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).
LIFE IN AN EGYPTIAN VILLAGE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Aphrodito Before and After the Islamic Conquest

GIOVANNI R. RUFFINI

Fairfield University, Connecticut
Contents

List of Figures ........................... vi
List of Map .............................. vii
Cast of Characters ....................... viii

1 ApΟroditο 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

Bibliography ............................ 214
General Index ........................... 227
Index Locorum ......................... 231
Figures

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

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

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

1.4 An aerial view of Egypt today, from Google Earth

1.5 An aerial view of Kom Ishqaw today, from Google Earth

1.6 An aerial view of Kom Ishqaw and its surrounding region today, from Google Earth

3.1 “Headman’s Door,” Kom Ishqaw (Egypt), Photo © 1995–2015 Clement Kuehn

3.2 “Rubble,” Kom Ishqaw (Egypt), Photo © 1995–2015 Clement Kuehn

7.1 “Church Door,” Kom Ishqaw (Egypt), Photo © 1995–2015 Clement Kuehn

7.2 “Crosses,” Kom Ishqaw (Egypt), Photo © 1995–2015 Clement Kuehn

11.1 Antinoopolis: an illustration of the ruins, published in 1809 in the Description de l’Égypte

11.2 An illustration of charioteers from an Antinoopolis papyrus, AD c. 500
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.

**Cast of Characters**
Map 1: Map of late Roman Egypt