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ΠΑΜΕΡΙΤ ΕΦΥΘΟΠ ΝΑΙ

## THE APHRODITO MURDER MYSTERY

P. Mich. XIII 660–661 (ed. P. J. Sijpesteijn, Zutphen 1977) contain parts of the record of proceedings of a sensational sixth-century trial, involving bribery and possibly the sale of honors, violent murder by hired killers, accusation and attempted whitewashing of local magnates, religious controversy, and the all-important village finances as they affected the Byzantine military presence in the Thebaid. It is also the last recorded law case of Flavius Apollos,<sup>1</sup> former *protocometes*, monk and father of the poet Dioscorus (so identifying the “Fl. ... Apollos ex civ(itate) Afrod(ites)” of 661.11). Since Apollos died in the year A.D. 546/7, we may identify the two dates in the documents, Mesore of the end of the seventh indiction (660.9–10) and Phaophi 8 of the previous sixth indiction (660.15–16), as respectively August of A.D. 544 and 5.X.542.<sup>2</sup> Although already a monk, Apollos testified for the prosecution against a powerful man called Sarapammon, not failing to bring up for tactical reasons the most important event of his, Apollos’, own life, a trip to the imperial court at Constantinople.

These papyrus texts, though fragmentary (661 is missing much of its left-hand side, which makes the continuity difficult to follow), deserve further attention. Besides the inherent interest of who was behind the murder mystery, they reveal the complex tensions in the structure of Byzantine Egyptian village life.

The personalities of the people in the case come vividly alive as their manner of speaking is taken down in the texts. First we have one of the accused, Flavius Menas the soldier (*miles*),<sup>3</sup> who is busily denying receiving any money (apparently bribe money); instead he outlines a strange vicious circle of payments (for “laundering” the money, one would infer): Sarapammon has given money to the *boethos*, who has given it to “his” (*αὐτοῦ*) *meizoteros*, who has in turn paid it back to Sarapammon (660.1–3). Next, Sarapammon, *μεγαλοπρεπέστατος* and *ἐνδοξότατος* (and

<sup>1</sup> For his career see J. G. Keenan, *Aurelius Apollos and the Aphrodite village elite*, XVII Congr. intl. papirolog. III, Naples, 1984, pp. 957–963. Sijpesteijn’s statement (p. 27) that no one in these texts can be identified is incorrect.

<sup>2</sup> The gap in time may actually be closer (which would make more sense), as Bagnall and Worp have called attention to the anomalous wording (*Chronological Systems of Byzantine Egypt*, Zutphen, 1978, p. 62 n. 65). On *epinemesis*, used in Maria’s testimony, see CSBE, p. 5 n. 21. The years involved ought to be 542 and 543.

<sup>3</sup> For soldiers as Flavii see J. G. Keenan, ZPE 11 (1973), pp. 61–63.

*inlustris*),<sup>4</sup> is called on to make a statement. What was this mysterious money for? Sarapammon's reply is bluff and colorful. "I found out," he says, "that some Aphroditans φρατριάζουσι" (660.4) and wished to make the village ... (?), so that they might again φόνους παρακολουθήσωσ[ιν], and therefore those who had made the φρατρία had required (ἀπητήθησαν) a pound of gold (= 72 solidi) εἰς ἀρχοντικόν." (660.5) This unusual phraseology should be looked at closely.

Sijpesteijn (p. 35) translates: "I did discover that some persons from the village of Aphrodite had made a conspiracy and wanted to make the village desolate(?) so that they again could attend minutely to murders and for that reason the conspirators have been asked for one pound of gold for the government." He interprets this money payment as being a kind of *wergeld*, a fine for murder (p. 29). I think a different interpretation of several points is necessary. First of all, φρατριάζειν and φρατρία are very unusual words in the sixth century (for that matter they are hapaxes in the papyri). Where this noun and verb are used in late antiquity is in Canon 18 of the Council of Chalcedon (Schwartz, ACO II.1, Berlin, 1933, p. 357, ll. 25-29). This canon decrees the punishment of loss of their religious status for clerics or monks who make a συνωμοσία (*coniuratio*) or φρατρία, or concoct trumped-up fakeries, fabricated charges (κατασκευάζειν) against bishops or their fellow clerics, especially if they do this in a church. The (fifth-century) cultural context of the provision is not hard to discern.<sup>5</sup> What was at stake was the outcome of the empire-wide attempt, to be renewed under Justinian, to ensure that monasteries operated obediently under the jurisdiction of their local bishops. An obvious tactic in opposing an uncongenial ordinary or diocesan would be to discredit him in order to put up a friendly candidate who would let one's own religious foundation alone. Clearly by the 540s in Egypt, when, after the death there in 538 of Severus of Antioch, local Monophysite opposition to serving under Chalcedonian hierarchs was growing to the stage of giving birth to a separate, parallel clergy structure,<sup>6</sup> this type of situation was at boiling point. Might we take it that the illustrious Sarapammon was a well-read Chalcedonian magnate who had detected a Monophysite plan? What sort of plan? Look at the rest of the sentence.

Next: the fragmentary word at the beginning of 660.5 is transcribed by the

<sup>4</sup> No one named Sarapammon is listed in V. Girgis, *Prosopografia e Aphroditopolis*, Berlin, 1938. A Sarapammon is the father of Julius in P. Cair. Masp. III 67353<sup>r</sup> (Coptic, from over twenty years later): see L. S. B. MacCoul, BSAC 25 (1983), p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> See L. Ueding, *Die Kanones von Chalcedon in ihrer Bedeutung für Mönchtum und Klerus*, in Grillmeier/Bacht, *Das Konzil von Chalcedon II*, Würzburg, 1953, pp. 569-676, esp. here 611-612.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. D. Bundy, *Muséon* 91 (1978), pp. 45-86; J. Maspero, *Histoire des patriarches d'Alexandrie*, Paris, 1923, pp. 182-190. Jacob Baradaeus, ordained by 542/3, was to travel through Egypt first in the mid-540s, revitalising twelve sees in the Thebaid alone: while Theodosius, Monophysite Patriarch of Alexandria, languished in Constantinople from 536 till his death there in 566. Theodora, Aphrodite's patroness, was alive till 548; Jacob's second journey was to be in 577.

editor as [...]ημοιρη, construed as agreeing with τὴν κόμην. I should prefer to restore [πλ]ημόρη(ν) “the Nile flood”, a Copticised spelling of πλῆμ(μ)υραν. (The word is used by Dioscorus of Aphrodito in his petition P. Cair. Masp. I 67002 II 21.) Translation: “... (and) wished to celebrate (or: to bring about) the Nile flood as far as the village is concerned.” Additional papyrological sources are helpful here. It is clear from the cultural context of SPP XV 250ab,<sup>7</sup> a Monophysite “farced” Trishagion with prayers to the abbot St. Shenoute, that the Monophysites successfully appropriated the rites of the annual Nile flood from the Chalcedonians. This was the strongest move they could make to ensure popular support, and it worked: the holy men who could be seen to be bringing about optimal flood levels and the consequent good harvests would stand unshakably high in the hearts of Egypt’s farmers.

Next comes the phrase (πάλιν) φόνους παρακολουθήσωσιν. Although murder is to figure prominently in this case, φόνος can be figurative, connoting “pollution” or “ruin”, as well as denoting actual physical killing; while παρακολουθέω is found in the sense of “following, being consequential upon” as well as of “paying attention”. “Pollution” is a favorite label to apply to the opposite religious party, and in the days of full-blown anti-Monophysite and anti-Chalcedonian polemics is so used. Translate here “so that they might again be disciples of defilement”, i.e. Monophysitism. Here the verb form from ἀπαιτέω is middle, “required for themselves” or “collected”.

Further, in fact ἀρχοντικόν can have a technical meaning here, namely “rank” or “order of nobility” (as it does in later Greek), denoting in sixth-century Aphrodito the κόμιτες, συντελεσταί, κήτορες: the landowning and titled *possessores*. Here the prepositional phrase without an article can mean something like “in keeping with what was required for belonging to the order of nobility”.<sup>8</sup> The whole of Sarapammon’s testimony in 660.4–5 can be translated as follows: “I learnt that certain people from the village of Aphrodito had formed a ‘brotherhood’ and wanted to put on the rites of the Nile flood with respect to the village, thus once again following (the party of) defilement, and to this end those who had formed the ‘brotherhood’ had gotten together a pound of gold in keeping with noble rank.” We are dealing with anti-Chalcedonian *dynatoi* taking into their own hands ritual matters of life-and-death importance for the whole community.

<sup>7</sup> See D. Bonneau, *La crue du Nil*, Paris, 1964, pp. 435–437. Bonneau’s translation and interpretation can be corrected at many points: no one has noticed the nature of this text as being a Trishagion “farced” with the Monophysite addition “Who was crucified for us”, besides being a troparion form with an indicated refrain. See now L.S.B. MacCoull, *SPP XV, 250 ab, a Monophysite Trishagion for the Nile Flood*, JTS 40 (1989), pp. 129–135. P. Lit. Lond. 239 is less openly Monophysite; P. Turner 10 (6th c., from Antinoe) is difficult to pin down doctrinally.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. G. Keenan on a possible property or wealth requirement, “Aurelius Apollon”, (above n. 1), p. 960 with n. 11.

The life and death are literal, and not only in terms of the harvest: two people have been murdered, one a priest; and the harvest itself is viewed in the context of the *συνωνή* (661.19), the state-arranged buying-up of grain for maintenance of the Byzantine military garrison (cf. P. Freer 3 for Aphrodito), whose presence was coming to be equated with the forcible imposition of Chalcedonianism. Menas the soldier's denial of involvement in the murders is classic: "I didn't do it, and anyway I was somewhere else at the time, and anyway he died of natural causes, and anyway I don't know anything about it." (660.7-8). The two accusers in the murders then testify: the brother of the victim Victor the priest (a non-Chalcedonian sympathizing priest?), beaten to death by Menas; and Maria, the wife of the victim Heraclius, killed with weapons (*ξίφεσι*) by *kephalaïotai* (heads of village guilds) suborned by Menas and Sarapammon. (Sijpesteijn does not notice the Biblical turn of phrase used by Maria in her pathetic story, in 660.18: "and I do not know where they have laid them (her husband's bones)", an echo of John 20:2b, ... *καὶ οὐκ οἶδαμεν ποῦ ἔθηκαν αὐτόν*.) In these first-person tales of violence do we see the actual working of the violent conduct of Chalcedonians towards non-Chalcedonians so dear to the historiography of Monophysite writers? (It has always been hard to find documentary evidence of the much-touted persecutions in the papyri.) This, however, remains speculation.

The testimony of murder and "dirty money" continues in P. Mich. XIII 661. Someone, apparently Sarapammon, declares that Heraclius was killed by popular will as being a *συκοφαντῶν* (661.7), an informer or slanderer. This notion, this term, will reappear in the petitions written by Apollos' son Dioscorus in the mid-560s, for example in P. Cair. Masp. I 67003.23, where a certain Ezekiel the barber is attacked for having tried to seize land that had been donated to Apollos' monastery of Pharoou; and in P. Cair. Masp. I 67097' D 39, the *apokeryxis* draft, in which the disinherited daughter is labelled as a *συκοφαντρία*. In P. Cair. Masp. I 67089' B 3, praise of a duke (probably a fragment of a petition), *ὁ συκοφάντης* is the enemy of the Thebaid's peace and order, along with those who use weapons (*σιδηρῶν*) against their *ὁμόφυλοι*. This is exactly what we have seen happening in the 540s, according to the Michigan texts. *Sykophantes* served as another handy label for your enemy. Now charges of "misrepresenting reality", being a *sykophantes* in that sense, could be levelled against adherents of the opposing religious party as well as against pagans (e.g. by Athanasius: see Lampe, s.v.). Is Sarapammon saying that the world is well rid of Heraclius and his like because they are Monophysites, people who might stand in the way of the all-important process of getting the taxes to Constantinople?

Accusations go in both directions: someone, presumed to be Sarapammon again, alleged to have paid money also to one Letoios (called *σοφώτατος*, presumably a lawyer), admits that the latter thought him, the speaker, to have perpetrated something *παράλογον* (661.10). Hence Letoios apparently had to be kept quiet with money. Then we hear from *οἱ παρόντες*, which must mean "the parties present",

not, as with Sijpesteijn, "the *adsestores*". Apollos speaks up, together with a colleague of his, Flavius Psoios (from Hermopolis?), now saying that the sum that has changed hands (or at least been demanded) is as high as four pounds of gold. Though parts of his statement are missing (we never find out, for example, who is the Theodore various people are *excusantes*), he does mention the possibility of going to Constantinople to approach the emperor (661.13): something he had himself recently done, in 541. Would confronting Justinian with a case of local religious violence have influenced policy at the top? Apollos' appearance in this text is tantalisingly brief. We must remember that he was already a monk of his own monastic house. He too would have its interests at heart, to defend it against *sykophantai* of whatever kind.

Before the papyrus breaks off we encounter the *συλλογή* or *coemptio* of grain on behalf of the state, in a context still of the mysterious money payments. The context is too fragmentary here to determine the exact relationship. Introducing the matter is the party Colluthus (661.18), presumably the Flavius Colluthus of line 13. One would like to propose an identification with the Colluthus son of Christopher who is known from P. Vatic. Copti Doresse 1 and 5 (of A.D. 535/6 and a little later);<sup>9</sup> cf. also P. Mich. XIII 666.3. In this whole imbroglio of bribery and violent death, always in the background is preoccupation with the public revenue, here as it supports the very Byzantine soldiers like Menas the *καλοσιώμενος* who are involved in the violence.

The text as it stands ends abruptly; there is no exciting revelation of "who did it". Yet we are clearly left with the impression that Sarapammon and Menas have incriminated themselves by their own testimony. The rough, direct narratives of Victor's brother and of Maria, spoken out in open court, tell their own story, as do the tellingly worded disclaimers of the powerful. A clearer understanding of the meanings of words and terms in these proceedings of the Aphrodito murder mystery can reveal aspects of how people in village and administrative life actually behaved to one another during the turbulent years in Byzantine Egyptian history when the confessional lines were being drawn that were to determine for centuries to come the character and the fortunes of Coptic society.

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<sup>9</sup> See L. P a p i n i, BSAC 25 (1983), pp. 83-89, and L. S. B. M a c C o u l l, *ibid.*, pp. 91-94. Full publication of the Vatican Aphrodito Coptic papyri is eagerly awaited.