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The Aphrodite Papyri and Village Life in Byzantine Egypt

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THE APHRODITE PAPYRI
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 'exca-
vations' of the sahah-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 geographic, and only a small propor-
tion of the papyri consists of pieces whose texts can stand on their own
as important historical testimonies. Nonetheless, to cite just a few exam-
plesthe Greek papyri of the Ptolemaic period have produced copies of
royal regulations, revenue laws and amnesty decrees, and documents of 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
precedence 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 touching 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
together the single most important source of Ptolemaic papyri. They are also
exceedingly rich in Roman papyri; but a decay in the irrigation works and the
consequent abandonment or depopulation of some of the major Fayum villages
in the Byzantine period in the fourth century have rendered them negligible.
as sources of papyri for the fifth and following centuries. On the other hand, Oxyrhynchus, 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 Aphrodisias in the Thebaid, though apparently yielding no Ptolemaic papyri and only one (doubtful) Roman, rivals Oxyrhynchus 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 Aphrodisias were made accidentally in 1901 by peasants who were digging a well in the village (modern Kon Işıklıh). A subsequent similar accident in 1905, which led to the recovery of a cist containing portions of five comedies by Menander, the first substantial fragments of that much-admired poet, brought M. Gustave Lebeau, 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 Kon Işıklıh: in 1903, a lion's share of the Greek papyri of early Arab date (these were products of the 1401 first just mentioned); in 1908 and 1907, more of the same, together with a significant complement (products of the 1905 find) 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 Kon Işıklıh, or the richness of a few finds, must have been considerable. Although some of these secretly found papyri — seen that had been purchased by natives, others that were in the possession of M. Szassé, 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 Aphrodisias's Byzantine and Islamic archives far and wide. Purchases of Aphrodisias papyri, Greek, Coptic and Arabic, for Russian collections are noted as having been made by Professor E. Leichakov from a Paris antiquity dealer in 1905, and in Cairo in 1907, and by N. Yurkev in Egypt in 1910. In 1908 Charles L. Freer bought in Cairo a number of Greek and Coptic Aphrodisias papyri, now in the Freer Gallery of Art (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C., and forgotten until their rediscovery by Dr. L.S.B. Kendall in 1974. The three Greek and one Coptic Aphrodisias papyri in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore were purchased in Paris in 1912; they had been part of the collection of Mr. Giovanni Battisti of Cairo, an Italian-born 'purchaser for the British Army in Egypt.' These examples, however, must have been just the tip of a much larger story, for papyri from Aphrodisias are today also to be found in libraries and museums in Alexandria, Aberdeen, Cologne, Hamburg, Berlin, Erlangen, Heidelberg, Florence, Genoa, Paris, Strasbourg, Vienna, Princeton, Michigan and the Vatican — and even this list may not be exhaustive. No doubt the most striking simple instance of the archive's dispersal was revealed in the 1976 publication by the late Rev. J.W. Barns of a papyrus owned by Dr. W.H. Fitzhugh of Monterey, California — the upper half of a document whose lower half was among the Cairo Museum papyri published by Maspero in 1911.

The early Islamic-period Aphrodisias papyri, Greek and Arabic, that came to light through these discoveries and purchases and through eventual publication are, of course, 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 the correspondence of an early 'Byzantedem' of Egypt, Kωραξ ον Καλη, with Flavioς Βασιλειους, administrator (paepos) of the region around Aphrodisias (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 trafficking down of the Byzantine-age Coptic papyri in the Cairo Museum and elsewhere and their publication are goals of Dr. Newcomb. Many, but far, far from all, of the Greek Byzantine-period papyri, however, have been seen their way into print. They are mostly all of the sixth century, with dated documents ranging from A.D. 506 to A.D. 596. Most of these fall in the reigns of the emperor Justinian (527-565) and of Justin II; most, and perhaps all, [thus P. Loomis, V 366 Intro.], in some way owe their ancient drafting or safe-keeping to one Flavioς Διονυσιος, one of the village landmen and (towards the end of his life) monastery-founder, Aπολλωνιος Διονυσιος. The careers of Apollo and Dionysus his son were summarised long ago by Sir Harold Bell, editor of the British Museum Aphrodisias papyri, in an article entitled 'An Egyptian village in the age of Justinian' (JHS 64 [1944] 21-36). Apollo was the son of another Dionysus and the grandson of a certain Palmobrot. (The family therefore must have had Coptic rather than Greek roots. By 514, Apollo is titled 'village headman' (byousar) even). Later
papyri show him to be active in the political and economic affairs of his village in A.D. 541 (P.Oxy.XXII. 1120), as Victor, a village priest, to Apollo's mound in Constantinople in the winter after his return and before his death (cf. 571), he established and gave his name to the monastery where business affairs he had discoursed sometimes represented. Meanwhie, Dioscorus had committed himself to publishing his work, a breviary 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 from political and legal difficulties, and economic losses, in consequence of which he was apolyte for the provincial capital, Antioch; there, from around 566 on, he earned a living as a notary. He then returned to Aphrodisias, bringing with him copies of many of the material instruments and petitions he had drawn up in Antioch. He died apparently shortly after 568.

A number of the papyri preserved among Dioscorus' papers were on publication early on, and some are still today, intensively studied: the codex with the Manander codex of course, but also the Greek-Coptic glossary Dioscorus compiled to extend his knowledge of Greek vocabulary, especially poetic, the many splendidly crafted poems he wrote on diverse occasions (prayers, epitaphs, etc.), the petitions drawn up for presentation to the provincial governor, the Duke of the Thracian, the imperial receptors 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, autokraateia or the right to supervise its own tax-collecting, a privilege dating back to the emperor Leo (557-562), and its claim to have placed itself under the special protection of the emperor Justinian's wife, Theodora.

Surely, therefore, the village of Aphrodisias was more than an ordinary Byzantine territorial village. Apart from its claims to autokraateia and to autonomous protection, it was able to send delegations to Constantinople to defend its rights at the imperial court. It had, moreover, in earlier times been the capital city of its own administrative district (ethnos) but by the sixth century at least, it had lost its metropolitan status and it and its surrounding territory were annexed to Antioch. Aphrodisias was reduced to village status in the Antioch district. Even as a village, however, Aphrodisias retained a prominence over nearby satellite villages. Pitha and Perniak are the two most frequently mentioned by the papyri. The papyri 'ethnics' tend to distinguish Aphrodisias the village (villaggio) from its environs (villaggio), and sometimes to classify portions of the latter as vigna, farm

or paperboys (vignai, yedovai, forofer). Land papyri are commonly noted as being situated in one of the village's 'plains' (ethnidos), named for the four cardinal geographical directions. Places are also often not measured exactly, but rather identified through an intricate, no doubt familiar, naming-system. Their boundaries are sometimes described as ancient or traditional (hagiou, maliou). Near the village were many monasteries, and in the village proper the buildings most frequently named in the papyri are the churches. There was the usual village storehouse, and in addition to the expected houses of ordinary amenities were, as one papyrus puts it, the 'prominent, brilliant dwellings of the village's ancient landlords.'

Despite the existence of such houses, however, and despite the presence of great landowners, in particular a certain Constantine, at Aphrodisias, the sixth-century Aphrodisias papyri, unlike contemporary papyri from Cyprian, do not concern themselves with the economic activities and political fortunes of rich and powerful magnates. Rather, the Aphrodisias papyri, since they are the product of their raw, dispersed papers, largely concern the affairs of men of more modest means, however prominent they may have been in village society: the 'small-holders.' Of interest, these in fact dominated the village scene, that one paper refers to the village as consisting of small-holders.

For certain purposes the Aphrodisias landowners were part of a college of village headmen and contributors and landowners. I have not yet determined whether the order of the terms of the membership in this group - village headmen, contributors, landowners - is an ascending (by descending) order of importance or whether the terms simply refer to different aspects of the same man: liturgical or martial (village headmen), fiscal (contributors), agrarian (landowners). Nevertheless, whatever the answer to that question, it is evident that members of the college 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 regards as well. It was, for example, through two village headmen that Dioscorus' father, Apollo, was empowered on one occasion to act on behalf of the village as the provincial capital in Antioch. The small-holders sent petitions to the governor of the province and were on several occasions responsible for selecting delegates to press the village's claims in Constantine, the queen of cities herself.

The college of village headmen, contributors and landowners further saw to the 'sanctification' of its members' relationships with another college, that of the village shepherds. The traditional service
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 Theodoros were discovered by Leibowitz and Buhl, 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 Amalian Phoibammon son of Triadelphus. That study reveals Phoibammon, 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 labors that could be supplied by the village peasants. Through this type of entrepreneurship, he acquired money 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. Phoibammon’s career raises the question whether others of the Aphroditic cito 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 Aphroditic village elite as a whole, as there is for many other subjects. For example, the Aphroditic 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 Aphroditic 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 Aphroditic can stand as the Byzantine Egyptian counterpart to Dismalash’s “medieval” French village Montaillou. For Egypt, the Aphroditic papyri-evidence is valuable in providing a counterweight to that of Cynthus, evidence that needs to be investigated toward modifying or readdressing 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 tenants. For the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century, the papyri of Aphroditic are valuable in helping to reconstruct the rhythm of ordinary life amid the grand wars and prophecies of Justinian, those events that are described in the pages of Procopius, Agathias and Malalas and in the texts of the emperor’s many laws. Much work remains to be done on the sixth-century Greek papyri from Aphroditic. The prospect of what contemporary topic papyri may have to offer is truly an exciting one; their evidence, I am sure, will be indispensable for a full and complete study of the village.

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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, in Boston, on 15 March 1981. The text printed here is slightly revised; notes have been substantially amended.


4. The earlier published Ptolemaic papyri are best synthesized in Cl. Prócas, L’Economie royale des leperides (Brussels 1930), and M. Montet-Blondeau, The social and economic history of the hellenistic world, 3 vols. (Oxford 1941). Recent additions to the corpus of ptolemaic papyri and trends in recent scholarship on the period were discussed by M. R. Bagnall in a paper on “Papyrology and Ptolemaic History, 1940-1980” at a meeting of the Association of Ancient Historians in Las Vegas in May 1981 (ASW).


6. For a chronological listing of hoard papyri, no longer complete, see C. Calderini, Dizionario del nord geografico e toponomico dell’Egitto greco-romano 1.2 (Madrid 1966) 201FF.; the first item in this list is to be eliminated (see R.S. MacCull, "The first appearance of Aphrodite in the papyri," ZEF [to appear]); cf. S. Nols, "The papyri of Dionysus: publications and emendations," Studi Calderini-Parkrand (Tulan 1987) 241-256. C. Garassini has now compiled a complete list of all connections to sixth-century Aphrodite papyri, from the xiii and other published works. The recent volumes of papyri from Apollon are Sigelstein’s F.R. XIII (1977) and Pintaudi’s P. Ver. Antepon. (1986). Generally on the "hoardic nature" of papyri, see Turner, Eng. 11. See also D. Hohlfeld, "Papyri and Papyri in the Roman Empire," JRS 57 (1967) 201-209.


13. P.Coll.Yorke 93. The combined document had been drafted by Diodorus (see below) during his years in Antioch in 147-148 A.D. and brought back by him to Aphrodisias on his return.


18. In addition to the (otherwise) article by Bell, see the thumbnail sketches on Dionysus by H. E. R. M. in RE suppl. 6 (1938) 27-29, and by Schuchardt in ZDPV 40 (1968) 145-147. For the forthcoming works of MacCull, "Dioscorus and the link between Coptic and Roman basilicas;" to appear in EEF 20 (1981): and the full-length monograph of Dionysus, his work and his world. For Dionysios’ Antibonopolis years, see the detailed discussion in P. Lond. V 1974 intro. Some of the papyri Dionysos drafted in Antibonopolis are conveniently grouped as P. Lond. V 1970-1972 and P. Lond. VI 1973-1975. Dionysios commonly used the reverse sides of those documents for writing his poems and Greek exercises; see, p. 349 (and see the forthcoming work of W. W. W. W. on the grammatical works). A sidelight on what we thought to be a connection between Bacchus and the imperial...


25. Evidence for most of what follows is compiled in Calderini, Dizionario 303-418. Other data I have collected myself.

26. The student of this feature of Aphrodite's existence would 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 crises, sudden changes, temporary breakdowns, and the constant need to plan, must be considered in the context of the rural complex which surrounds it and the networks formed by neighboring towns. . . . The essay, translated by Yves Le Page, was reprinted in F. Braudel, "The variorum of History. From Voltaire to the present," New York 1979, chapter 12 (pp. 419-610). A recent and comprehensive work on Aphrodite is T. D. Noone, "The Myth of Aphrodite," in D.G. 111. 2000-2002, 120-127.


30. P.Cair.Map. I 67002, II 24: several "theologus" among theoky (not necessarily slaves), whose names are not mentioned. See Calderini, Dizionario 330-33. For a discussion of these names, see P.D. Mich. 850.325 ff., especially the reference (no doubt Apisandes' S. 382-391) to what Calderini gives, Dizionario 325-326; 666 (village population); 662, seventh century; the village evidently divided into five named for the principal compass points; a public road; a dismantled house and its neighbors: public record office; a cemetery; various houses and their owners and owners' occupations; a public road; village road; road of the Holy Catholic Church; Village House; CBA (R. C.); P.Cair.Map. I 67002, II 24-35, P.Lond. V 1696 mentions temporary shrines (line 23 and note) and a village threshold (line 7).


32. Evidence for the existence of the Coptic Church at Aphrodite is supplied by the large number of Coptic ostraca in the village, CBA (R. C.). For a recent and comprehensive work on the theme, see P. D. Mich. 850.325 (notably 327).

33. P. Lond. V 1694, 2 line 7, and lines 294-305: drastic for "vanguard of the Coptic Church." In P.Cair.Map. I 67002 the jervi are described as themselves "vested" ( messed), but much of this was rhetorical, much of how much is really open to question. Recently, for the reality of their ministry, see D. P. Mich. 850-851, 212-213, 242-244 and line 3.

34. P.Cair.Map. I 67002, 3: the same, but here the Coptic Church is represented as entirely separate from the Roman Church. In P.Cair.Map. I 67002 the jervi are described as themselves "vested" ( messed), but much of this was rhetorical, much of how much is really open to question. Recently, for the reality of their ministry, see D. P. Mich. 850-851, 212-213, 242-244 and line 3.


38. P.Cair.Hasp. I 7001. Shepherds figure frequently in the Aphroditte papyri. Another important papyrus on them, with frequent links to 7001, is P.Cair.Hasp. III 67328, a series of agreements for shepherds who were also agriculturists. A troublesome shepherd figure in P.Cair. V 1981.

There are other texts on Aphroditte shepherds in the collection and separate study.

39. V.A. Gregos, Panegyrica e Aphroditopolin (Berlin 1936) 271-273, to be supplemented by the papyrology placed as part of a Guide to the sixth-century Aphroditte archives by C.H. Wood et al. (pamphlet).

40. Aurelius Phoibamon, son of Philadelphus: a precocious Egyptian land entrepreneur, BASP 17 (1990) 143-154. Another Phoibamon papyrus has been published in S. Platonou, ed. of Aphroditte papyri in the Vatican Library as Phil. 15-19. That text indicates, inter alia, that the rashness speculated at the last page of my BASP article (that Phoibamon may have been without family) needs modification (he was, at least, married to Apollo's sister's daughter), but confirms the impression of Phoibamon as something of a land entrepreneur. P.Brit.aphro. 14 is a fragment of the game contract in which appears Flavius Daniel, the scribe, who also figures prominently in the BASP article.

41. I am convinced Phoibamon fulfills, at least in part, some of the specifications of the entrepreneur, particularly in his "display a link" between "nonconnected circuits", in Phoibamon's case, the link between absentee landlords, monasteries, churches and the village work force. See P.M. Lewis, Social anthropology in perspective (Macmillan 1978) 201-231, of Schumpeter's model of the entrepreneur as summarized in P. Bouce, On History, p. 60.

42. Assumed papyri (e.g. P.Cair.Hasp. II 7011-35, III 7026-27; P.Brit. V 1950, 1702 and 1705; P.Brit. VIII 931; P.Brit.-Gregor. III 117) seem to indicate that Dismacros' father Apollo, a relative by marriage to Phoibamon, ran the papyri. Apollo's role as the man of his in-law perhaps even more extensively and successfully. I hope to discuss these, and other Apollo papyri in this connection in the near future.

43. For a possible model: George C. Romanza, English villager of the thirteenth century (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), chap. XXII. The Aphroditte papyri mention various "assemblies" or "estates" (e.g. II 7010) not doing things (the annual renewal to Thaisia, the time for the kalampos, throwing time, harvest time, etc.), and there is an interesting section of an account (P.Cair.Hasp. II 7011, V 11) recording dated payments for certain saints' feast-days, but there is little sure that the Aphroditte calendar, if possible, will have to be reconstructed from the numerous specific dates given on all the varied papyri and types that make up the Aphroditte archives.

44. Emmanuel Le Ray Ladurie, Montalieu: the promised land of error, tr. B. Bray (New York 1979). Supposition brought to my attention by Mr. F.J. Parzuch, deriving, as I recall, ultimately from Prof. B. Duncan-Jones. Whether the colorfulness of the Aphroditte characters can match those of Montalieu, given the nature of the evidence available for the respective villages, is, however, doubtful.

45. Cf. Keesman (above, n. 37) and idem, "Egyptian society in Late Antiquity," Ars (forthcoming).

46. This might be reformulated in the more general terms frequently employed by F. Brandel in his essays (ibid., 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) 16-22.

47. Cf. MacCull's paper in CAF noted above (note 15) and Haggai's review of F. Racine, Amphitrite, in Work 18 (1981) 271-302. I am grateful to Prof. Haggai 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.