

# People and Identities in Nessana

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the department of  
Classics in the Graduate School  
Of Duke University

2008

ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

In this dissertation I draw on the Nessana papyri corpus and relevant comparable material (including papyri from Petra and Aphrodito and inscriptions from the region) to argue that ethnic, linguistic and imperial identities were not significant for the self-definition of the residents of Nessana in particular, and Palaestina Tertia in general, in the sixth- to the seventh- centuries AD. In contrast, this dissertation argues that economic considerations and local identities played an important role in people's perceptions of themselves and in the delineations of different social groups.

The first chapter is intended to provide a basis for further discussion by setting out the known networks of class and economics. The second chapter begins the examination of ethnicity, which is continued in the third chapter; but the second chapter concentrates on external definitions applied to the people of Nessana, and in particular on the difference between the attitude of the Byzantine Empire to the village and the attitude of the Umayyad Empire. Building on this ground, the third chapter tackles the issue of ethnicity to determine whether it was at all operative in Nessana, – that though ethnonyms were applied in various cases, these served more as markers of outsiders and were situational.

Chapter four moves to the question of language use and linguistic identity, examining the linguistic divisions – the papyri. An examination of the evidence for Arabic interference within the Greek leads to the conclusion that Arabic was the vernacular, and that Greek was used both before and after the Muslim conquest for its connotations of power and imperial rule rather than as a marker of self identity. The

conclusions reached in this chapter reprise the discussion of imperial identity and the questions of centralization first raised in chapter two. This return to previous threads continues in chapter five, which deals with the ties between Nessana and neighboring communities and local identities. The chapter concludes that the local village identity was indeed very strong and possibly the most relevant and frequently used form of self-identification. Overall, it appears that many of the categories we use in the modern world are not relevant in Nessana, and that in those cases where they are used, the usage implies something slightly different.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Without significant help from several people, this dissertation would have been far worse. I am particularly grateful to Kent Rigsby for his patience with half-baked ideas and his careful advice. Generous readers have helped develop chapters and urged me to clarify ideas and expand my view: Josh Sosin, Grant Parker, Clare Woods, Lucas Van Rompay, Hannah Cotton, David Wasserstein, Margo Stroumsa-Uzan and Yair Wallach have all improved this study. My parents are responsible for many and varied services, not least of which were babysitting, cooking and other forms of domestic and intellectual support.

For complaining far less than he wished and refusing to allow me to get away with vague notions, I am immeasurably indebted to Simon Cook.

## **Introduction**

In their groundbreaking construction of the population pyramid in ancient Egypt, Marcel Hombert and Claire Préaux described the papyri on which they relied as consisting of matters “qui en soit, sont d’intérêt minime”. While my biased view is that the Nessana papyri are not quite as dull as the census reports to which Hombert and Préaux refer, the undeniable fact is that the source material with which this study is primarily concerned cannot be classed as a great work of literature or a riveting accounts of dramatic events. The importance of these documents lies more in the information gleaned from them than in any intrinsic pleasure they afford the reader. This information is both unique and crucial, affording us in several different ways a glance into uncharted territories and an opportunity to move beyond the standard descriptions and usual polemics of the field.

## **Background**

The site of Nessana was probably first occupied as early as the third century BC, as evidenced by oil lamps and coins from the period. By the end of the second century the settlement was developed enough to support the building of a fort and a monumental staircase leading to it;<sup>1</sup> and the material remains continue to show an increase in prosperity throughout the first century BC. There are extremely few archaeological finds, and no evidence of new construction, from AD 106 to the late fourth century AD,

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<sup>1</sup> Urman, "Nessana Excavations 1987-1995", p. 6.

corresponding to the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom to the Roman Empire. But by the reign of Theodosius I (AD 379 – 395), a new and substantial fort was constructed on the northern peak of the acropolis, and it is reasonable to suppose that the establishment of a military unit in Nessana dates from the same period.<sup>2</sup> Soon afterward, the papyri begin, and it is at this point that the present dissertation commences. The evidence of the papyri gives out by the end of the eighth century, but the settlement itself appears to have continued for almost a century longer, although the evidence of new building is increasingly scarce, and the ninth century shows increased signs of secondary uses of the churches and fort. By the mid-ninth century the settlement appears to have disintegrated as a coherent unit.

The history of the scholarship of the site is quickly described. A few visits in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century (including those of Musil in 1902 and Woolley and Lawrence in 1914) resulted in some descriptions and drawings of the site, particularly useful for their documentation of the grounds before the establishment of modern buildings in the first half of the twentieth century. The first serious attempt to excavate and document the site was that of the expedition led by H. D. Colt in the 1930's. The cache of papyri at Nessana, dating from 505 to *ca.* 700, was uncovered by the Colt expedition in 1937, a fortuitous result of the drought which forced the American team away from their chosen site of Sobata. The results of the excavations were presented in three volumes, published serially from 1958 to 1962; the papyri finds consist of 13 literary texts and 195 documents, 96 of which were judged by Kraemer to be lengthy or

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-15, contra Colt who dates the fort about half a century later.

important enough to warrant a full translation and commentary. The texts are, to a greater and lesser extent, fragmentary, and some are so badly damaged as to be incomprehensible.

After the Colt excavations, the site of Nessana served first as a base for the Egyptian army and then as an outpost of the Israeli army; both periods of occupation resulted in damage to the site. The department of archaeology at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev undertook to excavate the site in 1987, and continued until February 1995. Unlike the Colt expedition, which focused exclusively on the upper city and especially on the remains of the churches and the Byzantine fort, the Ben Gurion excavations, directed by J. Shershevski and D. Urman, paid great attention to the residences and the finds along the slope leading to the lower town on the plain, as well as expanding the excavations on the acropolis where the Colt expedition had previously dug. Most of the results of these recent expeditions were published in 2004; unfortunately, that volume was only the first of a projected three volumes, and due to the sudden death of the two editors and excavators, the publication of the second and third volumes seems unlikely. This is doubly unfortunate, since the published articles do not include most of the inscriptions found in Nessana, Bi'rain and their environs.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These Greek and early Arabic inscriptions, as well as notes and other unpublished finds from the excavations, are now housed in Beer Sheva at the Ben Gurion University; I know of no current plans to publish them.

The material from Nessana, with firmly dated documents beginning in AD 505 (*P.Ness.* 14)<sup>4</sup> and ending in AD 689 (*P.Ness.* 67 and 57), falls in what has sometimes been called “the great gap” of Byzantine historiography.<sup>5</sup> Between the well-known and well-studied age of Justinian, when the works of Procopius provide a rich primary source, and the revival of historiography with Leo the Deacon and Michael Psellos in the tenth and eleventh centuries, sources are scarce and limited in their information. Unfortunately, coverage of the early decades of Muslim rule in the Arabic sources is also problematic. Mas‘udi, the first serious historian in Arabic, is, for all his many virtues, still writing in the tenth century, 300 years after the conquest of Palestine. Though he does rely on earlier sources, and for lack of an earlier account is often used as a primary source for the Umayyad and early Abbasid period, he cannot provide us with a contemporary account. This is not to say that there are no historiographical sources at all for the sixth and seventh centuries: *Ta’rīkh Madīnat Dimashq* and *Futūh al-Shām* from the eighth and ninth centuries provide some information on the early conquests of Palestine, Arabia and Syria from the Arabic side, as does Baladhūri’s *Kitāb Futūh al-Buldān*. In Greek, there are several sources (including Agathias and Pseudo-Methodius), but their focus is either religious or the court in Constantinople, and they provide us with only meager information regarding Palaestina Tertia in the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> To be precise, *P.Ness.* 14 has AD 505 as its *terminus ad quem*; but it is not likely to be much earlier.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffreys, "Notes toward a Discussion of the Depiction of the Umayyads in Byzantine Literature", p. 133; also Whitby, "Greek Historical Writing after Procopius: Variety and Vitality".

<sup>6</sup> For a general discussion of the limitations of the sources, see Cameron and Conrad, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Problems in the Literary Source Material*.

This relative dearth of information makes the Nessana papyri and the insight they afford us into the last decades of Byzantine rule and the first decades of Umayyad rule in Palestine particularly valuable. The early papyri provide us with a sense of rural provincial life – a very rare occurrence in written sources – as the Byzantine grip on Palestine loosens. The later papyri, written under Muslim rule, and some of them written by Umayyad officials, allow us to fill some of the many gaps in our understanding of the early Muslim administration. The nature of the early Islamic state has recently been the subject of much contention, with a primary sticking point being the degree of organization and the point at which we can speak of an independent Muslim system, rather than a continuation of the previous Byzantine system under new rulers.<sup>7</sup> Given the fundamental and bitter nature of the disagreements here, one might expect that the Nessana documents, as one of the few available and relevant testimonies, would be fully exploited; and yet that has not always been the case.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the papyri's value in illuminating the Byzantine and the Umayyad worlds separately, their unique coverage can also allow us to break down the professional disciplinary barriers which have until recently divided the study of the late ancient world into the field of Classics / Byzantine studies on the one hand and Arabic studies on the other, with only a few attempts made to bridge the gaps between them. In the

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<sup>7</sup> See Foss, "A Syrian Coinage of Mu'āwiyah" and Johns, "Archaeology and the History of Early Islam" for contrasting points of view.

<sup>8</sup> "One might expect that such documents as do exist would be fully utilized, and yet vast numbers of papyri remain unedited, inscriptions unrecorded, and excavations unpublished, and even those that are known are often not taken into account by Islamic historians." Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State", p. 395.

introduction to the volume *Interpreting Late Antiquity*, the editors make a point of calling on the reader to “join the history of the later Roman Empire in the east with the subsequent evolution of the first centuries of Islam.”<sup>9</sup> It is with this goal that I begin this dissertation, under the belief that the gulf between the late Roman and the early Islamic worlds is in many cases artificial, created by the limitations of the relevant disciplines rather than reflecting the historical circumstances. With this in mind, I intend to use the evidence from Nessana, spanning as it does the sixth and the seventh centuries and moving between the Greek and Arabic languages, as one continuous body.

These questions of continuity cannot be discussed in a vacuum, as an issue separable from all others. Here, the lens used for examination will be that of microhistory – the story of a small settlement and its people, and the effect (or lack thereof) that the change of regimes had on them. “A people without a history” – so Kraemer calls the inhabitants of Nessana, with more than a touch of disparagement (or even contempt).<sup>10</sup> By that, Kraemer means that the papyri do not reflect or comment upon the great movements of armies and the change of the political map of the Levant and the Mediterranean in the seventh century. To Kraemer – and one suspects, to many of his colleagues on the Colt expedition – the fact that the capitulation of Palestine is not reflected in the evidence from the Negev towns is a liability; there is a definite disappointment discernable when the excavators note that the only contemporary record from 640 is the relaying of the South Church floor in Sobata.

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<sup>9</sup> Bowersock, Grabar and Brown, *Interpreting Late Antiquity: Essays on the Post-Classical World*, p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana, Volume 3: Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 30.

This attitude is a corollary of the focus on great men and grand movements which dominated history in general and Classics in particular in the 1950's. With the changes introduced by the French Medievalists of the so-called New History school, the emphasis changed to a focus on society as the proper subject of historical research, rather than events. This new focus obviously lent itself well to the wealth of documentary evidence pouring out of Egypt, and it is no surprise that Keenan cites LeRoy Ladurie as an influence on his papyrological work.<sup>11</sup> Thus what to Kraemer and his contemporaries was a liability – namely, the internal, micro-historical nature of the Nessana documents – can be seen as an asset. Since the inhabitants of Nessana were not members of the higher echelons of Palestinian society – in contradistinction to the wealthy and more sophisticated burghers seen in the papyri of Petra – they give us a chance to glimpse lives which are often unknown, and to examine the importance attached to different allegiances and groupings in circles that did not fall under elite or highly literate influence. Indeed, the fact that the Nessana papyri are not highly complex or nuanced texts, the fact that there is ground for debate on the literacy of their writers, is an advantage when we come to use them for sociological analysis. Unlike literary products and stylized productions, the papyri come closer to the holy grail of 'a native informant'.

Related to the modest social status of the people of Nessana is their residence in a peripheral village, far – spatially and mentally – from the cosmopolitan metropoleis of Caesarea or Berytus. Nessana here again suffered from the unfortunate coincidence of the papyri's discovery with the then-current fashions of scholarship; it is only more recently

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<sup>11</sup> Keenan, "New Papyrology and Ancient Roman History".

that attempts have been made to move away from urban life as the touchstone of ancient society to the rural hinterland.<sup>12</sup> Even the great venture encapsulated in the series of Workshops on Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East Studies focuses on urban culture, with passing mentions of the countryside as the exceptions rather than the rule. As Graf notes, this fascination with urban complexes such as the Decapolis cities is particularly unfortunate for the study of Arabia, which was to all extent and purposes “a world of villages”, especially in Late Antiquity, which was marked by an urban decline.<sup>13</sup> To the extent that scholarly attention has turned away from the cities, a common complaint has been that sources are lacking in detail about rural conditions.<sup>14</sup> The usual remedy has been to rely on epigraphy, but this solution will not do in Palaestina Tertia (as opposed to northern Syria), where inscriptions are relatively few and far between. The Nessana papyri, though, offer us exactly this insight into local or at best provincial affairs; not only are we dealing with a small settlement off the beaten track, but the people and concerns apparent in the papyri are far from the great hubs of activity. In this, as in the social background of the papyri writers, Nessana’s evidence is unusual even in the world of papyri. Most of the Egyptian papyri of Late Antiquity come from the propertied

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<sup>12</sup> In Byzantine studies in particular, note Lefort, "Rural Economy and Social Relations in the Countryside", as well as Laiou-Thomadakis, *Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire: A Social and Demographic Study*.

<sup>13</sup> Graf, "Town and Countryside in Roman Arabia in Late Antiquity", p. 219.

<sup>14</sup> Trombley, "War and Society in Rural Syria ca. 502-613 AD", p. 154.

classes of the nome metropoleis; the evidence of a small village community is exceptional.<sup>15</sup>

Given all this, it would seem odd that the papyri have suffered from a relative neglect in the secondary literature, a neglect which is especially astonishing when compared to the significant bibliography engendered by the much smaller Babatha archive, or even the interest aroused by the Petra papyri, which, though they have not all been published, are cited much more often and have sparked more discussions than their counterparts in Nessana. A couple of reasons for this relative dearth of research have been suggested above: for instance, it is only recently, with the move away from a focus on urban and specifically metropolitan life, that the smaller, marginal communities have gained in importance for modern researchers. It was the Nessana corpus' misfortune to have been discovered and published at a time when its possibilities did not match current research interests. In addition, the nature of that original publication is such that it did not encourage or facilitate further research. Kraemer's explicit purpose in the edition and translation was to make the work accessible to non-specialists, and to that end he adopted a very loose translation policy, which he himself describes as often veering into paraphrases; he also tends to rely on English equivalents and in general is not bound too closely to the text.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the success of this strategy as a way to make the

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<sup>15</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, Preface.

documents appealing to ‘non-specialists’, it has tended to make historians wary of using the Nessana papyri.<sup>17</sup>

It is also possible that one of the great advantages of the papyri – their combination of both the late Classical and the early Islamic worlds, and the combination found therein of Greek and Arabic – has been to their detriment in the world of scholarship. As noted above, the scholarly disciplines of Classics (including Byzantinology) and Arabic studies have developed along separate paths, and the disciplinary hurdles to mastering both Greek and Arabic may have helped to ensure that only a few scholars have been eager to discuss these intermediate periods and texts. Those scholars who have been interested in the points of contact between the Greek and Arabic cultures have tended to focus on the translation movement and the glory days of the Abassid empire,<sup>18</sup> leaving behind the relatively obscure and unassuming documentary texts.

If we do decide to take on board the evidence of the rather more humble papyri, integrating the Greek and Arabic worlds as they are integrated in the papyri, one of the main questions which must be dealt with is that of possible links between the period of Byzantine rule and the Umayyad government. The issues at stake here concern continuities and ruptures – or rather, the degree of continuity and the degree of rupture: if

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<sup>17</sup> This may be remedied by a proposed venture to re-edit and re-publish the papyri, headed by Constantin Zuckerman.

<sup>18</sup> Such as Dimitri Gutas’ groundbreaking and foundational studies.

every change of regime and change of period falls on a spectrum between unbroken continuity and a clean break, how would we describe this particular transition? To what extent did the new Muslim and Arab control of the region entail a disruption and an adjustment for the native residents?

As elsewhere, scholarly assessments of the degree of break posed by the new regime follow cycles.<sup>19</sup> With the establishment of the studies of Arabic and Islam as a serious historical discipline in the nineteenth century, the view has tended to be that there is little change on the ground immediately following the conquest. In spite of that, the Muslim era is often described as a completely new world in terms of customs and attitudes – the beginning of a new period in history. A frequent reference and inspiration for this point of view is Pirenne’s thesis, which places the blame for the final collapse of the urban, Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity squarely on the shoulders of the Muslim conquerors, viewing them as incapable of maintaining the old systems or replacing them with a new one.

More recently we have seen a move away from such a stark statement of the replacement of one culture and civilization by another, and a greater emphasis placed on the lack of change in administrative and governmental practices. Colt speaks of the conquerors as “untrained in administrative procedures”, and refers to “their custom to

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<sup>19</sup> One may profitably compare the change of attitudes regarding the conceptual break – or the lack thereof – surrounding the fall in the Western Empire around AD 500. As Amory notes, this supposed break is in great part a creation of Humanism, “transmitted in the twentieth century through the enduring works of Spengler and Durant, and preserved in the curriculum of European history in every school and university around the world (...) The notion of a break imperceptibly urges us to continue the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dispute between Montesquieu and Le Nain de Tillemont, or the nineteenth-century dispute between Fustel and Dahn: were the Roman successor states “Roman” or “Germanic”?” Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554*, pp. 1-2.

keep the existing officials as often as possible.”<sup>20</sup> Sartre also cites the lack of change in the governor’s title,<sup>21</sup> and Cameron speaks of the Umayyad caliphs as “content to follow existing Byzantine precedent, taking over existing practices and using Greek speaking officials in their administration.”<sup>22</sup> The new Muslim rulers are now more often seen as adopting the previous Byzantine practices wholesale. The Muslim government has also been seen as lacking in vision as well as experience, having “received no tradition and no training in the arts of government.”<sup>23</sup> The emphasis on the derivative nature of the early Muslim empire, and therefore its continuity with the previous regime, is influenced by an increasingly critical attitude to the early Islamic sources – those very sources which see the rise of Islam as a sudden and complete break with the past.<sup>24</sup> This growing reluctance to accept the early Muslim sources’ description of affairs after the conquest has led to a tendency to minimize the degree of disruption in administration and the ability of the new government to institute change.

Such a shift in emphasis also fits in quite naturally with a greater emphasis on continuity. Continuity has become increasingly important in the last fifteen years or so, as part of the attempt to pull down some of the disciplinary barriers between the study of the

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<sup>20</sup> Colt, *Excavations at Nessana, volume 1: Auja Hafir, Palestine*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Sartre, *Trois études sur l'Arabie romaine et byzantine*, p. 158.

<sup>22</sup> Cameron, "The Eastern Provinces in the Seventh Century A.D.: Hellenism and the Emergence of Islam", p. 295.

<sup>23</sup> Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman Dominion*, p. 450.

<sup>24</sup> The first and still foundational text challenging the previous reliance on Muslim sources is Crone and Cook, *Hagarism: the Making of the Islamic World*.

Greco-roman world in Late Antiquity and the Arabic-Islamic world, a trend exemplified by the series of workshops (and subsequent volumes) on the Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East. This trend is by no means unopposed: Giardini's "Esplosione di tardoantico" is a lament for the breakdown of fixed chronological periods in historical analysis, and a call to pay greater attention to economic issues such as modes of production and socioeconomic structures, since these would supposedly reveal the old chronological division to be both necessary and significant.<sup>25</sup> Overall, though, the current wisdom is that "the break [between the Muslim and the Byzantine worlds] was by no means as clear cut as it might seem at first sight and that in many ways the transformation of Syria and Palestine was a more gradual evolution than is often assumed."<sup>26</sup>

Often attempts at providing an answer to these questions fall back on the traditional boundaries between disciplines and languages. Thus, on the classical side of the fence, we have Carrié declaring that the study of these continuities and ruptures has indeed been neglected – and that the way to remedy the situation is by delving deeper into the (Byzantine) past and comparing the eighth century with the fourth century.<sup>27</sup> On the Arabist side of the fence we see Crone and Donner, both intent on determining and defining the degree to which the early Islamic conquests display an independent polity. Crone implies that no state existed in Arabia and that the Muslims relied therefore on the

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<sup>25</sup> Giardini, "Esplosione di tardoantico".

<sup>26</sup> Kennedy, "Change and Continuity in Syria and Palestine at the Time of the Muslim Conquest", p. 258.

<sup>27</sup> Carrié, "l'Etât à la recherche de nouveaux modes de financement des armées (Rome et Byzance, IVe - VIII siècles)", p. 27.

state structure that they conquered.<sup>28</sup> Donner denigrates this attitude, claiming it presents the new Muslim Empire “as a kind of afterthought, designed to stitch together the various provincial administrations, once virtually independent, that had been conquered by the expanding Arabian Muslims.”<sup>29</sup> On the contrary, Donner’s view is that we see at work here a rational and self-determining government, constructing its own policies based on its own ideology and traditions.<sup>30</sup> And yet, in spite of his conviction that the early Muslim state was not in the main derivative of previous administrations, Donner admits that the sources he examines do not allow for any definitive answers – they are “too thin”.<sup>31</sup> Thus a central argument in Islamic studies circles around the degree of influence exercised by the former Byzantine system; and the scholars in question tend to rely on the evidence of their respective fields.

We see then that both Classicists and Arabists are butting against the degrees of stability and change throughout the sixth to the eighth centuries. In both cases, the questions could be more thoroughly discussed by looking for comparative evidence, such as the evidence from Nessana before and after the conquest, rather than relying on sources internal to one side. In the case of Classical and Byzantine studies, the comparison would allow us to determine to what extent the changes are internal and to what extent they are motivated by the external Muslim influence. As regards Islamic

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<sup>28</sup> Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Early Islamic Polity*, p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Donner, "The Formation of the Islamic State", p. 294

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp. 284-285.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 294.

studies, comparison would allow us to advance beyond Donner's complaint of the slightness of the sources and determine with more precision the extent to which the new Muslim administration was indeed independent or derivative.

Throughout this dissertation, the cross-section used to discuss these questions of microhistory and continuity is that of identity, or identities: how did the people of Nessana think of themselves, and how does that compare with the ways they thought of others and others thought of them? Compared across the centuries and the empires, this will provide a useful way of addressing the question of continuity, as well as opening up the discussion of the relevance of identity in general, and particular identities (such as linguistic, local and ethnic identities) for the examination of ancient societies. These questions entail an attempt to take on board the current theoretical thinking in non-historical fields such as anthropology and sociology. The next section will outline the theoretical and methodological framework of the study, providing a few basic definitions of key terms as they will be used below.

### **Identities**

The study of identities and their politics has become something of a trend in scholarship in the last decades, whether employed loosely or used as a central organizing principle of societal analysis. In parallel, the use of identity has also become common in daily speech and as a political tool from the 1970's onwards.<sup>32</sup> This vogue has also

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<sup>32</sup> The explanation for this late-twentieth-century emphasis on identity as a foundational concept for human and societal understanding is beyond the scope of this study. The explanations suggested run the gamut

reached the world of Classics, albeit a little later, as evidenced in the first instance by Jonathan Hall's groundbreaking works on identity in the Greek and Hellenistic worlds and by Siân Jones' systematic explorations of the intersections of archaeological remains with the attempts to discern ethnic identities in the past.<sup>33</sup> One problem, however, is that the terms bandied about are rather nebulous, with different scholars seeming to refer to varying meanings and definitions. It might therefore be useful to begin with a few basic definitions of identity – and in particular ethnicity as a facet of identity—as they will be used here.

To begin with the most general formulation possible, identity can be defined as a sense of self, particularly as a member of a group. That group, in turn, can be defined by various characteristics – language, geography or ethnicity, to take just the most salient examples. This may seem a rather vague and unsatisfactory definition, and indeed 'identity' has been charged with being burdened by either far too many implications or far too few.<sup>34</sup> When used in the strong sense, 'identity' is open to the accusation of essentialism, and is in danger of being used explicitly or implicitly in a reifying manner; this usage tends to assume that it is a constant, inevitable part of all human experience. When used in the weak sense, 'identity' can dissolve into thin air, losing its analytical purchase and usefulness and disintegrating into a flimsy collection of associations and connections. It might seem that a more precise, more limited definition would avoid this

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from the effect of the civil rights movement in the US to the break up of the USSR and the change in perception of sexual and gender roles; see Miles, *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity*, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*, Jones, "Discourses of Identity in the Interpretation of the Past", and Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present*.

<sup>34</sup> Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", p. 1.

potential problem. Yet the vagueness of this definition is, I believe, inherent to the nature of the term when taken in general, and attempts to limit it a priori further run the risk of imposing an anachronistic view of identity, which may fit a particular society or period but would not have any potential for universal purchase.

I will here accept as a fundamental starting point that identity is a shifting, fluid concept, not a monolithic, reified entity with a stable existence in the world. As such, identity must also be understood to be manipulable – whether consciously or unconsciously – by the individual, by the group under discussion, and by other groups with which it comes into contact. As a discursive, constructed concept, identity exists in a particular context, against a particular background; this thesis will attempt to look at a certain case study – that of Nessana in the sixth and seventh centuries – and tease out the various possible concepts of identities which can be seen in the papyri, examining in each case whether a particular formulation is operative in this particular society and if so, how and under what circumstances.

Another corollary of the move away from a monolithic understanding of identity is the perception that several identities may come into play at the same time; sometimes because a group is in the process of shifting from one form of self-definition to another, and at other times simply because individuals and people emphasize different facets of their identity in different situations. Given this understanding, this thesis will often talk of ‘identities’ in the plural, and will look at the various possible indications – language, tribal names, and local relationships – to see how they are used in the construction of self-definitions. Though this might lean towards the ‘weak’ construction of identity in

denying any hard essentialist claims, I would not want to imply that this understanding denies the sense of identity as an influencing force on social realities. On the contrary; the very fact that identities are debated, constructed and reconstructed is a measure of their importance in the self-perceptions of people, and of their potential to act as coercive forces. Indeed, a fundamental question of this study is the process and mechanism through which an identity can crystallize as a powerful, compelling reality – though of course the fact that it can act in this way does not mean that it necessarily does so in all societies and in all situations.

As a whole, this thesis will deal with several manifestations of identity. Ethnicity is but one of these facets; a person's self-definition may rely more on other elements (such as religion, which is not necessarily bound up with ethnicity), and a group may define itself without reference to ethnicity. Yet ethnicity is a particularly problematic concept to pin down – one which has been described as lost in a “linguistic jungle” and as “definitionally chameleonic.”<sup>35</sup> In light of this ambiguity, and given the term's centrality for the discussion that will follow (particularly chapters 2 and 3), a few words of clarification are in order.

Given the uses to which racial theories had been put in the first half of the twentieth century, and given the perception that ‘ethnicity’ was simply a euphemism for ‘race’, a taboo on discussion of ethnicity was well-nigh inevitable from the 1940's to the late 1960's. To the extent that the term was employed, it was more often than not in order

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<sup>35</sup> Connor, "A Nation Is a Nation, Is a State, Is an Ethnic Group, Is a ...", p. 386.

to deny its existence.<sup>36</sup> As the understanding of ethnicity became more refined and diverged further away from race to include notions of self-perception and culture rather than biology, discussion of ethnicity in the modern and ancient world became more common and more nuanced, fueled also by the integration of anthropological and sociological tools into the historical disciplines.

As for the actual definition of ethnicity, or rather the components or markers of ethnic difference, opinions vary; the main question here being, in what sense is ethnicity different from any other form of self definition? Why is it that we accord the term ‘ethnic group’ to the Welsh, for instance, and not to Manhattan investment bankers? Hall insists on a common territory and a myth of shared descent as non-negotiable elements in distinguishing ethnic groups from other social groups, and this emphasis on perceptions – true or false – of common origin is also found in Johnson’s more recent exploration of perceptible ethnic identities in Eusebius.<sup>37</sup> Yet this is by no means the only or even the commonly accepted approach. If ethnicity is made up of various differing markers, then as the discourse of ethnicity changes over time, so does the importance assigned to the varying markers; and so we find Cohen, for instance, insisting on the necessity of biological connectedness, in great part because this marker is particularly relevant for the group (Jews) and the period (Hellenistic Palestine) he is examining.<sup>38</sup> Other commonly

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<sup>36</sup> Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*, pp. 13-15.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argumentation in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*; see especially p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Cohen, "Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not': How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?"

invoked fields are religion and language, and they gain prominence in certain historical situations and among certain historical groups.

Ultimately ethnic identity, like all other forms of self-definition, is a social construct, molded and re-formed through ‘what people say and what people do’, or discourse and praxis. This does not, of course, mean that ethnic groups have no basis in reality, or that they are not active presences in the world; but rather that this reality – this power that they have to instigate and explain events and changes—is not separable from its construction and reconstruction. It is also, in the final analysis, a subjective perception, and as such dependent on a group’s perception of itself more than on its categorization by others. As an element of identity, ethnicity is constructed discursively, and thus in opposition and in comparison to other ethnically-perceived groups; it is through engagement – and usually conflict – with other ethnicities that a particular ethnicity emerges, gains salience, and becomes visible to us as external observers.

Briefly, the current understandings of ethnicity may be divided into two, primordialism and instrumentalism. Adherents of the former consider ethnicity to be a historical given, a fundamental and necessary unit for the construction of group identity, and therefore always present it as a force in history. Instrumentalists, on the other hand, consider that groups exploit the symbol of shared, ancestral association in the pursuit of political and/or economic interests, and that therefore they only make use of it under particular circumstances; a self-definition under ethnic terms emerges only as needed. One of the goals of this study is to examine which of these understandings is applicable here. If the primordialists are right, then ethnicity is an a-historical phenomenon, and

should be discernable as operative and helpful in Byzantine Palestine as well as modern times. If, however, the instrumentalists are correct, then that is not necessarily the case; we may not find ethnicity to be an operative concept in fifth- to seventh-century Nessana, and if we do, it may well be perceptible as a power strategy hiding other interests.

Discussions of identity in general, and the relatively few studies of identity in the ancient world in particular, often focus on ethnicity as a matter of course. Although a significant part of the dissertation is devoted to the relevance of this term, I would also like to move beyond ethnicity and look at other manifestations of identity to see if they might also be relevant – or perhaps, even more relevant than ethnicity—to the people under question. Ethnicity is not the only form of communal grouping in a society, nor even necessarily the primary identity for a given individual or a given society. Any individual can and usually does see himself as belonging to several groups, defined according to different criteria; and he may be defined by others according to still other criteria and *indicia*. At different stages and in different situations, particular identities will be brought to the fore. This thesis is an attempt to examine what these situations and identities are for the people of Nessana in sixth- and seventh-century Palestine. This will necessitate touching upon questions of linguistic, local and legal identities, among others.

A critical distinction to keep in mind as we proceed is between *criteria* and *indicia*, which are related to *emic* and *etic* perceptions. While *criteria* are a definitional, ‘official’ set of attributes which determine membership in an ethnic group, *indicia* refer to the way people are distinguished in practice, or the attributes associated with a group

once criteria are established. Thus, the criteria for being an American are being born in the US or going through the naturalization process, whereas the indicia of an American vary, but may include a fondness for Coke, hamburgers, and firearms. Naturally, the different indicia and the importance accorded to them vary depending on the beholder; a Mexican would probably come up with a different set of indicia for recognizing a North American than would a Norwegian or a Pakistani. And of course, in addition to the fact that indicia and criteria do not necessarily correspond – a Coke-guzzling and hamburger-wolfing shooting fanatic may well be South African—indicia are always externally imposed characteristics, and tell us nothing about a person’s degree of identification with the group in question.

Related to this distinction is the one between etic and emic knowledge. Etic constructs are accounts and analyses regarded as meaningful by an external source, usually the scholarly community (though, when dealing with historical societies as we are, it is necessary to keep in mind that some of our primary sources also exhibit an etic knowledge; for example, Procopius’ portrayal of identities in the Sinai is an external one, and cannot be used to derive subjective understandings of identity within the residents of Sinai). In contrast, emic constructs rely exclusively on the internal understanding and consensus of the group under question, expressed in terms of the schemes and categories regarded by that group as meaningful and useful. These distinctions between external and internal definitions are critical when discussing questions of identity and self-definitions, not least because the gap between the two perceptions can be unbridgeable. In spite of the focus on subjective perceptions as necessary for ethnic identity, it is important not to lose

sight of the external categorizations operative in the area and period under question, but to maintain a balance between external and internal definitions. Among those historians who have adopted the strictures of sociology and anthropology, the fashion of late has been to focus on internal, or emic definitions, partly as a reaction to the almost exclusive focus on categories imposed from the outside which dominated the historical disciplines until the latter half of the twentieth century. And yet, internal definitions are not constructed in a vacuum, but are in constant dialogue with externally imposed categories. To the extent that expressions of identity are also shaped by practical considerations, there must be at least a degree of harmony between internal or external, or else they lose all touch with reality. To give a modern example, this tension between external and internal perceptions of identity is the source of the humor in Ali G's statement to a policeman, "Is it 'cos I is black?"<sup>39</sup>

It has been suggested that a more useful term than identity—if less theoretically alluring — is self-perception or self-understanding.<sup>40</sup> While this phrasing has the advantage of stepping away from the theoretical morass of 'identity' and placing the emphasis squarely on subjective understandings, it does so at the expense of giving due emphasis to external definitions and classifications. As this thesis also seeks to examine

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<sup>39</sup> Ali G is the stage name of a British white middle-class comedian, who adopts the persona of a suburban wannabe-gangster-rapper. As a side note, one may note that Ali G used the line 'Is it 'cos I is black' twice, once to a British policeman and once in speaking with Andy Rooney. The former accepted Ali G's internal evaluation of his identity without missing a beat, replying 'not at all, Sir'; the latter proceeded to argue that he was not, in fact, Black, replying on the level of 'objective', external criteria. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vX6maiHSZg>.

<sup>40</sup> Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", p. 18.

the classifications imposed by external observers on the people of Nessana and their effect on self-perceptions, I will here maintain the more inclusive ‘identity’.

The comprehensive umbrella nature of the term ‘identity’ and the attempt to include other elements of identity besides ethnicity entail relinquishing any idea of binary divisions: we will not be able to determine whether Nessana’s society was ‘Greek’ or ‘Arab’. This society lies in a grey ambiguous zone, and the most we can talk about are degrees on the spectrum.<sup>41</sup> This entails a movement away from the discussion of the region as a land bifurcated between ‘two cultures’, Hellenistic and Semitic,<sup>42</sup> and towards a multifarious, multifaceted identity, constructed from several separate and sometimes contradictory identities, varying their degrees of intensity.

## **Chapter Synopsis**

The obvious question, of course, is how this theoretical background translates into the examination of the papyri. The questions of identity are mostly implicit in the first chapter, which is intended to provide a basis for further discussion by setting out the known networks of class and economics. By describing such social divisions as can be gleaned from the evidence, this first chapter provides the backbone for further observations. The second chapter begins the examination of ethnicity, which is continued

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<sup>41</sup> Contra see Millar, who does speak of ‘Greek’ versus ‘non-Greek’ cultures and societies; Millar, *The Roman Near East*, p. 150.

<sup>42</sup> See Shboul and Walmsley, "Identity and Self-Image in Syria-Palestine in the Transition from Byzantine to Early Islamic Rule: Arab Christians and Muslims", p. 275, for references to this very common view, both among Semiticists and among Hellenists.

in the third chapter; but the second chapter concentrates rather on external definitions applied to the people of Nessana, and in particular on the way that these external perceptions affected the relationship of the village to the successive ruling empires. Building on this ground, the third chapter tackles the issue of ethnicity to determine if it was at all operative in Nessana – if we see an internal, as opposed to an external, self-identification as part of an ethnic group, and if people in Nessana applied ethnic categorizations to others or to themselves. Chapter four moves to the question of language use and linguistic identity, examining the linguistic divisions within the papyri and attempting to discern whether they had any definitional meaning for the people using them. The conclusions reached in this chapter reprise the discussion of imperial identity and the questions of centralization first raised in chapter two. This return to previous threads continues in chapter five, which deals with the ties between Nessana and neighboring communities and local identities. The focus in this chapter is on the village as a unit, which brings us back to some of the questions raised in the first chapter.

Throughout this dissertation, I will attempt to keep the theoretical discussions to a minimum, viewing them as a tool which may be helpful for the analysis of the documents and not as an end in themselves. This is not to minimize the importance of their role here: the lens through which the papyri are examined is that of identity, and inevitably this decision colors the conclusions reached. Not all of the proposed elements of identity will be found to be operative and useful in the case of Nessana in our period; but by looking for them I am imposing a particular direction on the analysis of the papyri.

As should be clear by now, the methodology adopted here will require examining documents from various angles: a particular papyrus may be examined in one chapter for the social relations it attests, in another chapter for its attitude to governance, and in yet another for the shift of languages. My hope is that this approach will result in a fuller, more complete picture of the various elements of self-definition which together made up the identity of the people of Nessana at a particular moment in time.

### **Caveats and boundaries**

The questions of national and religious identities are not accorded separate chapters or dealt with in great length here. The former, as will quickly become clear, is irrelevant in our time-frame. It is rare to find in the ancient world a correlation between identity and nationality, and attempts to look for one are too often a product of the modern link between ethnicity and the nation-state, and a function of our inability to step beyond the limits of our world.<sup>43</sup> In yet other cases, the question of nationalism as a form of identity is a result of the shadow cast by the Jewish community – the one ethnic group in antiquity which has been relatively well explored as an ethnic group, and an unusual case where nationalism is definitely an element of the ethnic identity. This attempt to take the particular form identity took in the Jewish community and look for it elsewhere is found particularly in Millar, who declares that one of his main goals is to ask whether “any other groups within this area exhibit any real national identity in the way that the

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<sup>43</sup> Smith, "Ethnic Persistence and National Transformation", p. 452.

Jews undoubtedly did.”<sup>44</sup> Not surprisingly, Millar finds that no other group has the same construction of ethnicity as the Jews; I would suggest that the idea of defining one group’s identity through another group is misconceived, and thus bound to fail. As national identity is not operative or heuristically useful in our case, it will be put aside rapidly. Instead of looking for a modern preconception or imposing categories from other groups, the question raised here will be what forms of identity can be seen as meaningful in the context of this particular social group at this particular time, and whether there are any general organizing features in the construction of identity that we can identify as particular to this period.

As for the question of religious identity, it has been explored in some length in the secondary literature, which is particularly extensive when compared to the dearth of discussion of other forms of identity.<sup>45</sup> I have drawn on some of this literature, but felt I had little to add to previous studies.

### **Potential problems in the use of the Nessana papyri**

1. One potential problem for the following exploration is the limited nature of the documents available: many of the documents were not intended for public consumption, and certainly not for posterity. A fairly miscellaneous conglomeration of legal and personal documents, they do not address explicitly the issues examined here. Since we cannot interrogate the writers, as a modern anthropologist would do when examining

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<sup>44</sup> Millar, *The Roman Near East*, p. 149.

<sup>45</sup> Most recently, see Van Rompay, "Society and Community in the Christian East".

identities in a living community, and since the residents of Nessana have not been considerate enough to leave us a manifesto declaring their varying allegiances and self-perceptions, this study will be forced to look for indirect evidence and ask questions that the documents' creators may not have envisaged. Non-historical, modern terms such as class and ethnicity will be used, but they will be understood as heuristic tools, which may have to be rejected if they are found to be inoperative, and not as stable anachronistic categories imposed upon a historical society regardless of their usefulness.

2. The second obvious problem is the limited number of papyri: the basic corpus examined here consists of the Nessana documents, which amount to fewer than one hundred substantial papyri and about a hundred more fragments.<sup>46</sup> No more papyri have been found in the recent and more extensive excavations undertaken by Ben Gurion University in the 1980's and 1990's, and it is likely that this is indeed the sum total of the documentary evidence available in this village.

Given the geographical and temporal limitations of this study – a particular village in a fairly well-defined period – this evidence seems to me adequate to allow for a discussion, assuming always that we are aware of the limits of the information available to us. These restrictions do, however, make the use of comparable material from other sources even more important. Unfortunately, no papyri were found (and, given the

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<sup>46</sup> As mentioned above, Kraemer includes 96 documents as 'major', and a further 99 documents as 'minor', being too fragmentary to repay detailed publication, translation and annotation. In point of fact, however, some of the so-called 'major documents' are also extremely fragmentary and have not been transcribed and annotated.

borderline aridity of the region, none are likely to be found) in the immediate neighborhood of Nessana: the other Negev towns, such as Sobata, Mampsis and Oboda, also offer much less evidence in the way of inscriptions and ostraca, though of course full use will be made of the ones that have been found. Fortunately, about 140 carbonized scrolls were recovered during the course of excavations in Petra in 1993. Of these, 16 were published at the time of writing, and were employed wherever such a comparison was useful.<sup>47</sup> Naturally, the corpus of Egyptian papyri will also be employed for comparative purposes. For questions of identity in particular, I will also make much use of the recent and vibrant discussions of ethnicity in Egypt – a discussion which has the advantage of being fueled by papyrological evidence.<sup>48</sup>

Another crucial supplementary source to the papyri are the inscriptions and archaeological evidence from the Nessana excavations. Nessana is unusual in being one of the rare cases where we have at our disposal both material evidence and integrated texts;<sup>49</sup> it would be wasteful not to make use of this confluence. The use of archaeology together with texts is also a safeguard against regarding the text – whether lapidary or

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<sup>47</sup> Frosen, Arjava and Lehtinen, *The Petra Papyri I*. 19 new documents were published in November 2007 in Arjava, Buchholz and Gagos, *The Petra Papyri III*, and another volume, containing a single lengthy papyrus, is projected to be published soon. Unfortunately, the date of the publication precluded me from making any serious use of these new documents, though I have been fortunate enough to benefit from remarks made by Matthias Buchholz. Surprisingly enough, a systematic comparison between the published documents of Petra and those of Nessana has not yet been made; the most direct study is a very short article, Daniel, "Toponomastic *Mal* in P. Nessana 22, and P. Petra Inv. 10".

<sup>48</sup> See Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 230-231 for a review of the debate; and see also especially Goudriaan, *Ethnicity in Ptolemaic Egypt*, McCoskey, "Race before Whiteness: Studying Identity in Ptolemaic Egypt" and McCoskey, "By Any Other Name? Ethnicity and the Study of Ancient Identity".

<sup>49</sup> A rarity often mourned, though it does not seem to have led to the rise of Nessana in prominence; see for example Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, p. 155.

written on papyrus – as divorced from its physical and social context.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, the documents, with their unique access into subjective perceptions, provide a safeguard against the temptation to create a straightforward equation between an archaeological culture and a social, cultural or racial entity. A number of recent studies have deplored the tendency to regard material culture as ethnically diagnostic, or in other words, the attitude that artefactual assemblages can act as defining criteria of identity.<sup>51</sup> The combination of material evidence with first-person witnesses may help guard us from this fallacy.

3. Finally, an apparent lacuna in the papyri might seem to render their use as a bridge between the Byzantine and the Umayyad period problematic. The firmly dated papyri run from AD 505 to AD 605, and pick up again in AD 674, almost half a century after the surrender of the Byzantine forces. This has led some scholars to claim that we are dealing with two distinct periods in the life of the community, which have been lumped together unjustifiably. Others have interpreted this apparent lacuna as an ominous silence, indicative of a serious disruption.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See Macdonald, "Some Reflections on Epigraphy and Ethnicity in the Roman Near East", p. 177, for a call to a more 'archaeological' approach to epigraphy; and Bagnall, "Archaeology and Papyrology", p. 199, on the uses of archaeology and papyrology in illuminating each other.

<sup>51</sup> Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*, p. 130; and Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present*.

<sup>52</sup> For instance Mayerson, "The First Muslim Attacks on Southern Palestine (A.D. 633-634)", p. 192, and especially footnote 121. See also Kennedy, "The Impact of Muslim Rule on the Pattern of Rural Settlement in Syria", p. 291, for the view that the arrival of the Muslims was preceded by a profound crisis.

I would disagree strongly with both these assessments. The lack of firmly dated papyri between 605 and 674 does not necessarily indicate a period of 69 years during which no papyri were written, nor even a period from which we have no papyri. Firstly, the documents derive from several discrete archives, and not from random finds; it is highly likely that the vagaries of preservation and discovery account for the lack of any archive covering the period between the termini of 605 and 674. Secondly, most of the ‘major documents’ and all of the ‘minor documents’ cannot be firmly dated, and can at best be assigned to a century based on paleography or internal evidence. Indeed, the very fact that the bulk of the documents cannot be more precisely dated, or even assigned to the period before or after the Muslim conquest, would seem to prove that the conventions and habits changed very little in that period, and that there is justification for regarding the span of the available documents as representing one period.

As for the suggestion that this supposed silence is an indication of upheavals and violent disruptions, the first thing to note is that the Persian conquest of 614-628 could not possibly be relevant here; as Schick has shown conclusively, using extensive archaeological evidence, the Persian influence – let alone the Persian army – did not reach this far south.<sup>53</sup> With regard to the Islamic conquest, it is vital to keep in mind that “the first 75 years of Islamic presence in Palestine are largely missing from the

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<sup>53</sup> Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule*, esp. p. 47. Schick’s conclusion is also backed up by epigraphic evidence attesting to the fact that Arabia and Palaestina Tertia were unaffected by the Sassanian invasions: Trombley, “War and Society in Rural Syria ca. 502-613 AD”, p. 201.

archaeological record,”<sup>54</sup> making the Nessana papyri one of the earliest witnesses to their rule. As mentioned briefly above, there is no necessary correlation between surviving remains and social realities, and the lack of identifiable traces of Muslim occupation in places where the Muslim presence is certain is a perfect case in point. The general dearth of information on the first decades of Muslim rule, and our firm knowledge elsewhere that this is not an indication of a brutal or even particularly disruptive transition, negates the idea that the lacuna indicates anything particularly ominous. Added to that is the fact that the archaeological record in Nessana shows no trace of disruption around the Muslim conquest; the churches were not robbed out, and there is evidence of continuous occupation even in the ‘silent years’.<sup>55</sup> Though some of the private dwellings show blocked entryways, which may indicate a reduction in the population, it is just as likely that these structural changes are simply part of the natural life-cycle of an inhabited city. This conclusion becomes all the more likely when we consider that the largest church to have been discovered at the site, the so-called Central Church in the lower town, was constructed in the late seventh or early eighth century, and that it continued to exist uninterrupted until the ninth century.<sup>56</sup> There is no basis for regarding the lack of firmly dated papyri as indicative of anything beyond the occasional and inevitable gaps in our information.

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<sup>54</sup> Schick, *Christian Communities*, p. 144.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 421. See also Urman, "Nessana Excavations 1987-1995", p. 21 for archaeological evidence of undisrupted occupation of the monastery up until the end of the seventh century, and perhaps even into the eighth century.

<sup>56</sup> Urman, "Nessana Excavations 1987-1995", p. 115.

A few final editorial notes: In distinction to the system employed by Kraemer in his edition of the papyri, this thesis will employ precise transliteration from Greek to English whenever possible, attempting to avoid the temptation to ‘correct’ the text. This will be the case even in cases where the Greek itself is clearly a Hellenized version of a Semitic name; thus Μεσλεμ will remain Meslem, not Muslim, and Βανυ Ουαρ will be rendered Banu Ouar, and not Bani War. I follow Kraemer in adding accents to the Greek for the sake of readability, but refrain from attempting to accent Semitic names.

Place names follow the Latin conventions (i.e., Elusa and not al-Khalus or Khalutza); this decision is meant to decrease the confusion with the modern place-names.

Although I take exception to many of Kraemer’s arguments, reading and conclusions, my debt to his work throughout the dissertation is obvious; very often if not always, his position is my acknowledged or unacknowledged starting point.

Finally, it would be naïve, not to say disingenuous on my part, to deny the influence of contemporary thinking and even more importantly, modern politics, on the interests which have motivated this research, or to deny that such studies of the identities of contested groups with possible modern descendants in contested areas may be put to political uses. I will make no such attempt. At the start of his masterful *People and Power in Byzantium*, Kazhdan states what has by now become a truism: “Historians cannot turn deaf ears to the voices of their times and cannot decide that they will or will not be objective. Their only choice is whether to recognize openly and consciously the influence

of the contemporary situation in their constructions of the past .... There is thus a constant – and in our view fruitful – tension between the desire of historians to be objective, in accordance with the first image, and their inevitable involvement in the attitudes and interests of their own day.”<sup>57</sup> I can only hope that the effect of politics and modern attitudes on this study has, indeed, been fruitful.

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<sup>57</sup> Kazhdan and Constable, *People and Power: an Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies*, p. 8.

## Chapter One: Elites and Identities

The authoritative Alexander Kazhdan remarks at the very beginning of the book *Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies* that “the selection of characters who appear in the pages of histories of Byzantium is to some extent one-sided and does not correspond to the real stratification of Byzantine society.” By this, he means that if we were to rely simply on the literary sources, we would have practically no information on the lives of merchants and craftsmen, not to mention peasants. Byzantine histories are known for their classicizing and archaizing tendencies, and one result of these tendencies is a narrow definition of the correct purview of history, resulting in a singular focus on the sources of political power, much more so than is true for previous centuries. Naturally enough, this bias of the primary literature has led to a similar bias in the scholarly literature: as Kazhdan notes, Ostrogorsky’s monumental work does not consider anyone but those with significant political or social clout.<sup>1</sup>

As scholarly fashions changed and late-ancient and Byzantine studies became more developed, this situation changed somewhat. In 1980, when Averil Cameron reviewed Evelyn Patalagean’s *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance*, this book stood alone in the field of social histories of the period.<sup>2</sup> A quarter of a century later, thanks largely to Cameron’s efforts, we have the proceedings of the workshops on *Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East Studies*, which attempt to step beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Cameron, "Review: Late Antiquity - The Total View", p. 195.

confines of the literary sources and describe a wider swath of Byzantine society; and John Haldon's many publications do indeed discuss social history, though he is more concerned with a wider economic picture and imperial economies. Yet although Patlagean positions herself as a follower of the *Annales* school and notes the influence of LeRoy Ladurie in particular,<sup>3</sup> neither her book nor any others since have attempted to do for early Byzantine history what Ladurie did for Languedoc – that is, describe and analyze the lives and networks of village communities, stepping beyond the literary material and its interests.

The papyri of Nessana offer us the opportunity to do so, albeit on a small and localized scale. Far from the centers of imperial or even provincial power, they give us the mundane details of life in an outlying village. It would be tempting to say that this allows us to see in detail the realities obscured in Byzantine histories – that through the papyri we can examine and describe fully the lives of the 'social under-classes', eliminated and ignored in official literary sources. Unfortunately, such a bald statement would be misleading. In his detailed and meticulous descriptions of daily life in *Egypt in Late Antiquity* and *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, Roger Bagnall cautions against assuming that papyri offer us a comprehensive or socially objective picture of the ancient world. Even in places as well documented as the Hermopolite nome, "Almost all of [the evidence] comes from the viewpoint of the propertied classes", reflecting mostly "the preoccupations of those who were literate in Greek or could pay scribes who were;"<sup>4</sup> and

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<sup>3</sup> Noted also by Ibid, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 5

Nessana is no Hermopolis. As Bagnall notes, “small holders farming their own fields need no leases, no rent receipts, no application for parts of machinery – that is, none of the paper generated by more complicated arrangements”.<sup>5</sup> Although their domestic arrangements do sometimes create paper traces – divorces and marriages must still be recorded – these papers are less likely to be preserved in family archives. And of course, the less property an individual has, the less likely it is that he will require documents detailing its distribution among his heirs. All in all, although papyri in general and those of Nessana in particular do show us a stratum of society absent from the literary accounts, it would be misleading and too sanguine to claim that they give us an unfettered and complete view of rural society.

This is not to say that a discussion of social realities in the lower and middle strata is a futile exercise. For a start, we would do well always to keep in mind the natural limitations of the source material, bearing in mind that there is almost certainly an understratum that does not appear in the papyri. Here archaeology may prove a useful complement, covering a wider territory with less bias. In addition, the selective nature of the documents need not deter us from trying to construct an image of the relations, attitudes and undercurrents within the community. This, then will be the twofold purpose of this chapter: first, to describe as thoroughly as possible the objective economic and social realities in Nessana – who was rich, who was not, and what the connections and differences between them were. Once this basis is laid, it will be possible to attempt an analysis of the subjective realities – in other words, the importance granted to these facts.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

Did it matter whose field was larger? Do we see an overlap between economic and political elites? Do the social networks follow or echo the economic fault lines? And finally, how does all this affect the village community – and in what sense can we speak of a village community?<sup>6</sup> Except in specific cases, this chapter will treat the entire period evidenced by the papyri – from 505 to 690—as one coherent and cohesive period. As will become evident, in most issues there is no evidence of substantive differences between the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries in Nessana, and therefore no profit can be gained from imposing arbitrary chronological divisions, separating the evidence only in order to establish that these divisions are indeed arbitrary.

## **Class, Status and Social Networks**

### **Economic differentials**

The papyri refer to Nessana as a village, κώμη, part of the Elusa οἰκουμένη, although the secondary literature often refers to it as a town.<sup>7</sup> The overall population of Nessana is not documented, and must have varied throughout the two centuries for which we have documentary evidence, but estimates move between 900 and 1,500 people, out of a population of 12,000 for the entire Elusa oikoumene.<sup>8</sup> In size, Nessana is mid-level,

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<sup>6</sup> An obvious question which is not dealt with here is that of gender divisions and their relation to status; it is ignored simply because the papyri evidence does not allow us to comment on it.

<sup>7</sup> Neither ‘town’ nor ‘village’ accurately convey the nature of the settlement. In size, Nessana is small enough to qualify as largish village, but the structure of the community is closer to what in English one would call a small town. I will accordingly use the terms indiscriminately and trust the reader to understand in both cases the connotations in English are misleading.

roughly equivalent to Ruheiba and Sobata, larger than Mampsis, and considerably smaller than Elusa's estimated population of 7,500. The numerical advantage and bureaucratic importance of Elusa do not, however, tell the whole story.

*P.Ness.* 39 is a list of tax revenues from a number of communities, showing us differences in wealth among the settlements of the region. Nessana ranks astonishingly high on the list, far above the metropolis of Elusa; it is surpassed, in fact, only by Chermoula and Bir Samis, which are in Palaestina Prima and therefore enjoy a different economic climate (in part because of ecological – and therefore agricultural – differences). Nessana's wealth according to *P.Ness.* 39 compared to other, bigger towns in the region is not entirely inexplicable. For one thing, although it is further south and west than other Negev towns, Nessana enjoys a reliable water supply, unlike Sobata and Ruheiba.<sup>9</sup> Nessana also enjoys another advantage: it is placed on the pilgrimage route, also unlike Oboda, Elusa or Ruheiba. The influx of pilgrims must have accounted in part for the 96-bed khan attested in *P.Ness.* 31 (possibly the same as the caravanserai excavated by the Ben Gurion expedition);<sup>10</sup> it is also directly visible in *P.Ness.* 72 and

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<sup>8</sup> The population estimates for Nessana come from Kraemer's extrapolation from *P.Ness.* 76, a poll tax register dating to the 680's (Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri* P. 31); and Mayerson's analysis of oil and wheat production and consumption requirements (Mayerson, "Ancient Agriculture in the Negev"). Elliott argues that these figures, while reasonably accurate, "are applicable not just to the town of Nessana, as they (Kraemer and Mayerson – RS) believe, but to the Nessana *kome*, that is the town and its hinterland." (Elliott, *The Elusa Oikoumene: a Geographical Analysis of an Ancient Desert Ecosystem based on Archaeological, Environmental, Ethnographic and Historical Data* P. 112). I see no reason to disagree with Elliott, but fail to see the great significance of his distinction. As will be discussed in greater detail below, Nessana did not have a clear distinction between the village and the countryside: the town was not surrounded by a wall, and many people maintained plots of land at some distance from the village itself.

<sup>9</sup> This water supply is incidentally responsible for the discovery of the papyri; the Colt expedition was driven from Sobata to Nessana largely because a sustained draught made the excavations there too difficult.

<sup>10</sup> Shershevski, *Byzantine Urban Settlements in the Negev Desert*, pp. 53-56.

73, where pilgrimages to Mt. Sinai are mentioned. The effects of a village's position on a recognized path of pilgrimage are apparent in the differences between the churches of the Negev towns. Whereas the church at Oboda is fairly minimal, Sobata – in spite of being no bigger in terms of population – exhibits a much more elaborate church. The signs of wealth include depressions for marble plaques, evidence of paint and geometric mosaics. Similarly, the churches at Nessana include colorful and complex mosaics and imported marble slabs.<sup>11</sup> The reliable income from pilgrims and their attendant trade must have accounted at least in part for the economic difference between the towns.<sup>12</sup> Nessana is also unusual in having a substantial date export economy, as evidenced in *P.Ness.* 90 and 91; in this, it is unlike most Egyptian towns.<sup>13</sup>

Nessana then had some potential for the creation of economic differences; some of the town's inhabitants had access to wealth beyond subsistence agriculture, and the town had potential for the development of differentiated economic strata. This is confirmed by *P.Ness.* 87, which lists the importation of two different qualities of honey and *garum*, a premium and a second-rate version. It would of course be foolhardy to assume that they were necessarily intended for different economic classes; but the ability to choose one's preferred quality of honey does indicate that at least some people could afford the luxury, even if the 'premium honey' was served on special occasions rather than in different homes.

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<sup>11</sup> Urman, "Nessana Excavations 1987-1995", pp. 73-75.

<sup>12</sup> The comparison of the churches and the explanation of the differences in terms of the pilgrimage routes comes from a conversation with Dr. Tali Erickson-Gini on March 10, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 80

The simplest measure of wealth distribution is the distribution of land; land has always held pride of place as a measure of wealth in the ancient world, both practically and ideologically.<sup>14</sup> An examination of the archaeological evidence for landholdings, statements in the papyri regarding plots, and the evidence of taxes in the papyri all point to considerable variation in real estate holdings. The evidence of the stone fencing around plots shows that most were very small, averaging about two hectares.<sup>15</sup> Of course, many people owned several non-adjointing plots; yet the evidence of the taxes and church donations indicates that most people did not have a substantial disposable income. Marfoe estimates that the standard for farming soldiers in the fifth-century Levant was 10-20 iugera.<sup>16</sup> This seems appropriate for Nessana in the Byzantine period, and later on, under Umayyad rule, the average farm size does not seem to have changed.

Parallel to these standard, minimal plots, which could hardly have provided much disposable income, we know of more than a few individuals with substantial wealth, certainly in comparison with their neighbors. Kedar's study of stone fences mentioned above includes the existence of one plot measuring more than 150 hectares, 300 times bigger than the smallest farm.<sup>17</sup> A recent study of the remains of animal pens from the Byzantine period in the area discovered that "One of the farms, for example, contained

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<sup>14</sup> Bagnall, "Religious Conversion and Onomastic Change in Early Byzantine Egypt", p. 128.

<sup>15</sup> Kedar, "Water and Soil from the Negev: Some Ancient Achievements in the Central Negev", pp. 186-7.

<sup>16</sup> Marfoe, "Empire and Ethnicity in Syrian Society: 'From Archaeology to Historical Sociology' revisited" p. 470. For more on the relevance of the comparison between the Lebanon hill settlements and Nessana, see below p. 233.

<sup>17</sup> Kedar, "Water and Soil", pp. 186-188.

pens covering an area of 1800 square meters which could accommodate 900 heads” – a herd whose size is even more impressive when compared to the standard 20-40 heads per family.<sup>18</sup> *P.Ness.* 31 from the sixth century is a division of property indicating that one man, the deceased Eulais, owned property in six different buildings, one of them being the khan which could house up to 96 people (and must have had corresponding facilities for animals as well). In a town where many shared a two- or three-bedroom house with a sibling’s family (cf. *P.Ness.* 22), this would have made him one of the richest men in town by a wide margin. Over a century later, an account of grain yields in *P.Ness.* 82 indicates that one individual owned a farm of 71 acres or 114 iugera, almost ten times larger than the average.<sup>19</sup> Clear evidence of differences in wealth also comes from *P.Ness.* 83, a record of amounts of wheat threshed in one of three threshing floors. Whereas Sergius son of Usaid’s yield is reported as 9 modii of wheat, al-Awwil’s yield is 150 modii, and George son of Hanun has 115 modii to his name. This same George son of Hanun’s comfortable economic position is confirmed in *P.Ness.* 81, where he is reported as having paid 65 modii of wheat in taxes –and in comparison, three other men mentioned in the same tax account paid an average of 5 modii of wheat.

Evidently, then, there were substantial differences in income in Nessana, differences that appear to have been reflected as well in the foodstuffs consumed. While throughout the Near East, barley was the standard grain, and it was sown frequently in

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<sup>18</sup> Haiman, "Agriculture and Nomad-State Relations in the Negev Desert in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods", p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 238.

Nessana (*P.Ness.* 81.1-2), there is also ample evidence for the cultivation of wheat – a higher-status grain whose yields are lower, and whose presence is therefore in itself an indication of greater wealth.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of living arrangements, the varying levels of wealth manifested themselves as expected – i.e., some houses are not only bigger but also noticeably more elaborate than others. One stately residential house in the lower town contained an exceptional eight rooms with traces of fine plaster and colorful vegetal decoration, clear indication of a wealthy resident.<sup>21</sup> Though most of the dozens of farmhouses outlying the Negev cities follow a similar, fairly minimalist pattern (two or three rooms, built from very roughly hewn small stones, centered around a courtyard), some are built of large, ashlar-dressed blocks, and include decorative architectonic elements such as lintels, door jambs, capitals and pillars.<sup>22</sup> Altogether, the picture we form is of a society with substantial differences in property, income, and basic lifestyle.

These economic gaps are all deduced by inferences from tax information, archaeological data, and contracts. No papyrus speaks of people as rich or poor; there is no evidence that people were categorized into different classes based on their wealth. What we do see in the papyri is that some importance is placed on professional identities, and that there are some discernable social differences between the professional groups.

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<sup>20</sup> Mayerson, "The City of Elusa in the Literary Sources of the Fourth - Sixth Century", p. 251.

<sup>21</sup> Urman, "Nessana Excavations 1987-1995", p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> Haiman, "Agriculture and Nomad-State Relations", p. 30; and see in particular the farmhouse north of the so-called 'Almond Farm', Urman, "Nessana Excavations 1987-1995", p. 112.

## Professional Identities

Emphasis on profession (as opposed to economic status or tribal affiliation) is not, of course, unique or even unusual. A study of contemporary Korykos in Cilicia reveals that nearly 39% of the epitaphs indicate professions in their commemoration of the deceased.<sup>23</sup> Yet in Korykos these professions are fairly varied, reflecting an active service sector of a mid-sized commercial polis: the epitaphs mention tradesmen, merchants, tavern keepers, stone masons, carpenters and doctors. Many of these professions are absent in Nessana, and indeed would be superfluous in a village: presumably, there would be less call for such an extensive division of labor. Apart from the divisions of ranks and occupations within the army, the only people mentioned by their professions are a doctor (*P.Ness.* 22), two goldsmiths (*P.Ness.* 30 and 79), and various religious functionaries (*P.Ness.* 31 and 45, for example). Yet we do see that often those people who have a definite profession are defined by it, both by and for others and by and for themselves. Moreover, in some cases we can say that these professional identities constituted coherent and discrete social groupings, discernable through differences in naming practices.

Roughly, the names of indigenous Nessanites (as opposed to, for example, Egyptian traders passing through the village) can be divided into three groups: traditional Semitic names, some of them theophoric (such as Wa'il and Khalafallah); Biblical names and Christian martyrs' and saints' names (Abraham and Stephen); and Hellenic names (Summachios). Of course this division of the onomasticon into three is somewhat crude;

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<sup>23</sup> Holum, "The Classical city in the Sixth Century: Survival and Transformation", p. 94.

Christians also named their children for martyrs who themselves bore pagan theophoric names, and it is only the names (and not the individuals) which can be described as 'Christian' or 'Semitic'.<sup>24</sup> And of course most Biblical names are themselves Semitic in origin; in this context, the 'Semitic' category should be understood as referring to a name which had not acquired any particular Christian references.

An examination of the Nessana onomasticon in the papyri and inscriptions shows that the percentage of officers' families with purely and obviously Semitic names, with no additional Biblical or Greek connotations, is 40%, as opposed to 68% with traditional Semitic names among the common soldiers. Given the size of the sample group (128 names from the papyri and another 38 names from the inscriptions), this statistical difference is telling; and the explanation appears to lie partly in economic difference. This reasoning is bolstered by the fact that of the inscriptions of those buried in the 'martyrium', only one name is Semitic; all the rest are Hellenic or Biblical, quite a striking percentage when compared to the ratio of 27% Christian names in the papyri. Though names may be a poor guide to individual ethnic affiliation, it appears here that one can say that as an aggregate, more of the higher social echelons, exemplified here by the officer class and those buried in the martyrium, carry identifiably Christian or Hellenic names. Conversely, more of the lower echelons, exemplified by the common soldiers, carry traditional pre-Christian Semitic names.

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<sup>24</sup> See Bagnall, "Religious Conversion and Onomastic Change in Early Byzantine Egypt", p. 109. Note also that I am here speaking only of ethnic identifications within certain geographic parameters; obviously a name such as Abdallah can be confidently assumed to imply an Arabian or Near Eastern origin of some sort rather than a Gothic one, for instance.

The same phenomenon appears in the inscriptions in Sobata's North Church, where Semitic names are markedly absent.<sup>25</sup> Though some have tried to explain this as reflective of religious orientation, on the assumption that Semitic names are less likely to appear in Christian families, that explanation is contradicted by the many instances of obvious Christians and even church leaders with Semitic names, not to mention the many families where one sibling has a Biblical name and one has a Semitic name (see *P.Ness.* 18 and *P.Ness.* 31). I would suggest that the preponderance of Hellenic and Biblical names in the 'martyrium' is more likely to reflect a wealthier class, from which officers were more often drawn. Inscription 94 – the only martyrium inscription referring to a family about whom we have some information – commemorates Sergius, whom we know to have been an important official originally from Emesa. Not incidentally, his nephew also holds office in Nessana as a deacon. Clearly this is one of the first and most important families of the community, and remains so for several decades. It is reasonable to assume that burial in the 'martyrium' was particularly expensive, and that the people whose deaths are inscribed there are therefore more likely to be members of the upper echelon of Nessana society. The naming practices commemorated in the 'martyrium' and in the officers' names are thus probably an indication of social difference. This fits with what we know of naming practices elsewhere in the province: though there are many Semitic-named churchmen, their numbers decline as one climbs higher in the church administration.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev*, p. 87.

We see then that what appears as a difference based on profession – a group identity based on the profession of churchman or officer – is not easily separated from divisions based on economic differences. Keeping this overlap in mind, we may still justifiably speak of profession as an important tool in the categorization of people.

One point to note is that no one is ever characterized by himself or by others as a farmer or a shepherd, despite the fact that most – if not all–of the population must have engaged in farming or pastoralism, if not both. Agriculture for subsistence and for export was the major economic basis of the all the Negev communities; manufacture was usually limited to locally produced goods, such as olive oil, wine, and dates.<sup>27</sup> Of course this is primarily an indication that farming was widespread enough to be taken for granted: in a community where everyone is (also) a farmer, there is no need or purpose to identifying people as such. Yet beyond this truism, a comparison with other, similar communities shows that this lacuna is not universal, and offers us some insight into the dynamics of Nessana.

The papyri of Aphrodito, and in particular the archives of Dioscorus, show us a society similar in many ways to Nessana: it is roughly the same size, has a similar mix of soldiers and civilians, and is also mainly Christian. Yet in Aphrodito people are frequently labeled as shepherd (ποιμήν) or landowner (γῆοῦχος), a fact that Keenan rightly interprets as indicative of the social tensions between the two groups.<sup>28</sup> In Nessana

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 87.

<sup>27</sup> Elliott, *The Elusa Oikoumene*, pp. 115-118 for a survey of the agricultural crops and their importance.

<sup>28</sup> Keenan, "Village Shepherds and Social tension in Byzantine Egypt", p. 253

we see no evidence of a strict line of demarcation between farmers and herders, nor any evidence that these two occupations were indeed perceived as separate occupations. Whatever tensions may have arisen between the needs of roaming animals and staple crops – and *P.Cairo Masp.* I 67087 is a perfect illustration of these kinds of inevitable clashes of interests – these tensions do not appear to have taken the form of professional group identities. This fits both the current theories regarding relationships between pastoral and sedentary agriculture and the archaeological record. Recent scholarship has tended to emphasize the lack of clear distinctions between pastoral and farming communities, preferring instead to see them as part of a continuous spectrum;<sup>29</sup> and Hirschfeld's field survey has uncovered ample remains of farmhouses with both herding pens and tilled terraces.<sup>30</sup>

### **Social Mobility**

These questions of external evidence for people's professions are particularly interesting in light of the frequent discussion regarding inherited occupations and changes in the social system in Late Antiquity. The traditional view of the later empire emphasized the severe restrictions on social mobility as embodied in the imperial law codes. A.H.M. Jones first challenged this notion, arguing that the social system under the empire was not only more fluid than had previously been thought, but was indeed fairly flexible and conducive to social mobility, not just relatively but also absolutely.<sup>31</sup> The

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<sup>29</sup> Elliott, *The Elusa Oikoumene*, p. 43

<sup>30</sup> Hirschfeld, "Farms and Villages in Byzantine Palestine", esp. p. 56, regarding site 164 on Mount Saggi.

law codes, according to Jones, “were witness to the weakness and frustration of the central government, not to its effectiveness in coercing and controlling its subjects.”<sup>32</sup> This appears entirely accurate in the case of Nessana, where we encounter very little evidence of inherited status.

In a society where family professions are important, we would expect to find people identified partly through their fathers’ occupations.<sup>33</sup> In Nessana, though patronymics are of course extremely common, the professions of previous generations are not mentioned: the one possible exception is *P.Ness.* 31.43, [Αβραα]μίου Θεμου οἰκέτου – Abraham son of Themos, the steward, as H.I. Bell suggests.<sup>34</sup> Though the noun οἰκέτης in this instance can indeed be seen as referring to the father rather than to the son, as Bell suggests, the fact that it would be the only case where an individual is identified through his father’s occupation may incline us to reject Bell’s construction. In any case it is not a typical or standard procedure: usually, people do not use paternal occupations as classificatory identification. This is the case even when we know the father to have been well known in the community or to have held an important public position.

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<sup>31</sup> Jones, "The Caste System in the Later Roman Empire".

<sup>32</sup> Keenan, "On Law and Society in Late Roman Egypt", p. 237. Recently Haldon has also emphasized that late antique society was “neither rigidly hierarchical nor inflexible. It was possible to move from relatively humble status to a position of considerable wealth and power, .... Such opportunities were by definition very limited, however, so that the vast majority of the population undoubtedly remained in the social group to which they were born.” Haldon, "Economy and Administration", p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> See for example pp. 79-80.

<sup>34</sup> Bell, "Non-Literary Papyri from Nessana", p. 34.

As for hereditary occupations, several instances in which a change of profession from father to son is treated as entirely unexceptional may suffice to show that an inherited profession was not legally or socially prescribed. An inscription published by Alt but no longer extant commemorates the death of a soldier, Flavius Sergius Patricius in 563/564 (Alt 1921.40, n.4). This soldier's grandson, Sergius son of Patrick, died in 592 while an abbot of the monastery (Alt 1921.42; Colt inscription 12), and must have begun his career in the church around the middle of the sixth century. It may be that the abbot's father was still a soldier; but it is evident that someone in the family left the army and turned to the church while the military presence in Nessana was still strong, long before the dissolution of the corps in the 580's. More than a hundred years later, Father Cyrin, a priest, apprentices his son to one al-Aswad, probably as a farm-worker of some kind since no specific occupation is mentioned (*P.Ness.* 56). In any case it is clear that the son is not going to follow in his father's footsteps and enter the church, and that this divergent path is undertaken with the father's blessing and indeed by his arrangement. There are of course plenty of cases where a son is known to have followed in his father's footsteps and entered the same profession; but from the two examples given above, we may assume that there was no legal obligation to do so and that this was matter of custom rather than law.<sup>35</sup>

The lack of inherited status groups should keep us from over-interpreting the few pieces of information regarding professional identities or economic divisions. And

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<sup>35</sup> Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, p. 861.

indeed, the two most rigidly defined and limiting social classes – slaves and tenant farmers – are almost completely missing from the world of Nessana. Slaves appear only twice in the 195 papyri and fragments of papyri (*P.Ness.* 89.21 and 165.4), and it is perhaps not coincidental that one of those mentions comes in the account of a trading concern foreign to Nessana. This is the case even though most of the documents are records of expenses and accounts, and we would thus expect the purchase and expenses of slaves to appear regularly, if indeed they were a feature of the community. There are also two possible mentions of a steward or agent managing property for a landlord, perhaps one that is absent at the time. *P.Ness.* 31.43 speaks of [Αβραα]μίου Θεμου οϊκέτου – either Abraham steward of Themos, as Kraemer assumes, or Abraham son of Themos, the steward, as H.I. Bell suggests.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the fragmentary *P.Ness.* 161 appears to be an account rendered to an absentee owner by an agent or *chargé d'affaires* of some sort.

All in all, these few isolated instances do not imply a highly stratified society, nor one in which routine use is made of assistants or legally bound servants. This is in stark contrast to contemporary Egypt, of course, where there were many absentee landlords and tenant farmers, and estates were often managed by stewards. Even more striking, the situation in Nessana is different from that in Petra, where we find evidence of tenant farmers in rental agreements.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Bell, "Non-Literary Papyri from Nessana", p. 34; see above, p. 55.

<sup>37</sup> *P.Petra* 2.

Both the social flexibility and the absence of legal castes are a historic characteristic of Palestinian society, and were noted as unusual features in contrast to the rest of the empire in the sixth century. Justinian notes in his Codex that “Whereas in other provinces which are subject to the rule of our serenity a law instituted by our ancestors holds tenants down by a kind of eternal right, so that they are not allowed to leave the places by whose crops they are nurtured or desert the fields which they have once undertaken to cultivate, but the landlords of Palestine do not enjoy this advantage.”<sup>38</sup> Justinian’s attempt to eliminate this Palestinian idiosyncrasy does not appear to have been successful, neither in Nessana nor in other regions of the Palestinian provinces.

The lack of strict social divisions and the ease of movement between different professions is made apparent and enhanced by the integration of the two most clearly defined professions – priests and soldiers – into the rest of the community. Far from being separated into a discrete social world, the military and the religious were an integral part of the Nessana community. The so-called ‘soldiers’ archive’<sup>39</sup> provides plenty of information about the daily life of the garrison from 505 to 595,<sup>40</sup> and the vast majority of the documents deal not with military business nor with administration related

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<sup>38</sup> *Codex Justinianus* 11.5.

<sup>39</sup> Kraemer divides the Nessana corpus into three distinct archives: the ‘soldiers’ archive’, composed of *P.Ness.* 14-33; the Church archive, *P.Ness.* 44-47, and *P.Ness.* 53; and the Arab archive, *P.Ness.* 55-96 (including the documents of George son of Patrick). Though I am not at all as certain as Kraemer that these are distinct archives or ‘genizehs’ as he refers to them – the collections seems random enough that it could not reasonably be a public archive or even an archive of a certain group’s or family’s important legal documents – the title ‘soldiers’ archive’ is useful shorthand for referring to the earliest papyri, which are all related either by their content or by their signatories to the corps stationed in Nessana until the end of the sixth century.

<sup>40</sup> Though it appears that the unit was disbanded by the 580’s, the later documents clearly form part of the same collection, and will also be placed as part of the ‘soldiers’ archive’.

to the running of the post. Instead, most of the papyri address entirely civil concerns, such as house divisions and marriage contracts, which happen to involve at least one soldier. Perhaps the best demonstration of the civilian nature of the archive can be found in the fragmentary minor documents (nos. 97-144). These have been assigned by Kraemer to the soldiers' archive on the basis of – considerations and the very occasional honorific Flavius (as in *P.Ness.* 110.1);<sup>41</sup> but other than that, there is nothing in their content to distinguish them from any other documents found in the other collections. Although the soldiers' archive is fairly comprehensive and well preserved, it shows no particular distinguishing characteristics, nor does it present us with any reason to suppose that the Nessana garrison lived a life separate or different from any other Nessana residents. Soldiers farmed their own land, entered into contracts and marriage ties with non-soldiers, and lived in the village among every one else: though the fort is still visible on what Shershevsky, with some exaggeration, called 'the Nessana acropolis', material remains show that the building "was not the actual residence of soldiers but was used rather for the storage of arms and equipment,"<sup>42</sup> and that soldiers lived among other residents of the village rather than in barracks or designated quarters.<sup>43</sup> Nothing in Nessana justifies seeing the military as a separate caste.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 312.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> In contradistinction to the very well preserved Diocletianic barracks at Oboda, situated separately from the rest of the town and preserving a distinct sense of planning, very different from the urban planning in evidence elsewhere in Oboda.

As with the absence of *coloni adscripti* and tenant farmers mentioned above, there are historic reasons for this integration of the military and civilian facets of life. Since the time of Justinian, Palestine was known for the weakness of its civil authorities – a weakness which led to substantial overlap between military and civil functions.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the inscriptions promulgating the Be'er-Sheva edict from the sixth century provides confirmation that even the imperial authority recognized that unlike elsewhere, in the communities of Palaestina Prima in general and the Negev in particular a distinction between the military and the general population would have been artificial and unenforceable. Although the inscription cites three different classes for tax purposes, it also notes that in some places these would all be considered as one category – the settlements mentioned being Mampsis, Asoa and Asouada, all neighboring to Nessana and with a similar demographic makeup.<sup>46</sup>

The assimilation of soldiers and civilians is not, however, unique: priests and churchmen of all ranks were just as involved in daily community life, and their daily habits and customs appear to have been extraordinarily similar. The archives of the abbots Patrick and Sergius display the same interests and occupations we encounter elsewhere: land deals are abundant, and loans are granted in the same amounts as elsewhere. Contrary to the vision of priests as lifted above the common concerns of the

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<sup>44</sup> This is in distinction to Alston's position, who speaks of soldiers as "intermediaries between the imperial polity and the local polity while being part of both communities". Alston, "The Ties that Bind: Soldiers and Societies", p. 187.

<sup>45</sup> See Justinian's *Novels 102* and *103* and Mayerson, "Justinian's Novel 103 and the Reorganization of Palestine".

<sup>46</sup> Mayerson, "The Beersheva Edict", p. 144.

populace, an ostrakon from neighboring Sobata mentions a churchman as liable for the usual corvée on the water reservoir.<sup>47</sup> Later, under Muslim rule, clerics of all ranks are mentioned in all of the usual tax accounts: evidently, priests and archdeacons were subject to the poll tax together with the lay members of the community. Even monks owned land, suggesting that they engaged in at least some farming.<sup>48</sup> The assimilation into community life continued after death: Nessana, unlike Sobata, shows no separation in burial procedures between laymen and clerics.<sup>49</sup>

To sum up: though it is possible to separate the society of Nessana into distinct categories and treat the soldiers, priests, farmers and tradesmen as discrete social groups, to do so would be to impose irrelevant and unjustified categories. The papyri and the archaeological remains do present us with evidence of economic differences in the community, and there are certainly different occupations discernable. But these 'objective' classifications do not translate into subjective groups. Economic classes and occupational groups do not appear to have played an important role in determining people's daily lives, nor do we see any evidence that the people of Nessana attached any great importance to these divisions; and there is certainly no justification for speaking of hereditary status groups. Overall, the community between the fifth and the seventh centuries seems to have been particularly homogenous in its perception of itself. One should note that these phenomena are similar throughout the ages, showing no sign of

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<sup>47</sup> Youtie, "Ostraca from Sbeitah", p. 457, ostrakon III.

<sup>48</sup> Elliott, *The Elusa Oikoumene*, p. 123.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev*, p. 94.

changing in accordance with the traditional chronological divisions. The slight distinctions between higher-status occupations, such as priests and officers, and the run-of-the-mill farmers, do not appear any different before or after the Muslim conquest. Of course, we encounter far fewer soldiers after the 580's when the corps based in Nessana was disbanded; but in all other senses there is little to support the view that "attention to economic issues such as modes of production and socioeconomic structures would reveal the old chronological division to be necessary and significant."<sup>50</sup> The debate on the possible polarization of society in Byzantine Egypt is still ongoing, with some claiming that the fifth and sixth centuries saw a progressive widening of the gap between rich and poor.<sup>51</sup> In the case of Nessana, an attempt to map out the socioeconomic structures reveals a relatively static society, with few changes in social attitudes.

## **Elites**

A recognition that late antique society was not as rigidly stratified as had been thought and an interest in social dynamics have necessarily led to a growth in the study of elites.<sup>52</sup> The main problem encountered by various scholars trying to describe those status groups who dominate social, political or economic life is that narrowing the field to just one group often proves impossible, as a given society will usually present a variety of 'elite communities', sometimes but not always overlapping. If, as Haldon proclaims in

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<sup>50</sup> Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev*, p. 95, paraphrasing the thesis in Giardini, "Esplosione di tardoantico".

<sup>51</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300–700*.

<sup>52</sup> Haldon, "Elites Old and New in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East", p. 7.

the introduction to the Proceedings of the *Workshop on Elites in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, “the key point is to appreciate that economic position, status and cultural self identity all intersect at various points on the social grid,”<sup>53</sup> this section will attempt to map out this grid in the microcosm of Nessana. Who were the dominant people in the community? How did that dominance manifest itself? And where, if at all, did the various elites intersect and overlap?

As always, the basic tools for answering these questions are found in the descriptions of self and others in the papyri. One may have expected the titles, honorifics and terms used in the papyri to be helpful in discerning the powerful forces in the community; but in point of fact, a study of address forms and vocabulary is not helpful here. Honorifics prove to be too widely used as a form of politeness to serve as a reliable guide; and the ancient terminology is too flexible and context-dependent – not to say vague—to be of substantial use.<sup>54</sup> What we can do instead is rely on the place people assume in the documents. Which people, and which types of people, are asked to witness documents, apart from family members and those connected to the principals in the contracts? To whom do people turn in times of financial or administrative trouble? Who is asked to intercede with the authorities or to arbitrate disputes?

The first place to look for powerful people is in dealings with the government, and fortunately, there are plenty of documents from the last quarter of the seventh century

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 216, for a similar phenomenon. Footnote 41 there refers to Fikhman 1979 for a discussion and explanation of the futility of a vocabulary-based study.

illustrating the administration of Nessana and the contact between the village and imperial centers. Particularly useful here are the *entagia*, *P.Ness.* 60-67—bilingual requisitions of oil and wheat, dating from 674 to 698, to be used for supplying the Muslim troops. The first point to be noted is that the *entagia* make use of different scribes for the Arabic and Greek portions of the documents. The short requisitions always include the name of the scribe, and this person always changes between the two portions of the text (and in no case can the Arabic name be seen as a transliteration or translation of the Greek name). An even greater separation between the Arabic and the Greek clerical worlds is observed in *P.Ness.* 56 of the same era (January 687), a contract in Greek and in Arabic, where even the witnesses to the Arabic portion of the document are different from the witnesses to the Greek portion. Though the existence of parallel and separate clerical systems may seem self-evident, it goes against the common wisdom of scholarship regarding pre-Arabization Umayyad administration. The usual explanation has been that overwhelmed with the sudden realization that they now had an empire to administer, the Muslim conquerors elected to keep the structure and the manpower of the previous administrative system in place. Only with Abd al-Malik's decree of Arabization did the Greek and Greek scribes slowly get phased out.<sup>55</sup>

The *entagia* sent to Nessana from Gaza preserve a different story – one of two parallel systems of scribal notation and administration: the former, Greek based,

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<sup>55</sup> The traditional position is to assign the shift to Arabic to 698 under Abd al-Malik. Recent study has shown that the process was probably more gradual, spanning the end of the seventh century and the beginning of the eighth century. This incremental approach is exemplified in Sijpesteijn's detailed examination of arabization in Egypt: Sijpesteijn, "New Rule over Old Structures: Egypt after the Muslim Conquest". For further discussion of the bureaucratic changes instituted with the change of empires, see Chapter Two below.

Byzantine-origin system, supplemented by a new cadre of Arabic scribes. This new body of clerks is visibly less at ease with the written word than their Greek counterparts. In *P.Ness.* 66, for instance, the Arabic writing is noticeably less professional than the Greek. The thicker, bigger cruder letters in the Arabic could conceivably be explained by a difference in conventions; but the Arabic lines are uneven, the spaces between them irregular, and words are unevenly spaced. Though Arabic writing of the period conventionally separates words with spaces, here we find spaces separating letters within the same word (note for instance the distance after the *waw* in *al-awwal* and *wahamis* in 66.4). Letters are big and unwieldy, spilling over into the Greek writing. The Greek, in comparison, is flowing, even beautiful, very sure-handed and confident: the letters are small, even and set together, the pen strokes thin and with some flourishes added, the spacing even. The same gap in proficiency at writing appears in other bilingual documents; the Arabic portion of *P.Ness.* 56, though not as ham-fisted as the *entagia*, is written in large, uneven letters with an appreciable variation in their size and shape. Clearly, the Arabic clerks were not as used to the scribal work as their Greek counterparts. Though common sense would dictate that the new administrators were likely to be bilingual – and indeed that has often been the assumption – the administrative system itself did not require bilingualism, and in some sense may be said to have discouraged it; such a skill may have come in useful, but the system functioned without it. This also means that the scribes employed by the Umayyads were not the same people to whom the villagers had been used to turn for their administrative and legal need, or they would have been better equipped to deal with their new job requirements.

During the same decades, we notice a different group of men, separate from the clerks and administrators whose names appear in the documents, serving as the unofficial leaders of the villages, both towards the administration and in internal arbitration between individuals. These are not people with any official role or title, beyond a frequent confluence with importance in the church. Rather, this is the group usually called in the secondary literature ‘village notables’: those men who for some reason – or some combination of reasons – hold a position of authority in the community and whose words carry weight.

Two such grassroots organizations appear in *P.Ness.* 58 and *P.Ness.* 75 from the late seventh century. The first is a receipt issued by a group of eight people to Sergius son of George, the priest whose family archive is responsible for the preservation of many of the seventh-century documents. The group must have had some clout and a measure of formal authority, as the receipt is issued for payment of taxes and Abraham son of Mousaios is styled ‘leader’ (ἄρχ(ων), 58.11). None other of the eight men is identified by any title (in fact, even the recipient of the receipt, Sergius, is not given his title of priest but simply styled κύρ(ι)ος, though he must have already entered the church). Two members of the commission, Stephan son of Hanun and George son of Raqi, appear as contributors to the church in *P.Ness.* 80, giving respectable if not unusual amounts (three and four modii of wheat, respectively, where the average donation is 3.7 modii). The very fact of their presence on the list of donors implies that Stephan and George had a measure of wealth, and that they were involved in the life of the community and invested in supporting the church. The commission is described as representing the entire

community; after listing the names of the eight members, the scribe adds ‘and the rest of our village of Nessana’ (καὶ εἰ λιπὲ τοῦ χωρίου ὑμῶν Νεστάνο[ν], *P.Ness.* 58.5).

None of the other members of the commission is otherwise known to us. In his notes to the document Kraemer cites some comparable documents and institutions from Oxyrhynchos, and in so doing attempts to remedy the ‘indefinite’ and ‘vague’ nature of the group by relating it to a better known and more formal arrangement – either the pagarchy, or the κοινότης τῶν πρωτοκομήτων.<sup>56</sup> None of these terms appears in this document or in others from the area, and the comparison is strained. This organization, whatever its purpose and derivation, is not very formal or clearly structured. There is no indication that the group or any member of the group represented the government administration or indeed anyone apart from ‘the rest of Nessana’. Its authority must have been accepted by other inhabitants for such receipts to serve their purpose; but the nature of the authority appears to have been unceremonious and voluntary.

The second instance we have of an informal but locally powerful group is particularly interesting, involving a cadre separate from, and opposed to, the formal government cadres. *P.Ness.* 75 records the attempt to organize a concentrated protest at the tax burden, starting with a certain Samuel in an unknown town in the area and including representatives from Nessana and Sobata. This delegation would not have included anyone formally affiliated with the government of the province; nor is there any reason to surmise a permanent βουλή governing the local townships. What we do see is a sense of community expressed in the phrases οἱ λοιποὶ and κοινότης (*P.Ness.* 89.25),

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<sup>56</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 170, notes on lines 1-5.

and an unofficial but nonetheless binding consensus on who the representatives of the community would be. Such ad-hoc committees, based mainly on standing in the community, are not unknown elsewhere, though there is little secondary scholarship on the subject; one may compare this tax protest to a letter addressed by eight named individuals and ‘everybody’ from the Arsinoite village of Euhemeria to their ‘patron’ complaining of ill-treatment (*P.Ross.Georg.* III 8, fourth century).

Our knowledge of the group of eight tax collectors shows that these ‘notables’ were probably better off financially than the average villager. They are also more likely to be associated with the church, whether as religious professionals, deacons or arch-deacons – positions which may have been more honorary than onerous – or simply donors. The connection between local clout and substantial donations to the church has been mentioned above. As for arch-deacons and deacons, these show up in greater than expected numbers as the witnesses to various contracts (for instance, see *P.Ness.* 46.10).<sup>57</sup> Presumably, being asked to witness a contract and being asked to serve in an official capacity in the local church were both expressions of the community’s respect. This is also the case in Petra, where the papyri show an increased and disproportionate presence of church officials in documents dealing with non-ecclesiastical matters.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> I have not seen elsewhere an analysis of the status of people asked to witness documents. Given the spread of functional illiteracy, it seems intuitive that a witness’s position was one of responsibility; in many cases, the witness is not only witnessing the signing of the document but is also testifying to the accuracy of the scribe’s rendition of the contracting parties’ wishes. Presumably the parties would be likely to ask people close to them (for family or personal reasons), or those people who had gained a reputation for honesty and reliability. The high incidence and repetition of particular well-known names in the witness lists supports this common-sense supposition.

<sup>58</sup> Fiema, "Byzantine Petra - a Reassessment", p. 116.

The archives of Patrick son of Sergius and George son of Patrick, both abbots (serially) of the church of St. Sergius, give us a fair picture of the role played by priests in the seventh century. Like the lay members, the priests appear as witnesses to contracts where they are not otherwise involved (*P.Ness.* 56 and 57, for instance); but they also serve a wider, more paternal role in caring for the community on the material and social level. *P.Ness.* 55 records George son of Patrick paying taxes for a certain Sergius. *Prima facie*, this appears as a financial transaction; yet it is not phrased as a straightforward loan, but as a respected member of the community assuming responsibility for the tax burden.

George son of Patrick does have a formal connection to the collection of taxes: the abbot is almost certainly the same man who is styled as διοικητής, to whom *P.Ness.* 68, 70, 72 and 74 are explicitly addressed, and who appears to have been the point person dealing with all the *entagia* (though most are addressed to the ‘people of Nessana’).<sup>59</sup> George’s main function appears to be to act as a tax collector reporting to the staff of the governor of *Filastīn* in Gaza. George the *dioiketes* is active in the 670’s and 680’s, arranging tax payments and dealing with the Umayyad administration’s requests, both personal (as in the request for a guide in *P.Ness.* 73) and governmental (as in the payment concerns of *P.Ness.* 71).

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<sup>59</sup> For the identification of the two Georges, see *P.Ness.* 59.3 which establishes the connection between the taxation official and George son of Patrick, and Kramer p. 7-8. Though, as Kramer notes, the name George is very common, the presence of the papers together in one archive seems to me to make the identification nearly certain.

It is no coincidence that it is impossible to establish with certainty the identity of the two Georges – the priest and the *dioiketes*—as one man. The official documents address George as ‘George of Nessana’ or George the *dioiketes*, making no mention of his church position; it is only in the papers dealing with other members of the village rather than with the administration in Gaza or Caesarea, that the title of priest is mentioned. From the standpoint of the governor’s office, the only relevant factor was George’s responsibility for the accounts and his official function. From the standpoint of the villagers such as the divorcing couple in *P.Ness. 57*, the religious position was relevant to George’s authority and actions.

It is perhaps worth stressing that a church job carried with it no legal power under the Umayyads, and that even much higher-placed members of the church hierarchy did not engage in disciplinary or coercive action.<sup>60</sup> The pastoral role, even in cases where priests are called to adjudicate, is conciliatory, not judicial. This is noteworthy in view of the fact that *P.Ness. 56* explicitly and clearly places the priest in a parallel position to the Muslim *qadi*, who does have a judicial position. In the Arabic portion of the contract, the first witness is Yazid ibn Fadi, who is known as the judicial authority of Nessana from *P.Ness. 77*;<sup>61</sup> the equivalent position in the Greek portion is taken by Sergius son of Patrick, and the Greek scribe is his father, George son of Patrick, both priests and eventually abbots of St. Sergius. Two types of authority thus guarantee and underlie the

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<sup>60</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 195.

<sup>61</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 159, quoting Dr. F.E. Day. Unfortunately, *P.Ness.77* itself has been missing since the 1950’s – a shame, since the letter to the *qadi* would have been informative regarding the administration of Nessana.

contract of *P.Ness.* 56 – the *qadi* as the official legal representative of imperial Umayyad power, and the religious and unofficially-recognized authority of the Christian leader.

The type of power underlying the priests' position is not easily pinned down. In part it must have been based on economic realities, like that of Stephan and George son of Hanun mentioned above; we may note that we know of other priests who are almost invisible in the documents, and are known to be relatively poor. In the list of donations recorded in *P.Ness.* 80, for instance, the two priests, John and Sadallah, give the least – only two modii of wheat. The fact that Sergius and George are well off and appear in many of the papyri (and not just those stemming from their family archive) is probably not coincidental. There is certainly also an element of the priest as representative of a higher power, though we should note that there is little to suggest that anyone in the village was particularly religious – the papyri exhibit notably few appeals to spiritual authority (and indeed, the one document to show any religious feeling stands out as an anomaly: *P.Ness.* 46).<sup>62</sup> Most obviously, the family of George and Patrick is one which has deep roots in the community and appears to have been at the forefront of village society for several generations. Here Nessana follows a pattern laid down in Egypt centuries before: “By the end of the fourth century it is normal to find presbyters and deacons as the representatives of the village population. The presbyters on average had more education than most other villagers, and they certainly had a moral authority deriving from their position, but the clergy also had a direct link to outside power, being

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<sup>62</sup> *P.Ness.* 96 is indeed a prayer, but the context is more apotropaic than an expression of piety; see *Ibid.*, p. 310. This is in marked contrast to Petra, where “settlements out of court ... are usually cemented by taking sacred oaths in the church.” Fiema, “Byzantine Petra - a Reassessment”, p. 116.

the direct subordinates of and appointees of the bishop of the metropoleis.”<sup>63</sup> This does hold true in Nessana of the seventh century – George is one of the few people whom we know to have been communicating with officials in other cities, such as the governor (*P.Ness.* 72). But in addition to the sphere of religious influence, a wider circle of village elites is also involved in the maintenance of village life.

In sum, there is some overlap between positions in the church and social status, and there is some overlap between economic and social positions, but neither of these is exactly coterminous with the other. The existence of poor priests has been mentioned above; one may add to that that some of wealthiest men in the village barely appear in the documents, and – what is less likely to be simply a reflection of the paucity of the evidence – are conspicuously missing from gatherings and groups of village representatives. Eulais, whose legacy to his sons includes a 96-bed khan and other buildings and plots of lands, is known to us only incidentally through *P.Ness.* 31, proof that some of the richest denizens of Nessana are not apparent in the papyri.

## **Literacy**

A link between education and social position in late antique society is often asserted. “In terms of social status, literacy and illiteracy might have been the dividing line between the well-off and the disadvantaged, or in other words, between the upper and lower class, at least as far as ancient urban society is concerned.”<sup>64</sup> Having identified

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<sup>63</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 316.

certain key figures in the political and social landscape of Nessana, can we say that these 'elites' are more likely to be literate than their fellow villagers? Could it be that their literacy is one reason for their heavier presence in the documents and for the willingness of Nessanites to be represented by them?

Before attempting to answer these questions, a few caveats are in order. The nature of the evidence is such that it naturally skews towards the more literate population; though illiterate people do appear in the papyri, they do so at a much lower rate than we would expect. Out of 41 cases and 38 individuals whose literacy we can comment upon with any certainty, only 7 are described as illiterate. Whatever the rate of functional literacy, it must have been significantly lower than that.<sup>65</sup> In addition, it is often impossible to determine whether or not an individual is literate. Literate people made use of scribes for different reasons, and when scribes are employed, it is often impossible to determine whether the party for whom the document is written was literate and if so, on what level. It is obviously easier to determine that the actual writer of a document is literate than to draw any conclusions about other parties – and indeed, in some documents, the most we can affirm is that the scribe and the witnesses were literate.

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<sup>64</sup> Kraus, "(II)literacy in Non-Literary Papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt: further aspects of the educational ideal in ancient literary sources and modern times", p. 323.

<sup>65</sup> Using tax returns, Hombert and Préaux estimated a literacy rate of 32%; subsequently published declarations show similar proportions, with about a third of the declarants signing for themselves. Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, p. 25. It is perhaps worth noting that although there are no instances in Nessana of signatures by mark, which are relatively common in Elephantine, this is almost certainly a product of different clerical habits than of higher functional literacy. In Nessana, someone who was completely illiterate would ask a witness or the scribe to sign for him, whereas presumably this was not so common in Elephantine.

Finally, literacy is not an either-or proposition, and there are many cases of ‘semi-literacy’ or ‘functional literacy’, which masquerade as illiteracy.<sup>66</sup>

Our corpus contains no personal letters, only business communications and accounts and contracts of various kinds. *P.Ness.* 50 comes the closest to a letter in its informal phrasing, and the two correspondents clearly know each other; but it is still very businesslike. Bishop George has a favor to ask; this is not equivalent to personal letters between friends or family members. As for the business accounts, some are meant for personal use, and as such are little more than aide-mémoires or notations for personal archives (*P.Ness.* 82); others are meant for consumption by others (*P.Ness.* 89).

The levels of literacy exhibited in the documents vary massively. Some of the handwritings indicate an ease with writing and composition. In these cases, the letters are evenly spaced, regular in size and flowing, the pen held with a light hand and there is little evidence of hesitation. Often the writing tilts slightly to the right, an indication of quick and practiced writing. Scribes are among these fluent writers (see the main text of *P.Ness.* 16), but they are not the only ones (see also Zacharias in *P.Ness.* 57.31) In contrast to these writers, many others who are literate enough to write their names (and sometimes even add a formulaic sentence such as ‘I have witnessed’), write only painfully. Victor son of Abraham in *P.Ness.* 19.9-10 writes in a very cramped hand, where even the signature is unpracticed and the letters are rather crudely drawn. Interestingly, Victor characterizes himself as unable to write, though we see that labored

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<sup>66</sup> For the problems facing a statistical analysis of literacy in Egypt, see Youtie, "Αγραμματος: An Aspect of Greek Society in Egypt", pp. 164-165.

as his writing is, he is not what we would term ‘illiterate’; the ability to write here becomes synonymous with the ability to compose a legal document. Similarly, Sergius son of Pallas in 57 writes slowly, with heavy stroke marks indicating strong pressure on the pen; the letters are all upright, each obviously drawn separately and showing no tilt to the right. George’s writing in the same document is even more labored, using unusually big letters and an uneven distribution of spacing.

The use of scribes is not limited to any particular group of people, nor is it a reliable indication of a person’s literacy level. Scribes are employed both by people who can barely sign their names (*P.Ness.* 24) and by fluent and practiced writers (*P.Ness.* 51). There are no noticeable differences in literacy or its distribution between the fifth century and the seventh century.

The expected convergence between literacy and authority in the community is visible in the documents of Sergius son of George, who acts as a scribe in *P.Ness.* 55 and 57; witnesses *P.Ness.* 56; and is known to have been a priest and later abbot of St. Sergius. Sergius is a central figure in the village, as evidenced by the fact that he is asked to serve as witness; his family is well established and reasonably well-off (as shown by the loan in *P.Ness.* 55 and the unusually large tax recorded in *P.Ness.* 58). The impression we get is of a pillar of the community, whose literacy – not just the ability to write but also the ability to compose documents, a familiarity with the language of the law and an ease with other officials (as evidenced by the reference to the governor in *P.Ness.* 58) – gives Sergius a certain edge, serving to enhance and reaffirm his local power.

In contrast, we see that other officials in Nessana – people who are involved in the running of the village, hold a formal position and play an important role in the life of the community—are not necessarily literate. John and Victor, who appear in both *P.Ness.* 55 and 59, are tax collectors – a task which we might have assumed to require a degree of literacy. Instead we see that John and Victor simply dictate the accounts and receipts for their customers, declaring matter of factly that they cannot write (55.8); and indeed, the lack of even a signature for either of them suggests that this was meant literally. Evidently, this did not hinder them in carrying out their job.

Though it seems to us intuitive that the division between literate and illiterate would follow economic lines, echoing the gap between rich and poor, this is often not true. Egyptian papyri have shown that there was no emphasis on literacy as connected to the ability to carry out official positions;<sup>67</sup> in Nessana these fault lines were even less likely to intersect. We do not see a necessary correlation between literacy and social position in the community, though the ability to compose documents must surely have been helpful and conducive to maintaining authority.

### **Elites – conclusion**

The last decades of the Byzantine empire saw a radical change in the relationship between urban centers and village communities, a change which continued apace in the seventh century both in the rump Byzantine Empire and in the lands now governed by the

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<sup>67</sup> Kraus, "(Il)literacy in Non-Literary Papyri ", Youtie, "Αγραμματος: An Aspect of Greek Society in Egypt", pp. 168-169. Contra see Kraus, p. 133, although even Kraus concedes more than a few cases of tax officials unable read and write anything apart from their own signature.

Muslims. This change consisted in part of a loss in the autonomy and fiscal responsibility of cities, leading in turn – perhaps paradoxically – to an assumption of greater political power among “hitherto unimportant local leaders – village headmen, small scale local landlords.”<sup>68</sup> The authority these local leaders had was in part a reflection of the power-vacuum outside the village communities; and in part a reflection of the social status granted to them within the community for a variety of reasons. These ‘prominent citizens’ did not form a city council; the complete absence of the words βουλή or βουλευταί from the Petra and Nessana papyri and all Negev inscriptions speak volumes. Nor can we speak of a fixed administrative cadre with specific titles and job descriptions.<sup>69</sup> What appears is a much looser, more flexible arrangement, and one which evidently continued to co-exist side by side with the government machinery (as evidenced by the two versions of the contract and two sets of witnesses to *P.Ness.* 56). Moreover, the use of ad hoc committees in dealings with the Umayyad administration demonstrates a belief that they will be accepted as representative of their communities. Unlike in Egypt or in the northern Mediterranean, we do not see in the Negev a pattern of patronage or of dependency. At most, the generally respected members of the community grant a certain legitimacy to transactions without involving any legal machinery, and provide some mechanism for facilitating dealing with the outside world and for arbitrating disputes within the community.

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<sup>68</sup> Haldon, "Pre-Industrial States and the Distribution of Resources: the Nature of the Problem", p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Contra see Kraemer’s attempt to pin down the commission in *P.Ness.* 75 (see pp. 60-61 above); see also Kraemer’s discussion of the groups of ‘village headmen’, p. 219, as if the term was an official and well-defined position.

## Social Networks

Two features characterize the nature of personal ties in the village: on the one hand, a strong sense of mutual reliance and interdependency within the family, and on the other hand, a surprisingly limited understanding of the family. Ties between siblings are given great importance: they are stressed in the papyri (*P.Ness.* 15.4 and throughout), and many of the documents involve dealings between brothers or involving brothers as witnesses. Several examples will suffice here: Inscription 94 records the burial of Maria sister of Patrick in the church – an unusual burial for a woman, and one which is clearly and explicitly derived from her brother’s position in the village.

A similar assumption regarding the role of siblings is found in the marriage settlement of 537, giving Aniyah in marriage to Flavius Valens and to his brother al-Geb, sons of al-Ubay: δεδωκέναι ?] / Ανιαν ὑπεξουσίαν αὐτοῦ θυγατήρα ν[εωτέραν πρὸς γάμου κοινωνίαν ? Φλαουίω] / Οὐάλεντι τοῦ Αλοβαιου, Αλγεβ Αλ[οβαιου... (18.4-6). Kraemer sees this odd phrasing as a consequence of the minority of Valens, the intended bridegroom.<sup>70</sup> It is surely also an indication that the two brothers were seen as constituting a single household, and it is this household that Aniyah is about to join. The same conception of siblings as comprising a single household, regardless of the presence or absence of the parents, is visible in the poll-tax register, 150 years later. *P.Ness.* 76 is an alphabetized list of Nessanites subject to the poll tax. Placed out of alphabetic order and subject to the main alphabetic entry are 18 dependents, of whom ten

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<sup>70</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 59.

are brothers and five sons. For tax, as well as for social purposes, the main unit is seen to be the nuclear family – but the parent figures are often absent from the unit, and sibling responsibility and inter-dependency continues as a matter of course. Tax returns and registers from Egypt suggest that this was not uncommon elsewhere; Bagnall and Frier’s study includes many examples of *frèrèches*, in which families are extended laterally and married siblings share a household for several years or decades, if not permanently.<sup>71</sup>

The fact that classification in the tax register is not by individual but by household underlines the central and fundamental, if not unexpected, role of the family. It is notable, however, that the household is not expanded beyond the sibling group; we see no evidence, neither in the returns nor in other documents, less formal and not as constrained by legal precedent, that the unit of reference included extended family or more than two generations in household, let alone a tribal framework.<sup>72</sup> This is not to say that other generations, extended both into the past and into the future, are not present. People are routinely identified by their patronymics in all the papyri, and the language of contracts includes an assumption that future generations will carry on present concerns, rights and debts, as indicated by the standard references to διάδοχοι (*P.Ness.* 15 and 26, to name but a couple). But grandparents are much more rarely mentioned, and though families are

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<sup>71</sup> Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* pp. 62-63. The dependent brothers in *P.Ness.* 76 cannot technically be classified as constituting *frèrèches*, since we do not know their ages and whether any were married. On the intensity and importance of sibling bonds in Egypt, see also Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, pp. 204-205, and its analysis of the many documents devoted to his siblings’ affairs in the archive of Aurelius Isidorus.

<sup>72</sup> See Chapter Three below.

extended laterally, there is little evidence of a vertical sense of belonging; certainly identifications and appellations do not extend beyond present memory.

This can be clearly seen in those cases where a particular feature of past generations may well have been expected to be remembered in the present. As mentioned above, no one is ever identified by his father's occupation. Furthermore, the Syrian roots of a transplanted family are never mentioned beyond the first generation. Inscription 94 tell us that Sergius moved to Nessana from Emesa with his sister and her son; but within a generation, the family's foreign roots are entirely irrelevant, in spite of the normally very strong emphasis placed on local provenance.<sup>73</sup> Here the Petra papyri provide us with a useful example of an alternative: for in Petra, the past is present to an almost excessive degree. Families are quick to mention former honors, and the contracts display a sentimental and oddly out of context attachment to past honorifics and to the former position of the city.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, Nessana is quick to subsume the past to the present. There is no sense of a family or civic memory extending back to previous generations; it is perhaps almost too trite to note that Nessana exhibits many instances of lintels reused in floors with no attention given to their intended and previous use.

Overall, this brief look at relations within families confirms our previous conclusions regarding the social structure in Nessana. This is not a very hierarchical society, and individuals are relatively free of the weight of previous generations. Though

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<sup>73</sup> See Chapter Five below.

<sup>74</sup> Fiema, "Byzantine Petra - a Reassessment", p. 122.

economic differences play a role in determining a person's place in the community, class defined technically is not operative here.

### **Communal Identity**

So far this chapter has focused on smaller-scale ties within the village; this section will attempt to put the pieces of the puzzle together and see what we can say about the functioning of the community as a community. The first characteristic to note is that although, as we have seen above, families are not extended very far, neither horizontally nor vertically, property held in joint ownership is very common. Sometimes the two owners are related; oftentimes they are not. Ownership is held in common between soldiers and civilians, men and women; houses, courtyards, threshing floors and plots of land are all shared. Indications of joint ownership are found in *P.Ness*. 16, 23, 26, 97 and 98. In the cases where siblings share a house, that situation is often the result of joint inheritance; but this will not suffice to explain all of the many cases. This pattern fits the distribution of farmhouses in the area: "Most of the farms contain one or two farmhouses with two to three nuclear units", indicating several households sharing in the running of the farm. Furthermore, the farms themselves follow a pattern whereby several farms are clustered together, sharing the same drainage basin.<sup>75</sup> It is a reasonable assumption that clusters like this may well have shared in work animals as well, pooling their resources and perpetuating a pattern of shared resources.

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<sup>75</sup> Haiman, "Agriculture and Nomad-State Relations", p. 41.

The same habits of mutual responsibility are repeated on a larger scale in the village itself. Civic spaces in the Negev show the same absence of a street network that had led Francoise Villeneuve to speak of ‘anarchy and disorder’ in the Hauran villages.<sup>76</sup> There is little evidence of internal planning; most settlements are unwalled (the one exception being Obodas); and most telling of all, there are no market places or rows of shops.<sup>77</sup> Nessana follows this pattern, with houses built very close to each other, separated only by narrow alleys, with no identifiable public space, and no buildings that can be interpreted as shops. Indeed, the concept of a road which is decidedly and uniquely in the public domain – as opposed to alleys which are partly an extension of private houses – is rare enough to be explicitly labeled. In describing the limits of the property in *P.Ness.* 31, the scribe includes “the public street,” ἡ δημοσία ῥύμη, as a marker for the north and south boundaries (31.46-47). In general we see here a lack of separation between private and public, and a habit of assuming common ownership.

The importance attached to community and the crucial role that this sense of community played in people’s daily lives appears clearly in the papyri. The vaguely described but evidently authoritative eight-man commission witnessed in *P.Ness.* 58 has been mentioned above. A careful look at other documents indicates that this is not unusual, and that in many cases the village relied on extra-judicial, consensual agreements, enforced by the members of the community. The first, and perhaps vaguest, evidence of this emphasis on the community’s opinions appears in the prologue to a

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<sup>76</sup> Villeneuve, "L'économie rurale et la vie des campagnes dans le Hauran antique".

<sup>77</sup> Hirschfeld, "Farms and Villages in Byzantine Palestine", p. 62.

summons preserved in *P.Ness.* 29. The document begins, “it is said ... that sensible people turn to what is reasonable and voluntarily comply with what is judicious and ... to turn aside and think otherwise, nor to bring upon themselves blame” (καὶ λεγε [...]η τοὺς εὐφρονοῦντας πρὸς τὸ εὐγνώμον ῥέπειν καὶ ἀφ’ ἑαυτῶν τῶι εὐλόγωι κατακολο[υ]θεῖν καὶ τεθεν [...] / ~40] τι [~10] παρατρέπειν καὶ ἕτερα φρονεῖν καὶ οὐτ’ ἐ[ί]ς μέμψιν ἑαυτοῖς ἐπιφέρειν, 29.5-7). Though entirely formulaic, by asserting a cliché this phrasing voices the importance granted to communal opinion; reasonable people, it is implied, are cautious not of doing wrong, nor of falling into sin, nor of being found guilty – but of being considered at fault by the community.

An emphasis on common opinion continues to show up in the papyri, both before and after the conquest. *P.Ness.* 46 records a relatively standard loan of money in 605; but the document itself is phrased with studied and unusual formality, including a careful attention to legal formulae and to titles and honorifics, and beginning with a unique (and lengthy) invocation: “In the name of the holy, most glorious, life-giving Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and of our most glorious Lady, mother of God and constant virgin Mary, and of the Choir of Holy Martyrs” (46.1-3). All these features single out document 46 as attempting to reach a high degree of formality and official recognition – an attempt that is enhanced by the unusual number of witnesses. At least five people witness the document, guaranteeing its legality by putting the force of society behind it. The number of witnesses is simply another way of buttressing the contract, ensuring that it is not simply an agreement between two individuals but that the entire community will guarantee it.

Even better witnessed is *P.Ness. 57*, a divorce agreement from 689 guaranteed by the presence of seven witnesses, and in this case the role of the community is stated explicitly. Before recounting the actual divorce proceedings, the papyrus describes the situation: ἐμήναμεν πάντες οἱ προνομασθέντες ἄνδραϊς ἵνα εἰσὶν πρὸς / ἄλλους καὶ πολλὰ εἶπαμεν μεταξύ αὐτῶν ἵνα συναχθοῦσιν πρὸς ἀλλήλους / καὶ οὐκ ἀνασχέθουσιν; “we – the aforementioned men – all insisted that they remain together and said many things as go-between so that they remain together, but they were not deterred.” (57.7-9) Regardless whether the situation described took place or if the phrase is a conventional one, several assumptions regarding the role of the community are revealed here. Conventionally, at least, it is assumed that the couple’s peers should and do exert their influence to keep the marriage together, and only when the gathered witnesses are convinced that their remonstrances are useless can the divorce proceed. This is not an instance of church teachings; though one of the witnesses is a priest and two others are lay members, the rest of the men have no stated formal connection to the church, and are present by virtue of being part of a group of ἐταῖροι (57.29, 30 and 32).

The emphasis on the opinion and consent of society fits with the proliferation of extrajudicial practice in the time of Justinian. As Humfress has shown using the Oxyrhynchos papyri, outside of the imperial capital many legal problems were resolved through negotiation and an application of common customs rather than strict interpretation of the language of the law, carried out by lawyers.<sup>78</sup> This was a frequent phenomenon elsewhere in the sixth century; and in the provinces of Palaestina the

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<sup>78</sup> Humfress, "Law and Legal Practice in the Age of Justinian".

emphasis on consensual opinion and the view of the community as having a legal standing appears long before Justinian, already in the Babatha archive from the second century, and only strengthens over time.<sup>79</sup> Over 500 years later in Petra, we see a lengthy dispute between neighbors over boundary and water rights resolved by arbitration, carried out in the presence of respected members of the community who also guarantee that the settlement will be respected.<sup>80</sup> Despite Justinian's efforts to centralize the legal system and enforce the weight of the imperial – or at least provincial – administration, there is no evidence to suggest that the Justinianic reforms ever took hold in Palaestina. On the contrary, all that the papyri show us is an increase in the weight placed on the role of the community in resolving disputes.

This pattern continues after the conquest with little change. The Muslim administration shows an understanding and acceptance of the cohesion of the village in the addressing of the *entagia*: with one exception (*P.Ness.* 68), all the rest are addressed to 'the people of Nessana' (τοῖς ἀπὸ Νεστάνων) rather than to a particular official. The Umayyad governor is generally content to accept that the village usually polices and runs itself, relying more on informal status and social conventions than on official enforcement.

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<sup>79</sup> As an example of this standard practice, when Babatha's husband dies, it is the βουλή of Petra that appoints guardians for her minor son (*P.Yadin* 12).

<sup>80</sup> *P.Petra* 83, published very recently in Arjava, Buchholz and Gagos, *The Petra Papyri* III. A description of the content comes from a lecture given by Martin Buchholz on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2007 – "The Diplomats of the Petra papyri". The lecture was given in Jerusalem at the conference "From Sumer to the Genizah—Diplomatics and Legal Documents in the Ancient World."

The strong sense of communal cohesion and mutual responsibility is in part a product of the unique agricultural system developed in former Nabataean lands as a response to the harsh climate. The Negev farms and villages were built in the midst of a brutally arid environment: Nessana receives an average of 100 mm of precipitation a year (for comparison, any climate receiving less than 250 mm fulfills the technical definition of a desert). And yet, these areas sustained a flourishing agriculture: An account of grain yields in *P.Ness.* 82 shows yields of seven- and eight-fold for wheat and barley, comparable to good harvest years in Egypt and Sicily, whose climate is of course much more forgiving and hospitable.<sup>81</sup> This agricultural success – and indeed, any attempt to live in Nessana – is made possible only by a careful and relentless husbanding of moisture. Terraced wadis, well-maintained cisterns, irrigation ditches, run-off collection systems and moisture-trapping basins are all standard features in and around the Negev towns; and all of these require the entire community to be involved in the effort. Four ostraca found in Sobata confirm that participation in the cleaning and upkeep of the public cisterns was a standard public duty.<sup>82</sup> But apart from the public reservoirs, neighbors must have relied on each other to keep up the terracing and water-catching and directing systems. Since the rare rainfalls in the Negev tend to be torrential and brief, without interference the water would naturally flood the dry river beds, leaving the fields on both sides barely moistened. The system in the Negev depended on manipulating the rivulets sideways into the fields, and here obviously one careless farmer could jeopardize

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<sup>81</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 29.

<sup>82</sup> Youtie, "Ostraca from Sbeitah".

the ability of others downstream. Similarly, the run-off collection system and stone removal characterized by the small stone mounds called *tleilat al-anab* depended to some degree on the participation and goodwill of the entire surrounding community.<sup>83</sup> Dependence on others was exacerbated by the fact that most people owned several small plots, and that large contiguous tracts of land are almost unheard of. This is equally true for small-scale farmers, such as the brothers mentioned in *P.Ness.* 22, and for the wealthier owners, as the one in *P.Ness.* 82 who owns 114 iugera divided among at least six different plots.

## **Conclusion**

Georg Ostrogorsky's works in the 1940's ushered rural history into the realm of social history, by all means an overdue endeavor; but Ostrogorsky sought to do so by focusing on the figure of "the Byzantine peasant through the centuries", a figure which, as Lefort has noted, seems very abstract today.<sup>84</sup> My intent here is to achieve a much more limited goal: not to define an archetypal figure of the peasant through the centuries, not even of the 'typical' Nessana peasant, but to describe the community in terms of the internal dynamics and the usual mechanisms by which it functioned.

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<sup>83</sup> Yair, "Slope Hydrology, the Collection of Run-Off Water, and the Spatial Distribution of Ancient Agricultural systems in the Northern Negev (Hebrew)".

<sup>84</sup> Lefort, "Rural Economy and Social Relations in the Countryside", p. 101.

At the turn of the fifth century, John Chrysostom criticized Byzantine society for the weakness of social networks above the level of the nuclear family;<sup>85</sup> and this criticism has been taken as a trustworthy description of social realities for Late Antiquity.<sup>86</sup> Whatever the validity of the observation elsewhere, it does not appear to describe social dynamic in Nessana adequately or accurately. Though the nuclear family is indeed the basic building block, the network we see is perhaps closest to what system topologists describe as a mesh network, with little emphasis on hierarchy and multiple connections between the different nodes, resulting in a resilient, flexible and self-sustaining system.

Whereas foreigners are usually identified by their residence (τινος Βεροσαβῆς, a certain man from Berosaba. 79.57, and see also 79.9), locals are more often identified by the relations they have with other members of the community: τῆς πενθερᾶς τοῦ ἄββᾶ Ἠλίου, Father Elias' mother-in-law (79.38). Thus in *P.Ness.* 24 when the parties mention in passing Zeno son of Firsan, they add that he is their cousin (24.7), though this fact is entirely irrelevant. Property is also described through its owners – sometimes not even the present owner, or the penultimate owner, but a previous owner in the unknown past whose name became attached to the land in question: thus in *P.Ness.* 82 plots have names like μαλακκᾶνι, i.e. *māl al-kāni*, property of the short man, and μαλζημαρχε, or

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<sup>85</sup> “As the theater is ended, each man hastens to his own home...and if (...) [the great man] is in want, and standing on his feet begs in the center of the market place, and not one of those who formerly hailed him as their patron attends him or stretches out his hand...can anything be more pitiful than that?” Laistner, *An Address on Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children*, by John Chrysostom 5-7, pp. 88-89.

<sup>86</sup> Kazhdan and Constable, *People and Power*, pp. 25-26.

*māl dhi mārīq*, property of the deserter or the heretic;<sup>87</sup> and the khan which used to belong to Eulais and now passes to his son Khalafallah is described as ὁ οἶκος ὁ λεγόμενος Αββου Ἰωσήφου Δοβαβου, ‘the so-called House of Abu-Yosef son of Dobab’ (31.33-34). This is not in itself unusual; naming after former owners is common throughout the empire and throughout the centuries. Yet though it may not be rare, it does indicate a village society governed by its own history rather than by objective descriptions imposed from the outside. Similarly today, a stranger asking for directions in rural America might well be directed to ‘take a right at the Brubaker place and keep going until you come to where Jenson had his old silo’, rather than instructions given in numbers and compass directions. This is how people and property are defined and categorized in Nessana – not through any objective classifications, but through the social and family ties running through the village. Public property is rare, but so is entirely private property held by one individual; most real estate is held in joint ownership, and mutual dependence is common.

A lot has been made of the confusion over the terminology appropriate to Nessana and other Negev towns: as Gatier and others note, calling them ‘cities’ ignores the nature of the settlement,<sup>88</sup> and most importantly, the fact that the Nessana papyri consistently speak of Nessana as a village in the Elusa city district, ἐν κώμῃ Νεσσάνοις ὀρίου πόλεως Ἐλούσης (22.4, to name but one instance). Nessana is indeed not a polis, but

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<sup>87</sup> This could also be a transliteration of *mal dhi marikh*, i.e. property of the proud man. See Chapter Three on language.

<sup>88</sup> Gatier, "Villages du Proche-Orient protobyzantin (4eme - 7eme s.): étude régionale".

the sense of ‘civic’ identity and the self-sufficient functioning of the settlement are very similar – if not identical – to those found in bigger communities with well-established political structures. Indeed, the very predominance of a widely-recognized local elite, not coterminous with the economic elite and deeply involved in settling civic and administrative issues, is a typical feature of the classical city – though of course, there more often than not the city council gives a certain framework which defines this elite.<sup>89</sup>

This pseudo-civic identity and the cohesiveness of Nessana as a community with its own elite and a firm if flexible web of social ties may explain why the oft-mentioned ‘urban crisis’ of Late Antiquity is not visible in Nessana, neither in the documents nor in the archaeological remains. The disintegration of the cities has been variously blamed on the Persians, the Muslims, Christianity, the spread of large estates and the rise in power of the notables.<sup>90</sup> An examination of the Negev shows that the urban disintegration affected only certain urban forms of settlements; villages like Nessana, whose continued functioning did not depend on vertical ties of dependence, formal social categories such as the *curiales*, or institutions such as the βουλή, did not experience a crisis but continued to function as they had done, through mostly horizontal ties and collective decision-making, led by generally-recognized if informal and open elites. This particular case showcases the danger of myopia and distortion in focusing only on the cities in Late Antiquity. By looking at the rural and semi-urban countryside we can see that the

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<sup>89</sup> Holum, "The Classical city in the Sixth Century: Survival and Transformation", p. 88.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, esp p. 109. Also Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance : 4e-7e siècles*, pp. 426, 431.

Muslims did not impose completely “new patterns of settlement and new forms of city,”<sup>91</sup> but that they expanded and built upon a pre-existing system. This pre-existing system, which we see in Nessana from the fifth century, is not ‘tribal’, nor specifically ‘Nabataean’, but an expansion of the idea of the polis, or rather of the dynamics between citizens, to an environment which does not follow the definition of a polis. To call Nessana a ‘town’ is indeed inaccurate; but the confusion is excusable given the way that the village functions.

Averil Cameron ends her review article on Late Antiquity by cautioning against placing too much emphasis on the demise of the towns, “variable and uncertain as that was.”<sup>92</sup> I have tried to argue here that the problem is compounded by a too-narrow definition of towns, and a lack of sufficient attention to the smaller settlements. When a trading account from Nessana identifies a buyer as *χορικοῦ* (a redneck: *P.Ness.* 91.6), the implication is that the sellers did not see themselves or the other sellers as country bumpkins but as members of a municipal community. The substantial civic identity manifest in the documents gives grounding to this view.

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<sup>91</sup> Holum, "The Classical city in the Sixth Century: Survival and Transformation", p. 109.

<sup>92</sup> Cameron, "Review: Late Antiquity - The Total View", p. 135.

## Chapter Two: Nessana and the Empires

Late Antiquity has been defined as the Age of Empires; this chapter will explore what that meant in practice to the people living under imperial rule. How did the two successive empires regard the population of the Negev towns, and Nessana among them? Did the people of Nessana consider themselves to be part of a wider imperial entity? How important a presence was the state, first Byzantine and later Muslim – and do we see any differences between Byzantine and Muslim rule in the way that the residents of Nessana relate to the central imperial power and vice versa? By examining the centralization of bureaucracy and the connotations attached to the terms ‘Roman’ and ‘imperial’, this chapter should allow us to draw some conclusions about Nessana’s integration into the larger fabric of the imperial administrations and its sense of imperial identity.

This dissertation is a discussion of group identity in its various manifestations; this chapter and the following one will attempt to deal with the issue of ethnic self-identity. Accordingly, these two chapters will not deal with whether or not *we* would consider the inhabitants of Nessana to be divisible into significant ethnic groups, but whether the inhabitants *themselves* appear to have regarded these questions as relevant to their lives. It is worth repeating that recent studies of ethnicities have focused on the boundaries of the ethnic identity rather than on its contents.<sup>1</sup> Rather than concentrating on the defining and definitive features of the group, the emphasis is on how these characteristics are put to work in various situations, and on the dynamic which guides the

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argumentation in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica* p. 27-28.

formation and dissolution of boundaries. This approach will be adopted here in the examination of the ways in which the residents of Nessana categorized and classified themselves and others.

The following discussion of imperial attitudes to Nessana and of Nessianite attitudes to governance will be the beginning of an examination of ‘ethnic’ identity in Nessana, which will continue in the next chapter. Identities are in the first and primary instance a matter of internal, subjective affiliations; but before we can discuss the internal attitudes of the people of Nessana, and the degree to which they identified themselves as “Roman” or “Arab” or members of a particular tribe, it would be useful to gain some understanding of the use of these terms generally. To that end, this chapter will begin with a necessarily brief overview of the different ethnonyms and terms which could be applied to the residents of Palaestina Tertia under the Byzantine empire, and only then discuss the attitude of the residents towards the empire. We will then move to a similarly brief overview of early Muslim views of the ethnic makeup of the Negev, and then compare the relationship between the empire and the population under the Muslim administration to that under the Byzantine administration. Thus, this chapter will touch upon issues of identity (which will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter), but remain grounded in the questions of the place of Nessana within the larger empire, both from the point of view of the imperial capitals and from the point of view of the town residents.

The implied connection between questions of ethnic identity and the more precise if mundane issues of imperial administration and bureaucracy is in part a reaction to the frequent mention of Nessanites as either ‘Roman’ / ‘Romanized’, or ‘Semitic’ / ‘ethnically Arab’. Irfan Shahid, who has devoted his attention to the question of Arabs in the Roman and Byzantine Empire, usually speaks of the residents of Nessana as ‘Romanized Arabs,’ based on their names and professions;<sup>2</sup> whereas Schick speaks of the population of Palaestina Tertia as ‘Semitic’.<sup>3</sup> These categorizations are problematic, based as they are on little more than assumptions regarding the nature of the population in Palaestina and a division of the sixth- and seventh-century worlds into relatively static categories of ‘Roman’ and ‘Arab’. They are also inherently problematic in that they rely solely on external divisions – how do these people appear to us—rather than trying to discern whether these divisions were perceptible and meaningful to the people in question. Both this chapter and the next will try to gain some insight into the possible meanings of these divisions for the writers of the papyri, but before we can discuss the validity of these descriptions and the assumptions they imply, we would do well to pause a little over the contemporary definitions of these terms. We can then consider to what degree the inhabitants of Nessana accepted the categorizations foisted upon them by

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs*, p. 61, note 38, for the assumption of the ‘Arab ethnic constitution’ of the Nessana military unit; and Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, p. 143, for the assumption that the ‘*Rhomaioi*’ of Nessana “concealed (their) ethnic origin” under Roman names. In spite of these appearances, Shahid refers very little to the inhabitants or the papyri of Nessana.

<sup>3</sup> Schick, *Christian Communities*, p. 11.

external observers, and to what extent they considered them important to their sense of ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup>

### The view from Byzantium

Before attempting to determine the attitudes of the Nessanites towards the wider Byzantine empire, we would do well to establish the place the people of Nessana took in the intricate world of the empire. Like all imperial powers, the Byzantines, having inherited the classificatory systems of the Greek, Roman and Christian worlds, organized and mapped status in their territories and subject peoples;<sup>5</sup> the issue is which classifications and organizational schemes applied to Nessana. To begin with, although the village of Nessana was responsible for garrisoning and billeting a troop of soldiers, the Dedicated Theodosians<sup>6</sup> (at least until the late sixth century), the soldiers and the townsmen were *cives*, not *foederati*. It is for this reason that Shahid's magisterial and voluminous works on the relations between Byzantium and the Arabs only mention Nessana in passing; Shahid's work is explicitly focused on the *foederati*, that is, the

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<sup>4</sup> I know of no systematic attempt to outline the degree to which the population of the Near East saw themselves as Roman or were aware of being Roman citizens. Millar touches upon the issues in Millar, "Ethnic Identity in the Roman Near East AD 325 – 450: Language, Religion and Culture", but he mostly leaves aside the question of Roman identity, after suggesting that it would be a useful study (p. 380).

<sup>5</sup> Maas, "*Mores et Moenia: Ethnography and the Decline in Urban Constitutional Autonomy in Late Antiquity*", p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Kraemer and Colt translate the expression Θεοδοσιακοί throughout as 'the very loyal Theodosians'. As Welles points out in a review of the edition, "the participial is the equivalent of *devotissimi*, and the implication is the same as the term *sacri*, used before the Christianization of the Empire. It does not mean that the troops were loyal. It means that they were "dedicated", or in other words, that they belonged to the emperor; that they were part of the Imperial forces." Bradford Welles, "Review of Excavations at Nessana, Volume 3, Non-Literary Papyri", p. 286.

Saracen tribes along the border between the Roman and the Persian dominions, whose services were engaged by one or the other of the empires (and sometimes by both in quick succession).<sup>7</sup> The confusion between these distinct categories of *cives* and *foederati* probably stems from the fact that some desert tribes made the transition into regular military units, as demonstrated by the presence of the Thamud tribe in the *Notitia Dignitatum* (*Not.Dig.* or. 28.17: *Equites Saraceni Thamudeni at scenas veteranorum*, referring to troops in Egypt; and *Not.Dig.* or. 34.22, *Equites Thamudeni Illyriciani*, referring to troops at Birsama in Palestine).<sup>8</sup> The origin of the Dedicated Theodosians at Nessana, however, was different, and in this respect Shahid is right to draw a firm line between the tribesmen, to whom *civitas* was not extended, and the citizens in the area, among whom are the soldiers and denizens of Nessana.<sup>9</sup>

Some have tried to classify the Negev soldiers as *limitanei*, border troops established by the Severans; this is probably technically accurate but in practice rather meaningless. As Isaac has shown, the term *limitanei* did not function as a separate and meaningful category. Though previous scholars from Mommsen onwards saw the *limitanei* as “a peasant militia, farmers who cultivate lands allotted to them by the government and performed guard duties in addition,”<sup>10</sup> it appears that the *limitaneus* was

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<sup>7</sup> Greatrex points out that in the West, at least, *foederati* are not always clearly distinguished from ‘regular’ troops, and that “the search for hard and fast distinctions seems pointless”; Greatrex, "Roman Identity in the Sixth Century", p. 270.

<sup>8</sup> Graf, "The Saracens and the Defense of the Arabian Frontier", p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, p. 50, and Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 1.1 p. XX and *passim*.

not tied down to the land or restricted to hereditary positions. The term had a much broader and vaguer application, referring to all soldiers serving in the frontier command rather than the field army, who thus fell under the general jurisdiction of the *dux militis*. This means that while we could apply it to the Nessanites, it tells us little about their place inside the imperial system. As Isaac establishes, we can accept the probability of soldiers owning land and cultivating it while rejecting the alleged evidence for the creation of “a formal institution by the imperial authorities of a frontier militia which expected soldiers to work their own land as farmers.”<sup>11</sup>

All this serves only to tell us that the soldiers of Nessana and their descendants – the people who apparently constituted the majority of the town in the sixth century and were certainly responsible for the majority of the papyri – did not have any sort of formal designation under the Byzantine empire. Of course, like all Roman citizens, their legal entity was that of subjects of the emperor, a definition which was particularly prominent after Justinian;<sup>12</sup> but there are no observable legal status categories within this extremely broad group. As the previous chapter was at pains to establish, there is no evidence for any sort of distinction between the soldiers and the townsmen in daily habits, occupations, and marriage patterns; and a comparison with the more copious evidence from Egypt confirms this impression. These locally recruited and locally stationed units were “by no stretch of the imagination ... the advance guard of a Roman civilizing

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<sup>10</sup> Isaac, "The Meaning of the Terms *Limes* and *Limitanei*", p. 139.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 140.

<sup>12</sup> Maas, "*Mores et Moenia*: Ethnography and the Decline in Urban Constitutional Autonomy in Late Antiquity", p. 32.

mission,”<sup>13</sup> living among a distinct local populace. Rather, they were an integral and virtually indistinguishable part of the town’s population. There is therefore no evidence for any kind of categorization or legal distinction which distinguished any part of the population of Nessana.

### **Saracens and Arabs in Byzantine literary sources<sup>14</sup>**

Since there are no specific legal or administrative terms which are applicable and useful for understanding the attitude to the residents of the Negev, the question now is whether vaguer ethnographic terms are applicable – and if so, when. This will require us first of all to understand the denotations and connotations of the ethnonyms ‘Saracen’ and ‘Arab’ as they are employed in the administrative documents and literature of the period.<sup>15</sup> There is no question that the imperial education and the administrative vocabulary fostered an interest in ethnic and provincial distinctions.<sup>16</sup> Official Byzantine documents distinguished between the Saracens, the name used for the Ghassanid

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<sup>13</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 177. Of course, this was not the case throughout the empire; Bagnall points us to a striking contrast in Numidia and (central and northern) Palestine, which were controlled by an army of outsiders.

<sup>14</sup> I will not deal at all with the etymology of the word Saracen. This issue has been discussed often and thoroughly (see Shahid, I., ‘Saracen’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam II*, and a more controversial interpretation and suggestion in Retso, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads*), and is irrelevant for clarifying the uses of the term in our period.

<sup>15</sup> I will not here deal with the frequent mention of Arabs in the Zenon archive, fascinating as these are, since the time gap makes them less useful as evidence for our question. Hanson argues that in this context, the term probably referred to pastoralists, and that its use implies a significant alterity for Semitic (as opposed to ‘Egyptian’, Greek, or Roman) ethnicities. Hanson, "Egyptians, Romans, Arabes and Ioudaioi in the First Century AD Tax Archive from Philadelphia: *P.Mich. inv. 880 recto* and *P.Princ. III. 152 revised*", pp. 137-139.

<sup>16</sup> Hall, "Latinitas in the Late Antique Greek East: Cultural Assimilation and Ethnic Distinctions", pp. 85-86.

*foederati*, and the *Arabes*, the term used for the Arab *Rhomaioi*, citizens of the empire and mostly former subjects of the Nabataean kingdom. The problem is that the term Saracen was also applicable to nomadic pastoralists throughout the Arabian peninsula and the Near East, whatever their status within the Empire;<sup>17</sup> and so the term Saracen came to have several different meanings and, more importantly, several different undertones.

In the literary record, the term Saracen appears to have had a pejorative connotation. This is true already for Ammianus Marcellinus in the late fourth century, who begins his detailed excursus on the Saracens by stating *Saraceni tamen nec amici nobis umquam nec hostes optandi*; “We never desired the Saracens as either friends or enemies” (14.4.1-7). This suspicious and hostile tone continues throughout his description, which presents the familiar picture of conflict between a nomadic society and the settled ones, with the Saracens characterized as birds of prey: *quicquid inveniri poterat momento temporis parvi vastabant, miluorum rapacium similes, qui si praedam dispexerint celsius, volatur rapiunt celeri, ac si impetraverint, non inmorantur*: “They plunder whatever can be found in a short space of time, like snatching kites, who, when they see some prey from on high, grab it, flying quickly, and if they have obtained it, do not delay.” (14.4.1) Ammianus here follows the classical dichotomy between nomadic and settled, a consistent feature of ethnographic narratives. This, as well as the identification of nomadism with banditry, are a long-standing tradition in ethnographic literature, going back already to Aristotle who, in his disquisition on the various forms of

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<sup>17</sup> Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, p. 9.

human livelihood, is quick to associate the nomadic way of life with one of brigandage (*Politika* 1256b 1-6). That this identification was wide-spread in Ammianus' surroundings can be also seen from the fact that Julian the Apostate, before his designation to the Caesarship, referred to Arabs in general as λησται.<sup>18</sup> Modern research has found little to sustain this picture. Although of course there were battles, skirmishes and instances of pillage, the current scholarly consensus is that there is no evidence that 'the Bedouins' systematically attacked the settled communities or that the settled communities engaged in an organized campaign against 'the Bedouins'.<sup>19</sup> The picture of the destructive nomad, raiding others as a way of life, is indeed a reflection of hostility between the two groups, but may have been also a reflection of standard rhetoric, and should not be taken at face value.

Ammianus continues to describe Saracens as stereotypical barbarians, focusing on their uncivilized eating habits and the licentious marriages which give women the upper hand – a clearly recognized sign of a barbarian nation. The barbarism of the Saracens culminates in the battle between them and the Goths at Constantinople. According to Ammianus, the Goths lost heart upon seeing one of their number killed by an Arab, who then proceeded to slit his throat and drink his blood (31.16.5-7). Apart from the element of the horror story found here, this is an instance of the raw-human-flesh-eating-nomad,

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<sup>18</sup> Julian, *First Oration (Panegyricus to Constantius)*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> See Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, p. 10; Sartre, *L'Orient Romain*, p. 332; and the extensive discussion of the subject in Banning, "Peasants, Pastoralists and *Pax romana*: Mutualism in the Southern Highlands of Jordan"; Banning, "De Bello Paceque: A Reply to Parker", Parker, "Peasants, Pastoralists, and *Pax Romana*: A Different View"; and Banning, "De Bello Paceque: A Reply to Parker"

which was by then a well-established literary *topos*.<sup>20</sup> The picture of a nomad drinking human blood would be understood as one barbarian group, the Saracens, out-doing in barbarity the Goths, another famously barbarian people.

The hostility evident in Ammianus continues to appear in the works of later Christian writers. Sozomen, writing a couple of generations after Ammianus, is concerned with Arabs chiefly as prototypes of pagan barbarians. Procopius in the sixth century follows Ammianus' lead in assuming and emphasizing a hostility towards the inhabitants of Palaestina Tertia and Secunda.<sup>21</sup> In his description of Justinian's fortress at Mount Sinai he explains the rationale behind building such a strong fortress: 'in order that the barbarian Saracens might not be able ... to make inroads with complete secrecy into the lands of Palestine proper' (Procopius, *De Aedificibus* 5.8.5). We see here the familiar usage of Saracens as designating an ethnic community, and one, moreover, with furtive and dangerous habits. In this case, the influence of the literary construction and standard rhetoric is particularly clear since the building in point could not possibly have fulfilled Procopius' claim: the monastery of St. Catherine is situated in a cleft between two mountainous peaks, and the striking Justinianic fortifications may have been

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<sup>20</sup> On which see Shaw, "'Eaters of Flesh, Drinkers of Milk': The Ancient Mediterranean Ideology of the Pastoral Nomad", p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> For more on Procopius' hostile attitude towards the Ghassanids in particular and Arabs in general, see Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, pp. 359-361, and in particular the analysis of Procopius' suggestion that the foundation of Palmyra was due to the necessity of protecting the region from the raids of the Saracens.

fulfilling religious or diplomatic functions, but could hardly serve as a military barrier to security threats.<sup>22</sup>

There are many other examples which could be brought up here: Cyril of Scythopolis, east of Nessana, speaks of the Saracens, as “the wolves of Arabia”, adding Σαρακηνοὶ τῷ ἤθει βάρβαροι, τῇ γνώμῃ κακοποιοί, “Saracens: barbaric in manners, evil in mind.”<sup>23</sup> In general, the connotations of the word ‘Saracen’ in the late-Roman and Byzantine world were unfavorable. This attitude of suspicion and distrust at the least, and outright hostility at the worst, is a reflection of a more general trend of hostility towards outsiders, evident in Justinian’s era.<sup>24</sup>

Complicating the picture is the relative marginalization of Arabs in general. Though the examples given above may have given the (misleading) impression of a wide body of literature dealing with the Saracens, in point of fact both the terms Arab and Saracen are conspicuously missing from several places where we would expect to encounter them. Bowersock has shown that up until the fourth century there are no senators of Palestinian or Arabian descent; nearly all the senators from the Near East appear to have come from cities in greater Syria, while Roman senators from the cities of Judaea and Arabia are conspicuously absent, even during the reign of Philip the Arab.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The observation regarding the gap between Procopius’ description and the geographic reality comes from Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, pp. 118-120.

<sup>23</sup> Life of St Sabas, ed. Schwartz, “Kyrillos von Scythopolis” in *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der alchristlichen Literatur* 49, 2 (Leipzig 1939), p. 97.

<sup>24</sup> This is usually noted in connection to the Jews; see Evans, *The Age of Justinian: the Circumstances of Imperial Power* p. 246.

This situation is unparalleled among other provincial groups.<sup>26</sup> It is not only that no senators are designated as Arab or Saracen in origin; there is no evidence for any resident with such status from any of the urban centers of Arabia, such as Philadelphia or Petra. This omission is striking enough that it led Graf to conclude that “Roman policy deliberately excluded provincial Arabs from the senate. Any incentives for political advancement by local elites were obstructed by these prejudices within the ruling regime.”<sup>27</sup> While Bowersock’s work has not been systematically continued into the sixth and seventh centuries, it appears that the inhabitants of these provinces are routinely under-represented in Byzantine high-level administration. We find no indication of significant officials or administrators with Arab-derived names or with origins from one of the historically Arab cities.

The absence of high-ranking Arabs fits in with the relative dearth of mentions of Arabs in geographic and historical passages. This is particularly striking when we take into account that from the time of Justinian onwards, Byzantine literature experiences a massive revival of ethnographic conceptions and ethnographic texts;<sup>28</sup> and yet these texts pay little attention to the Arabs in general. The interest in ethnography and ethnogenesis, on the one hand, and the ‘blind spot’ in regard to the ethnography of the Arabs, on the

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<sup>25</sup> This observation relies on an analysis of the names from the senatorial lists. While I would not wish to imply a blind identification of names with ethnicities, certain geographic generalizations can be said to hold here – for instance, that a senator named Sigibuldus is not likely to have a Near Eastern origin, whereas a senator named Hafez is not likely to have a Gothic origin.

<sup>26</sup> Bowersock, "Roman Senators from the Near East: Syria, Judaea, Arabia, Mesopotamia".

<sup>27</sup> Graf, "Rome and the Saracens: Reassessing the Nomadic Menace" p. 382.

<sup>28</sup> Amory, *People and Identity*, p. 39; and see also Maas, "*Mores et Moenia: Ethnography and the Decline in Urban Constitutional Autonomy in Late Antiquity*".

other hand, is evident even in the texts of the Justinianic novels to the provinces. These novels, published from 535 to 538, were part of the Justinianic effort to restructure and reform administrative and legal procedure. In each novel, the differing characteristics and histories of the *ethne* in each province are emphasized.<sup>29</sup> In the historical prefaces to the novels, Justinian uses ethnographic tropes to characterize the different populations and provinces, using these stereotypes as explanations and justifications of the reforms undertaken. For instance, *Novel 26* to Thrace puts forward the supposed bellicosity of the Thracians as a reason for the new laws and procedures:

It is an admitted fact that when anyone mentions the country of Thrace there straightway arises in his mind a spirit of courage and a desire for war and battle. And indeed, such a desire is innate in this people and is, as it were, an inherited attribute. For this reason we first determined to establish better conditions in that country ...<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, *Novel 29* speaks of the Paphlagonians as a distinct people, with a specific heritage and characteristics. In contrast, neither *Novel 102* (Arabia) nor *Novel 103* (Palestine) exhibit this ethnographic bent. The preface to *Novel 103* mentions that “this land (i.e., Palestine) is inhabited by a great and remarkable people” – a vague and all-encompassing statement; no further details are given, nor is there any attempt to describe the community. *Novel 102* offers us even less, only once referring to the province as “the country of the Arabs”. The contrast with the Thracian Novel is clear-cut;

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<sup>29</sup> Maas, "Roman History and Christian Ideology in Justinianic Reform Legislation", p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> The translation of the novels is taken from Ibid.

the territories of Palaestina and Arabia are not treated with the same attention to the communities inhabiting them as other provinces. This tendency reappears in the writing of another emperor, Maurice, whose *Strategikon* includes a chapter on the habits and battle tactics of four peoples: the Persians, the Scythians (including Avars and Turks), the ‘blond people’ (Franks and Lombards), and the Slavs. Arabs – whether labeled ‘Saracens’ or not – do not even register in this division of the world.<sup>31</sup>

Those Byzantine literary sources that do mention the Saracens treat them as an ethnic group, that is, a biologically self-perpetuating collective with a shared history, culture and myth of descent, characterized by a sense of communal solidarity. Indeed, in the fifth-century Nilus narrative, Saracens (who appear, characteristically, while attacking a convoy and kidnapping the narrator and his son) are called an ἔθνος.<sup>32</sup> In spite of this, we see that the term is used as a highly flexible rhetorical tool, applicable to various different groups and collectives and for various reasons. This is facilitated by the relative absence of ethnographic literature on the inhabitants of the region: if there are no established categories and criteria, then many different people can be assigned the label ‘Saracen’ according to circumstances. This is not to imply that the term is applied randomly, by any means. Like any rhetorical tool, its application is dependent on the situation; but in situations where one might want to emphasize a person’s ease of

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<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that Maurice is writing at the turning of the sixth century, just a generation before the rise of Islam. Three centuries later, when the emperor Leo VI picks up where Maurice left off with his own version, the *Tactica*, the situation has changed dramatically, and leaving out the Arabs is no longer an option; by then, Leo is obliged to include a long section on the Arabs in his manual.

<sup>32</sup> Probably not written by Nilus of Ancyra, though it sometimes appears under his name. *Nilus Narrationes*, PG 79 column 612.

movement, as when speaking of a courier, or when looking for an explanation for thieves attacking a caravan, the term Saracen and its baggage of connotations is useful.

### **“According to Roman custom”**

Since we see that the Byzantine empire had no specific terms which can be or were applied to the people of the Negev villages, we can now start questioning in what contexts the people of Nessana refer to the Empire and its subjects, and what they imply when they do so. I will here use the term ‘Roman’ to refer to the Byzantine empire and administration, since it is abundantly established that this is the common contemporary term.<sup>33</sup>

Regarding the western half of the empire, the work of Greatrex and Amory has fully established that the term ‘Roman’ was not understood as designating a purely civic or ethnic identity. Greatrex has argued that in the time of Justinian – contemporaneous with the documents from the so-called ‘soldiers’ archive’ in Nessana – loyalty to the emperor was a crucial element in the definition of a Roman.<sup>34</sup> This is very different – and much more flexible – than an understanding of ‘Roman’ as based on political or national status; indeed, in the two cases where we hear of Belisarius attempting to appeal to

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<sup>33</sup> This is not to imply that the two terms are entirely interchangeable. I will use Byzantine when referring to the imperial reality from an outsider’s point of view, and Roman when referring to the perceptions of the empire. Bowersock has argued that the use of Roman is deeply problematic since “Rome had virtually nothing to do with the Near East from the fourth century onwards” (Bowersock, “The Greek Moses: Confusion of Ethnic and Cultural Components in Later Roman and Early Byzantine Palestine”, p. 34). I would respectfully submit that at the very least, the *idea* of Rome had a great deal to do with the late ancient Near East, and continued to exercise a real power.

<sup>34</sup> Greatrex, “Roman Identity in the Sixth Century”, p. 268; see also Amory, *People and Identity*, pp. 4-5 and *passim*.

‘Roman identity’ on a national basis, the appeal failed miserably, indicating that such a view did not strike a chord with the contemporary citizens of Rome or Naples.<sup>35</sup>

The problems with assuming an ethnographic interpretation of the term ‘Roman’ are made manifest in the disengagement between Roman identity and lineage.<sup>36</sup> The standard definitions of ethnic identity include putative descent as a fundamental element in the construction of the identity. When we see that from at least 600 AD onwards, self-defined Roman elites did not base their identity on family consciousness or bother to maintain or fabricate a history going back to the late Roman urban aristocracies, that suggests that lineage in itself offered little legitimacy; instead, Roman identity was focused and built around institutions such as the emperor, the church and the legal system.

Since, then, we have seen that in the West the superficially limpid category of Roman has been shown to be both fluctuating and far from obvious to our eyes, the next task is to establish what the residents in Nessana meant when they employed it.

#### **“Romans”: *P.Ness. 18 and 20***

The ethnonym Roman appears in two of the earlier documents, *P.Ness. 18* and *P.Ness. 20*. *P.Ness. 18*, dating from the spring of 537, is a marriage settlement between al-Ubayy, father of Aniyah,<sup>37</sup> and Valens, both from military families (18.4) residing in

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<sup>35</sup> Chrysos, "The Roman Political Identity in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium", p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Wickham, "Conclusion", pp. 294-296.

Nessana (18.7). The document is fairly typical, and paralleled closely by several contemporary marriage settlements (in particular *P.Cairo Masp.* 67006).

16: ὁμολογ[ε]ῖ [δὲ τῆι Ανιαι ὁ εἰρημένος Αλγεβ Αλοβαιου(?)  
τὸν]  
γαμετὴν ὀφίλειν τε αὐτῇ καὶ κληρονόμοις αὐτῆς  
καὶ διαδόχοις(?) ± 8]  
τὰς προγεγραμμένας τῆς προικ[ὸς χρυσοῦ οὐγκίας  
ἕξ καὶ τὰ προγεγραμμένα(?)]  
νομίσματα ἕξ ὄφλημα προικιμ[αῖον ὃ καὶ  
παραδώσει? ± 19]  
20 τιας ἔθει Ῥωμαικῶ

“The aforementioned husband, son of Al-Geb Al-Ubay, contracts with Aniyah that he will owe to her, and to her heirs and descendants .... the aforementioned six ounces of gold belonging to the dowry and the aforementioned six solidi, as dotal debt, which he shall also give ... according to the Roman custom.”

It is the last phrase which will occupy us below, stating that the dowry is to be regarded in the nature of a debt, which must be returned in case of divorce, and characterizing this arrangement as a ‘Roman’ practice.

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<sup>37</sup> I am here and throughout the discussion following the alterations proposed by Lewis and Katzoff to Kraemer’s reading and translation. The points relevant to our discussion are the observations that the contract is between the bridegroom and the bride’s father, and that the bridegroom’s father has a double name, Al-Geb al-Ubay. Katzoff and Lewis, "Understanding *P.Ness.* 18".

The same phrase appears in another marriage contract, *P.Ness. 20*, dated to AD 558, and also contracted between Nessianites attached to the army.

ὡμ[ολόγησε δὲ τῇ Μολεχη ὁ εἰρημένος Σέργιος? ± 10]

[τὸν γ]αμετὴν ὀφίλειν [τε αὐτῇ καὶ κληρονόμοις αὐτῆς καὶ διαδόχοις]

[τὰς πρ]ογεγραμμένας [τῆς προικὸς χρυσοῦ οὐγκίας ἕξ καὶ τὰ  
προγεγραμμένα]

20: [νόμισμα]τα ἑνναία ὄφ[λημα προικμαῖον ὃ καὶ παραδώσει  
χωρὶς πάσης ζητήσεως καὶ]

[ἀντιλο]γίας ἤθει Ῥωμα[ικῶ]

“The aforementioned Sergius contracts with Moleche .... that the husband will owe her and her heirs and descendants the aforementioned six ounces of gold of the dowry and the aforementioned nine solidi as dotal debt, which he shall also give her, without any (grounds for) suit or dispute, according to Roman custom.”

The recurrence of practically identical phrasing in two marriage contracts separated by over 20 years suggests that the labeling of the dowry as a debt was a standard if not self-evident feature in marriage contracts. This corresponds to what we know elsewhere of the ubiquity and the nature of the προῖξ – a form of dowry which the husband could use but not dispose of, and moreover, one for whose depreciation he was responsible at the dissolution of the marriage; hence the specification of the exact amount in the contract. This is in contrast to the παραφερνά mentioned in *P.Ness. 18.25*,

usually household implements and furnishings intended for the wife's use during her married life, and which were not conceived of as a debt and therefore left unappraised.<sup>38</sup>

All this still leaves us wondering about the force of the phrase ἤθει Ῥωμαικῶ. The phrase κατὰ τοὺς νόμους, "in keeping with the laws," is found in some Egyptian and Palestinian marriage contracts before this period,<sup>39</sup> but the implication of ἤθει Ῥωμαικῶ in Nessana seems to go beyond that, suggesting not only that the contract is valid, but that it is valid specifically according to Roman customs.<sup>40</sup>

I would argue that this implies, at the least, an awareness of other possible customs and formulations of marriage contracts. We know that the Jewish marriage contracts of the time included other specifications, which are absent in the Roman legal tradition, such as the husband's obligation to feed, clothe, and provide the woman with conjugal rights.<sup>41</sup> We also know that long before the advent of Islam, some tribes in the Syrian and Arabian deserts used the bride-price or *mahr* for contracting marriages, which

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<sup>38</sup> For a useful and analytical summary of the documentary evidence before our period, see Yiftach-Firanko, *Marriage and Marital Arrangements: A History of the Greek Marriage Document in Egypt, 4th century BCE - 4th century CE*; also Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity: The Emperor Constantine's Marriage Legislation*.

<sup>39</sup> See Wasserstein, "A Marriage Contract from the Province of Arabia Nova: Notes on Papyrus Yadin 18", p. 108.

<sup>40</sup> I do not know of a comparable use of a similar phrase. *P. Yadin 10* includes the phrase "according to Greek law" in reference to a marriage, which Wasserstein interprets as referring to either the laws of Greek cities in that region or the ordinary customs of Greeks resident in the area (p. 123). Though this may seem an obvious comparison to make with the Nessana contracts, the distance of several centuries from our documents make it problematic.

<sup>41</sup> This stipulation appears as a standard phrase in Jewish marriage contracts from the second century AD to the present day; see Cotton, "A Cancelled Marriage Contract from the Judaean Desert", p. 79.

is of course a fundamentally different system from that reliant on dowry,<sup>42</sup> and inscriptions as well as Muslim sources and traditions attest that desert tribes in pre-Islamic times knew and practiced a custom similar to present-day *mut'a* marriages, a form of 'temporary marriage' for a pre-determined length of time, usually with financial compensation for the woman.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Isfahāni's description of pre-Islamic marriage in his *Kitāb al-Aghāni* gives women the right of initiating divorce, a right which is unprecedented in Roman law:<sup>44</sup> "The women in the *Jahiliyya*, or some of them, had the right to dismiss their husbands, and the form of dismissal was this. If they lived in a tent they turned it around, so that if the door faced east it now faced west; and when the man saw this he knew that he was dismissed and did not enter." We see here that the tent was the property of the woman, since on divorce the man was denied entrance to it, and that the divorce could be the decision of the woman, with the man having little to say.

All this goes to show that at the time that *P.Ness.* 18 and 20 were being written, various alternative marriage customs existed in the area around Nessana; and indeed, we know that despite Justinian's unsuccessful attempts to impose imperial laws to the exclusion of others, local laws continued to play a significant role well into the sixth

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<sup>42</sup> O. Spiess, "Mahr", *EF*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> W. Heffening, "*Mut'a*", *EF*<sup>2</sup>. The similarity to the marriage of the 'Saracens' described in Ammianus Marcellinus 14.4.4 is striking.

<sup>44</sup> Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahāni wrote in the first half of the tenth century about pre-Islamic society. In spite of his great distance from the period in question, he is generally recognized as a reasonably reliable source. He relied heavily on Hishām al-Kalbi, an eight-century Arab historian of the Pre-Islamic era, who in turn relied on oral traditions and pre-Islamic epigraphy, and has been shown to be unexpectedly accurate. See Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, pp. 3 and 365.

century.<sup>45</sup> The use of the specifying phrase “according to Roman custom” implies not just a choice as to which convention would be followed in this instance, but also at the least an awareness that there is a choice to be made. An obvious comparison is with the phrase *ke-dat Moshe ve-Yisrael*, “according to the custom of Moses and Israel”, found in Jewish marriage contracts from the second century.<sup>46</sup> That this expression is common and becomes standard in Jewish communities living under Imperial laws and surrounded by non-Jewish communities, is probably not a coincidence; the need to identify and delimit the rules of the community is an indication of a boundary-drawing which at the least indicates an awareness of other possibilities and, in the strongest case, implies a defensiveness and a need to gather within a carefully drawn circle. This is not to imply that the citizens of Nessana who chose to follow the Imperial legal tradition in their marriages were beleaguered or persecuted as a minority. But it is clear that in the questions of dowry arrangements, divorce proceedings, and several other issues (like the intestate inheritance of the wife), there were alternatives circulating in the region. By adding the phrase “according to Roman custom”, the writers of the document are recording their decision to be identified – in this instance – with the imperial tradition, rather than with any other local customs of the area, and implicitly suggesting that this was not a self-evident choice, or else there would have been no need to mention it.

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<sup>45</sup> Maas, "*Mores et Moenia: Ethnography and the Decline in Urban Constitutional Autonomy in Late Antiquity*", pp. 33-35.

<sup>46</sup> The earlier appearances in documents include slight variations, such as “according to the customs of Moses and the Jews”; *DJD* 11 no. 20 (117 AD?), *P.Yadin* 10 (122-125 AD), and *CPI* 1: 236 ff, no. 128 from Fayyoun, dated to 218 CE. See Cotton, "Cancelled Marriage Contract", for the argument that these slight variations represent a stage prior to the canonization of Rabbinic law. I am grateful to Hannah Cotton and David Wasserstein for alerting me to the comparison to the Jewish *kettubah*.

Both these contracts point to a legal understanding of ‘Roman’ – a view of the Roman world and Roman the empire as defined primarily by laws and legal customs. Further confirmation can also be found in the titles accorded to Berytus, a week’s journey to the north of Nessana. Berytus was known as ‘a very Roman city’, πόλις ῥωμαϊκότερα.<sup>47</sup> This appellation has been variously ascribed to the colonial status of Berytus and to the prevalence of Latin in the city. Millar emphasizes Berytus’ history as a Latin colony, founded by veterans after the destruction of the original city and the exile and slaughter of the indigenous inhabitants.<sup>48</sup> And yet, as Millar himself points out, several other cities in the area also held colonial status, including Caesarea, Petra and Gaza, to name just the ones close to Nessana, while Tyre and Emesa, among other cities, were granted *ius Italicum*. In addition, both Heliopolis and Aelia Capitolina (Jerusalem) have a similar foundation history, being composed of veterans settled in the city after its destruction. And yet, no other city, whatever its legal status, is identified as ‘Roman’ in the same way.

In her work on identities in Berytus, Hall gives a different explanation for the appellation, suggesting that it derives from the preponderance of the Latin language, and noting that Latin inscriptions there survived longer than elsewhere in the Greek East.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> From a description given by Gregory the Thaumaturgus, *Panegyricus in Originem* 5.58-9 (239); *PG* 10, 1065-6.

<sup>48</sup> Millar, "The Roman *Coloniae* of the Near East: A study of Cultural Relations".

<sup>49</sup> Hall, *Roman Berytus: Beirut in Late Antiquity*, esp. p. 1, though the same assumption regarding the connection between Latin inscriptions and the modifier ‘Roman’ are current throughout the book.

Though this is of course both true and notable, the connection between the terms Roman and Latin is mostly a modern one (as attested by the unhesitating and frequent use of the term ‘Roman’ in the Greek-speaking Byzantine world). I would suggest that the underlying cause of Berytus’ reputation as a ‘Roman’ city, as well as of the hardness of Latin in inscriptions, is the strength and importance of the law academy in Berytus. Outside of Rome and Constantinople, Berytus housed and developed the most distinguished and vibrant tradition of legal scholarship – a tradition which was transmitted mostly in Latin, and is thus connected to the unusual preponderance of Latin in the city. If we see the praise of Berytus as ‘very Roman’ in this light, that appellation falls into line with the other known descriptions of Berytus, all of which stress her role as a promulgator of legal learning. Gregory of Nazianzus (AD 328-89) obliquely refers to Berytus as ‘the celebrated city of pleasant Phoenicia, the seat of Roman laws’<sup>50</sup>; Zacharias of Mytilene echoed the term ‘mother of laws’, μήτηρ τῶν νόμων; while Justinian’s *Digest* speaks of ‘nurse of the laws’, *legum nutrix*.<sup>51</sup> Of course, the Justinianic digest itself is written in Latin, further proof of the intimate connection between the language and the legal professions in the sixth century. That Berytus represented a ‘Roman island’ is ultimately a function of its history and therefore also its legal status, and is manifested also in the preponderance of Latin inscriptions; but it seems to me that

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<sup>50</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina* 2.2.5 verses 226-7; PG 37.1538.

<sup>51</sup> Zacharias of Mytilene, *De Opificio Mundi* 84. 9, ed. J-F Boissonade, Paris; Mercklein 1836; Justinian, *Const. Omnem* 7.

neither of these reasons is the immediate impetus behind the use of the adjective ‘Roman’ to refer to the city in Late Antiquity, but rather its identification with a Roman legal tradition.

As long as Latin was seen as the language of the law; as long as laws and precedents were published in Latin, and even after some laws were issued in Greek; as long as the great law schools continued to function and teach in Latin; then knowledge of Latin was a prerequisite for a legal or bureaucratic career.<sup>52</sup> As a corollary, Latin in the East developed a functional association; it was most likely to be used in a legal context. This can be seen very clearly in the documents of Dioscorus of Aphrodito. Writing in the sixth century in Egypt, in a slightly more sophisticated environment than Nessana, but otherwise very similar, Dioscorus resorts to Latinisms in Greek characters and to Latin in Roman characters exclusively when addressing legal matters, and especially when using precise terminology such as *ousufructu* (sic) and *confirmateuменous*.<sup>53</sup>

The most commonly used tools in the study of Latin were the texts of Cicero and Vergil; and here we would do well to remember that the only two Latin texts found in Nessana are associated with Vergilian studies – a glossary of words from the *Aeneid*, and a text of the *Aeneid*.<sup>54</sup>

A connection between the legal and ethnic aspects of communal identity is not unprecedented, especially not in the ancient world. “The terms *politeuma* and *politeia*

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<sup>52</sup> Hall, "Latinitas", p. 85.

<sup>53</sup> MacCoull, *Dioscorus of Aphrodito: His Work and His World*, p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> For more on the significance of the Latin papyri, see Chapter Four.

often encompassed legislative features of an ethnic identity within the overarching representation of communal ways of life”, and legal codes often served to preserve or promote a set of moral or religious values.<sup>55</sup> As the connection between Romanness and legal customs shows, this was also so specifically in the vicinity of Nessana. Thus the usage implied in the *P.Ness.* 18 and 20 has a well-established context: ‘Roman’ here does not imply any necessary connection to the empire in any sense but to the laws and customs promulgated by and imposed through imperial offices.

As is often noted, the extension of citizenship in 212 to all inhabitants of the empire deprived both the imperial administration and the imperial subjects of a useful and straightforward set of distinctions – between Roman and non-Roman, citizen and foreigner. It appears that in spite of the passage of three centuries since the Antonine Constitution, the identification with Rome and its legal traditions was still very much a matter of choice.

### **Imperial decrees in daily life**

If, as argued above, the term ‘Roman’ refers to a legal context and does not necessarily attest to a sense of imperial identity, the next question is how far imperial legislation affected life in the village. This section will examine the presence of decrees and imperial conventions in Nessana and try to come to some conclusions about their dissemination from Constantinople. As before, the focus will be mostly on the sixth century. This is partly a result of the accidents of preservation; the so-called ‘soldiers’

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<sup>55</sup> Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argumentation in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*, p. 46.

archive', a relatively cohesive body of evidence, testifies to the period from 505 to 595.<sup>56</sup> In addition, Justinian's era (527-565) makes for an interesting test case since Justinian vigorously attempted to disseminate and implement a unified rule of law throughout the empire. As part of his drive to unify the empire – manifested also in the frequent attempts at unifying religious dogma and rites – Justinian weakened local laws and the financial and administrative autonomy of the cities, while tightening imperial control of the provinces and cities. "Instead of an empire comprising a honeycomb of cities and their hinterlands with local laws and customs, as had been the case under Augustus, there stood one empire," unified by religion and by law.<sup>57</sup> The question to be considered here is how far the Justinianic program was successful in the case of Nessana.

The question of the religious unification of the empire is simplest to deal with. One of Justinian's first priorities was to reassert imperial control over the religious life of his subjects, both by suppressing religious heterodoxies and by tying the church ever tighter to the Emperor's office.<sup>58</sup> The growing Christianization of the imperial image was also meant to tie the emperor and his subjects together more effectively and strongly than secular means. There is no hint of such a program in any of the documents in Nessana (nor indeed elsewhere in the Negev or Transjordan). Though elsewhere we hear of bishops becoming the emperor's "eyes and ears",<sup>59</sup> in Nessana there is no indication of any communication between the bishops – or indeed, any level of the church or imperial

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<sup>56</sup> See note 98.

<sup>57</sup> Maas, "People and Identity in Roman Antioch", p. 21.

<sup>58</sup> Sarris, *Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian*, p. 205.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p. 210.

bureaucracies – with higher echelons in Constantinople. This may, of course, be simply a matter of the vagaries of preservation; as always when dealing with papyri, we cannot discount the possibility that our picture is limited or even skewed. But it may also be that the circumstances which led Justinian to make these changes in the role of the emperor and to the centralization of power simply were not present in the Negev communities. Whereas elsewhere in the realm, the emperor’s power was threatened and sometimes obscured by local grandees and growing estates, such conditions did not exist in much of Palaestina Tertia, since, as the previous chapter has shown, local powers were not such as would be seen as a threat, and the vast estates of Egypt were virtually unknown.

In the urban centers of the empire, the Justinianic agenda led to a weakening of local customs and to a greater integration with the empire. Most cities had been ruled by council, until Justinian appointed imperial officials to oversee tax collection. The real rulers of cities were no longer the aristocratic elites who had filled the city senates for centuries. Instead, a new pattern developed whereby the men of influence in the city – bishops, imperial officials, or other ‘notables’ – owed their primary allegiance not to the other residents of the cities “but to imperial service, the new source of honor and prestige.”<sup>60</sup> In contrast, Palaestina Tertia exhibits the opposite tendency. Instead of greater integration within the empire, we see a drawing away from the wider world exemplified by Constantinople. This is the case even in the Petra papyri, which show a greater involvement of the upper-class *possessores*, recognizable by the designation Flavius, among the tax collectors and officials at the land-tax office, as opposed to

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<sup>60</sup> Haldon, "Economy and Administration", p. 21.

members of the *boule*. As the director of the Petra church project, Zbigniew Fiema, suggests, this “may indicate the shift of fiscal and legal responsibilities from the imperial administration to local wealthy landowners”.<sup>61</sup> There is no direct correlation to this trend in Nessana, since the village never had a city council; but we do see an unbroken continuation of its rule and administration by the social elites, churchmen and other notables, who in this case had little to do with the wider empire. To this we may add the loss of importance and eventually the dissolution of the military garrison in Nessana in the sixth century, severing the last formal tie with the wider empire and removing from daily life a constant reminder of the emperor in his capital.

Speaking generally, as the previous chapter has shown, the hand of the Byzantine bureaucracy lay lightly on Nessana. We have little evidence of disputes being resolved officially – in fact, the one instance of such a case is dismissed in favor of the plaintiff without a discussion in the absence of the accused (*P.Ness.* 19). Business and personal disputes are more often resolved by private arbitration, and community opinion exerts a lot of power. Unlike in comparable texts from Jewish communities, we do not have a sense of a parallel legal system; there is not an alternative legal tradition which is employed in unison with or in opposition to the Roman system, but the empire’s laws are more often than not enforced by local notables rather than by the imperial apparatus. Of course, the presence of arbitration does not in itself prove abandonment by the imperial authorities; but the lack of any evidence for imperial legal intervention in the 50-some documents preserved from the Byzantine era does seem to be a strong indication of

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<sup>61</sup> Fiema, "Byzantine Petra - a Reassessment", p. 115.

neglect – especially when we consider that such official documents, had they existed, would normally have been more likely to be preserved in such archives.

All this is not to say that Palaestina Tertia was abandoned or ignored by the imperial bureaucracy, of course, nor even to imply that these communities, exemplified by Nessana, functioned entirely independently and autonomously of the empire. The Be'er-Sheva edict (*ca.* AD 536), which was carved in stone and displayed publicly in Elusa, is proof that Justinian's changes did have significant effects. Following the creation of proconsul with civil and military responsibilities within the three Palestinian provinces (*Novel* 103), additional personnel was required, and the Be'er-Sheva edict accordingly announced the levy of an extraordinary tax.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, in speaking of the taxation system we can say without hesitation that the empire was at the least a financial reality.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, naturally the military unit in Nessana was subordinate to and in touch with other military units. *P.Ness.* 35, 36 and 37 record the connection between the units, with *P.Ness.* 35 requisitioning 64 dromedaries and camels, and 37 mentioning other instances where camels were sent on missions to Caesarea (in Palaestina Prima) or Egypt. Yet these isolated and small-scale exceptions are nothing but that – exceptions to the general atmosphere of self-sufficiency, and perhaps even indifference on the part of the central government.

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<sup>62</sup> Mayerson, "The Beersheva Edict", p. 147.

<sup>63</sup> Haldon, "Economy and Administration", p. 35.

It is generally accepted that in late antiquity imperial government was ‘far more absent than present’, barring a few Egyptian cities.<sup>64</sup> Not only is this true in Nessana, but even the cadre of local officials and the litany of liturgies found elsewhere are pruned and limited. Whereas in Egypt we see much more evidence of local, small-scale bureaucracies, Nessana appears to solve most of its administrative issues informally, without the benefit of titled clerks and regular imperial employees, and – tellingly – without leaving a paper trail. This is true throughout the reign of Justinian, and continues in the same vein until the Muslim conquest. At no point is there any evidence of any involvement with the powers-that-be beyond local bishops, any mention of the governor or indeed Constantinople itself, or any evidence of attempts to contact the emperor.<sup>65</sup> This, although in theory, such a course of action was open to any imperial subject who felt wronged; and in sixth-century Aphrodito, a roughly similar rural community (slightly bigger than Nessana but smaller than Elusa), we know of at least two and perhaps three delegations to Constantinople. In organizing these delegations, the townsmen of Aphrodito are not only exercising their right as imperial subjects, but also demonstrating “the awareness that the complexities of culture and faith that preoccupied them were unavoidably bound up with what happened in New Rome.”<sup>66</sup> Such an awareness is

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<sup>64</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 62.

<sup>65</sup> As Haldon shows, this administrative and psychological disengagement from the center came to characterize the regular Byzantine field-armies by the latter half of the seventh century; it may be that at Nessana we are simply seeing the forerunners of a trend of diminishing ties between the center and the peripheries. Haldon, "Military Service, Military Lands, and the status of Soldiers: Current Problems and Interpretations", p. 44.

<sup>66</sup> MacCoull, *Dioscorus of Aphrodito: His Work and His World*, p. 1.

entirely absent in Nessana. Furthermore, the Negev shows no evidence of any emotional attachment to or involvement with the wider world of the empire. There is no Negev equivalent to the fifth-century inscription from Idjaz, east of the Beroia-Epiphaneia highway, whose writer boasts proudly of his emperor.<sup>67</sup> Unlike in Umm al-Jimal in Arabia, where inscriptions refer to the Blue and Green racing factions,<sup>68</sup> Nessanites show no sign of engaging with politics or cultural developments outside the limited world of the Negev.

### **Bureaucratic practices**

One quick and simple way to evaluate Nessana's integration into the legal and bureaucratic customs of the empire is by examining the degree and speed with which imperial decrees were implemented. In 537, Justinian decrees that all official and semi-official documents must include the regnal year in their dating formulae (*Novel* 47). An official deposition from 548 does not include the regnal year (*P.Ness.* 19); but by 558 we see the imperial decree observed (*P.Ness.* 20). This fits the evidence from Petra, where we see a relatively rapid implementation of the regnal year dating system;<sup>69</sup> and it stands in direct contrast to Egypt, where scribes did not adapt to the new usage quickly or

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<sup>67</sup> Prentice, *Greek and Latin Inscriptions, Section B: Northern Syria*, 1020 = *IGLS* 1600.

<sup>68</sup> MacAdam, "Settlements and Settlement Patterns in Northern and Central Transjordan, ca 550-ca 750", p. 58; the inscriptions are published in Enno Littman et al., *PPUAES Division III, Greek and Latin Inscriptions: Section A, Southern Syria* (Leiden 1913), p. 148 no. 256; p. 154 no. 260.

<sup>69</sup> "The Diplomats of the Petra Papyri", a lecture given by Martin Buchholz on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2007 in Jerusalem at the conference "From Sumer to the Genizah—Diplomatics and Legal Documents in the Ancient World." The lecture relies mostly on the new papyri, published in Arjava, Buchholz and Gagos, *The Petra Papyri* III.

uniformly. Even as late as 566 – 29 years after Justinian’s decree – we still find Egyptian documents dated solely by the post-consulate of the last private person to hold the consulate in the Roman Empire, i.e. that of Flavius Basilus.<sup>70</sup> This reluctance to adopt the new imperial conventions may be related to the strong, independent scribal tradition in Egypt; but whatever the reason, we see that compared to its neighboring province Palaestina Tertia shows a relatively quick, if fitful, adoption of the new regulations.

To continue with the issue of dating, it is noticeable that dating by the emperor’s consulship year and by indiction cycle is not infrequently erroneous. *P.Ness.* 26, dated to January 570, also describes the year as “the first year after the second consulship” of the emperor (26.3), which must, as Kraemer points out, be a mistake for ‘the third year’, since Justin held his second consulship in 567. Mistakes in indiction cycles also appear in inscriptions 14, 24 and 72. In all these cases the errors do not appear to be the result of a scribe replacing one letter for another, as the numbers are spelled out. Rather, the inaccuracies point to the irrelevance of the numbering by consulship and by indictions to daily life. If these dates had any intrinsic meaning to the scribes, or had they been part of daily life, the difference between the current date and the one appearing on the documents would have jumped out at the writer. As it is, these imperial dating systems do not appear to have played a significant role in Nessana, and the addition of these dating systems to the documents appears to have been done merely in acquiescence to imperial conventions, which did not take root in the community.

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<sup>70</sup> Bagnall and Worp, *Chronological Systems in Byzantine Egypt*, p. 47. The document in question is from 566-567 or 581-582 or 596-597; I have taken the earliest possible date, but of course the same argument holds true if the later dates are assumed.

The last element of the beginning formulas to be considered is the invocation. Like the regnal dating of documents, the compulsory use of an invocation of Christ was instituted by imperial decree, in this case by the emperor Maurice (582-602); the date of the decree is uncertain, but its force is felt in Egypt by 591. Though Maurice required only the invocation of Christ himself, the invocation varied over time: under Phocas (602-610) a Trinitarian formula was used, and soon came to include also invocations of Mary and the Saints.<sup>71</sup>

The earliest invocation at Nessana is probably from 517,<sup>72</sup> falling under the reign of Anastasius I, and takes the form ἐπὶ πάντων ἀγαθοῖς, “In the name of all that is good” (*P.Ness.* 17.4). This formula continues to appear throughout Justinian’s reign (*P.Ness.* 18, of 537; *P.Ness.* 20, of 558; and *P.Ness.* 21, of 562), although *P.Ness.* 19, a formal deposition on the settlement of a lawsuit in 548, does not include it, and neither do *P.Ness.* 22 and 23 from 566 (Justin II’s reign). It is under Justin II that the standard formula changes to πιστοῦ ἐν χριστῷ, “With faith in Christ”, and this formula keeps appearing from 569–i.e., well before Maurice’s decree–until 596 (*P. Ness.* 24, 26, and 29). More interesting than the appearance of the formula before the imperial decree requires its use is the fact that it is not found in documents from Maurice’s and Phocas’s reigns (*P.Ness.* 44 of 598 and *P.Ness.* 45 from 602). A final and exceptional invocation before the Arab conquest appears in *P.Ness.* 46, a loan of money of 605: ἐν ὀνόματι τῆς

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 112.

<sup>72</sup> One should note here that Kraemer dating relies on the omission of the regnal year to place the *terminus ante quem* as 537. As we have seen, however, the 537 imperial decree was not always immediately implemented.

ἀγίας καὶ ἔνδοξ(οτάτης) καὶ ζωο[π(οιοῦ)] τριάδος πατρὸς καὶ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἀγίου πνεύματος καὶ τῆς ἔνδοξ(οτάτης) δεσποίνης ἡμῶν τῆς θεοτόκου καὶ ἀειπαρθέν[ου Μ]αρίας καὶ τοῦ [χοροῦ τῶν ἀγίων μαρτύρων]: “In the name of the holy, glorious and life-giving trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and of our glorious Lady Mother of God and Eternal Virgin Mary, and of the choir of holy martyrs.” This unusually explicit and comprehensive formula appears only this once, and there is no ready explanation for its use here. Although one of the parties to the contract is a churchman, other documents which include churchmen and priests among the parties lack such a detailed invocation or indeed, an invocation of any kind, thereby negating any attempt to explain the unusual invocation as an expression of particular piety. In general, there appears to be little connection between the presence of an invocation and the religiosity of the scribe or the contractual parties: the invocation is more a matter of convention than piety. Invocations do not even seem to be a guarantee or an indication of greater formality, though they are slightly more likely to be entirely missing from letters between people who know each other well (*P.Ness.* 47). Furthermore, the lack of consistency in using invocations and the independence of their appearance and form from the imperial decrees regulating their use suggest that the decrees issued in Constantinople had but little effect in Nessana.

One last bureaucratic practice enjoined by the emperor and present at least partially in the Nessana papyri is the use of protocols. A highly decorative – indeed, practically unreadable – calligraphic superscription at the top of an official document, these are found in *P.Ness.* 41 and 42. In a 536 injunction (*Novel* 44.2), Justinian ordered

that all official documents drawn up by public notaries must include this label, and forbade severing the label from the document. The distinctive label branded a document as a state product, and the attempt to create a state monopoly on legal documents is in keeping with Justinian's drive to unify the empire. Yet the fitful presence of the protocols in Nessana does not exactly attest to the success of the imperial decree. Papyri 18, 19, 20 and 21 are all securely dated after the 536 decree and before Justinian's death; all four are official legal documents (marriage settlement, division of property, etc.) making use of official clerks, and so should have been affixed with the required label; and yet none of them contains a protocol.<sup>73</sup> The two preserved protocols appear to be an aberration rather than indication of dutiful obedience to imperial commands.<sup>74</sup>

In a period when the emperors were consciously focused on imposing one Roman law throughout the realm, we see Nessana sometimes bowing – if occasionally a little belatedly – to the imperial dicta. Unlike in Egypt, there are no signs of any significant reluctance to adopt new bureaucratic procedures; but on the other hand, there are also no signs that when implemented, the changes were anything but cosmetic, and it is clear that they were observed sporadically and inconsistently. This attitude towards the wider world of the empire is of a piece with the general self-contained world of Nessana. It is also in

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<sup>73</sup> Since the top and left-hand edges of the documents are preserved, there is no question of a missing original protocol.

<sup>74</sup> Two more protocols are preserved in *P.Ness.* 60 and 76, but as those date from after the Muslim conquest, their presence cannot be attributed to obedience to an imperial decree.

keeping with the ultimate failure of Justinian's attempts to shore up and reassert imperial authority.<sup>75</sup>

It is now increasingly rare for modern scholars to suggest, as A.H.M. Jones did, that a major contribution of the Roman Empire was the imposition of a superior culture on 'backward' areas such as Syro-Phoenicia.<sup>76</sup> This is partly because of the increased reluctance to assume, implicitly or explicitly, the greater value of the Greek and Roman culture over indigenous cultures. It is also a consequence of the growing awareness of the complexity and variation in degrees of integration and identification with the empire in the different provinces. On the one hand, we have examples such as the pro-Roman demonstrations of Edessa's citizens in 449, and this is not an isolated or transitory phenomenon in the Eastern provinces. As late as 661 or 681 AD, the tract known as "The Trophies of Damascus" shows a distinct sense of identification with the Byzantine empire, referring to it as 'our empire'.<sup>77</sup> But there is no reason to think that the same sentiments were current in Nessana, and in fact, there is a significant reason to think otherwise.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> For a complete account of imperial vs. local power struggles in the age of Justinian, see Sarris, *Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian*. Sarris focuses exclusively on the struggles between the central imperial authorities and the local big-estate landowners. As Nessana had no large-scale estates, this is not directly relevant to our discussion, but it is interesting to see that even in cases which earned the emperor's direct and focused attention, the results were not a successful integration into the orbit of the capital, but rather a greater disassociation from the idea of imperial government.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. the brief discussion of the value judgments implicit in A.H.M. Jones's (and B. Isaac's) works in Hall, *Roman Berytus*, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Cameron, "Hellenism and the Emergence of Islam", p. 304.

<sup>78</sup> The degree of identification with the Byzantine empire is sometimes measured through the reaction to the Muslim conquest, and specifically by the decision of the local population to remain or to flee to Antioch or

### **Nessana under the Muslim Empire**

Rather than beginning from any pre-established position regarding the effect of Muslim rule, this section will examine the three parameters scrutinized above for the Byzantine period: the imperial attitude to the residents of Nessana, the attitudes of the residents towards the central government (as exhibited in appeals and references to the government), and invocations and dating formulas. Before going on, it is important to note a few caveats.

There is no doubt that the early decades of Muslim rule show a system less well-organized and definitely less complex than the Byzantine one in some details. The administration and its details are also much less well preserved, perhaps as corollary to the previous point; there is nothing to equal the Imperial novels and decrees preserved on stone of the sixth and early seventh century. Last, but not least, although the Byzantine and late-ancient world was relatively neglected by the standards of classical historical scholarship, it is still a much older and more established field of study than Early Muslim studies. Having begun as a serious field of research only in the nineteenth century with Goldziher, and attracting fewer researchers, Islamic studies is in some ways still a developing field. Primary texts often exist only in outdated nineteenth-century editions,

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elsewhere. Though the evidence here would seem to support my argument, inasmuch as the Negev did not experience a flight ahead of the Muslim forces or after their arrival, I am dubious as to the value of this measurement. Our evidence for evacuation comes exclusively from the urban areas, such as Damascus (Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, pp. 246-248). It may be true, as Donner asserts, that this difference in reaction stems from the greater degree of identification with the Byzantine world to be found among the urban Orthodox Greek-speakers. Yet it is at least as likely that a peasant whose wealth is the land and not in moveable items will be much more reluctant to leave, regardless of his attitude to the former or new regimes.

and many of them do not have translations, let alone detailed contextual commentaries.<sup>79</sup> Arabic papyrology is a nascent discipline, as is early Islamic epigraphy. All these factors combine to make the early decades of Muslim administration less easy to research, and ought to encourage us to proceed with caution in comparing it with the very differently-studied Byzantine world.

### **The view from Damascus**

The Muslim army and the Umayyad administration were accustomed to seeing the world as divided into distinct ethnicities or tribal groups, as reflected in *P.Ness.* 92 and 93, accounts of Muslim army payments *ca.* 685. In both these ledgers, the soldiers are mentioned by name, patronymic and tribal affiliation, and indeed these papyri have been used for discussion of the tribal makeup of the Umayyad army in *Jund Filastīn*.<sup>80</sup> This essentially ethnic mindset is the Umayyad framework for organizing the world, and it is with this system in mind that the Arab newcomers attempt to make sense of the complicated groupings of the new territories, and assign the inhabitants accurate labels. Baladhuri tells us that the population of Baalbek in the former province of Phoenicia was divided by the Arab administration into three ethnic groupings: Greek (*rum*), Persian (*furs*) and Arab, while Caesarea was seen as composed of Arabs, Greeks (*rum*),

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<sup>79</sup> Of course, as has often been noted, the use of these historical texts is problematic in itself, as they are seldom eyewitnesses to the events but rather accounts written decades and sometimes (as in the case of Tabari, a crucial source) centuries after the events describes.

<sup>80</sup> Since ethnic identification depends in the first instance on a belief in shared descent, the tribal identification (literally, 'X of the *Bani Y*', 'X of the sons of Y') is obviously a type of ethnic category: membership in the tribe is seen as defined by a purported line of genealogical descent.

Samaritans and Jews.<sup>81</sup> In this case, we see the wish to divide the world into clearly recognizable ethnicities, and an instance where the categorization is (relatively) easily and appropriately applied to the region in question. Later on, after the initial conquest, the division and categorization followed more closely the religious boundaries, as the tax categories differentiated between *muslims*; and *dhimmis* (Jews and Christians).<sup>82</sup>

Yet in the case of Nessana a straightforward ethnic division into Arab and Greek would have been difficult to accomplish. This conflict between their own ethno-centric framework and the realities of the region obviously troubles and engages the new Muslim administration, which clearly does recognize (unlike some modern scholars) that their categories might not fit very well. ‘Are you Arab or *Nabat*’, a Muslim Arab general asks a Ghassanid tribesman, and receives the answer “We are Nabateanized Arabs and Arabized Nabateans” (Mas’udi, *Murūj al-Dhahab* 1.231). The fact that Mas’udi chooses to report this story does indicate the unease which these overlapping identities cause the invaders: they recognize that these people present a liminal identity, and choose to make sense of this fact by assigning to them a borderline position, straddling the two worlds. In several other cases, we know that the conquering Arabs dealt with the issue not by fitting the inhabitants into the pre-existing categories but by recognizing that these categories are not sufficient to contain them. In the case of Damascus, for instance, the Muslim jurists divided its inhabitants into the *Rum*, i.e. presumably former members of the

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<sup>81</sup> Al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan* 154 (Baalbak); 167 (Caesarea). The following discussion relies a great deal on the insights found in Shboul and Walmsley, "Identity and Self-Image", pp. 265 ff.

<sup>82</sup> For the relatively late appearance of divisions along religious lines into the categories of *ahl al-kitāb* and *ahl al-dhimma*, see *EF*<sup>2</sup>, s.v.

Byzantine military and administration (if not necessarily the church functionaries), and the other inhabitants, or ‘the city’s own people’ (*min ahliha*) – i.e., the very people who would not fit comfortably into any category, being neither quite Arab nor quite Byzantine.<sup>83</sup>

### **Muslim imperial involvement in daily life**

As an agricultural community based on marginally-fertile land, Nessana, like all other Negev communities, depends on an intensive moisture-trapping and maximizing system, which requires the participation of the entire community. That this elaborate system was kept up partly through the use of *corvées* is confirmed by four ostraca found in neighboring Sobata.<sup>84</sup> The level of organization and coordination required for this has prompted some scholars to suggest that all Negev settlements must have been centrally directed and motivated, and thus tied intrinsically to the imperial agendas and plans.<sup>85</sup> This does not seem to be a necessary conclusion; the *corvées* and water upkeep duties were organized locally, and continued in this manner after the Arab conquest without recourse to the imperial authorities. We do have evidence of compulsory public service on a supra-provincial level, both during Byzantine times and under Muslim rule; but this type of public service is not related to the maintenance of the agricultural water network. *P.Ness.* 74 from *ca.* 685 documents the requisition of two camels and two men (possibly,

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<sup>83</sup> Ibn Asaḳir, *Tarikh Madīnat Dimashq* (ed S. Munajjid, 1954) I.128.

<sup>84</sup> Youtie, "Ostraca from Sbeitah".

<sup>85</sup> Haiman, "Agriculture and Nomad-State Relations", p. 34.

but not necessarily, camel drivers) for service on the road from Caesarea to Scythopolis. This would have meant going beyond the boundaries of Palaestina Tertia (though the requisitioned men and camels would still have stayed within the boundaries of the *jund Filastīn*, which comprised all three Byzantine Palestinian provinces). This is very similar to the levies documented in *P.Ness.* 35, 36 and 37. Both the Byzantine and the Muslim administrations commandeer pack animals and their handlers; in both cases the order probably came from the central office (from Elusa, in the Byzantine case, and from Gaza or possibly Caesarea in the Muslim case), and in both cases the requisitioned men and animals were directed to a location which required traveling at least a hundred miles from Nessana. *P.Ness.* 74 indicates that the same administrative habits and patterns were maintained by the new imperial authority, and is a prime example of the areas in which the new rule changes very little in the old ways. Water issues are still dealt with on a purely local level, and we still see a redistribution of resources on a supra-provincial level when needed.

This case aside, other evidence compels us to note a subtle but significant change in the relations between the government and the residents. The first sign of a change in the air comes from an off-handed mention of a new land survey conducted by ‘the Saracens’. In a receipt, probably dating to the 680’s or 690’s, an eight-person committee acknowledges the receipt of land taxes from Sergius son of George for land “resulting from the Saracen land-survey, due on the property given to you by our lord the governor Meslem, from the land portion of the Banu Ouar” (ἐκ τῆς γηωμετρίας τῶν Σαρακινῶν / ἐκ τῶν δοθέντο<ν> σου ἐκ τοῦ δεσπότης ὑμῶν / Μεσλεμ

συμβούλου ἐκ τῆς γεομορίας τ[ὸν] / β(αν)υ Ουαρ, *P.Ness.* 58.8-11). This indicates not only that the government had recently become interested in mapping out property lines, but also that at least some re-distribution had been going on – in this case, a significant amount of land (judging by the impressive tax of 37.5 solidi due on the land), probably grazing or pasture land, was removed from tribal property and transferred to Sergius, who in following years acted as a village representative and go-between for the Umayyad administration.

One should also note the personal involvement of the governor Meslem (or Muslim) in what would seem to be a purely local matter in a relatively obscure and marginal village. This is in direct contrast to the Byzantine years, where we do not so much as hear of any governors or high officials outside the villages. Yet under Umayyad rule, various officials appear in the documents, either mentioned by the corresponding parties or actively partaking in the correspondence. Apart from the governor mentioned in *P.Ness.* 58, seven of the nine *entagia* (*P.Ness.* 60-67 and 69) come from Al-Hārith ibn ‘Abd in Gaza. Though the title of the official is not given and he is not otherwise known, comparison to similar *entagia* from Aphrodito, clearly addressed from the governor Qurrah ibn Sharīq (as well as the presence of the governor’s offices in Gaza), implies that he is the governor of *jund Filastīn*. As the *entagia* present several interesting elements, it is perhaps as well to examine them separately.

### **The bilingual *entagia***

All nine *entagias*, dating from 674 to 689, are bilingual, with the first portion of the document in Arabic and the second in Greek. The products requisitioned are solely wheat and oil (presumably olive oil), and the term used for the requisition is *rizq* in Arabic.

The root *r.z.q.* in Arabic is fairly common and broad in scope; its primary meaning is sustenance of any kind, and with the advent of Islamic theology it gains an additional meaning as “the support and growth of the body which God sends to mankind and animals.”<sup>86</sup> Adjectives derived from the root *r.z.q.* appears frequently in the Qur’ān, and *Rāziq*, i.e. the provider of existence enters fairly rapidly into the canon as one of the 99 Names of God.<sup>87</sup> This religious nuance is not necessarily present in every use of the term, as can be seen from the neutral manner of its use in secular classical Arabic poetry. Indeed, it is far more likely that the primary meaning is not theological, but as occurred with other phrases, the need for expressing divine attributes led to the word’s conscription into theological service.

Yet this derivative religious usage is one of the factors leading Mayerson to conclude that the *rizq* which appears in the *entagia* is an essentially religious tax, a theologically authorized entitlement. Though he is willing to admit that the native population may well have viewed the *rizq* as simply another obligation, equivalent to any other tax or levy, Mayerson sees it as representing an attempt to bring non-Muslims into

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<sup>86</sup> E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, New York, 1955 (I.3.1077).

<sup>87</sup> The instances are too numerous to mention, but see the many citations for the noun and verbal forms of *r.z.q.* in Muhammad Abd al-Baqi, *A Concordance of the Qu'ran*, pp. 310-312.

the fold and force them to participate in the Muslim economy – i.e., to assist Allah in providing for his soldiers. “From the Muslim point of view, *rzk* is an entitlement of an adherent of Islam for sustenance in its broadest sense. It not only encompasses food, or money with which to purchase food, but also, as reflected in *P.Apoll.* 49, clothing, as well as other necessities. It is an entitlement imposed on a non-Muslim population by right of conquest on behalf of Allah's cause.”<sup>88</sup>

Relying on no germane evidence, Mayerson here attributes an economic and administrative detail to a religious impulse – an attribution that I hope to show below is not only unfounded but also demonstrably mistaken. What we see here is an idealization of a supposed ‘Islamic’ economic system, combined with an idealization of the period between Muhammad’s death and the consolidation and centralization of the Empire during the Umayyad rule. The implicit assumption is that unlike secular or non-Muslim societies, the government and the administration of a Muslim society are *not* governed by the will of individuals or by historical traditions adapted to a particular historical context. According to this view, “Islamic economy” and “Islamic government” are divinely ordained and hence immutable, rather than being subject to modifications according to the changing social and political circumstances. The laws of Islamic societies are seen as originating in a pious attitude; Islamic laws precede all social configurations and forms of government, and therefore exist in a separate realm, untouched by such developments.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Mayerson, "Ῥουζικόν and Ῥογά in the Post-Conquest Papyri", p. 128.

<sup>89</sup>Nomani and Rahnema, *Islamic Economic Systems*, p 1. The attitude described above is exemplified throughout the book and in particular pp. 1-80.

Man is seen as ‘god’s vice-regent’,<sup>90</sup> and his actions are interpreted in the light of divine commandments and wishes. In the context of this chapter, such a view would mean that any Islamic administration would be fundamentally and intrinsically different from the Byzantine one, not for any practical reasons but for theological ones.

As regards the early post-conquest papyri, this stance is often complicated and strengthened by the propensity to idealize the reigns of the first four caliphs. Unlike the rulers of the subsequent Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, Abu-Bakr, ‘Omar, ‘Othman and ‘Ali had all known Muhammad personally, were part of his inner circle, and were chosen by acclamation of the community (*ijmā’*) rather than by the virtues of birth or power. Representing the last links to Muhammad, the first generation of astounding conquests and the last generation in which the entire Islamic community was united before the split into Sunnah and Shi‘ah, the decades spanned by these caliphs are for all these reasons romanticized and viewed through rose-tinted lenses. This favorable predisposition is evident already in the earliest Muslim chronicles with the epithet ‘the four righteous caliphs’ or ‘four rightly-guided caliphs’ (*al-khulafā’ al-rāshidūn*); and it is still to be found in some modern scholars who continue to view these early years as examples of a still-pure, uncorrupted Muslim society.<sup>91</sup> This predilection strengthens the tendency to attribute any features of the four caliphs’ administrations to their piety and

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid, pp. 31-32: “The phenomenon of confining religion to the private domain of personal laws and separating it from socio-political, economic and cultural activities of the community, thus subverting the Ideal Islamic society of the ‘golden age of Islam’, began in earnest in 661” – i.e., with the rise of Mu‘āwiya and the beginning of the Umayyad dynasty.

adherence to the Qur'ān. Thus any feature which is seen as being rooted in the pre-Umayyad period is likely to be seen a-priori as religiously motivated.

The attitudes described above not only preclude any social and political explanations for the norms of society; they also force the discussion of administrative policies towards the moral and ethical realm. Since the sphere of economic life is seen as defined by a rigid set of guidelines, based on divine revelation and inspired interpretation, even details such as the financing of garrisons are bound to be seen through an ethical lens. Obviously, these statements are very crude and generalizing: many Islamic scholars now lean towards economic explanations. Nevertheless, what we find in Mayerson's formulations should not be dismissed as an isolated view but one that is symptomatic of an influential mind-set in modern scholarship, common to both sides of the religious and linguistic divide. Thus we find, even with objective scholars such as Donner, who can hardly be accused of a Muslim bias, interpretations of standard letter-ending formulas as representative of a deeper piety and religious world view.<sup>92</sup> The religious explanation of *rizq* may be seen as part of the same phenomenon.

### ***Roga and Annona Militaris***

If, as Mayerson argues, the *rizq* is a Muslim expression of the role of Allah in the universe, we should expect to find little correlation between the practice of *rizq* and

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<sup>92</sup> Donner, "The Formation of the Islamic State", p 293: "We might note that many papyri letters end with pious phrases such as *wa-l salam ala man athaa al huda* ([Peace be upon Him who established serenity, RS]; APEL III no 147, dated 710). This can also be viewed as expressing a notion of absolute Laws in the form of *huda*."

earlier Byzantine and Roman practices. Fortunately, the documents themselves direct us to the Byzantine equivalent, using ῥογά as well as ῥουζικόν as an equivalent to *rizq*. *Roga* appears in *P.Lond* IV.1349.15-16; in *BGU* 304.11, where *roga* is used for wheat; and in *P.Lond* IV.1433.17, *roga* is used again in connection with wheat.<sup>93</sup> *Roga* is current in both Latin and Greek, and is clearly derived from an abbreviated form of *erogatio*, "expenditure" or "disbursement." Like *rizq* in Arabic, it had a variety of nuances, and only in this context does it develop the technical meaning of a levy supporting local troops, usually through payment in kind.<sup>94</sup>

*Roga* also crops up in two pre-Conquest documents from Oxyrhynchus, one having to do with a quantity of grain, and the other with money or provisions for soldiers. *P.Oxy.* XVI 1913, a list of expenditures for estates from *ca.* 555, mentions a baker who "supplies the service of our master and the allowance (*roga*) of his retinue, in accordance with the account held by him of 1,132 *artabae* and 4 *choinoi* of grain" (col. III.60). Slightly later, we have *P.Oxy.* XVI 2012 from 618, a fragmentary receipt for the purchase of a large amount of barley with a mention of "the soldiers' *roga*". *Roga*, then, is used like *rizq*, to designate a tax in kind dedicated to the local soldiers.

The custom of paying in kind for the upkeep of nearby garrisons is fairly well documented from the third century onwards. While the rigidity of the Roman tax system in the third century prevented the imposition of new monetary taxes, growing inflation

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<sup>93</sup> The last two instances would seem to invalidate Bell's suggestion that *roga* "is used only of the money-allowance, *rouzikon* for corn" or that "*roga* was the general term for the whole allowance but was also used for the money-allowance, while *rouzikon* denoted corn, or perhaps provisions, only." Bell, *Greek Papyri in the British Museum, IV: the Aphrodito Papyri*, note on *P. Lond.* IV.1349.15-16.

<sup>94</sup> Contra see Mayerson, who thinks the Arabic term is narrowly defined while the Greek remains very broad in scope: Mayerson, "'Ρουζικόν and 'Ρογά in the Post-Conquest Papyri", p. 128.

meant that “the government was forced to turn increasingly to exactions in kind, particularly for their major expense, the army.”<sup>95</sup> That these levies were current in Palestine is evidenced by their frequent appearances in the Palestinian (Jerusalem) Talmud, where they are called *arnona*, a version of the Latin *annona militaris*.<sup>96</sup> By the fourth century, the practice is common from Egypt to Syria,<sup>97</sup> and the documents show more evidence for its existence (though the payments are not always labeled by a particular technical term). Thus from AD 324/327 we have *SB XX 14661*, mentioning items of clothing required from villages, with a striking similarity to the cloaks mentioned as part of the *rizq* in *P.Apoll.* 49 and 50. A few decades later we have *P.Oxy.* LXIII 4373 of AD 364, documenting a landlord’s requirement to provide volunteers to the troops with wine, and possibly also with meat and money.<sup>98</sup> All these payments in kind to the troops – usually falling upon the middle class and local elites – were classified generically as *annonae*,<sup>99</sup> and are documented until the early seventh century. *P.Oxy.* XVI 2046 of the sixth century is an account of payments of bread, oil, wine and wood to

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<sup>95</sup>Howgego, "The Supply and Use of Money in the Roman World: 200 B.C. to A.D. 300", p. 23.

<sup>96</sup> See particularly the Palestinian Talmud, *Baba Metzi'a* 7.8; and Roth, 2002, p. 284.

<sup>97</sup> Carrié argues stridently against accepting Ramsay MacMullen’s statistics, which purport to show that a monetary economy in Egypt has been replaced almost entirely by the fourth century by payment in kind. While the argument is outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that even in Carrié’s view, the role of payment in kind is not denied but simply seen as more restricted, perhaps 25% of the total taxes. For our purposes, then, it will suffice to agree that payment of taxes in kind was a significant feature of Roman taxation from the fourth century onwards. See Carrié, "L’Etât à la recherche", pp. 28 and 33..

<sup>98</sup> For the possibility of meat and money being required as well, see Alston, "Managing the Borders: Supplying the Frontier Troops in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries", p. 411.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

soldiers of various units; and, as mentioned above, in 618 we find *P.Oxy.* XVI 2012 mentioning an unspecified *roga* in proximity to a mention of barley.

It seems amply demonstrated, then, that from the third century until the eve of the Islamic conquest local communities were accustomed to paying the ruling troops in kind. Indeed, this statement would hardly have been worth demonstrating at such length if it were not for the previously established connection between *roga* and *rizq* and the attempts to classify *rizq* as stemming from an autonomous Arabic and Muslim tradition; it ought now to be clear that *rizq*, *roga*, *arnona* and *annonae* are simply different terms for the same practice. But before we can state confidently that the Islamic practice simply absorbed the structures found in place at the time of the conquest, it is necessary to deal briefly with the question of Byzantine presence in the relevant areas.

It has been suggested, notably by Parker, that the literary and archaeological evidence shows that a significant and crucial section of the Arabian and Palestinian frontier were largely denuded of troops after the mid sixth century.<sup>100</sup> If true, this suggestion would present difficulties for the attempt to perceive continuities between the financing of the Byzantine troops and the Islamic troops in Palestine. In a rural society with relatively few sophisticated records, it is hard to imagine that the memory of a particular Byzantine tax would remain strong enough over a century to influence the arrangements of the conquering Arab troops, and thus if Parker is correct, the argument for a direct line from the Byzantine to the Islamic practice would face a problematic lacuna.

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<sup>100</sup>Parker, *Romans and Saracens: a History of the Arabian Frontier*, pp. 151-152.

Parker's thesis has been challenged by Whitby, on the basis of literary evidence, and by Isaac, using the documentary and archaeological evidence.<sup>101</sup> Whitby makes it clear that our literary sources cannot be relied on for such details of military placement in general, and that there is no concrete information at all about the beginning of the seventh century. Isaac uses a papyrus from Nessana to demonstrate that while some military sites may have been reduced in strength, others were being reinforced. *P.Ness. 37* is a fragmentary double list of villages in the northern Negev. If we accept Lionel Casson's very plausible explanation of the list as representing a military organization, we note a discrepancy when compared to the fourth century *Onomasticon* of Eusebius and the *Notitia Dignitatum*. At least five place names appear in the Nessana list and not in the literary sources, leading Isaac to conclude that these places became prosperous over the intervening centuries and received their own garrisons.<sup>102</sup> This conclusion directly contradicts Parker's theory that the military presence in Palaestina Tertia was characterized by a high point in the early fourth century and a gradual reduction during the next three centuries. Isaac concludes that "a substantial number of military sites in the northern Negev, attested in the fourth century, were occupied into the sixth or longer."<sup>103</sup> While literary and documentary evidence as well as archaeological site reports cannot conclusively confirm or deny the possibility of a reduction of forces at some stages, "it is

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<sup>101</sup>Whitby, "Recruitment in Roman Armies from Justinian to Heraclius (*ca.* 565-615)", pp. 66-70; and Isaac, "The Army in the Late Roman East: the Persian Wars and the Defense of the Byzantine Provinces", pp. 137-144.

<sup>102</sup>Isaac, "Late Roman Army", p. 140.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

quite clear however that there was no full withdrawal and there is, so far, no positive evidence of withdrawal in this region.”<sup>104</sup> In the absence of further evidence, then, the burden of proof is on those who would claim that the sixth century saw a significant denudement of troops. To return to our question of taxation, this conclusion allows us to assume a continued and substantial military presence in the northern Negev. Thus the influence of Byzantine taxation systems on the Muslim conquerors remains a possibility, and the great similarities between the *roga* and the *rizq* requests make the connection not only plausible but highly likely. This is not the only case where administrative practices are carried over from the Byzantine to the Muslim empire; as Haldon has argued, it appears that even the new districts, the *ajnād*, were “established on the preexisting pattern of the older *ducatus limitaneorum* established in the same areas”.<sup>105</sup>

Having established then that the practice of extracting *rizq* from the population in Palestine and Egypt is in all likelihood a direct continuation of the same system under Byzantine rule, we are now in a position to claim that this particular tax shows a surprising continuity in the decades before and after the conquest. This cautious and small-scale conclusion may not appear particularly exciting, but it is worth noting if only as a counterpoint to the common wisdom. In their haste to describe the continuities between the Classical and the Late Antique world, many scholars have cavalierly assumed that the point of rupture, the precise moment at which we can no longer recognize the classical society, must be the Islamic conquest. This assumption seems

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<sup>104</sup>Isaac, "Late Roman Army", p. 144.

<sup>105</sup> Haldon, "Military Service", pp 10-11.

prima facie eminently sensible: after all, the conquest did create eventually a completely new Empire, dominated by a new language and new religion. Yet it ought to be now clear that the *entagia* do not represent a religiously-motivated innovation.<sup>106</sup>

### **A new tone: contact between authorities and villagers under the Umayyads**

The *entagia* do break the Byzantine pattern in one crucial way, by phrasing the requisition request as coming from a specific individual, albeit one very highly placed: a level of familiarity with the officials is assumed and established. Although they still fit within the general dynamic between central administration and village established in the fifth and sixth centuries, whereby interactions are limited to fulfillment of tax obligations, the interaction between village and center is already in the process of changing. This is not, as Mayerson asserts, because a new practice is established – it is in the realm of administrative practices that we see the greatest continuities with the Byzantine system. But the fundamental tone and assumptions undergirding the exchange are no longer the same. The orders do not come from an anonymous central authority, but from a specific figure, and one which is becoming more and more involved in the details of village life.

This new reality is manifest in *P.Ness.* 72 and 73, in which the governor is much less remote and figures more prominently in the life of the village. Both are orders from the governor for a guide to conduct first a man and then the governor's wife to Mount Sinai. Both requests are in Greek, and begin with a Christian invocation: ἐν ὀνόματι

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<sup>106</sup> This fits in with the general reticence of the early Islamic state with regard to public, state-sanctioned religious declarations. See Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State", p. 410.

τοῦ Θεοῦ παντοκράτορος, followed by εὐχαριστῶ τῷ Θεῷ. Yet although they follow the former Christian conventions, the entire tone of the letters is unparalleled and indeed would be inconceivable in the context of the relationship between the village notables and the Byzantine governors and authorities. The letters are addressed from the governor, appearing only by name and title with no additional honorifics, to “George of Nessana” and to “the people of Nessana”. The informality and degree of intimacy implied in these short informal notes mark them out as indicative of a new attitude towards governance.

The greater involvement of the Umayyad authorities was not limited to requests from the resident population. Yazīd ibn Fā’id appears as a witness to the Arabic portion of the contract *P.Ness. 56*; in the notes to the document, Kraemer mentions that the verso of 77 contains a letter in Arabic in which a higher official, Nabr ibn Qays, rebukes Yazīd ibn Fā’id for his treatment of the people of Nessana. Kraemer deduces that Yazīd ibn Fā’id “was probably the qadi or judge of Nاستان, and in fact, dealing with contracts (as in *P.Ness. 56 – RS*) was one of the duties of the *qadi*.”<sup>107</sup> The letter of admonishment mentioned by Kraemer was never published. *P.Ness. 77* itself was already lost in his day, and it is not in the Morgan Library with most of the other papyri, nor is it in the Rockefeller Museum, the inheritor of the Department of Antiquities in the Palestine Archaeological Institute, where some other Colt Expedition finds reside.<sup>108</sup> Judging by

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<sup>107</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 159.

<sup>108</sup> Regarding *P.Ness. 77*, Kraemer notes that he was only able to read it from a photograph, as the original was displaced. It is not clear how he was then able to ascertain the contents of the verso, or where the photograph came from. Note that *P.Ness. 56* also testifies to the apparently peaceful and easy co-existence

Kraemer's description, we have here an indication of governmental involvement which is without precedent in the Byzantine era, when there is little enough evidence of any imperial officials, let alone an imperial monitoring of the conduct of these officials.

That this change in the relationship between the imperial center and the community was understood and reciprocated (not always to the administration's advantage) is clear from *P.Ness. 75*, a letter from an unknown location in the vicinity inviting the representatives of another unknown village and Nessana to join their neighbors on an expedition to the governor in Gaza, in order to protest against the tax burden.<sup>109</sup> Only now in the late seventh century do we see anything similar to the protest delegations current in Aphrodito a hundred years earlier. As always, it is important to be wary of placing too much emphasis on one document whose survival and rarity might be due to chance rather than indicative of a genuine trend. Yet this particular document confirms a change evidenced by many others: All the documents from the 680's and 690's reveal a much closer tie between the administration and the residents, and especially notable is the level of interest exhibited by the bureaucracy in the daily details of life, such as distribution of land. The presence and involvement of high-level

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of the newly appointed Muslim judges with the local notables. This marks a slight but significant difference from the situation described by Donner, where justice is administered either through the *qadi* or through "the local pagarchs of village headmen". See Donner, "Islamic Empire", p. 519; what we see here is rather the two systems acting in unison.

<sup>109</sup> This document has been used as proof of the supposed increase in tax burden upon the population following the conquest (see for instance Rubin, *The Negev as a Settled Land: Urbanization and Settlement in the Desert in the Byzantine Period* (Hebrew), p. 20). This conclusion seems to me to be under-supported by the evidence; complaints on taxes are ubiquitous and do not always – or even often – indicate an increase in taxation. It is possible, of course, that the taxes grew more onerous, especially when we consider the addition of a new poll-tax on non-Muslims as well as ad-hoc levies: Sijpesteijn, "New Rule over Old Structures: Egypt after the Muslim Conquest", p. 191.

government officials in relatively routine administrative matters was typical of the Umayyad government, and not confined to its dealings with Nessana or indeed to local residents. *P.Ness.* 92 and 93 stand out from the rest of the papyri as being entirely internal to the Muslim army; an account of troops and their supplies, they are not connected by any detail or name with the other papers or with the village of Nessana. This routine army account, which appears to deal with a relatively small force, refers often to the caliph ‘Abd al-Mālik in Damascus, as well as mentioning by name the governors of Egypt and of Palestine. Clearly, the highest levels of government and administration were not a far off abstraction, but a very concrete and visible presence in the life of soldiers and residents in *jund Filastīn*. Though we may not find here a wholesale and enthusiastic adoption of the new imperial identity, this is certainly a far cry from the neglect, on the one side, and indifference, on the other, that characterize the Byzantine governance.

## **Conclusion**

Colt’s and Cameron’s dismissal of the new government as “untrained” in administrative matters has been mentioned above (p. 22). It ought to be clear now that whatever the truth of such an observation as regards the first years after the conquest, by the time of the Umayyads this dismissal no longer fits as an explanation for the particular features of provincial government exhibited in Nessana. For one thing, while it is true that scribes with Greek names are retained and employed for the Greek portions of the documents, they function side-by-side with scribes with Arabic names writing in Arabic,

as we see in all the *entagia*. Just as with the instance of the newly-appointed *qadi* who functions in parallel to the traditional local authority (*P.Ness.* 57, above), the administration runs on two parallel tracks – one traditional and Greek-speaking, one recent and Arabic-speaking.

As for the actual practices of administration, it should be clear now that far from adopting whole-heartedly the Byzantine system, the Muslim government developed a novel and unprecedented approach to government, opting for an entirely different tone and level of involvement with the provincial residents. All this is not to imply that the conquest presented a complete and traumatic break with the Byzantine world. The archaeological evidence shows no evidence of destruction, ruin or change,<sup>110</sup> and in most ways the Palestinian population must have continued its life much as it had before.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, we have seen that some bureaucratic practices changed very little, such as the *roga / rizq* requirements.<sup>112</sup> The areas in which administrative practices remained the same must have been areas in which the new administration did not feel the need for a change; the causes were not the result of an inability to come up with a new system or an incompetence in administration, as evidenced by significant changes in other fields.

This conclusion fits with the recent examination of the Arab administrative practices in Egypt conducted by Petra Sijpesteijn. In a comprehensive survey of the

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<sup>110</sup> Schick, *Christian Communities*.

<sup>111</sup> This notwithstanding the fiery and inciting rhetoric of Sophronius' sermons; see Levi-Rubin, "The Influence of the Muslim Conquest on the Settlement Pattern of Palestine during the Early Muslim Period (Hebrew)", p. 54.

<sup>112</sup> Contra see Kennedy, "Islam", p. 222: "The Muslims came with their own ideas about administration and taxation and they felt no need to look to late Roman models."

changes and continuities in Egyptian life in the aftermath of the conquest, Sijpesteijn reaches very similar conclusions to those implied by the Nessana texts. While noting the continuity in bureaucratic personnel and infrastructure throughout much of Egypt, Sijpesteijn stresses that the preservation of the administration “was not a function of mere expediency, or, worse, a failure of governmental imagination”, as has sometimes been implied.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, one area in which change is apparent is a proliferation of paperwork which seems to be the result of “heightened scrutiny on the Arabs’ part of the country’s financial apparatus”<sup>114</sup>; a process which tallies perfectly with the growing centralization – one might almost say a trend towards micro-management – which we have seen in Nessana. The same signposts appear in Egypt as in the Negev: compared to the situation in the sixth and early seventh century, we now see a greater involvement of senior officials and a greater visibility of the governor himself in relatively minor issues. Against the background of continuity and stability, maintained for pragmatic reasons, a deliberate and different policy of administration is also taking shape.

Aside from increasing our knowledge of the history of Nessana – which is, after all, only one small provincial village – the comparison between Byzantine and Muslim assumptions about governance and the ties between center and the peripheries has much

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<sup>113</sup>Sijpesteijn, "New Rule over Old Structures: Egypt after the Muslim Conquest", p. 184.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p. 194.

wider ramifications. Recently there has been much contention regarding the nature and degree of organization in the early Islamic state. While Clive Foss sees the state as highly organized already under the caliph Mu‘āwiyah (661-680), Jeremy Johns, on the contrary, does not see any centralized administrative apparatus under Mu‘āwiyah.<sup>115</sup> The evidence from Nessana is crucial to this wider debate, and weighs in on the side of Foss: the process of centralization and increased state supervision is visible in Nessana already in the 670’s. Thus a minute examination of the small-scale bureaucracy of a Negev outpost has repercussions for an understanding of the nature of the early Islamic state. Unlike the descriptions of ‘a very loose tributary state’, or ‘a loose confederation of Arab tribes’, the papyri show a highly developed system in the process of exerting tighter control, changing the structure of the bureaucracy so as to fit the needs and agendas of the government more precisely. In his critique of Johns, Hoyland notes the evidence for increased organization long before ‘Abd al-Mālik.<sup>116</sup> The discussion above allows us to strengthen his position by noting not only the bureaucratic changes but also a shift in attitude about governance, which is already in place during in Mu‘āwiyah’s reign.

This change is apparent both in the Muslim imperial government, which acts in a noticeably different manner from the Byzantine one, and is mirrored in the attitude of the governed, the people of Nessana. This is not to say that we encounter in Umayyad

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<sup>115</sup> Foss, "A Syrian Coinage of Mu'āwiyah" and Johns, "Archaeology and the History of Early Islam". For discussion of this debate – and a rueful complaint that the existing documentary resources are not utilized enough by Islamic historians – see Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State", p. 395. Hoyland points out that though Johns does use the Nessana papyri, his usage and dating are problematic.

<sup>116</sup> Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State", p. 401.

Nessana an identification with the empire or a construction of identity which relies on the imperial definition. Indeed, the most that can be said for the self-identification of the Nessianites is that under Byzantine rule they appear willing to accept and follow Roman legal traditions, and that under Muslim rule they appear willing to accept and participate in the new rules of administration. For further explorations of self-definition, we must turn to the next chapter.

### Chapter Three: Ethnic Identities

Having looked at the external definitions and categories applied to the residents of Nessana and at the relation between the two successive empires and their subjects, this chapter will attempt to examine the extent to which ethnic identities are present in the Nessana archive. So far, the discussion has centered mostly on ethnic categorization – what the contemporary observer would have noted about Nessana, and how he would have described its residents. This chapter will look at the question of ethnic community rather than category:<sup>1</sup> did the residents of Nessana see themselves as “Arabs” or “Saracens”, and if so, how and where is that identity expressed? This question has been examined in some detail in a comparable archive posing some comparable problems, the archive of Babatha in the new province of Arabia from the second century AD.<sup>2</sup> But in that case it can be stated without hesitation that Babatha herself and many of the other people appearing in the papyri are Jewish, leaving only the question of how that Jewishness is expressed in the documents. In Nessana, we must first establish whether the terms “Saracen” or Arab are at all applicable to the writers of the papyri.<sup>3</sup> The question,

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<sup>1</sup> A concise explanation of the difference between ‘ethnic category’ and ‘ethnic community’ is given by Smith, "War and Ethnicity: the Role of Warfare in the Formation, Self-Images, and Cohesion of Ethnic Communities", pp. 379-380: “In the eighteenth century, it would have been possible for the perceptive observers to distinguish the populations of certain East European valleys and plains from neighboring populations by their different dialects, religious observances and possibly antecedents. It was only in the early nineteenth century that scholars, poets, priests, and later journalists among these populations began to convince wider strata that the population who spoke these dialects and possessed these customs and antecedents constituted an ‘ethnic community’ because they possessed a common origin, history, and culture; and hence that they belonged together in virtue of their common roots in time and place.”

<sup>2</sup> Most notably and clearly in Cotton, "The Guardianship of Jesus Son of Babatha".

then, is how issues of ethnicity functioned in Nessana: whom do we see defined ethnically? Is this concept heuristically useful for understanding the society of Nessana?

The starting point for any discussion of ethnicity ought to be self-identification. To do that we must examine the ethnic categorizations as they appear in the papyri, in the context of any contemporary external categorizations. It is not overly optimistic to expect overt self-labelling; after all, if we turn north and south of Nessana we find a fairly well-developed sense of ethnic consciousness identity in both Syria and in Egypt by the seventh century. If we turn east, we encounter Safaitic inscriptions with numerous tribal designations, including one text in which the author calls himself a 'Nabataean'.<sup>4</sup> In other inscriptions we find people referring to themselves as 'Arab' –most famously, in the early Namarah inscription of AD 328, where Imru'u al-Qays takes obvious pride in styling himself "king of all the Arabs"—*mlk al-'arab klh*.<sup>5</sup> As these examples show, it is perfectly reasonable to expect a sense of ethnic identity to be manifested in self-labelling in surviving texts. Yet Nessana offers us nothing of the kind. The people appearing in the Nessana papyri never define themselves as members of one ethnic group or another.

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<sup>3</sup> I will not discuss the idea of 'Nabataean' identity here or elsewhere, apart from touching briefly on the residue of Nabataean theophoric names below. After the collapse of the Nabataean kingdom in AD 106, 400 years before the Nessana papyri, there is no Nabataean political entity, and the main reason for continuing to speak of 'Nabataean' are the so-called Nabataean inscriptions. Yet as Macdonald argues convincingly, this is mostly a modern paleographical and linguistic perception, and a highly anachronistic one: the script called by scholars 'Nabataean Aramaic script' is not always used to express the 'Nabataean Aramaic language'. See Macdonald, "Personal Names in the Nabataean Realm: a Review Article", p. 255. In short, any search for Nabataean identity in Nessana is bound to be anachronistic and biased by modern categorizations of the writing systems.

<sup>4</sup> Graf catalogues 140 tribal names in the Safaitic inscriptions: Graf, "Rome and Saracens", pp. 359 and 369.

<sup>5</sup> Musée du Louvre AO 4083, published in Dussaud, "Inscription nabatéo-arabe d'en-Namâra". See also Bellamy, "A New Reading of the Namârah Inscription".

While tomb inscriptions often include the rank of the dead man in the church, they never give an ethnicity, not even a provenance, such as “X from Emesa”, which might be interpreted ethnically.<sup>6</sup> This silence is repeated in similar communities across Palaestina Tertia and Secunda: none of the hundreds of inscriptions from the other Nabataean towns offer any help, and the Petra papyri are similarly silent on this issue, offering us no ethnonyms at all. This lack of self-reference is not unprecedented: in fifth-century Gaul, “no one outside the royal families and the Arian church hierarchy ever declares himself or herself a Goth in the surviving sources.”<sup>7</sup> It does, however, make answering the questions set above more complicated.

One possible solution to the problem has been to use material culture to determine the ethnic makeup of the population. Thus, Haiman uses the ritual *stela*e and architectonic features of the farmsteads in the Negev to deduce an (Arab) ethnic identity, and concludes from burial customs that the inhabitants of the towns “were assimilated into the dominant Mediterranean Christian culture that prevailed to the north.”<sup>8</sup> Such an approach is viable only if one assumes a straightforward and direct relation between material culture and subjective identities, or if one assumes an objective ethnic identity which can be determined apart from any subjective internal identifications. These assumptions and their problems have been dealt with admirably by many, notably Siân

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<sup>6</sup> This is in stark contrast to the situation at Hammat Gader in Palaestina Secunda to the north and east of Nessana, where many of the inscriptions do include a toponym, such as ‘the Gazaean’ or ‘the Caesarean’. See inscriptions nos. 66, 53, 52 in Di Segni, “The Greek Inscriptions of Hammat Gader”. For the question of identification by locale and provenance, see chapter 5 below.

<sup>7</sup> Amory, *People and Identity*, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Haiman, “Agriculture and Nomad-State Relations”. pp. 32 and 35.

Jones in *The Archaeology of Ethnicity*.<sup>9</sup> For our purposes, it will suffice to reiterate that there is rarely a one-to-one correlation between material culture and ethnic groups, and that archaeology will not offer an answer to the question of Arab ethnicity.

Since the Nessanites have not obliged us with a text declaring that they considered themselves as ‘Arab’ or ‘Saracen’ or ‘of the Judham tribes’, we must fall back on analyzing the ways in which they identify and categorize others. This is not just a necessary evil, a product of the limitations of our sources; it is also a methodologically sound avenue of investigation. If identity is not to be seen as an objective, unchanging ideal, then it should not be perceived in isolation. Group identity, and ethnicity as a specific case of group identity, do not exist in a vacuum but are constructed in relation to others, built in the process of erecting boundaries around neighboring groups. A close look at the construction of these groups of ‘others’ in the papyri may therefore give us an insight into the question of ethnicity in Nessana.<sup>10</sup>

### **Ethnonyms in the Nessana papyri**

Ethnonyms and ethnic affiliations appear in eight of the Nessana papyri. Two of these—*P.Ness.* 92 and *P.Ness.* 93—contain numerous tribal identifications, but since they are written by Muslim officials and list soldiers in the Muslim army for the benefit of the

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<sup>9</sup> Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present*.

<sup>10</sup> This position has been associated primarily with Fredrik Barth. Recently, Anthony Cohen has argued against the view that identity is merely contrastive, arguing that it runs the danger of “treating ethnicity merely as a tactical identity” (Cohen, “Culture as Identity: An Anthropologist’s View”, p. 198). I would argue that in the case of Nessana, we may use the evidence regarding the bounding of other identity groupings without thereby claiming that all identity is by definition merely a negative reflection on ‘that which we are not’. Here, the use of the contrastive position is adduced as a tool.

Umayyad administration, they can provide us with no information regarding the attitudes of the indigenous community in Nessana and were accordingly adduced in the previous chapter as evidence for the ethno-centric worldview of the Muslim newcomers. Two other documents (*P.Ness.* 18 and 20) deal with Roman identity and were addressed in the previous chapter. Let us then examine the remaining four documents in chronological order, focusing on the information we can glean regarding the identities of the correspondents, the people to whom ethnonyms are applied, and the situations in which they appear.

The first relevant document – *P.Ness.* 28 – records a loan of money, made sometime after 572; the borrower is Stephanus the son of Sergius. The fact that Stephanus is not styled ‘Flavius’ as soldiers usually are but rather simply *καθοσιώμενος*, ‘dedicated’, may indicate that he did not follow his father Sergius into the army. The sum lent is four *solidi* – enough to purchase a camel or a slave, according to the traders’ account of *P.Ness.* 89 – suggesting that Sergius must have been well off. The borrower’s name is lost, but he is described as ...*εχου ἐκ τῶν υἱῶν Ζαμζαμα* (28.2), X (perhaps [Mol]echos?) of the Banu Zamzam tribe.<sup>11</sup>

**P.Ness 51** is an early seventh-century note from Moses, the bishop of Aela, to one Victor, requesting that he give something, possibly a donation, in the bishop’s name to St. Sergius of Nessana and St. Sergius of Elusa. Although the relevant line is not fully

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<sup>11</sup> Kraemer suggests that the Banu Zamzam may be the same tribe as the Abitamtam which appear in 92.30: *χρη αποστρε( ) τὸ μεμβε( ) τοῦ Σουλαιμ β(εν) Αβιθαμθαμ τῶ(ν) β(ανι) Δαχα*. This seems to go against the grain of the reading: there is no reason not to understand Abitamtam straightforwardly as the name of an individual and the father of Sulaim, especially since he is designated as part of the Bani Daha tribe.

preserved, Moses mentions that the donation arrived in Nessana via ‘the Saracen’: (...) ἔλαβες [ἀπ]ὸ τοῦ Σαρακηνο[ῦ] / δοῦναι τῷ ἀγί[ω] Σεργίω] Νεσάνω[ν] καὶ τῷ ἀγίω Σεργίω Ἐλούσης. The note is brief and to the point, written in a quick, rapid hand, with letters set out somewhat carelessly; the evident lack of care in composition and the fact that it was rolled but not sealed strengthens the suggestion that it was an informal, business-like communication. The relatively casual nature of the document is confirmed when we compare it with contemporary letters in the same archive. *P.Ness.* 53, in comparison, is much more elaborate and formal in tone and adheres much more closely to social conventions: it begins with γ]εγράφηκα προσκυνῶν τὰ εἶχνη ὑμῶν, ‘I have written kissing your feet’ and ends with the address δεσπ(ό)τ(η) ἐμῷ τὰ π(άντα) πάσ(ης) τιμ(ῆς) (καὶ) πρ(οσκυνήσεως) ἀξι(ω) μετὰ θε(όν): ‘To my lord, worthy with God’s help, of all – and reverence’. Our *P.Ness.* 51 includes none of these niceties, and is not even dated; it appears to be little more than a quick scrawl to an underling.

This evidence regarding the casual tone of the document will be important to keep in mind as we try and ascertain what is meant by ‘Saracen’; this may well be a colloquial term, or a term used loosely in a way which is intelligible to the two interlocutors, but does not represent a formal definition of any kind. Of course, we will not necessarily find that there is one formal ‘dictionary definition’ which explains all the appearances of the word ‘Saracen’, nor is it my purpose here to search for such. The question to be considered is rather how the term is applied in everyday life in Nessana, and for that purpose, *P.Ness.* 51 will do admirably. We should note, moreover, that the usage implies

that it was obvious to both the bishop and – more importantly – to Victor the son of Sergius from Nessana, that neither of them would be categorized as ‘Saracen’: The use of the term to describe the messenger enfoldes the delineation of the correspondents as non-Saracens.<sup>12</sup> This, then, is what we can hope to gain from an analysis of the ethnonyms used to refer to outsiders: by examining the boundaries defining the ‘out-groups’, we may gain an insight into how Nessanites saw themselves – or rather, what they saw as not-self. Thus the importance of the one-word reference to ‘the Saracen’; if such a concise definition was sufficient reference, he must have been clearly distinguishable to both the Bishop and to Victor as in some sense a member of a different social group.

*P.Ness. 89*, from the turn of the seventh century, stands out by virtue of being the longest and most complex document of those mentioned here; it is also unusual in not coming from residents of Nessana, nor is it addressed to them, but originating in an unspecified partnership of local traders. The writer of the account is a certain Zunayn, and the document reflects the varied activities and expenses of a trading corporation, which may have had partners in Nessana.<sup>13</sup> Several entries in the ledger of expenses refer to Saracens or tribe members; they appear below.

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<sup>12</sup> It has been suggested that two members of a particular ethnic group might refer to a third person, a member of that same group, by the ethnonyms: thus, two Englishmen might speak of a someone else as ‘an Englishman without implying that he belongs to different ethnic grouping than themselves. This view would of course mean that the use of the ‘Saracen’ does not necessarily rule out the possibility that the Bishop and Victor also saw themselves as Saracens. I would argue that this type of referral is sensible only if two conditions are met – one, that the surrounding environment is overwhelmingly composed of a different ethnic group(s), since to refer to an Englishman in Surrey would be of little distinguishing use; and two, that the adjective is preceded by an indefinite article. The use of the definite article (‘the Englishman’, or in our case, ‘the Saracen’) implies a singularity, which does not fit well with the understanding of ‘a Saracen (as we are)’.

<sup>13</sup> See Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 252.

22: ... δοθ(έντα) τῷ Σαρακαίνῳ τῷ σικοφαντέσαντι / ἐμᾶς ἰς τὸ ἅγιον  
ῶρος (νομίσματα) γ S

.... paid to the Saracen who guided us to the holy mountain: 3.5 solidi.

27: ....καμηλίου ἀσινού τῷ Σαρακενῶν τὸν σίτο[ν μ(ό)]δ(ια) Κ τοῦδε  
ἔνεκεν ἔλαβεν ....

...20 modii of wheat by(?) the undamaged camel of the Saracens; and in return he  
received ...

35: ἀ]νεκ[ομί]σαμεν ἀπὸ τιμῆς τοῦ καμαλίου ὡπερ ἔλαβα <ν> οἱ  
Σαρακενοὶ υἱοὶ Εἰαλωδεειδ (νομίσματα) δ.

We subtracted as the price of the camel which the Saracens, the  
Sons of Eialodeied, took: four (coins).

40: [...] δοθ(έν) Σαρακαίνῳ Ἀδίου (νόμισμα) α τ' ὃ ἐδανίσασμεν ἐξ  
αὐτοῦ ἰς τιμὴν ἐρέας.

Given to the Saracen Adi—the money that we borrowed from him  
towards the price of wool ...

Saracens appear in this document in several roles. They supply the guides to the  
caravan; they supply the camels carrying the supplies; and they are also a source of



10 Μεσλεμ συμβούλου ἐκ της γεομορίας τ[ῶν]

β(αν)υ Οουαρ

37.5 solidi, for the land-survey of the Saracens; from (the property) given to you by our lord governor Meslem from the land-apportionment(?) of the Banu Ouar.

As before, the phrasing allows us to conclude that the parties to the agreement did not see themselves as Saracens or as members of the Banu Ouar tribe. Here we also see that ‘Saracen’ is used to refer to the new Umayyad administration; this usage becomes common later in other papyri collections, and we shall have to determine the impetus behind its use.

### **Analyzing the documents**

The documents cited above are from the sixth and seventh century, both before and after the Muslim conquest. The writers and the central parties mentioned in the documents appear to be more or less from the same social stratum, which is indeed the main element represented in all the Nessana papyri: well-to-do, sometimes even wealthy by local standards, engaging with some contacts outside of town, and on terms – if not very intimate ones – with the provincial elites of Palaestina Tertia, like the bishop. In other words, represented here is the upper stratum of Nessana society, economically and socially. The association with the church and its functionaries, in conjunction with the decidedly Biblical names of most of the actors, (such as Elias and Stephan) make the Christianity of the writers very likely.

It appears that ‘Saracen’ is used to refer to at least two distinct groups, the Muslim newcomers and the tribes inhabiting the area (though there is at least one case where a tribal name is used without, or instead of, ‘Saracen’, *P.Ness.* 28.2). The writers of the documents indicate that they consider themselves as constituting a social group distinct from the indigenous tribesmen and from the Umayyad administrators; both those latter groups are assigned to the same category. The first obvious question to consider is the common factor uniting these different appearances of the term: what is the common characteristic uniting the new Muslim administration and indigenous tribesmen in the eyes of the writers, and what does that tell us about the perception of ethnicities in Nessana?

#### A. Saracens as nomads

The explanation most often offered in secondary literature for the term ‘Saracen’ is that it is equivalent to our ‘Bedouin’, used to indicate Arab nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists. Indeed, Kraemer suggests that this term is a derogatory reference to ‘the Bedouin’ or ‘the Arabs’, an indication of tensions between nomads and the settled residents of the province. In the commentary to *P.Ness.* 89, Kraemer explains that the papyrus sheds light “on the relationship of the traders with the Arabs with whom they came into contact. They were themselves Christians and one seems to detect an air of superiority to the ‘Saracens’ much like that connoted currently by our usage of ‘Bedouin’”.<sup>15</sup> This explanation implies that religion was also a factor in the delineation of

boundaries between the writers and ‘the Saracens’ (on which see more below). For the moment, let us concentrate on the problems in identifying the differentiating factor as the line between nomadic and settled.

Kraemer’s suggestion relies implicitly on a division of society into rigid, clearly distinguishable ethnic groups. Kraemer is hardly unique in this: we find the same strict, objective understanding of ethnic divisions in many other scholars, some much more recent than the Colt expedition.<sup>16</sup> This is true, of course, whenever a categorizing set of terms is used without caveats to indicate not just a convenient set of social groups but a reified reality. Like many others, Kraemer assumes that the ethnic names represent a fixed external – that people were either ‘Arab’ or ‘Romanized’, and that this identity was obvious and evident to their contemporaries. Furthermore, Kraemer assumes a clear dichotomy between the urban and the nomadic world.

Contrary to Kraemer’s opinion, as a general rule no absolute separation exists between pastoral nomadism and agricultural sedentarism. Rather, there is a continuum running from full-time pastoral nomads to sedentary agriculturalists, with intermediate groups characterized by varying ratios of nomadic pastoralism and sedentary agriculture. This is true in the Negev as it is elsewhere. Pastoralism in the Negev requires such mobility as to almost require nomadism at least for part of the year, since no piece of land

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 253. It might be noted in passing that the identification between the nomads of the Byzantine and Umayyad periods and the Bedouin in Mandate Palestine relies on a Romantic myth of the unchanging East; see Graf, "Rome and Saracens", p. 356. Hugh Kennedy has also shown the roots of Pirenne’s assumption that the Arab conquest represented a movement away from urban life: Kennedy, "The Last Century of Byzantine Syria", p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> See also Mayerson, "Saracens and Romans: Micro-Macro Relationships " For a review of similar views of ethnicities (and the attendant problems) in the Western half of the empire around the same time, see Amory, *People and Identity*

can sustain a herd by itself. The archaeological record shows animal pens, indicative of pastoralism which is settled for at least part of the year, present both in temporary sites (inhabited presumably by people falling closer to the nomadic end of the spectrum) and in the larger, non-mobile farmsteads.<sup>17</sup> This is indeed only sensible from an economic point of view: Nessana's agriculture relies on run-off methods for irrigation – that is, employing a large catchment area and diverting the unpredictable rainfall into a much smaller crop area. This system by necessity utilizes only a minuscule proportion of the land for crops;<sup>18</sup> it would be wasteful not to use the rest of the land for pastoralism. Furthermore, the combination of pastoralism with agriculture in different degrees allows for a certain diversification of resources, reducing the farmer's absolute dependence on the success of the crops or the herder's vulnerability to plagues.

The assumption of a clear division between the residents of Nessana and pastoral nomads is belied by the archaeological evidence; yet it may have been facilitated by the dearth of mentions of pastoralism in the papyri. Although we know it must have been an economically significant activity, the papyri offer no hint of any pastoralist activity, in contrast to the many appearances of various crops – a lacuna which is reiterated in the Petra papyri.<sup>19</sup> The absence of herding from the papyri may certainly explain scholars' assumption regarding the nature of Nessana's economy, but given the definite and ubiquitous archaeological finds indicating a developed pastoral economy, in this case the

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<sup>17</sup> Haiman, "Agriculture and Nomad-State Relations", p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> Elliott, *The Elusa Oikoumene* Haiman, "Agriculture and Nomad-State Relations", p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> This is also mentioned by Koenen, "Phoenix from the Ashes: the burnt archive from Petra", p. 524.

papyri cannot be assumed to give us a full picture. One explanation for the documents' odd silence on this point relies on social status: pastoralism may have been associated with a lower social class, which would explain why the relatively wealthy residents who appear in the papyri omit to mention it. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that we cannot conclude that the writers of the papyri did not engage in pastoralism, nor can we assume a strict division between nomadic and settled communities.

Moreover, practically all the Negev towns and the isolated farmsteads dotting western Palaestina Tertia are not fortified or protected by walls or defenses of any sort. Ruheiba, Sobata and Elusa – the significance of the last evidenced already in the fourth century by its prominent position on the Peutinger Table – show no signs of having a military installation or defensive structure of any kind which could serve in case of an attack.<sup>20</sup> Nessana, Oboda and Mampsis did each have a military presence of some sort, but only Mampsis out of all the desert towns had a surrounding wall.<sup>21</sup> “There is no evidence that the numerous farmsteads of the region were fortified in any way to fend off raiders and attackers; and many of these farmsteads were situated quite far from the populated centers.” As Mayerson concludes, the western portion of Palaestina Tertia was open country.<sup>22</sup> This behavior is not indicative of a community under siege, nor one

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<sup>20</sup> As noted already by the early travelers to the cities: Woolley and Lawrence, *The Wilderness of Zin*, pp. 91, 125, and 129.

<sup>21</sup> Nessana has some remains of what may have been a wall between the fort and the so-called South Church; but the temporary nature of the finds make it likely that either the town nor the acropolis were surrounded by a defensive wall. Shershevski, *Byzantine Urban Settlements in the Negev Desert*, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> For the location of the *Limes Palaestinae* and Nessana's position south of it, see Mayerson, "The Saracens and the *Limes*", p. 38.

which is fearful of constant raid and attacks from the desert. Whatever the truth behind the long-standing and ubiquitous idea of an active feud between settled and nomadic communities, it does not appear that fifth- to seventh-century Palaestina Tertia experienced any significant hostilities between the groups (to the extent that such groups were indeed distinct). Rather, it implies that whatever the tensions between the different social groups, ultimately the existence south of the *Limes Palaestinae* was a relatively peaceful one.<sup>23</sup>

The identification of ‘Saracen’ with ‘semi-nomadic tribesman’ also fails to explain the appearance of the term to describe the Muslim army and administration. This use is also echoed in papyri elsewhere: Of the 45 known mentions of – in other papyri collections, 13 refer clearly to the Muslims, including mentions of the Saracen era (ἔτ(ου)ς Σαρακ(ηνῶν)) i.e., the Hijra count.<sup>24</sup> The Umayyad governor who ordered the land survey in *P.Ness.* 58 was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a Bedouin, nor indeed were the Muslim soldiers who conquered Palaestina Tertia and were then stationed there: these units were recruited primarily from the settled urban highlands of Yemen, and indeed modern research leans more and more towards abandoning the view of a “purely Bedouin Arabian peninsula.”<sup>25</sup> The explanation of ‘Saracen’ as based on a difference in lifestyle is therefore not sufficient to explain its reference group.

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<sup>23</sup> Graf suggests that further support for the symbiotic nature of the relationship between more pastoral and more sedentary societies may be found further north, in the Thamudic and Nabataean inscriptions together with Greek ones upon the temple at Ruwwafa: Graf, "The Saracens and the Defense of the Arabian Frontier", p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> For example *SB*, I.5602, 2.

## **B. Saracens as a religious group**

Another explanation for the common denominator of both groups would be that it is used to indicate religion; as Christians, the inhabitants of Nessana may have regarded the Muslim rulers and their (presumably) pagan neighbors as heathens, to be lumped together in one group. Religion as a crucial, and sometimes the decisive, element in people's self-definition in antiquity has been established most recently by Robertson who shows that religion (in the form it took in the Classical world, i.e. festivals) was the litmus test for ethnic groups such as the Dorians.<sup>26</sup> Closer to our period, Jeffreys has argued that in the Byzantine world "the border between acceptance and rejection, or hostility, lay in religious affiliation" – in other words, that religious conformity played a greater role than what we would term racial or ethnic conformity.<sup>27</sup> In Palaestina Tertia itself, both the Samaritans and the Jews present an obvious comparison, as two cases where a religious community was seen and saw itself as also having ethnic and racial elements. Of course, the case here is a little different: the instances mentioned above are examples of religious affiliations which are used to denote ethnic communities. In contrast, *Σαρακηνός* is an ethnonym which may have a religious dimension. In this

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<sup>25</sup> "Many of the early Muslim conquerors of the Near East were not nomads at all but came from the settled fertile areas of highland Yemen, from a world of stone built towns and carefully terraced mountainsides." Kennedy, "Islam".

<sup>26</sup> Robertson, "The Religious Criterion in Greek Ethnicity".

<sup>27</sup> Jeffreys, "The Depiction of the Umayyads", p. 234, and see also Van Rompay, "Society and Community in the Christian East" for a similar emphasis on the importance of religion as a delineating criterion (although note that Van Rompay assigns such ethnic undertones present in religious communities "to the outcome of the process rather than to its beginnings"; Van Rompay, "Society and Community in the Christian East", p. 254).

respect, it is closer to the use of *barbarus* to indicate ‘heathen’ or ‘non-Christian’ in sixth-century Gaul, or to the ethnonym ‘Goth’ used to indicate not necessarily ethnic origin or *genos* but religious affiliation.<sup>28</sup>

There is significant archaeological evidence to suggest that some of the inhabitants in the vicinity of Nessana were not Christian but pagan up until Umayyad times. Sites in the Negev have yielded ritual *stelae*, sometimes in dedicated rooms, other times in clusters of elliptical structures with a small shrine (evidenced by ash stains) nearby.<sup>29</sup> The more elaborate installations consist of “a row of flat stones up to 0.80 meters high, which are fastened upright. The row of stones is as long as two meters, and a low platform (about 0.40 meters wide) made of small stones is in front of that row. Such installations were found in both agricultural farms and in the contemporaneous temporary sites of the semi-nomads.”<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the depth of identification with Christianity in the desert towns, and in Nessana as it appears in the papyri in particular, cannot be doubted. Many otherwise secular documents begin with a mention of the Trinity, such as *P.Ness.* 46, and the church authorities figure heavily in the documents. As the first chapter has shown, church functionaries are the linchpin of Nessana society, and often lend their authority and underpin the various contracts as witnesses or actors (cf. *P.Ness.* 57).

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<sup>28</sup> Amory, "Ethnographic Rhetoric, Aristocratic Attitudes and Political Allegiance in Post-Roman Gaul" p. 439; also Greatrex, "Roman Identity in the Sixth Century", pp. 270 ff.

<sup>29</sup> Avni, "The Byzantine – Islamic Transition in the Negev – an Archaeological Perspective".

<sup>30</sup> Haiman, "Agriculture and Nomad-State Relations", p. 35.

It is thus reasonable to suppose that ‘Saracen’ is used to distinguish the non-Christians from the Christians. Such a conclusion is supported by the evidence from outside the Negev: Byzantine texts often equate ‘Arab’ or ‘Saracen’ with ‘heathen’. Christides has pointed out a visual corollary of this tendency to elide ethnic identities with religious ones: his study of Byzantine illuminations demonstrates the seventh and eighth century tendency to assign ‘Arabic’ features only to the unconverted, while Arab saints and martyrs share the same physical features as the other Byzantine Christians.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, the problem with this explanation is that the paganism, probably animism, of the Negev tribes is decidedly different from the Islam of the Arab armies and administration; nor was it seen as similar by the groups involved – in fact, the Muslims regarded the pagan tribesmen as much further from the true religion than the Christians who fell into the category of *ahl al-kitāb*, people of the book, and were therefore *dhimmi*s and eligible for protection. Once again we see here the papyri lumping together two disparate groups, who would not have recognized the categorization as coherent. Like the supposed division between nomad pastoralists and city-dweller, this line of demarcation tells us more about the perceptions of difference in Nessana than about the realities of groups outside Nessana.

### **C. Saracens as a professional identification**

A third possibility which would explain most of the appearances of the term ‘Saracen’, and has the advantage of illuminating its usage in particular contexts and not

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<sup>31</sup> Christides, "Arabs as *barbaroi* before the Rise of Islam", p. 320.

in others, is that ‘Saracen’ functions as a professional or economic designation, in this case referring to professional couriers. This would be a natural side-trade for people further along the nomadic end of the spectrum, and it is thus that we see the bishop Moses in *P.Ness.* 51 using the term: the ‘Saracen’ there is simply the man conveying something from Aela to Nessana, and he is identified as such (rather than, say, a member of a particular tribe or by name) because his function in the document is his role in transporting the bishop’s donation. A similar explanation may lie behind the use in *P.Ness.* 89, where the Saracens serve as road-guides – again, a natural and convenient secondary activity for pastoral nomads, who are likely to be traveling along the trade routes often. This aspect of the word also fits in with the usage in some of the post-conquest Umayyad papyri from Aphrodito, where the Muslim administration refers to couriers as ‘Saracens’.<sup>32</sup>

Using ethnic terms to denote a profession is known elsewhere. In Gaul we have the example of “[e]thnographic ideology ... (attempting to) construct new communities by redefining profession and region in ethnographic terms”<sup>33</sup>; thus soldiers are called Goths under Theoderic, and the ethnic terminology implies not ethnicity *per se*, but a professional identity. Thus Vitalian and his followers, whom we would naturally classify as ‘ethnically Goths’, receive different labels from contemporaries, depending on whether

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<sup>32</sup> See for example *P.Lond* 1464, Folio 7; also 1433, Fol. 9b, 360, where payments are conveyed through ‘Shuraih’s Saracen’ or possibly through ‘Shuraih the Saracen’.

<sup>33</sup> Amory, *People and Identity*, p. 14.

the determining factor is seen as religion, loyalty to the emperor, or service as a soldier.<sup>34</sup> “*Gens* comes to mean ‘army’, *barbarus* to mean ‘soldier’, even in the imperial rhetoric of fifth-century legal texts.”<sup>35</sup> This is not to imply that there was not a collection of social behaviors which were associated with a Gothic origin; but that the word ‘Goth’ was not used in this ethnographic sense in the sixth century, and that profession was as important an element of communal identity, expressed in ethnic terms, as belief in common descent. For instance, Pope Boniface in the sixth century, whose father’s name is Sigibuldus, is never referred to as Gothic, since his Christianity is well established, and he is not connected to the army professionally; his professional and religious identity overcomes any kinship-based identity.<sup>36</sup>

To return to the sixth- and seventh-century Negev, the idea that professional identity played an important role in defining people’s perception of themselves and others is eminently reasonable. In Nessana itself, it is clear that the professional affiliation with the military was extremely important, as soldiers make a point of specifying their army connection in civilian documents – and indeed, it appears that they continued to do so even after the corps was disbanded (see *P.Ness.* 44.1, dated to 598; the corps was probably dissolved by the 590’s at the latest). This is also the case in the other desert

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<sup>34</sup> Greatrex, "Roman Identity in the Sixth Century", p. 274.

<sup>35</sup> Amory, *People and Identity*, p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> One might also compare modern usages, such as a white American saying he’s going to hire ‘some Mexicans’ to mow the lawn, where the emphasis is not on the ethnic origin of the workers but on their association with temporary black-market work; or the Frenchwoman of the 60’s and 70’s, speaking of the ‘p’tite Arabe’, by which she means a maid of non-European origin, whether or not that maid comes from North Africa.

towns, where graffiti and inscriptions often record a name and a profession (and indeed, the last known Nabataean writing records ‘Gadio, the plasterer’, on a wall in Obodas).<sup>37</sup> Of course, this explanation will, once again, not suffice to explain the application of the term to the Umayyads in *P.Ness.* 58, nor in *P.Ness.* 28: the Muslim conquerors were not, by any stretch of the imagination, couriers or guides, and the fact that they themselves apply the term ‘Saracen’ to others indicates that they saw themselves as distinct from this group.

### **Situational Uses**

It is clear that none of the three explanations offered above is sufficient in and of itself. The ethnonym ‘Saracen’ does not appear to be used to represent any coherent distinctive ethnic group. Though such a group may have existed, this is not what we see in the documents before us. There is no single common factor which explains assigning these different individuals to one group, and in particular, the fact that the indigenous inhabitants of the region and the new Muslim soldiers, settlers and administrators, are classified as one group whereas the documents’ writers put themselves in another group is difficult to reconcile. This incongruity is heightened when we notice that in post-conquest papyri written by and for the Muslim administration, there are references to ‘Saracens’, who are clearly not members of the new governmental system. So, while the (Christian, urban) inhabitants often used ‘Saracen’ to denote the administration, speaking

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<sup>37</sup> Add ref number. Mentioned (without date) in Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev*. Dated confidently by Dr. Tali Faith Erickson-Gini, the graffito’s excavator, to the fifth century, in a personal communication.

of the ‘Saracen era’ (*SB* – 5609 and many others) and the ‘Saracen land survey’ (*P.Ness.* 58), the Muslim administration perceived the Saracens as distinct from itself.<sup>38</sup>

All three explanations offered above for the uses of the term ‘Saracen’ – and crucially, the ways in which each of these explanations explains some of the instances well and yet is clearly inadequate in other cases – lead to a final possibility, and the one which I suggest we apply here: that Saracen is something of an all-purpose word, used in the Nessana papyri to indicate outsiders, or rather members of out-groups. The nature of the particular out-group varies according to context and situation, indicating either a different religion, a different lifestyle, a different administration, or a different origin. This understanding assumes, in the first place, a rather fluid understanding of ethnicity – one which is perhaps reflected in the findings of the 2000 US census, where over 6.7 million Americans checked more than one box in describing their race and ethnicity. This explanation also expands the supposedly ‘ethnic’ component of the term ‘ethnonym’ to the point where one might legitimately wonder if these ties can usefully be called ‘ethnic’ at all.<sup>39</sup>

And so we return to the questions with which we began: When are ethnic terms used in Nessana, and why? In the first place, applying categorizations of any kind to a group of people is a means of exercising power over that group. By saying, ‘X belongs to

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<sup>38</sup> Here Saracen is very different from *Αραβ* and *Αραβες*, which appear to be much more precise in their denotations in the papyri; unlike Saracen, this term refers exclusively to the Muslim newcomers, and not to any indigenous inhabitants of the region.

<sup>39</sup> See Geary, "Ethnicity as a situational construct in the Early Middle Ages", arguing that what we see as ethnicity was actually a situational construct in Merovingian Gaul, and the ensuing criticisms, most notably Liebeschuetz, "Late Antiquity and the Concept of Decline".

the A group’, the speaker exercises his power to organize his world and construct societies around him.<sup>40</sup> Applying ethnic labels is rarely if ever a neutral exercise; more often than not, it implies an active construction of one’s own identity in implicit contrast to the circumscribed group. Thus when the writer of *P.Ness.* 89 speaks of the Saracens who stole the camel, he is not simply pointing to a particular ethnic group but assimilating the thieves to a problematic group: since they have stolen the donkey, they merit the name Saracens – whereas we, who have not stolen anything, are not Saracens. The use of the ethnonyms is shorthand for ‘people who fall outside our group, for one of several reasons, and are somewhat looked down upon.’ The ethnonym reinforces on the level of associations the picture described by the bare words of the text – of a camel which disappears with the ‘Saracens’, much to the displeasure of the traders.

In contrast, note that in *P.Ness.* 28 the lender is not called a ‘Saracen’ but given his proper tribal affiliation (the Banu Zamzam tribe). Similarly, *P.Ness.* 89.40 suddenly adds a private name (Adi) to the vague designation ‘Saracen’ when speaking of a loan. In these cases, the person who may have in other instances been put into the ‘outsider’ category is the one holding the purse strings; as the lender, he is the powerful one in relation to the writer, and so in this situation the use of a generic and faintly disparaging term is inappropriate. The ability to categorize others is an expression of an assumption of superior status; whether or not it is used depends on the situation. These two documents encapsulate the difference between ‘Saracen’ (a generic and rhetorical label) and personal and tribal names (specific and concrete, if still implying that the individual

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<sup>40</sup> See also Marfoe, "Syrian Society", p. 465.

is in some sense an outsider).<sup>41</sup>

In an intriguing discussion of Jewish identity in Late Antiquity, Shaye Cohen moves through various possible guidelines for delineating ethnic communities (such as external appearances, dress, profession and names) before coming to the conclusion that ultimately none of these are necessary or sufficient criteria for recognizing someone as a Jew. “How, then, did you know a Jew in Antiquity when you saw one? The answer is that you did not ... but if someone said he or she was a Jew, that statement alone apparently sufficed to establish the fact. A Jew is anyone who declares himself/herself to be one.”<sup>42</sup> This insight jibes with what we find in the Babatha archive, whose documents show no particular Jewish features and are indeed identical to their counterparts from Arabia or Egypt, “notwithstanding the fact that the people who wrote these documents or are attested in them were mostly Jews. Their ‘Jewishness’ is expressed in nothing except their names.”<sup>43</sup> In Nessana the situation we encounter is an odd mirror of that of the Jews: a person is recognized as a ‘Saracen’ not because he declares himself to be one, but

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<sup>41</sup> The Petra papyri which I have been able to incorporate into this discussion do not include a single ethnonym, and in that respect seem to me to strengthen the argument made here – that the desert communities did not have a strong sense of ethnic differences. One should note, moreover, that the Ghassanid leader Abu Karib ibn Jabal, the phylarch of Palaestina Tertia and a leader of the *foederati*, is mentioned in the Petra papyri – and that even he, whom we would expect to be categorized as ‘Saracen’ and who is referred to as such in Byzantine texts, does not receive an ethnonym. (Fiema, “Byzantine Petra - a Reassessment”, p. 115). I would suggest that this may be seen as proof of the importance of social status for the ethnic designation: ‘Saracen’ is not appropriate for a phylarch and a military and social leader.

<sup>42</sup> Cohen, “‘Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not’: How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?”, pp. 39-41. This conclusion obviously relies on the anthropological work of Michael Moerman, who in his study of the Lue of Thailand, concluded that in the final analysis, “(s)omeone is Lue by virtue of believing and calling himself Lue.” Moerman, *Agricultural change and peasant choice in a Thai village*.

<sup>43</sup> Cotton, “Cancelled Marriage Contract”, p. 64.

because you declare that he is a ‘Saracen’ – and in so doing, you also declare that you do not fall into that category.

Byzantine sources make it clear that an Arabian or ‘Saracen’ label was not laudatory or even useful. Saracen is not just a neutral term, but also a rhetorical move, carrying with it a world of associations, some of them pejorative,<sup>44</sup> In this respect, it is similar to the way βάρβαρος is used – not only to indicate a precise ethnos, but to delineate an in-group and an out-group, and to place the person in question outside the main in-group, whether that is defined in religious or social terms. Unlike ‘Barbarian’, the term ‘Saracen’ does imply certain geographic restrictions; a German or a Celt would not be called so, no matter how definite his position as an outsider. But within these understood geographic limitations, ‘Saracen’ is a useful shorthand for implying group boundaries and who falls outside them.

It may be that for the people of Nessana, who might easily be tarred with the same brush as their (non-Christian, semi-nomadic) neighbors, the labeling of others as ‘Saracen’ was also a means of clarifying their own place within the empire. Placed on the outer edge of empire, beyond the *limes*, the citizens of these communities would have been most invested in having others seen as even more marginalized than themselves. As we have seen, Christianity would not have sufficed for someone wishing to avoid the label ‘Saracen’; often in the Byzantine sources, we see an indiscriminate lumping

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<sup>44</sup> Of course this is often the case with ethnonyms: “The statement made in Ethiopia, ‘I am Orormo’, or in northern Ireland, ‘He’s a prod’ – is clearly not merely descriptive: it has an added value, either negative or positive, depending on who is speaking and to whom.” Cohen, "Culture as Identity: An Anthropologist's View", p. 197.

together of all the inhabitants of the desert regions, and an elision between living beyond the *limes* and a barbarian nature.<sup>45</sup> There is a long-standing state tradition assuming a dichotomy between the ‘Roman’ and the ‘Barbarian’ world; by participating in this discourse – by labeling others as ‘Saracens’, who are often described as a type of barbarian<sup>46</sup> – Nessanites make a bid for participation in the cultural life and traditions of the Roman state, staking their claim for belonging.

The fact that the papyri caches at Nessana include a copy of the *Aeneid*, together with a Latin-Greek vocabulary, prove that this community was eager to participate in the wider cultural life of the empire.<sup>47</sup> Like the attention focused on the Virgilian manuscripts – an attention which might well seem to us disproportionate, given the size of the town and the obvious difficulty the scribes had with the Latin<sup>48</sup> – calling others ‘Saracens’ is partly a claim for a place within the Greek-speaking, Byzantine, Christian world. This claim would have been important to make both before and after the Muslim conquest, for obviously different reasons. The assimilation to the Saracen and Arab world gains even greater importance for the population after the Muslim conquests. If before, a Saracen was a slightly – ethnonym, now the Saracens were the enemies of the Byzantine state and the Christian world. The Byzantine literature of the period appears not to distinguish ethnically between the inhabitants of the area and the Muslim armies: Theophanes speaks

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<sup>45</sup> “The Saracen nation inhabits the desert”; Conca, *Nilus Ancyranus Narratio*, p. 12. For the location of the *Limes Palaestinae* and Nessana’s position south of it, see Mayerson, “The Saracens and the *Limes*”, p. 38.

<sup>46</sup> See the quote from Cyril of Scythopolis, above p. 94.

<sup>47</sup> One might also note that a certain connection has been suggested between the adoption of Virgil in the East and the spread of a vocabulary for ethnic distinctions. Hall, “Latinitas”, p. 85.

<sup>48</sup> On which see further below, Chapter Four.

of ‘the Arabs’ (i.e., the indigenous inhabitants) going to ‘their fellow tribesmen’ (i.e., the Muslim armies) and guiding them to Gaza.<sup>49</sup> Given this lack of differentiation in Byzantine sources, it may have become important for the Christian population who had been integrated into the life of the Byzantine Empire to distinguish themselves clearly from the victorious Muslims. Modern parallels for this desire of the marginalized to identify other groups even more marginalized than themselves abound. One need only think of the extreme case of Rwanda, where in the 1980’s and 1990’s the importance placed on the ethnic designation to Tutsi and Hutu varied in inverse proportion to the speaker’s socio-economic status. The relatively well-off inhabitants of Kigali’s established neighborhoods tended to consider the question irrelevant, whereas the core support of the Interhamwe militias came from shanty towns and the countryside, where the disenfranchised felt a need to declare that others were still further beneath them in the social order. Further back in the past, the threat of marginalization in revolutionary France and Weimar Germany led to increased aggression against perceived minorities and outsiders as a way of bolstering confidence.<sup>50</sup>

To return to Nessana: In the cases mentioned above, it was somewhat important to the writers of the documents to place themselves within the circle of the Christian, urban, Greek world, and to differentiate themselves – whether rightly or not – from the nomadic, non-Christian elements surrounding them. This fits in with what we saw in the previous chapter – a community which is marginally aware of its identity defined in terms of

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<sup>49</sup> De Boor, *Chronographia*, 1.335-36, 2.210.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, "War and Ethnicity", p. 376.

ethnicity. Once again, we see the writers of the papyri attempting to place themselves within the sphere of the Roman empire, though this is not a self-evident identification.

The starting point for this discussion was the hope that through examining the use of certain ethnonyms in the Nessana papyri we would gain an insight into the self-definitions of the inhabitants of Nessana. On the surface it appears that this hope has not been met: ‘Saracen’ and ‘Roman’ have proven to be too elusive to afford us a stable base from which to say, for example, ‘Nessanites defined their identity primarily in religious terms’ or ‘professional identity was the defining feature for the writers of the papyri.’ And yet, the very nebulosity of the ethnonyms – the very fact that they are used situationally, and that they are not based on distinctions of origin, or what we would call ‘ethnicity’ – should allow us to draw some conclusions regarding ethnic identity in Nessana.

In the first place it becomes very hard to countenance the argument that tribal identities were primary for all the inhabitants of the region. This is often the understanding of tribal relationship current among Arabists, where tribes are most usually seen as objective entities, rigid superstructures with a reified external existence.<sup>51</sup> Speaking generally, Arabists tend to see group identity before and after the Muslim conquest as expressed primarily in terms of tribal relationship, with a strong sense of ethnic identity. This view is articulated most sharply by Fred Donner: “Whatever his way

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<sup>51</sup> See for instance Hasson, "The Spread of Arab Tribes in Israel in the First Century of the Hijrah (Hebrew)"

of life, the Arabian was first and foremost a tribesman: identified with his tribe, loyal to it, and secured as much as possible by abuse against it," he states, in an exposition stressing the overarching and pervasive influence of the tribes.<sup>52</sup> Yet as seen above, the view of tribal ties and ethnic groupings as of overarching importance for all is not borne out in the surviving Nessana papyri. This is not to say that the tribal structure was non-existent – indeed, a couple of tribal names do appear, and they appear to lack the derogatory, exclusionary undertone of the term ‘Saracen’. But it is notable that in the few cases where an individual’s tribal affiliation is mentioned, that individual is also thereby catalogued as an outsider, and that we do not encounter a single instance of self-identification by a tribal name; it is only used to refer to third parties. If Donner’s view is correct – if indeed the tribal identification was the primary and foremost element in a person’s view of himself, we would expect to see much more use of tribal names – or even some use of tribal names – in signatures and the like.<sup>53</sup>

We may go even further and state that not just tribal affiliations but ethnicities in general appear to have had a marginal place in the Nessanites’ consciousness: The very fluidity, the ease with which ethnic terms are applied in different situations, suggests that ethnic identities can have had little stable meaning in Nessana.<sup>54</sup> This should not be construed as implying that the people of Nessana did not have an ethnicity. “Ethnic

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<sup>52</sup> Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, p. 22.

<sup>53</sup> Note also that there is no evidence of any tribal arbitration mechanisms (see Ch. 1), and that the poll-tax register from 689(?) shows dependents listed under the brothers’ households, rather than their fathers’, as we would expect in a primarily tribal system.

<sup>54</sup> See Amory, "Ethnographic Rhetoric", p. 452, for a similar fluidity in the manipulation of ethnic terms and similar conclusions in sixth-century Burgundian Gaul.

consciousness is eternally latent everywhere, but it is only realized when groups either feel threatened with a loss of previously acquired privilege, or conversely feel that it is an opportune moment politically to overcome long-standing denial of privilege.”<sup>55</sup> Neither of these conditions appears to have been met at Nessana throughout the given time period.

This relative absence of an interest in ethnicity is reflected in the onomastic record of Nessana, especially when compared to the names attested in neighboring and otherwise similar desert towns. In the epitaphs found at the town of Ruheiba (Rehobot-in-the-Negev), the use of Hellenic, Biblical and Semitic (Arabic and Nabataean) names follows easily recognizable paths.<sup>56</sup> Semitic names are more likely to be used for women than for men, and most of the women’s names are Semitic.<sup>57</sup> Such a division is not seen in Nessana: men’s names and women’s names alike are drawn from the same pool, which includes a combination of Semitic names, some of them theophoric, Biblical names, Christian martyrs’ and saints’ names, and Hellenic names.<sup>58</sup> No pattern allows us to associate certain names with any ethnic origins; names from all the groups are found mingled in the same families, with instances where one man is called Algeb – a grecized spelling of al-Ghubb, a common enough Arabic name – whereas his brother, born to the same parents and presumably raised in the same cultural and religious atmosphere, is

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<sup>55</sup> Wallerstein, "The Two Modes of Ethnic Consciousness: Soviet Central Asia in Transition" p. 166.

<sup>56</sup> For the division of the onomasticon into these categories, see above, p. 44 ff..

<sup>57</sup> Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev* p. 85

<sup>58</sup> Note also that I am here speaking only of ethnic identifications within certain geographic parameters; obviously a name such as Abdallah can be confidently assumed to imply an Arabian or Near Eastern origin of some sort rather than a Gothic one, for instance.

called Valens.<sup>59</sup> It is nowadays a commonplace that onomastics in Egypt are a poor guide to individual ethnic identification;<sup>60</sup> yet in Egypt one may still plausibly argue that names can be used (with certain caveats) as indication of the aggregate – of 100 individuals called Apion, the great majority are more likely to have thought of themselves as Egyptian, especially when compared to 100 individuals called Hermolaos.<sup>61</sup> The same is not true in Nessana. No such general pattern emerges to allow us to associate, even with the greatest care and delicacy, certain names with certain ethnicities.

What one might call a lack of awareness of ethnicity is also apparent in the comparison with the onomasticon of Petra. The Christian community in Petra includes several members carrying unmistakably Nabataean names, such as Obodianus, a traditional name of Nabataean kings and one which is not found elsewhere, and Dusarios, a Hellenized version of the Nabataean god Dushara.<sup>62</sup> Although the population of Nessana and of Petra is often presumed to be similar, as the descendants of Nabataeans settled along the Spice Road in the second century, Nessana's much greater statistical base offers not a single appearance of names with such clear-cut Nabataean connections.

Drawing ethnic conclusions from names is a tricky business; it can too often be understood as implying a monolithic conception of ethnicity, and the evidence from

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<sup>59</sup> This is also the case in Palmyra, another city of mixed identities, where very few families' naming practices can be confidently tagged as 'purely' Aramaic or 'purely' Nabataean. Yon, "L'identité civique et ethnique de Palmyre", p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Goudriaan, *Ethnicity in Ptolemaic Egypt*.

<sup>61</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 232.

<sup>62</sup> *P.Petra 1* and *P.Petra 2*.

Egypt has shown that one cannot deduce an Egyptian ethnicity from an Egyptian name, nor a Greek ethnicity from a Greek name.<sup>63</sup> With these caveats in mind I offer the observations above not as proof that Nessanites were not Nabataean, but that in the context of comparable cities in the region, the inhabitants of Nessana appear to have been particularly unconcerned about their tribal, Arab, or Nabataean ethnicity – the same conclusion at which we arrived from an examination of the ethnonyms in the papyri. To the extent that names represent a community holding on to a sense of itself as distinct from those around it, holding on to a tradition of descent, these are attitudes that are perceptible in Petra and Ruheiba but not in Nessana.<sup>64</sup>

Ethnographic discourse in general, and the ethnic labels we see used in Byzantine histories and in the Nessana papyri, do not just describe society but construct it, imposing an order – or various overlapping ordering systems – upon the world they describe. Ultimately no single explanation covers all the instances of its use in literary documents, legal texts or papyri.<sup>65</sup> The search for one explanatory system has proven illusory. This is not to imply that the term is applied randomly, by any means. Like any rhetorical tool, its application is dependent on the situation; but in situations where one might want to

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<sup>63</sup> Goudriaan, *Ethnicity in Ptolemaic Egypt*.

<sup>64</sup> “Some ‘names’ maintain a long historical continuity because at frequent historical intervals it has been in the interests of the conscious element bearing this ‘name’ to reassert the heritage, revalorize the mythical links, and socialize members into the historical ‘memory’.” Wallerstein, “The Two Modes of Ethnic Consciousness: Soviet Central Asia in Transition”, p. 166.

<sup>65</sup> For such attempts to find a single overarching explanation of ‘the meaning’ of Saracen, see Shahid’s magisterial trilogy on Byzantium and the Arabs and Retso, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads*.

emphasize a person's ease of movement, as when speaking of a courier, or when looking for an explanation for thieves attacking a caravan, the term Saracen and its baggage of connotations is useful.

This very latent ethnic consciousness is not at all usual. In many of Nessana's neighboring communities, both temporally and geographically, ethnicity is not only an operative concept but a crucial one, with some groups exhibiting an intense awareness of their ethnic affiliations. A stark contrast is the case of contemporary Palaestina Secunda, where the Jews of Caesarea are clearly aware of themselves as an ethnic minority.<sup>66</sup> Further afield in Syria, the long-standing and pervasive definition of Berytus as a 'Phoenician' city, applied both by the city's residents and by outsiders, would seem to suggest that its inhabitants regarded themselves as different from other Syrians,<sup>67</sup> implying a much more developed and pervasive sense of ethnicity than that found in Nessana. In the Namarah inscription mentioned earlier, Imru'u al-Qays takes obvious pride in styling himself "king of all the Arabs": "*mlk al 'arab kllh.*" Without entering into the complex debate regarding the ontological basis for this sweeping claim, we can agree that the inscription undoubtedly displays an awareness of 'Arabs' as a distinctive ethnic group. Moreover, Imru'u al-Qays' insistence on including 'all' the Arabs displays an awareness of the potentially fragmentary nature of this 'Arab' identity, composed as it is of several sub-groups, presumably tribal groups. One might add as further proof the

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<sup>66</sup> Holum, "Identity and the Late Ancient City: the Case of Caesarea".

<sup>67</sup> Hall, *Roman Berytus*, p. 256.

numerous tribal designations found in the Safaitic inscriptions.<sup>68</sup> That these divisions into distinctive ethnic groups were not just subjective but were also recognized by outsiders as an objective reality is confirmed by the *Notitia Dignitatum*'s listing of tribes among the army corps. Nessana, on the other hand, shows only what we might refer to as the germ of an ethnic consciousness, which surfaces only under specific circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

“It is curious that a profession so addicted to complaining about students’ blind trust in anything printed is itself so prone to take at face value anything written, provided that its author has been dead for a very long time.” This is Bagnall’s indictment of historians’ tendency to grant documents a veridity and credibility which they would be much more hesitant to assign elsewhere.<sup>69</sup> Taken to heart, this warning leads away from accepting the ethnonym ‘Saracen’ as it appears in the Nessana papyri as a straightforward indication of a distinctive ethnic group.

If we can draw any conclusions from the rare instances in which ethnic identifications appear, it is that the people who appear in these documents used ethnonyms primarily to distinguish those who do not appear, to refer to third parties mentioned obliquely, rather than actors in the contracts. Often, the intent is socially pejorative, expressed through the ethnic term: the higher one’s status, the less likely it is that an ethnicity will manifest itself, whereas lower social status is conveyed also through

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<sup>68</sup> See Chapter Three, note 4 above.

<sup>69</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 9.

tribal affiliation.<sup>70</sup> This type of behavior is typical of dominant groups: Jonathan Hall comments on the tendency of Londoners in the eighties to think of ethnicity as relevant to immigrant groups, or to the Irish, the Welsh, and the Scots – in short, anyone apart from the people whose ethnicity was the default ‘English’ identity.<sup>71</sup>

Kraemer in his analysis of the documents in question has already recognized the slightly disdainful tone lying behind the words ‘Saracen’, and he assumes ethnicity to be the cause of tension, an explanation of antagonisms and conflicts, reflected in the terminology. I am suggesting instead that we reverse the causal relation and see the ethnic identifications as the result of these tensions: that the social difference between the priest Sergius son of Patrick and the anonymous member of the Banu Zamzam tribe is expressed and made manifest in the garb of ethnicity. We do not have here two essentially and substantially different social groups, but rather an attempt to establish and construct divisions.

Whether or not a ‘Saracen’ identity or community existed in Palestine of the sixth and seventh centuries, this is not what the papyri reflect. At most, what we find is a conventional literary use, malleable and applicable in several different situations. Ethnic terms as they are used in the papyri serve various rhetorical ends, and do not reflect ancient, iron-clad ethnic distinction, nor do they reflect any internal self-identification as ‘Saracen’ or ‘Arab’. Similarly, it is becoming increasingly clear that applying the label

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<sup>70</sup> See Chapter One. This is a reversal of the situation in sixth-century Gaul as described by Amory, where ethnic allegiance is expressed only in the upper echelons of society.

<sup>71</sup> Hall, *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture*, p. 3.

‘Arab’ to the people of Nessana is meaningless. The characterization of the inhabitants of the three provinces of Palestine and the former province of Arabia as ‘Arabs’ is extremely widespread in the secondary literature. In its weak form, this label is simply and easily understood as rough shorthand for ‘the inhabitants of the Sham regions’; this usage is easily defended, but also fairly empty. In its stronger form, the label is assumed to reflect an objective ethnicity.

This is, of course, the basic framework adopted by Irfan Shahid in his monumental works on Byzantium and the Arabs – a corpus whose very title assumes the existence of a discrete and recognizable group called ‘Arab’. Similarly, Fergus Millar speaks often of ‘the Arabs’ as an objective and coherent entity in the region.<sup>72</sup> “The native inhabitants were still the Hellenized Arabs who had long since ceased to be a unified state, and who had reverted to their normal tribal organization under sheikhs with varying allegiances and rivalries,” claims Kraemer, whose views on the subject are echoed throughout the Colt expedition’s analysis.<sup>73</sup> Yet as we have seen, there is no evidence of tribal structure as a significant presence in the two centuries represented in the Nessana papyri. Any evidence of tribal organization in the ninth century is more likely to be a reflection of the new imperial authorities than a return to a presumed memory of tribal community, a memory preserved across several centuries. The ethnocentric view appears not to be justified, at least in the case of Nessana. Although the

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<sup>72</sup> Millar, "Ethnic Identity in the Roman Near East AD 325 – 450: Language, Religion and Culture".

<sup>73</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 19.

papyri speak of ‘Saracens’ and ‘Romans’, these terms do not seem to have had fixed, coherent meanings.

Speaking of contemporary Gaul, Amory warns that “we must not let these terms (i.e., Roman and Goth or Burgundian), as manipulable and indefinite as they obviously were, dictate our picture of the society within which these people lived, or even our picture of the attitudes of the aristocratic authors who used this language so freely. For we face a major difficulty when we try to relate this rhetoric to the reality of life in the Rhone basin at the turn of the fifth century. Did either the Romans or the Burgundians actually imagine themselves as a discrete, coherent community?”<sup>74</sup> Amory’s answer to that question is no, they did not; and it appears that we must follow a similar path in understanding the role of ethnic identities in Nessana. Rather than taking them at their word and being misled by the entities named in the texts, searching fruitlessly for their corollaries in the real world, we must leave behind categories of thought which are clearly inapplicable to this society.

It is worth noting also that, unlike with other communities, we see no change in the conceptions of identity before and after the Muslim conquest: the change in rule does not appear to have jolted the community in Nessana in any way. This continuity tallies with the archaeological evidence, which also gives no grounds for seeing a break in the life of the community with the conquest.<sup>75</sup> It is also notable in contrast to other groups in

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<sup>74</sup> Amory, "Ethnographic Rhetoric", p. 452.

<sup>75</sup> Nahlieli, *The Negev in the 7th-11th Centuries in Light of the Archaeological Findings and the Historical Sources*.

the region; for Nessana here is by no means representative. We see that the advent of the Muslim army does raise questions of identity for some groups, proving in the process the importance of ethnic identification for some in the area; this may be an instance where political upheaval leads to the emergence of ethnic consciousness from the dormant phase for some groups. Both Tabari and Baladhuri relate the story of the Taghlib tribesmen in the Syrian desert, who identify themselves proudly as Christian Arabs, and refuse to pay the *jizyah* poll tax, incumbent on non-Muslims, since that would put them in the same category as Greek Christians and Jews. Instead, the Taghlib opt to pay double the *sadāqah*, the 10% ‘charity tax’ placed on Muslims. The result is that they maintain their status as Arabs, differentiated from other subjects of the Muslim administration.<sup>76</sup>

Taken in the context of these examples, we see even more clearly that Nessanites are simply not occupied much with questions of their ethnic identity, and that to the extent that they think about these issues, they treat identity as a fairly amorphous, malleable phenomenon. This may well be related to the continuity exhibited before and after the Muslim conquest. In the modern world, one speaks often of the dangers of ‘role and image dissociation’ attendant on decolonization, or the threats an occupation might pose to a community’s perception of itself.<sup>77</sup> These issues do not arise at all in Nessana; there is absolutely no evidence that the Muslim occupation was seen as an existential or ideological threat. In the first place, this is probably related to the tenuous identification with the Byzantine Empire which has been explored in the previous chapter. But it may

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<sup>76</sup> Tabari IV 55-56; Baladhuri, *Futuh* 216-218.

<sup>77</sup> Smith, "War and Ethnicity", p. 377.

also be related to the fact that whatever sense of ethnicity there was in Nessana was fluid enough to accommodate a conquest; only a more well-defined and strong ethnicity would have been jolted by the Muslims or experienced the new administration as a crisis of belonging.

Interpretation of a limited corpus is a dangerous exercise; there is always the risk of coming to conclusions which are not warranted by the scant data to hand. Had the conclusions above been based solely on the five documents with which we began, the problem of under-determination would have been cause for concern. But the silence of over 195 documents and thousands of inscriptions cannot be random or coincidental.<sup>78</sup> The ethnic categories which seem to us so natural were not operative in Nessana. With this observation taken as a starting point, it becomes clear why the population of Palaestina Tertia is so often assigned differing ethnic labels, why we have such a hard time trying to pin down 'who' these people were: Arabs? Bedouin? Romanized Arabs? There is no answer to be found here, and the very posing of the question shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the community in Nessana. The boundary lines of a community can be perceived only when it is ethnically conscious.<sup>79</sup> Here we are faced with a community which is only marginally aware of its ethnicities, and uses ethnic terms in a thoroughly flexible manner. The inhabitants of Palestine have been characterized as

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<sup>78</sup> See also Kennedy in a different context: "Each individual piece of negative evidence is not itself decisive but the cumulative effect can be very convincing. If it can be shown to be part of a widespread and consistent pattern, then we must suppose that it is more than mere coincidence." Kennedy, "The Last Century of Byzantine Syria", p. 151.

<sup>79</sup> Wallerstein, "The Two Modes of Ethnic Consciousness: Soviet Central Asia in Transition", p. 166.

suffering from “ethnic and cultural confusion”<sup>80</sup>; I hope to have shown here that the problem is not their confusion but our tendency to impose our own categories in situations where they are irrelevant – and even worse, misleading. A persistent ethnic group, is sustained by what its members do and say. Judging by what we see in the papyri, Nessana does not appear to have sustained itself as an ethnic group. As for what they may have done outside the documents, this is beyond our ken; but the rapidity of assimilation into the Muslim empire might appear to speak for itself here.

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<sup>80</sup> Bowersock, "The Greek Moses", p. 31.

## Chapter 4: Linguistic Identities

Greek, Latin, Arabic, Nabataean and Syriac: all of these languages and writing systems are found among the Nessana documents, and to a greater or lesser extent, all of them have left their mark on the Nessana community. The relative importance of these languages, and the meaning of their presence in different types of documents, has been the source of many casual mentions since their discovery some eighty years ago, though not of sustained debate. This chapter will attempt to examine the role of Greek in the years covered by the papyri, and in particular the interaction of Greek and Arabic in the community.

It might be well to begin with what would seem to be one of the least promising papyri in the Nessana collection: a fragmentary papyrus, relegated by the editor of the corpus, Casper Kraemer, to the tail end of the edition, lumped together with other ‘minor documents’. *P.Ness.* 145 comes from the early seventh-century church archive, and is not only fragmentary, but also incomplete. The writer begins composing an official letter, apparently dealing with household provisions; but after seven lines – five of which are spent on salutations and courtesies – he becomes dissatisfied with his efforts. He then turns the papyrus over and begins writing a letter again, only to grow discouraged at the difficulty of the task, this time after only one line of salutation. Having given up on the actual letter as a task beyond him, the writer then turns the papyrus around by 90 degrees and practices writing only one sentence over and over again, on both sides of the papyrus, that sentence being ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου καὶ δεσπότης Εἰσοῦ Χριστοῦ, ‘in the

name of the lord, the master, Jesus Christ'.<sup>1</sup> The writer tries out different spellings of ὄνόματι; he experiments with abbreviating Εἰσοῦ Χριστοῦ; he fiddles with the formula, adding – in one version. What is so important about this sentence that this man concentrates on it, even when other writing proves to be beyond him? Why would someone expend so much energy on one particular phrase, given that he cannot complete a simple request for more vinegar? The answer to these questions lies in a thorough examination of the role of languages and their relative status and functions in the community.

The standard interpretation of this document, exemplified in the first instance by the editor, Kraemer, is that the author of this document is a 'Hellenized' inhabitant of Nessana, as evidenced by his use of Greek, but that his shaky knowledge of written Greek proves the deterioration of education in the township.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation is in line with a more general trend, where in mapping out the interplay between various cultures and identities in the Near East, scholars often attempt to describe a socio-cultural reality by using linguistic evidence to yield a quantifiable result: the central, unfounded, assumption, is that the use of language allows us to determine ethnic, religious and cultural identities. This approach is problematic on two fronts, the abstract and the empirical: and a careful examination of Greek and its use in the Nessana corpus will allow us to reach a different understanding both of this document and of others.

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<sup>1</sup> The homogeneity of the writing and ink preclude any change in writers or the identification of the papyrus scrap as used for pen tests.

<sup>2</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 319.

On the theoretical level, reading language as a necessary and sufficient mark of identity is, at best, anachronistic, relying – explicitly or not – on nineteenth-century notions of personal and group identity.<sup>3</sup> While scholars often speak of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the region, and the region as a whole is often described as a ‘mosaic’ of languages and cultures,<sup>4</sup> there is still a tendency to presume homogeneity within an individual’s identity: any particular individual is described as either ‘Greek’ or ‘Semitic’, either ‘Hellenized’ or not. The assumption that identity has a monolithic, binary nature easily leads scholars to assume that differing indicia can be used as positive and certain criteria for determining an identity. Thus we find scholars assuming that language is a straightforward indication of identity, rather than seeing language as one definitional element among many, used situationally in the construction of a fluid identity.

The deep-rooted assumptions underpinning the above-mentioned scholarly analyses lead to a view that cultural identity can be quantified: if every individual has a definite and definable identity, the cultural make-up of the population can be divided and counted. This approach stands at the base of the debate between the Hellenists and the

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<sup>3</sup> The assumption of a one-to-one correlation between linguistic habits and ethnic groupings stems from modern European notions of the nation-state and a Romantic understanding of identity as a mystical, stable construct, whose existence is untouched by changing historical and social situations. The roots of this identification of language and culture are found in the eighteenth century with Herder’s prescription of one language per person and one language per a people. This notion was then picked up by philologists and historians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who divided the world into distinct races or cultures, assuming that group identity within a ‘society’ or a ‘culture’ was homogenous and stable. Any particular group was understood to be unchanging through time and space, and all individuals within that group were expected to participate equally in all facets of that culture. The continuation of this mindset in modern scholarship has been criticized by, among others, Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present*; Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*; and Amory, *People and Identity*.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, p. 185.

Semiticists, who claim to distinguish the cultural make up of the area, based in great part on linguistic usage. Both parties start from the same premise – that an answer is obtainable, and that it will be one identity or the other. Thus both Fred Donner and Glen Bowersock see late ancient Syria and Palestine as bifurcated into two communities, the Semitic and the Greek, and the argument between them focuses on the placing of the boundaries defining these two distinct and discrete communities.<sup>5</sup> Both sides of the modern debate accept as a given the existence of an unbridgeable gap between the Semitic-speaking and the Greek-speaking populations. Both sides take for granted that an individual would have had one genuine identity, and that the job of the scholar is to discern that identity, and then tally up the number of ‘true Greeks’ and ‘true Arabs’.

My argument here is that this view consists of a misconception, leading to a false dichotomy between ‘Greek’ and ‘Arab’ and to a misleading debate as to the identity of particular people. As mentioned above, the reliance on language as a marker of ethnic identity has been discredited, and it is particularly inappropriate for the world of late ancient Palestine. On the empirical level, an examination of the papyrological testimony of Nessana, as well as other evidence from sixth- and seventh-century Palestine and Syria, will reveal that this approach is simply not borne out by the facts: linguistic, ethnic and religious boundaries do not coincide so neatly.

If, then, language is not operative in distinguishing ethnic identity, we are left questioning its use, since it is very clear that more than one language was in play in the community and that the choice of language was not random. The question to be examined

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<sup>5</sup>Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, esp. pp. 72-77; Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, p. 94.

thus becomes what roles did the different languages play: in what context and for what purposes were they used?

### **Greek in Nessana**

The Greek papyri contain what are frequently described as ‘barbarisms’ – to such an extent that this is often the first characteristic to excite comment. Many of the papyri deviate substantially from standard Greek spelling, grammar and syntax. Kraemer, who does not shy away from value judgments, reads this as evidence of a significant decline in education: “the priest who wrote the text of 57 as well as the archdeacon author of 56 were both, as far as Greek was concerned, only semiliterate. In fact, the carelessness or ignorance of the scribe George is rather noteworthy.”<sup>6</sup> Kraemer describes a community where Greek used to be the primary language, whose inhabitants are still ‘Hellenized’, but no longer have the education to express themselves in ‘acceptable’ standard Greek.

This account presents several problems. In the first place, we would need to assume that the decline in education was not limited to a particular social or economic class; as Kraemer notes, the archdeacon is just as likely to make mistakes of gender and case as the day laborer; and we see that even the family of Patrick, which by all accounts is one of the central political and social pillars of the community, is prone to a carelessness in distinguishing between genitive and nominative which leads to ambiguity (Inscription 12). This in itself does not invalidate Kraemer’s hypothesis – one could well imagine a society in which ignorance is widespread – but it should give us some pause.

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<sup>6</sup>Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 157.

Kraemer's account of declining knowledge is also at odds with what we know of Greek learning elsewhere in Palestine: Cyril Mango has demonstrated the vitality of Greek culture in Palestine in the early eighth century, showing that this was 'the most active centre of Greek culture' at the time.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, Kraemer's explanation leaves us without an explanation for the insistence on writing in Greek, given the supposed massive decline in education. It also flies in the face of recent scholarship on the evolution of language, and in particular, the parallel changes in contemporary Latin in the western Empire.<sup>8</sup> When compared to the Latin of Gregory of Tours, for instance, the Greek found in Nessana no longer seems so unusual, showing many of the same unorthodox characteristics. With regard to contemporary Latin, it is by now a commonplace that these phenomena are not necessarily an indication of inability to write in 'correct' classical Latin but of a stage in the alteration of the language; it may well be that the same holds true for the Greek.

Yet another possibility is that the non-standard Greek is the result of interference from another language, with which the writer feels more at ease. It is notoriously and exceptionally difficult to distinguish between accepted but non-standard Greek, problems arising from a limited literacy, and bilingual interference. This vexed issue has been well explored in Greek papyri from Egypt, where at least some orthographical idiosyncrasies

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<sup>7</sup>Mango, "Greek culture in Palestine after the Arab conquest", p. 149.

<sup>8</sup>Banniard, *Viva Voce: Communication écrite et communication orale du IVe au IXe siècle en occident latin*.

and grammatical gaffes should be put down to the effect of Coptic interference.<sup>9</sup> To examine the possible purchase of this explanation in Nessana, and since on both theoretical and practical grounds, it appears that ignorance and slovenliness will not suffice as explanations for the idiosyncrasies of the papyri, we will have to examine the role of other languages in Nessana.

### **Greek and spoken Arabic**

If we try to set aside any preconceptions and examine the documents in terms of their functions, the Greek documents fall into two groups. Some documents reflect an idiomatic, easily spoken Greek. Many of these papyri, such as *P.Ness.* 38 and *P.Ness.* 82, were evidently meant for personal use, and as such are little more than *aide-mémoires* or notations for personal archives. The fact that some Nessanites were comfortable enough in Greek to use it for their personal notes, has no influence on whether they were also at ease in another Semitic language. This section will examine the evidence for the presence and function of another such language in Nessana, taking particular note of interference in the Greek.

### **Vernacular languages**

Before continuing, the question of the language which I have heretofore referred to as the vague 'Semitic' should be addressed. Three main linguistic terms are used to describe the languages of the inhabitants of Palaestina Tertia: Aramaic (specifically CPA, Christian Palestinian Aramaic), Arabic or proto-Arabic, and Nabataean. The last is the

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<sup>9</sup> Keenan, "On Languages and Literacy in Byzantine Aphrodito", p. 164.

easiest to deal with, if the hardest to define. Though there is a recognizable and distinct writing system which is commonly called ‘Nabataean’,<sup>10</sup> there is no evidence that ‘Nabataean’ was ever an independent spoken dialect. If the people who wrote using Nabataean letters did speak a distinct dialect, it is unclear whether that dialect should be classified as ‘Aramaic Arabic’ or ‘Arabic Aramaic’.<sup>11</sup> It is in all events clear that Nabataean cannot be used straightforwardly to refer to a distinct spoken language.

As for the distinction between Aramaic and Arabic, on balance the evidence points to the indigenous Semitic language around Nessana as being Arabic. As Aramaic has no definite article or a comparative or superlative, problems with these issues indicate typical grammatical interference from Aramaic.<sup>12</sup> The fact that these types of problems are not representative of the issues we see in Nessana would suggest Arabic rather than Aramaic as vernacular.<sup>13</sup> I shall therefore refer to this Semitic dialect as Arabic, while keeping in mind that it may well have been a local dialect of Arabic, distinctly different from North Arabian Arabic.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Though even this is debatable: Macdonald claims that “the choice of what is included under the rubrics ‘the Nabataean script’ and ‘Nabataean Aramaic’ is based purely on modern paleographical and linguistic perceptions.” Macdonald, "Personal Names in the Nabataean Realm: a Review Article", p. 255.

<sup>11</sup> “The Nabataeans spoke a version of Aramaic (...) their language seems to have participated in a development that made the Nab vocabulary virtually indistinguishable from pre-Islamic Arabic”: Koenen, "Phoenix from the Ashes: the burnt archive from Petra", p. 529.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, "Bilingualism and Diglossia in Late Antique Syria and Mesopotamia", p. 308.

<sup>13</sup> Koenen has reached the same conclusion regarding the Semitic dialect spoken at Petra: see Koenen, "Phoenix from the Ashes: the burnt archive from Petra", p. 529.

<sup>14</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that North Arabian Arabic used *h-* for the definite article, whereas Old Arabic (a purely spoken language) and the dialect evidence in Nessana employ *ʾl-*. See Macdonald, "Some Reflections on Epigraphy and Ethnicity in the Roman Near East", p. 179.

It is an often-lamented truism that the written sources – the only ones to which we have access in the ancient world – either completely obscure the spoken language or distort our vision of them.<sup>15</sup> Inscriptions in particular suffer from the bias in favor of the imperial languages, with their entrenched epigraphic habits, and against the vernaculars of the region. Yet though the sources themselves, particularly those before the conquest, are almost exclusively Greek, yet within the Greek can be found evidence for a widely-used vernacular, which one may glimpse through the veil of Greek in the shape of interference.

Before beginning with the evidence for such interference, it is perhaps as well to outline what will not be included here. I will not deal with Arabic concepts with no Greek equivalents, transliterated into Greek and used to refer to the Arabic concept. For example, when in *P.Ness.* 72 the scribe of the Muslim governor refers to a certain Abou Almouger as the  $\mu\alpha\upsilon\lambda\epsilon$  of Eria ben Abi Soufian, this tells us nothing about the linguistic identities and proclivities of Nessanites. The term *mawla* has no equivalent in Greek and no meaning except in a Muslim context; it is proof of the fact that the society in which the note was written was following early Muslim divisions between freed slaves and freeborn Muslims, and gives us no information on the spread of the Arabic language.

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<sup>15</sup> “How many village churches in the depths of the English countryside contain monuments to dead squires in Latin, a language which none of the congregation could read and which the squire himself probably had long since forgotten? Similarly, it is dangerous to assume from the wealth of Greek formal inscriptions throughout Syria that the population in general spoke (let, alone, read) Greek, rather than (or, even as well as) Aramaic or another Semitic language.” *Ibid.*, p. 180. See also Cotton, “Language Gaps in Roman Palestine and the Roman Near East”, p. 152.

These types of cases are classified as loanwords, and characterized by their total integration into the receiving language. At the end of the process, the alien word is no longer perceived as such, and the users do not think of themselves as switching languages when they use that word.<sup>16</sup> A Frenchman declaring ‘que je suis stressé!’ does not think of the origin of the word, nor is he necessarily aware of referring to an English root.

In distinction, true code-switching depends on an acute awareness of the shift between languages. A classic example is the use of Greek in Cicero’s Latin letters – a use which is dependent both on the topics under discussion and on the addressee’s educational and social level.<sup>17</sup> This type of functional differentiation between two languages is sometimes also called diglossia. Though the terms diglossia and code-switching are often used interchangeably, diglossia is more often employed technically to indicate a society in which one language can be consistently marked as High, and the other as Low.<sup>18</sup> This distinction will prove to be unnecessarily restrictive in the case of Nessana, and so I will here refrain from referring to diglossia.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Swain, "Bilingualism in Cicero? The Evidence of Code-Switching", p. 129.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, "Bilingualism and Diglossia in Late Antique Syria and Mesopotamia", pp. 298-299.

<sup>19</sup> The problems with identifying one language as a ‘High’ variant are recognized also in Egypt, where MacCoull’s work on Dioscorus led her to conclude that “There is no easy classification rule that equates “Greek-speaking” and “classically educated” with “upper class and Chalcedonian.” MacCoull, *Dioscorus of Aphroditos: His Work and His World*, p. 151. Contra see Levy-Rubin, *The Jerusalem Patriarchate After the Arab Conquest (Hebrew)*, p. 261, who does see the linguistic divide as reflective of a class system, whereby the upper echelon speaks Greek and the lower speak CPA. The problems with this hypothesis are raised and dealt with thoroughly in Griffith, "From Aramaic to Arabic: the Languages of the Monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods", pp. 23-24.

The most obvious instance of Arabic infiltration into the Greek text comes in the form of place names. Three places mentioned in the papyri include obvious Arabic elements – Χαφρεα[...] in *P.Ness.* 54, Χαφρ in *P.Ness.* 94, and Τουρσινα in *P.Ness.* 73. In the first publication of the documents, F.E. Day suggests that the use of Χαφρεα[...] in a Greek document implies that the writer “did not realize the native usage, and took *kafr* as a place name, omitting its relative word.”<sup>20</sup> Yet the opposite conclusion may also be drawn, and as we shall see, it is more in keeping with the rest of the evidence – viz., that the writers knew full well that *kafr* was a village, that the place indicated was called Kafr X, and that the missing remainder of the name would have supplied the full toponym. This is supported by the later reappearance of a place called Kafr in the post-conquest *P.Ness.* 94. Given the date of that manuscript, we can hardly assume the writers to be ignorant of the meaning of the word *kafr* in Arabic, and yet we still find it used as a place name. Clearly, then, it is rash to assume that this usage implies ignorance of Arabic convention. A similar instance appears in an order from the Muslim governor, dated to 683, where Mt. Sinai is called Τουρσινα (73.7). Here again we have the identifier of a place (*tūr*, i.e. mountain) used as a portion of the proper name of a place, and thus according to Day’s rationale we ought to assume ignorance of Arabic; and yet the date and context of this document assure us of the writer’s knowledge of Arabic. We may then read the use of Arabic place descriptions as evidence for knowledge of Arabic.

Further indication of the widespread use of Arabic as a spoken language is furnished by the Arabic words used to describe plots of land. Altogether, fourteen fields

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, 152.

are given proper names, in papyri ranging in date from 512 (*P.Ness.* 16) to the late seventh century (*P.Ness.* 82). Thirteen of the names are indubitably Semitic in origin, and have a meaning in Arabic. Day suggests that αλεγραδ in *P.Ness.* 24.6 is simply *al-ajrād*, plural of *jarad*, field.<sup>21</sup> Two of the fields mentioned have a similar name –αβιαθαλβον in *P.Ness.* 16.14, and αβιαθαλβα in *P.Ness.* 21.35, written 40 years later. These may refer to the same field or to two distinct fields; in either case we might suggest that the name is a reflection of *abī-tha’laba*, i.e. the possessor of foxes, or the field (inhabited by) foxes. Two fields are named after their master in *P.Ness.* 82 – μαλαλκωνι, i.e. *māl al-kāni*, property of the short man,<sup>22</sup> and μαλζημαρχε, or *māl dhī māriq*, property of the deserter or the heretic.<sup>23</sup> Another field is called βεραειν, i.e., *bi’rain*, the two wells (*P.Ness.* 82.1).<sup>24</sup>

The use of Arabic words, and not just proper names, to identify sections of land, implies that Arabic served in daily life, particularly when discussing elements of agricultural life such as the fields. This use is paralleled in the papyri from Petra where we find over 100 Arabic toponyms and oikonyms embedded in otherwise Greek texts.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> The root *kn’* can denote a person with short or lame legs or arms: *Lisan al-Arab* VIII 314-316.

<sup>23</sup> This could also be a transliteration of *māl dhī mārih*, i.e. property of the proud man. Eck has suggested that Zemarche is a given name. As it is obviously not Greek or Latin, he suggests a connection to the Thracian Zemarchus (as in *P.Oxy.* XVI 1903). Eck, "Language of Power: Latin in the Inscriptions of Iudaea / Syria Palaestina", p. 196. To my mind the presence of a single Thracian in Nessana, established well and long enough to have purchased land and to have that land commonly called after him, is rather less likely than a reasonable Arabic provenance.

<sup>24</sup> In view of these readings, we might propose that the field Kraemer reads as Αιρεγλα be emended to αλρεγλα, i.e. *al-rijla*, the water-channel; this would allow us to transform it from a meaningless name (and one, moreover, that does not follow either a Semitic or a Greek form) to a meaningful description, consistent with other field names.

As in the Nessana papyri, some fields are not just named after people but also given names with specific Arabic meaning (e.g. *gannath al-salam*, garden of peace, *P.Petra* 10). Here, too, the unavoidable implication is that Arabic served in daily life, particularly when discussing elements of agricultural life such as the fields.<sup>25</sup> Both in Petra and in Nessana, though the documents disposing of the fields and naming heirs were written in Greek, the business of farming appears to have been conducted in the Arabic vernacular.

### **Greek and written Arabic**

The difference between the use of Greek and Arabic, then, does not lie in who spoke which language, as we see that use of Greek does not preclude a deep familiarity with Arabic as a vernacular. The difference between the two languages manifests itself in the second category of Greek documents, those not meant for private but for public consumption. In these cases Greek is used to convey additional connotations of power and authority, serving as more than just a straightforward, limpid tool for conveying the spoken words. This aspect is particularly apparent in the post-conquest papyri, written well into Muslim rule, in contracts such as *P.Ness.* 56 and in government communications such as *P.Ness.* 73.

Observations relating to the function of languages in Palaestina under late Roman and Byzantine rule and *Filastīn* under Umayyad rule are more often than not detached

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel, "P. Petra inv. 10 and its Arabic"; see also Koenen, "Phoenix from the Ashes: the burnt archive from Petra", p. 529. It is worth noting that in the Egyptian context, the use of Coptic toponyms and specifically field names is considered proof positive of the "the Coptic basis of village life"; Keenan, "On Languages and Literacy in Byzantine Aphrodito", p. 161.

from each other, partly as a result of the disconnect between scholars of Late Antiquity and scholars of the early Muslim period. Since, then, pre-conquest documents are in Greek, and it is only through a closer analysis that we see the spoken Semitic dialects, Umayyad historians tend to speak of the ‘– of the Christian population, implying that until the latter half of the seventh century the population spoke Greek as a matter of course. The texts examined here suggest that this is only a partial truth; Christians in the Sham regions were indeed familiar with Greek, but even before the conquest it was used in situations where conveying power, status and culture were of importance.

The Nessana papyri show that a people who seem to have spoken a version of Arabic in daily life and nicknamed their fields in that language, chose to resort to Greek when drawing up various contracts (*P.Ness.* 16 and 30, for instance), with the presumed intention of increasing the formality of the documents. It is not simply a matter of legalities, since many of the Greek papyri are not meant to function as legal documents (such as *P.Ness.* 47, 49, 68 and many others), but rather of the connotations and association of power linked to the use of Greek.

This division of languages according to their connotations continues in the Nessana papyri after the Muslim conquest, when in fact we can see it even more clearly. *P.Ness.* 92, a record of accounts involving orders from Damascus and Egypt, represents the highest levels of Umayyad authority, including the governors of Egypt and Palestine and the caliph ‘Abd al-Mālik himself. Written at the very end of the seventh century – probably around 690 – the document is entirely Arabic in content; in fact, it is nothing but a memo internal to the Umayyad administration. All the names and titles mentioned

are transliterated from Arabic (note in particular Αμῖρ αλμουμινiv, leader of the believers, as applied to the caliph); the institutions and administrative habits are all Arabic; the record deals with payment for the Muslim army. And yet, this detailed and formal text is composed entirely in Greek. Unlike the bilingual *entagia* from the same period, it does not even have a translation into Arabic appended to it.

That the Umayyad regime used Persian and Greek for its accounts is well-known; This situation held until the 690's, when Arabic gradually replaced all other languages. The papyri from Nessana reflect the stage before arabization; although the *entagia* do include Arabic, it is noteworthy that there is not a single document written exclusively in Arabic, whereas there are several Umayyad documents exclusively in Greek. Usually the phenomenon is explained as a result of the new regime, relatively poor in administrative structure, choosing to take over the intricate bureaucracy of the Byzantine and Persian empires wholesale, and maintaining the scribes who therefore continued to write in Greek. Yet if we examine not just the use of Greek from 636 to the time of the Abbasids, but look at these texts in the context of the preceding centuries, another possibility emerges, namely, that the continuities in the use of Greek reflect something other than a continued use of the same scribes. After the conquest, as before the conquest, the use of Greek among a population fluent in Arabic or Aramaic carries connotations of power and status. In the beginning of this chapter we have seen that scholars will often conclude from the use of Greek for written documents and inscriptions that the writers' cultural identity must have been Greek. Clearly, this assumption will not hold when we look at the Umayyad documents: their users and patrons – governors and the backbone of the

administration, arriving from Arabia—could not possibly be said to be ‘Hellenized’. In fact, a comparison of the *entagia* from Nessana with those from Aphrodito shows that if anything, the former was more integrated into the new Muslim, Arabic speaking- and writing-society. The dating in Nessana includes the Hijric year, months are given following the Arabic calendar, and the recap of tax amounts appears in Arabic as well as in the Greek – all features which are missing from the Aphrodito *entagia*. The use of Greek does not imply a break with the Muslim, Arabic-speaking Umayyad rule.

By this stage – well into Muslim rule in the 680’s and 690’s – Greek is no longer a *koinē*; it is neither the language of the empire nor the language of daily life and commerce. A common explanation for the continued use of Greek is that Greek remained the language of the administrators. Bowersock has shown that the limited number of Arabic scribes is not a sufficient explanation.<sup>26</sup> Whereas in Egypt there is comparatively very little writing in Arabic at all (until the arabization of the province in the 690’s),<sup>27</sup> Nessana shows that there were sufficient scribes for administrative uses two decades earlier. Furthermore, these scribes seem fluent and at ease in writing Arabic; it is noteworthy that despite the gulf between the spoken and written Arabic, the documents show no deviations in spelling or grammar from the norm of written Arabic. As noted above, the same certainly cannot be said for the Greek scribes. These observations bolster Robin’s point that the so-called ‘aversion to writing’ in early Islam is dependent on the

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<sup>26</sup> Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> On which process, see Sijpesteijn, "New Rule over Old Structures: Egypt after the Muslim Conquest".

region. Although some early Muslim theologians express a distrust of the written word, this is by no means a universal attitude, as evidenced by the massive epigraphic corpus in Arabic and by the numerous mentions of written treaties in the first century of Islam.<sup>28</sup> It is true that the non-adjusted early Arabic is not entirely convenient for administrative purposes, lacking as it is in *matres lectionis* and diacritical marks. In this context, it is worth noting that the Arabic documents in Nessana testify to a transitional stage in the development of Arabic script; *alif* appears often—though not always—as a *mater lectionis*; and *h* is consistently used for noting the *ta marbuta*.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to these indications that the Arabic scribal system was fully functional, the *entagia* sent to Nessana from Gaza preserve a different story – one of two parallel systems of scribal notation and administration: the former, Greek-based, Byzantine-origin system, supplemented by a new cadre of Arabic scribes. Thus, by the last quarter of the seventh century, there was a functioning Arabic administrative system, which did not supplant but merely enhanced the existing Greek system. This means that though common sense would dictate that the new administrators were likely to be bilingual – and indeed that has often been the assumption<sup>30</sup> – the administrative system itself did not

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<sup>28</sup> Robin, "La reforme de l'écriture arabe à l'époque du califat méroïte", p. 321; see also Hoyland, "The Content and Context of Early Arabic Inscriptions".

<sup>29</sup> For the significance of these changes, see Robin, "La reforme de l'écriture arabe à l'époque du califat méroïte", pp. 345-346.

<sup>30</sup> In a lecture given on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2007 in Jerusalem at the conference "From Sumer to the Genizah—Diplomatics and Legal Documents in the Ancient World," Bagnall noted that bilingual people not only affect the process but are usually the ones responsible for the transition between languages. Quite clearly this is not the case in Nessana.

require bilingualism, and in some sense may be said to have discouraged it; such a skill may have been useful, but the system functioned without it.

Before moving on it is necessary to address the role of Greek as a liturgical language and as the language of the Christian Church. In the monasteries of Palestine and north into Syria, the language of worship and of theology was generally Greek.<sup>31</sup> Yet in spite of the dominant role of Greek in religious contexts, it would be inaccurate to say that it was the only language of Christian worship. There is ample evidence that services were sometimes held in other languages, even in the monasteries;<sup>32</sup> and the Nessana inscriptions refer to the women in a group of pilgrims as *ομηνα* i.e., Mother— using the Arabic title as an indication of a religious position.<sup>33</sup> Though later on, and certainly by the ninth century, Greek became confined to a liturgical language (particularly among the Melkite community), in the period covered here there is no reason to suppose that it was limited to religious connotations.

Altogether, it appears that the use of Greek, like the application of ethnonyms, bespoke ideological claims, and did not represent an identity; it would behoove us not to mistake one for the other nor to accept without reservation the ideological claims made.

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<sup>31</sup> Gatier, "Villages du Proche-Orient protobyzantin (4eme - 7eme s.): étude régionale", p. 152; Griffith, "From Aramaic to Arabic: the Languages of the Monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods", p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Kirk and Welles, "The Inscriptions", p. 152. Note that the men are addressed in Aramaic (?) as *αββα* and not, as they would be in Arabic, *abouna*.

The tendency to use a language other than Arabic for formal communication is not unprecedented, but in fact continues the practices of pre-Islamic Arabia and the Hauran. Before Islam, Arabic was not used in writing; instead the script of prestige in the locality was chosen.<sup>34</sup> In a multilingual society, where people were often fluent in more than one dialect or language, the distinction between them becomes a matter of tone, conveying a message by the very choice of language. It is easily recognized that formal, monumental inscriptions are for public consumption and many different factors govern their choice of language, prestige being foremost among them. The example of Nessana shows us that is true not only when aimed at an external audience but that similar considerations also apply to documents aimed internally, with at most a semi-public audience in mind. It is this sensibility that we see continued in the Greek papyri at Nessana – the recognition of Greek as a language of power and authority. The so-called arabization of Syria and Palestine is only in part then a process by which Arabic became the spoken language: to a certain degree, a dialect of Arabic was already the colloquial language. More importantly, the transition from Greek to Arabic reflects the growing prestige of the new Muslim rulers. By the time of the Abbassids, there was no longer a need to use Greek to convey messages of power and status: Arabic represented a

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<sup>34</sup> Hoyland, "Language and Identity: the Twin Histories of Arabic and Aramaic", p. 184. Macdonald notes that a telling example of this habit is that of the Himyarites in South Arabia, who wrote all their numerous monumental inscriptions from the fourth to the sixth centuries in Sabaitic, the language of the kingdom which they had conquered and which had enormous prestige throughout the Arabian Peninsula. "[F]rom the mistakes and inconsistencies in their Sabaitic inscriptions, it would seem that the Himyarites must have spoken an entirely different language and it appears that, like Old Arabic in the North, this was regarded as a purely spoken vernacular which, normally, 'could not be written'." Macdonald, "Some Reflections on Epigraphy and Ethnicity in the Roman Near East", p. 181.

powerful enough rule. Only at that point was there no longer a need for public inscriptions in Greek, just as the coins of the time begin to demonstrate an independent style and Arabic legends.<sup>35</sup>

### **Parallels and Comparanda**

Further confirmation for this view of language as a tool of status and a symbol of imperial power is found in the few Latin papyri found in Nessana. Though none of the documentary papyri is in Latin, or indeed shows any significant knowledge of the language, the literary papyri include two singular exemplars: a Latin-Greek glossary of the vocabulary in the *Aeneid*, and fragments of books II-VI from a papyrus codex of the *Aeneid*. Both these papyri are notable for the abysmal quality of their Latin; indeed, the illiteracy of the glossary scribe is such that Casson and Hettich speak of ‘monstrosities’,<sup>36</sup> and describe the scribe – not unfairly – as merely copying the shapes of the strokes to the best of his ability, with no attempt to make sense of the letters. To give but a few examples from the glossary, *Peget* stands in for *pigebit* (749); *Efello* for *refello* (818); *hortamuis* for *hortamur* (445). When speaking of idiosyncrasies in Greek spelling and grammar, the possibility of a transitional phase of the language was raised; what might appear as ‘bad’ Greek is just as likely – if not more – to be the result of changing conventions. The Latin displayed here falls into an entirely different category. This is not a question of making a mistake in the use of the subjunctive, or using the accusative case

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<sup>35</sup> Shboul and Walmsley, "Identity and Self-Image", p. 287.

<sup>36</sup> Casson and Hettich, *Excavations at Nessana, volume 2: Literary Papyri*, p. 11.

where we would expect a genitive. This is not a case of typical scribal error, or the mistaking of one word for another. What we see in these papyri is only the outward semblance of a language, comparable to the gibberish babbling of a child imitating adults. We may be tempted to put this down to a novice apprentice or to a phenomenally and singularly inept scribe, were it not for the fact that the papyrus shows signs of extensive revisions by another hand, just as ill-informed. The first scribe then passed on his efforts to be corrected by a superior, whose knowledge of Latin proves to be just as execrable.

The insistence of the sixth-century scribes on going far beyond the limits of their knowledge of Latin, and the continued use of such a poor text (as attested by the careful, if unsuccessful, attempt at emendation) is even more incomprehensible in view of the limited usefulness of Latin. Kraemer, following Casson and Hettich, suggests that the impetus is a Christian one, rooted in the view of Virgil as Christian *avant la lettre*. It is difficult to accept a religious reason for insisting on Virgil given that these texts are nearly unreadable; surely an appreciation of the subtle Christian interpretations of elements in the *Aeneid* would have been difficult, if not impossible, given this mutilated and often incomprehensible copy. A Christian explanation also seems unnecessarily restrictive, given the preponderance of pagan Greek imagery elsewhere in the Christian communities of the region.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The popularity of Classical pagan cultural traditions such as Homeric stories and depictions of Pan and satyrs is amply demonstrated in the iconography of the Jerash bowls from the same period. Shboul and Walmsley, "Identity and Self-Image", p. 281.

As for practical reasons for a small school in the Negev to insist on Latin, these are also hard to countenance: Latin had already become a “complete anachronism” by the seventh century.<sup>38</sup> It may be that what we see here is the well-known phenomenon of lag between center and periphery: although by the time these papyri were written, at the end of the sixth century, Latin was no longer necessary or even important for administrative or cultural prestige in the imperial centers, this change in attitudes to the language did not yet reach Nessana. Thus the glossary and the *Aeneid* codex still reflect the situation in the late fifth and early sixth century, when Latin was the official language of law, the administration and the army, and knowledge of Latin was useful for aspiring bureaucrats and administrators. This remnant of an outdated outlook, which saw in Latin the mark of a man educated beyond the common run,<sup>39</sup> would explain why such care was taken with the glossary in spite of the obvious limitations of both the primary scribe and the secondary scribe attempting to emend the former’s mistakes. Latin still stands here as one of the trappings of imperial culture and power, just as it is still used in legends upon coins and in the legal texts taught at the university of Berytus, even when the language of instruction was firmly established as Greek.<sup>40</sup>

We see here a clear illustration that the prestige associated with a language is not diminished through spelling, grammatical and syntactical mistakes. On the contrary, the more incomprehensible a text is, the more of an aura it gains. As a symbol of status – an

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<sup>38</sup> Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, p. 310.

<sup>39</sup> Latin as a marker of class: Hall, *Roman Berytus*, p. 197.

<sup>40</sup> Geiger, "How much Latin in Greek Palestine?", pp. 41-42.

attempt to lay claim to a heritage of power and prestige – the external appearance of a language, as expressed by an alphabet, is sufficient. This phenomenon is motivated by the same forces which create instances of pseudo-writing.

The division of labor between Greek and Arabic is not simply between a language of administration and that of daily use, or between a spoken and a written language; as the papyri show us, both languages could take on different roles. It is also not sufficient to equate use of Greek with ‘cultural Hellenization,’ as Greek is plainly used by the Arab newcomers well into the Abbasid period.<sup>41</sup> It would also be a mistake to equate Greek with a higher-status language simply because of its more frequent use in public writing. As Taylor has shown with regard to sixth- and seventh-century Syria, a particularized use of Greek cannot be taken as evidence for “the cultural and linguistic dominance of Greek and the decline in prestige of Aramaic.”<sup>42</sup>

What we see here are rather different norms associated with different languages, in a rather flexible system. The bilingual papyri are not direct and precise translations from one language to the other, but are each composed separately, by different scribes, in the tradition of their own language: the Arabic begins with *bismi allah al-rahmān al-rahīm*, whereas the usual Greek invocation is ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ θεοῦ

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<sup>41</sup> Schick, *Christian Communities*, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor, "Bilingualism and Diglossia in Late Antique Syria and Mesopotamia", p. 331.

παντοκράτορος.<sup>43</sup> Each invocation conveys a similar sentiment, but the exact phrasing is dependant on the conventions of that language.<sup>44</sup>

The question then is what is the specialized use of Greek which makes it appear in these circumstances – what governs the code-switching between Greek and Arabic? Though inscriptions are more likely to be in Greek, this is not a hard-and-fast rule; there are many inscriptions in Aramaic (though most from northern Palaestina Secunda),<sup>45</sup> and a fair number of Arabic inscriptions. The inscriptions at Ruheiba and Mampsis are particularly noteworthy for their professional execution and beautiful handwriting, speaking to the evident education and experience of their scribes.<sup>46</sup>

If the explanation is not to be found in a simple division between spoken and inscribed languages, the solution might be sought rather in the content of the inscriptions – just as the content of the communication is an important factor in Cicero’s decision to switch from Latin into Greek. This distinction has several precedents in the area. *P. Yadin* 12, from AD 124, records in Greek the minutes of the βουλή meeting of Petra. Though the discussion would not necessarily have taken place in Greek, “the possession of a

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<sup>43</sup> A similar parallel is also found in *P.Ness.* 56. For a contrasting example of a precise translation of an invocation, see the examples at SB 5177-87, e.g. ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ θεοῦ ἐλεήμονος καὶ φιλανθρώπου οὐκ ἔστι θεὸς εἰ μὴ ὁ μόνος θεός· Μααμετ ἀπόστολος θεοῦ.

<sup>44</sup> See also Taylor, "Bilingualism and Diglossia in Late Antique Syria and Mesopotamia", p. 321, for independent composition in multilingual inscriptions.

<sup>45</sup> Synagogues in particular tend to incorporate two or three different languages in their mosaics; cf. the examples from Gadara, Ein Gedi and Sepphoris. Millar, "Latin in the Epigraphy of the Roman Near East", p. 398.

<sup>46</sup> Sharon, "Five Arabic inscriptions from Rehoboth and Sinai", p. 50.

polis-constitution by a city in the Roman Near East implied the use of the Greek language in the public sphere.”<sup>47</sup>

A useful example of this Greek-Aramaic code-switching comes from Madaba. There a sixth-century Greek inscription describes a miraculous rainfall in Greek, but quotes the inhabitants’ reaction to it in Aramaic *goubba ba-goubba*, “cistern for cistern”. The inscription is seen as proving that the mass of the residents spoke Aramaic to the exclusion of Greek, in contrast to the writers and readers of the inscription.<sup>48</sup> I would suggest that seen in the context of other linguistic ‘incongruities’, instances in which the language used does not seem to correspond to the language spoken, another interpretation suggests itself: that the shift in the text between Aramaic and Greek expresses a shift in the situation and medium, rather than in the identity of the users. When inscribing a formal document, the appropriate language is Greek; but when quoting a spoken exclamation, said in surprise at a miraculous downpour of rain, the appropriate vehicle is Aramaic – the language actually spoken. This is not bilingualism, but rather code-switching, the use of different languages for different purposes: Greek, Latin and Arabic are used as we would use different registers of the one language. This conclusion gains in plausibility when we look beyond Nessana and the sixth-century provinces of Palaestina to Umayyad al-Sham, where we find several other instances of Greek used as a marker of power.

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<sup>47</sup> Cotton, "Language Gaps in Roman Palestine and the Roman Near East", p. 159.

<sup>48</sup> Wasserstein, "Why did Arabic Succeed where Greek failed? Language Change in the Near East after Muhammad", p. 187.

In Hammat Gader, the hot springs below Gadara (Umm Qays), a monumental and carefully cut Greek inscription informs us over nine lines that the bath was thoroughly restored in the reign of the caliph Mu‘āwiya (661-680). As Fowden has shown, the stone maintains both the conventions and even the letterforms and general aesthetic of pre-Islamic inscriptions.<sup>49</sup> The name and title of the caliph and the name of the local governor are carefully transliterated from the Arabic, while the governor’s title is translated. It is perfectly clear that no need was felt for a parallel Arabic version of the Greek inscription.<sup>50</sup> The use of Greek creates continuity with previous Byzantine and Roman dedications and public inscriptions, and continues the epigraphic tradition, linking the new regime to the old ones and evoking imperial power. In contrast, the Arabic inscriptions found in the vicinity are private inscriptions, prayers for forgiveness or commemoration, rather than statements of authority.<sup>51</sup> If we return to the Arabic inscriptions from Ruheiba mentioned above, examining the content of the communication, the impetus – and perhaps even the necessity – of using Arabic rather than Greek becomes clear. These inscriptions refer to the Suhbah literature and contain early Sufi ideas<sup>52</sup> – concepts which have no equivalent in Greek and indeed would lose their connotations in translation. This is significant in reinforcing the understanding that

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<sup>49</sup> Fowden, *Qusayr Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria*, p. 266

<sup>50</sup> SEG XXX 1687; SEG XXXII. 1501.

<sup>51</sup> Sharon, "Five Arabic inscriptions from Rehoboth and Sinai". This typical use of the Semitic for personal requests is recognized also by Levy-Rubin, in spite of her insistence that the real difference between Greek and the Aramaic vernacular represents a difference in social strata. Levy-Rubin, *The Jerusalem Patriarchate After the Arab Conquest (Hebrew)*, p. 285

<sup>52</sup> Sharon, "Five Arabic inscriptions from Rehoboth and Sinai", pp. 51-52.

the line of demarcation between the languages is not simply about the division between written and spoken languages.

In the Babatha archive, the adoption of Greek is motivated by practical reasons: although Aramaic (and/or –) are the commonly spoken languages, the need to have the contracts validated and enforced by the courts requires the use of Greek, as does the wish to deposit them in public archives.<sup>53</sup> The case of Nessana is noticeably different: Greek is also used when Arabic was a serviceable legal language, and at a time when there is an established and competent bureaucratic system fluent in Arabic (as evidenced by the Arabic scribes and by the sophistication of the Arabic inscriptions). Greek is also used in private contexts with no legal implications.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter argues that language use in the Nessana papyri was determined by context and situation; and that languages were used to make claims of power, rather than ethnicity. In other words, the same man might well use Greek in one context and Arabic in another, depending on the message he wishes to convey to his interlocutors and on the content of the communication. The use of Greek in the purely Umayyad register *P.Ness.* 92 is motivated by the same reasons which urged the scribe to pay particular attention to the layout and external appearance of the register; these details increase the formality of the document and signal its governmental nature. Linguistic usage alone cannot therefore

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<sup>53</sup> Cotton, "The Languages of the Legal and Administrative Documents from the Judaean Desert", p. 230.

be used to determine the ethnic, religious, or cultural identity of the speaker/writer, but only that facet which is being emphasized in a given situation.

If we return to the example with which we began – our discouraged and frustrated letter writer – we can now see that this neglected papyrus affords us a glimpse into people’s motives for insisting on Greek. This is a man who is incapable of composing a simple letter in Greek; and yet there is one line he considers important enough to practice over and over again, and that is the standard formula beginning a formal letter, an appeal to authority or any other kind of legal document. Greek writing is important to master not just so that one may write formal letters (since this individual has shown that he is incapable of doing so); the ability to string together Greek letters takes on an almost magical meaning, creating the illusion of participation in the life of influence. The standard epistolary formula declaring the writer’s literacy, with which the abandoned letter begins γραμμάτων παρόντων μου γράφω – literally, I write to you since I possess letters – takes on an added poignancy. In this case, the literal interpretation is applicable, but the meaning of the phrase – a declaration of literacy and competence as a scribe – is not.

Both before and after the Muslim conquest, Greek was used for the overtones it carried as much as for its familiarity as a spoken or written language. Instead of explaining the idiosyncrasies of Greek in late Roman Palestine and in Umayyad *Filastīn* using two different models, one spectrum emerges. Averil Cameron has already argued that the change from Greek to Arabic was neither as sudden nor as complete as has been thought. This has been confirmed by recent findings attesting to the use of Greek side by

side with Arabic until much later than previously thought: one need only point to the steel yard from the mid-eighth century, whose arms are marked with Greek letters on one side and Arabic on the other.<sup>54</sup> It seems that for at least a century, the two languages maintained an easy coexistence.

The Nessana papyri uphold this insight, and suggest that the nature of this change has been wrongly understood: this is not a story of a shift from one spoken language to another, but of the change in the connotations each language carried. Just as Latin was used in late ancient Caesarea, at a time when Greek was the *lingua franca*, to represent and imply Rome's power,<sup>55</sup> so Greek was used at a time when Arabic was the *lingua franca* to imply the power of an empire. Until Arabic was well established enough to connote power and formality by itself, the Muslim administration continued to use Greek as it had been used before them: not to signify cultural identity, but to signal status and intentions. In trying to understand the complexities of this society, imposing an anachronistic linguistic dichotomy can only be a hindrance.

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<sup>54</sup> Tsafirir and Foerster, "From Scythopolis to Baysan - Changing Concepts of Urbanism", p. 111.

<sup>55</sup> Eck, "Language of Power: Latin in the Inscriptions of Iudaea / Syria Palaestina", p. 140.

## Chapter 5: Local connections and networks

As mentioned in the introduction, the fact that the Nessana papyri are concerned with purely local matters has been a cause for some disappointment among their excavators.<sup>1</sup> Nessana is not unusual here; papyri rarely have a viewpoint wider than local village or town politics, one reason for the relatively recent incorporation of papyrological evidence into general historiography.<sup>2</sup> But what Colt and Kraemer saw as a disadvantage may be an asset when we come to reconstruct the networks and ties connecting the various local communities surrounding Nessana. Did the inhabitants of Nessana see themselves as part of a Palestinian community? Or did their regional identity stretch wider, reaching into Syria and covering the lands known as Bilād al-Sham? In what sense is it helpful to distinguish between, say, different provinces, and when are geographical boundaries less meaningful? If such a local identity existed, where can we see it operating and how important was it? These will be the questions addressed in this chapter, first from an external standpoint – i.e., what does the Nessana community appear to us to have in common with its surrounding villages, towns and cities – and second with a more subjective focus, i.e., which of these ties appear to be important to the people in question.

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<sup>1</sup> “During the whole of the sixth century, when the Near East was astir with great movements in all phases of human activity – political, social, religious, and economic – the data from Nessana deal with local or at most provincial affairs.” Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 23. See also above, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Keenan, “New Papyrology and Ancient Roman History”, p. 161.

An important point to keep in mind before tackling the subject is the danger of extrapolating from Nessana's current isolation to its position in the past. A modern visitor to the site is inevitably struck by the desolation of the barren landscape and by its distance from any urban center, even given modern transportation; one is tempted to assume that the settlement must have been even more remote in the sixth century. This impression of seclusion is, of course, not necessarily applicable to the period under examination; the current placement of the desert towns and the Negev is not a useful guide to their position and status in the past.

### **Importance and relevance of administrative divisions**

Under Byzantine rule, Nessana belonged to Palaestina Tertia, whose capital was Petra; Palaestina Prima began just north, and Palaestina Secunda was further north and to the east, covering the Galilee. These provincial divisions were established in the fourth century. Though the provinces are often mentioned and used for delineating boundaries, both in primary and in secondary sources, any concept of the provincial boundaries as delineating neat and observable categories is damaged by *P.Ness.* 39, an account of village allotments dated paleographically to the mid-sixth century. The document's official character is clear from the seal and the careful docket, negating any possible suggestion that the irregularities found therein are a reflection of a careless private communication, and affirming that we have here a reflection of an official attitude. The papyrus consists of a register of accounts for Nessana and eight other settlements in the general area, mostly to the north and east of Nessana (the only exception is Oboda, which

lies east and slightly south of Nessana). Since some of the figures in the columns are consistent fractions of the first column of figures (respectively 1.855% and 6%), Kraemer's suggestion that this document represents a register of allotments and tax liabilities seems straightforward and probable. Two irregularities make this register of interest to us here: firstly, of the nine settlements mentioned, three – Birsamis, Chermoula and Sobila – are located in Palaestina Prima, and not Palaestina Tertia like Nessana. Second, judging by numbers and taxes assessed, Nessana looms larger than Elusa or Oboda, and indeed is surpassed only by Chermoula and Birsamis – a fact which does not accord at all with our notions of the relative importance of the towns. Elusa boasts a cathedral and under the Byzantine Empire served as the administrative center for the region, as testified by the address in several of the papyri: “[written] in the village of Nessana in the district of the city of Elusa,” ἐν κώμῃ Νεσσάνοις ὀρίου πόλεως Ἐλούσης (*P.Ness.* 16, 17, 18 and many others). We would not, therefore, have expected it to be surpassed in wealth and economic importance by one of its satellites towns. Clearly, the realities of these towns and their relative importance and wealth could not be summed up in terms of respective official roles; and equally clearly, the administrative borders did not mean as much as we might think, since this tax-assessment cuts across such divisions quite unselfconsciously.

A similar flouting of the provincial boundaries is found in other papyri, ordering supplies, animals and men to be sent from Nessana to Caesarea, the capital of Palaestina Prima, and to Egypt. *P.Ness.* 37 from the latter half of the sixth century records such a requisition of camels and drivers, again entirely unselfconsciously; there is nothing in the

document to imply that this was an unusual procedure, or that the writers of recipients saw anything worth noting in this crossing of boundaries.

The same disregard for the official boundaries, even in imperial communiqués where we would expect them to be observed, is found in the four fragments of the Be'er-Sheva inscription, a tax edict from the sixth century. Like *P.Ness.* 39 mentioned above, the inscriptions deal with specific portions of the entire area of Palestine, giving more importance to organic ties which are barely discernible to us now than to the administrative borders. Thus in Inscription Two, all the towns come from the Wadi Arabah region; whereas Inscriptions Three and Four include towns in Palaestina Prima, Palaestina Secunda and Palaestina Tertia.<sup>3</sup> The Babatha archive a few centuries earlier shows us that borders had “very little inhibiting effects on movement.”<sup>4</sup> There, we see residents who disregard the official boundaries in ordering lives, property holdings and litigation, and display much more concern for the internal coherence of a community across provincial lines. Here, on the other hand, we see that the boundaries hold little meaning even within the imperial administration, and that it is the administration itself which not so much as flouts but rather ignores the provincial borders.

This dissonance between the theory of administration and its practice is not necessarily the case throughout the Byzantine empire; in fact, other regions not far from Nessana show a much greater emphasis on the province, and in some cases provincial identity begins to rival the local allegiance to a particular city. This is the case in late

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<sup>3</sup> Mayerson, "The Beersheva Edict", p.141.

<sup>4</sup> Cotton, "Cancelled Marriage Contract", p. 65.

ancient Berytus, where several inscriptions note imperial provincial offices rather than local civic accomplishments, and where the province of Phoenicia is given greater prominence than the city of Berytus.<sup>5</sup> There is no hint of this type of attitude throughout the Negev – a distinction all the more astonishing given that we would have expected Berytus, with its strong sense of local history and pride, to be less amenable to the pull of provincial gravity than the small towns of the Negev. In fact, the contrary is true; the Negev towns maintained much more their own sense of the ties and connections and paid surprisingly little attention to the formal Byzantine partition of provinces. This may be connected to the general independence of these towns, and the relatively modest weight of the central administration, which was noted above.<sup>6</sup>

The lack of attention paid to the imperial administrative divisions was not due to any overshadowing administrative divisions by the Church; in fact, the administrative church divisions appear to have played as little a part as those of the secular authorities. The accounts found at Nessana often record donations from without the town, not only from strangers passing through but also from what appear to be Nessana's near neighbors, coming from well-established communities with their own significant churches such as Sobata and Elusa, whom we otherwise might have expected to maintain a certain 'brand loyalty' (see for instance *P.Ness.* 79). Kraemer suggests that these donors from outside the parish must have had "special reasons for contributing to the church at

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<sup>5</sup> Hall, "Latinitas", p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter Two. Isaac also comments on the laxity of provincial boundaries exhibited in the Nessana papyri, though he focuses on this as a symptom and indication of army centralization: Isaac, "Late Roman Army", p. 147.

Nessana.”<sup>7</sup> Yet the supporting evidence and the apparent ubiquity of the practice suggests rather that the distinctions between one parish and another or even between one bishopric and another meant very little to the residents of these parishes and bishoprics; in fact, there is not a single shred of evidence that these divisions had any bearing on local life, while there is significant evidence to the contrary.

With the Muslim conquest, some changes in administration and in geographical divisions were instituted. Instead of the theme and provinces system, the Muslim empire was divided into *ajnād* (sing. *jund*), and Nessana now fell within the jurisdiction of *jund Filastīn*, whose capital was Gaza.<sup>8</sup> Over time, this new administrative system assumed a greater importance; with the greater centralization apparent under the Muslim empire, the attention paid to the *ajnād* also increases. The papyri from the late seventh century exhibit a greater attention paid to the role of the administrative centers of Elusa and above it Gaza, and all the *entagia* and several other documents take care to specify Nessana’s position as part of the Elusa district and the Gaza province. Interestingly enough, the term used is not *jund* but *kurra*, a transliteration of the Greek *χώρα*; this may well indicate that we have here a glimpse into a transitional period, when the administrative habits are in the process of changing incrementally, but the old Byzantine expressions have not yet been entirely replaced by new Arabic terms.

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<sup>7</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 228.

<sup>8</sup> For the connection between the *ajnād* system and the Roman provincial and *themata* system, and for the differences between them, see Haldon, "Seventh-Century Continuities: the Ajnād and the "Thematic Myth" ".

### **Specific Cases: Elusa and other Negev towns**

Since imperial administrative categories appear to have counted for little in daily life as manifested in the documents, this section will examine any links with specific prominent cities and localities in the wider region, trying to discern whether there are any special connections between Nessana and these centers.

The relative ease of movement along the roads of the Negev highlands, where inclement weather would only rarely render the routes impassable, must have contributed to the relative mobility of the residents.<sup>9</sup> *P.Ness.* 45, evidencing dealings between Nessana and Oindos village, was mentioned above; and *P.Ness.* 25 records a contract between two soldiers who moved from Nessana to Rhinocorura in Egypt, just a few kilometers away.<sup>10</sup> There are only two examples; in general, the Nessana papyri exhibit evidence both of permanent moves, legal changes of residence, and of an intricate network of short-range and short-term movements between the villages, motivated primarily by business considerations.

In terms of building habits, Nessana does not show any significant differences from its surrounding communities; both the private and the public architecture are entirely of a piece with other Negev towns and cities. The streets were not laid out on a

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<sup>9</sup> The two greatest dangers to a traveler would have been then, as now, sudden and violent sandstorms or floods. Both of these occurrences are relatively rare, and they do not render the roads impassable during particular seasons or months.

<sup>10</sup> Kraemer assumes that the soldiers moved to Rhinocorura of their own accord, as the unit was stationed at Nessana. Verreth suggests that the unit may have itself been stationed near Rhinocorura and that the soldiers were originally natives of Nessana, but that seems both underdetermined by the evidence and unnecessary. Verreth, *The Northern Sinai from the 7th Century BC till the 7th Century AD: A Guide to the Sources*, pp. 299-300.

grid, nor do they appear to have been part of any deliberate urban planning process, but included many turns and blind alleys, as found also in Sobata, Mopsis and Elusa. Most residences are comparatively large and well-built, centered around a courtyard with a cistern and sometimes a tower, typical of other Negev towns as well as the more rural courtyard farmhouses found in the hinterland;<sup>11</sup> most outer walls are blank and present no windows to the street. When decoration is found – that is, in the churches, public and semi-public buildings, and on gravestones – it is dominated by vegetation, especially palm trees, with a few animal images. Nessana appears to have been functionally divided based on its topography, in a similar way to Oboda; the acropolis is composed almost exclusively of primarily public buildings, whereas the slope and the lower town were residential.<sup>12</sup> The building materials are also no different from the norm in other settlements, relying mostly on the local limestone, with imported marble slabs making an appearance in the churches.

The evidence of ties to other communities shows that Nessana was far from being ‘off the beaten track’, as Kraemer put it,<sup>13</sup> and as it might appear to be today. The archaeological remains here are misleading. Oboda’s remains appear much more impressive today, and yet the church there is minimal, not to say austere, when compared to the churches at Nessana or Sobata; a natural enough austerity, when we consider that Oboda was not on any pilgrim route. In contrast, Nessana, though a less impressive

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<sup>11</sup> Hirschfeld, "Habitat", pp. 268-270.

<sup>12</sup> Shershevski, *Byzantine Urban Settlements in the Negev Desert*, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 23.

archaeological site today – due partly to its modern occupation first by the Turkish police and army and then the IDF – lies on the road to Sinai for southern-bound pilgrimages and on the road to Jerusalem and other Holy Land sites via Elusa for northern-bound pilgrimages, and we have ample evidence that it hosted groups of pilgrims on a regular basis; this central location is recorded also in the more elaborate churches of Nessana.

The centrality of Nessana as a trading and pilgrimage hub is confirmed also by the excavated caravanserai, consisting of six large rooms which may have had a capacity of nearly a hundred guests.<sup>14</sup> It is also clear from a papyrus which mentions a khan with a capacity of 96 beds (*P.Ness.* 31). The function of Nessana as a meeting point for various religiously-motivated trips is confirmed by the wide geographical distribution of offerings to the church of St. Sergius recorded in *P.Ness.* 79. In this rather long account, no more than half of the sixty entries, by the most generous estimate, come from residents local to Nessana; the rest come from known and unknown towns in the region, including large towns like Sobata and Elusa where we may have expected the local churches (and, in Elusa's case, the local cathedral) to have kept the residents' donations.

During the fifth and sixth centuries, Elusa was the largest town in the Negev, both in size (about 400 dunams or 40 hectares, almost 4 times the size of Nessana) and in population;<sup>15</sup> in some ways, it was also the most important town in the region. It was the only one which could boast the status of a polis (as compared to Nessana's status of

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<sup>14</sup> Musil's 1902 sketch indicates yet another khan, but that has not (yet?) been excavated. Shershevski, *Byzantine Urban Settlements in the Negev Desert*, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> Rubin, *Negev as a Settled Land (Hebrew)*, p. 25.

κώμη or village), a status which was bolstered by the presence of a theater and a resident bishop. The city's administrative position in regard to Nessana is evidenced by the presence of a court there and the regional land registration office (*P.Ness.* 24 and 25). The important maps of the region, the Peutinger map and the Madaba map, also testify to the prominence of Elusa. The former, dated to the fourth century, shows Elusa as the first station south of Jerusalem. The Madaba map, dated to the mid-sixth century, represents Elusa by a middle-sized symbol, including four towers and at least two red-roofed churches.

### **Petra**

The importance of Elusa in the world of the Nessana papyri stands in stark contrast to the dearth of any mentions of Petra, nominally the province capital since the foundation of the Palaestina Tertia as a province in the fourth century; it is also mentioned as an administrative and political centre already in the Babatha papyri (*P.Yadin* 16.13-14 and *P.Yadin* 37.2-3). Petra is unusual in having been granted *metropolis* status under Hadrian (117-138) – a status of which its residents were still proud some 400 years later, as proven by its mention in the Petra papyri (*P.Petra* 1). In fact, the Petra papyri exhibit the residents' palpable pride in the city, which is garnished with extravagant adjectives, among them Mother of the Colonies (*P.Petra* 1.4). It has been suggested that the earthquake of 363 and the changing trade routes led to a decline in the importance of the city, and perhaps to its eventual replacement by Elusa as the capital of the province. This theory has been based mostly on archaeological evidence,

and does not entirely jibe with the literary and documentary evidence. In the first place, the handbooks of Hierocles and Georgius Cyprius, dated to about AD 535 and the last quarter of the sixth century, respectively, imply that the status of provincial capital was retained at least until the end of the sixth century.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the theory has been shaken if not entirely discredited by the discovery of the carbonized Petra papyri. Of these, 16 have been published to date.<sup>17</sup> In spite of their problematic and fragmentary state, it is clear that they do not support the hypothesis of a substantial decline of Petra, evident by the fourth century; the tax collection and other city mechanism remained active throughout the sixth century, and the documents portray a vibrant and wealthy land-owning class.

Given the presumed importance of Petra and its evident wealth and size, it is all the more notable that the Nessana papyri do not contain a single mention of the city (nor indeed, is Nessana mentioned in the Petra papyri – but given the relative size of the two settlements this is much less surprising). This might appear to us all the more surprising given that the two towns appear to share a legal and administrative culture, at the least. Both Petra and Nessana yielded several exceptionally long documents, such as *P.Ness* 31 and 37, clocking in at slightly over 120 centimeters.<sup>18</sup> These lengthy documents would have been noteworthy in any case, but especially so given the time and the place; the proportion of long documents is altogether greater than expected in limited archives. In

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<sup>16</sup> Fiema, "Byzantine Petra - a Reassessment", p. 112-113.

<sup>17</sup> Another volume was published in November 2007, and was – unfortunately – not available to me at the time of this writing. See Introduction, note 45.

<sup>18</sup> *P.Ness*. 43 is probably also exceptionally lengthy, but in very bad condition.

addition, both Petra and Nessana include the more active version of the notary's completion formula, compared to the passive formulation found in Egypt.<sup>19</sup> On the surface at least, Petra and Nessana seem to have had more in common with each other, at least when it comes to legal conventions, than with Egypt. And yet, there is no denying the fact that Petra simply does not figure in the Nessana archives. Whether for traditional or practical trade reasons, Nessana was oriented in its political and economic life towards the coast, i.e. Gaza and the Mediterranean, and not towards Transjordan. Its administrative needs were served by Elusa, whether or not that was officially the provincial capital. There have also been suggestions that after Petra's decline in the fourth century the seat of the province capital was moved to Elusa; this is a possible, but by no means necessary, interpretation.<sup>20</sup> What is abundantly clear is that whatever the role of Transjordan in Palestine during the early years of the Byzantine administration – and both the evidence of the earlier Babatha archive and the very arrangement of the provincial boundaries indicate that at one time it was integral – by the time we encounter Nessana through the papyri, the magnetic pull of the Negev centers counters any draw felt from across the river. Petra, the symbol of the Nabataean kingdom and a metropolis, plays no role that we can see – economic, political or administrative – in the lives of the Nessianites. Tempting as it might be to speak of the 'desert towns' and 'Nabataean

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<sup>19</sup> The rare exceptions being limited to Alexandrian contexts. The last observations regarding the conventions of the Nessana and Petra papyri are due to Uri Yifrach in private communications; they were reinforced at a lecture given by Mattias Buchholz on March 13<sup>th</sup> 2007 in Jerusalem at the conference "From Sumer to the Genizah—Diplomatics and Legal Documents in the Ancient World."

<sup>20</sup> For the suggestion, see Rubin, *Negev as a Settled Land (Hebrew)*, p. 27. See above for the problems in this hypothesis.

gateway cities’, lumping together Petra and the Negev towns, it appears that by the sixth century at least the inhabitants of these towns did not think of themselves as forming a coherent unit.

## **Gaza**

One possible tool when looking at the circles of local influence is an examination of the conditions under which different dating systems are used, since six different systems are found in the papyri: the eras of Gaza, Bostra, Roman regnal, Roman consular, Roman indictions, and the Hijra all appear, sometimes in conjunction with one another. As a rule, all documents originating in Nessana before the Muslim conquest use the era of Provincia Arabia, also known as ‘the era of the city (= Bostra)’, whose starting date is March 22, AD 106. This is the era used in all the dated inscriptions and in most of the papyri. The few cases where the papyri use a different dating system are associated with an origin or a connection outside Nessana.

This is probably the case in *P.Ness.* 119 and *P.Ness.* 178, which use the Egyptian calendar, though the fragmentary nature of the documents precludes us from drawing any conclusions beyond the strong possibility that the writers originated in Egypt or intended the document to be read in Egypt. *P.Ness.* 45, dating from ‘the year 662’, with no era specified, provides us with a little more information. As Kraemer has shown, the Arabia Provincia era – which would make this AD 767/768 – is not likely for internal reasons; whereas the Gaza era, (beginning in 61 BC), which would accord with AD 602, is more probable. This may mean that the document was not written in Nessana but in Oindos

village, the origin of one of the parties to the document.<sup>21</sup> Yet since another of the parties to the agreement was a Nessanite, and since the document – a receipt of rental charges – was meant for his use and taken back to Nessana with him, we may conclude that the Gaza era was, at the least, comprehensible and usable and would have excited no special comment in Nessana. This is bolstered by the observation that the era is not specified, indicating matter-of-fact acceptance, though a different era may have been used on a regular basis. Indeed, the era of Gaza is prominent in epigraphic and documentary material throughout southern Palestine; it also appears in the papyri of Petra, which like those of Nessana use primarily the Bostran Arabian era.<sup>22</sup> This impression of an ease with the conventions of Gaza is reinforced further by the fact that the gold standard used in Nessana is the Gazan one, as apparent in *P.Ness.* 26 and 46.<sup>23</sup> Again, this is also the gold standard mentioned in the Petra documents; this standard should have been used in all documents written in Gaza and its neighborhood, and its use here confirms that Nessana, like Petra, was in some respects considered to belong to the orbit of Gaza.

*P.Ness.* 45 also serves as a salutary warning against assuming that all the dated documents use the Arabian era in the absence of any mentions of a specific era. If it had

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<sup>21</sup> Kraemer concludes without reservation that the document originated in Oindos and that Oindos (otherwise unknown to us) was in Palaestina Prima. As Di Segni notes, this conclusion is not warranted; there is a significant body of inscriptions from Palaestina Tertia utilizing the Gazan era. Di Segni, "The Territory of Gaza: notes of historical geography", p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> Frosen, Arjava and Lehtinen, *The Petra Papyri I*, p. 17

<sup>23</sup> The Gaza gold measurement is probably also used in *P.Ness.* 21, but as that document is restored only on the basis of *P.Ness.* 26, it cannot be safely used here. Note also that all three of the documents mentioned here date from before the conquest, and therefore before Gaza became an administrative center for the Umayyads; at the time, it had no privileged status, besides being a close-by metropolis.

not been for the fact that the life of one of the parties to the contract, Patrick son of Sergius, provided us with termini, we would not have been able to rule out the Arabian date. It may be that this is also the case in other documents which do not specify a particular era. Evidently, the use of a particular era did not accord entirely with municipal or administrative borders, and is not a clear-cut indication of the origin of a document.

After the Muslim conquest, the *entagia* – as would be expected – refer to the Hijric era and to Arabic months, both in the Arabic and in the Greek portions of the *entagia*. In addition, the Greek includes the Roman calendar month and the indiction cycle year, placing these markers before the new Arabic dating system and thereby implying that the old Roman system would have been more immediate and familiar to the readers. The Greek scribes are careful to specify that the Hijric era used is κατὰ Ἄραβας, whereas the Arabic assumes so without needing to make explicit references. The indiction cycle also continues to be used in other official post-conquest documents, such as the two orders from the governor for a guide in the early 680's (*P.Ness.* 72 and 73), and in private accounts (*P.Ness.* 83, 684/685?). In parallel, official receipts also continue to use the Gaza calendar (*P.Ness.* 55 and 59, dated to the early 680's); these documents may have been written in Gaza itself, though as noted above, this is not a foregone or a necessary conclusion.

Di Segni raises the question whether the extended use of the Gazan chronological system in the fifth- to seventh-century Negev derived from the cultural, administrative or economic influence of Gaza. All of these possibilities remain open and likely; Gaza was the nearest metropolis, closer even than Petra to Nessana, and with its law school and

vibrant urban life would surely have acted as a cultural magnet. As an administrative center, Gaza came into its own under the Muslims, when it was the capital of *jund Filastīn*, as attested in the first instance by the Nessana *entagia* (*P.Ness.* 60-67) which originate there. This shift in the centers is also indicated in *P.Ness.* 55 and 59, where taxes (both the poll-tax, ἐπικεφάλιον (= *kharaj*), and the land-tax, δημοσιον (= *jizya*)) are recorded by officials from Gaza. Kraemer also assumes that the affairs of George the *dioiketes* of Nessana, recorded in *P.Ness.* 68, 70, and 74, are directed from a superior in Gaza, and that it is to the *jund* capital that his correspondence is addressed. In fact there is no evidence for this, likely as it may have been. Elusa still continues to appear as an administrative center in the papyri well into the seventh century, mentioned even in the *entagia* which are clearly being organized in Gaza, and in other papyri (*P.Ness.* 71).

As for its economic prominence in the lives of the Negev residents, the activity of merchants along the Gaza-Sinai road is well documented in the period under discussion: this was one of the three major roads crossing the provinces of Palestine and Arabia, and led from Gaza to Elusa, Ruheibeh, Nessana and the Sinai, serving for both pilgrimage and trade with Egypt.<sup>24</sup> As the nearest big port, Gaza would have served as the shipping point for any cash crops raised in the hinterland, and as the distribution point for necessities from outside the immediate vicinity of Nessana – such as the preserved fish, which were an important source in the diet of the inhabitants. These fish appear in the papyri (*P.Ness.* 47, an exchange of letters centering around the exact quantity of fish delivered) and their bones were found in great quantities during excavations, both in the

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<sup>24</sup> Shershevski, *Byzantine Urban Settlements in the Negev Desert*, p. 4.

expedition directed by Colt and in those directed by Urman and Shershevsky.<sup>25</sup> Gaza was clearly an important center for the Negev towns, even before its status changed with the Umayyad re-distribution of administrative power; and the frequent occurrence of the Gazan calendar throughout the sixth century serves only to reinforce this point.

### **Al-Sham: Syria and Lebanon**

The influence of Syria is notable in religious practices and habits in Nessana. This is evident first in the devotion to St. Sergius and by the range of religious literature found there. The church at the high point of the fort was named after St. Sergius,<sup>26</sup> and a festival was also dedicated to him. A little less prominent if also highly visible is St. Stephen, and the religious building identified by the Colt expedition as a martyrium appears to have had a special connection to both the saints, Stephen and Sergius, judging by the fact that all the decipherable inscriptions refer to the former and most to the latter as well.<sup>27</sup> In other inscriptions found throughout the site, appeals are frequently made either to both saints ("God of Saints Stephen and Sergius", in inscriptions 32, 33, 43, 89 and 109) or St. Sergius by himself ("God of Saint Sergius", inscription 69). There is no trace of another saint cult.

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<sup>25</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 141; also Klenck, "A Preliminary Report on the Animal Fauna at Nessana".

<sup>26</sup> Technically the church was also named after Saint Bacchus, Sergius' companion in his travels; but he is almost never mentioned. This accords with the gradual decrease in his importance after the fifth century, as documented in Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran*.

<sup>27</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 15.

The cult of St. Sergius has strong roots in Syrian Rusafa, also known as Sergiopolis, more than a week's travel north of Nessana.<sup>28</sup> Similar to Nessana in its combination of pastoralists, merchants, farmers and soldiers, Rusafa was the center of a strong and vibrant devotion to St. Sergius, which developed from the fourth century and through the seventh century; this local cult spread out from Rusafa, east into Iran and south towards Arabia. The saint was particularly popular among people bearing Arab names and often identified by others as 'Saracens'<sup>29</sup> – a profile which fits Nessana very well. One of the most important characteristics of St. Sergius, and possibly one of the sources of his appeal in communities with a military core, is his image as a soldier. The saint is often represented on horseback with military attire, and found in connection with cavalry units, whether equine or *camelarii*.<sup>30</sup> This of course had an obvious appeal for the unit stationed at Nessana, which was mounted (*P.Ness.* 35, for instance). Moreover, the importance of military identity appears to have been both prominent and long-lived in Nessana, perhaps lasting until well after the formal dissolution of the military unit. Soldiers always identify themselves as such or as belonging to the Nessana camp, even in documents with a purely civilian character; and even in one document – *P.Ness.* 29 – dating from 590, which may be as much as a decade after the unit was disbanded. The connection to the military seems to have been a source of personal dignity and pride for

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<sup>28</sup> The cult of St. Sergius in Rusafa has been the subject of an exhaustive and thorough book, on which the followings section relies heavily: Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117-119.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

its members, and as such a particularly military saint, and a mounted one at that, would have had a special appeal.

Another saint-cult with local implications and resonances is that of St. George, who is specifically connected to Lydda (Diospolis or present day Lod in Palaestina Prima), where he is supposed to have been buried. The legend appears in various languages from the end of the fourth century, and judging by the popularity of the non-Greek versions (among them Coptic, Syriac, Arabic, Armenian and Ethiopic) was especially popular in the Eastern half of the Empire. The original story contains several episodes which occasioned swift and severe church disapproval already in the fifth century, and the extant Greek texts are Bowdlerized, excising such sections as the violent execution of the queen, the graphic and lengthy portrayal of George's tortures and his repeated and undaunted resurrections from various gruesome deaths.<sup>31</sup> Yet the Eastern languages all preserved the original, popular form of the story, including all the explicit details. It is therefore of particular interest that the version found at Nessana follows the non-Greek version of the legend.

The fragment found at Nessana consists of four fragments and five complete leaves from a Greek codex. Paleographically it is clear that the text is rather late – certainly post-conquest, and quite possibly dating to the eighth century.<sup>32</sup> At the time, the Greek variants were already in existence, as proven by a fifth-century palimpsest (*Cod.*

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<sup>31</sup> Indeed, already in 494 Pope Gelasius singled out the legend of St. George as the work of heretics: *sicut Georgi aliorumque huiusmodi passiones, quae ab hereticis perhibentur compositae*. *AA. SS. Aprilis*, vol. III., p. 101.

<sup>32</sup> Casson and Hettich, *Literary Papyri*, p. 123.

*Vindob. lat. 954*). What is more, the correcting hand on the Nessana fragment proves that variant version of the Greek text were in circulation and available at this time and place.<sup>33</sup>

And yet, there is no question that the Nessana papyrus follows the old, local, unexcised version of the legend, the same version which is found in Coptic, Arabic and Syriac manuscripts; it contains the problematic episode of the poor widow, and is missing several intrusions which are found in the later Greek texts.

In addition to these signs of Syrian religious influence at Nessana, the papyri also contain the fragment of a Syriac religious poem written in Syriac and employing the heptasyllabic meter made famous by Ephrem the Syrian.<sup>34</sup> The presence of Syriac so far south is a decided anomaly; most of the Palestinian province, as noted in the previous chapter, utilized the Christian Palestinian Aramaic dialect, and certainly the Syriac alphabet was not in wide currency among Palestinians. Yet as this fragment shows, at least one person in Nessana must have been fluent in Syriac.

The similarity between the religious literature found at Nessana and the Syriac religious vocabulary is further enhanced by the presence of the letter of Abgar among the literary papyri and the Syriac influence upon the Twelve Chapters of Faith as found at Nessana. The legend of Abgar of Edessa attributes the king's miraculous healing and subsequent conversion to a letter sent by Jesus and a subsequent visit of the disciple Addai.<sup>35</sup> The legend may well have arisen in the third or even second century, and

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134, notes on lines 115-116, and p. 141, notes on lines 240-245.

<sup>34</sup> Kraemer, *Non-Literary Papyri*, p. 9.

versions of the correspondence between Abgar and Christ have survived in Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, Coptic, Persian, Latin and Greek.<sup>36</sup> The Greek text found in Nessana is interesting in the first instance for its preservation of a legend which had local appeal in Edessa and greater Syria. It is also noteworthy in that it is clearly related to the version found in an Edessan inscription and in the *Epistula Abgari*, an eleventh-century manuscript which preserves a local Syrian version.<sup>37</sup>

The Twelve Chapters (or Twelve Propositions) of Faith are traditionally (and probably erroneously) attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus; their full title being κεφάλαια περὶ πίστεως ἐν οἷς καὶ ἀναθεματισμὸς κεῖται καὶ ἐρμηνεία ἐκάστῳ ὑποτέτακται.<sup>38</sup> Both a Syriac and Greek version of the Twelve Chapters were in existence and in reasonably wide circulation by the sixth century; the differences between the two center on the numbering and order of the propositions, which are reversed in the two languages. As Casson and Hettich are at pains to show, the Nessana papyrus, though fragmentary, clearly follows the Syriac order of propositions (in spite of some irregularity in the explications, which are influenced by the Greek order).<sup>39</sup>

One might object that the Syriac influence evidenced in Nessana's religious archive cannot be used as evidence of a more general nature for the currents circulating in

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<sup>35</sup> For an outline of the legend and its development, see Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City*, p. 62 ff.

<sup>36</sup> The earliest mention is in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, completed in 325.

<sup>37</sup> Casson and Hettich, *Literary Papyri*, p. 144.

<sup>38</sup> Migne, X.1127-35. Syriac version published with a Latin translation in J.B. Pitra, *Analecta Sacra* (Paris 1883) 95-100 (Syriac text) and 357-60 (Latin translation).

<sup>39</sup> Casson and Hettich, *Literary Papyri*, p. 154.

the region; that it may be simply a coincidence of preservation, and that the lack of other comparable libraries and the limited nature of the evidence prohibits us from using it to draw any wider conclusions as to the influence of Syriac religious currents in the Negev. I would suggest that it is precisely because of the limited scope of the library, and its presence in a relatively small community, that these pieces of evidence are particularly telling, and that, far from being discounted as statistically insignificant, they should be carefully examined. In his thorough investigation of nineteenth-century circulating libraries, where there are no limitations on preservations such as the ones we are faced with here, Franco Moretti has shown conclusively that “the smaller a collection is, the more canonical it is.”<sup>40</sup> The more limited a collection, the safer the choices found there, even at an age where literacy and books were more abundant than in sixth-century Palestine. It is therefore precisely the smaller collections, in the more provincial (not to say peripheral) libraries, that give us greater scope for extrapolating the orthodox reading habits of the region. All this allows us to assert fairly safely that Syriac religious and literary influence is found in Nessana, and that at least on the level of religious ideas and traditions, we see here a strong local tradition, influenced by the important theological schools to the north and somewhat independent of the more ‘Greek’, more ‘Western’ canons and strictures.

The Syrian influence is not confined to religious trends; there is also evidence for migration of people and not just ideas or literature. Inscription 94 tells us that the family of John the deacon was originally from Emesa in Syria, and that it was his uncle who

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<sup>40</sup> Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900*, p. 146.

moved to Palaestina Tertia, presumably in the mid-fifth century: “For the salvation of the benefactors Sergius, ex-assessor and monk, and Pallus his sister, and John the deacon, her son, *curialis* of the metropolitan city of Emesa. In the year 496, in the fifth indiction, on the twentieth of the month of Gorpiaeus”. This inscription, important as it is in attesting the movement of influential citizens, is, however, a rarity; much more frequent are the mentions of short-range movements and ties, within a 50-60 mile radius. Evidently Nessana did not suffer from a lack of external contacts.

Material remains from Nessana also make it clear that there were active trade links between the Negev and the northern Mediterranean coast. The Ben Gurion expeditions in the 1990’s found abundant remains of furniture made from Lebanese cedar, both in the Central Church in the lower city, which we would expect to be outfitted with the best available, and in a private residence.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of building habits, Nessana appears to have followed a different tradition from that exhibited in Syrian architecture and town planning. The general character of the cities and the houses has been described above, and while it is entirely comparable to other Negev towns, the meandering nature of the streets is very different from that found further north. Building inscriptions, which are very common in Syria, are found in only one example at Nessana (Inscription 72). The streets are laid out with little forethought, and certainly do not exhibit much evidence of urban planning; this in contrast to the big

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<sup>41</sup> Urman, "Nessana Excavations 1987-1995", pp. 79 and 35, respectively. The private residence is designated by Urman as a schoolhouse, based on the findings of pottery shards with writing exercises and “two large conch shells ... which might have been used as inkwells.” The designation of the house as a school seems unnecessarily restrictive, given the limited nature of the evidence.

cities of Syria, such as Emesa, Bostra and Antioch, where up until the sixth century (and in some cases beyond that) we find urban planning sticking closely to a grid.

## **Egypt<sup>42</sup>**

The importance of the Egyptian market for the economy of Nessana, and quite probably also the importance of the Egyptian trading community, is manifested clearly in *P.Ness* 90 and 91, recording the sales of dates in the area. In particular in *P.Ness*. 90 the high percentage of indubitably Egyptian names (which are not found outside of Egypt) indicates that most of the buyers of dates recorded here lived in Egypt. This evidence of a vibrant trade is not surprising given the location of Nessana on the trade road from Egypt towards central Palestine. There is also a well-travelled pilgrim route – heading presumably from the coast although maybe also from the east towards the St. Catherine monastery on Mt. Sinai – attested circa 684 in *P.Ness*. 71 and 72, where the governor requires a guide to lead a pilgrim from Nessana to the mountain. The use of these routes also for purely economic purposes is attested by *P.Ness*. 89 and *P.Ness*. 90. The former, an account of a trading venture, exhibits a nice mixture of secular and religious occupations: the company deals in fish, almonds and wool, but does not neglect to stop off at the “Holy Mountain” on their way, participate in prayers and offer the monastery of Saint Catherine a donation.

We might add to this the testimony of papyri fragments which use the Egyptian

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<sup>42</sup> One should note, of course, that the case of Egypt is not entirely comparable with Syria, given the abundance of comparable documentary material in the former and lack of papyri in the latter.

calendar – another indication of the presence of people accustomed to living in Egypt. The fragmentary *P.Ness.* 119 and *P.Ness.* 178 refer to the Egyptian calendar, which was not in use in Palaestina, as does *P. Petra* 119. In addition, inscriptions 30 and 38 include names which were very common in Egypt and are not found elsewhere, and inscription 30 also which uses the Egyptian month of Choiak. On at least two occasions, then, pilgrims on their way from Egypt (to Jerusalem, presumably), not only passed through Nessana but also thought it worthwhile to record their stop there in lapidary form. That the traffic was not only Egyptian in origin but two-way is shown by *P.Ness.* 15 and 30, where former natives of Nessana are mentioned as having moved, apparently permanently, to Rhinocorura and Alexandria.

But the link between the Egyptian evidence and that of Nessana does not end here. In the first place, the documents in the two provinces are extremely similar technically: the hands appearing in Nessana papyri and ostraca are remarkably similar to those found in Egypt. In fact, the fragments of the gospel of St. John found in Nessana are so similar paleographically to the Vienna fragment of the same gospel, which reportedly comes from the Fayyum, that there have been attempts to piece them together – attempts which failed since the two fragments do not fit each other's lacunae, but left some scholars wondering whether they might come from the same scriptorium.<sup>43</sup> This is maybe not a necessary conclusion. The gospel fragment is far from being the only document to exhibit such a remarkable affinity with Egyptian documents; Youtie's assessment of the Sbeitah ostraca is "there is nothing in letter formation or in style to

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<sup>43</sup> Casson and Hettich, *Literary Papyri*, p. 81.

mark them as written outside the Nile valley.”<sup>44</sup> The stylistic resemblances are also notable: there are few formal phrasings which are not paralleled in Egypt. The similarity in administrative conventions continues past Byzantine rule into the Umayyad period, and is particularly noticeable in the *entagia* (AD 674-689). The form of the *entagia* is both very distinctive, and easily distinguished from the conventions of a private or an official letter, and repeated in the Nessana documents in exactly the same form as in the *entagia* found in Aphrodito (for instance *P.Lond.* IV 1408). The similarities extend beyond the phrasing to the external appearance and arrangement of the texts. In all these instances, the Arabic text appears before the Greek, the texts are similar but not identical, and the Greek is positioned directly below the Arabic (rather than side-by-side or on a separate roll).

Of course, there remains the question whether all these points of contact between Egypt and Palestine are simply a function of the spread of our evidence; in other words, were the Nessana documents particularly close to those produced in Egypt, or is it simply that we see these similarities because of the vagaries of survival, and in fact the apparent similarities are an indication of a general pattern imposed throughout the Byzantine and then the Umayyad empire, which we would see had any papyri survived elsewhere? With all due caution, I would argue that the evidence seems rather to point to the former option – that the ties between Egypt and Palestine were particularly strong, and are manifested in the parallels between the papyri. The evidence of frequent and varied connections between Egypt and Nessana have been mentioned several times; they are motivated by

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<sup>44</sup> Youtie, "Ostraca from Sbeitah", p. 453.

the economics, religion and proximity.

The importance of all these points of contact between Nessana and Egypt lies not just in the light they can shed on local networks operating in and around Nessana. While the previously prevalent concept of *die Sonderstellung Ägyptens* is no longer as widespread as it was,<sup>45</sup> the dearth of documentary papyri outside Egypt has allowed Egypt to be regarded as far too much of an exception. The publication of the Babatha archive has done much to disabuse the scholarly community of this notion, given the striking similarity between the Greek documents there and contemporary Egyptian documents and the resemblances evidenced in that archive between the diplomatics in the province of Arabia and in Egypt.<sup>46</sup> It appears that several centuries later, the same still holds; archives from Nessana would be at home in similar Egyptian villages and are entirely comparable.

While not wishing in the least to discount the influence and effect of Egypt upon its neighbor to the north, it is also important to remember that all these similarities and meeting points aside, socially and economically Nessana was far more similar to the Lebanese highlands than to Egypt. In contrast to reliance on irrigation and the larger estates they fostered, Nessana's agriculture – like Lebanon's – is built on small, highly fragmented plots, irrigated by using run-off methods and relying on the reclamation of

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<sup>45</sup> See for instance Patlagean's dismissal of Egypt in her otherwise exhaustive survey of Byzantine society, and Cameron's acceptance of this dismissal in her review of the book: Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance : 4e-7e siècles*, and Cameron, "Late Antiquity - the total view".

<sup>46</sup> Cotton, "Cancelled Marriage Contract", pp. 64-65.

marginal land.<sup>47</sup> This fundamental difference in agriculture also led to fundamental differences in the social structure, some of which have already been explored in the first chapter. Egyptian villages of the time did not have any political institutions to speak of, and, more importantly, they did not function as political communities. Virtually all governance was oriented towards administrative centers, i.e. the metropoleis; there is no sense of a collective responsibility, autonomy or accountability, leading Bagnall to describe them as “rudderless and captainless vessels.”<sup>48</sup> The world of Nessana, as described in the previous chapters, is entirely different. Though we do not know of any formal, official institutions such as a village council or a βουλή, this village community appears to have been self-governed and quite autonomous. The papyri exhibit a sense of collective responsibility, which goes beyond an accountability for providing labor and taxes to the metropolis, and extends into the regions of family life and welfare. The similarities of language and customs should not blind us to the significant difference in administration and governance, which led to real differences in the distribution of power between Palaestina Tertia and its neighbor to the south. Until the reorganization and centralization undertaken by the later Umayyad administration, Nessana was much more independent and unified in its sense of community than its equivalents in Egypt.

## **Conclusion**

So far, we have concentrated on the external regional similarities and differences; are the documents comparable to those in other provinces in their use of conventions, do

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<sup>47</sup> See Marfoe, "Syrian Society", for agriculture during the relevant period in the Lebanese highlands.

<sup>48</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 137.

we see any evidence of local traditions, and what evidence do we have for travel between Nessana and other communities. This examination has been sufficient to confirm that the village was far from being a closed community; the papyri give proof of extensive and significant ties with other cities and regions, and in terms of religious literature and economics, Nessana is inextricably tied to its neighbors.

Yet all this tells us very little, if anything, about people's self-identifications, or how they defined themselves. When we look at the titles and descriptions people assign themselves in the Negev towns and villages, a slightly different picture emerges – one which is based on a much narrower sense of identity. *P.Ness.* 15, which has been mentioned as evidence for a change of residence, is also proof that a change of residence, long-term though it may be, did not change people's basic allegiances. In this document, a soldier who is currently living in Rhinocorura identifies himself as a native of Nessana, though this is entirely irrelevant to the legal matter in question (a change of title to a certain piece of property), and in spite of the fact that he left Nessana many years ago (*P.Ness.* 15.5). This sense of an identity which is not altered by a mere change of residence is repeated in *P.Ness.* 29, where once again a soldier currently living elsewhere (in this case, Elusa), clarifies that he is to be seen as a member of the Nessana community, and addresses another soldier as not only a member of the Nessana camp but also a native of the village:

[                   στρατιώτης τοῦ κάστρου Νεσσάνων ἐνταῦθα ταν[ῦ]ν  
                  παραγενόμενος Γεωργίω Ιανητος καθ(ωσιωμένω) στρατιώτη τοῦ  
αὐτοῦ κάστρου κακεῖθεν ὠρμωμέ(νω) (*P.Ness.* 29.3-4).

This emphasis on one's specific village, town or city as the most salient and most useful marker of man is also found in contemporary inscriptions from the immediate area. The use of local specifications is very common in registers of donations, where people from different communities are included; we see this in the Nessana papyri in 79, where almost half of the 60 donors for various religious institutions are given origins other than Nessana.<sup>49</sup> But whereas in these cases the combination of donors from varying locations provides a good reason for differentiating between the names by their origin, this is not the case in other inscriptions. In an inscription from Oboda, a builder identifies himself as "Wa'il from Petra";<sup>50</sup> similarly in Mampsis, a Byzantine era column drum records the contribution of a doctor from Gebalene.<sup>51</sup> Further north in Gadara, many inscriptions refer to people by their origin: "Christ help Siricius the Gazean", piously declares a typical inscription,<sup>52</sup> and several others refer to their subjects as "Caesareans".<sup>53</sup> In all these cases, the identification by origin is not required or necessary; the only reason to include it is as a way of self-identification.

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<sup>49</sup> One might add *P.Ness.* 78 to the list of accounts where donors are registered by origin, judging by line 5 – "from Theodosius of Bi'rain". Unfortunately, the document is too fragmentary to be of much use.

<sup>50</sup> Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev*, p. 27, inscription 13.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71, inscription 86.

<sup>52</sup> Di Segni, "The Greek Inscriptions of Hammat Gader", p. 209, inscription 26, (unpublished).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235, inscription 52 (= *SEG* 32, no. 1503); and Di Segni, "The Greek Inscriptions of Hammat Gader", p. 247, inscription 66 (unpublished).

The importance of regional identities in late antiquity has often been asserted, both in the West and in the East.<sup>54</sup> Usually the emphasis has been on the importance of the province of the wider regional loyalty, such as, in one example, the attitude that a man from western Asia Minor was a despised stranger in Pontus,<sup>55</sup> or the habits of Armenians. What we see in the Negev is a much more localized, much more finely defined identity, centered around the village community, and comparable to the identity associated with much larger urban centers. This, for instance, is the sense of identity and local pride exhibited in Petra or in Antioch in the sixth and seventh century, whose inhabitants did not think of themselves only as Christian or Roman but “first and foremost still Antiochene.”<sup>56</sup> A similarly strong sense of local, civic identity is found in Dioscorus’ poems in praise of Aphrodito.<sup>57</sup> A fine example of the immediate ramifications of this civic identity is found in Procopius’ account of the recruitment of a trader who happened to be both a ‘friend from childhood’ and a ‘fellow citizen’ of Caesarea (*Wars* 3.14). As Holum explains, although the two men met after each had been associated with other cities and differing livelihoods for several decades, the civic link between them not only persisted but was enough to guarantee a man’s loyalty and trustworthiness.<sup>58</sup> Through this incidence Procopius witnesses the robustness of the identification with one’s native city into the sixth century.

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<sup>54</sup> For the western Empire, see Amory, *People and Identity*.

<sup>55</sup> Mango, *Byzantium: the Empire of New Rome*, p. 25. See also Kazhdan and Constable, *People and Power*, p. 129, for the emergence of regional cultural particularity.

<sup>56</sup> Maas, "People and Identity in Roman Antioch", p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> MacCoull, *Dioscorus of Aphrodito: His Work and His World*, p. 59.

<sup>58</sup> Holum, "Identity and the Late Ancient City: the Case of Caesarea", p. 87.

The comparison of Nessana to Caesarea or Antioch may seem ludicrous to us – indeed, it is ludicrous if we compare the cities to the village. Nessana cannot be called a polis by any stretch of the term: it lacks a gymnasium, a fountain, a theater, or an official civic council – all the attributes Pausanias sees as necessary for a community to meet the definition of a polis (Pausanias 10.4.1), and all that we associate with an urban entity. Most importantly, Nessana is never defined in official or private documents as a polis, remaining steadfastly with the designation κώμη, village. But in terms of self-designations, there is much that the residents of the village and the urban centers cited above have in common. Though Nessana may seem to us barely worthy of being called a ‘one-horse town’, it did not appear that way to its residents, who proclaimed their origin with some pride, and based their sense of identity on their origin in much the same way as did the natives of Antioch or Berytus.

On the surface, the Nessana community has a lot in common with other neighboring communities, and even with communities outside the provincial borders; administrative and formal boundaries seem to have counted for little. This observation, however, remains on the level of etic differentiations – those indicia that are visible to us, such as customs and habits. In terms of self definitions – the emic, internal definitions – we do not see anything which allows us to speak of a wider local identity. When people do identify themselves in local terms, they refer to their city, town or village, not to the wider region, no matter how much that wider region might seem to us to be comparable.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, the importance of the narrow social circle of Nessana itself was explored; and having looked at various other formulations of

identity, it is to that identity that we return. It is worth stressing once again that this is not a function of any supposed isolation of the Nessana community; in fact, it is quite clear that far from being secluded, Nessana functioned as a crossroads for religious and administrative routes, and was in contact with larger metropoleis such as Caesarea and Gaza in addition to the closer Elusa. It may be, as has been suggested, that in terms of the practices and traditions, the entire area “formed a historically and culturally coherent landscape;”<sup>59</sup> but the fact remains that this is an external observation. There is no evidence that the residents of the region perceived it to be so, or that they saw themselves as part of such a cohesive and unified community. Ultimately, the only sense of identity which can be seen to be indisputably operative and important for the people themselves is the local one, in its most limited sense – the identity of the village community.

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<sup>59</sup> Millar, *The Roman Near East*, p. 517.

## Conclusion

This dissertation began as an inquiry into various modes of self-definition, in an attempt to distinguish which of these modes are useful and operative in sixth- and seventh- century Palaestina Tertia. The results have been mostly negative: the effort to look for a perception of identity according to categories recognizable to us – ethnicity, state, and language – have only exposed the problematics and even futility of such endeavors. The level of identification with the empires is minimal; ethnonyms appear on closer examination as a façade for conveying superiority; and the different languages employed in the documents are not used to convey a fixed group identity, but rather to assert particular facets of an identity which the writer is trying to emphasize in a given situation. The lack of any evidence of real ethnic divisions within Nessana and between Nessana and the communities with which it came in contact is particularly striking given the fact that in AD 529 – precisely when the ‘soldiers’ archive’ provides us with a window onto Nessana society – the Saracen uprising in Palaestina claimed 20,000 lives; and a few years later, Justinian’s *Novel* 103 reflects the continuing concern over the continuing ethnic conflict and the resulting upheavals. The importance of ethnicity in these cases, coupled with the clear and recognizably operative concept of ethnicity bound with language in writers such as Eusebius,<sup>1</sup> have combined with our modern sensibilities to create an assumption that the standard self-definition in Antiquity must have included these elements of ethnicity and language. In light of our study of Nessana, it is clear that

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argumentation in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*.

this assumption is both too crude in general and inappropriate when applied to the community examined here.

This lack of a specific identity as defined according to the Roman categories of *gens* and *natio* may go some way towards explaining the very gradual transformation of Syria and Palestine under Muslim rule – a process which can now be recognized as more in the nature of a ‘gradual evolution’ than a dramatic historical revolution.<sup>2</sup> This recognition is supported by the evidence from the Nessana papyri, which present a nearly unbroken and unchanging picture throughout the years and the change of regimes. The only instance in which we can speak of a significant change is in the matter of governmental attitude towards the imperial subject, and even here the change is subtle and gradual, occurring only towards the end of the Nessana evidence, with the beginning of Abassid rule. Even this change is instigated by the ruling powers, rather than by the residents of Nessana: as the Muslim administration settles into the reality of governance and develops its own methods, there is a greater emphasis on centralization and an increasingly close connection between the centers of administration and the village bureaucracy. Extrapolating from these conclusions, it seems that the political divisions, as expressed by the passage from the Byzantine empire to the early Caliphate and then the Umayyad empire, are not commensurate with the cultural history of the region.

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<sup>2</sup> Kennedy, "Change and Continuity", p. 258.

Obviously, the evidence cannot prove a negative, i.e. that no one in Nessana or its environs in the relevant centuries defined himself using, for instance, ethnic categories.<sup>3</sup> But we can affirm that according to all the evidence available to us, the people whom we know from the papyri did not define themselves primarily according to ethnic allegiance, imperial allegiance, or linguistic abilities. The major allegiances apparent are those of locality and social and economic classes. In fact, the importance of economics is striking, as it appears as the hidden root explanation, underlying what seem at first sight to be ethnic categories. This is partly an explanation for why we face problems in attempting to divide the ancient world into neat and sociologically meaningful categories. In a world where identities are not fixed but negotiable, and to be asserted rather than assumed, the use of identity definers is a rhetorical tool, which can often mask other prejudices and concerns, such as social status and economic position within the community. Part of our task here is to distinguish between the narratives we are given, sound though they may seem, and the sociological realities behind them. If we do not do so, we run the risk of conniving with “one party or another of that period to tell a story their way about people seen through their eyes”<sup>4</sup> – a story which may well be very interesting, but does not necessarily constitute an accurate depiction.

Yet economics, important as they are to understanding the boundaries imposed and created between ‘us’ and ‘them’, are not the be-all and end-all. The last chapter on local connections shows that the significant economic networks which bound the village

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<sup>3</sup> For a similar problem with a proving a negative, see Amory, "Names, Ethnic Identity and Community in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Burgundy", p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> O'Donnell, "Late Antiquity: Before and After", p. 203.

of Nessana to its neighbors to the north and to the south were not enough to create a sense of regional identity. Economic ties, apparently, could not replace the very strong – and very narrowly defined – sense of identity as defined by one’s village, with a wider sense of provincial identity. This is the one steady thread which runs through all the evidence; the importance of what we might compare to a ‘*polis* identity’, though the community is far from being a *polis*.

Focusing as it does on only one small community, and that one fairly peripheral, this dissertation cannot hope to be anything but a case-study. The differences with other communities, mentioned throughout the chapters, should caution us from applying these conclusions straightforwardly to other communities; it is clear that the social situation in Petra, for instance, was very different, and that both this and other considerations led to a very different set of imperial, religious and ethnic allegiances. Yet the fact that Nessana does not always follow the patterns we have come to expect in late Byzantine and early Muslim Palestine is noteworthy in itself; and this may serve as a basis for further comparison with other towns. With the publication of all the significant Petra papyri, one may hope for a similar investigation of the criteria of self-definition in Petra, which in turn would allow for a serious comparison of the two communities.

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## **Biography**

Rachel Stroumsa was born on July 31, 1976 in Jerusalem, Israel. She earned her BA from the Hebrew University in 2000 and anticipates her PhD from Duke University in 2008. She has written papers on Greek and Arabic bilingualism in Nessana and on the connections between Greek and Biblical hymns (both forthcoming). Since 2002 she has been a University Scholar and the recipient of the James B. Duke Scholarship, and in 2006-2007 she was the recipient of the Julian Price Endowed Fellowship.