

EXHIBITION REVIEW

ELEPHANTINE, ISLAND OF THE MILLENNIA

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Elephantine is an island in the Nile at Aswan, about 1,000 km south of Cairo and 220 km south of Luxor. Many different peoples have inhabited this island since time immemorial; different languages, cultures, and religions have met here. It is the only place in the world with written records about the past 4,000 years of social and lifestyle changes. The texts, recorded on different materials, in different languages, and in different scripts, provide an insight into the daily life, legal system, beliefs, and worldview of the inhabitants of this southern Egyptian island. The evaluation of the cultural heritage of the island, which has been on UNESCO's World Heritage List since 1979, has been the focus of an international project in recent years; the results are published in the exhibition presented here and the accompanying trilingual catalogue. During the temporary exhibition, lectures on specific themes are held.

Keywords: exhibition, Elephantine Island, Southern Egypt, archaeology, cultural anthropology, written sources, Neues Museum Berlin, James-Simon Galerie Berlin

The exhibition *Elephantine, Island of the Millennia*, opened on 26 April, is the result of prolonged organisation and research. The preparatory work was carried out over seven years in the framework of an international research project in Berlin; it was funded by the European Research Council (ERC) with €1.5M. The project was led and the exhibition curated by Dr Verena Lepper of the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung in Berlin. More than 10,000 items, each with 120 data points, were entered into a specially programmed database, so the data collecting was already comprehensive, extending to several disciplines. Particular attention was paid to written records since the many different scripts and hieroglyphs had to be deciphered, the texts translated, and then digitised. This was followed by the analysis and evaluation of the artefacts and texts and the contextual evaluation of the archaeological finds and written remains found on the island. Designing the exhibition, sourcing finds from foreign museums, creating information panels and interactive materials that the public can understand, and compiling a 392-page [catalogue](#) were the final stages of the project.

Alongside the Musée du Louvre in Paris and the Brooklyn Museum in New York, the Berlin museums have the largest collection in the world of artefacts from Elephantine Island. The exhibition presents artefacts from the collections of 60 museums in 24 countries. The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA), celebrating its 10th anniversary, was a key partner in the cooperation, allowing twenty-two Arab researchers to participate in interdisciplinary work with German colleagues.

Several foundations and organisations have supported the exhibition, which thus has all texts in three languages: Arabic, English, and German. The division of exhibits between more venues has worked well for several previous archaeological exhibitions; this time, the James-Simon-Galerie has chosen 'time' and the Neues Museum 'space' as the main themes around which the content units are grouped. A basement interconnects the two museums.

At the entrance of the exhibition space, one can watch by the sounds of birdsong and sea waves field photos and pots embedded in sand, referring to the excavations (*Fig. 1*). The curators wanted to appeal to all the visitors' senses, so the exhibition includes not only things to see but also things to hear, touch, and smell (unfortunately, not to taste, despite the culinary history of the island is certainly very exciting, given the influence of different cultures and the favourable climate).

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Special sound and fragrance designers have been commissioned to create these installations, and the exhibition was designed by specialists as well. Tired visitors can, for example, sit on small Felukka tour boats and view the artefacts and information panels in and between the showcases along the walls. The largest of the panels, or rather the longest, is a timeline that divides the cultural history of four millennia (from the 3rd millennium BC to the post-Arab occupation of AD 642) into smaller sections. In addition, the attractions are arranged in seven accessible ‘thematic islands’:

1. Materials and written sources

In the first thematic unit, one can touch the different writing media (pots, leather, paper, papyrus, and parchment) and learn about the languages and scripts used on the island, from Egyptian hieroglyphics to Phoenician, Aramaic, and Arabic.

2. Plurality and identity

These themes, now in vogue, are primarily designed to bridge the gap between past and present societies. Diversity and ‘good neighbourliness’ are key elements of the exhibition. The scented plate here exudes a fresh, flowery, exotic scent, perhaps referring to the German saying ‘*Man kann sich gut riechen*’ (literally ‘smelling each other with pleasure’, figuratively ‘getting along well’). The inhabitants of Elephantine Island were, however, open not only to each other but also to the world (Fig. 2).

3. Medicine and knowledge of medicines

Papyri from the island often contain prescriptions for potions and other medicines; these are displayed together with medical instruments that reveal, e.g., gynaecological techniques that were long forgotten by mankind and only rediscovered in modern medicine. When rubbed, the piece of scented fibreboard here gives off a bitter smell that can hardly be described as a fragrance.

4. Trade and economy

In this unit, spices are the main attraction; not only can one see them in glass jars and read about them, but after rubbing the scented fibreboard, one finds itself in a cloud of scent created by the smell of several spices.



Fig. 1. Excavation crates with pieces of paper from Elephantine Island (© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, photo by Sandra Steiß)

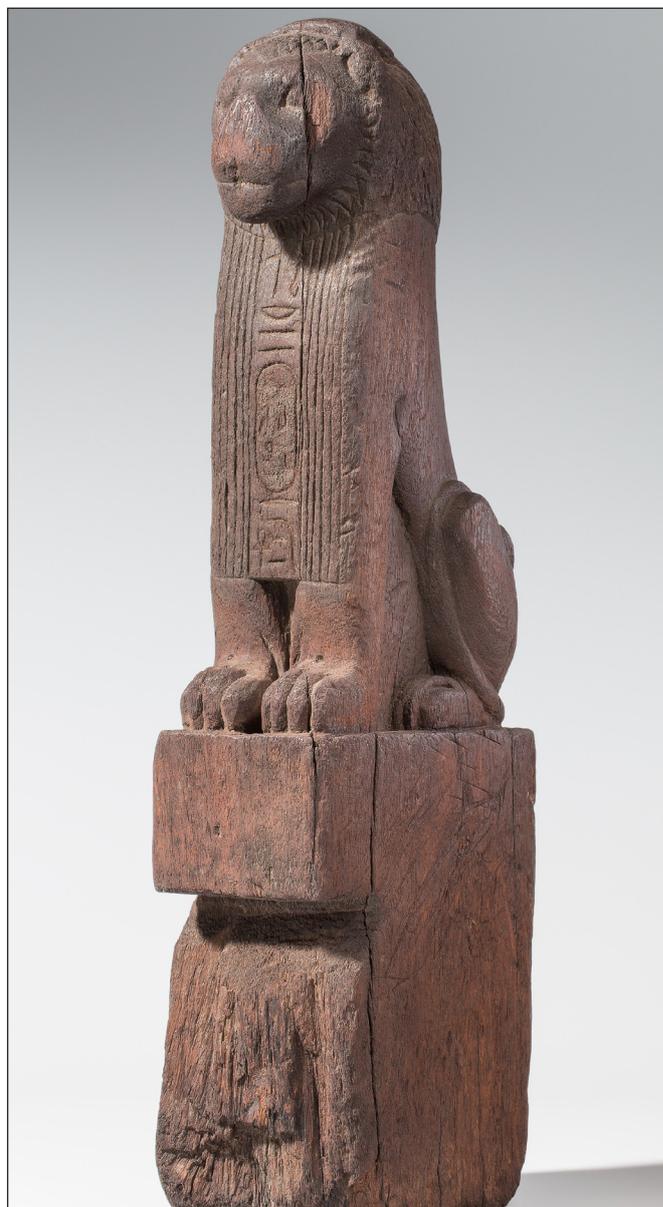


Fig. 2. Furniture foot in the shape of a lion from a war booty (© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, photo by Andreas Paasch)

5. Women and family

The written documents show that women on the island could own property, make donations, and divorce. There are also descriptions of how alcohol can be used to stop bleeding after a miscarriage—something that was not used again in Europe until the 20th century. Men were also helped in their choice of women by oracles.

6. Law and conflicts

This section presents surviving contracts written on papyrus and leather, including a marriage contract signed by 77 witnesses. The couple's parents were still Christians, but the young couple were married according to the rules of Islam. Also on display is a leg of furniture shaped like a lion, inscribed with a sign that says it was brought to the island as a spoil of war.

7. Religions and faith

Elephantine Island is also a model of peaceful coexistence between different religious communities. In addition to the polytheism characterising mainland Egypt, some groups practised the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim religions. The most important god on the island was Hnum (Khnum), the Ram God, often depicted on statues. He was the creator and guardian of the source of the Nile. Two goddesses were associated with him: Shatet, the mistress of Elephantine Island, and Anuket, the Goddess of the Flood. As the flooding necessary for the fertility of the land was also important on the mainland, the Elephantine Island 'trinity' was also worshipped there. The island also homed one of the Nilometers, the most important tide gauges of the Egyptian Empire.

In the last room, visitors see not only a panoramic image of Elephantine Island with its palm forests but also a model of the island with accurate markings of the sites excavated so far. There is also a granite block rounded by water, one of the grey rock formations resembling elephants, after which the island got its name.

The organisers have left the project's biggest scientific highlight for the exhibition's end. Even conservators had been unable to unroll the thousands of years old fragile papyrus scrolls without damaging them; thus, their contents were inaccessible. However, with the help of mathematicians and computer scientists, a method has been developed to digitally 'unroll' the scrolls without physical impact, making the writing on them visible and decipherable (Fig 3). The method is similar to medical CT or MRI: the imaging devices separate the different components (papyrus/ink) by specific gravity and digitally 'slice' the papyrus rolls. The biggest challenge was separating the overlapping layers and putting them back in the right place; in this spirit, visitors can put pieces of papyrus rolls like a puzzle on digital screens at the end of the exhibition.

The special [temporary exhibition](#) is open until 27 October 2024 at the James-Simon-Galerie and the Neues Museum on Museum Island in Berlin.

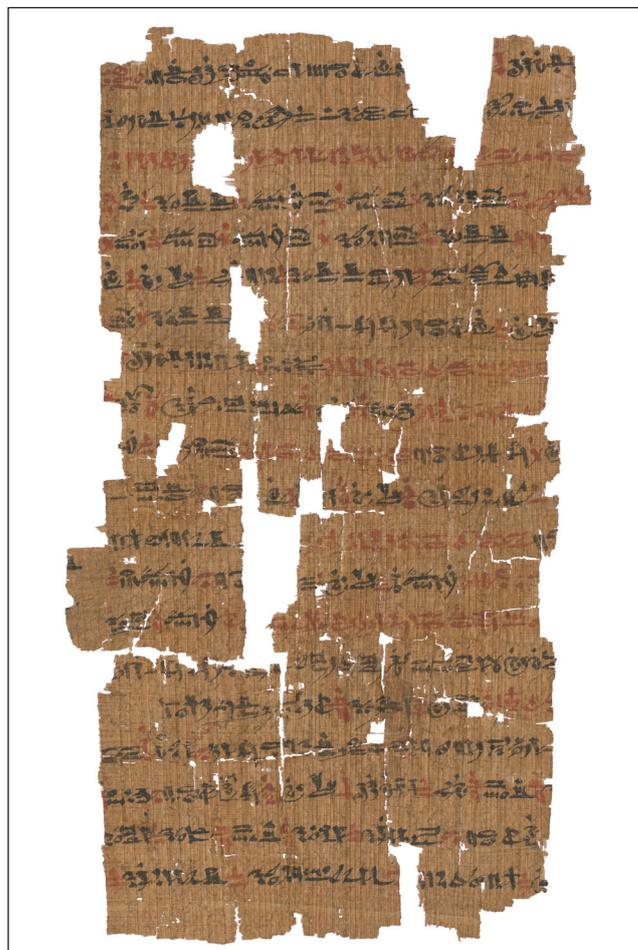


Fig. 3. Hieratic papyrus with a recipe for cough medicine (© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung)