The Aphrodite Papyri and Village Life in Byzantine Egypt

James G. Keenan
Loyola University Chicago, jkeenan@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/classicalstudies_facpubs

Part of the Classics Commons

Recommended Citation
BULLETIN
DE LA
SOCIÉTÉ D'ARCHÉOLOGIE COPTE

TOME XXVI
(1984)

LE CAIRE
MCMLXXXIV
THE APHRODITE PAPYRI
AND VILLAGE LIFE IN BYZANTINE EGYPT*

The nearly one thousand years during which Egypt was characterized by a Greek-speaking elite have by papyrologists and historians traditionally been divided into three periods: the Ptolemaic, which marks its beginning with Alexander's invasion in 332 B.C.; the Roman, which begins with Octa-
vian's reduction of Alexandria in 30 B.C.; and the Byzantine, which starts with Diocletian's accession in A.D. 284 and ends with the Arab invasion of A.D. 639. 1 The Greek papyri recovered from ancient Egypt's centers and wrote houses, whether by supervised excavations or by the less formal 'cannot excuses' of the sahel-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. 2 The evidence is not without its gaps, chronological and geographical, and only a small portion of the papyri consists of pieces whose texts can stand on their own as important historical testimony. Nonetheless, to cite just a few willow 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. 3 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. 4 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 5 .

Moreover, as has been indicated, most of the papyri that have been published are of uneven historical value, and this 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 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, Daphnephos, the best-known source of Greek papyri and the most important single source for Roman and Byzantine pieces, has as yet yielded very little in the way of Ptolemaic papyri. Still another site, the one which this paper is about, the village of Aphrodisias in the Thebaid, though apparently yielding no Ptolemaic papyri and only one (doubtful) Roman, rivals Daphnephos as a source of Byzantine documents and is itself the most important source of Greek papyri of the early Islamic period.

The first finds recorded as having been made at Aphrodisias were made accidentally in 1911 by peasants who were digging a well in the village (modern Kon Iskewa). A subsequent similar accident in 1905, which led to the recovery of a coda containing portions of five comedies by Menander, the first substantial fragments of that much-admired poet, brought M. Gustave Lebeuf, Inspector of Antiquities at Assiut, to the site, and in that year and the two years following he was responsible for the retrieval and removal to the Cairo Museum of many papyri from the village. At the same time the British Museum was actively acquiring for itself papyri originating from Kon Iskewa in 1903. A lion’s share of the Greek papyri of early Arab date (these were products of the 4th chirust mentioned) in 1906 and 1907, made of the same, together with a significant complement (products of the 1905 find) to the sixth-century papyri that had been conveyed to the Cairo Museum and that would come to be published in three large volumes by Jean Maspero.

Meanwhile the number of clandestine finds at Kon Iskewa, or the richness of a few finds, must have been considerable. Although some of these secretly found papyri — ones that had been purchased by natives, others that were in the possession of m. znabiq, 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 discovered Aphrodisias’ Byzantine and Islamic archives far and wide. Purchases of Aphrodisias papyri, Greek, Coptic and Arabic, for Russian collections are noted as having been made by Professor P. V. Lechov from a Paris antiquities dealer in 1905, and in Cairo in 1907, and by N. Zaradeh in Egypt in 1915. In 1908 Charles L. Freer bought in Cairo a number of Greek and Coptic Aphrodisias papyri, now in the Freer Gallery of Art (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C., and forgotten until their rediscovery by Dr. E.R. Marchand in 1971. 1 The three Greek and one Coptic Aphrodisias papyri in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore were purchased in Paris in 1912; they had been part of the collection of Dr Giovanni Battista di Cairo, an Italian-born "pioneer of the British Army in Egypt. " These examples, however, must have been just bits and pieces of a much larger story, for papyri from Aphrodisias are today also to be found in libraries and museums in Alexandria, Aberdeen, Cologne, Hamburg, Berlin, Erlangen, Heidelberg, Florence, Ghent, Geneva, Paris, Strasbourg, Vienna, Princeton, Michigan and the Vatican — and even this list may not be exhaustive. 1 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. Barns of a papyrus owned by Dr. W.H. Fithen of Monterey, California — the upper half of a document whose lower half was among the Cairo Museum papyri published by Maspero in 1911.

The early Islamic-period Aphrodisias papyri, Greek and Arabic, that came to light through these discoveries and purchases and through eventual publications 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 Cairo, Kurnak Ibn Sharik, with Flavien d’Edicin, administrator (papre) of the region around Aphrodisias, as the village came to be called in the Arabic date. 14 Relatively few of the Coptic papyri, whether of Byzantine or of Islamic date, have been published; the tracing down of the Byzantine-age Coptic papyri in the Cairo Museum and elsewhere and their publication are goals of Dr. N. C. 15 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. 590 to A.D. 591. 16 Most of these fall in the reign of the emperor Justinian (527-565) (and of Justin II): most, and perhaps all, (thus P. L. R. V 350 intro., that in any way have their ancient origin dating or reflecting-keeping to the Flavion Dicorosus, one of the village headman and (founded by the end of his life) monastery-founder, Arabius Apollon.

The centuries of Apollon the titular and Dicorosus his son were summarized by Sir Harol Bell, editor of the British Museum Aphrodisias papyri, in an article entitled ‘An Egyptian village in the age of Justinian’ (SBE 64 [1944] 21-35). Apollon was the son of another Dicorosus and the grandson of a certain Palmobates. The family therefore must have had Coptic rather than Greek roots. By 574, Apollon is titled ‘village headman’ (founder); later...
In the political and economic affairs of his village, in A.D. 541 (P.Coll.Masp. II 4726), with Victor, a village priest, Apollon found himself in Constantinople. Some time after his return and before his death (567), he established and gave his name to the monastery where business affairs and on. He sometimes represented. Meanwhile, Dioscorus had committed himself to publishing his work, a lexicon which he had prepared or to use in 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 and the provincial capital, Antinoopolis. There, from around 566 to 571, he earned a living as a notary. He then returned to Aphrodisia, bringing with him copies of many of the material instruments and petitions he had drawn up in Antinoopolis. He died apparently shortly after 586.

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 Man Asphaltus codex of course, but also the Greek-Coptic glossary Dioscorus compiled to extend his knowledge of Greek vocabulary, especially poetic, the many stately crafted poems he wrote on various occasions (proemial, epigraphical, etc.), the petitions drawn up for presentation to the provincial governor, the Duke of the Thebaid, the imperial regicides and other legal and procedural documents that Dioscorus retained in his 'library'. Also attracting notice when revealed in the papyrus were the village's claim to special tax-status, autogoria of the right to supervise its own tax-collecting, a privilege dating back to the emperor Leo (557-574), and its claim to have pleased itself to end the special protection of the emperor Justinian's wife, Theodora.

Surely, therefore, the village of Apollon was no less than an ordinary agrarian terraena village. Apart from its claims to autogoria and to autonomy 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 metropolis status and in its surrounding territory were annexed to Antiocheia. Aphrodisia was reduced to village status in the Antiocheian territorium. Even as a village, however, Aphrodisia retained a prominence over nearby satellite villages. Pitha and Pherene are the two most frequently mentioned by the papyri. The papyri 'testimonia' tend to distinguish Aphrodisia the village (vill) from its environs (villas), and sometimes to classify portions of the latter as vicus, farm or pastures (vindait, yelvita, horostra). Land papyri are commonly noted as being situated in one of the village's 'plain' (stadium), named for the four cardinal geographical directions. Site often not measured accurately, but rather identified through an intricate, no doubt familiar, naming system. Their boundaries are sometimes described as ancient or traditional (kata), (nahi). Near the village were many monasteries, and in the village proper the buildings most frequently named in the papyri are the churches. There was a 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 great landlords'.

Despite the existence of such houses, however, and despite the presence of great landowners, in particular a certain Count Antonius, at Aphrodisia, 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 far-flung papers, 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 such. In that case 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 in the group -- village headmen, contributors, landowners -- is an ascending (les demanding) order of importance, or whether the terms simply refer to different aspects of the same man. Liturgical or social (village headman), fiscal (contributor), aquatic (landowner), benefactor -- whatever the answer to that question, it is evident that members of the collegium were considered as 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 respects as well. It was, for example, through two village headmen that Dioscorus' father, Apollon, was empowered on one occasion to act on behalf of the village at the provincial capital in Antinoopolis. 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 Constantiople, the quasi of cities, chieftains. The collegium of village headmen, contributors and landowners further no to the 'convulsion' of its members' relationships with another collegium, that of the village shepherds. The traditional service
of the shepherds as field guardians (ὑποκηρύσσεια), 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.\(^{39}\)

The name of quite a few of the village's sixth-century elite are known. There is considerable information about some of them\(^{40}\), but only a few have received detailed study. Apollon and Melleus were discussed by Keenan and Sells; 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 Amilian Philippenn son of Triadalpoo.\(^{41}\) That study reveals Philippus, 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\(^{42}\), 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 current means to accumulate more for the future. Philippus's career raises the question whether others of the Aphrodite elite were operating in the same way\(^{43}\) and whether they and their families were on 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.\(^{44}\)

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 DSandorla Lou Rey Laducia's medieval French village Montalbou.\(^{45}\) For Egypt, the Aphrodite papyri—evidence is valuable in providing a counterweight to that of Cyprochus, evidence that needs to be investigated toward modifying or redressing the long-held scholarly views about Byzantine Egypt as a land primarily dominated by politically connected great magnates whose lands were farmed by quasi-marsh tenants.\(^{46}\) For the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century, the papyri of Aphrodite are valuable in helping to reconstruct the rhythm of ordinary life amid the grand war and progress 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.\(^{47}\) Much 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 an exciting one; their evidence, I am sure all will agree, is indispensable for a full and balanced study of the village.\(^{48}\)

LOVOL UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

J.G. KEENAN

NOTES

* Originally a paper read on the invitation of Dr. Gladys Pease-Murphy for a panel at a meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt, in Boston, on 25 March 1981. The text printed here is slightly revised; notes have been substantially condensed.


2. On the rediscovery of the ancient Greek papyri, see, among other works, E.D. Turner, Greek papyri: an introduction (Oxford 1968) chap. 11-12; and the supplementary note to the expanded paperback edition (Oxford 1980) on pp. 200-202; L. Drouz, Testaments of time: the search for lost manuscripts and records (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970) chap. XV. Papyrologists sometimes distinguish early (i.e. late third-fourth century) from late (fifth-sixth) papyri, but both subdivisions are of course 'early' from the standpoint of Byzantinists.

3. The earlier published Ptolemaic papyri are best synthesized in C. Fréau, L'Economie royale des souverains (Brussels 1930), and M. Bontemps, The social and economic history of 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, 1940-1980" at a meeting of the Association of Ancient Historians in Las Vegas in May 1981.\(^{49}\) The most recent synthesis is C. Fréau, Le monde hellénistique, 2 vols. (Paris 1976). For Ptolemaic decrees, see the collection of R.O. Lounson, C-Ord.Pent., 3nd ed. corrected and updated, 1986.


7. See Bell's P. Lond. IV Preface (1900). P. Lond. IV Introduction (1917): P. Cairo. II (1911), III (1931), IV (1943). New, the first bighpapa volume published posthumously, Harper having failed to complete his work on the Intra muros on 20 November 1943. Bell (p. 349) notes 345-346, 32 T.C. Battey, on consulari MS, records in the 'Letter of E. September 1945 that British Museum 'inventory numbers 2025-2126 and 1415-1753 were purchased of the Rev. C. Burch on 25 November 1943 and 12 December 1940 respectively.' Murch clearly understood the British Museum's payment for many Coptic manuscripts obtained in Egypt by Budge. For Burch, who died in 1907, cf. Burch and Burch, who was in Egypt in 1907. (London 1972) 168-169. S. H. Ball, ZSE 65 (1954) 23, mentions other British Museum acquisitions made '[(some twenty years after the original discovery)] still unpublished, but now under study by L. Nagel and R. Pinto.'


11. These four papyri were [listed in the catalogue of sale of the collections of Jean P. Lanzoni, XVIII, and Corrado Gritti, Cairo, held in Paris, 17-18 June 1912, under Collection Giovanni D'Alberto].

3a. Nolli, 'Three papyri of Dionysus and the Aegyptiaca Papyri'.

3b. Nolli, 'Three papyri of Dionysus and the Aegyptiaca Papyri'.

3c. Nolli, 'Three papyri of Dionysus and the Aegyptiaca Papyri'.

3d. Nolli, 'Three papyri of Dionysus and the Aegyptiaca Papyri'.

29. Churches and monasteries: Calderini, Dizionario 325-349; an interesting point of departure for churches in P. Ciar. Map. III 57280, an affidavit submitted and signed by, inter alios, priests of ten of the village’s churches.


31. Count Rambaud: H. Hardy, The large estates of Byzantine Egypt (New York 1911) and (see the forthcoming work of J. Thomas). Texts on Count Annone are listed in P. Rosso-Georgii. III 77.3 note. P. Ciar. Map. I 67005 (wq. 297) mentions a παρεκκλήσιον τῆς Αφροδίτης (presumably Antakapolis), and in particular the estate (οἰκίας) of Julians, former bishop, conserved (in Αφροδίτης) (no doubt Aphrodite’s). See now J. Canepa, Las grandes Edades: la ciudad en el estado episcopal (150, 46° 27° S. (Date to appear).


33. P. Lond. V 1674, intro., and lines 19-21: ἀντικείμενος τοῦ ἀθάνατον Φίλιππος. In P. Ciar. Map. I 67002.1 the cast possessors call themselves ‘ἱερηποι’ (ἱερηποι), but how much of this unorthodoxy was rhetorical, how much real, is open to question. Recently, for the reality of their existence: O. E. P. de Crook, The cast struggle in the ancient Greek world (Athens 1983) 223-224, 262-242 and 361 n. 39.


62  J.G. KENAN


