



1995

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Recommended Citation

Keenan, JG. "The Aphrodito murder mystery: a return to the scene of the crimes" in *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 32, 1995.

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The Aphrodito Murder Mystery: A Return to the Scene of the Crimes¹

The human desire for certainty
collides with our love of enigma.—
Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*

Early in Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (Chapter III), Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, M.D., who have only recently met and begun to cohabit, find themselves in what becomes their familiar mode of conveyance, a hansom cab, "driving furiously for the Brixton Road" and thence to the scene of an apparent crime at 3 Lauriston Gardens. Watson recalls a morning whose glumness matched his own dismal mood, an edgy mood that was further exasperated by a Sherlock Holmes who, "in the best of spirits," . . . "prattled away" about fiddles and violins:

"You don't seem to give much thought to the matter in hand," I said at last, interrupting Holmes's musical disquisition.

"No data yet," he answered. "It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgment."

It is certainly a lucky thing that papyrologists are not detectives, because any one of them who is tempted to theorize must necessarily violate Holmes's rule.² As everyone knows, the full papyrological documentation is never in; and even that which is available has regularly suffered the ravages of time—from tears and folds, dampness, mice and worms, and even (or especially) from willful human destruction. The papyri therefore, usually fragments themselves, tend to produce data that "exist only as a congeries of contiguously related fragments."³ And often, in the papyri, even the contiguity is missing.

¹Although revised in parts, this article retains the tone and time perspective of the oral version that was given on October 22, 1994, at the Byzantine Studies Conference in Ann Arbor.

²Like Watson himself in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (see Chapter VI). Holmes sends Watson to the moors of Devonshire and—with typical arrogance—instructs the good doctor to report only the facts ("I wish you simply to report facts in the fullest possible manner to me, and you can leave me to do the theorizing"); but even the habitually obedient Watson cannot ultimately resist the temptation to theorize.

³I borrow, and twist, a phrase from Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore 1985) 125.

This is well illustrated, I hope, by the two sixth-century Michigan papyri I propose to discuss here: *P.Mich.* XIII 660-661.⁴ These documents, although they were probably written at the provincial capital, Antinoopolis, came subsequently to rest in the middle Egyptian village of Aphrodito. They arrived along with other papers Flavius Dioscorus, lawyer, poet and landowner, brought home with him after a stint as notary in the provincial capital (between A.D. 566 and 573). Together the two papyri, which are unique in form and content among the Dioscorus papers, contain a report of proceedings before a military officer, a *comes militum*. Its protocols are in Latin; but, as is usual in such documents from Egypt, testimonies are recorded in Greek. The incompleteness of the first papyrus and severe loss to the second leave in doubt the circumstances of the deeds they record.⁵ This much at least is clear: there have been mysterious requisitions of gold and two men have been murdered.

As described by hearsay witnesses, these murders were nastier than most. In one, the accused, a soldier named Menas,⁶ is charged with having killed a priest by whacking him with a piece of irrigation machinery and pummeling him in the stomach for the better part of a day. Death, it is sad to report, was hardly instantaneous, for the victim died only some ten or eleven days after his cruel beating. Nonetheless, the complainant, the victim's brother, insists that the beating and its results fall within the scope of the law of homicide and the relevant statutory action: ὀρίζομαι κατ' αὐτοῦ τὸν ἄρμόνζοντά (sic) μοι νόμον κ[α]τὰ τῶν φονέων (lines 11-12).

In the other, apparently related incident, a wife complains of her husband's murder. In this one, in the daytime, the headmen of the village of Aphrodito, under the instructions of a certain Sarapammon and the Menas just accused of beating the priest, arrested the man and clapped him in the town jail. It is peculiar that they spent some time drinking wine with the soon-to-be victim.⁷ When evening came, they beat him up, then killed him with their swords. The murderers cremated the corpse, then doused the

⁴Both papyri are germane to the discussion, but focus will be on 660, the larger, better preserved, and more important of the two.

⁵An additional fragment (P.Palau Rib. inv. 70) that joins the upper left corner of *P.Mich.* 661.1-10 was published by S. Daris in *Studia Papyrologica* 21.1 (1982) 82-86; now also accessible as *SB XVI* 12542.

⁶Menas' military status explains of course the competency of the military tribunal hearing this case: A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602* (Oxford 1964) 484-94 (on *praescriptio fori*), esp. 487-88.

⁷But for a near parallel see the story of ritual murder and cremation reconstructed by Alain Corbin, *The Village of Cannibals: Rage and Murder in France, 1870*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

remains with water,⁸ then boxed and hid the bones.⁹ How the poor widow has come by this knowledge is unstated; to judge by her testimony, which immediately follows that of the dead priest's brother, she shows herself most concerned to locate, recover and bury her late husband's remains.

Despite the tabloid sensationalism of the two murders,¹⁰ the papyri that report them, perhaps because they are so perplexing in their contents, have received little scholarly attention since their 1977 publication. In 1990, however, there appeared Leslie MacCoull's article, "The Aphrodito Murder Mystery,"¹¹ since reprinted in her book, *Coptic Perspectives on Late Antiquity*.¹² In her article, my good friend intriguingly suggested that the murders described in *P.Mich.* 660 and 661 were likely to have been acts of violence perpetrated on Monophysites by Chalcedonian sectaries. The textual evidence for this view, which strikes me as dangerously thin, provides the occasion for another critical look at the two Michigan papyri. Time does not permit a full reexamination of the texts. But this is not too great a drawback because it so happens that two important pieces in the MacCoull thesis are derived from a mere two lines, lines 4-5, in *P.Mich.* 660.

These lines contain the answer given by a certain "illustrious Sarapammon" (mentioned above) to a question posed by the officer in charge of the hearings. Sarapammon has been asked about money that had been requisitioned from a man named Zacharias. Sarapammon, in the editor's translation, replies:

I did discover that some persons from the village of Aphrodite made a conspiracy and wanted to make the village desolate(?) so that they could again attend minutely to murders and for that reason the conspirators have been asked for one pound of gold for the government.

Among other things, the translation makes it clear by its parenthetical question-marking of the word "desolate" that this passage has its own little puzzle in the unresolved word at the beginning of line 5. Dr. MacCoull suggests an emendation, but it strikes me that this does not so much

⁸Another strange detail, since (I have read) the main problem with cremation as a method of disposing of a victim's corpse is preventing the body's natural juices from quenching the fire that is trying to consume it. See Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties* (New York 1991) 212-13. I am reminded, in passing, of Bigger Thomas's frantic efforts to dispose of Mary Dalton's corpse, in the Dalton mansion furnace, in Richard Wright's great, terrifying novel, *Native Son*.

⁹Which would of course have survived the conflagration: Dr. Douglas Ubelaker and Henry Scammell, *Bones: A Forensic Detective's Casebook* (New York 1992), chapter 11 ("Burning Questions").

¹⁰Tabloid sensationalism: cf. Richard D. Altick, *Deadly Encounters: Two Victorian Sensations* (Philadelphia 1986).

¹¹*Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 20 (1990) 103-07.

¹²Variorum Collected Studies Series (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK/Brookfield, VT, 1993), chapter XVIII.

emanate from the text as from her theory that the background of the conspiracy is one of violent religious confessionism.

She suggests restoring the damaged word at the beginning of line 5 as [πλ]ημοίρη <ν>, treating this orthographically as equivalent to πλήμ(μ)υραν, "a Copticised spelling," and lexically as referring to the "Nile flood." By extension this is taken to be an allusion to "the rites of the annual Nile flood" that had been appropriated from the Chalcedonians by the Monophysites as a way to secure the support of the local peasants and their families. Attractive as the idea may be, it must be pointed out that there are four orthographical distortions, coming from the hand of a skilled scribe, that must be accepted in order to surrender to it:

1. A haplography: there is one mu in the text where two are needed for the suggested word.
2. The omicron-iota of the text as standing for upsilon in the proposed word.
3. The eta vowelling, where alpha is expected, at the end of the word.
4. The need to add a terminal nu to the eta.

These four distortions, all trivial in themselves, are bothersome in their totality. But it is a fifth distortion that strikes me as fatal to the proposed emendation. That is the replacing of a simple syntactical scheme that has κώμην as the object of ποιῆσαι with a jarring syntax that converts κώμην into an apparent accusative of respect. To accommodate this, the translation must be stretched to something like this: "(sc. they) wished to celebrate (or: to bring about) the Nile flood *as far as the village is concerned*" (MacCoull's translation, my stress).

Dr. MacCoull goes on to suggest that the word φόνους later in the same line, despite the murders described in the documents, may not carry its literal meaning, "murders." It can and therefore does carry a figurative meaning, "pollution," a religious slur used by one party against the other. The phrase should be translated: "so that again they might be the disciples of defilement."

Methodologically, it seems to me, this is just the right time to invoke Ockham's razor; or golfing legend Bobby Jones's observation about golf swings: namely, the best swings are the simplest.¹³ In Jones's terms, MacCoull's swing is too far complicated; φόνους, "murders," mean just that: "murders." Therefore translate the entire phrase as:

I learned that some men from the village of Aphrodito were conspiring; they wished to make the village . . . so that they might again engage in murders.

But to take this a possible step further: the opportunity to examine *P.Mich.* 660 in Hatcher Library late this morning and early this

¹³Robert Tyre (Bobby) Jones, *Bobby Jones on Golf* (New York 1966) 12 ("The first requisite of a truly sound swing is simplicity") and passim.

afternoon,¹⁴ suggested to me that as an outside possibility the problem word that both the editor and Dr. MacCoull wrestled with, and that I have just criticized, is after all *διμοιρῆ* (read *διμερῆ*), and that it carries a meaning, "divided, in two parts (*μέρη*)," that well suits the context. What the editor printed as the damaged first eta in [...]ημοιρη shows two hastas, a left hasta rather tall, a shorter right hasta, and no crossbar. The first hasta is consonant with the vertical stroke of a Latinate delta, the second with a damaged iota. The bell of the delta would occupy some, though perhaps not all the space formerly occupied by the short, two-letter lacuna given in the *editio princeps*.

With or without this emendation, we return to a concept of these lines close to that of the original editor and remove two crucial points in Dr. MacCoull's theory of religious conspiracy. But we are unfortunately no closer to penetrating the mystery of the transactions in gold that accompanied the two murders, no closer to identifying the motives for the murders themselves. That one victim was a priest need not indicate sectarian violence; the other victim was evidently a lay person, and priests were numerous and fully involved in the village's secular life. But it must be admitted that there are some nagging hints of possible religious significance. First, according to Menas' own report (660.7-8), the priest suffered an abscess of the throat while the priest was in church and Menas was (conveniently) out of town. Second, and more importantly, the cremation of the other victim's remains may suggest some sort of vicious religious insult.¹⁵ But even this seems to me insufficient to prove the existence of an Aphrodito conspiracy based on religious sectarianism.

It seems then that we cannot with certitude identify the motives for the murders reported in *P.Mich.* 660-661. It is, however, possible to simplify earlier impressions of the two cases by trimming back the *dramatis personae* of the original edition. For as we proceed from lines 4-5 of *P.Mich.* 660 to line 6, we meet an amusing problem: a woman who nowhere else appears in the proceedings. Her name is supposedly Talis and she figures in only one brief sentence (660.6):

ἡ μὲν Ταλῖς ἐπικείσεται Σραπάμμωνι τῷ μεγ[αλ]οπρεπ[εστ]ᾶτῳ
ἐν[ε]κα τῆς Ζαχαρίας παραγωγῆς.

The editor translates:

¹⁴October 22, 1994. For this opportunity I thank Traianos Gagos.

¹⁵Either as an expression of plain contempt, or one that would—presumably in popular belief—render the body's hoped-for resurrection impossible. See *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd edn. (New York 1913), vol. 4.481-83 ("Cremation"); *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC, 1967), vol. 4.439-40 ("Cremation"), 440-41 ("Cremation (Moral Aspect)"); *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem 1971), vol. 5.1072-73 ("Cremation").

Talis will attack the most magnificent Sarapammon about the production of Zacharias in court.

The mystery of this otherwise unattested, and evidently physically or morally potent woman has recently been solved by Traianos Gagos: Talis is a phantom. What is to be read here rather is *τάξις*,¹⁶ the Greek equivalent of the Latin *officium*. This probably indicates here the provincial bureau of either the duke or the *praeses* of the Lower Thebaid. It seems then that the provincial office will be instructed, in a revised, and presumably more sensible, translation, to "bring pressure to bear upon¹⁷ the most magnificent Sarapammon for the production of Zacharias in court." This makes sense, especially in light of other duties the provincial *officium* is indicated as performing elsewhere in connection with these murder cases (660.3, 14).

But Talis is not the only extraneous party in the editor's interpretation of his text. This is because the testimony about the first murder, beginning at 660.9, is seen by the editor as having been delivered by the victim's "unnamed brother"; more precisely, the brother carries the status designation Flavius in damaged, abbreviated form, but lacks a personal name. As always, it is dangerous to emend on the assumption of a scribal error, but it strikes me as necessary in this line to suggest that *Theodorum* is a mistake for *Theodorus* and that the victim's brother does therefore have a name, Theodore; he reappears in line 13 and, again, in 661.11.

One final point elaborates briefly on an emendation made shortly after the Michigan texts were published. It has to do with an adjectival form, a participle, applied to the alleged murderer, Menas. In the *editio princeps* this was presented as a previously unattested word, *κακοσιώμενος*, "evil-doer" (660.10, cf. 661.12, 14), and Menas crops up as such in MacCoull's 1990 article. Nevertheless, in an early review of *P.Mich. XIII*, Jean Gasco¹⁸ had seen that Menas as a soldier probably carried a suitable soldierly epithet, *καθοσιωμένος*, that is, "devoted"; and this suggestion, however one is to accent or treat the word in question,¹⁹ was recently confirmed against the original papyrus by Traianos Gagos.²⁰ The result is of course ironic, but typical of any society that is committed to according formulas of respect to its more important members. For just as Aegisthus, the murderer of Agamemnon in the Homeric *Odyssey*, remains "blameless, noble, [or] excellent" in the poet's formulary,²¹ so Menas remains "devoted" even in the testimony of a man who is describing the brutal beating and subsequent death of his own priestly brother.

¹⁶E-mail message from Traianos Gagos, 2 February 1994.

¹⁷Or, both more literally (in Greek) and colloquially (in English): to "lean on ...".

¹⁸*Cd'É* 52 (1977) 361, reported in *BL* VIII (1986) 116.

¹⁹I prefer a present passive participle, accented *καθοσιώμενος*.

²⁰*ZPE* 92 (1992) 222.

²¹Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edition, s.v. *ἀμύμων*, "in Hom., an honorary epithet or title, even of Aegisthus."

The Aphrodito murders remain, after all, in the active file as crimes of unsolved motivation. What I hope to have provided here is some refinement of evidentiary detail, however slight. More important than this in the long run is a statement of the need to study and re-evaluate *P.Mich.* 660-661, afresh, and without preconceptions.²²

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²²At the risk of being deemed, in former U.S. Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew's memorable phrase, a "nattering nabob of negativism," I should nevertheless record my reservations about MacCoull's specific datings of the Michigan papyri in the first page of her article. It is true that an Apollos is mentioned as a witness in the protocol in 661.11; he *may be* the father of Dioscorus, but without clearer indicators of this relationship, I think it best left (for now) a matter of doubt. The text at this point, by the way, is badly damaged at a crucial point and the line is misleadingly deployed typographically in the *editio princeps*. Of course, if this Apollos is not Dioscorus' father, the question why these papyri became papers Dioscorus saw fit to preserve among his own, remains to be answered. [Roger Bagnall notes that the *bon mot* attributed in this footnote to Spiro Agnew more properly belongs to Agnew's former speechwriter, William Safire. He further points to *P.Oxy.* I 129 (= *Sel.Pap.* I 9 = *M.Chr.* 296 = *FIRA* III 21) as a better parallel than the Homeric one offered above for the use of a laudatory epithet in reference to an opponent one is trying to vilify: a father-in-law, seeking a divorce for his daughter, refers to his son-in-law (twice) as *εὐδοκίμωτατος* despite his allegedly "lawless deeds, which are pleasing neither to God nor to men, and things that ought not to be committed to writing."]