THE CULT OF APHRODITE PANDAMOS AND PONTIA ON COS

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One reason why the work of Henk Versnel has long been to me a model and a source of delight is the peculiar success with which he has always combined study of the particular and of the general. He speaks of concrete, specific phenomena and speaks of them in all their specificity, but never of them alone; the theoretical issues in relation to which the specifics matter are never lost from his view, and indeed are always handled with a subtlety and nuance that are themselves an example. As a tribute to Henk Versnel I would ideally wish to offer a study that in the same way blends the particular with what is of broad theoretical interest. Half of my ideal I have achieved: I am undoubtedly about to speak of a specific phenomenon, a particular cult. The second half may prove harder to realise, but I can at least claim that the methodological issues that this particular cult raises are typical and important, whatever my success in handling them.

The cult of Aphrodite Pandamos and Pontia on Cos is known from two long inscriptions, both belonging to a class of which there are many other examples from Cos; they are documents authorised by the assembly which lay down the terms on which a priesthood is to be sold. One of these inscriptions, first published in 1993, apparently dates from shortly after 198 BC, since it contains a reference to damage caused by an earthquake which is doubtless the one of that year;\(^2\) the second, which is on the point of publication,\(^3\) should

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1 For comments from which I have learnt much I am very grateful to audiences in Uppsala, Victoria B.C. and London as well as in Leiden, and to participants in a graduate seminar in Oxford. I have also received excellent counsel from my Oxford colleagues John Day (Lady Margaret Hall) and Jane Lightfoot (All Souls College).

2 Segre 1993, ED 178 (A); for the date see Habicht 1996, 88 and the prosopographic arguments of Höghammar 1997, 132 n. 35 and Dillon 1999, 77. For an English translation see the appendix to this article; Parker/Obbink 2000 contains a translation of the Herzog text.

3 Parker/Obbink 2000, where a discussion of the genre of priesthood sale text
probably be dated on the basis of letter forms to the late second c. B.C. The two will be cited in what follows by the name of their discoverers, as the Segre and the Herzog text. The reason for which we have two texts regulating the sale of the priesthood in the same cult is that (like a modern job description) the terms and conditions were re-considered, and often re-published, each time that a priesthood was offered for sale; it is to this practice of re-publication when a vacancy arose that we owe the great abundance of surviving texts of this type.

The inscriptions contain several references to two different cult epithets, Pandamos and Pontia, but it is clear from the second text in particular that, though there are two titles, there is only one priestess. Thus the situation is like that illustrated by a decree from Priene which lays down that the purchaser of the priesthood of Dionysos Phleos shall also serve Dionysos Katagogios (LSA 37.3–5). If one had to give primacy to one title among the two it should be Pandamos, since this is the one that appears in the more official contexts: in line 3 of the Segre text, where the task of a commission of the assembly to draw up a job description is mentioned, it is for the priesthood of Aphrodite Pandamos; in the Herzog text, though Pontia is the commoner title, it is specified in line 36 that the chief magistrates of the state are to sacrifice, in connection with the sale of the priesthood, to Aphrodite Pandamos. Formally this is perhaps a priesthood of Aphrodite Pandamos, with one of Aphrodite Pontia attached to it.

What, however, is more striking about the cult is the way in which the two titles are treated as a pair in parallel. The Italian excavations of the 1930s uncovered a remarkable Hellenistic building complex which is still visible on the seaward side of the agora of the town of Cos, very close to (and facing) the ancient waterfront.⁴ (The sea has receded somewhat now.) A large rectangular portico closed to the outside contained within it an open space in which stood side by side a pair of identical temples, each of 14.5 by 9.5 metres. No formal proof was found of the identity of the precinct, but there is a high general probability that a large shrine right beside the sea in

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⁴ The only publication is the preliminary report of Morricone 1950; see too Laurenzi 1959, 796 and Livadiotti/Rocco 1996, 112–116.