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The Aphrodite Papyri and Village Life in Byzantine Egypt

James G. Keenan

Loyola University Chicago, jkeenan@luc.edu

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The Aphrodisite 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 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 sheikh-diggers, especially toward the end of the nineteenth century 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 testimonies. Nonetheless, to cite just a few relevant 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 provided 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 uncertainty 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 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 decade 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 for which this paper is about, the village of Aphrodite in the Thebaid, though apparently yielding no Ptolemaic papyri and only one (doubtless Roman) rival in Oxyrhynchus as a source of Byzantine documents 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 Isgāī). A subsequent similar accident in 1905, which led to the recovery of a codec containing portions of five comedies by Menander, the first substantial fragments of that much-admired poet, brought M. Gusseve 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 Egyptian Museum was actively acquiring for itself papyri originating from Kom Isgāī: in 1903, a lion's share of the Greek papyri of early Arab date (these were products of the 14th century; first just mentioned); in 1906 and 1907, more of the same, together with a significant complement (products of the 10th-11th century) to the ninth-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 Isgāī, or the richness of a few finds, must have been considerable. Although none of these secretly found papyri — some that had been purchased by natives, others that were in the possession of m. zouaop, chief engineer of Egyptian railroads at Assiut — were uncovered by the Antiquities Service for the Cairo Museum, only to disappear at the village and sales through dealers at Assiut and Cairo and Paris dispersed Aphrodite's Byzantine and Islamic archives far and wide. Purchases of Aphrodite papyri, Greek, Coptic and Arabic, for Russian collections are noted as having been made by Professor H. Michael from a Paris antiquity dealer in 1905, and in Cairo in 1907, and by B. Puchler in Egypt in 1915. 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. L.S.B. Marshull in 1971. In 1971 the three Greek and one Coptic Aphrodite papyri in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore were purchased in Paris in 1972; they had been part of the collection of Dr. Giovanni Passamani of Cairo, an Italian-born 'surveyor for 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, Alexandria, Cologne, Hamburg, Berlin, Erlangen, Heidelberg, Florence, Genoa, Paris, Strasbourg, Vienna, Princeton, Munich 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 Prof. J. W. B. Furniss of a papyrus owned by Dr. W. M. F. Petrie of Montecito, 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 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 the correspondence of an early 'emir of emirs' of Egypt, Marzuk b. Sharik, administrator 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 tracking 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 perhaps a few (thus P. Z. 1071 intro.) in the reign of the emperor Heraclius (527-64; and of Justin II (565-68); most, and perhaps all (thus P. Z. 1071 intro.), in some way owe their ancient drafting or reproduction to one Flavian Dionysios, one of the village headmen and (hence the end of his life) monastery-founder, Apollonios Apollonis.

The careers of Apollo, the father and Dioscorus his son, were summarized 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' (JRS 64 [1974] 21-36). Apollo was the son of another Dioscorus and the grandson of a certain Ptolemy. He must have had Coptic rather than Greek roots. By 514, Apollo is titled 'village headman' (hieronomos) and later...
papyri show him to be active in the political and economic affairs of his village in A.D. 540 (P.Oxy.Nap. II 3216), with Victor, a village priest, Apollon found himself in Constantinople sometime after his return and before his death (by 547), he established and gave his name to the monastery where business affairs his son Diocorius sometimes represented. Meanwhile, Diocorius had committed himself to publishing his work, a Literator which he tried to put in good use on behalf of his community. He represented his village in Constantinople in A.D. 551, later suffered various political and legal difficulties, and economic losses, in consequence of which he went to Antioch for the provincial capital, Antiochopolis. There, from around 546 to 57?, he earned a living as a notary. He then returned to Aphroditopolis, bringing with him copies of many of the legal instruments and petitions he had drawn up in Antiochopolis. He died apparently shortly after 555.

A number of the papyri preserved among Diocorius' papers were on publication early on, and some are still today, intensively studied: the codex with the Manander comedies of course, but also the Greek-Coptic glossary Diocorius compiled to extend his knowledge of Greek vocabulary, especially poetic, the many succinctly crafted poems he wrote on diverse occasions (tomoes, epithalamia, etc.), the petitions drawn up for presentation to the provincial governor, the Duke of the Thebaid, the imperial secretaries and other legal and procedural documents that Diocorius retained in his lifetime. Also attracting notice when revealed in the papyri were the village's claim to special tax-status, autokrator, or the right to supervise its own tax-collecting, a privilege dating back to the emperor Leo (557-574), and its claim to have placed itself under the special protection of the emperor Justinian's wife, Theodora.

Surely, therefore, the village of Aphroditopolis was more than an ordinary Byzantine peasant village. Apart from its claims to autokrator and to monastic 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, (along with the sixth century at least, it had lost its metropolis status and it and its surrounding territory were annexed to Antiochopolis. Aphroditopolis was reduced to a village status in the Antiochopolis territories. Even as a village, however, Aphroditopolis retained a preeminence over many satellite villages. Pithia and Terenogene are the two most frequently mentioned by the papyri. They were the 'suburban' Aphonit OTA PAPYRI or pastoralists (kýpaitai, yódaite, bozóforoi). Land papyri are commonly noted as being situated in one of the village's 'plains' (ekkýleia), named for the four cardinal geographical directions. Pithia are also often not measured exactly, but rather identified through an intricate, if not familiar, naming-system. Their boundaries are sometimes described as ancient or traditional (skýpto, maládi). 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 landowners'.

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

For certain purposes the Aphonit OTA PAPYRI or pastoralists were part of a colobium of village headmen and contributions and landowners. I have not yet determined whether the order of the terms of the membership in the group -- village headmen, contributions, 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 (contributions), agrarian (landowners). Nonetheless, whatever the answer to that question, it is evident that members of the colobium were the core of the village, for the village's corporate responsibility for taxes, ordinary and extraordinary, and for the village's protection and stability in other regards as well. It was, for example, through two village headmen that Diocorius' 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 behalf of the village at the provincial capital in Antiochopolis. The small-holders sent petitions to the governor of the province and were 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 behalf of the village at the provincial capital in Antiochopolis. The small-holders sent petitions to the governor of the province and were on behalf of the village at the provincial capital in Antiochopolis.
of the shepherds as fieldworkers (έργατες), 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.26
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 Nicomachus were discussed by Kassaro and
Ball; 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
Phobamon son of Triadellus.27 That study reveals Phobamon, who was ac-
tive 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 landlords in-
teresed in the village (land owned by monasteries, churches, and government
officials) and the laborers that could be supplied by the village peasants.
Through this type of entrepreneurship,28 he acquired land and produce beyond
what was needed for his own use. He also acquired land, and never seems
to have rested content with what he had, but always seems to have used his cur-
cnt means to accumulate more for the future. Phobamon's career raises the
question whether others of the Aphrodite elite were operating in the same
way and whether they and their families were an 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.29

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 Aphroditas can stand as the Byzantine
Egyptian counterpart to Emanual la Roy Ladurie's "medieval French village
Montaillou".30 For Egypt, the Aphroditas papyri-evidence is valuable in pro-
viding a counterweight to that of Cyrene, evidence that needs to be in-
vestigated toward modifying or redressing the long-held scholarly views about
Byzantine Egypt as a land primarily devoted by politically connected great
episcopates whose lands were farmed by quasi-vassal tenants.31 For the Byzantine
Empire in the sixth century, the papyri of Aphroditas are valuable in helping
toreconstruct the rhythm of ordinary life amid the grand wars and projects
of Justinian, those events that are described in the pages of Procopius,
Aphroditas and Maltares and in the texts of the emperor's own laws;32 much
work remains to be done on the sixth-century "Greek papyri" from Aphroditas.
The prospect of what contemporary papyri may have to offer is truly
an exciting one; their evidence, I am sure, will be agreeable, in indispensable
for a full and balanced study of the village.33

LOV рА UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO J. G. KEENAN

Notes

1. Originally a paper read at the invitation of Dr. Gladys Pease-Murray for a
panel at a meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt, in Boston.
15 March 1981. The text printed here is slightly revised; notes have been
substantially curtailed.
2. D. W. nuru: (Greek papyri) see among other works, E. Darrall, "Greek papyri:
an introduction" (1968) chap. 11-12, and the supplementary notice in the expanded paperback edition
(1970) on pp. 200-201. L. D. Detwiler, Testaments of time: the search for lost manuscripts and records
(Baltimore: Penguin, 1970) chap. 9. Papyrolo-
gists sometimes distinguish early (i.e. late third-fourth century) from
late (fifth-sixth century) Byzantine; but both these subdivisions
are of course "early" from the standpoint of Byzantine
3. The earlier published Ptolemaic papyri are best synthesized in Cl. Prasaa ,
"Papyri in the Ptolemaic World." 3 vols. (Oxford
1941). Recent additions to the corpus of ptolemaic papyri and trends in
recent scholarship on the period were discussed by R. S. Bagnall in a paper on
"Papyrology and Ptolemaic History, 1980-1983" at a meeting of the
Association of Ancient Historians in New Orleans in May 1981 (WWW
The most recent synthesis is Cl. Prasaa, La mode heliastique, 2 vols.
(Dari 1978). For Tolemaic sources, see the collection of M. Ch. Lioneq,
4. E. M. de la Ch. L. Neuwirth, AE 5 1970, 217-225. Recent articles on the same papyri include H. M. Nasr, "Augustus" Fu-
nal oration for Horius, 5 CQ 75 (1975-80) 353-359, and E. Wallin, "Notes


6. For a chronological listing of some papyri, see also, C. A. Calderini, Dizionario del mondo geografico e topografico dell'Età grecoromanica 1-4 (Milan 1974) 67-99; the first item in this list is to be eliminated (see L. E. D. MacCull, "The first appearance of Aphrodite in the papyri," JSEG [to appear]; cf. C. F. Hauer, "The papyri of Dionysius: publications and emendations." (J. Calderini-Pashyni [Milan 1977] 297-304. C. A. Calderini has now compiled a complete list of all connections to 6th-century Aphroditian papyri, from the 1960 to other published works."


11. These two papyri were chiefly in the catalogue of sale of the collections of Jean P. Lasserre, X'Homme, and Giovanni Cartari, Cairo, sold in Paris, 17-19 June 1912, under Collection Giovanni Dalché du Cate, group 666 as "inscriptions identiques aux papyri." C. W. N. "Three papyri of Dionysus at the Walters Art Gallery," AJA 60 (1956) 370-377 at 170 n.1. Cartari was a numismatist, 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". Dawson and Uphill, Who was Who in Egyptology.

12. The general history of locations in which Aphroditian papyri are now to be found: Calderini, Dizionario, 303-304; P. Rich. XIII, p. ix. Michigan. P. Rich. XIII (these papyri were purchased for the University of Michigan collection in 1923 from W. Thomas Whittemore, then Director of the Byzantine Institute of America (Boston)), "editor's preface, p. (ix).

13. The papyri were given to the Vatican by Jean Gres on in 1961. For the Geneve Dionysius papyri (acquired by Egypt in 1959) see C. W. N. "Three papyri of Dionysus at the Walters Art Gallery," AJA 60 (1956) 370-377.


18. In addition to the "omission" of the epigraphs, see the ten small sketches of Aphrodisias on the facing pages of the volume. For the full-length portrait of Aphrodisias, see the detailed discussion in P. Lond. 1973, p. 27-29, and the work of Schober in the full-page drawing of the statue. For Dionysius, see Antinoopeia, see the detailed discussion in P. Lond. 1973, p. 27-29, and the work of Schober in the full-page drawing of the statue.
20. For this feature of agrarian existence, i.e., 'land communalism', cf. Marc Bloch, French rural history: an essay on its basic characteristics, tr. J. Betham (Berkeley-Los Angeles 1966) 38-39. For measurement (landscape) of land at Aphrodisias, however, cf. P. Mich. NITT 859, 225 ff., and for the frequently mentioned land registration at Aphrodisias (which had to entail its measurement) under John the cameator, see A. Class, 'D ESPOGNUS (Biss. Hist. 1891) 168 f.; L. Fagiani (Ricordi from the Vatican Coptic parallel to P. Michael.), in BAH 25 (1959) 17-49.


25. Evidence for some of what follows is compiled in Calderini, Dizionario 203-215. Other data I have collected myself.

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

27. 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 it and the networks formed by neighboring towns. ... The essay, translated by Sian France, was reprinted in P. Keaveney, ed., The varieties of history: from Voltaire to the present (New York 1973), 425-429 (quoted from p. 428) and more recently in F. Braudel, On History, tr. S. Matthews (Chicago 1980) 33-54 (complete version with notes). Cf. however, P. Mich. XXXII 61 (11, civilizing Afrodisius).


38. P. Cairo, Map 17 (1911). The shepherd's figures frequently in the Aphrodite papyri. Another important papyrus on them, with frequent links to P. Cairo, Map 17, is P. Cairo, Map 1791 (1946). The information is summarized in a guide to the sixth-century Aphrodite archives by E. A. Worp et al. (Leiden).

39. V. A. Gigas, Pennantopagra e Aphroditeopolis (Berlin, 1931). To be superseded by the geography planned as part of a guide to the sixth-century Aphrodite archives by E. A. Worp et al. (Leiden).

40. A. H. H. Maddison, Penantopagra e Aphroditeopolis (Berlin, 1931). Another Maddison papyrus has been published in S. N. Poston’s edition of a papyrus from the Vatican Library, published in Berlin, 1931. This text indicates, among other things, that the name of the last page of my BASP article (that Maddison may have been without family) needs modification (he was, at least, married to Apollo’s sister’s daughter). It confirms the impression of Maddison as something of a land entrepreneur, P. Vat. Ap. 1450, which is the top of a front of a fragmentary contract in which appears Flavio (name) the scribe, who also figures prominently in the BASP articles.

41. I am convinced Maddison fully fills, at least in part, the specific requirement of the entrepreneur, particularly in his ‘display of wealth’ between ‘unconnected circuits’, in Maddison’s case, the link between absentee landlords, non-Americans, churches and the village work force. See J. F. Kvan, Social anthropology in perspective (Harmondsworth, 1996). 204-233, of Saving the model of the entrepreneur as summarized in F. Brousel, On history, p. 60.

42. Amiatl’s papyri (e.g. P. Cairo, Map 1791 (1946), 1791 (1946) 216-237 of Saving the model of the entrepreneur as summarized in F. Brousel, On history, p. 60.

43. For a possible model, see George C. Roman’s English villages of the thirteenth century (Cambridge, Mass., 1944), chap. XIII. The Aphrodite papyri mention various ‘houses’ or ‘farms’ (e.g. 224) for doing things (the annual payment to the head of the household, the time for the scribes, the time for the scribes, the time for the scribes, the time for the scribes, etc.), and there is an interesting section of an account (P. Cairo, Map 1791 (1946), 231), recording dates for certain saints’ feast days, but there is little more that the Aphrodite calendars, if used, will have to be reconstructed from the numerous specific dates given on all the various papyri and types that make up the Aphrodite archives.

44. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Montaubon: the promised land of error, tr. S. Braut (New York 1979). Supposition brought to us by Le Roy Ladurie, deriving, so I recall, ultimately from Prof. C. Dunstan-Jones. Whether the colorfulness of the Aphrodite characters can match those of Montaubon, given the nature of the evidence available for the respective villages, is, however, doubtful.


46. This might be reformulated in the more general terms frequently employed by F. Brousel in his essays on history, at e.g., in the middle of the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II, tr. S. Reynolds (New York 1975). 11-22.


I am grateful to Prof. Rapp for sending me a copy of that review in advance of publication, as well as other materials that aided me in revising the present paper.

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