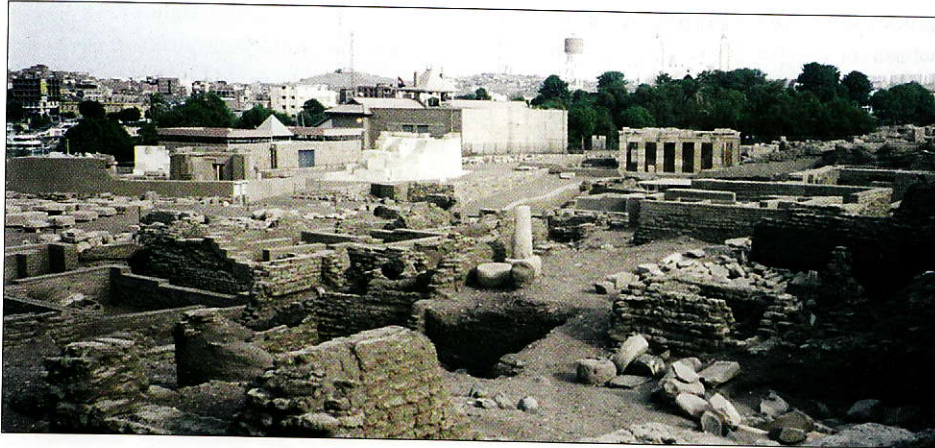


The Jews of Elephantine Island

Lindsay Levy



On the last day of my holiday in Egypt I visited Elephantine Island.

I was looking forward to seeing this site as I vaguely remembered it had some Jewish connection, but my guide book only gave me a tantalising half-sentence...and the remains of an Aramaic Jewish colony dating from the 5th century BCE. Fortunately the Egyptologist travelling with our group was able to give me more information. The remains, he told me, were situated on the site of a long-established archaeological dig. We should look for signs to the rams' cemetery, the colony had been built alongside it.

Elephantine Island is situated in the middle of the Nile off the coast of Aswan. It is thought to have taken its English name from the huge grey granite boulders that surround it and look from a distance like a herd of bathing elephants. It was also a centre for ivory trade. It now houses the archaeological site, a small museum, a luxury hotel, and two Nubian villages.

My friend and I caught the public ferry across the river and were met by a swarm of small boys hoping to earn

some money showing the tourists around. We followed them and a couple of other foreigners from the boat through a maze of small streets. When we finally succeeded in detaching ourselves from the others we found ourselves in the middle of the ruins.

A couple of the Egyptian temples have been reconstructed by the archaeologists; the rest of the site consists of the remains of dwelling

"we walked through the ancient streets, overwhelmed and silent."

houses. We couldn't make out the rams' cemetery so we began wandering through the ruins, trying to work out which of these groups of houses might have been the Jewish colony.

It was October and the German archaeologists had not yet returned from their summer break. It was also the Muslim hour of prayer and the Egyptian caretakers had all gone to the mosque. The site was completely

deserted and we walked through the ancient streets, overwhelmed and silent. Individual houses were clearly recognisable and the walls had been cross-sectioned and marked out into chronological strata by the archaeologists. From each layer of history protruded the remains of ordinary every day life - potsherds, wood, pieces of rush matting, ashes from a hearth. Was this really how our ancestors had lived 6000 years ago?

Our time travel was interrupted by the sound of very angry yelling. The prayer hour was over and the Egyptians had returned. Clearly we were not supposed to be here. They waved their arms furiously at us and we waved back apologetically and hurried out. The boys had apparently led us onto the site through a back route through their village. Just as we were wondering how we were going to explain ourselves our friend the Egyptologist miraculously appeared. He has spent years researching in various sites and was enthusiastically embraced and greeted as "Professor" almost everywhere we went, so we were saved from a potentially very awkward few minutes with the caretakers by his presence and given a brief tour of the site. Sadly the houses we were wandering through were not the Jewish colony after all, but a Middle Egyptian settlement. He took us to the official viewing platform and pointed us in the direction of the rams cemetery. There were remains of the Jewish houses; next to the burial place of mummified ram's and barely a stone's throw from two Egyptian temples.

Since I returned home I have been trying to find out as much as I can about the Jews of Elephantine Island. Surprisingly there is a lot of information available, because their existence was revealed by the discovery of a cache of Aramaic papyri of legal documents dealing with

the minutiae of their everyday life: marriage, divorce, inheritance, property deals.

"The island was a frontier town and the cult centre of worship for the Egyptian ram-headed god Khnum."

In the 5th century Elephantine island was known as Yeb. The island was a frontier town and the cult centre of worship for the Egyptian ram-headed god Khnum. It also housed government buildings, a residential area, and temples. The Jewish community there was a military garrison. They had their own stone built temple, with five gates and a cedar wood roof, which they used for animal -Sacrifices. The Elephantine Jews kept many religious laws - Sabbath observance and the prohibition against eating chometz during Pesach are specifically mentioned in the papyri - but they

also lived in a multicultural society alongside Egyptians, Arameans, Phoenicians, Babylonians, and Persians, and the legal documents show that they transacted and intermarried with members of these communities, using a newly developed Levantine common law. Women had almost equal rights with their spouses. They could initiate divorce, conduct business and hold property in their own right.

In 411 BCE the Jewish temple at Yeb was destroyed by the Persian governor at the request of an Egyptian, an incident that is claimed to be the first anti-Semitic outbreak in history. In his history Louis Finkelstein puts it down to local disagreements. When the Jewish colonists wrote to Jerusalem asking for support in rebuilding their temple they were met with a cool response. King Josiah's reforms condemned any temple built outside Jerusalem. The temple of Yeb was never rebuilt.

Visiting Elephantine Island was a wonderful experience. My

overwhelming impression was that in some ways life in the Diaspora hasn't changed a great deal in five thousand years. The Jews of Edinburgh still live with temples (churches) at the end of their streets, integrated with their neighbours, but retaining their identity.

Books consulted:

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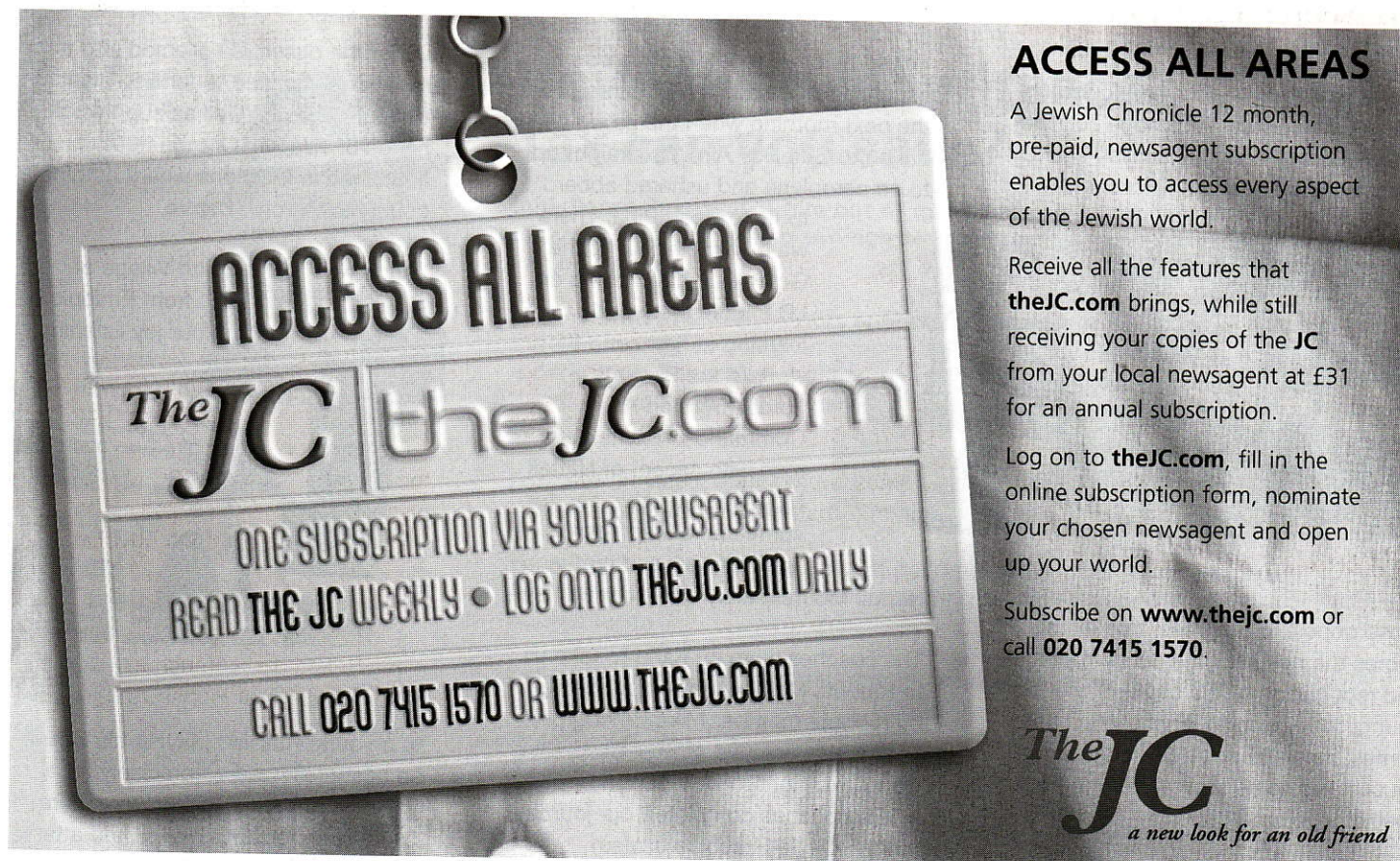
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