# Review

## BEZALEL PORTEN ET AL.
## THE ELEPHANTINE PAPYRI IN ENGLISH:
## THREE MILLENNIA OF CROSS-CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND CHANGE
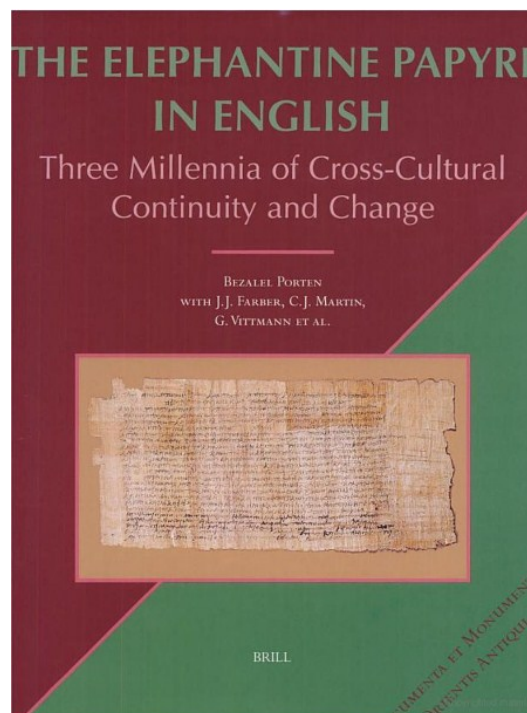## SECOND REVISED EDITION

Reviewed by Nikolaos Lazaridis
California State University, Sacramento

ABSTRACT

*The essay reviews the second edition of the well-received collection and translation of Egyptian hieratic, demotic, and Coptic, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and Arabic papyri from Elephantine. This monumental project, which was supervised by Bezalel Porten and which was originally published in 1996, has greatly contributed to a multitude of disciplines, such as Egyptology, Classics, and Aramaic Studies, not only promoting interdisciplinary methods and approaches, but also granting a unique insight into the historical developments of the multiethnic community living on the island of Elephantine.*

A considerable number of reviews and responses have surfaced since the original publication of *The Elephantine Papyri in English* in 1996; some of these steadily praised almost every choice made by the editors and contributors influencing the making of this work, while others mixed their positive comments with significant criticism.[1] The diversity of scholarly reactions was an expected consequence of the fact that the scope and undertaking of this work had crossed multiple disciplinary boundaries and it was bound to make an important impact on the study of societal developments in the ancient Mediterranean. Bezalel Porten, the tireless editor and supervisor of this project, acknowledges in the foreword to the second edition these scholarly responses to the first edition, in some cases defending his own, and his colleagues', choices and in other cases justifying the revisions made in this second edition.[2] The foreword provides the reader with a unique insight into the challenges the editor and the translators faced while working on, and comparing, the translations of the Elephantine multi-lingual papyri, the most important of these being the maintenance of uniformity and consistency in the styles of presentation, translation, and annotation of the texts.

Preceding the long presentation of the ancient papyri, the book begins with a substantial introductory survey of the texts' history of acquisition, publication, as well as of selected themes illustrating the different types

of continuity and change which can be identified through the study of the papyri from Elephantine. The first part of the introduction is very informative and connects well the ancient texts to the context of their scholarly study. In the second part on the themes of continuity and change, however, the authors at times make superficial comparisons of similar features of papyri from different historical periods that possibly reflect continuity in literary and social practices. Such comparisons, as is the case, for instance, of similar anxieties shared by members of the Elephantine communities from different periods when they had to leave home,[3] albeit inspirational, resemble more romantic remarks rather than historically useful observations. These short and light comparisons, intended probably to promote the unique opportunity the study of these texts grants the readers to catch a glimpse over the diachronic human character of the society on Elephantine, seem a little redundant, since the sheer juxtaposition of the translated ancient material demonstrates on its own its great potentials for being used as priceless evidence for intercultural influence and historical continuity.[4]

The book is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter 1 Günter Vittmann presents ten hieratic papyri, whose dates range from the Old Kingdom to the Prolemaic Period. Chapter 2 consists of Bezalel Porten's readings and interpretations of fifty-two Aramaic texts from the sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries BCE, including letters in addition to a variety of personal documents, such as contracts and petitions. In Chapter 3 it is the turn of Cary Martin to present thirty-seven demotic papyri varying from sixth century BCE contracts to first century CE letters. Next is Chapter 4 on fifty-two Greek papyri translated and interpreted by Joel Farber and consisting of Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine documents, such as receipts of sale and debt acknowledgements. In Chapter 5 Leslie MacCoull and Sarah Jackson present twenty Coptic texts of a more limited variety than the preceding Egyptian, Aramaic, and Greek ones, most of whose dates cannot be determined. Chapter 6 is dedicated to two Arabic papyri presented by Simon Hopkins and dating to the ninth and tenth centuries CE, while finally, Chapter 7 includes two third century CE papyri in Latin translated and interpreted by Ranon Katzoff.

In general, the style and format in which these scholars presented and interpreted their papyri are, with a few exceptions, indeed, uniform and consistent, including a number of features that facilitate the reading and understanding of the ancient texts, some of which (as is the case with the hieratic papyrus A2, for instance) included the usage of obscure vocabulary and difficult grammatical forms. Thus for example, the authors help their readers by including useful headings on the margins, as well as brief introductions summarizing contents and noting the context for each of the texts. Even with regard to the difficult issue of translation, the authors retain a uniform style, preferring in most cases to render the ancient text in a literal manner, rather than translating it metaphorically and changing its form to comply with the rules and style of the English language. Although this choice, which is also discussed and explained in Porten's forward, definitely helps the readers to maintain a direct contact with the original style of these documents, occasionally it does not do justice to the ancient text. So for instance, the strictly literal rendering of ancient phrases that were commonly used in the texts as pieces of technical terminology does not take into consideration the possibility that after these set phrases had become common, they probably lost their literal sense and were instead used metaphorically (or idiomatically).[5] Such phrases are often called in Linguistics "dead metaphors" and in fact, are essential elements of every ancient and modern language (examples in English would be the verbal components in the phrases "to get up from bed" or "to bring up in a conversation").[6] In spite of the fact that the lack of evidence for the vernacular versions of the ancient languages in which these texts were written does not help us easily identify and confirm "dead metaphors", the popularity of phrases repeated in these documents could suggest that their literal meaning by that time had been replaced by a more metaphorical one.

In addition to the aforementioned features facilitating the reading and understanding of the ancient texts, I must also note the extremely useful introductions in each chapter, in which the translators offer substantial overviews of the context of the texts they are about to present, including discussions of the ancient archives of which these texts were part, and thus paying homage to New, or Material, Philology. Equally useful are the prosopographical indices following the longest of these chapters, namely those on the Aramaic, demotic, and Greek papyri.

The rest of the indices found after Chapter 7 are topical and incorporate information from all the translated ancient texts. The last section of the book consists of eleven plates that consist of photographs of some of the presented ancient papyri. The reader may wonder at this point why the editor chose to include only these select plates, as one would expect to find photographs either of all the texts or of none of them.

Overall, this second edition has improved the contents of the original 1996 edition. The paperback publication of this edition will make this monumental work more accessible, extending its important influence on an even larger pool of students and scholars, who will, certainly, benefit from studying this rare specimen of ancient intercultural encounters.

## NOTES

1 These reviews are listed on page xxiv.

2 These revisions are listed on pages xvii-xviii. They mainly consist of the correction of several omissions in the translations of the ancient papyri and the inclusion of updated bibliography.

3 See pages 12-13.

4 Hence contributing to a number of recent scholarly studies, such as Mark Depauw's *The Demotic Letter. A Study of Epistolographic Scribal Traditions against their Intra- and Intercultural Background* (2006), or Alejandro Botta's *The Aramaic and Egyptian Legal Traditions at Elephantine: An Egyptological Approach* (2009).

5 An example of such a phrase would be the Egyptian verb "to be far from" used commonly in the so-called "withdrawal" documents. Martin translates it literally here, while Porten, in Chapter 2, translates the Aramaic equivalent more metaphorically as "to withdraw". Martin prefers the literal rendering, although in the case of the demotic phrase meaning literally "to give truth against", he chooses to translate it metaphorically as "to rule against" – see, for instance, text C31, page 359 with note 5.

6 See for instance, the recent work by Cornelia Müller, *Metaphors Dead and Alive, Sleeping and Waking: A Dynamic View* (Chicago; London, 2008).