine complete scrolls purchased by Charles Edwin Wilbour in 1893, long packed away in a trunk in a New York warehouse, were brought to light by the staff of the Brooklyn Museum to which Wilbour's daughter had bequeathed her father's large collection of Egyptian antiquities. These documents provided highly detailed information on the location of the Temple of Yahu on Elephantine Island, indicating possible alternatives in places where the earlier excavations had not dug. But by the time these scrolls were translated and published in the early 1950's, a new expedition was impossible. Egypt was officially at war with the newly-established State of Israel and the Egyptian government was unsympathetic to the idea of a renewed search for Jewish remains.

But today, Elephantine Island is once again the site of intensive archaeological activity. Since 1971, a joint expedition of the German and Swiss Archaeological Institutes in Egypt have been excavating the island's ruins and reconstructing its long and rich history. The expedition is headed by Professor Werner Kaiser, an archaeologist whose earlier work was concerned mainly with the remote Predynastic and Archaic periods of Egyptian history (c. 3400-c. 2700 BC). His methods and goals are naturally quite different from those of his archaeological predecessors at Elephantine, but as I discovered, he must still contend with a lingering controversy.

* * *

In February, when I was in Aswan, I was anxious to visit the German-Swiss excavation on Elephantine, one of the most important archaeological projects underway in Egypt today. When I called to arrange an appointment, I spoke with Professor Kaiser, who, on learning I had just come from Israel, assumed that I was primarily interested in the question of the Temple of Yahu. I hadn't yet

become aware of the long-standing debate on that subject and I explained that I just wanted to see anything that he thought significant. The next morning, when I arrived at Elephantine and introduced myself to Dr. Horst Jaritz, the architect of the expedition who was assigned to show me around, I encountered an identical reaction. Jaritz, too, thought I had come in search of the ancient Jewish sanctuary. Again I denied any ulterior motives, and the subject was quickly dropped from our conversation.

Horst Jaritz, I learned, has been at Elephantine since the beginning of the excavations and has assisted Professor Kaiser in drafting the detailed plans of the various structures they have uncovered and in planning the reconstruction of a temple built by Queen Hatshepsut around 1500 BC. Jaritz's main interest is in tracing the development of ancient settlement on the island through the form and function of its architectural remains. And as I walked with him through the widely scattered excavation areas, he described his preliminary conclusions to me.

At the southernmost tip of the island, he showed me the excavations still in progress that are uncovering evidence of the earliest occupation at the site. In the hollows and crannies of the bedrock, the excavation team has discovered a number of graves from the Predynastic period with their human remains well preserved. I watched in astonishment as one of these graves was opened; inside was a dessicated body in a contracted, fetal position surrounded by wooden utensils wrapped in woven reed mats. The warm, dry conditions of the Aswan area have insured the preservation of organic objects that would have rotted away quickly in a rainier climate. This advantage, Jaritz explained, has additional implications for the Elephantine excavations; most of the ancient structures and fortifications on the island were built of mud-bricks, and since there is no rain to dissolve them, many are still standing to almost their original height.

Along the southeastern shore of the island, Jaritz showed me the impressive remains of the fortification wall of the settlement built at the end of the Old Kingdom period around 2200 BC. By this time, the early settlement had expanded to a city, an important trade and military post controlling river communication between Egypt and Nubia to the south. As the first major strategic position below the First Cataract-- or rapids-- of the Nile, the early kings of a united Egypt used Elephantine as a fortress and customs center to monitor the rich African trade. And as inscriptions from that period indicate, the nobles of Elephantine bore the honorific title, "Keepers of the Southern Gate."

This strategic function was greatly reduced, Jaritz told me, during the Middle Kingdom (c. 2000- c. 1750 BC), when the kings of

Egypt conquered Nubia and pushed the "Southern Gate" hundreds of miles farther south. The city walls were rebuilt and even expanded in this period, but as the new excavations have discovered, the function of the city became primarily religious, as an important pilgrimage shrine. Egyptian mythology identified Elephantine as the abode of Khnum, the ram-headed god of creation, who, with his wife Satis and daughter Anukis, presided over the annual innundation of the Nile. Beginning in the Old Kingdom the patron deities of the island were honored with temples and as the centuries passed, these structures were expanded to cover most of the eastern side of the city. The earlier French excavations under Clermont-Ganneau had uncovered most of the sanctuary of the Temple of Khnum, Jaritz explained, but only recently has the new German-Swiss excavation clarified the temple plan.

The huge portal of that temple is still standing and Jaritz pointed out to me the fragmented evidence for the temple's structural history. Many rulers of Egypt, from New Kingdom times to the end of the Roman Period added something to the building; in the courtyard were the huge feet from a statue of Ramesses II (c. 1304- c. 1237 BC) and on the portal itself were the cartouches or royal insignia of Nectanebo II (360-343 BC) and of the son of Alexander the Great, also named Alexander (317-304 BC), whose flexible Hellenism easily accommodated the worship of a ram-headed god of the Nile.

As we walked toward the ceremonial platform at the entrance to the temple where in ancient times Khnum's image was displayed before throngs of pilgrims, an Israeli tour group passed by. Ever since the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in 1979, Egypt has been a popular vacation locale for Israelis, understandably, considering its closeness to Israel and its wealth of archaeological sites. This group seemed excited about Elephantine's ruins, but because the tourist paths are not clearly marked, some children of the group wandered dangerously close to a mud-brick wall recently restored by the excavation team.

I could see that Jaritz was nervous and I spoke to the children in Hebrew, asking them not to climb on the wall. One of the adults in the group smiled broadly, surprised to hear Hebrew spoken at the German-Swiss dig. He apparently knew quite a bit about Elephantine's history, but he mistakenly assumed I was on the excavation staff. "Any news about the Temple of Yahu?" he asked.

I had no answer for the tourist, and after the group had left, I admitted to Jaritz that my curiosity had now gotten the better of me. I wanted to know about the issue that had become unavoidable; what was it about the Temple of Yahu that kept coming up

again and again? Jaritz briefly recounted the story of the earlier excavations and how they had left a lingering suspicion in the minds of the Egyptian authorities. The 5th-century-BC Jewish garrison and its Temple of Yahu, Jaritz told me, is just a minor sidelight in the long history of Elephantine Island, and he feels that it doesn't really deserve all the attention it still gets. For the last 14 years, the German-Swiss expedition has been concentrating on the full range of Elephantine's archaeological record and has consciously avoided the area of the earlier digs. But now, even though they are confident that the Egyptian Antiquities Organization fully supports them in their attempt to place Elephantine in the mainstream of ancient Egyptian history, there is a new cloud on the horizon. Jaritz revealed that some Israeli scholars had opened up the old issue again. The old issue has taken on new political implications, and I could see that the mention of the search for the Temple of Yahu, its connection to Biblical history and to the Temple in Jerusalem unsettles the German-Swiss excavation team.

* * *

When I got back to Jerusalem, I wanted to hear the other side of the story, and I went to see Professor Bezalel Porten of the Hebrew University, a scholar who has spent the better part of his career studying and writing about the Elephantine papyri. Porten's name had come up during my discussion with Jaritz as one of the Israeli scholars who had come to Elephantine since the Egypt-Israel peace treaty with the uncomfortable suggestion that the search for the Temple of Yahu be resumed. Yet when I spoke with Porten about the possibility of actually finding it, he surprised me with his discouraged attitude toward such a project's success.

His initial visit to the site in 1978, he told me, convinced him that a proper excavation would be difficult. The levels are too jumbled and much of the crucial archaeological evidence is now gone. There are still some relatively untouched places to dig, but Porten is aware that the current political tensions between Israel and Egypt and the reticence of the German-Swiss expedition make Israeli participation in the Elephantine excavations highly unlikely.

The situation really should be different, Porten told me wistfully, "Israel now has full diplomatic relations with Egypt, we have our own research institute in Cairo, and theoretically, we should have the privileges of any other foreign mission working there." But wishes do not create reality, and in the meantime, Porten has encountered other, even more serious obstacles to his academic work.

For the last two years, the trustees of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo have denied him permission to study the Elephantine papyri, despite his repeated appeals. For a linguist and historian like Porten, the texts are more important than potsherds and mud-bricks. And although he had relatively free access to the documents in the years immediately after the Camp David Agreement, his freedom to work in the museum has been progressively restricted as relations between Egypt and Israel have chilled. "These things tend to go with political events," he told me and he revealed that he intends to go to Cairo again this spring. The trustees of the museum are scheduled to meet to discuss foreign scholars' requests, and Porten intends to press his application in person, though he is prepared for rejection again.

So this spring, as the archaeological work goes on at Elephantine Island, Bezalel Porten will sit in Cairo and wait for a reply from the museum authorities. His situation is markedly different from that of the earlier explorers and of the current German-Swiss expedition. Yet he has something in common with all of them. All scholars involved in the historical problems of Elephantine Island are participants, willingly or unwillingly, in a painful and politically sensitive archaeological controversy whose origin in a turn-of-the-century European rivalry has been compounded by the politics of the Middle East today.

Best Regards,

Neil

Received in Hanover 5/1/85