CHAPTER 1

Aphrodito in Egypt

Aphrodito, Southern Egypt, AD c. 540*

"The headmen of my village Aphrodito arrested my husband and put him in the watch-house of my village," Maria says to the judge.[1] "After taking wine to the watch-house, they drank with him, and when the evening came, they beat my husband Herakleios and killed him with their swords. Afterwards, they gave his remains to the fire." Maria knows who killed her husband, and she knows who put them up to it: a local nobleman, the most illustrious Sarapammon and a soldier named Menas. "When Herakleios, my wretched husband, had been killed," she continues, "and his remains had been given to the fire so that they may be burned . . . they threw his bones in a basket and buried them I do not know where. I ask, therefore, that they are given to me so that I can bury them."

Earlier in the proceedings, the judge had heard further testimony against Menas from a man whose name is lost. "Menas forced my brother Victor, a priest, outside and murdered him. He threw a piece of machine wood at his left arm and beat his stomach from the fifth hour until evening of the same day . . . If I shall not prove that he murdered my brother, I shall die instead of him." When Menas testifies he insists he is innocent. He claims

* Citations follow the *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets* and *The Checklist of Arabic Documents*. Throughout this book, when footnotes cite only a personal name and a number (e.g., 'Dioskoros 3'), they refer to that entry in Ruffini 2011.

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Leslie MacCoull had also agreed to read this book's first draft, but died two months before it was complete. I dedicate this book to her memory.

[1] *P.Mich*. 13.660, paraphrase of translation in ed. princ.

to have been somewhere else entirely and that Victor died from a throat abscess. As for Maria's husband Herakleios, "I was not there and I do not know."

Menas's defense does not ring true and the trial points to a larger conspiracy. Flavius Apollos, the town headman and a central figure in Aphrodito's story, suspects a setup from the beginning.[2] When he comes before the judge, his testimony hints at the truth. Imperial officials above his pay grade had instigated the killings with an eye on the kickbacks they could skim off the top of the fines levied for the murders.

It is not clear why Herakleios and Victor died or whether the plaintiffs had the right suspects. Nor is it clear whether Apollos's conspiracy theory is correct. These proceedings are exceptional: nothing else like them survives from the records of this town. Aphrodito is not awash in violent crime. But this murder mystery does record the authentic voice of the ordinary men and women of late antiquity, facing the hardships of the world around them. Moreover, it is only one story out of hundreds from the records of everyday life in Aphrodito.

These records are unique for the ancient world. No other place or time gives such an immediate glimpse of daily life for so many of the average men and women of antiquity. No other place or time lets us watch thousands of people interact with each other from cradle to grave. Almost all of these people are neighbors. Hundreds of them are demonstrably friends, family, and business partners, or in some cases the reverse – enemies and rivals. Most of the rest almost certainly know each other, or know someone else who does.[3] These ancient documents show people living their lives from the inside, the way we live our own. Regarded in this way, the ancient world starts to look quite a bit different than it does in the "big picture" histories, with their eyes on the emperors and the cultural elite.

For a modern audience, ancient Egypt may conjure up the world of the pyramids and the mask of Tutankhamen. But ancient Egyptian civilization continued after the last of the pharaohs for another thousand years under Greek and Roman rule. Although Egyptians abandoned their ancestral gods in favor of Christianity, much of their language and culture remained unchanged. The Muslims who conquered Egypt in the seventh century AD and brought an end to Greco-Roman antiquity discovered people like Maria and her husband Herakleios, who still spoke a later form

[2] Assuming Apollos 2 = Apollos 33 in Ruffini 2011.
[3] Hundreds connected: Ruffini 2008a, 203. Degrees of separation: Ruffini 2008a, 206–207.

of the language of the pharaohs, but also debated Christian theology and practiced Roman law.

These people lived in an intensely busy period of history. The reign of the emperor Justinian, from AD 527 to 565, is one of the most intriguing political periods in late antiquity. History remembers Justinian's reign for its architectural accomplishments, particularly the Hagia Sophia, which is still one of the dominant features of the skyline in modern Istanbul. History also remembers him for the extensive and influential codification of Roman law he initiated during his reign. His wars against Persia in the east and the barbarian kingdoms of the west show his determination to assert Roman strength after the weakness and uncertainty of previous generations.

Throughout, Justinian struggled to solve the most pressing religious issue of his time, the controversy over the Council of Chalcedon. This church council, held generations before in AD 451, had deepened an ongoing theological division in the Christian church. A debate, arcane to many modern readers, raged over the divinity and humanity of Jesus. The Council of Chalcedon declared that Jesus had both a human and a divine nature. This decision alienated many people throughout the Roman world: so-called Monophysites who believed that Jesus had only one divine nature, synthesized with his humanity. This debate would ultimately sever the Monophysite Egyptian church from the rest of orthodox Christendom. However, we must always remember as we explore Aphrodito that these pressing issues – the wars, the legislation, the theological debates of Justinian's reign – are almost nowhere to be found in the town's documentary records.

Aphrodito is a small town: it had legally been a city long ago, but probably never had more than 10,000 inhabitants.[4] Tucked away, off the beaten path in southern Egypt, it is not a center of the action. But it is not far from the Nile, and that river's regular agricultural rhythms shape its life. Like so many Egyptian towns in this period, it is dotted with Christian churches and monasteries. At the same time, its elite enjoyed a classical education, studied Roman law in Alexandria, read Homer's *Iliad* and wrote poetry inspired by it. What sets Aphrodito apart from the dozens, even hundreds of Egyptian villages like it is an accident of history: hundreds of papyri – possibly over a thousand – survive from sixth-century

[4] This is not a scientific estimate, merely a hunch based on the number of attestations in Ruffini 2011 and the number of apparently missing women, on which see page 158.

Aphrodito, showing the daily activities of thousands of people at a level unknown for any other site of this period.

These records paint a complicated picture, with two dominating towers of evidence. On the one hand, the forces of chaos, conflict, and struggle appear throughout the papyri. Late antique Aphrodito is a town of factions and competition for local power. Beyond the two murders, the record includes street brawls, home invasions, contested divorces, spousal abandonment, and even false enslavement. Local clans hold the reins of town power. The competition between these clans stirs up violence on the borders between Aphrodito and nearby villages. This violence is in turn part of a larger game of land grabbing and agricultural speculation played by both town elites and the more powerful but more distant provincial nobility.

On the other hand, the forces of order and control appear as well. Top officials meticulously record each theft. The town elites gather in the courthouse to settle inheritance disputes. Marriage vows include elaborate conditions for the satisfaction of both parties. Monks and nuns record the pious endowments of the local elite and guard Aphrodito from evil demons. Powerful women run local businesses and large estates. House builders, goldsmiths, ironworkers, and other tradesmen record contract after contract to order their affairs. But both parts of this picture, the order and the chaos, are ultimately exceptional. Throughout this book, we will also imagine a missing world. In this world, most events thrive on the mundane currency of face-to-face small-town trust, and need no written evidence.

Aphrodito is the best-documented place per capita in the entire ancient world. We deceive ourselves about the places we think we know better. The great cities of antiquity – Athens, Alexandria, Rome, Constantinople – have left detailed histories, literary works introducing their political and social elites, but the average resident of those cities is lost, nameless, and faceless. Pompeii, buried under ash in the first century AD, survives remarkably intact, but most of its people remain anonymous, and their affairs are largely unknown. (The papyri surviving from nearby Herculaneum only show the contents of one man's library.)

Other places in Egypt have produced papyrus finds comparable to or larger than those from Aphrodito: Karanis, Herakleopolis, Hermopolis, Oxyrhynchos, Soknopaiou Nesos, Tebtunis. These cities and towns have provided hundreds, even thousands, of papyri for our study. But these papyri cover centuries at a time. They give close-ups only rarely, of

comparably few people at a time.[5] The evidence from Aphrodito, by contrast, zooms in on just a few decades, but introduces many more people in detail. The contrast is comparable to studying a neighborhood in a modern city by looking at the passengers of a single train car stopped in a station. They are far more comprehensible than the passengers of an entire train moving past at full speed.

Because of the rich detail included in its records, Aphrodito has been compared to Montaillou.[6] In the 1970s, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie published a pioneering work of microhistory on Montaillou. This French village – with a population of only a few hundred – was the subject of extensive investigation by the Inquisition. The records of that investigation allowed Le Roy Ladurie to write a detailed history of Montaillou's social life in the period from the 1290s to the 1320s. His work became one of the best-known studies of microhistory ever written. Antiquity will never produce any records so richly detailed. Aphrodito is the closest we can get.

Evidence survives from Aphrodito in part because of sheer luck. There were at least three major finds: in 1901, 1905, and in the 1930s or 1940s. In 1901, the villagers of Kom Ishqaw came across a large collection of papyri while constructing a tomb on the edge of the village's Islamic cemetery.[7] Reporting the find the following year, the British Egyptologist James Quibell wrote:

> There was, I was assured, nearly 2 cubic metres of [papyrus]: it lay in an ancient house, with a mat above it and a mat below . . . Some had been found before by *sebakh* diggers and burnt. Another pile had been found and covered up again . . . But, this time . . . nearly everyone in the village had a sample. Word was sent to dealers at Tema, Luxor, Ekhmim, who promptly came.[8]

After the antiquities officials were alerted, the site was guarded, and Quibell started formal excavations (Figure 1.1). He found only a few papyrus fragments, but was able to excavate parts of a series of houses, giving a sense of how the ancient residents had lived.

[5] In terms of texts per period, the only real competition is Soknopaiou Nesos, which gives us 666 texts in ninety years in the second and third centuries AD: see www.trismegistos.org/fayum/fayum2/2157.php?geo_id=2157 (accessed February 28, 2016). It was a much smaller place than Aphrodito in this period, with a population around 1,000.

[6] For the origins of the comparison, see Keenan 1984, 56 with note 44.

[7] A tomb (Quibell 1902, 85), not a well (Bell 1908, 97; Bell 1944, 21; Keenan 1984, 52; MacCoull 1988, 2).

[8] Quibell 1902, 85.

Figure 1.1 An overview of the 1901 excavations in Kom Ishqaw (Aphrodito), reproduced from Quibell, J. (1902) "Kom Ishgaw." *Annales du Service des antiquités de l'Égypte* 3: 85–88

> The houses had been of two stories, with square winding staircases inside the building: the rooms were 3 to 5 m. long and about 1 1/2 m. wide, and often covered with barrel vaulting still complete in some cases. Every door seems to have been flanked by brick columns with capital and base of limestone . . . fragments of long carved beams were not rare. There were fragments too of various kinds of fine glass. The signs of a much higher degree of comfort than in modern time were unmistakable.[9]

Quibell also found a number of ostraca (sherds of broken pottery used for writing), a wooden box that he took to be a linen chest (Figure 1.2), which also held a few fragments of papyrus, and a number of other small finds, including a wooden relief of an antelope, a hammer, and some earthenware and pottery dolls (Figure 1.3).

The papyri found in 1901 sold on the open market. Over the next few years, they found their way into museum collections in Cairo, Heidelberg, Strasbourg, and London (where the largest portion of the find is housed, in

[9] Quibell 1902, 87.

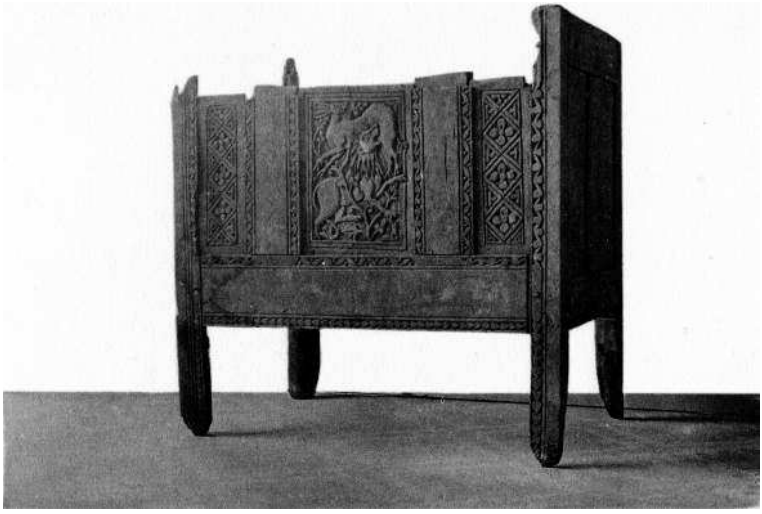

Figure 1.2 A chest found in the 1901 excavations in Kom Ishqaw (Aphrodito), reproduced from Quibell, J. (1902) "Kom Ishgaw." *Annales du Service des antiquités de l'Égypte* 3: 85–88

Figure 1.3 The small finds from the 1901 excavations in Kom Ishqaw (Aphrodito), reproduced from Quibell, J. (1902) "Kom Ishgaw." *Annales du Service des antiquités de l'Égypte* 3: 85–88

the British Library).[10] In subsequent decades, further collections came to light in the United States and the Soviet Union.[11] These papyri are mostly letters and accounts from the early AD 700s and represent some of the best sources for the early Muslim administration of Egypt. They include seventy-five letters from the Muslim governor, Qurra ibn Sharīk, to Aphrodito's local administrator, and some – although far fewer – addressed to the people of the region as a whole.

The local official at the receiving end of the governor's attention, Basil, is the administrator of Aphrodito. Basil's archive has over 400 texts.[12] The majority of them are in Greek, but the archive also includes over fifty texts in Arabic and over 150 in Coptic. They are an excellent source for learning about the administration and finance of early Muslim Egypt, but they are dry and impersonal compared to the earlier texts found at Kom Ishqaw.

The next major discovery came in 1905. A wall collapse in a house in Kom Ishqaw opened a crevice full of papyrus scrolls. Gustav Lefebvre, the local antiquities inspector, was able to recover some of the pieces, including fragments of a Greek comedy, but large portions of the find had already been dispersed.[13] He took the village headman's word that he would be notified if anyone in the village made plans to demolish any of the local houses. He did not have to wait for long: the owner of the same property was soon planning to raise one of his walls as part of a house renovation.

> Hearing the news, Lefebvre launched three quick days of excavations on the site. After only one meter of digging, he uncovered ancient walls of unbaked brick. There had been a roof, of which the first few courses were still visible. The walls continued down for another two meters and demarcated three rooms. It was a medium-sized house, which had been built during the Roman period. In the corner of one small room, which had an area of no more than one and a half square meters, stood a large jar which was shattered down to its neck. It was now about .90 meter tall.[14]

In that jar, he found a codex (an ancient book) with fragments of the lost plays of Menander, and some 150 rolls of documentary papyri. Lefebvre went back twice in the next two years, but found nothing as spectacular as the finds from 1905.[15]

However, spectacular they are. This find includes 680 texts: sixty-three of them are literary papyri, preserving pieces of ancient literature; the

[10] Bell 1908, 98. [11] Abbott 1938, 9. [12] Fournet 2016. See also Morelli 2013, 172–175.
[13] Lefebvre 1907, ix. [14] Kuehn 1995, 43. [15] Lefebvre 1907, xi.

remaining 617 are documentary.[16] Over 90 percent of these documentary texts are in Greek, forty of them in Coptic Egyptian. They include personal letters, petitions, loans, sales, rent agreements, tax lists, tax receipts, and more. A large portion of these documents relate to the business affairs of Apollos and – more importantly – his son Dioskoros, who appears in so many of these texts that for over a century they have been described as the Dioskoros archive.

This archive is a multi-headed beast. Much of its material comes directly from the town records: tax lists, police reports, court proceedings, and other official business. But this is not the town government's archive. Much of its material comes directly from Dioskoros's family affairs: rent records for family land, administration of the family monastery, personal accounts, and property lists. Apollos and Dioskoros – who both serve as village headman in Aphrodito over several decades – either conduct official business out of their own homes or take some of the town's official papers home with them when they retire. The result is an unparalleled glimpse into the public and private lives of a single town and extended family over the course of the sixth century.

According to Leslie MacCoull, "natives later carried on clandestine diggings at the Kom Ishqaw site, in 1937–38, and some papyri uncovered in these operations found their way to the Cairo Museum."[17] Jean-Luc Fournet has written about clandestine digs in Kom Ishqaw taking place at the start of the 1940s.[18] Both reports probably refer to the same events. One group of Aphrodito papyri purchased in 1943, and another reportedly found circa 1945, come from these clandestine digs.

Not all of the Roman-period papyri from Aphrodito came from the archive of Dioskoros. The organized excavations of 1905 and the clandestine digs of the 1930s or 1940s produced what appear to be several different late antique archives.[19] The clandestine papyri, over seventy of which are known, include the Greek archive of Phoibammon, son of Triadelphos, and the later Coptic archive of Kollouthos, son of Christophoros.[20]

These two batches of texts formed a larger single collection in antiquity. However, the exact connection between them is not clear. Kollouthos may

[16] Totals: Fournet 2016. List: Fournet 2008a, Annexe 2.
[17] MacCoull 1990a, 107, provides no source for these excavations. She argues that this dig produced the texts in P.Cair.inv. SR 37333, some of which have been published in Hanafi 1985, Hanafi 1988, and Fournet 2001. In a personal communication to me, she recalled a report of these excavations as personal information from Mirrit Boutros Ghali.
[18] Fournet 2016. [19] Gascou 1977, 361; Fournet 2001, 475, note 2. [20] Fournet 2016.

be one of Phoibammon's descendants.[21] Furthermore, these may not be the last Aphrodito finds. A visitor to Kom Ishqaw in the 1980s could not find anyone still alive who had ever heard anything about the discovery of these papyri.[22] Nevertheless, another house renovation project in Kom Ishqaw may yet outdo what we already have.

In the indigenous Egyptian language Aphrodito's name is Jkow, meaning "Emporium."[23] It must have been a market town at some point, if not for most of antiquity. The town is called Aphrodito or Aphrodite in Greek, after the goddess the Greeks believe to be the equivalent of the town's ancient Egyptian patron deity, Hathor, the goddess of love and motherhood. The spelling of the town's name changed over time from Aphrodite in late antiquity to Aphrodito in the Arab period. Although Aphrodite is the correct spelling for the period covered in this book, Aphrodito is retained throughout. The discovery of the Arab papyri came first, to some degree ensuring that Aphrodito will always remain the spelling most familiar to modern readers.

There is no real evidence concerning the town during the pharaonic period.[24] The first clear literary testimonies of Aphrodito come in the first century AD.[25] According to Pliny the Elder, Aphrodito is a *polis*, one of Egypt's celebrated cities. According to Ptolemy the geographer, writing in the second century, Aphrodito is the capital city of a *nome* or regional administrative unit called the Aphroditopolite nome. But here, Ptolemy is apparently confusing our Aphrodito with another Aphrodito farther north.[26] Later, in the third century, Aphrodito makes no appearance in the so-called Antonine Itinerary. This sparse collection of literary references is a fragile foundation for studying Aphrodito in earlier periods of Roman rule.[27]

The documentary papyri give a little more information to work with. A papyrus from the 100s BC describes someone as a member of the Aphrodito bodyguard.[28] Aphrodito was probably never the capital of its own nome or administrative region,[29] but it had certainly once enjoyed the legal status of a city. A papyrus from the AD 100s mentions the city of Aphrodito and its nearby neighbor, the village of Phthla.[30] At this point, the city was probably under the authority of the Apollonopolite nome. When Aphrodito appears next in the papyri, in the AD 300s, the papyri specifically call it a village, not a city.[31] For some unknown reason, it had

[21] Fournet 2016. [22] MacCoull 1988, 3, note 10. [23] MacCoull 1988, 6. [24] Marthot 2013, 14.
[25] Marthot 2013, 19. [26] Marthot 2013, 20–22 and 30. [27] Marthot 2013, 22.
[28] *PSI* 7.815; see Marthot 2013, 24–25. [29] See note 26. [30] *P.Brem.* 42; see Marthot 2013, 29.
[31] *P.Col.* 8.235; *P.Kell.* 2.32; Marthot 2013, 29.