

DMG Travel Stipend Report

“The Figurines from the ‘Aramaic Quarter’: A Reappraisal of Domestic Cult and Rituals in the Polytheistic, Multicultural Context of Elephantine in the Persian Period”

Sarah Hollaender (Visual Culture Researcher, University of Graz)

Overview

In preparation for my planned project on the (terracotta) figurines of the Western Town of Elephantine, I received a travel stipend from the DMG in order to conduct firsthand research on the finds from the so-called ‘Aramaic Quarter’ (Persian Period, 525-404 BCE). The ‘Aramaic Quarter’ has long attracted scholarly interest due to the presence of Yehudites with their own Temple of Yahu, practicing a regionally differentiated form of Yahwism.¹ I turn to the neglected topic of materiality in household religion of the Western Town, including the ‘Aramaic Quarter’, bringing together unpublished and recently published iconographic sources like figurines, miniature models, and amulets. My research on the ‘Aramaic Quarter’ is guided by methodological principles, promising new insights on the history of religion. First, I analyse the artifact types in their broader horizons before turning to a site-specific interpretation, in order to place them in a globalized perspective. Second, I shift away from prevailing ethnic-based approaches to these iconographies, instead treating them as common semantic resources with a potentially widespread appeal in this multicultural community. In the process, I move beyond the typical focus on Yehudites by bringing other groups into view, like Egyptians, Persians, and Syrians/Aramaecans. Third, I explore household religion as a part of a dynamic religious landscape, with the ritual practices of different groups forming through interaction.

Research Trip #1: German Mission to Elephantine, Spring Season 2026 (Feb. 13-27, 2026)

General Goal:

The general goal of this research was to get an overview of the iconographic record at Elephantine in the *longue durée*, in order to analyse the finds from the Western Town in the Persian Period in light of both longstanding traditions and contemporary trends.

¹ See C. von Pilgrim, On the Archaeological Background of the Aramaic Papyri from Elephantine in the Light of Recent Fieldwork, in: M. L. Folmer (ed.), *Elephantine Revisited. New Insights into the Judean Community and Its Neighbors* (Pennsylvania 2022) 1–16; B. Becking, The Identity of the People at Elephantine, in: M. L. Folmer (ed.), *Elephantine Revisited. New Insights into the Judean Community and Its Neighbors* (Pennsylvania 2022) 106–123.

It was not possible in this season to explore long-term coroplastic production at Elephantine in any systematic way, only to gain a first impression.² Besides the well-known terracotta figurine types from Elephantine, like the numerous Egyptian Woman-on-Bed Plaques of the New Kingdom to Third Intermediate Period, more anomalous finds were spotted as well. This includes a fragmentary solid and mould-made terracotta plaque of a nude and adorned female figure with a relatively short and wavy hairstyle placing one or both hands to her breasts.³ From a technical and iconographic perspective, it exhibits affinities to so-called ‘Astarte Plaques’ of the ANE in the Late Bronze Age.⁴ An in-depth analysis of this artifact is still necessary though. This also includes a fragmentary solid and mould-made terracotta plaque of two nude female figures standing in an architectural façade.⁵ This is an Egyptian Shrine Plaque of the Late to early Ptolemaic Period.⁶ It was previously thought that Shrine Plaques were unusual at Elephantine but three examples have now been identified at the site.⁷

Main Goal:

The main goal of this research was to pinpoint iconographic sources, especially (terracotta) figurines, conceivably stemming from the Western Town of Elephantine in the Persian Period⁸ based on their archaeological context, i.e., artifacts discovered in Stratum 4 (‘26th/27th Dynasties’) of the Western Town⁹ and/or associated with Phase V ceramics (‘Late Saite – Persian Periods’).¹⁰ Based on the recent publication of the finds of the Western Town,¹¹ a list was compiled of ca. 100 artifacts of potential interest (e.g., figurines, pendants, special finds). Many of these artifacts have the potential to provide insight into household religion. Roughly 50% of these artifacts were located in the SCA Magazine 2 (Aswan) as well as the Annex

² See already e.g., P. Kopp, ‘Zu den Kleinfunden. Weibliche Figurinen’, *MDAIK* 61 (2005) 82-90.

³ K 333. The terracotta plaque is damaged so it is difficult to assess the position of the arms. The right arm is preserved to about the middle of the forearm: her right hand is reaching in the direction of most likely the right breast (or possibly the left breast). The left arm is broken off but perhaps a similar gesture was attested here.

⁴ For discussion on ‘Astarte Plaques’, see e.g., *RLA* IX (1998) 53–64 s. v. Nackte Göttin. B. In der Bildkunst (C. Uehlinger).

⁵ 39801A/k-5.

⁶ For an examination of Shrine Plaques, see S. Hollaender, ‘From the Bed to the Shrine. Plaques with Enshrined Nude Females in Egypt and the Levant (with a Special Focus on Elephantine),’ *JDAI* 141 (Forthcoming 2026)

⁷ It was long thought that there was only a single Shrine Plaque from Elephantine but the present author has identified two further examples, see Hollaender, *JDAI* 141 (Forthcoming 2026). Whether there are further examples from Elephantine demands further consideration.

⁸ For discussion on the Western Town in the Persian Period, see C. von Pilgrim, ‘On the Archaeological Background of the Aramaic Papyri from Elephantine in the Light of Recent Fieldwork’, in M. L. Folmer (ed.), *Elephantine Revisited. New Insights into the Judean Community and Its Neighbors* (Pennsylvania, 2022), 1-16.

⁹ See A. Krekeler and J. Kuckertz, *Elephantine XXI. Ausgrabungen in der Weststadt 1987–1992. Bauten und Stadtstruktur vom späten Neuen Reich bis in die Römerzeit*, *AV* 101 (Wiesbaden 2023).

¹⁰ See D. A. Aston, *Elephantine XIX. Pottery from the Late New Kingdom to the Early Ptolemaic Period*, *AV* 95 (Leinen 1999), esp. pgs. 213-246.

¹¹ See J. Kuckertz and I. Nebe, *Elephantine XXII. Die Ausgrabungen in der Weststadt 1987-1992. Die Funde*, *AV* 102 (Wiesbaden, 2022).

Museum (Elephantine)¹² and examined first hand, including the majority of the (terracotta) figurines; the rest of these artifacts will need to be considered in the upcoming seasons. Notes and photographs of the artifacts were taken for future analysis and interpretation.

As a whole,¹³ the anthropomorphic figurine types include Egyptian deities (e.g., Osiris, Bes), as well as an array of generic figures, such as highly stylized males, male riders and horses, highly stylized nude females, and clothed females. There are also theriomorphic figurines (e.g., cow, ram, horse) and so-called miniature models of inanimate items (e.g., model shrines, model boats, model furniture). The pendants represent gods (e.g., Isis/Horus, Mut, Taweret, Bes), body parts and clothing (e.g., udjat eye, red crown), animals (e.g., ibis, sow, baboon), and plants (e.g., papyrus stem). There are also isolated finds of interest, such as a votive offering table.

The two most remarkable terracotta figurines examined in this season are both relatively large and well-preserved items with clear remains of paint. The first terracotta figurine is a rider on a horse.¹⁴ It is solid and handmade, with the rider and horse modelled separately and then joined together. The head of the rider is missing; the head and legs of the horse are missing too.¹⁵ An in-depth analysis of this terracotta figurine is still necessary, but a few points speak in favour of a date in the Persian Period. Equestrian imagery played a role on the official monuments of the Achaemenids in Persia but the rider-and-horse motif is more or less absent.¹⁶ Despite this, images of horses and riders drawing on dress features characteristic of these monuments – conventionally referred to in scholarship as so-called ‘Persian Riders’ – developed in minor arts of the Western Achaemenid Empire.¹⁷ The horseman dons riding dress (e.g., hooded headdress, long-sleeved coat, trousers); the horse has a topknot, tied-up tail, and a saddle cloth. The popularity of terracotta rider-and-horse figurines spiked in Egypt under Achaemenid influence.¹⁸ The most diagnostic parts of the ‘Persian Rider’ are broken off on our example

¹² Select artifacts from display cases 13, 17, 24 and 26 were examined.

¹³ See J. Kuckertz and I. Nebe, *Elephantine XXII. Die Ausgrabungen in der Weststadt 1987-1992. Die Funde*, AV 102 (Wiesbaden, 2022).

¹⁴ See J. Kuckertz and I. Nebe, *Elephantine XXII. Die Ausgrabungen in der Weststadt 1987-1992. Die Funde*, AV 102 (Wiesbaden, 2022), pg. 64 cat. no. 10226 (reg. no. 2125).

¹⁵ The preserved parts measure 7.2 cm in height, 14 cm in length, and 5.57 cm in width.

¹⁶ C. Tuplin, ‘All the King’s Horse. In Search of Achaemenid Persian Cavalry’, in G. Fagan and M. Trundle (eds.), *New Perspectives in Ancient Warfare, History of Warfare* 59 (Leiden, 2010), 101-182: ‘In the public and monumental iconography at the heart of the empire the mounted warrior has no currency whatsoever,’ pg. 104.

¹⁷ For a survey of images of riders and horses in the Achaemenid Empire, including the ‘Persian Rider’, see Tuplin, in Fagan and Trundle (eds.), *New Perspectives in Ancient Warfare*, 101-182, pgs. 104-120.

¹⁸ For general discussion on terracotta rider-and-horse figurines in the Achaemenid Empire, including the ‘Persian Rider’, P. R. S. Moorey, ‘Iran and the West. The Case of the Terracotta ‘Persian’ Riders in the Achaemenid Empire’, in R. Dittmann, B. Hrouda, U. Löw, P. Matthiae, R. Mayer-Opificius, S. Thürwächter (eds.), *Variatio Delectat. Iran und der Westen. Gedenkschrift für Peter Calmeyer, AOAT 272* (Münster 2000), 469-486. For general discussion on coroplastic production in Egypt in the Late Period, including the ‘Persian Rider’, see V. Vaelske, ‘Coroplastic Figural Art in Egypt during the Late Period (664-332 BC),’ in E. Darby and I. J. de Hulster

from the Western Town but one feature stands out: the saddle cloth with fringes at the rear is a common feature of the ‘Persian Rider’.¹⁹ In addition, a hole poked at the top of the tail is probably a point of attachment, perhaps to add real (horse) hair. This artifact was discovered in Areal III in a pile of rubble between Wall 96 and the North Wall of f (western section) with Phase V ceramics (‘Late Saite – Persian Periods’).²⁰ The second terracotta figurine is a standing clothed female.²¹ It is solid and double-moulded. The head, the right forearm, and the lower body below the thighs are missing.²² A preliminary analysis suggests that the terracotta figurine was inspired by (Eastern) Greek korai of the late Archaic Period.²³ She wears a long, decorated robe and a fringed mantle falling in a curve on her lower back. She holds out her right hand (probably once holding an object) and places her left hand to her chest. The artifact was discovered in House M (Stratum 4, ‘26th/27th Dynasties’), which was renovated in Stratum 4a.²⁴ It was retrieved from beneath the south-west threshold of Room M7, which is interpreted as a ‘private’ area, probably for sleeping. There were no associated ceramics.

Other Task:

In addition, 30 artifacts from Elephantine retrieved from strata of the Late Period were located in SCA Magazine 2 (Aswan) and Annex Magazine 3 (Elephantine) and examined first hand.²⁵ These were predominantly fragments of relatively small and crudely handmade terracotta figurines, both anthropomorphic and theriomorphic, as well as faience pendants of (nude) female figures. These finds demand further consideration in order to determine their dates.

Research Trip #2: Egyptian Museum in Cairo (Aug. 1-7, 2026)

Josefine Kuckertz and Ingrid Nebe have determined that artifacts retrieved in the early excavations of the Western Town of Elephantine by Otto Rubensohn and then Friedrich Zucker

(eds.), *Iron Age Terracotta Figurines from the Southern Levant in Context, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East* 125 (Leiden 2021), 375-424, esp. pgs. 400-403.

¹⁹ For a few examples, see M. Minardi, ‘‘Persian Riders’’ on a Post-Achaemenid Terracotta Mould from the Bhir Mound, Taxila’, *Mesopotamia (T)* 57 (2022), 123-136, pg. 124 figs. 1. 2, pg. 127 figs. 4. 6. 7.

²⁰ See A. Krekeler and J. Kuckertz, *Elephantine XXI. Ausgrabungen in der Weststadt 1987–1992. Bauten und Stadtstruktur vom späten Neuen Reich bis in die Römerzeit*, AV 101 (Wiesbaden 2023), pg. 161 (find complex 17225a).

²¹ See J. Kuckertz and I. Nebe, *Elephantine XXII. Die Ausgrabungen in der Weststadt 1987-1992. Die Funde*, AV 102 (Wiesbaden, 2022), pg. 35 cat. no. 10030 (reg. no. R 2064).

²² The preserved parts measure 10.8 cm in height, 6.3 cm in width, and 4.4 cm in diameter.

²³ A close parallel from Elephantine in the Louvre (AF 10159) has been shown to exhibit this kind of Greek influence, P. Ballet and C. Lyon-Caen, ‘Les objets en terre’, in E. Delange (ed.), *Les fouilles françaises d’Éléphantine, Assouan, 1906-1911. Les archives Clermont-Ganneau et Clédat. 1 Textes*, MAIBL 46 (Paris 2012) 343–378, pgs. 351-352 (doc. 812).

²⁴ See J. Kuckertz and I. Nebe, *Elephantine XXII. Die Ausgrabungen in der Weststadt 1987-1992. Die Funde*, AV 102 (Wiesbaden, 2022), pg. 161 (find complex 17225a), pgs. 102-103 (find complex 16214b).

²⁵ I would like to thank Cornelius von Pilgrim and Beatrice von Pilgrim for providing me with this list of artifacts.

from 1906-1908 ended up in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.²⁶ As such, I organized a few research appointments at the EMC Registration, Collections Management and Documentation Department in order to search the records of the museum for relevant material. The museum houses roughly 700 artifacts from Elephantine, stemming from a variety of excavations, with only a minority stemming from the excavations of Rubensohn and Zucker. I pinpointed roughly 100 artifacts with figural imagery (e.g., statues, steles, figurines, amulets, etc.), although virtually none of them have been retrieved from the excavations of interest. It is rather difficult to offer a preliminary assessment of the material, since I was searching through inventory books with short descriptions and if any images were provided, these were typically schematic drawings or thumbnails. A few artifact types were already addressed in my previous research, including figurines of ithyphallic males and figurines of frontal nude females. Although the research trip was valuable for getting a broader overview of the visual culture circulating at Elephantine over the course of millennia, I did not come across any obvious candidates for artifacts from the ‘Aramaic Quarter’. A few of the artifacts were on display in the museum. Otherwise, I will need to apply for permits to study select artifacts first hand in the future.

*

I would like to thank the DMG for generously funding these research trips!

Bibliography

D. A. Aston, *Elephantine XIX. Pottery from the Late New Kingdom to the Early Ptolemaic Period*, AV 95 (Leinen 1999).

P. Ballet and C. Lyon-Caen, ‘Les objets en terre’, in E. Delange (ed.), *Les fouilles françaises d'Éléphantine, Assouan, 1906-1911. Les archives Clermont-Ganneau et Clédat. I Textes*, MAIBL 46 (Paris 2012) 343–378.

S. Hollaender, ‘From the Bed to the Shrine. Plaques with Enshrined Nude Females in Egypt and the Levant (with a Special Focus on Elephantine),’ *JDAI* 141 (Forthcoming 2026).

P. Kopp, ‘Zu den Kleinfunden. Weibliche Figurinen’, *MDAIK* 61 (2005) 82-90.

A. Krekeler and J. Kuckertz, *Elephantine XXI. Ausgrabungen in der Weststadt 1987–1992. Bauten und Stadtstruktur vom späten Neuen Reich bis in die Römerzeit*, AV 101 (Wiesbaden 2023).

²⁶ See J. Kuckertz and I. Nebe, *Elephantine XXII. Die Ausgrabungen in der Weststadt 1987-1992. Die Funde*, AV 102 (Wiesbaden, 2022), pgs. 23-25.

J. Kuckertz and I. Nebe, *Elephantine XXII. Die Ausgrabungen in der Weststadt 1987-1992. Die Funde, AV 102* (Wiesbaden, 2022).

M. Minardi, ‘Persian Riders’ on a Post-Achaemenid Terracotta Mould from the Bhir Mound, Taxila’, *Mesopotamia (T)* 57 (2022), 123-136.

P. R. S. Moorey, ‘Iran and the West. The Case of the Terracotta ‘Persian’ Riders in the Achaemenid Empire’, in R. Dittmann, B. Hrouda, U. Löw, P. Matthiae, R. Mayer-Opificius, S. Thürwächter (eds.), *Variatio Delectat. Iran und der Westen. Gedenkschrift für Peter Calmeyer, AOAT 272* (Münster 2000), 469-486.

C. von Pilgrim, ‘On the Archaeological Background of the Aramaic Papyri from Elephantine in the Light of Recent Fieldwork’, in M. L. Folmer (ed.), *Elephantine Revisited. New Insights into the Judean Community and Its Neighbors* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 2022), 1-16.

C. Tuplin, ‘All the King’s Horse. In Search of Achaemenid Persian Cavalry’, in G. Fagan and M. Trundle (eds.), *New Perspectives in Ancient Warfare, History of Warfare 59* (Leiden, 2010), 101-182.

RLA IX (1998) 53–64 s. v. Nackte Göttin. B. In der Bildkunst (C. Uehlinger)

V. Vaelske, ‘Coroplastic Figural Art in Egypt during the Late Period (664-332 BC),’ in E. Darby and I. J. de Hulster (eds.), *Iron Age Terracotta Figurines from the Southern Levant in Context, CHANE 125* (Leiden 2021), 375-424.