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Review of Ruffini, G.R. (2018) Life in an Egyptian village in late antiquity: Aphrodito before and after the Islamic conquest

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GIOVANNI R. RUFFINI, *LIFE IN AN EGYPTIAN VILLAGE IN LATE ANTIQUITY: APHRODITO BEFORE AND AFTER THE ISLAMIC CONQUEST*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 233, illus., map. ISBN 9781107105607. £28.99.

At the beginning of the twentieth century a chance find in the middle-Egyptian town of Kom Ashqaw brought to light hundreds of papyri in Greek, Coptic and Arabic dating from the sixth to the early eighth century C.E. The town is known by different names — Aphrodito in Greek, Shkoo in Coptic and Ishqūh in Arabic — which point both to the continuity of occupation and to changes in activity and focus under different political rulers. Despite this supremely rich documentary record, Aphrodito and its inhabitants remain largely unknown to historians. It is to Giovanni Ruffini's credit that he has brought this important material to the attention of new readers through a stimulating and accessible micro-historical study. With an engaging style and confident reconstructions, he uses the papyri to draw a lively picture of this community, away 'from the big historical questions most scholars are interested in' (26–7), delving instead into the struggles of daily life.

The protagonist in R.'s story is Dioskoros, a land-owner, lawyer, notary and poet in the mid sixth century whose recovered papers consist of legal deeds, petitions, mediation settlements, accounts, Homeric texts with verbal conjugations, word lists and, of course, his own poems — but no 'private' correspondence. We follow Dioskoros as he tries to manage bullying shepherds and abusive government officials (ch. 4), as he teaches his children to read and do sums, and in his travels to Constantinople, to the nearby district capital of Antinoöpolis (ch. 11), and back to his home town where he composes most of his poetry. Through Dioskoros' papers we encounter an entire village community.

R.'s expertise lies with the systematic ordering of connected bodies of textual material to uncover patterns of social behaviour. R. draws on his detailed work in *A Prosopography of Byzantine Aphrodito* (2011) and *Social Networks in Byzantine Egypt* (2008) to reconstruct a Byzantine Aphrodito where personal relations and patronage were key in a 'never-ending struggle for information and financial edge' (99). He sees a flexible system in which negotiation, exchange of favours and information — and also blackmail, slander and public humiliation — enable inhabitants of all social backgrounds to exert pressure by offering or withholding support. Village factionalism (74) is what drove this community, rather than Constantinople's legal system, 'which only impinges so far' (74), or the Byzantine state which is inadequate and absent (177). This is not a society where 'the weight of the state and the aristocracy rests too oppressively on the shoulders of free men' (77), but one that promotes economic mobility and benefits entrepreneurs (93). It puts more power in the hands of peasants (82, 91) and all in all 'is for the best of almost everyone involved' (213). It is in this statement that R.'s engagement with other interpretations of this material (especially those of Peter Sarris and Jairus Banaji) becomes most apparent (but see also 91, 209, 212), as well as his either/or approach to assessing the impact of the Byzantine state.

R.'s masterly reconstruction of Aphrodito's village politics as a constant cycle of villagers ascending and descending through positions of favour offers a complex, vivid and persuasive model of conditions as lived. Papyri containing apparently irrelevant bits of unrelated information are woven into a meaningful whole and interpretations of seemingly straightforward events skilfully turned upside down. Thus theft becomes (rightful) compensation for economic damage suffered (68–9), tax collection an opportunity for collectors to enrich themselves or, even, plunder (51) and mediation a way to exercise pressure (52–8). R.'s desire to offer a complete and completely new view, however, also regularly leads him to fill in gaps in the evidence: reconstructing the possible contents of documents that do not exist (67–8, 69, 73) or assuming that things did not happen because the papyri do not record them (90, 101).

It is tempting to think that the word Islam was added to the title as an afterthought — from the outset the book, with one map of late Roman Egypt omitting Coptic and Arabic place names, is clearly defined as dealing with the age of Justinian (3, 18). Still, R. tries to connect or rather oppose Byzantine with Islamic Aphrodito. His statement that the Islamic material is dry and impersonal compared to the earlier papyri (8) does not seem to be based on a thorough engagement with the later material, which is also largely missing from his bibliography (for example the editions by Adolf Grohmann, Werner Diem, Yūsuf Raġib, Albert Dietrich, C. H. Becker or the work of Arietta Papaconstantinou). It is unfortunate, as the Islamic material offers a wealth of opportunities for comparison. For example, R. makes much of the formula 'I rent out to you', which appears in agricultural leases and strikes him as remarkable (82–3), but is in fact typical in Arabic documents

of sale (though not yet attested at Aphrodito). A fuller reading of the Islamic material would also have made him aware of other letters that the Muslim governor Qurra son of Sharik wrote to the pagarch of Aphrodito which do indeed suggest the persistence of a 'social marketplace' (207). Yet the Islamic material is not read with the same attention to social interaction, but used to emphasise the 'unique' success of Byzantine statelessness by contrasting it with Islam's oppressive top-down rule. If these are reservations, they are offered as recognition of the potential of R.'s method as a model for understanding Egyptian village life also in the Islamic period.

This book should be read for the exhilarating view it offers on the daily lived reality of late Roman village life and as a tour de force of documentary analysis. R.'s model of a world determined by patronage networks can, moreover, be very well adapted to other moments in Egypt's history. It is this open mind to the papyrological material and the view it offers across the traditional boundaries in historical studies that make this such an exciting and admirable achievement.

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JEAN-LUC FOURNET, *THE RISE OF COPTIC: EGYPTIAN VERSUS GREEK IN LATE ANTIQUITY*. (The Rostovtzeff lectures.) Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. 224. ISBN 9780691198347. \$45.00.

This book brings together the four lectures given by Jean-Luc Fournet as part of the Rostovtzeff lecture series at New York University in March and April 2017. Its aim is to examine the way in which Coptic developed and began to undercut the monopoly held for centuries by Greek as the official language of Egypt. In the four thematically distinct but chronologically continuous chapters, corresponding to his four lectures, F. presents the reader with a cohesive account of the relationship between the written cultures of Greek and Coptic in late antique Egypt.

In recent works, F. has examined the first appearances of Coptic in the papyri (*Études coptes XI* (2010), 125–37; *Études coptes XIV* (2016), 115–41; *Études coptes XVI* (2018), 199–226). The first chapter builds on his findings, which so far have focused on individual archives of early Coptic judicial texts. F. establishes that, contrary to the situation found in other provinces of the Eastern Roman Empire, where local languages were used in official contexts in the early years of their history, documents written in Coptic from the third to the sixth century A.D. were principally literary or epistolary. The second chapter provides an explanation for this state of affairs, as F. outlines five reasons why Greek was preferred to Coptic, notably in legal and administrative documents, up until the mid sixth century. The first is one internal to the Coptic language, which was multi-dialectal: this may have hindered its development as a legal and administrative language (45). Secondly, unlike Coptic, Greek had a long tradition as a legal language, and adapted itself to Roman law, which was in force in Egypt at the time (48). Thirdly, the fact that Greek was the language of the early Church served to consolidate its position of prestige (57). F.'s fourth reason is that of the institutional marginalisation of the Egyptian language, as he shows that, when Coptic emerged, the official and legal written culture was completely occupied by Greek (64). As a final reason for the singular diglossic situation in Egypt, F. advances the hypothesis that Coptic developed as an auxiliary to the process of Hellenisation. The very first written examples of Coptic are bilingual texts, in which Coptic was used principally to annotate and gloss Greek texts. F. therefore posits that Coptic was initially used to compensate for limited competence in Greek (66). The argument that Coptic was paradoxically a product of Hellenism, developed as a complement to Greek language training, is very compelling: it explains why Coptic was written in Greek letters, why the scope of Greek loanwords was so broad and, above all, why the first users of Coptic continued to use Greek in official and legal documents.

In ch. 3, F. shows how the mid-sixth to mid-seventh centuries were a transitional stage, in which Coptic gradually began to be used in legal and judicial contexts, culminating in a more widespread use once the Arab invasion had severed the link between Egypt and the Greek-speaking Byzantine