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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 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 scribes-diggers, especially toward the end of the nineteenth
and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, have made Egypt: the best-known
corner 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-
ple samples, the Greek papyri of the Ptolemaic period have produced copies of
royal regulations, revenue laws and amnesty decrees, and documents on impor-
tant 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
decrees 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
among 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 Aphroditia in the Thebaid, though apparently yielding no Ptolemaic papyri and only one (doubtfully) 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 Aphroditia were made accidentally in 1911 by peasants who were digging a well in the village (modern K. I. I. K.) A subsequent similar accident in 1909, 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 Lefebvre, 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-Fawâl: in 1903, a lion's share of the Greek papyri of early Arab date (these were products of the 1401 first just mentioned) in 1906 and 1907, more of the same, together with a significant complement (products of the 1905 finds) 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 I. K. K., or the richness of a few finds, must have been considerable. Although some of these secretly found papyri — one that had been purchased by natives, others that were in the possession of n. zaqat, 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 dispursed Aphroditia's Byzantine and Islamic archives far and wide. Purchases of Aphroditia papyri, Greek, Coptic and Arabic, for Russian collections are noted as having been made by Professor K. Konstantinov from a Paris antiquity dealer in 1909, and in Cairo in 1907, and by B. Yaar in Egypt in 1919. In 1908 Charles C. Freer bought in Cairo a number of Greek and Coptic Aphroditia papyri, now in the Freer Gallery of Art (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C., and forgotten until their rediscovery by Dr. E. A. Wallis Budge in 1971. The three Greek and one Coptic Aphroditia papyri in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore were purchased in Paris in 1912; they had been part of the collection of Dr. Giovanni Patsi of Cairo, an Italian-born 'pioneer for the British Army in Egypt'.

In 1971 the three Greek and one Coptic Aphroditia papyri in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore were purchased in Paris in 1912; they had been part of the collection of Dr. Giovanni Patsi of Cairo, an Italian-born 'pioneer for the British Army in Egypt'. These examples, however, must have been just bits and pieces of a much larger story, for papyri from Aphroditia 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, Michigan and the Vatican — and even this list may not be exhaustive. No doubt the most striking single instance of the archive's dispersal was revealed in the 1976 publication by the late Rev. J. W. B. Bums of a papyrus owned by Dr. W. M. F. Pritchard of Montecay, 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 Aphroditia 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 a correspondence of an early 'Umayyad era of Egypt, 'Umayr ibn Sharik, with Flavian Institute, administrator (paparh) of the region around Aphroditia (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 trucking down of the Byzantine-age Coptic papyri in the Cairo Museum and elsewhere and their publication are goals of Dr. Manoukian. 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) most, and perhaps all, [thus P. H. H. 1955: intro.]; in some way their ancient drafts of or after keeping to one Flavio Dionysios, one of the village headman and (toward the end of his life) monastery-founder, Apollinios Apollonios. The career of Apollonios the father and Dionysios his son was summarised long ago by Sir Harold Baily, editor of the British Museum Aphroditia papyri, in an article entitled 'An Egyptian village in the age of Justinian' (JRE 64 [1944]: 21-36). Apollonios was the son of another Dionysios and the grandson of a certain Palmobytos. The family therefore must have had Coptic rather than Greek roots. By 514, Apollonios is titled 'village headman' (evparchos). Later
papyri show him to be active in the political and economic affairs of his village, in A.D. 541 (Cod. Map. II 6736), with Victor, a village priest, to Apollon in Constantinople some time after his return and before his death (p. 57), he established and gave his name to the monastery where business affairs in his ten districts are sometimes represented. Meanwhile, Dioecoros had committed himself to polishing his Greek, a language 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 adds to the provincial capital, Antiochopolis. There, from around 546 to 57, he earned a living as a notary. He then returned to Aphroditos, bringing with him copies of many of the material instruments and petitions he had drawn up in Antiochopolis. He died apparently shortly after 548.

A member of the papyri preserved among Dioecoros' papers were on publication early on, and some are still today, intensively studied: the codex with the Manander canon of course, but also the Greek-Coptic glossary Dioecoros compiled to extend his knowledge of Greek vocabulary, especially poetic, the many splendidly crafted poems he wrote on diverse occasions (sermo, epitaphia, etc.), the petitions drawn up for presentation to the provincial governor, the Duke of the Thebaid, the imperial successors and other local and provincial documents that Dioecoros retained in his 'file.' Also attracting notice when revealed in the papyri were the village's claim to special tax-status, autonomy or the right to supervise its own tax-collecting, a privilege dating back to the emperor Leo (557-471), and its claim to have passed itself under the special protection of the emperor Justinian's wife, Theodora.

Surely, therefore, the village of Aphroditos was more than an ordinary provincial terrrain village. Apart from its claims to autonomy and to some territorial protection, it was able to send delegations to Constantinople to defend its rights at the imperial court. 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 metropolitical status and it and its surrounding territory were annexed to Antiochopolis. Aphroditos was reduced to village status in the Antiochopolitan territories. Even as a village, however, Aphroditos retained a prominence over nearby satellite villages. Pitana and Pheronkene are the two most frequently mentioned by the papyri. The papyri of Aphroditos tend to distinguish Aphroditos the village (villium) from its environs (folkos), and sometimes to classify portions of the latter as vineyards, farms

or pastures (trigeta, yarda, Korynna). Land papyri are commonly noted as being situated in one of the village's 'plains' (skedais), named for the four cardinal geographical directions. Piles are also often not measured accurately, but rather identified through an intricate, no doubt familiar, naming-system. Their boundaries are sometimes described as ancient or traditional (skedai, kalaidi). 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, one papyrus lists it: the 'prominent, brilliant dwellings of the village's ancient landlords.'

Despite the existence of such houses, however, and despite the presence of great landlords, in particular a certain Count Ammonius, at Aphroditos, the sixth-century Aphroditos papyri, unlike contemporary papyri from Oxyrhynchus, do not concern themselves with the economic activities and political fortunes of rich and powerful magnates. Rather, the Aphroditos papyri, since they are the product of their raw-farm dispersed papyri, largely concern the affairs of men of more modest means, however prominent they may have been in village society: the 'small-holders.' It is significant, then, that we dominated the village scene that one papyrus refers to the village as consisting of small-holders.

For certain purposes the Aphroditos Landholders were part of a collegium of village headmen and contributaries and landowners. I have not yet determined whether the order of the terms of the membership in the group -- village headmen, contributaries, 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 headmen), fiscal (contributaries), agrarian (landowners), however, 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 Dioecoros' father, Apollon, was empowered on one occasion to act on behalf of the village at the provincial capital in Antiochopolis. The small-holders sent petitions to the governor of the province and were on direct responsibility for selecting delegates to press the village's claims to Constantinople, the county of cities herself. The collegium of village headmen, contributaries and landowners further row to the 'summarizing' of its members' relationships with another collegium, that of the village shepherds. The traditional service
of the shepherd as fieldworker (μετεωρώτης), 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 their service in specific terms.10

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. Apollonios and Theophranthes were discussed by Nagy 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 Athenian

Phobazmon son of Triadellus.11 That study reveals Phobazmon, 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 entrepreneurship12, 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. Phobazmon's career raises the question whether others of the Aphrodite cinctae were operating in the same way13 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.14

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 Roy Ladurie's medieval French village Montaillou.15 For Egypt, the Aphrodite papyri-evidence is valuable in providing a counterweight to that of Cyrrhus, evidence that needs to be investigated toward modifying or redescribing the long-held scholarly views about Byzantine Egypt as a land primarily dependent politically connected great magnates whose lands were farmed by quasi-serf tenants.16 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 processions of Julianus, those events that are described in the pages of Procopius, Anastasius and Malalas and in the texts of the emperor's many laws.17 Such work remains to be done on the sixth-century Greek papyri from Aphrodite.

The prospect of what contemporary topic papyri may have to offer is truly exciting now; their evidence, I am sure all will agree, is indispensable for a full and balanced study of the village.18

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NOTES

1. Originally a paper read on the invitation of Dr. Gladys Peake-Murphy for a panel at a meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt, in Boston, on 12 March 1981. The text printed here is slightly revised; notes have been substantially expanded.


7. See Bell’s P. Lond. IV preface (1700). P. Lond. IV introduction (1717); P. Caiar. II (1711); JHS I (1711-12), 431 (1716), the last two volumes published posthumously. Harper’s failure to include some of papyri on the storm front on 16 November 1892, Macl. (private note) 345-346, K. T. C. Patten, on canceling Museum records, informs me (letter of 9 September 1910) that British Museum Inv. numbers 1020-1020 and 1185-1185 were purchased from the Rev. C. Hurp on 20 November 1892 and 12 December 1908 respectively. Hurp clearly understood the British Museum’s payment for many Coptic and Greek manuscripts obtained in Egypt by Budge. For Hurp, who died in 1907, cf. Hurp’s own text, who was who in Egyptology (London 1923) 209-210. T. Ball, forthcoming, will examine other British Museum acquisitions made "[the same century after the original discovery];" still unpublished, but now under study by G. Foakes and E. Piantini.


11. These four papyri were *listed in the catalogue of sale of the collections of Jean P. Lenczner, Avranches, and Giovanni Bartali, Cairo, held in Paris, 17-18 June 1913, under Collection Giovanni Dallo’s de Caire, group 616 as "Lo-scriptions identiques aux papyrius."* C. Mink, "Three papyri of Dionysus at the Walters Art Gallery," JAP 60 (1939) 370-377 at 370 n.1. Bartali was a nautical antiquities collector and dealer resident in Cairo; he first worked for Thomas Cook and Son, then as a purveyor to the British Army in Egypt." Dowson and Uphill, "Who was who in Egyptology," 78-79.

12. General listing of locations in which Aphrodisiac papyri are now to be found: Calderini, Dizionario, 302-303, P. Rich. XIII, p. ix. Michigan, P. Rich. XII (these papyri were purchased for the University of Michigan collection in 1925 by Thomas Whittemore, then Director of the Michigan Museum of Art, Detroit); P. Lond. 61, P. Vatic. Aphrod. These papyri were given to the Vatican by Jean Lorcer in 1961. For the Geneva Dionysius papyri (acquired in Egypt by Julius Nicole in 1907) see C. Winfield, Proc. XVI 1911. Congr. Papyro. (Chico 1981) 487-490. Jean Lorcer has compiled a complete listing of all sixth-century Aphrodisiac papyri ( alphabetical by collection).

13. P. Co1. Year 83. The combined document had been drafted by Dionysius (see below) during his years in Antinoopolis and brought back by him to Aphrodisius on his return.


18. In addition to the (unadvised) article by Kal, see the two articles by Schuch on Dionysus of Herculaneum as discovered in the Coptic and other manuscripts, especially P. Lond. IV 1674 introm. Some of the papyri of Dionysius drafted in Antinoopolis are conveniently grouped as P. Lond. IV 1704-1706 and P. Lond. IV 671145-5160. Dionysius commonly used the reverse sides of these documents for writing his poems and Greek exercises, maill., p. 349 (and see the forthcoming work of A. Woutera on the grammatical work). A sidelight on what was thought to be a connexion between Dionysius and the imperial...
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28. For this feature of agrarian existence, i.e. 'landonomia', cf. Marc Bloch, French rural history: an essay on its basic characteristics. Tr. J. Besteman (Berkeley-Los Angeles 1966) 38-39. For measurements (square) of land at Aphrodite, however, cf. P. Mich. VIII 859.225 ff. and the frequently mentioned land registration at Aphrodite (which had to entail its measurement) under John the compound, see A. Class, 'Die KOPHRADITE' (iss. UR 1965) 118 ff. L. Papini (nicholas from the Vatican Coptic parallels to P. Mich.) in BNE 19 (1963) 87-98.


30. P.Cair.Masp. I 76003, II, 24: general 'villager' having the 'knowledge of Aphrodite', M. Mich. XII has brought new interest and new insight into the topography of the village proper, to be added to what Calderini gives, Dizionario 123-125: 680 village phylakia; 682, seventh century (the village evidently divided into two named for the principal compass points; a public road; a dispersed house and its neighbors; public record office, (byōrus skyphos); 665 (former houses and their owners and owners' politics on occupations; a public road; Solon's road; road of the Holy Catholic Church); Villaggio strombolidiano (V Aulidiana) P.Cair.Masp. I 76003, II, 24-35; P.Lond. V 1694 mentions temporary sheepfolds (line 23 and note) and a village tithing floor (line 27).

31. Count Amielini: H.R. Hardy, The large estates of Byzantine Egypt (New York 1911) 122-123 (and see the forthcoming work of J. Thomas). Texts on Count Amielini are listed in P.Ross.-Geoery. I 77.3 note. P.Cair.Masp. I 76003 (see Chr. 297) mentions of yeilds referring to Vidie (presumably Antiochopolis), and in particular the estate (megalos) of Johnus, former owner. Dizionario lists this as 'in doubt Aphrodite's'. See now J. Casson, Ian grande, Domodossola 1985 (in Italian). See also in Egypt Egyptia (5th, 6th or 7th c. (Price, to appear).


33. P.Lond. V 166.4; infra, line 666.64 et al: the oinochoe(s) to which the inscription refers. In P.Cair.Masp. I 76002.1 the garvi possessors call themselves 'wretched' (kaphropoi), but much of this wretchedness was rhetorical, how much real, is open to question. Recently, for the reality of their misery: O.E.M. de Ste Croix. The class struggle in the ancient Greek world (Chicago 1983) 212-213, 229-234 and 354 n.39.

34. P.Cair.Masp. I 76003.3-4: 'the citizens, the landlords, the householders and inhabitants of Aphrodite' (See P. Mich. 19).
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38. P.Cair.Hyp. I 7001. Shepherds figure frequently in the Aphrodisite papyri. Another significant papyrus on them, with frequent links to 7001, is P.Cair.Hyp. III 67328, a series of guarantees for shepherds who were also armorial. A troublesome shepherd figure in P.Hyp. V 1181. These and other texts on Aphrodisite shepherds merit collection and separate study.

39. V.H. Gimpel, Penangrafia e Apocrifopapiri (Berlin 1958), to be superseded by the prosopography planned as part of a Guide to the sixth-century Aphrodisite archives by E.A. Wisp et al. Press.

40. Aurelius Phoibamon, son of Philadelphon, a pyramidal Egyptian land entrepreneur,' BASP 17 (1959) 143–154. Another Phoibamon papyrus has been published in R. Fracchia’s edition of Aphrodisite papyri in the Vatican Library as P.Vat. Aphric. 10. That text indicates, inter alia, that the rashly speculative at the last page of my BASP article (that Phoibamon may have been without family) needs modification (as was, at least, married to Apollo’s sister’s daughter), but confirms the impression of Phoibamon as something of a land entrepreneur. P.Cair.Aphric. 14 is the top of a fragmentary contract in which appears Flavius Damos, the Senator, 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 'unconnected circuits', in Phoibamon’s case, the link between absentee landlords, monasteries, churches and the village work force. See T.N. Lewis, Social anthropology in perspective (Macmillan 1976) 200–203. J. Hamborg’s model of the entrepreneur as summarized in P. Bra- gel, On history, p. 60.

42. Assumed papyri (e.g. P.Cair.Hyp. II 5714–15, III 5726–27; P.Bens. V 5990, 1702 and 1703; P.Bens. VIII 933; P.Bens.–Grop. III 77) seem to indicate that Dioscurus’ father Apollo, a relative by marriage to Phoibamon (P.Cair.Aphric. 10), operated 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. Musa, English villages of the thirteenth century (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), chap. XXIII. The Aphrodisite papyri mention various 'seasons' or 'times' (some?) for doing things (the usual ordinary to thank, the time for the sicigorgia, thanksgiving time, harvest, time, etc.), and there is an interesting section of an account (P.Cair.Masp. II 67311, V 7) recording dated payments for certain saints’ feast-days; but there is little more that the Aphrodisite calendar, if possible, will have to be reconstructed from the numerous specific data given on all the varied papyri and types that make up the Aphrodisite archives.

44. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Montalembert: the promised land of error, tr. B. Bray (New York 1979). Supposition brought to my attention by Mr. F.C. Parsons, deriving, as I recall, ultimately from Prof. R. Duncan-Jones. Whether the colorfulness of the Aphrodisite characters can match those of Montalembert, 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 AME (forthcoming).

46. This might be reformulated in the more general terms frequently employed by F. Brandel in his essays on history, of e.g., in the passage in The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II, tr. S. Ray and oth., New York 1980) 19–22.


I am grateful to Prof. Bagwell 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.