

3.2.2 Elephantine Temple Papyrus: The Destruction of the Temple at Elephantine¹³

This papyrus indicates that the Jewish military colony of Elephantine, established in the 6th century B.C.E., had a Temple at which they worshipped. When this Temple was violently destroyed, they appealed for the right to rebuild it, indicating in their letter that they had performed sacrifices there.



To our lord Bagoas, governor of Judea, from your servants Jedaniah and his colleagues the priests who are in Elephantine the fortress. May the God of Heaven be concerned about the welfare of our lord greatly at all times, and grant you favor before Darius the King and the members of his household a thousand times more than now, and give you long life. May you be happy and strong at all times. And now, your servant Jedaniah and his colleagues say thus:

In the month of Tammuz, year 14 of Darius the King,¹⁴ when Arsames had left and gone to the king, at that time the priests of Khnub the god,

12. A high official in the Persian Empire directly responsible to the king.

13. Trans. S. Berrin from the Aramaic in B. Porten and A. Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, p. 72 (Cowley 31, 32).

14. 410 B.C.E. Darius II ruled from 423–404 B.C.E.

who are in Elephantine the fortress, gave silver and goods to Vidrang who was fratarak¹⁵ here, saying: "The temple of YHW the God,¹⁶ which is in Elephantine the fortress, let them remove from there." Then that Vidrang, the accursed, sent a letter to his son Nafyan who was garrison commander in Syene the fortress, saying: "The temple of the God YHW which is in Elephantine the fortress, let them demolish." Then, that Nafyan led Egyptians with the other troops. They came to the Elephantine fortress with their arms, entered the temple and demolished it to the ground. And the pillars of stone which were there, they smashed. They even demolished the five great gateways, built of stone sculpture, which were in that temple. And the upright doors and the bronze hinges of those doors and the roof of that temple, all of it cedarwood, with the rest of the temple and the other things which were there, all these they burned with fire. As for the basins of gold and silver and the things which were in that Temple—all these they took and made their own.

And in the days of the kings of Egypt, our fathers had built that temple in Elephantine the fortress. And when Cambyses entered Egypt,¹⁷ he found that temple built. And the temples of the gods of the Egyptians—all of them they overthrew, but none damaged anything in that temple. And when this had been done, we with our wives and children were wearing sackcloth and fasting and praying to YHW, Lord of the Heaven, who has let us see the punishment of that Vidrang. The dogs removed the fetters from his legs and all the possessions which he had acquired were lost. And every man who had sought evil to that temple, all were killed and we watched their punishment.

Moreover, before this, when this evil was done to us, we sent a letter regarding this. We sent to our lord, even to Yoḥanan the High Priest, and his colleagues the priests who are in Jerusalem, and to Ostanes the brother of Anani and the nobles of Judea. Not one letter did they send us. Moreover, from the month of Tammuz, year 14 of Darius the king, and until this day, we have been wearing sackcloth and fasting. Our wives are made as widows. We do not anoint ourselves with oil and do not drink wine.¹⁸ Moreover, from that time and until this day, the year 17 of Darius the king, meal-offering, incense, and burnt-offering are not made in that temple.

15. A term for governor.

16. A designation for the God of Israel.

17. 525 B.C.E. Cambyses was the eldest son of Cyrus and succeeded him after his death in 530 B.C.E.

18. They abstained from sexual relations, oil, and wine as a sign of mourning.

And now, your servants Jedaniah and his colleagues the priests, and the Jews, all of them, the citizens of Elephantine say thus: If it please our lord, take thought of that temple to build it, as they do not allow us to build it. Look to your benefactors and friends who are here in Egypt. Let a letter be sent to them from you about the temple of YHW the God to build it in Elephantine the fortress as it was built before. And meal-offering, incense, and burnt-offering we will sacrifice on the altar of YHW in your name, and we will pray for you at all times, we and our wives and our children, and all the Jews who are here, if you will do so without fail, so that that temple will be built. And you will have merit before YHW the God of Heaven more than a man who sacrifices to Him burnt-offerings and sacrifices worth 1000 talents of silver. Regarding this we have sent to inform our lord. . . . Moreover, all this which was done to us, Arsames did not know.

On the 20th of Marheshvan, the 17th year of Darius the king.¹⁹