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Dioskoros of Aphrodito

JEAN-LUC FOURNET

Dioskoros was born around 525 CE and died between 573 and 585. He would have never been brought out of oblivion without the discovery of his archive in 1905 in the village of Kûm Ishqâw (ancient APHRODITO or Aphrodite). This archive contained ca. 650 papyri of all kinds: classic literary works by HOMER, ARISTOPHANES, and MENANDER, documentary texts written in Coptic and above all in Greek, and occasional poems in Greek contemporary with the latter. The key figure in this collection was a certain Dioskoros, the owner of the books, the writer of part of the documents, and the author of the poems. So Dioskoros became a well-known figure in the field of papyrology; while the Menander codex marked the rediscovery of this famous Greek author forgotten by the manuscript tradition, the hundreds of documents (tax registers and receipts, contracts, letters, petitions, etc.) form the largest and richest archive from the Byzantine period and help to reconstruct Dioskoros' career and background. They portray a man descended from a Coptic family, deeply Hellenized, who conducted his affairs as a landowner, was in charge of his village as a *prôtokômêtês* (litt. "first of the village"), and practiced as a lawyer for a few years in the capital of his province, ANTINOOPOLIS. They cover all aspects of social, administrative, economic, cultural, and religious history of Egypt one century before the Muslim conquest.

As to his poetic oeuvre, it consists of more than fifty compositions, written in hexameters, sometimes in trimeters, and only surviving in the form of drafts in Dioskoros' handwriting (which allows us to follow the poet at work). Except for some poems on mythological subjects, there are occasional eulogies (*enkômia*) addressed to prominent individuals (notably governors) and celebrating their taking up of office, their marriage (*epithalamia*), or

birthday. Since their discovery, they have been subject to mockery and, though evidencing the vogue of poetry in late Roman Egypt, particularly in the Thebaid, Dioskoros has been considered one of the worst poets of Antiquity. Nevertheless, if one goes beyond the prejudices coming from an obsolete conception of Late Antiquity and avoids focusing on the actual clumsiness of this amateur poet, one can see in the poems "literary documents" embodying a perfect example of rural elite culture in a Hellenized province of the Late Roman Empire. The variety of his archive provides us with the rare opportunity of grasping, in a quasi-archaeological way, the processes of acquiring knowledge, producing literature, and writing documents: Dioskoros' library (literary works, *scholia* to those, schoolbooks) sheds light on the processes of learning and reading; the drafts of his poems show how this acquired culture was employed for the production of new material; the documents testify to the use of literary culture for practical ends.

The most striking feature of this ensemble may be the interaction of literature and documentary texts, a phenomenon characteristic of Late Antiquity: for instance, most of Dioskoros' poems were composed to accompany the petitions in prose he delivered to the authorities – and Dioskoros, who suffered reversals of fortune, delivered many petitions demanding justice. He is the best representative of petitions in verse, which were probably more widely practiced than one might think according to the extant documentation. An example: "O greatest ruler of the city, general assistance against distress, listen to an inhabitant of the land of the Paphian (=Aphrodite) in his suffering. Receive the sad tears of pain from my family. I have brought from home many documents testifying that Gabriel has committed crimes (...): he himself stole and appropriated the fruit from our threshing floors (...)." This poem, along with the others, shows how poetry came to serve the writing of documents and became itself a sort of document. They reflect the cultural choices of

contemporary society, which perpetuated archaic and artificial modes of expression (Homeric poetry) in the service of present actions. As a result, they contain, among other things, a surprising mixture of pagan motifs (imposed by the use of Homeric verse) and Christian references (corresponding to the contemporary way of thinking), as do the other arts of the same period.

In a complementary way, Dioskoros' documents, especially the petitions, are deeply influenced by literature: they have an introductory part that bears the strong stamp of laudatory rhetoric and are peppered with poetical words and with quotations or paraphrases from works by famous poets (particularly Homer).

As a paradigm of the culture of his time, our "worst poet of Antiquity" might be one of the most vivid figures of Late Antique Hellenism.

SEE ALSO: Archives; Coptic; Papyrology; Papyrus, Greco-Roman period.

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