

From the Nile to the Lys

The Late Antique Village of Aphrodite and its Papyri

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The Egyptian village of Aphrodite (current Kôm-Išqaw), about seventy kilometres south of the modern city of Asyut, does not naturally catch the attention of modern tourists or passionate Egyptologists: unlike innumerable localities in the country, it does not preserve any ancient sites or offer any stunning view of the Nile.¹ To quote the words of Harold I. Bell, one of the greatest papyrologists of all times, “till the year 1901 it was totally unknown to fame” (Bell 1944: 21). After that date, it became one of the most important sites for papyrologists and historians of Late Antiquity.

The village of Kôm-Išqaw and its discoveries

During the first half of the 20th century, the village happened to be in the spotlight due to three fortuitous discoveries. In 1901, 1905, and 1938-1940, three papyrological archives were discovered there, offering a unique insight in the history of Aphrodite before and after the Arabic conquest of Egypt in 642 AD. Until then, we knew little about the village: its first sound attestation in literary sources comes from the 1st century AD, when Pliny the Elder includes Aphrodite (*Veneris iterum*, “another town of Venus”) among other well-known Egyptian cities in a section of the *Naturalis Historia*.² In the papyrological documentation, only a few papyri from the Ptolemaic and Roman period mention the village and its surroundings (Marthot 2013: 23-30); none of them were found *in loco*.

¹ The modern village of Kôm-Išqaw was shot vividly in 1995 by Clement Kuehn. The pictures can be found online at: <https://www.byzantineegypt.org/>

² Book V, ch. 11, paragraphs 60-61. On the interpretation of this passage and, more generally, on (the lack of) historical and literary sources on Aphrodite from the pharaonic and graeco-roman periods, see Marthot 2013: 12-22.

The evocative name of the village points us to additional information about its history: the Greek name, Ἀφροδίτης κόμη, is a perfect example, related to small scale toponymy, of *interpretatio Graeca*, that is, the assimilation of the Greek pantheon to the Egyptian one. Usually, this revolves around a divinity's main features or their role: Isis, for example, was assimilated to Demeter, as both were mother goddesses (von Lieven 2016). In our case, the village's name was translated as 'Aphrodite' after the town's original patron deity, Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of love. In Coptic, the final stage of the Egyptian language in use from the 4th century AD, the village is known under the name of Jkow, which has been related to 'emporium', suggesting that Aphrodite was a market town (MacCoull 1988: 6). Nowadays, the Coptic name can still be recognized in the modern place name Iṣqaw.

Aphrodite stopped being a ghost city in 1901, when some villagers discovered a mass of papyri (almost two cubic metres of papyrus!) while building a tomb on the edge of the Muslim cemetery. Ancient papyrus was something the inhabitants of this tranquil Egyptian countryside village never encountered before. They did not know their value, and most of them did not know what to do with it. As James Quibell, the Egyptologist who was appointed in charge of the excavations soon after, wrote in his report:

Those who found it did not know that papyrus or, as they called it, *banana leaf*, had any value. Some had been found before by *sebakh* diggers³ and burnt. Another pile had been found and covered up again, apparently from the feeling that it was something uncanny. [...] The chief of the guards took some more and nearly everyone in the village had a sample (Quibell 1902: 85).

When Quibell arrived at Kôm-Iṣqaw and supervised formal excavations, it was unfortunately too late: antique dealers had already been informed of the discovery, and hastened to arrive to the village from the nearby cities of Tema, Luxor, and Ekhmim, in order to seize the papyri and sell them to the best bidder. After eighteen days of excavations, Quibell was able to find only three fragments of papyri and a number of potsherds written in Greek and Coptic, mainly orders for payment (Quibell 1902). Considering these circumstances, which do not allow for a higher degree of accuracy, the first discovery is thought to have consisted of more than 400 papyri. The documents belong to the Umayyad period (mostly from 709-710 AD) and are written in Greek, Coptic, and Arabic. They are mostly related to the pagarch Basilios, the administrator of Aphrodite at that time (Richter 2010). With no less than seventy-five letters from the Muslim governor, Qurra ibn Sharik, they constitute an

³ In Arabic language, the *sebakh* refers to the fertile earth. This usually can be found in mud bricks of ancient houses. *Sebakh* diggers constantly look for it as a valuable fertilizer, causing the looting of archaeological sites.

invaluable source for the study of the administration and politics of early Islamic Egypt.



Fig. 1. The excavations led by J. Quibell at Kôm-Išqaw in 1901
(from Quibell 1902, pl. I).

Only four years later, in 1905, a wall of a house collapsed, and the crack in the wall revealed, once again, papyrus scrolls. This time, the villagers were well aware of the implications of the discovery: when Gustave Lefebvre, the local antiquities inspector, arrived, he found that the scrolls had already been broken and mutilated; he could only take possession of what was left (Lefebvre 1907: ix). Nevertheless, he launched three seasons of excavations (1905-1907), hoping for better luck than Quibell's. As we can see from his words (Lefebvre 1907: x), he got it:

Jamais le hasard, dieu des fouilles, ne s'était montré si favorable. A un mètre au-dessous du sol apparurent les murs, en brique crue, hauts environs de deux mètres, d'une médiocre habitation romaine; la voûte, qui reliait ces murs et formait toit, avait été défoncée, mais les premières assises en étaient encore très visibles. La maison se composait de trois chambrettes, se faisant suite. Dans un angle de la dernière pièce, dont la superficie n'excédait pas 1m50, se dressait une jarre au col

brisé, haute de 0m90, remplie de papyrus; tout autour, épars dans le *sebakh*, quelques rouleaux et feuillets échappés du vase. L'inventaire fut vite faite: à la partie supérieure de la jarre, apparut, recroquevillé, un codex de onze feuillets: c'était le manuscrit de Ménandre. [...] Dans la jarre, il y avait, en outre, quelques cent cinquante rouleaux, la plupart grecs, papiers d'affaires, testaments, contrats, lettres, etc.

According to the report, the excavations led to a massive finding: Lefebvre found a codex of Menander's plays, among which there were lost scenes from comedies such as *The Arbitration*, *The Girl from Samia*, and *The Girl with her Hair Cut Short*. These are the only preserved copies of these plays: without this finding, we would not have any access to them. It is worth noting that the ancient book was used as a dismissed cork to close the jar and to protect its contents (around 150 papyrus scrolls), suggesting that the owner of the jar was more concerned about preserving the documents inside than the literary piece. It was not unusual to store a group of documents in a jar. In antiquity, people used different containers for this purpose, such as vases, wooden cases, or wooden bags (Gallazzi 2016). The archive of Papas, the pagarch of the city of Edfou (660/670 AD), was also found in a one-meter tall earthenware jar, which is currently stored at the Institut français d'archéologie orientale in Cairo (Marchand 2013). But Lefebvre seems to have shaped the account in his favour and romanticized it: a new examination of the private correspondence between Lefebvre and Gaston Maspero, the director of the Antiquities Service, shows that almost all the papyri were found by the villagers, and that Lefebvre's real efforts were spent in acquiring the lot from them (Fournet 2009: 117).

That said, the bulk of the second discovery brought to light around 650 papyri, delivering the largest papyrological ensemble of Late Antiquity (in particular, the papyri cover the period from 506 to 585 AD). The documentation revolves around Dioscorus, a landowner with grand poetic ambitions engaged in the village administration, and his family. For this reason, it is also commonly known as 'the archive of Dioscorus of Aphrodite'. In papyrology, the term 'archive' refers to "a deliberate collection of papers in antiquity by a single person, family, community (e.g., of priests) or around an office" (Vandorpe 2009: 218).

After these two major discoveries, Kôm-Išqaw was on the radar of looters. Clandestine digs around the end of the 1930s and the beginnings of 1940s delivered the third finding, which consists of the Greek archive of Phoibammon and his heirs, and the Coptic archive of Kollouthos. This bilingual dossier of 74 texts is slightly connected with Dioscorus' family, since Phoibammon was married to Dioscorus' cousin (Fournet 2016). However, unlike Dioscorus' archive, this documentation extends to the very first years of the Arabic period (524 – ca. 650 AD), and offers a glimpse of the new government and the gradual change of Christian Egypt into a Muslim state.

Thus, the village of Aphrodite offers unique conditions which are not comparable to any other location from Egypt: the three major multilingual papyrological archives offer an insight into the everyday life of an ancient village over two centuries (VI-VIII AD) and during the country's crucial transition from Byzantine to Islamic rule. In the following sections, I will focus on the archive of Dioscorus and, in particular, on the life of its owner.

The archive of Dioscorus of Aphrodite: “a multi-headed beast”

The consequences of the chaotic and illegal discoveries in Kôm-Išqaw still affect the study of this archive nowadays. Because of the bargaining of the papyri by the antique dealers, the archive is dispersed through the collections of museums and universities all over the world. The Greek letters belonging to the Dioscorus archive reflect the disordered character of the second discovery and provide a perfect example: while most of them are kept in the Egyptian Museum and at the brand new Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the rest is scattered between the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, the British Library in London, the Vatican Library in Rome, the Bibliothèque de Genève, the Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire in Strasbourg, the University Library of Hamburg, the Staatliche Museen of Berlin, the University Library of Oslo, the Historical and Ethnographic Museum of Tbilisi, in Georgia, and the University of Michigan in the United States – no less than twelve collections in nine different countries (Amory 2018: 6). In such circumstances, the papyrologist has to reconstruct the scattered archive far from the archaeological field, with the help of other methods. This kind of research is known as ‘museum archaeology’ (Vandorpe 1994): we look at the dates of acquisitions of the papyri collections and at the history of these collections, in order to find links between the papyri, the people who sold them, and the people who bought them. In general, if two pieces of the same papyrus are preserved in two different collections, there is a very high chance that those fragments were acquired from the same person around the same time. This person might have sold more pieces from the same archive to other buyers, which may now be in other collections. It is a matter of sensing and following the right leads.

The Ghent University Library happens to have a few Aphrodite papyri in its papyrus collection as well. The collection, which includes 135 papyri, was pieced together with three acquisitions, in 1908, 1922, and 1927 (Bogaert 1970: 107-109).⁴ The first lot, made of 48 papyri, is also known as the “fonds Cumont”, as it was purchased by Prof. Franz Cumont. The inventory numbers 44 and 45 are two Greek papyri which have been attributed to the Dioscorus

⁴ One can easily scroll through the whole collection online: <https://lib.ugent.be/catalog/access%3Azoomable?q=BHSL.PAP>

archive: P.Ghent inv. 44 is a majestic piece related to the community of hunters of Aphrodite that attempts to establish some rules for their association, while P.Ghent inv. 45 is a fragmentary contract written by Dioscorus himself.⁵ The “fonds Cumont” also contains two Coptic papyri, which have so far been overlooked. Their inventory number (P.Ghent inv. 47-48) is very close to the Greek Aphrodite papyri, suggesting that they could have been part of the same small ensemble. Together with Joanne Stolk, a former postdoctoral research fellow at Ghent University, we decided to investigate this possibility. The colour of these papyri, a very dark brown typical of the Aphrodite papyri, was another strong hint supporting our assumption. A close examination of these two papyri eventually confirmed our intuition: on the verso of the letter we could read “Send to Dioscorus from [... and] all his brothers” (l. 13). P.Ghent inv. 47 is a letter addressed to Dioscorus, witnessing the last years of his life (Amory & Stolk 2021).

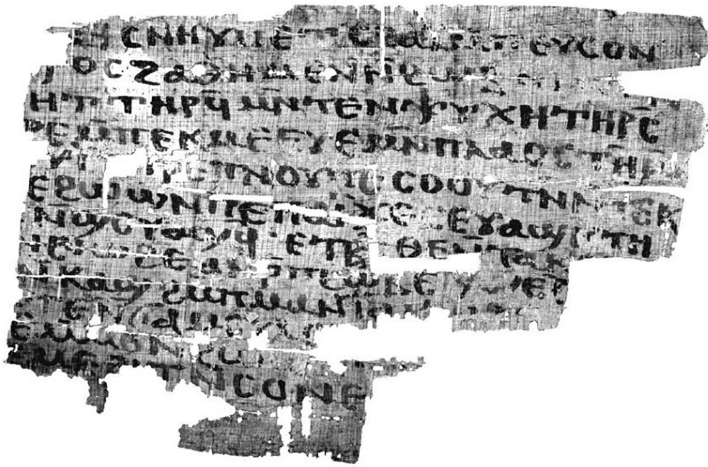


Fig. 2. P.Ghent inv. 47 recto, a letter to Dioscorus of Aphrodite.
(© Ghent University Library)

To gain even more from the ancient manuscripts, the antique dealers tore apart the papyri in multiple fragments, with the consequence that different fragments from the same papyrus have been acquired by different buyers, and are now kept in different collections, sometimes even in different continents. Thus, a fragment with the line beginnings of the Ghent letter has been recently found in the collection of the Coptic Museum in Cairo (Vanderheyden 2023).

⁵ A new edition of P.Ghent inv. 44 has been recently published by Raschel 2023. For the edition of P.Ghent inv. 45, see Hombert 1925: 649-652.

The edition of these fragments allows a virtual assembling that would not otherwise be possible.

This situation complicates even more the global picture. For this, and many more reasons, this archive is known to be “a multi-headed beast” (Ruffini 2018: 9). The archive of Dioscorus of Aphrodite is an intricate as well as incredible source. The variety of this archive has no equal in all the papyrological documentation: it contains texts written in Greek, the official language at that time, and Coptic, the vernacular language; documentary and literary pieces (Dioscorus’ own library and his poems); private documents related to his family (private letters, accounts, contracts), as well as official documents (receipts, petitions, imperial rescripts, legal proceedings, official letters). During their lives, Dioscorus and his father Apollos acted as headmen of the village. Thus, the archive includes the town records as well, and some documents attesting the relationship between the village, Antaiopolis (the main town of the nome Aphrodite depended on), and the imperial city of Constantinople. Through these papyri, we open a window on the public and private lives of a family and an entire Egyptian village in the 6th century AD. As has been put wittily, “if the still scanty band of papyrologists should ever compile a calendar of their own, it would be necessary to assign a red letter day to the memory of Dioscorus” (Bell & Crum 1925: 177).

The worst poet of Antiquity?

Not a red letter, however, but a scarlet one of public shaming has been more commonly assigned to Dioscorus of Aphrodite. Among his papers, there are about 50 poems composed by Dioscorus himself. The poems, mostly *epithalamia* and *encomia*, are written in dactylic hexameters or iambic trimeters and are addressed to high ranking officials, such as the Duke of Thebaid. The quality of his verses has been brutally judged by eminent scholars: Alan Cameron asserted that they were “the clearest proof that the flame had already gone out” (1965: 509), and Harold I. Bell and Walter Crum declared that the “verses indubitably merit damnation”, and deplored “the morass of absurdity into which the great river of Greek poetry emptied itself” (1925: 177). H. J. L. Milne inevitably sentenced: “At no moment, has he any real control of thought, diction, grammar, metre, or meaning” (1927: 68). Thus, Dioscorus has been commonly labelled as “the worst poet of Antiquity”.

Indeed, a quick look at his compositions would seem to give credence to these harsh opinions. The imperial *chairetismos*, presumably addressed to Justin II, provides a clear example of Dioscorus’ excessively obscure and extravagantly pretentious style, with complex epithets referring to the numismatic portrait of the emperor:

P.Cair.Masp. I 67097 verso (F) part 2, ll. 18-27:

Χαῖρε, ὀλοκοττινοπερίπατε ἀγγελοπρόσωπε,
 χαῖρε, κ(ύρι)ε χρυσαργυροπιναροσμαραγδο/μαργαρι/τοβελτίων,
 χαῖρε, δέσπ(οτα) χρυσολιθοκαχατωνύχιε, πρα[σ]ινοπάντιμε
 λαμπρόβ[ιε,

(gap of 1 or 2 lines)

χαῖρε, δέσπ(οτα) ... θαλα]σσιοπλοιοχρυσ[ο]γόμου,
 χαῖρε, κ(ύρι)ε παναξιοκτηνοπτηναστροφωστηροκοσμοποιίας,
 χαίρων χορείης εἰς μυριάμορον χρόνον.

Hail, angelic face on the circulating *nomisma*,
 hail, lord surpassing gold, silver, mother-of-pearl, emerald, and pearl,
 hail, master of onyx, chrysolith, and agate, all-honoured of the Greens,
 bright of life,
 hail, master of the golden cargo of seagoing ships,
 hail, most worthy possessor of a star in the ascendant that illuminates
 the whole created universe,
 in joy may you dance to a time of ten thousand jars of wine.⁶

In recent years, however, Dioscorus' poetry has been reconsidered in light of its time (Fournet 1999), rather than against the standards of 'good Greek' to which it has usually, and unfairly, been compared. Dioscorus was an average man of letters, living at a time when differences of length in Greek vowels were scarcely discernible – something that inevitably affected his sense of metric. His poems, moreover, do not aspire to literary status or universal acclaim, but have a utilitarian function, as they praise authorities who might offer some help to Dioscorus. Finally, we should bear in mind that the poems that were found in the jar were preliminary versions of the final compositions which eventually reached the intended addressees. As such, they should be appreciated even more: they provide a unique witness of a(n aspirant) poet at work and his ongoing creative process. Dioscorus' autographs show various degrees of overwriting: he may add a verse between two lines, or change a few words to correct himself or to avoid repetitions, or elevate his writing with less common expressions (Fournet 2015: 233-240). His style is clearly influenced by the authors he studied during his education.

Together with his poems, the jar preserved Dioscorus' private library. This is exceptional: usually, we have access to the literary production of an ancient individual, a selection of which might have been preserved on papyri or through manuscripts, but not to their own library. In addition to the lost comedies of Menander that sealed up the jar, other literary pieces were found inside:

⁶ Text and translation by MacCoull 1981: 43.

among these, a codex of Homer's *Iliad*, fully covered with commentary (*scholια minora*); a copy of ancient comedies, such as Eupolis' *Demes*; a folio containing a *Life of Isocrates* with a few notes on rhetorical aspects; and a poem on the Pan-Hellenic games (*Palatine Anthology*, IX, 357). These authors constituted the bulk of the rhetorical education of an ancient individual: from the imperial period, Homer and Menander became models of rhetoric and their works were used as handbooks by soon-to-be lawyers. In particular, the arbitration scene from Menander's *Epitrepontes* in the codex allegedly found by Lefebvre on top of the jar, was carefully read and examined by notaries, especially in the late antique period with the increase of private arbitrations and dispute settlements (Van Minnen 1992). These authors' influence on Dioscorus' writing is evident, as he constantly quotes or alludes to them. At times he mentions them explicitly: in *P.Aphrod.* IV 4, an encomium for Romanos, a high official in Constantinople, Dioscorus compares the eloquence of the addressee to Menander and Isocrates (l. 7-9: "You are Menander, wise man of old, in your intelligence! Isocrates speaking with manly power!"). Interestingly, the findings in the jar do not include a single fragment either of the most famous Egyptian author of that time, Nonnos of Panopolis, or of Christian texts, in spite of the fact that the Christianisation of Egypt is the most important cultural phenomenon of the country's late antique history. Yet, Dioscorus' verses and prose include exact quotations of Nonnos and the Bible (Dijkstra 2003), showing that Dioscorus' education and interests included biblical learning and contemporary authors. What happened, then, to these texts? Why were they not preserved along with the rest of the documentation? As the jar was conceived as a storage space for family documents, and was probably assembled after Dioscorus' death, it is possible that his successors kept for themselves, outside of the jar, the texts they were using more often. Another possibility is that Dioscorus donated all the Christian texts to a monastic community living nearby Aphrodite, perhaps to the monastery of Apa Apollon.

As we just saw, the contents of the jar may not witness in full the life and education of their owner. However, they are still an open window into the life and culture of a late antique Egyptian family. Next to the documentary and literary pieces, a few practical works were found, such as two metrological tables with correspondences between various measures, a codex with the conjugation of the contract verbs $\pi\omicron\iota\tilde{\omega}$, $\beta\omicron\tilde{\omega}$ and $\chi\rho\upsilon\sigma\tilde{\omega}$, and a Greek-Coptic glossary with sections on animals, units of land, irrigation, and occupations. These pieces, which complement the literary counterpart, seem to be intended for educational purposes. A couple of ethopoeiai by the hand of Dioscorus – a typical rhetorical exercise which requires the student to create a speech according to the personality of a given character (e.g., "What words Achilles would say when dying on account of Polyxena", or "What words Achilles would say when calling on Thetis to come in arms") – suggest that Dioscorus might also have acted as a *grammatikos*-schoolmaster (Fournet 2015).

Dioscorus of Aphrodite beyond his poems

Dioscorus was much more than an overambitious man of letters from a middle-size village in Upper Egypt. Born in 520, he descended from a Coptic family, as suggested by his great-grandfather's Egyptian name Psimanobet, literally 'the son of the gooseherd'. He was the son of Apollos, who towards the end of his life funded a monastery on a deserted land about eight kilometers from Aphrodite, also known as 'the monastery of Apa Apollos'. As shown by his papers, Dioscorus received an advanced education and probably a legal training, perhaps in a major city, like Antinoopolis or Alexandria. Proficiently bilingual, he could communicate fluently in both Coptic and Greek. He was married to a certain Sophia, with whom he had two sons, Petros and Victor, and a daughter, Theodosia. Little is known about the family, but a contract drafted in Antinoopolis suggests that Petros did an apprenticeship there around 567-568 to learn calculus. Dioscorus' family owned land in the surroundings of Aphrodite and in the nearby village of Phthla. Next to this, they were also involved in the administration of the village. Like his father, Dioscorus was Aphrodite's headman (*protokometes*). His main duty in this role was the collection and good management of taxes – a task that turned out to be extremely challenging.

Aphrodite benefitted from the incredible privilege of *autopragia*, meaning that the community could pay their taxes directly to the provincial Treasurer and bypass any other intermediary. Needless to say, this privilege was quite disliked by the local officials, who would have preferred to supervise, and possibly take advantage of, the tax collection of Aphrodite. In several occasions the regional pagarchs attempted to deprive Aphrodite of this unique right, often by threatening them with raids. A vivid, albeit fragmentary, account of the pagarch Julianus' wrongdoing is reported in the petition *P.Cair. Masp.* III 67283:

(We report to our most august mistress that his brilliance Julianus (?) wishes), against] custom, to drag us into the pagarchy of the (city) of the Antaiopolites, of which he has gained control [... although we are] under the authority of the *dux* and our mistress' agents. And we are at a loss to imagine the grounds [(of this attack on our independence?) ... [...] (But this Julianus has not shrunk?)] from plundering our property more than the places ravaged by barbarians, on the pretext [(of tax-arrears) ... and,] as already said, they have plundered in an indescribably evil manner. Indeed even [... so that we are not able] to pay our [customary] contributions to the public dues, or to live a modest life in possession of our animals and [... for] in the [fields?] they have left us [nothing] and in the village absolutely none of the furnishings of a decent life for us. [...] the foul killings that have occurred as part

of this plague, which has struck and brought shrieking, [... (and all the crimes)] which surrounded us then, for which a papyrus has no room unless it narrates with no break [...].⁷

This petition is considered exceptional for many reasons: first of all, it is addressed to the most powerful and controversial woman from late antiquity, the Empress Theodora. As the inhabitants of Aphrodite sought protection against Julianus' abuses, they aimed for the highest person they could reach to ensure their right. Second, it preserves the original signatures of all the petitioners: at the end of the complaint, 53 people from the village's elite penned their name. It was a men's world: not a single woman is named in the petition. There are representative of the main village churches, leading landowners, notaries, heads of the trade-guilds, village headmen, and financial officials. A closer analysis of the text shows that, even if the petitioners are 53, the hands are only 39, which means that almost one fourth of the upper classes' representatives had to rely on a *hypographeus*, someone who had to write on their behalf because they could not. The notary Pilatos, for example, signed for himself, but also for Promauos and Makarios (probably heads of a trade-guild), as well as for the landowner Iosephis, because they "do not know letters" (l. 20: ἔγραψα ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν γράμματα μὴ εἰδ[ότων]). Thus, this document is an incredible snapshot of the range of literacy among various social classes, and allows to challenge a common belief according to which a higher degree of literacy is intrinsically correlated to the social position of a person.

Generally, a petition is personally handed to the official it is addressed to. It is therefore quite unusual to find a final draft, subscriptions included, in a personal archive rather than an official one. This can only mean one thing: the petition was never submitted to the authority. We do not know the reason why this happened; perhaps the community of Aphrodite found other ways to protect their rights, or the pagarch Julianus was transferred to another region. What we do know is that the village encountered the exact same problem with other pagarchs who succeeded Julianus. In particular, the frictions between the pagarchs and Aphrodite were so frequent and rough that Dioscorus and his fellow colleagues were urged to sail towards Constantinople on two occasions, in 548 and in 551, in order to appeal for their own cause at the core of the Imperial power. One of Dioscorus' poems, *P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 5, may include a reference to one of these epic intercontinental journeys: "I have suffered enough pain on the impetuous waves of the sea because of Theodoros of Pentapolis" (l. 19-20: ἄρκια πῆματ' ἔπασχον ἐνὶ ῥροθίσισι θαλάσσης, | Πενταπολίτου Θεοδώρου οὐνεκα βίης).

The main aim of these embassies was to obtain an official document from the imperial Court, in order to show local officials, upon return to Aphrodite,

⁷ Translation by Rowlandson 1998: 45-46.

an official proof of support. Once again, it is difficult to say if these embassies were successful in the resolution of conflicts. A few petitions from the 560's attest to the harsh conflict between the newly appointed pagarch Menas and, to use Dioscorus' own words in *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67002, "the inhabitants of the all-miserable village of Aphrodite". In the same petition, addressed to the Duke of Thebais, Dioscorus describes the abuses of Menas in dramatic tones, stating that the pagarch, together with a gang of brigands and soldiers, had made the village his prey, worse than any group of barbarians, burning down houses and violating nuns, blocking the irrigation canal to the fields, and robbing hundreds of golden coins. The line between what really happened and its vivid narration is blurred: after all, we can only count on Dioscorus' narrative, which has most likely been twisted by the urgency of persuading the Duke to come to his aid.

However, a group of documents dating from 565 to 570/573 disclose that Dioscorus spent these years in the provincial capital of Antinoopolis. A poem to the *praeses* Victor witnesses the moment when he was probably new in the city and looking for a job (*P. Aphrod. Lit.* IV 12, l. 32: στήσον τὸν οἰκέτην νομικὸν τῇ πόλει, "grant your servant a position as a notary in the city"). There, Dioscorus drafted different kinds of deeds: petitions, but also sales, marriage contracts, contracts of divorce, and agreements, confirming that he found a position in a notarial bureau. It is difficult not to correlate Dioscorus' need to start a new life in a quite distant city, about 140 kilometres north from Aphrodite, far from his family and his business, to his endless conflict with Menas: perhaps, in the end, Dioscorus was banned from his hometown.

The last document mentioning Dioscorus, in which he appears as the manager and superintendent of his father's monastery, dates from 573. In late antique Egypt, it was custom to spend the last years of one's life retired in a monastery, and this is likely what Dioscorus did. In the Coptic letter from the Ghent University Library that I mentioned above, a certain Papa Diane and his monastic brothers greet Dioscorus, their 'venerable brother', and the whole community of the monastery of Apa Apollos. The letter dates from this last period, and therefore brings an additional piece of information to the last years of Dioscorus archive. Yet, the archive did not end with him: a small number of texts belong to the period following his death. They concern the fiscal administration of the lands owned by Dioscorus' family, which was managed by his wife Sophia (Fournet 2008). To give more credit to the role of Sophia, we could consider renaming Dioscorus' archive 'the archive of Dioscorus and Sophia'.

Conclusions

The fortuitous discoveries in the village of Kôm-Išqaw marked the entry of Aphrodite and its inhabitants in the history of papyrology. The three archives found there are an exceptional record of the history of an Egyptian village over two centuries on the cusp of the Arabic conquest of the country. However, due to the circumstances of these findings, the documentation was scattered through the museums and universities' collections all around the world. The meticulous task of papyrologists is to put together the original archives, albeit virtually, by studying the papyri as well as the history of their acquisitions for these collections. As already said, a few years ago, using the so-called method of 'museum archaeology', I was able to find a new Coptic piece from the archive of Dioscorus in the collection of the Ghent University Library. This little discovery adds new information to the last years of the Dioscorus archive, and provides a more complete picture of a quite complicated puzzle. As the above outline of the archive of Dioscorus, the largest papyrological dossier from Late Antiquity, has showed, literary and documentary papyri can open windows into the lives and sorrows of the inhabitants of Aphrodite, and, in this particular case, are witnesses to the culture of a member of the village elite in a Hellenistic multilingual province of the Empire: the formidable Dioscorus of Aphrodite.

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