

## A Samaritan Amulet and an Anatomic Votive Offering in the Ancient World (Object 5)

Subtitle: The Relationship between Human and Divinity in the Comparison of the Samaritan Amulet and the Roman Anatomic Votive Offering.



The Samaritan Amulet



The Votive Offerings of the Roman Republic

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This essay focuses on two objects from the Kelsey Museum. The first object is a thin piece of inscribed bronze with inscriptions from the Samaritan Bible, likely an amulet produced in the time of Baba Rabbah (late 3<sup>rd</sup>-early 4<sup>th</sup> century AD) worn by his followers<sup>i</sup>. The second is a set of anatomical votive terracotta figurines from the Roman Republic (late 4<sup>th</sup>-early 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), found in Veii and Pozzuoli, Italy. Both amulets and votive offerings, empowered through rituals and spells, are ways through which ancient people established their relationship with the divinity, based on diverse religions and formulae. This essay discusses the social situations when these objects were made, and specifically, how Samaritan's ethnic identities and the two religious traditions, i.e. YHWH and Greco-Roman traditions, are shown in these objects and their comparison with the other archeological materials.

## I. Historical Background

A thorough analysis of the material resources is impossible without a larger historical context in which the Samaritan people emerged and developed. From the destruction of Solomon's Temple to the second division of the Roman Empire, the land of Israel and Palestine witnessed the wax and wane of a series of political entities and the formation of diverse ethnicities and religious traditions. After Nebuchadnezzar II captured Jerusalem in 597 BCE and destroyed the city due to rebellion against him, he exiled a number of well-educated, ruling-class Israelites from Judea to Babylon. In 530 BCE, when the exiled Israelites returned to Jerusalem with the declaration of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire, the Israelites encountered the Samaritans whom the returners treated as enemies. The Persian Empire was conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, whose kingdom, Macedon, was then divided into the Seleucid Empire and the Ptolemaic Empire. The two empires were finally annexed by Rome, which soon developed from the Roman Republic, and had governed the Pan-Italy area since 509

BCE, to the Roman Empire in 27 BCE, which lasted for over one thousand years with its deliberate political structure and laws. Living in the bottleneck under the games of global powers, the peoples in the land of Israel/ Palestine experienced prosperity and persecution, rebellion and obedience alternatively, shaping their identities and customs in the constant interaction of cultures<sup>ii</sup>. In this broad historical stage, this essay will shed light on the life of the Samaritans, a group of people settling on the northern central hill and the Romans in the Roman Republic by analyzing the details of the two objects.

The Samaritans, an ethno-religious group of the Levant, are the worshipers of YHWH based on the Samaritan Pentateuch, who accept only Mount Gerizim as their religious center<sup>iii</sup>. They claim descent from the Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh as well as from the priestly tribe of Levi (*Wikipedia*, “the Samaritans”). The word “Samaritan” in the Old Testament only refers to the inhabitants of Samaria, but since Josephus’ writings and the New Testament, the word “Samaritans” has been used to refer to an ethnic group. In rabbinic sources, the Samaritans are called Cuthim, the foreign settlers from Cutha in Mesopotamia who adopted the worship of both YHWH and their own gods<sup>iv</sup>. However, archeological materials suggest that the Samaritans might be the local people who were left in Judea during the exile period<sup>v</sup>. With Judaism and Christianity, Samaritanism is one of the three monotheistic religions that grew out of ancient Israelite religion. Sharing many similarities with the Jewish Pentateuch, the Samaritan Pentateuch is distinguished by its emphasis on Mount Gerizim as the place chosen by God. A Samaritan temple was built at Mount Gerizim in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE<sup>vi</sup>, which was destroyed by the Jewish Hasmonaean King John Hyrcanus in 129 BCE. In the Roman period, the Temple of Gerizim was rebuilt around 135 CE after the Bar Kokhba revolt against the Romans (*Wikipedia*, “the Samaritans”). From the late 3<sup>rd</sup> to the early 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, the Roman Empire experienced

a series of crises including the Military Anarchy and the rise of the Persians. The emperor, Diocletian, appointed Maximilian as the junior co-emperor in 285 AD, and the empire was finally divided into western and eastern empires in 395 AD. During this period of time, as the foreign rulers were preoccupied with their own affairs, the oppressed Samaritan community had a brief respite. Baba Rabbah, the high priest of the Samaritans, codified much of the Samaritan liturgy and worship, and fought against Roman for autonomy (*Wikipedia*, “Baba Rabbah”). The object this essay discusses is made during this period during Baba Rabbah’s period.

The second group of people are the Romans in the Roman Republic, which governed Italy from 509BC to 27 BC. The Roman government was headed by two consuls elected by the citizens, and its evolution was greatly influenced by the tensions between the patricians and the plebeians, as two opposite social classes. In terms of religion, the Roman gods came from the proto-Indo-European Pantheon and the Greek culture, in which Jupiter and Mars were the most famous deities. (*Wikipedia*, *The Roman Republic*) The private aspect of worship was emphasized to the extent that “in a sense, each household was a temple to the gods (*Wikipedia*, *The Roman Republic*)”.

## II. The Samaritan Amulet

The object is a thin piece of inscribed bronze with the Hebrew inscription of the Samaritan Bible. It is 32 mm wide, 52 mm high and less than 1 mm thick, with a hole on its top, indicating that it was worn on the neck on a cord or chain. It has no decoration, with only the bronze rust caused by oxidation. Based on its scratch marks, which clearly not a result of casting, it was made through a metalworking process and its inscription was carved on it.

The material and techniques used to produce this object and its appearance indicate a society with a relatively low developed economy and a relatively high devotion to religion. The

rough metalworking process implies that the economy at that time might not have been good. Either the craftsmen were not very skillful in an economy with low level of specialization, or the commodity circulation was poorly developed to the extent that individuals had to make the amulet on their own. The crudely-made bronze amulet was likely used by common people rather than the rich, suggesting that the common people at that time had time and energy to devote to religion. The abrasion, especially the vague letters on its edge, was perhaps caused by the corrosion of human perspiration and the attrition during usage. If so, the amulet might have been used in the everyday religious life of the Samaritans. But the abrasion might also have been created by the oxidation and corrosion under the ground, indicating that the object might be a burial object. The fact that such inscriptions are not uncommon in Samaritan tomb inscriptions<sup>vii</sup> enhances this assumption. In either case, the amulet at least shows that the religious life was important for the Samaritans during this time. They were as superstitious as the Romans, who firmly believed that the divine power could guide them every day and every moment.<sup>viii</sup> The amulet also sheds light on the time of Baba Rabbah. The words, “strong,” “anger,” and “destroyer”, used in the inscription to describe YHWH, suggests that the amulet was probably made for war. The war-like inscription portrayed an age of great political and religious upheavals, and the fight of Samaritans in the name of YHWH.

The Samaritan religions close relationship with Jewish culture and their self ethno-identity as the Israelites are suggested by the amulet’s biblical inscription. In this short, right-to-left Hebrew inscription, “YHWH” is repeated five times, clearly illustrating the Samaritans’ belief in the God of Israel. The sentence “There is no one like God” reaffirms the monotheistic belief. The Samaritan Pentateuch, written in the Samaritan alphabet, is slightly different from the Hebrew one (*Wikipedia*, “Samaritan Pentateuch”). The inscriptions from Deuteronomy and the Samaritan

bible's version of Exodus 15:3 show both the similarities and the differences between Samaritan and Jewish biblical texts. In all, the monotheistic belief in YHWH, the God of Israel, and the largely similar biblical text reveal a close relationship between the two people's religious tradition.

“Jeshrun”, the Samaritans called themselves. In the Hebrew Bible, “Jeshrun” is a poetic name referring to the people of Israel (Deut. 32:15; 33:26), the Land of Israel (Deut. 33:5;), or the Patriarch Jacob (whom an Angel renamed Israel in Genesis 32:29) (*Wikipedia*, “Jeshurun”). The inscription reaffirms the Samaritans' self-identity as the true Israelites, the descendants of the “Ten Lost Tribes”. They believe that the original sanctuary is their own temple on Mount Gerizim. Although the Jews, who also claim descent from Israelites, have rejected this declaration, and the alienation has increased as time passed, physical materials including the elephantine papyrus<sup>ix</sup> correspond to the close kinship between the Samaritans and the Jews. In addition, the cross-comparison of the inscribed amulets found around the broader Mediterranean area provides a deeper view of Samaritans' life condition.

In the global stage, a few actors including the Jewish, the Egyptian, and the Greco-Roman peoples all actively influenced the land of Israel and Palestine. Each culture left its own types of amulets. “More amulets are preserved from ancient Egypt than from anywhere else in the ancient Near East.<sup>x</sup>” Throughout history, Egyptian amulets, mostly made of faience, kept developing new forms and styles. “Theoretically everything could be made into an amulet, if a powerful recitation was spoken over it.<sup>xi</sup>” Amulets could represent animals and deities including the scarab beetles, a manifestation of the young sun god, as well as symbols like the healed eye of the god Horus. Natural objects including claws and stones could also be used as amulets. Some of the

Egyptian amulets were used by the living, but others were for the after-life<sup>xii</sup> based on Egyptian religion.

Etymologically, the amulet in Greek refers to “things tied around” and in Latin means “denoting the metal sheets on which they were engraved<sup>xiii</sup>”. The prayers on the amulets, primarily inscribed on gemstones, were for either protective (cure ailments) or aggressive (win lovers or battles) wishes. Although a few amulets featured images or names of gods/ goddesses and magical words, Greeks and Romans in some cases considered that the amulets worked based on the “inherent power of the object or by the rationale of *similia similibus* (like for like)<sup>xiv</sup>.”

Compared to the Egyptian and Greco-Roman amulets, the Jewish amulets share much more similarities with the Samaritan one because of their closer cultural kinship. Rather than being made of Egyptian Faience or Greco-Roman gemstones, the preserved Jewish amulets were mostly made of metal or of burnt clay. Without mentioning the after-life like Egyptians, the Jewish amulets share with the other ones its purposes of protective and aggressive petitions, while emphasizing more on the exorcism and the protection against evil spirits<sup>xv</sup> just like the Samaritan one. Since the Jews have practiced YHWH worship since the ethno-identity was formed, the Jewish amulets always contain the biblical texts, especially the divine name YHWH. There was “a certain amount of literary overlap between magical formulae and prayer traditions in ancient Israel<sup>xvi</sup>”. Smoak argued that both the psalms and the amulets drew from a stock set of phrases, i.e. “guard” and “protect”, commonly associated with and employed in apotropaic magic<sup>xvii</sup>. In Jewish amulets, the psalms reflect “a war of words between evil sorcerers and the priest(s) of YHWH, who employ the divine name as an efficacious counter-curse.<sup>xviii</sup>” The application of psalms and their functions are quite similar with those of the Samaritan amulet.

In conclusion, by analyzing the details of the Samaritan amulet and comparing it with the other amulets from the Mediterranean area, this essay shows the social situation and the ethnic identity of the Samaritans and their close cultural and religious relationship with the Israelites.

### III. The Anatomical Votive Terracotta Figurines

While the amulets represent a tendency to invite the expansion of religious and magic power into the secular, everyday life, and to some extent deify daily life, the votive offerings suggest an attempt to emphasize the personal or state existence in the realm of deities: an expansion of the mortal desire derived from the secular life into the immortal sphere.

The second set of objects includes a veiled votive head in profile and votive eyes, noses, breasts, foot, and etc. The anatomical votive terra-cottas, made in the Roman Republic (late 4<sup>th</sup>-early 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), were found in Veii and Pozzuoli, Italy.

A votive offering is “a gift to a deity that can consist of almost anything so long as it is given with the intention of making contact with a god or goddess<sup>xix</sup>”. The preserved votive offerings date from the Protogeometric/ Geometric to the Roman period, but these are only a small fraction of all the votive offerings that once existed in the ancient world. The votive offerings might be in the form of either *ex voto* (according to a vow) or *do ut des* (I give so that you may/will give), and mostly do not bear any inscriptions. Anthropomorphic sculptures and animal representations are found throughout the period, while the human ones became more popular from the Late Archaic and Classical periods onward. No strict guidelines were set on the type of offerings for a given divinity, but the anatomical votive offerings are mostly found in the sanctuaries of healing deities<sup>xx</sup>. Among various kinds of votive offerings, the anatomical votives are the “depictions of body parts placed under the protection of a deity<sup>xxi</sup>”. According to some

scholars, while the *do ut des* type does exist, the *ex voto* practice seems to dominate in anatomical votives<sup>xxii</sup>.

The anatomical votive terracottas in the forms of legs, feet, hand, veiled head, breast, uterus, are shown together as a set in the Kelsey museum, each of which represents different kinds of petitions and in some cases different local, cultural dispositions<sup>xxiii</sup>. While most of the anatomical votive terracottas request divine help for curing a disease, they may also have other implications. Feet and legs may symbolize “travel on foot, and other day-to-day activities that required walking long distances<sup>xxiv</sup>”. Feet could also symbolize pilgrimage and pilgrims, or act as images of support and stability<sup>xxv</sup>. Hand could represent praying or the sphere of manual labor, production and crafts<sup>xxvi</sup>. The heads differ significantly in terms of style and type in different places—naturalistic at nearby Sepino, highly schematic and stylized in Samnium, and unveiled in Apennine<sup>xxvii</sup>. In addition, the veiled terracotta heads may either be the characteristically Roman artefacts that spread out with Roman colonization<sup>xxviii</sup> or a wider Latin fashion<sup>xxix</sup>, indicating the local features in terms of culture. The breast and uterus could request divine help for lactation, reproduction and fertility. They are widely spread in Tyrrhenian Italy, but only a small number of them are found in Apennine Italy. It may have been “considered less important—or appropriate—to express publically anxieties about fertility and reproduction, which surely existed, but would have been dealt with in other contexts.<sup>xxx</sup>” In general, the different parts of human bodies indicate diverse types of wishes, and they all together show the local difference in cultural sphere.

The appearance of these votive offerings is also a showcase of the people’s living condition in the Roman Republic period in Italy. The well-proportioned limbs indicate that the Romans inherited the Greek obsession with on human proportions. Only a bit of red paint is shown, and

there is no trace for jewelry or other precious ornaments. The lack of decoration suggests that either these terra-cottas may represent more of the poorer people who wore less adornments, or perhaps they include some metaphysical meanings in general, rather than referring to the limbs of a specific person. The fact that making terra-cottas was relatively cheap in this period<sup>xxxii</sup> and that the terra-cotta foot shows a deformity which might have been seen in the toes of the long-term, weight-carrying workers, reaffirms the assumption that these offerings are for the lower class.

#### IV. Comparison

The Samaritan amulet and the anatomic votives in the Roman Republic, both made by ancient people in the lower class and for the purpose of communicating with the divinity, show a divergently religious and cultural disposition led by the dissimilarities of the historical and regional contexts. A noticeable divergence here is that the amulet requests for the divinity's accompaniment in the secular world with inscriptions, while the anatomic votives emphasize the human's existence to the divine sphere without any words on them.

The religious mindsets play an important role in forming this difference. In the YHWH belief system, "word" itself is inherently endowed with supernatural power. Genesis said that "And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." God created the world with his word, and he left his sacred word in the Bible. The belief thus places a great emphasis on the narrative itself: one needs to trust the Bible to believe in YHWH. The religious-historical-ethnical narratives form a series of ethno-religious identity accordingly. Additionally, the biblical narratives keep saying that only when one obeys God's order can he be blessed and justified. God should be obeyed, and he is the only rightness. As a contrast, in the Greco-Roman belief system, the power of "words" is limited to the oracles whose potency are based on the authority

of the gods. The authority of the gods is not derived from a trust in words; rather, the gods, representing the natural existence—ocean, sky, river, and so on—indicate the power of nature. Nature does not always correspond to rightness; instead, the gods keep making mistakes because of their Eros. The Greek tragedies eulogize the greatness of heroic individuals' fight against destiny, i.e. the greatness of human's virtues in the struggle with the world's and their own natures which always bring disasters. Those who disobey the gods are inherently tragically heroic. Hence, compared to the YHWH tradition, the Greco-Roman religion places human beings on a more equal standing with the divinity. With the difference on the attitudes towards the words and the god-man relationship, it is no wonder why the amulet carries inscription but the anatomic votives don't, and why the amulet relatively emphasizes divinity but the anatomic votives focus more on the human side.

In a conclusion, this essay, firstly, shows the ethnic identities, religious traditions and social situations of the Samaritans and the Romans by analyzing the Samaritan amulet and the anatomic votive offerings. Secondly, by comparing the two objects, this essay argues that the religious beliefs play an important role in shaping the material cultures of the two peoples.

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<sup>i</sup> Frank's Comments, *Assignment: Kelsey Object Exercise*. Nov.19

<sup>ii</sup> Eliav, Yaron. "The land of Israel and Palestine." University of Michigan, 1210 Chemistry Building, n.d.

<sup>iii</sup> Pummer Reinhard "Religion, Samaritan." *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, First Edition. Edited by Roger S. Bagnall, Kai Brodersen, Craige B. Champion, Andrew Erskine, and Sabine R. Huebner. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 5796-5798. Print.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

<sup>v</sup> "Elephantine: The Elephantine Papyri," *The Land of Israel / Palestine: Image Database*, accessed December 2, 2015, <https://www.lrc.lsa.umich.edu/eliav/image-database/items/show/118>.

<sup>vi</sup> *Yitzhak Magen*, The Dating of the First Phase of the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim in the Light of the Archaeological Evidence (in *Oded Lipschitz, Gary N. Knoppers, Rainer Albertz*,

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eds, "Judah and Judeans in the Fourth Century BC", Eisenbrauns, 2007). Books.google.com.au. Retrieved 2011-12-05.

<sup>vii</sup> Frank's Comments, *Assignment: Kelsey Object Exercise*. Nov.19

<sup>viii</sup> Aldrete, Gregory S. *Daily Life in the Roman City: Rome, Pompeii, and Ostia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print.

<sup>ix</sup> "Elephantine: The Elephantine Papyri," *The Land of Israel / Palestine: Image Database*, accessed December 2, 2015, <https://www.lrc.lsa.umich.edu/eliav/image-database/items/show/118>.

<sup>x</sup> David E. Anue. "Amulets"

[https://www.umich.edu/~hjcs277/kelsey\\_exercises/exercise\\_01/obj\\_05/Ox%20Ency%20Arch%20in%20NE%20-%20Amulets.pdf](https://www.umich.edu/~hjcs277/kelsey_exercises/exercise_01/obj_05/Ox%20Ency%20Arch%20in%20NE%20-%20Amulets.pdf)

<sup>xi</sup> Stunkel, Isabel. "Amulets, Egypt." *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, First Edition. Edited by Roger S. Bagnall, Kai Brodersen, Craige B. Champion, Andrew Erskine, and Sabine R. Huebner. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 385-387. Print.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Poliard, Elizabeth Ann. "Amulets, Greece and Rome." *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, First Edition. Edited by Roger S. Bagnall, Kai Brodersen, Craige B. Champion, Andrew Erskine, and Sabine R. Huebner. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 388-389. Print.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xv</sup> Hahari, Yuval. "Amulets, Jewish." *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, First Edition. Edited by Roger S. Bagnall, Kai Brodersen, Craige B. Champion, Andrew Erskine, and Sabine R. Huebner. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 389-391. Print.

<sup>xvi</sup> Smoak, J. D. "'Prayers of Petition' in the Psalms and West Semitic Inscribed Amulets: Efficacious Words in Metal and Prayers for Protection in Biblical Literature." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36.1 (2011): 75-92. Web.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xviii</sup> Wevers, *A Study in the Form Criticism of Individual Complaint Psalms*, pp. 94-95

<sup>xix</sup> Gagarin, Michael, and Elaine Fantham. "Votive Offerings." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*. New York: Oxford UP, 2010. N. pag. Print

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxi</sup> Dasen, Veronique. "Anatomical Votives." *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, First Edition. Edited by Roger S. Bagnall, Kai Brodersen, Craige B. Champion, Andrew Erskine, and Sabine R. Huebner. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 402-403. Print.

<sup>xxii</sup> Cazanove, O. (2009) "Oggetti muti? Le iscrizioni degli ex voto anatomici nel mondo romano." In J. Bodet and M. Kajava, eds., *Religious dedications in the Greco-Roman world: distribution, typology, use*: 355-71. Rome.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Scopacasa, Rafael. "Moulding Cultural Change: A Contextual Approach to Anatomical Votive Terracottas In Central Italy, Fourth-Second Centuries Bc." *Pap. Br. Sch. Rome Papers of the British School at Rome* 83 (2015): 1-27. Web.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>xxv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Pensabene, P. (1979) Doni votivi fittili di Roma: contributo per un inquadramento storico. *Archeologia Laziale* 2: 218-19)

<sup>xxix</sup> Roselaar, S.T. (2011) Colonies and processes of integration in the Roman Republic. *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Antiquité*

<sup>xxx</sup> Scopacasa, Rafael. "Moulding Cultural Change: A Contextual Approach to Anatomical Votive Terracottas In Central Italy, Fourth–Second Centuries Bc." *Pap. Br. Sch. Rome Papers of the British School at Rome* 83 (2015): 1-27. Web.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid.