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## Late Antiquity viewed from below: What a village and its papyri can add to the bigger picture

Isabelle Marthot-Santaniello

University of Basel <i.marthot-santaniello@unibas.ch>

RUFFINI, G. R. 2018. *Life in an Egyptian Village in Late Antiquity: Aphrodito before and after the Islamic Conquest*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. x + 233. 12 figures, 1 map. ISBN 978-1-107-10560-7.

The Egyptian village of Aphrodito is well known to papyrologists and historians of Late Antiquity because of the thousand papyri found there at the beginning of the 20th c. These papyri form two distinct groups. The first group found contained the more recent pieces: a trilingual archive from the beginning of the 8th c. CE in which the village administrator Basil figures centrally. All the other texts, found subsequently, are from the 6th c. and early 7th c. This latter group, called the Dioskoros archive, is better known and more extensively studied, and is at the heart of the reviewed book.<sup>1</sup> With around 700 Greek and Coptic papyri, it is the largest archive coming from a single village, making Aphrodito the best-documented village of antiquity. Although many specialized studies are available from scholars like J. Keenan and J.-L. Fournet, the only attempt to synthesize this massive documentation was done by L. MacCoull in 1988.<sup>2</sup> Revisions of this work as well as an update, taking into consideration the newly published texts and studies from the last 30 years, were greatly needed. The task, however, was not an easy one, since the documentation is massive and not easy to access: the texts often have several gaps, most of the editions predate the adoption of modern standards, and the bibliography is, as expected, both extensive and sparse. That is what makes the present book extremely valuable, since the author undertook to account both for all the main aspects of these texts and for the state-of-the-art analyses of the scholarly community.

The author had the necessary experience to face the challenge thanks mainly to two of his prior works. The book resulting from his PhD thesis applied network analysis to compare Aphrodito with the other massively documented site of this period, the city of

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<sup>1</sup> See Fournet 2016 for the distinction, within the Byzantine papyri, between the archive of Dioskoros and the one of his cousin-in-law Phoibammon.

<sup>2</sup> MacCoull 1988.

Oxyrhynchos.<sup>3</sup> This previous experience is reflected in the use of technical expressions like “social ties” (26) and “two degrees of separation” (40), as well as in the short summary at the end of p. 208. However, it was the production of *Prosopography of Byzantine Aphrodito* that required him to look at all the 6th- and 7th-c. texts in close detail, which gave him a global and precise view of the population.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this book is to give an overview of the texts’ content that is accessible to non-specialists. For example, the author is careful in his use of terms that could be seen as technical (e.g., “codex” is immediately explained as “an ancient book”; 8); the presence of ancient Greek is limited to keywords and expressions transliterated into the Roman alphabet, always with a translation; and ancient measures like the *artab* and *aroura* are converted into modern equivalents (liter of grain and acre respectively). The number of footnotes is limited: although some are clearly for papyrologists (as on 21 n.71, discussing textual emendations), others may lack the line number of the reference, which is problematic when some texts have hundreds of lines. It is therefore a good introduction to this period and documentation for students and non-specialists, but often requires further investigation and caution so as not to confound grounded statements with speculation.

This is, indeed, the main caveat to keep in mind while reading the book: as with any reconstruction of the past from incomplete material, the author faces the necessity of filling in the gaps with imagination, of extrapolating. Usually he mentions such a procedure: for example, “Throughout this book, we will also imagine a missing world” (4). Some assertions, however, simply do not rely on any explicit evidence, as in the statement that the village “elite ... studied Roman law in Alexandria” (3), which will only later be given in a much more nuanced form (187). The same goes for the idea that the villagers “debated Christian theology” (3), although a few lines below the author acknowledges that “theological debates ... are almost nowhere to be found in the town’s documentary records.” One last example among many: it is said that “the town today sits amid a network of irrigation canals seemingly unchanged from antiquity” (13), with mention of “The impression of MacCoull” and a reference to her 1988 book (n.45). In fact, it is now known that the irrigation system in the Nile valley underwent a series of important transformations over the centuries, for example in the Ottoman Period and in the early 19th c. The content of the papyri points to only one main canal, a few ditches, and mostly wells and cisterns.<sup>5</sup> The reader should therefore be aware of such reconstruction work, keeping an open mind in order to question and possibly challenge the impressions given by the book.

The second element to point out is its misleading subtitle: the book is about Aphrodito during the 6th c. CE, not a comparison between its state before and after the Arab conquest. The 8th-c. evidence is only alluded to in Chapter 1 (more of an introduction than a chapter per se) and is brought forward a bit more in the conclusion, with approximations that will be dealt with the chapters’ description below. Otherwise it is hardly used in the various chapters.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the major article on the 8th-c. archive by T. S. Richter is missing

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<sup>3</sup> Ruffini 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Ruffini 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Marthot 2016, 1877–80.

<sup>6</sup> The only notable exception is the reference to Arietta Papaconstantinou’s works (122–23).

from the bibliography.<sup>7</sup> Some assertions here and there suggest that the initial project for the book was based on the 6th-c. sources only.<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, as the work addresses non-specialists, some specific characteristics of the documentation could have been emphasized. For example, at this period there was not a wide diversity of names, and therefore homonyms are extremely frequent; as the author explains in his *Prosopography*, if two texts bear mention of persons with the same name and even the same fathers' names, they do not necessarily refer to the same individual. Thus, indications throughout the book that one person "may be the same" as another must be taken with great caution. Besides, what the author often refers to as "Aphrodito's records" are mostly the archive of Dioskoros and his family, not the town hall papers, where you could expect exhaustiveness on the village (for example, 8th-c. CE data coming from the village administrator's office are closer to this).<sup>9</sup> If something does not show up, it does not mean that it did not exist at the scale of the village – just that Dioskoros' family was not related to it.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the place given to Coptic evidence is quite small and, even when it is present, this aspect is not underlined. For example, there is discussion of an order given to one of the village leaders about a butcher named George (52). There is no mention that the text is written in Coptic, although it is an important element in the picture of who could give orders to the village leaders. The bilingualism of the society is only alluded to (186–87).

Since the source material is the Dioskoros archive and the author's goal is to show its many facets, the study includes not only texts related to Aphrodito and to the closest local city, Antaiopolis, but also to the provincial capital, Antinoopolis, because Dioskoros spent years there and brought some of his papers back to his village. Sometimes comparisons are drawn with the other well-documented place in this period already mentioned: the city of Oxyrhynchos. Regularly, at the end of chapters, the author compares what he has found in Aphrodito with general theories on the Late Roman Empire, which often differ.<sup>11</sup> In order not to lose the readers in this vast documentation, the author makes many internal references to link various passages of his book. Some are, however, missing and will be indicated in the description of the chapters below.

Chapter 1, "Aphrodito in Egypt," is an introduction *in medias res* that presents clearly the place, the main characters, the documentation with its wealth and limits, and the work of previous scholars. There is no evidence that the modern place Tima corresponds to the antique Thmonachthe (18), but much more convincingly to Pteme (n.55).

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<sup>7</sup> Richter 2010.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the evidence zooming in on just "a few decades" (5) and the correct spelling of the village name that only makes sense for the 6th c. CE (10). Note, too, the confusion: "hundreds of papyri – possibly over a thousand – survive from sixth-century Aphrodito" (3–4). This is only true if the entire 6th–8th c. is taken into account. Even more explicitly, see the beginning of the concluding chapter: "This book focuses on one of Aphrodito's archives, from the middle of the sixth century, but Aphrodito's second archive tempts us too" (200).

<sup>9</sup> For a content-based comparison of the two groups, see Marthot and Vanderheyden 2016, 218–20.

<sup>10</sup> This should be kept in mind while reading, for example, speculations on how common disputes were (see 58).

<sup>11</sup> See the description of Chapter 2 below.

Chapter 2, “A world of violence,” relates two cases of murder, one of physical violence, three examples of theft, two of prison, and possible mentions of rape. Evidence from the neighboring city of Antaiopolis completes the picture, with two cases of violence inflicted by soldiers and related to tax levying. The conclusion underlines how these elements go against the general theory about Justinian’s time.

Chapter 3, “A world of law,” starts with a short general introduction to the political and fiscal organization of 6th-c. CE Egypt, and then gathers what can be known of the collective administration of the village. The author digs into the complex question of *autopragia*, the right of the village not to depend upon the neighboring city to collect its taxes, which is rarely attested elsewhere. Tensions surrounding the respect of this right led the villagers to write a petition to the empress Theodora, and to travel to Constantinople to have their voice heard. This chapter shows how the headmen were appointed and what their duties were: mainly tax collection and maintenance of the local legal system, with two cases of arbitration in disputes.

Chapter 4, “Dioskoros, caught in between,” relates cases of trespass and theft that Dioskoros personally experienced from shepherds and bandits, and the solutions he found that were more social remedies than recourse to the law. One aspect could have been mentioned in order to be fair toward shepherds: several of them in Aphrodito also had the duty of guarding fields, so they were not solely forces of chaos but maintained security.

Chapter 5, “Working in the fields,” draws portraits of several kinds of landlords: first of all, Phoibammon, Dioskoros’s cousin, a skilled entrepreneur, then some large estate owners, and finally Dioskoros himself, as exemplified by a few elements concerning this side of his life. It is an opportunity to raise questions of rents and sublets, tax rates and the role of the regional official (pagarch), the Gini index measuring wealth inequality, and the possibility of social ascension. The author uses this evidence to argue against the idea that peasants were, at that time, crushed by landlords. An internal reference could have announced in this chapter that monasteries were among the most important landowners, which will be developed in Chapter 7 (123). Two main bibliographical references are missing: the Aphrodito cadaster (79 and n.26) should now be consulted in its 2008 reedition;<sup>12</sup> and a major work on the subject of extra payments included in rents (*sunetheia*, 81 and n.45) has been published by K. Worp.<sup>13</sup>

Chapter 6, “Town crafts and trades,” starts with an overview of the physical organization of the village with its districts and streets. It then sums up elements on guilds, potters, carpenters, (hydraulic) engineers, oil makers, goldsmiths, beekeepers, and less attested trades such as sculptors, coppersmiths, shipbuilders, and hunters. Thanks to evidence from the provincial capital Antinoopolis, a comparison is drawn with the urban labor organization, which was, as expected, more specialized and more frequently involved slaves. The chapter ends with the town’s guarantees, a manner of interaction between the various trades.

Chapter 7, “Looking to heaven,” begins by emphasizing that, compared with monasticism in Syria, Egyptian monasticism was involved in worldly concerns. It then deals with

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<sup>12</sup> Gascou 2008, 247–305.

<sup>13</sup> Worp 2001.

the questions of Christian onomastics, charitable contributions from local aristocrats, and religious institutions funded by villagers, among whom we find Dioskoros's father. If the texts do not tell us much about the content of Dioskoros's faith, we can catch a glimpse of his activities managing his father's foundation. Some information is found on local worshipping, the economic power of religious institutions, and aspects of religious life, including the role of the bishops. The conclusion of this chapter insists on the limits of our documentation, which certainly leaves personal sides of everyday life in the shade. An important point is, however, missed (129–30): if there is no evidence that Dioskoros's father was ultimately worshipped as a saint, the monastery he founded did survive far beyond Dioskoros's life and is well attested in 8th-c. documents under the name of Pharou.<sup>14</sup>

Chapter 8, "From cradle to grave," starts with the lack of evidence regarding the lives of children. It would have been worth indicating that the question of education is discussed later (187 ff.). The chapter continues with the topics of marriage, divorce, and wills, as well as disinheritance and the general health situation, including cures for headache. The conclusion underlines how romance is absent from our papyri.

Chapter 9, "Aphrodito's women," is a gallery of portraits: two cases of "well-born" businesswomen from Aphrodito and Antinoopolis, rich and influential women from the elite, or, on the contrary, enslaved ones, with even a Cinderella story, as well as religious vocations and widows. When underlining the overwhelming presence of Maria/Mariam in onomastics for women, the author reminds us that women appear 10 times less often than men in the documentation and that they are often mentioned without being named, referred to as just "the wife of" or "the daughter of." The chapter ends with female portraits in literature, and specifically Dioskoros's poetry addressed to Patrikia, a woman and pagarch.

Chapter 10, "Big men and strangers," collects content that could also have fitted into Chapters 2 and 3. It deals mostly with petitions seeking for high-ranking patrons, fear of the nomadic Blemmyes living in the eastern deserts, and the three known journeys by Aphrodito villagers to Constantinople.

Chapter 11, "Life in the big city," starts with the sparse evidence on traveling and exchanges with surrounding cities. It should be corrected that Aphrodito is between the Apollinopolite Minor – not Antinoopolite – region to the north and the Panopolite to the south (182). The chapter then zooms in on Antinoopolis: its minorities, possibilities of entertainment (circus races), and education. This provides the opportunity to mention Dioskoros as a teacher, thanks to literary and para-literary texts he most likely brought back from his stay in the big city. A reference (188 n.32) to the major article by J.-L. Fournet would have been welcome here.<sup>15</sup>

Chapter 12, "Conclusion," collects hints regarding the situation in the 5th c. CE before dealing, finally, with the 8th-c. documents, but only for six pages and with several important mistakes. The author does not take advantage of the most recent studies on this documentation. Therefore, he gives credit to the interpretation that "Aphrodito becomes a fully-fledged regional capital" (202), although it has now been proved that the place was

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<sup>14</sup> This point, already clear from various publications, is fully developed in a forthcoming work by Marthot-Santaniello to appear in the proceedings of the conference *Monastic Economies in Egypt and Palestine, 5th–10th centuries CE*, organized by L. Blanke and J. Cromwell.

<sup>15</sup> Fournet 2015.

still called “village” and kept the same territory, while Basil, although in direct contact with the central administration of the province, is its “administrator” (*dioiketes*) and not a pagarch.<sup>16</sup> The sentence, “Bear in mind the circumstances of the papyrus find: the same homeowner renovating the same property led to the papyri of both Basil and Dioskoros” (203) is wrong: the two groups were found in different places.<sup>17</sup> The monastery of Apa Sourous is not only “one of the most common place-names in town” (204 and n.16) but it changes its status to “domain” (*ousia*), which means that it is no longer treated like the other monasteries in Aphrodito’s territory but seems administratively – and fiscally – outside the village jurisdiction.<sup>18</sup> A major confusion is made on *P.Qurra* 2 (206), which was not written by the administrator Basil but came from the Governor’s office, i.e., Qurra.<sup>19</sup> On that same page, a reference to the article by A. Papaconstantinou on Qurra’s violence would have been most welcome.<sup>20</sup> The same holds for Cadell’s article on requisitions, missing from the discussion (206–7) although present in the bibliography.<sup>21</sup>

The second part of the conclusion returns to 6th-c. CE society without stating that fact. It discusses Peter Brown’s and Averil Cameron’s assertions on Late Antiquity in the light of evidence from the Dioskoros archive, where “almost all of the great narrative of the sixth century” (209–10) is invisible: plague, religious debate, and Neoplatonism, even the figures of Justinian and Justin II, mentioned almost entirely in dating formulas. Finally, the author reflects on how Aphrodito is typical or special (211 ff.): he considers, correctly in my opinion, that it is representative, since it offers an antidote to the bigger picture coming from Constantinople. Here we see the view from the villages, far from powerful bishops and rich aristocrats, a rural world of daily struggle and trust.

T. Hickey, in the concluding section of his chapter (“Writing histories from the papyri”) in the *Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, regretted the lack of initiative from papyrologists in using narrative to explore evidence from Greco-Roman Egypt: “While a papyrological *Alabi’s World* is beyond our evidence ..., a *Death of Woman Wang* (with Aphroditê and environs in place of the T’an-ch’eng district, and the poet/notary Dioskoros taking the roles of both the author P’u Sung-ling and the magistrate Huang Liu-hung?) might be possible.”<sup>22</sup> He immediately added the nuance: “Less controversially – *Woman Wang* was criticized for its ‘fictions’ – an examination of storytelling in Graeco-Roman Egypt along the lines of *Fiction*

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<sup>16</sup> Marthot 2013, 187–96.

<sup>17</sup> The author himself correctly relates these two discoveries (5, 8). Basil’s papers and other 8th-c. CE papyri were found in 1901 while the villagers were “constructing a tomb ... on the edge of the Muslim cemetery” (Quibell 1902, 85). Dioskoros’s archive did indeed emerge when a villager renovated his house in 1905 and the confusion may come from the fact that this second discovery was made at two separate times: see Lefebvre 1907, ix–xi.

<sup>18</sup> See Marthot 2013, 211–12, and the forthcoming paper by Marthot-Santaniello (see n.14 above).

<sup>19</sup> The mention “written by Basil” appears in a scribal note, i.e., where one expects the identity of the secretary penning the document, at the end of what is clearly a letter from the governor to the village administrator. It is therefore to be interpreted as the name of “a scribe writing in Arabic although bearing a Greek name.” See Richter 2010, 213–14, as well as nn.96 and 97: the reading of the name is doubtful.

<sup>20</sup> Papaconstantinou 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Cadell 1967.

<sup>22</sup> Hickey 2009, 508, with references to Price 1990 and Spence 1978.

*in the Archives* could certainly be written.”<sup>23</sup> The present book by Ruffini seems to fit the latter suggestion: it does not take the reader into a single comprehensive narrative of Dioskoros’s life or of a particular event in the village. Rather, the author collects snippets of stories which he often has to partially reconstruct, and then organizes them thematically so that they confirm, complete, or nuance one another, because he shares the conviction that “contingent and discontinuous facts of the past become intelligible only when woven together as stories.”<sup>24</sup> As long as we keep in mind that it is such a reconstruction, the book offers a picture as complete as possible of life in an Egyptian village during the 6th c. CE

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<sup>23</sup> Hickey 2009, 508, with reference to Davis 1987.

<sup>24</sup> Lowenthal 1985, 218, quoted by Hickey 2009, 508.

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## Escapism for lovers of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*

Richard Hodges

The American University of Rome <r.hodges@aur.edu>

SCHEIDEL, W. 2019. *Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pp. xviii + 670, figs. 69, tables 5. ISBN 978-0-69-117218-7.

There was once a dream that was Rome. You could only whisper it. Anything more than a whisper and it would vanish, it was so fragile.

(Marcus Aurelius to General Maximus Decimus Meridius<sup>1</sup>)

"The gripping story of how the end of the Roman Empire was the beginning of the modern world," extols the cover blurb of S.'s new book. The fall of the Roman Empire has been considered one of the greatest disasters in history. But in this "groundbreaking" book, S. argues that Rome's dramatic collapse was actually the best thing that ever happened, clearing the path for Europe's economic rise and the creation of the modern age. Ranging across the premodern world, *Escape from Rome* offers new answers to some of the biggest questions in history: Why did the Roman Empire appear? Why did nothing like it ever return to Europe? And, above all, why did Europeans come to dominate the world? The author asserts that the title is not just a nod to his own personal transition from writing traditional history to global comparative history; it seeks to capture the essence of our collective progress (xvii).

*Escape from Rome* is aimed not at peer academics but, as the jacket's hyperbole suggests, at a popular audience and, my best guess is, airport bookshops in particular, with their jet-setting customers. Its target readership is surely those who reluctantly take high-end vacations and head to Cape Cod, the Hamptons, or Tuscany and, forsaking their quotidian read, *The Economist*, opt for something "serious" and "historical" to keep their dinner companions exercised. At its heart is a "what-if" narrative, seeking ancient origins for modern circumstances. S. also aims to have written a book for our (pre-COVID pandemic)

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<sup>1</sup> Scott 2000. Ridley Scott's film had a significant impact on the Roman city of Butrint, where I was excavating at that time. Increased numbers of visitors sought out the theater, believing it was where gladiators fought, rather than a place for performances of music and plays. Perhaps to exploit the fame of *Gladiator*, the Albanian government issued a 2,000-lek note with an image of Butrint's theater inaccurately entitled "Amfiteatri in Butrintit."