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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 Octavian’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 ‘excavations’ of the saheb-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 proportion of the papyri consists of pieces whose texts can stand on their own as important historical testimony. Nonetheless, to cite just a few excellent examples, the Greek papyri of the Ptolemaic period have produced copies of royal regulations, revenue laws and amnesty decrees, and documents on important 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 procedures 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 is an unevenness that is roughly 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 particularly 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, Caryophyllos, 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 Prolemaic papyri. Still another site, the one where this paper is about, the village of Aphrodite in the Thebaid, though apparently yielding no Prolemaic 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 Aphrodite were made accidentally in 1901 by peasants who were digging a well in the village (modern Kom El-Falah). 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 Moustafa Lefevre, Inspector of Antiquities at Assis, 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-Falah: in 1902, a lion's share of the Greek papyri of early Arab date (these were products of the 1st-2nd century A.D., in 1906 and 1907, none of the name, 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 Kom El-Falah, or the richness of a few finds, must have been considerable. Although some of these secretly found papyri — some that had been purchased by natives, others that were in the possession of m. Zaqaf, chief engineer of Egyptian railways at Assis — were uncovered by the Antiquities Service for the Cairo Museum, private discoveries at the village and sales through dealers at Assis and Cairo and Paris dispersed Aphrodite's Byzantine and Talmidic archives far and wide.

Purchases of Aphrodite papyri, Greek, Coptic and Arabic, for Russian collections are noted as having been made by Professor H. Lichakov from a Paris antiquity dealer in 1905, and in Cairo in 1907, and by W. Turand in Egypt in 1910. In 1908 Charles L. Freer bought in Cairo a number of Greek and Coptic Aphrodite papyri, now in the Freer Gallery of Art (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C., and forgotten until their rediscovery by Dr. E. S. Marshall in 1971. The three Greek and one Coptic Aphrodite papyri in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore were purchased by Dr. Marshall for 500,000 francs in Paris in 1912; they had been part of the collection of Dr. Giovanni Battisti di Cairo, an Italian-born 'purveyor to the British Army in Egypt. These examples, however, must have been just bits and pieces of a much larger story, for papyri from Aphrodite 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 Aphrodite papyri, Greek and Arabic, that came to light through these discoveries and purchases and through eventual publication are a few, 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 'muyyad emir of Egypt', Kausik Ibn Sharik, with Flavian Institute, administrator (paqsrk) of the region around Aphrodite (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 trickling down of the Byzantine-age Coptic papyri in the Cairo Museum and elsewhere and their publication are goals of Dr. Masoud. Many, but far from all, of the Greek Byzantine-period papyri, however, have seen their way into print. They are nearly all of the sixth century, with dated documents ranging from A.D. 506 to A.D. 596. Most of these fall in the reign of the emperor Justinian (527-565), and of Justin II (575-582), and perhaps one more (thus P.Lond. V 1640 intro.): in some way owe their ancient drafting or safekeeping to one Flavian Dioscorus, son of the village headman (and toward the end of his life) monastery-founder, Aurelius Apollon. The careers of Apollo and Dioscorus and their sons were summarised long ago by Sir Harold Bell, editor of the British Museum Aphrodite papyri, in an article entitled 'An Egyptian village in the age of Justinian' (SBE 64 [1941]: 21-36). Apollo was the son of another Dioscorus and the grandson of a certain Psalmobos. The family therefore must have had Coptic rather than Greek roots. By Sft, Apollo is titled 'village headman', (N首先著作) of the village of Achmim.
papyri show him to be active in the political and economic affairs of his village in A.D. 541. E. Calf. JASP. 41 (1972), with Victor, a village priest, Apelles found himself in Constantinople some time after his return and before his death (by 547), he established and gave his name to the monastery where he was sometimes represented. Meanwhile, Dioscorus had committed himself to publishing his work, a lexicon 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 legal difficulties, and economic losses, In consequence of which he wrote the provincial capital, Antioch. There, from around 566 to 577, 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 595.

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 Menander comedies of course, but also the Greek-Coptic glossary Dioscorus compiled to extend his knowledge of Greek vocabulary, especially poetic, the many strangely crafted poems he wrote on various occasions (nomen, epithalamia, etc.), the petitions drawn up for presentation to the provincial governor, the Duke of the Thahdai, the imperial edicts and other legal and procedural documents that Dioscorus received in his lifetime. Also attracting notice when revealed in the papyri were the village's claim to special tax-status, autarchy of the right to supervise its own tax-collecting, a privilege dating back to the emperor Leo (557-74), 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 provincial territorial village. Apart from its claims to autarchy and to some form of 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 (demos) but by the sixth century at least, it had lost its metropolis status and it and its surrounding territory were annexed to Arcadia. Aphrodisias was reduced to village status in the Antiochene territories. Even as a village, however, Aphrodisia retained a prominence over nearby satellite villages. Pitana and Perenome are the two most frequently mentioned by the papyri. The papyri sometimes tend to distinguish Aphrodisia the village (villagr, from its environs (villae(s)), and sometimes to classify portions of the latter as vicuspera, farms or pastures (vivaria), vilcenses, below). Land papiyri are commonly noted as being situated in one of the village's 'plains' (tholos), named for the four cardinal geographical directions. Flows 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 (hagi, malm). 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 landholders".

Despite the existence of such houses, however, and despite the presence of great landowners, in particular a certain Count Aemilianus, at Aphrodisias, the sixth-century Aphrodisian papyri, unlike contemporary papyri from Oxyrhynchus, do not concern themselves with the economic activities and political fortunes of rich and powerful magnates. Rather, the Aphrodisian papyri, since they are the product of their own dispersed paperae, 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 one in fact dominated the village scene that one papyrus refers to the village as consisting of small-holders.

For certain purposes, the Aphrodisian landowners were part of a collegium of village headmen and contributors and landowners. I have not yet determined whether the order of the terms of the membership of the group -- village headmen, contributors, landowners -- 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 headman), fiscal (contributor), agrarian (landowner). Inevitably, whatever the answer to that question, 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 regards as well. It was, for example, through two village headmen that Dioscorus' father, Apelles, was empowered on one occasion to act on behalf of the village at the provincial capital in Antioch. The small-holders sent petitions to the governor of the province, and were on occasion responsible for selecting delegates to press the village's claims to Constantinople, the queen of cities herself. The collegium of village headmen, contributors and landowners further ran to the 'enslavation' of its members' relationships with another collegium, that of the village shepherds. The traditional service
of the shepherd as fieldsperson (livia sparsus), for reasons uncertain but on which we may speculate, was rendered formal by a contract drawn up in A.D. 526, binding them to the landowners and to that service in specific terms. 40

The name of quite a few of the village’s sixth-century elite are known. There is considerable information about some of them, 41 but only a few have received detailed study. Apollon and Philomarion were discussed by Keenan 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 Herodian Philomarion son of Triadellus. 42 That study reveals Philomarion, 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 laborers that could be supplied by the village peasants. Through this type of entrepreneurship, 43 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. Philomarion’s career raises the question whether others of the Aphrodite elite were operating in the same way 44 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. 45

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 Emmanuel le Ray Ladurie’s medieval French village Montaillou. 46 For Egypt, the Aphrodite papyri-evidence is valuable in providing a counterweight to that of Cyrene, which, 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-feudal tenants. 47 For the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century, the papyri of Aphrodite are valuable in helping to reconstruct the rhythm of ordinary life and the grand wars and projects 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. 48 Such work remains to be done on the sixth-century Greek papyri from Aphrodite. The prospect of what contemporary topics papyri may have to offer is truly an exciting one; their evidence, I am sure, will well repay intensive study for a full and balanced study of the village. 49

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 Houston, on 15 March 1981. The text printed here is slightly revised; notes have been substantially condensed.


on the Laudentio of Apirrca, C 27 19 (1980-81) 97-107. For papyri and Roman imperial history, particularly for the apadaphy from 1960 to 1975, see


6. For a historical chronology of the production of papyri, no longer complete, see


8. T. S. Ratto, on unpublised manuscripts, in the London Museum, reports on the letter of 11 September 1913 that British Museum 'inventory number 11800-11820' was purchased by the Rev. C. H. Merrick on 20 November 1913 and was shown (personal note) 375-376. Dr. G. W. Whitley, in a preface to the new edition of the Correspondence of C. H. Merrick and P. Casi. Max. I, notes: "Hscw (personal note) 375-376. The letter was not shown to the public, but is now published.


11. These four papyri were not listed in the catalogue of the sale of the collections of Jean P. Leclercq, Vienne, and Giovanni Dattari, Cairo, sold in Paris, 17-19 June 1912, under Collection Giovanni Dattari de Caire, group 64: as "Inscriptions identifiques aux papyri." - G. V. A. M., "Three papyri of Dicoccus


22. Descriptions and related documents: the rich scholarly literature is surveyed by A.H. Schiller, 'The courts are no more,' Studia Volcara I (Milan 1969, publ. 1971) 409-507.


25. Evidence for most of what follows is compiled in Calderini, Dizionario 303-415. Other dates I have collected myself.

26. The student of this feature of Aphrodite's existence would do well to bear in mind P. Brant'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 its constant need to plan, must be considered in the context of the rural complex which surrounds and networks itself by neighboring towns...

The essay, translated by Sian France, was reprinted in P. Brant, ed., The varieties of history: From Voltaire to the present (New York 1979) 43-129 (quoted from p. 419); see also recently in P. Brant, On History, tr. S. Matthews (Chicago 1990) 35-58 (complete version with notes). ( Cf. however, P.Kn. XII 611-11, civilizations Afroasian.)

27. Thylard CE, e.g., P.Cair.Masp. I 6705, II 6714, II 6719, II 6720-27; P.Flor. 177 296; P.Lond. V 1680.10 note, 1665-1666; P.Et. 875: 815-875; P.Lond. XVIII 291-321, line 76 ( = Biskach XIII 3.78) (identification by Harpocactes as B 3 19 (1840) 1-411). Phonemcraphy (variously spelled): e.g., P.Cair.Masp. II 6713 and line 3 note. P.Lond. V 1660-7 note. 1689 P.Lond. XII 679; Calderini, Dizionario 147. For another village, Monnkras, see P. Lond. V 1682 and line 3 n.

28. For this feature of agrarian existence, i.e., 'land ownership', cf. Mark Bloch, French rural history: an essay on its basic characterizations, tr. J. Bodecker (Berkeley-Los Angeles 1966) 38-59. For measurement (metrical) of land at Aphrodite, however, cf. P.Mich. 860.262 ff., and for the frequently mentioned land registration at Aphrodite (which had to entail its measurement) under John the papam, see A. Class, '0 PRAXEOU S. Wiss. Rm. 165 (1965) 112-35. L. Papam (professor from the Vatican Coptic parallels to P.Michael I), in BRep. 24 (1983) 87-89.

29. Churches and monasteries: Calderini, Dizionario 295-330, an interesting point of departure for churches in P.Cair.Masp. III 57263, an affidavit submitted and signed by, inter alia, priests of ten of the village's churches.

30. P.Cair.Masp. I 6700, II, 24: georph 'docetera' koyvaioi tou ayyallou xin-Idovny aydavon tiv (~42,00) and P.Mich. XII has brought new interest in what information on the topography of the village proper, to be added to what Calderini gives, Dizionario 333-335: 660 (village phylake); 662, seventh century (the village evidently divided into four for the principal compass points; a public road; a disused path and its neighbors: public record office, little library); 665 (various houses and their owners and occupants; a public road; Solomos' road; road of the Holy Catholic Church); yllages anacolou (i.e. 1675); P.Cair.Masp. I 67002, II, 24-35. P.Lond. V 1694 mentions temporary pharmaceutical (line 23 and note) and a village threshing floor (line 27).


33. P.Lond. V 1674, intro., and lines 60-61: de kallinon tiv ('literally'), tis ayndes. In P.Cair.Masp. I 6702.2 the yllai possessors call themselves 'wretched' (mara), but how much of this wretchedness was rhetorical, how much real, is open to question. Respectfully, for the reality of their misery: D.B.N. de Ste Croix. The class struggle in the ancient Greek world (Edinburgh 1981) 211-214, 232-244 and 364 n. 39.

34. P.Cair.Masp. I 6701.3-4: yllai ayndes (i.e., ayndes) tiva kexanikou fylakei (ves). A typical example of the oppression of the wretched.}


36. E.g., P.Cair.Masp. I 6702.

38. P. Cairo, Map. I 7001. Shepherds figure frequently in the Aphrodite papyri. Another important papyrus on them, with frequent links to 7001, is P. Cairo, Map. III 67326, a series of guarantees for shepherds who were also armorialaters. A troublesome shepherd figure in P. Cairo, V 5831. There are other texts on Aphrodite shepherds merit collection and separate study.

39. V. A. Gigas, Panegyricos a Aphroditopolin (Berlin, 1938), to be superseded by the papyrography planned as part of a Guide to the sixth-century Aphrodite archives by K. W. (cf. J. F. Alberg, 1974).

40. Aurelius Philotheus, now of Philadelphia: a ptocheian egyptian land entrepreneur,' BAEP 17 (1966) 143–154. Another Philotheus papyrus has been published in T. Maaschaut's edition of Aphrodite papyri in the Vatican Library as P. V. A. Ph. 10. That text indicates, inter alia that the redaction speculative at the last page of the 1995 article (that Philotheus was born out of marriage or a less substantial marriage) needs modification (at least, married to Apollo's sister's daughter), but confirms the impression of Philotheus as something of a land entrepreneur. P. V. A. Ph. 14 is the top of a fragmentary contract in which appears Flavius Daniel, the senator, who also figures prominently in the 1995 article.

41. I am convinced Philotheus fulfills, at least in part, none of the specifications of the entrepreneur, particularly in his 'expansive link' between 'unconnected circuits', in Philotheus's case, the link between absentee landlords, monasteries, churches and the village work force. See K. N. Lewis, Social Anthropology in Perspective (New York, 1979), 216–237, of Schumpeter's model of the entrepreneur as summarized in A. Brown, On History, p. 60.

42. Assured papyri (e.g., P. Cairo, Map. II 67314–15, III 67326–37; P. Buck. V 3950, 1702 and 1930; P. V. A. Ph. 11) seem to indicate that Dionysus's father Apollo, a relative by marriage to Philotheus (cf. P. V. A. Ph. 12), operated on in the manner 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. Romanu, English villages of the thirteenth century (Cambridge, Mass., 1931), chap. XIII. The Aphrodite papyri mention various 'seasons' or 'times' (massaia) for doing things (the annual harvest to Th触れis, the time for the clipeis, the time for harvesting, the time, etc.), and there is an interesting section of an account (P. Cairo, Map. II 67316, V 11) 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 winter papyri and types that make up the Aphrodite archives.

44. Emmanuel le Ray Ladurie, Montaillou: the promised land of error, tr. B. Bray (New York, 1979). Supposition brought to my attention by Dr F. C. Parsons, deriving, as I recall, ultimately from Prof. B. Dunne-Jones. Whether the colorfulness of the Aphrodite characters can match those of Montaillou, given the nature of the evidence available for the respective villages, is, however, doubtful.

45. Cf. Keenan (above, n. 37) and idem, 'Egyptian society in Late Antiquity,' in (forthcoming).


47. Cf. MacCull's paper in O.C. (note above) and Bagnall's review of P. V. A. Phil. 1 (1981) 371–381. 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.