

## LIFE IN AN EGYPTIAN VILLAGE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Most ancient history studies focus on the urban elite. Papyrology explores the daily lives of the more typical men and women in antiquity. Aphrodito, a village in sixth-century AD Egypt, is antiquity's best source for micro-level social history. The archive of Dioskoros of Aphrodito introduces thousands of people going about the normal business of their lives: loans, rent contracts, work agreements, marriage, divorce. In exceptional cases, the papyri show raw conflict: theft, plunder, murder. Throughout, Dioskoros struggles to keep his family in power in Aphrodito, and to keep Aphrodito independent from the local tax collectors. The emerging picture is a different vision of Roman late antiquity than the one from the viewpoint of urban elites. It is a world of free peasants building networks of trust largely beyond the reach of the state. Aphrodito's eighth-century AD papyri show that this world died in the early years of Islamic rule.

GIOVANNI R. RUFFINI is a professor in the Department of History at Fairfield University, Connecticut. He is the co-founder of *Dotawo: A Journal of Nubian Studies* and is the author of numerous articles and several books on Byzantine Egypt and medieval Nubia. These books include *Social Networks in Byzantine Egypt* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) and *Medieval Nubia: A Social and Economic History* (2012).

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-10560-7 — Life in an Egyptian Village in Late Antiquity  
Giovanni R. Ruffini  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

LIFE IN AN EGYPTIAN  
VILLAGE IN LATE  
ANTIQUITY

*Aphrodito Before and After the Islamic Conquest*

GIOVANNI R. RUFFINI

*Fairfield University, Connecticut*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-10560-7 — Life in an Egyptian Village in Late Antiquity  
 Giovanni R. Ruffini  
 Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

**CAMBRIDGE**  
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
 New Delhi – 110025, India  
 79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107105607](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107105607)  
 DOI: 10.1017/9781316226377

© Giovanni Ruffini 2018

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

NAMES: Ruffini, Giovanni, 1974– author.

TITLE: Life in an Egyptian village in late antiquity : Aphrodito before and after the Islamic conquest / Giovanni R. Ruffini.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2018.  
 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2018014719 | ISBN 9781107105607 (alk. paper)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Aphrodito (Extinct city) – History. | Egypt – History – 30 B.C.–640 A.D. | Egypt – History – 640–1250.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC DT73.A75 R84 2018 | DDC 932/.3–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018014719>

ISBN 978-1-107-10560-7 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

## Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page vi
<i>List of Map</i>	vii
<i>Cast of Characters</i>	viii
1 Aphrodito in Egypt	1
2 A World of Violence	28
3 A World of Law	42
4 Dioskoros, Caught in Between	60
5 Working in the Fields	75
6 Town Crafts and Trades	94
7 Looking to Heaven	111
8 From Cradle to Grave	131
9 Aphrodito's Women	149
10 Big Men and Strangers	164
11 Life in the Big City	181
12 Conclusion	200
<i>Bibliography</i>	214
<i>General Index</i>	227
<i>Index Locorum</i>	231

## Figures

1.1	An overview of the 1901 excavations in Kom Ishqaw (Aphrodito), reproduced from Quibell, J. (1902) “Kom Ishqaw.” <i>Annales du Service des antiquités de l’Égypte</i> 3: 85–88	page 6
1.2	A chest found in the 1901 excavations in Kom Ishqaw (Aphrodito), reproduced from Quibell, J. (1902) “Kom Ishqaw.” <i>Annales du Service des antiquités de l’Égypte</i> 3: 85–88	7
1.3	The small finds from the 1901 excavations in Kom Ishqaw (Aphrodito), reproduced from Quibell, J. (1902) “Kom Ishqaw.” <i>Annales du Service des antiquités de l’Égypte</i> 3: 85–88	7
1.4	An aerial view of Egypt today, from Google Earth	14
1.5	An aerial view of Kom Ishqaw today, from Google Earth	15
1.6	An aerial view of Kom Ishqaw and its surrounding region today, from Google Earth	17
3.1	“Headman’s Door,” Kom Ishqaw (Egypt), Photo © 1995–2015 Clement Kuehn	48
3.2	“Rubble,” Kom Ishqaw (Egypt), Photo © 1995–2015 Clement Kuehn	49
7.1	“Church Door,” Kom Ishqaw (Egypt), Photo © 1995–2015 Clement Kuehn	121
7.2	“Crosses,” Kom Ishqaw (Egypt), Photo © 1995–2015 Clement Kuehn	122
11.1	Antinoopolis: an illustration of the ruins, published in 1809 in the <i>Description de l’Égypte</i>	183
11.2	An illustration of charioteers from an Antinoopolis papyrus, AD c. 500	186

*Map*

Map 1 Map of late Roman Egypt

*page x*

## *Cast of Characters*

### **Ammonios the Count**

An outsider to Aphrodito who appears in its records over several decades in the first half of the sixth century. He owns land in the region, some of which is managed by the town headman, Apollos. He acts as a patron of Aphrodito, or at least of the family of Apollos when that family dominates town politics.

### **Apollos, father of Dioskoros**

Headman of Aphrodito over several decades in the first half of the sixth century. He is the father of Dioskoros of Aphrodito, and keeper of the family papyrus archives, perhaps until his death in the 540s. Founder of a local monastery in Aphrodito, he travels as far as Constantinople in defense of his family and town business.

### **Athanasios the Duke**

An outsider to Aphrodito, a duke of the Thebaid (southern Egypt) in the 560s, and contemporary of Dioskoros. Dioskoros writes petitions to him multiple times, seeking redress both for others and for himself, particularly in the case of complaints against the pagarch, Menas.

### **Dioskoros, son of Apollos**

Poet, headman of Aphrodito in the 550s, and the central character in his family papyrus archives. He is the son of Apollos, and husband of Sophia. His poems, petitions, and accounts record his many struggles against both internal and external rivals. He travels twice to Constantinople at least in part on business related to these rivalries.

### **Herakleios the Headman**

Headman of Aphrodito in the 550s or 560s, and rival to Dioskoros. Count Ammonios extracts administrative favors from Herakleios for Dioskoros. Dioskoros accuses the partisans of Herakleios of damage to his property



and other attacks against him. (But this Herakleios is not the murder victim appearing at the start of Chapter 1.)

### **Ioulianos the Pagarch**

A pagarch (regional administrator) in the 550s and colleague of Patrikia and Menas. He is a consistent target of complaints from Dioskoros, who objects to his attempts to bring Aphrodito into his administrative jurisdiction. Dioskoros also accuses him of seizing some of his family's property.

### **Menas the Pagarch**

Patrikia's deputy in the 550s, and a pagarch in his own right in the 560s. Dioskoros writes a series of petitions accusing Menas of various misdeeds, including seizure of his land, transfer of his land to residents in a neighboring village, violence against his brother-in-law, and the arrest of his son.

### **Patrikia the Pagarch**

A pagarch in the 550s, and thus one of the region's most influential women. She is a colleague of Ioulianos and Menas. Dioskoros writes a poem celebrating her marriage in which he compares her to the Graces and credits her with descent from the sun god Apollo.

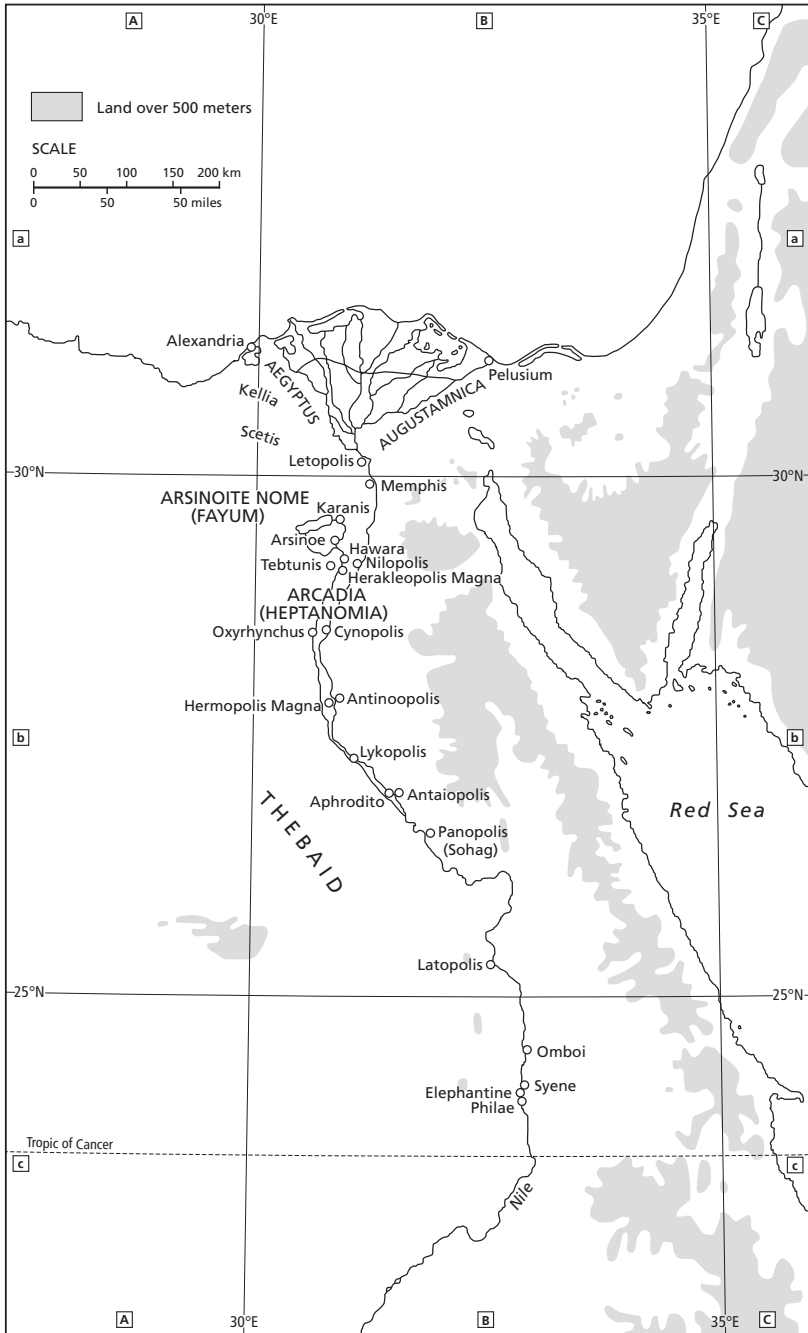
### **Phoibammon, son of Triadelphos**

Married to a cousin of Dioskoros and himself, like Dioskoros, a headman of Aphrodito in the 550s. He is best known as a land entrepreneur whose career stretched from the 520s to the 570s. He specializes in loans to and leases from absentee landowners and the gradual accumulation of their overleveraged assets.

### **Sophia, daughter of Ioannes**

The "well-born" wife of Dioskoros, she appears in the Aphrodito papyri in the second half of the sixth century, particularly as an intermediary in tax receipts and a lessor in lease agreements. She is likely to have been the keeper of the family papyrus archives after her husband's death.

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-10560-7 — Life in an Egyptian Village in Late Antiquity  
 Giovanni R. Ruffini  
 Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)



Map 1 Map of late Roman Egypt