

Samarians in Egypt ca. 300 BCE and the Origins of Papyrus Amherst 63

A Historical Reappraisal

Łukasz Niesiołowski-Spanò | ORCID: 0000-0002-7835-4904

Faculty of History, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

l.niesiolowski@uw.edu.pl

Received 3 January 2026 | Revised 23 July 2026 | Accepted 23 July 2026 |

Published online 23 September 2026

Abstract

This article addresses the problem of interpreting the hybrid identity of Samarians living in Egypt in the third century BCE, particularly those attested in the village of Samerina in the Fayum oasis, who are nevertheless designated as *Ioudaioi*. The discussion draws primarily on evidence provided by Josephus, especially his accounts of the conscription of Samarians and Judeans into the armies of Alexander the Great and Ptolemy I, their subsequent settlement in Egypt, and the administrative reorganisation of Palestine following 332 BCE. These factors prove crucial for resolving the apparent contradiction between Samaritan provenance and Judean designation. The second part of the article advances a hypothesis according to which the historical context most suitable for locating the origins of the Aramaic text P.Amherst 63 is Samaria during the period of Alexander's campaign.

Keywords

Ptolemaic Egypt – Samerina (Fayum) – Samarians/Samaritans – Judea – Ptolemy – *Ioudaioi* – P.Amherst 63

In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the Jewish population in Egypt.¹ This renewed interest stems both from the growing body of available evidence and from a reassessment of interpretative frameworks developed largely in twentieth-century scholarship. One of the central issues under debate concerns the criteria by which the Jewish population of Ptolemaic Egypt may be identified. This question is closely connected with the interpretation of personal names and of the terms *Ioudaios/Ioudaioi*.

In the first case, Hebrew or Yahwistic names, rendered in Greek transcription, are sometimes treated as decisive indicators of Jewish identity. The difficulty with this approach lies in the implicit assumption that such names were borne exclusively by Jews.² In the second case, scholarly opinion is divided. Some interpret *Ioudaios/Ioudaioi* as an ethnic designation, best translated as “Jew(s)” or “Jewish,” while others argue that the term lacks ethnic content and should instead be understood in a geographical or administrative sense, namely as “Judean(s).”³

The present article seeks to clarify the historical circumstances in which Samaritans⁴ found themselves in Egypt at the end of the fourth century BCE. The conclusions drawn from this analysis provide a useful framework both for interpreting references to *Ioudaioi* in the papyri and for situating the origins of P.Amherst 63.

1 Samaritans in Ptolemaic Egypt

It is particularly instructive to examine the documentary evidence for the presence of Samaritans in Egypt, although such evidence is relatively limited. Unlike the term *Ioudaios/Ioudaioi*, the designation “Samaritan/Samaritan” is exceedingly rare in papyrological sources. The only occurrence of the term Σαμαρίτης appears in P.Enteux. 62, dated to 221 BCE, where it refers to an individual named Adamas, son of Libanos. Scholarly consensus, however, holds that this designation does not denote a Samaritan/Samaritan in the religious or ethnic sense, but rather a person originating from the village of Samareia.

1 This article was written as part of a research project funded by the National Science Centre, Poland (UMO-2020/39/G/HS3/02059).

2 Honigman, “Naming Practice”; Adler, *Between Yahwism and Judaism*, 10–12.

3 Cf. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, esp. 69–106; Schwartz, “Judaean’ or ‘Jew’?”

4 In this article, I use the term “Samaritan” to refer to the toponym Samaria, thereby avoiding the term “Samaritan.”

It is this settlement—whose very name indicates a connection with Samaria—that forms the basis of the extant documentation. The papyri attest the village of Samareia (Σαμαρεία or Σαμάρεια), located in the Fayum oasis, in more than forty texts dating from the mid-third century BCE to the end of the third century CE, with a particularly dense concentration in the second half of the third century BCE.⁵

Despite the evident Samaritan association implied by the village's name, the majority of its inhabitants, as recorded in the papyri, bear Greek names, and there is no indication that the settlement differed significantly from other contemporary villages in Egypt.⁶

Nevertheless, a number of inhabitants do bear Semitic names—such as Ananias, Chelkias, Ezekielos, Jakubis, Joanna, Jonatas, Judas, Marion, Samoelos, and Sabbataios—although these constitute only a minority within the local onomastic record. Notably, such names disappear from the documentation relating to Samareia by the end of the second century BCE. Particularly striking, however, is the fact that in the third and second centuries BCE some inhabitants of this village are explicitly designated as *Ioudaios* or *Ioudaia*, including the formula *Ioudaios tēs epigonēs*, conventionally translated as “Judean” or “Jew.”

The predominance of Greek names is hardly surprising and should not be taken as a reliable indicator of ethnic or religious identity.⁷ After several generations, the adoption of Greek names would have been entirely normal, regardless of the settlers' original provenance. What demands explanation, however, is the conscious retention of Hebrew names by certain individuals and, more significantly, their self-identification as *Ioudaioi* within a settlement whose very name proclaims its connection with Samaria.

A notable analogy for the name of this village—derived from the designation of its inhabitants or a segment thereof—is found in the cuneiform documentation mentioning *āl-Yahudāya* / *āl-Yāhūdu* (“town of the Judeans”/“Judah-town”) in the vicinity of Nippur during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.⁸ While the precise origin of this toponym remains uncertain, it was likely assigned either by the local population or by the authorities responsible for establishing the settlement, rather than by the settlers themselves. Here, too, we encounter a scenario in which the majority of the personal names attested in the documents

5 https://www.trismegistos.org/fayum/fayum2/2077.php?geo_id=2077. The most comprehensive and up-to-date monograph on this village is an unpublished master's thesis: Kuhs, *Das Dorf Samareia*.

6 Honigman, “Naming Practice,” 159–161; Szanto, *Jews of Ptolemaic Egypt*, 76–78.

7 Honigman, 159–161; Szanto, 42–43, 102–104.

8 Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*, 99.

from *āl-Yahudāya* lack features that can be associated with the settlers whose identity gave the village its name.⁹ This may serve as a compelling parallel for the village of Samareia in the Fayum, both in terms of settler acculturation and the presence of a mixed population.

Previous scholarship has struggled to account for this apparent tension between Samaritan provenance and Judean designation. A satisfactory explanation, however, emerges when the papyrological evidence is read against the broader historical background. While the question of whether the Jews or Yahwists attested in early Ptolemaic Egypt might descend from populations settled there during the Persian period lies beyond the scope of the present study, the discussion here will focus exclusively on evidence from the Hellenistic period.¹⁰

Josephus reports at least three episodes of forced or voluntary resettlement of Judeans and Samaritans in Egypt. The first occurred under Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, while the second and third are attributed to Ptolemy I and likely date to 323 and 312 BCE respectively.

And, when he said to the people [of Jerusalem] that if any wished to join his army while still adhering to the customs of their country, he was ready to take them, many eagerly accepted service with him.

Ant. 11.339; transl. R. MARCUS

But the soldiers of Sanaballetes he ordered to accompany him to Egypt; there, he said, he would give them allotments of land, as in fact he did shortly afterwards, in the Thebaid, and this territory he ordered them to guard.

Ant. 11.345; transl. R. MARCUS

Now Ptolemy, after taking many captives both from the hill country of Judea and the district round Jerusalem and from Samaria and those on Garizim, brought them all to Egypt and settled them there. (...) he assigned many of them [people of Jerusalem] to his garrisons, and at Alexandria gave them equal civil rights with Macedonians and exalted oaths of them that they would keep faith with the descendants of him who had placed them in a position of trust. But now a few of the other Jews as well came to Egypt of their own accord, for they were attracted by the excellence of the country and Ptolemy's liberality. Their descendants, however, had quarrels

⁹ Pearce and Wunsch, 10–93.

¹⁰ Szanto, *Jews of Ptolemaic Egypt*, 48–52; Honigman, “Jewish Communities.” Cf. van der Toorn, *Becoming Diaspora Jews*, 96.

with the Samaritans because they were determined to keep alive their fathers' ways of life and customs, and so they fought with each other, those from Jerusalem saying that their temple was the holy one, and requiring that the sacrifices be sent there, while the Shechemites wanted these to go to Mount Garizein.

Ant. 12.7–10; transl. R. MARCUS

The accounts from *Jewish Antiquities* are supported by a passage from Josephus' *Contra Apionem*, which mentions the Battle of Gaza (312 BCE):

Now, Hecataeus further says this, that after the battle at Gaza, Ptolemy became master of the territories of Syria and many of the people, when they heard about Ptolemy's kindness and benevolence, wanted to go with him to Egypt and to share in the political affairs.

C.Ap. 1.186; transl. J.M.G. BARCLAY

Josephus' accounts make clear that both Judeans and Samaritans/Samaritans were conscripted into the Macedonian and Ptolemaic armies and subsequently settled in Egypt, often as military colonists (*klerouchoi*) receiving land in return for service.¹¹

While later papyrological evidence confirms the presence of Judean descendants in Egypt under such arrangements, it does not in itself explain why inhabitants of Samareia are described as *Ioudaioi*. Josephus' reference to disputes between Judeans and Samaritans in Egypt over the primacy of the sanctuaries in Jerusalem and on Mount Gerizim (*Ant.* XII, 7–10) merely indicates their coexistence, not a hybrid identity.

A crucial clarification, however, is provided by another passage preserved by Josephus and attributed to Hecataeus of Abdera.¹² According to this testimony, Alexander rewarded the loyalty of the Judeans by annexing Samaritan territory to Judea and exempting it from tribute:

For he held our nation in honor, as Hecataeus also says concerning us: because of the kindness and loyalty that the Judeans showed to him, he added the Samaritan territory to theirs, free of tribute.

C.Ap. 2.43; transl. J.M.G. BARCLAY

11 Magen et al., *Mount Gerizim Excavations*, vol. III, 28; Szanto, *Jews of Ptolemaic Egypt*, 29–52; Méléze-Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt*, 83–87.

12 On Hecataeus cf. Schwartz, "Diodorus Siculus 40.3."

This administrative reconfiguration is corroborated by Josephus (*Ant.* 11.340–345) and contextualised by Curtius Rufus’ account of Alexander’s suppression of a Samaritan revolt and its pacification around 331 BCE:

The sorrow was made greater by news of the death of Andromachus, to whom he had given the charge of Syria; the Samaritans had burned him alive. To avenge his murder, he hastened to the spot with all possible speed, and on his arrival those who had been guilty of so great a crime were delivered to him. Then he put Menon in place of Andromachus and executed those who had slain his general.

Historiae Alexandri Magni, IV 8.34.9–11; transl. J.C. ROLFE¹³

The consequences of this intervention were significant: the decline of Samaria as a political centre in favour of Shechem,¹⁴ the foundation of the Greek city of Sebaste, and, most importantly for the present discussion, the temporary subordination of Samaria to Judean administration.¹⁵ Although this arrangement was likely short-lived and later reversed under the Lagid reorganisation, it provides a crucial key for understanding the evidence from Egypt.

Samarians conscripted during this period and resettled in Egypt could thus possess a dual identity. Religiously, they remained Samaritans, preserving their attachment to Mount Gerizim and commemorating their origins through the name of their settlement, Samareia. Administratively, however, they hailed from territory governed from Jerusalem and were therefore designated, like others from that region, as *Ioudaioi*—that is, Judeans.¹⁶

13 Cf. *GLAJJ*, I, 447–449.

14 Magen, “The Dating,” 191–192; Schäfer, *The History of the Jews*, 5.

15 This situation is probably illustrated by the fact that Yehizkiyah, the governor of the province of Yehud, continued to mint coins in the late Persian period and during the time of Alexander, cf. Gitler and Lorber, “A New Chronology”; Gitler et al., *The Yehud Coinage*, 41–47.

16 Cf. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 104–105: “Greek *Ioudaios*, Latin *Iudaeus*, and Hebrew *Yehudi* are almost always translated as ‘Jew,’ but in all occurrences of the term before the end of the second century B.C.E. this translation is wrong, because before that point these words always and everywhere mean ‘Judaean,’ not ‘Jew.’ ‘Judaean’ is an ethnic geographic term: a Judaean is a member of the Judaean people (ethnos) and hails from Judaea, the ethnic homeland. In the diaspora a ‘Judaean’ is a member of an association of those who hailed originally from the ethnic homeland; a person might be a Judaean even if he or she had not been born in Judaea or ever set foot there.”

2 The Origins of P.Amherst 63: A Hypothesis

This historical reconstruction not only clarifies the situation in the village of Samerina in the Fayum during the third century BCE, but also provides a compelling context for reassessing the origins of the Aramaic text written in Demotic script known as P.Amherst 63.¹⁷ The papyrus contains a collection of religious texts, including compositions analogous to Psalm 20 and hymns in which YHW appears as the supreme deity, alongside elements that point clearly towards a Samaritan milieu.¹⁸

Earlier scholarship tended to locate the origins of P.Amherst 63 in Upper Egypt, particularly at Edfu or Syene, and to associate it with the Yahwistic community at Elephantine in the fifth century BCE.¹⁹ More recent studies, however, have increasingly questioned such connections.²⁰ As Ingrid Hjelm has observed, the text reflects traditions associated with both Samaria and Judea:

Although Papyrus Amherst 63 [...] shows traces of Samaria's and Judea's traditions of the past, whether ascribed to events in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, as van der Toorn does, or at another time, which could be as late as the early third century BCE emigrations and exiles to Egypt following Alexander's invasion (Joseph. *Ant.* 11.345) and the unrest ensuing during Ptolemaic rule (Joseph. *Ant.* 12.7–10).²¹

Building on this insight, it may be suggested that the resettlement of Samaritans and Judeans in Egypt under Alexander and Ptolemy I constitutes the most convincing historical context for the traditions preserved in P.Amherst 63. While Karel van der Toorn's proposal that the text originated in eighth-century Samaria and reached Egypt via Palmyra during the Persian period has not gained broad acceptance, the Samaritan connections of the papyrus are undeniable.²² This is particularly evident in column 17, lines 1–6, which describes the displacement of people from both Samaria and Judea.

17 Steiner, "Aramaic Text"; Steiner and Nims, "Aramaic Text"; van der Toorn, *Papyrus Amherst 63*; Holm, "In Praise of Gods"; Holm, "Nanay and Her Lover."

18 Holm, "Samaritans."

19 Becking, *Identity in Persian Egypt*, 19–20. Cf. Holm, "Papyrus Amherst 63," 328–329.

20 Granerød, "What Indeed."

21 Hjelm, "What Can Elephantine Teach," 111.

22 Van der Toorn, *Papyrus Amherst 63*, 18–39; van der Toorn, *Becoming Diaspora Jews*, 73–80, 87–88; van der Toorn, "The Background."

ʔI' ..., I awoke/was agitated/went up in ... your/my ... in/between ... [with] my own two eyes a trʔooʔ[p]

[I] was waʔtchʔing; people were coming; a b[an]d of Samar[i]ans sought out my lord [the] king.

“Where are y<ou> from, young man (OR: From where, O young man), from where are the [peo]ple of your speech?” “I come ʔfromʔ [J]udah, my brother from Samarʔiaʔ

has been brought, and now, a man ʔis brʔinging up my sister from Jerusalem.” “Enter, young man—we

will host you. Pick up a kab of ʔwhʔeat on your shoʔulʔder. We will fee<d> your people, every refugee. (OR: Let us know your people, every refugee.)

On your table one will place bowls, and from every fountain wine; bowls, and from every vessel an excellent portion.”²³

Transl. T. HOLM

Despite variations in translation, the passage unmistakably evokes a scenario of forced migration involving both groups. On the basis of the currently available evidence, the incorporation of Samaritans and Judeans into the Macedonian army and their subsequent resettlement in Egypt between 332 and 312 BCE offers the most plausible historical framework for this text. If column 17 indeed reflects events of that period, it is reasonable to assume that other compositions contained in the papyrus—including its religious hymns—originated in Samaria shortly before Alexander's arrival.

Accepting this interpretation has several important implications. First, the juxtaposition of Samaritans and Samaria with Judeans and Jerusalem within a single text centred on themes of hospitality corresponds closely to the administrative realities of Palestine after 332 BCE. Secondly, the polytheistic or henotheistic elements found in P.Amherst 63 may reflect not conditions within the Egyptian diaspora, but rather the religious landscape of Samaria immediately prior to the Macedonian conquest. In this light, the contrast between the Yahwism promoted in Jerusalem during the Persian period and the more traditional, syncretistic forms of Yahwism attested in Samaria becomes particularly striking.²⁴

²³ Holm, “Nanay and Her Lover,” 6; cf. van der Toorn, *Papyrus Amherst* 63, 75.

²⁴ Cf. Becking, “Earliest Samaritan Inscriptions.”

3 Conclusions

The two interrelated lines of inquiry pursued in this article allow for a renewed and more nuanced understanding of the Samaritan community in Egypt at the turn of the fourth and third centuries BCE. First, the evidence preserved by Josephus supports the conclusion that the founders of the village of Samaria in the Fayum oasis originated in Samaria. Since, however, these territories had been administratively incorporated into Judea following Alexander's intervention, their designation as *Ioudaioi* should be understood as indicating regional origin rather than ethnic identity. Second, this observation lends further support to interpreting *Ioudaios/Ioudaioi* as an administrative or geographical term best translated as "Judean(s)" rather than "Jew(s)." Third, the hypothesis that soldiers from Samaria conscripted by Alexander and Ptolemy were responsible for the transmission and preservation of P. Amherst 63 provides a coherent explanation for the coexistence within this text of migration narratives involving Samaritans and Judeans alongside poetic compositions devoted to the cult of Yaho and other polytheistic traditions.

Bibliography

- Adler, Yonatan. *Between Yahwism and Judaism: Judean Cult and Culture during the Early Hellenistic Period (332–175 BCE)*. Cambridge University Press, 2025.
- Becking, Bob. "Do the Earliest Samaritan Inscriptions Already Indicate a Parting of the Ways." In *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.*, edited by O. Lipschits, G.N. Knoppers, and R. Albertz. Eisenbrauns, 2007.
- Becking, Bob. *Identity in Persian Egypt: The Fate of the Yehudite Community of Elephantine*. Penn State University Press, 2020.
- Cohen, Shaye J.D. *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*. University of California Press, 1999.
- Gitler, Haim, and Catharine Lorber. "A New Chronology for the Yehizkiyah Coins of Judah." *Schweizerische Numismatische Rundschau* 87 (2008): 61–82.
- Gitler, Haim, Catharine Lorber, and Jean-Philippe Fontanille. *The Yehud Coinage: A Study and Die Classification of the Provincial Silver Coinage of Judah*. The Israel Numismatic Society, 2023.
- GLAJJ—Stern, Menahem. *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 1. The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976.
- Granerød, Gard. "What Indeed Has Papyrus Amherst 63 To Do with Elephantine?" The Amherst Papyrus's Relevance to the Question of the Elephantine Judean Community's Historical Background and Identity." In *Judeans in the Land of the Nile*, edited by K. Ziemba and F. Poulson. Zaphon, 2026.

- Hjelm, Ingrid. "What Can Elephantine Teach Us about Ancient Samati(t)ans?" In *Judeans in the Land of the Nile*, edited by K. Ziemba and F. Poulson. Zaphon, 2026.
- Holm, Tawny L. "Nanay and Her Lover: An Aramaic Sacred Marriage Text from Egypt." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 76 (2017): 1–37.
- Holm, Tawny L. "In Praise of Gods and Goddesses in Aramean Egypt. Papyrus Amherst 63." In *Hymnen und Aretalogien im antiken Mittelmeerraum: Von Inana bis Isis*, edited by L. Bricault and M.A. Stadler. Harrassowitz Verlag, 2021.
- Holm, Tawny L. "Papyrus Amherst 63 and the Arameans of Egypt. A Landscape of Cultural Nostalgia." In *Elephantine in Context: Studies on the History, Religion and Literature of the Judeans in Persian Period Egypt*, edited by R.G. Kratz and B.U. Schipper. Mohr Siebeck, 2022.
- Holm, Tawny L. "Samaritans in the Egyptian Diaspora." In *Yahwism under the Achaemenid Empire: Professor Shaul Shaked in Memoriam*, edited by G. Barnea and R.G. Kratz. De Gruyter, 2024.
- Honigman, Sylvie. "Jewish Communities of Hellenistic Egypt: Different Responses to Different Environments." In *Jewish Identities in Antiquity: Studies in Memory of Menahem Stern*, edited by L.I. Levine and D.R. Schwartz. Mohr Siebeck, 2009.
- Honigman, Sylvie. "Naming Practice in the Jewish Communities of Egypt." In *Greek Personal Names in Egypt*, edited by A. Almásy-Martin and Y. Broux. Oxford University Press, 2025.
- Kuhs, Clemens. *Das Dorf Samareia im griechisch-römischen Ägypten: Eine papyrologische Untersuchung*, Dissertation. Institut für Papyrologie, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität in Heidelberg, 1996, <https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/propylaeumdok/25/1/samareia.pdf>.
- Magen, Yitzhak. "The Dating of the First Phase of the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim in Light of the Archaeological Evidence." In *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.*, edited by O. Lipschits, G.N. Knoppers, and R. Albertz. Eisenbrauns, 2007.
- Magen, Yitzhak, Gabriela Bijovsky, and Yoav Tzionit. *Mount Gerizim Excavations*, vol. III. *The Coins*. Israel Antiquities Authority, 2021.
- Mélèze-Modrzejewski, Joseph. *The Jews of Egypt: From Rameses II to Emperor Hadrian*, transl. Robert Cornman. The Jewish Publication Society, 1995.
- Pearce, Laurie E., and Cornelia Wunsch. *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*. CDL, 2014.
- Schäfer, Peter. *The History of the Jews in the Greco-Roman World: The Jews of Palestine from Alexander the Great to the Arab Conquest*. Routledge, 2003.
- Schwartz, Daniel R. "Diodorus Siculus 40.3—Hecataeus or Pseudo-Hecataeus?" In *Jews and Gentiles in the Holy Land in the Days of the Second Temple, the Mishnah and the Talmud*, edited by M. Mor, A. Oppenheimer, J. Pastor, and D.R. Schwartz. Yad Ben-Zvi, 2003.

- Schwartz, Daniel R. "Judaean' or 'Jew'? How Should We Translate *Ioudaios* in Josephus?" In *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, edited by J. Frey, D.R. Schwartz, and S. Gripentrog. Brill, 2007.
- Steiner, Richard C. "The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script." In *Context of Scripture*, edited by W. Hallo. Brill, 2003 (1.99).
- Steiner, Richard C. and Charles F. Nims. "The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script: Text, Translation, and Notes." Repository.yu.edu / Academia.edu, 2017.
- Szanto, Zsuzsanna. *The Jews of Ptolemaic Egypt: The History of a Diaspora Community in Light of the Papyri*. De Gruyter, 2024.
- Van der Toorn, Karel. *Papyrus Amherst 63*. Ugarit-Verlag, 2018.
- Van der Toorn, Karel. *Becoming Diaspora Jews: Behind the Story of Elephantine*. Yale University Press, 2019.
- Van der Toorn, Karel. "The Background of the Elephantine Jews in Light of Papyrus Amherst 63." In *Elephantine in Context: Studies on the History, Religion and Literature of the Judeans in Persian Period Egypt*, edited by R.G. Kratz and B.U. Schipper. Mohr Siebeck, 2022.