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The Aphrodite Papyri and Village Life in Byzantine Egypt

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AND VILLAGE LIFE IN BYZANTINE EGYPT

The nearly one thousand years during which Egypt was characterized by a Greek-speaking elite have by papyrologists and historians traditionally been divided into three periods: the Ptolemaic, which marks its beginning with Alexander's invasion in 332 B.C.; the Roman, which begins with Octa-
vian's reduction of Alexandria in 30 B.C.; and the Byzantine, which starts
with Diocletian's accession in A.D. 284 and ends with the Arab invasion of
A.D. 639. The Greek papyri recovered from ancient Egypt's cemeteries and
waste heaps, whether by supervised excavations or by the less formal 'excava-
tions' of the sahel-diggers, especially toward the end of the nineteenth
and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, have made Egypt the best-known
region of the Hellenistic, Roman and early Byzantine world. The evidence is
not without its gaps, chronological and geographical, and only a small pro-
portion of the papyri consists of pieces whose texts can stand on their own
as important historical testimony. Nonetheless, to cite just a few exam-
ple cases, the Greek papyri of the Ptolemaic period have produced copies of
royal regulations, revenue laws and amnesty decrees, and documents on im-
portant land-reclamation projects in the Fayum. Shortly over a decade ago, a
Cologne papyrus of the Roman period proved to contain a fragmentary Greek
version of the emperor Augustus' funeral oration for his second-in-command,
Marcus Agrippa. Byzantine-period papyri have produced references to some
of Justinian's laws and practical examples of the working of legal rules and
practices whose theoretical outlines are set forth in the codes.

Nonetheless, as has been indicated, most of the papyri that have been
published are of uneven historical value, and this an unevenness that is rough-
ly analogous to the vagaries tainting the sites from which the Greek papyri
have been recovered. For there is no single site or cluster of sites that is
rich in documents for all three traditional periods: Ptolemaic, Roman, and
Byzantine. The villages on the desert edges of the Fayum, for example, are
among the single most important source of Ptolemaic papyri. They are also
exceedingly rich in Roman papyri; but a decade in the irrigation works and the
consequent abandonment or depopulation of some of the newer Fayum villages
in the Byzantine period in the fourth century have rendered them negligibly
As sources of papyri for the fifth and following centuries. On the other hand, Ugarit, the best-known source of Greek papyri and the most important single source for Roman and Byzantine pieces, has as yet yielded very little in the way of Ptolemaic papyri. Still another site, the one which this paper is about, the village of Aphrodisia in the Thebaid, though apparently yielding no Ptolemaic papyri and only one (doubtful) Roman, rivals Ugarit as a source of Byzantine documents and is itself the most important source of Greek papyri of the early Islamic period.

The first finds recorded as having been made at Aphrodisia were made accidentally in 1903 by peasants who were digging a well in the village (modern Kom el-Ahshaf). A subsequent similar accident in 1905, which led to the recovery of a cache containing portions of five comedies by Menander, the first substantial fragments of that much-admired poet, brought M. Gustave Lebeuf, Inspector of Antiquities at Assiut, to the site, and in that year and the two years following he was responsible for the retrieval and removal to the Cairo Museum of many papyri from the village. At the same time the British Museum was actively acquiring for itself papyri originating from Kom el-Ahshaf: in 1903, a lion's share of the Greek papyri of early Arab date (these were products of the year 401; first just mentioned); in 1906 and 1907, more of the same, together with a significant complement (products of the 9th century) to the sixth-century papyri that had been conveyed to the Cairo Museum and that would come to be published in three large volumes by Jean Maspero.

Meanwhile the number of clandestine finds at Kom el-Ahshaf, or the richness of a few finds, must have been considerable. Although some of these secretly sold papyri -- some that had been purchased by natives, others that were in the possession of M. J. Zayd, chief engineer of Egyptian railroads at Assiut -- were conveyed by the Antiquities Service for the Cairo Museum, private discoveries at the village and sales through dealers at Assiut and Cairo and Paris dispersed Aphrodisia's Byzantine and Islamic archives far and wide. Purchases of Aphrodisia papyri, Greek, Coptic and Arabic, for Russian collections are noted as having been made by Professor E. Lischakov from a Paris antiquity dealer in 1909, and in Cairo in 1907, and by B. Verlaver in Egypt in 1910. In 1908 Charles E. Evans bought in Cairo a number of Greek and Coptic Aphrodisian papyri, now in the Freer Gallery of Art (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C., and forgotten until their rediscovery by E. S. B. MacCorkell in 1971.

The three Greek and one Coptic Aphrodisia papyri in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore were purchased in Paris in 1912; they had been part of the collection of Dr Giovanni Battista of Cairo, an Italian-born 'pervyseur' to the British Army in Egypt. These examples, however, must have been just bits and pieces of a much larger story, for papyri from Aphrodisia are today also to be found in libraries and museums in Alexandria, Aberdeen, Cologne, Hamburg, Berlin, Erlangen, Heidelberg, Florence, Ghent, Geneva, Paris, Strasbourg, Vienna, Princeton, Chicago and the Vatican -- and even this list may not be exhaustive. No doubt the most striking single instance of the archive's dispersion was revealed in the 1976 publication by the late Rev. J.W. Barne of a papyrus owned by Dr W.M. Fitch of Monterey, California -- the upper half of a document whose lower half was among the Cairo Museum papyri published by Maspero in 1913.

The early Islamic-period Aphrodisia papyri, Greek and Arabic, that came to light through these discoveries and purchases and through eventual publication, are a few of them, from the very end of the seventh century, while the large majority are from the first two decades of the eighth century. Many are the remains of correspondence of an early 'emerald emir of Egypt,' Kursh ibn Shakhir, with Flavian Institute, administrator (papoura) of the region around Aphrodisia (as the village came to be called in the Arab period). Relatively few of the Coptic papyri, whether of Byzantine or of Islamic date, have been published; the tracking down of the Byzantine-age Coptic papyri in the Cairo Museum and elsewhere and their publication are goals of Dr Maspero. Many, but far from all, of the Greek Byzantine-period papyri, however, have been seen their way into print. They are nearly all of the sixth century, with dated documents ranging from A.D. 506 to A.D. 598, most of these fall in the reign of the emperor Justinian (527-565) (and of Justin II); most, and perhaps all [thus P. O. M. 1 1 46 intro.], in some way owe their ancient dating or safekeeping to one Faxian Dioscorus, one of the village headmen and (toward the end of his life) monastery-founder, Aurelius Apollon...
papyri show him to be active in the political and economic affairs of his
village. In A.D. 541 (B.Calv.M Gry II 1236), with Victor, a village priest,
Apollon found himself in Constantinople17 sometime after his return and
before his death (by 577), he established and gave his name to the monastery
where business affairs of his son Dioscorus sometimes represented. Meanwhile,
Dioscorus had committed himself to publishing his views, a lengthy which he
tried to put to good use on behalf of his community. He represented his
village in Constantinople in A.D. 551, later suffered certain political and
local difficulties, and economic losses. In consequence of which he "urged
Aphrodite for the provincial capital, Antiochopolis. There, from around 666 on
57), he earned a living as a notary. He then returned to Aphroditopolis,
bringing with his copies of many of the material instruments and petitions to
had drawn up in Antiochopolis. He died apparently shortly after 595.18
A number of the papyri preserved among Dioscorus' letters were on publi-
cation early on, and some are still today, intensively studied: the codex
with the Monarches (censorial law) of course,19 but also the Greek-papyri glossary
Dioscorus compiled to extend his knowledge of Greek vocabulary, especially poetic,20
the many similarly crafted poems he wrote on divergent occasions (pompa, epigrams, etc.)21,22, the petitions drawn up for presentation to the
provincial governor, the Duke of the Thebaid, the imperial emperors and
other legal and procedural documents that Dioscorus retained in his 'library.'
Also attracting notice when revealed in the papyri were the village's claim
to special tax-status, autogoria or the right to supervise its own tax-col-
c ecting, a privilege dating back to the emperor Leo (557-620), and its claim
to have placed itself under the special protection of the emperor Justinian's
wife, Theodore.23
Surely, therefore, the village of Aphroditopolis was more than an ordinary
rural territorial village. Apart from its claims to autogoria and to sacred-
place protection, it was able to send delegations to Constantinople to defend
its rights at the imperial court.24 In fact, moreover, in earlier times been
the capital city of its own administrative district (nomos) but by the sixth
century at least, it had lost its metropolis status and in its surrou-
ding territory were annexed to Antiochopolis. Aphroditopolis was reduced to village
status in the Antiochopolis territot.ors.25 Even as a village, however, Aphro-
dite retained a prominence over nearby satellite villages.26 Pitha and
Pentandrites are the two most frequently mentioned by the papyri.27 The papyri
'territories tend to distinguish Aphroditopolis the village (polis) from its environs
(loco), and sometimes to classify portions of the latter as viciopolis, farms
or pastures (vicipas, vediwa, bovina). Land parcels are commonly noted as
being situated in one of the village's 'plains' (theladoi), named for the
four cardinal geographical directions. Places are also often not measured ex-
actly, but rather identified through an intricate, no doubt familiar, naming-
system.28 Their boundaries are sometimes described as ancient or traditional
(qaluta, maldia). Near the village were many monasteries, and in the village
proper the buildings most frequently named in the papyri are the churches.29
There was the usual village storehouse, and in addition to the expected
houses of ordinary amenities were, as one papyrus puts it: the 'prominent,
bright dwellings of the village's ancient landlords'30.
Despite the existence of such houses, however, and despite the presence
of great landowners, in particular a certain Count Anastasios,31, at Aphroditopolis,
the sixth-century Aphroditopolian papyri, unlike contemporary papyri from Oxyyna-
chus, do not concern themselves with the economic activities and political
fortunes of rich and powerful magnates.32 Rather, the Aphroditopolian papyri,
since they are the product of their now far-dispersed papers, largely concern the
affairs of men of more modest means, however prominent they may have been in
village society: the 'small-holders'. A letter from 629, for instance, de-
noted the village scene that one papyrus refers to the village as consisting of
small-holders.33
For certain purposes the Aphroditopolian landowners were part of a collegium
(often comprised of village headmen and contributors) and small-holders.34 I have not yet de-
termined whether the order of the terms of the membership in the group --
headmen, contributors, small-holders -- is an ascending or descending
order of importance, or whether the terms simply refer to different aspects
of the same man: liturgical or social (village headmen), fiscal (contributors),
aristocratic (landowners). Irrespective, whatever the answer to that ques-
tion, it is evident that members of the collegium were the core of the village,
that they monitored the village's corporate responsibility for taxes, ordinary
and extraordinary, and saw to the village's protection and stability in other
pects as well. It was, for example, through two village headmen that Dios-
orus' father, Apollon, was empowered on one occasion to act on behalf of the
village as the provincial capital in Antiochopolis.35 The small-holders sent
petitions to the governor of the province and were not deemed responsible for
selecting delegates to press the village's claims in Constantinople, the
queen of cities herself.36 The collegium of village headmen, contributors
and small-holders further contributed to the legalizing of its members' relationships
with another collegium, that of the village shepherds. The traditional service
of the shepherds as fieldworkers (kufjaike), for reasons uncertain but on which we may speculate, was recorded formal by a contract drawn up in A.D. 526, binding them to the landowners and to that service in specific terms. The name of quite a few of the village’s sixth-century elite are known. There is considerable information about some of them, but only a few have received detailed study. Apollon and Philomachus were discussed by Neuser and Bell; but their ‘biographies’ can now be written in somewhat greater detail. I had recent occasion myself to investigate the dozen or so papyri that concern a less well-known member of the village elite, the contributory Amilian Philomachus son of Triadelpus. That study reveals Philomachus, who was active from at least A.D. 526 to at least A.D. 572, to have been a man who made a good living by serving as an intermediary between absentee landholding interests in the village (lands owned by monasteries, churches, and government officials) and the labor that could be supplied by the village peasants. Through this type of entrepreneurship, he acquired land and produce beyond what was needed for his own use. He also acquired land, and never seems to have rested content with what he had, but always seems to have used his current means to accumulate more for the future. Philomachus’ career raises the question whether others of the Aphrodite elite were operating in the same way and whether they and their families were en route to becoming great landowners by the time of the invasions (Persian, then Arab) in the seventh century. Whether that was the case or not, there is certainly enough evidence for a much-needed study of the Aphrodite village elite as a whole, as there is for many other subjects. For example, the Aphrodite papyri may supply enough data to enable us to construct a model calendar of the typical cycle of events in the villagers’ year.

To close in brief: the rich vein of Aphrodite evidence for village life in Byzantine Egypt has only begun to be tapped, and there may well be some truth in the idea suggested to me that Aphrodite can stand as the Byzantine Egyptian counterpart to Daimoum la Roy Ladurie’s medieval French village Montaillou. For Egypt, the Aphrodite papyrus-evidence is valuable in providing a counterweight to that of Cynocephalon, evidence that needs to be investigated toward modifying or rephrasing the long-held scholarly views about Byzantine Egypt as a land primarily dominated by politically connected great magnates whose lands were farmed by quasi-serf tenure. In the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century, the papyri of Aphrodite are valuable in helping to reconstruct the rhythm of ordinary life amid the grand wars and politics of Justinian, those events that are described in the pages of Procopius, Agathias and Malales and in the texts of the emperor’s many laws. Much work remains to be done on the sixth-century Greek papyri from Aphrodite. The prospect of what contemporary papyrologists may have to offer is truly an exciting one; their evidence, I am sure all will agree, is indispensable for a full and balanced study of the village.

NOTES

1. Originally a paper read on the invitation of Dr. Gladys Pease-Murphy for a panel at a meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt, at Boston, on 15 March 1981. The text printed here is slightly revised; notes have been substantially expanded.

2. On the discovery of the ancient Greek papyri, see, among other works, E. Turner, Greek papyri: an introduction (Oxford 1968); N-T; and the supplementary notes to the expanded paperback edition (Oxford 1980) on pp. 209-202. I. D. French, Testaments of time: the search for lost manuscripts and records (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970) shapes IV-N. Papyrologists sometimes distinguish early (i.e., late third-fourth century) from late (fifth-sixth seventh century) papyri; but both of these subdivisions are of course ‘early’ from the standpoint of Byzantine.


7. For the list of papyri by author, see A. C. Bouman, JRS 76 (1976) 155-167. For further discussion, see A. C. Bouman, JRS 76 (1976) 155-167.


The Apocryphal Papyri

At The Walters Art Gallery, J. 21.60 (1992) 370-377. The papyri described in the article below were purchased for the University of Michigan collection in 1921 from H. S. Thomas Whittemore, then Director of the Byzantine Institute of America (Baltimore) - editor's note. p. 15.

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22. Descriptive and related documents: the rich scholarly literature is surveyed by A.H. Schiller, 'The courts are no more,' South Volcari 7 (Berlin 1969, publ. 1971) 409-502.


25. Evidence for most of what follows is compiled in Calderini, Dizionario 301-416. Other data I have collected myself.

26. The student of this feature of Aphrodite's existence could do well to bear in mind F. Braudel's formulation in his well-known essay on 'History and the social sciences':

**EVERY TOWN, BEING AS IT IS A SOCIETY BUILT ON TENSION, WITH ITS RACES, SUDDEN CHANGES, TEMPORARY BREAKDOWNS, AND THE MEANS USED TO PLAN, MUST BE CONSIDERED AS THE CONTENT OF THE SOCIAL COMPLEX WHICH GIVES FORM TO THE NETWORKS FORMED BY NEIGHBORING TOWNS.**


28. For this feature of agrarian existence, i.e., 'land somnambulism', cf. Marc Bloch, French rural history: an essay on its basic characteristics, tr. J. Boetticher (Berkeley-Los Angeles 1964) 38-39. For measurement (including land at Aphrodite, however, cf. P.Mich. NTT 955-322 ff., and for the frequently mentioned land registration at Aphrodite (which had to entail some measurement) under John the co-signor, see A. C. von 3 (DURAND), 111 58 ff.; L. Papini (hearing from the Vatican Coptic parallel to P.Mich. 15 in M. 30 29 (1893) 37-39.)

29. Churches and monasteries: Calderini, Dizionario 325-340; an interesting point of departure for churches in P.Cair.Map. III 67928, an affixivit submitted and signed, by later allos, priests of ten of the village's churches.

30. P.Cair.Map. I 67023, II 24: several 'olofraria' having the apocope vertisement 'ΕΠΑΘΟΣ; P.Mich. XII has brought new interest and new imaging on the topography of the village proper, to be added to what Calderini gives, Dizionario 322-323: 660 village phylakia; 662, seventh century (the village evidently divided into units named for the principal compass points: a principal road, a disassembled houses and its neighbors; public record office, and governor's residence; various houses and their owners and owners' occupations: a public road; 660, seventh century; road of the Holy Catholic Church). Village monasteries (V. Andronikou); P.Cair.Map. I 67023, II 24-25; P.Cair.Map. IX 1694 mentions temporary abandoned lines 29 and 30 and a village three-storied esco (line 27).


33. P.Cair.Map. I 6702, II 24, and lines V.27: διότι αποκοπή το τετράγωνον ἡ ἐκκλησία. In P.Cair.Map. I 67022.2 the particular possesses can themselves 'wrestled' (κάμπτεται), but how much of this exercise was rhetorical, how much real, is open to question. Recently, for the reality of their meaning O.E.M. de oste Creek. The class struggle in the ancient Greek world (Leiden 1981) 211-212, 237-238 and 241 n. 39.


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38. P.Cair.Masp. I 7001. Shepherds figure frequently in the Aphrodite papyri. Another important papyrus on them, with frequent links to 7001, is P.Cair.Masp. III 67326, a series of guarantees for shepherds who were also armourers. A troublesome shepherd figure in P.Conf. V 481.

39. And other texts on Aphrodite show that ritual collection and separation study.

40. V.A. Gimpel, "Phosphibron et Euphrosyne" in Aspects of the Eleusinian Mysteries (Berlin 1939), to be superseded by the prosopography planned as part of a Guide to the sixth-century Apollodora archives by E.A. Wisp (in press).

41. "Kallimachos, son of Philadelphia, a pyramedian Egyptian land entrepreneur," AM 17 (1960) 143-154. Another Phenomenon papyrus has been published in S. Panaitilo's edition of Aphrodite papyri in the Vatican Library as Phidias-Aphrod. 10. That text indicates, inter alia, that the reader's speculative is the last page of my essay (article that Phenobron may have been without family) needs modification (as was, at least, married to Apollo's sister's daughter), but confirms the impression of Phenobron as something of a land entrepreneur. Phidias-Aphrod. 14 is the top of a fragmentary contract in which appears Flavian's name; the scholar, who also figures prominently in the ASB article.

42. I am convinced Phosphibron fulfills, at least in part, none of the specifications of the entrepreneur, particularly in his 'creating a link' between 'unconnected circuits'. In Phenobron's case, the link was the absentee landlord, monasteries, churches and the village work force. See I.M. Lewis, Social Anthropology in Perspective (Harmondsworth 1976) 230-233, of Schumpeter's model of the entrepreneur as summarized in F. Bunge, On History, p. 60.

43. "Romantic" papyri (e.g. P.Cair.Masp. II 67134-35, III 67226-27; P.Bond. V 1990, 1702 and 164c) P.Cair.-Georg. III 71) seem to indicate that Dioscorus, son of Apollo, a relative by marriage to Phosphobron, and Phidias-Aphrod. 14. operated together in the manner of his in-law, perhaps even more extensively and successfully. I hope to discuss these, and other Apollodora papyri in this connection in the near future.

44. For a possible model George C. Rowan, English Villages of the Thirteenth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), chap. XXIII. The Aphrodite papyri mention various seasons of 'time' ('tima' (masculine) for doing things (the annual procession to Thinsa, the time for the 'planopole', throwing time, harvest time, etc.), and there is an interesting section of an account (P.Cair.Masp. II 67131, V 7) recording dated payments for certain saints' feast days; but there is little doubt that the Aphrodite calendar, if feasible, will have to be reconstructed from the numerous specific dates given on all the various papyri and types that make up the Aphrodite archives.


46. This might be reformulated in the more general terms frequently employed by F. Brandl in his essays on history, or, e.g., in the preface to The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, tr. S. Reynolds (New York 1976) 17-22.

47. Cf. MacCull's paper in CAF noted above (note 15) and Bagnall's review of F. Brandl, in Amer 19 (1981) 177-180. I am grateful to Prof. Bagnall for sending me a copy of that review in advance of publication, as well as other materials that aided me in revising the present paper. 

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