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Village Life and Family Power in Late Antique Nessana*

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SUMMARY: This article explores social structures and family competition in late antique Nessana. Nessana, a small village in the Negev, is attested through archaeological, papyrological, and epigraphic remains. This evidence shows that the engine of social change was family power. Nessana experienced remarkable growth, including construction of four new churches and two monasteries. The driving forces behind each institution came from distinct local families in ongoing competition with one another. This localizing model of family power challenges the standard models of provincial economy and society in the late antique east, which imagine a world of great estates and powerful aristocrats.

NESSANA, A SMALL BUT VIBRANT VILLAGE IN THE NEGEV, IS ATTESTED THROUGH archaeological, papyrological, and epigraphic remains from the fifth through the eighth centuries. Despite the convergence between overlapping sets of evidence for Nessana, and the considerable research potential inherent in such a convergence, the village has eluded synthetic study. To the extent that modern consensus has imposed an analytical framework on the evidence from Nessana, it has seen that evidence solely as a resource for questions of ethnicity and of village subordination to the strong arm of the state. This

* My thanks to the staff of the Morgan Library and Museum, where I was able to study select Nessana papyri in person on September 3, 2009. These autopsies support several of the arguments and identifications made below. I am also grateful to Katharina Volk, editor of *TAPA*, and to *TAPA*'s anonymous reviewers for their suggested improvements to this article, incorporated herein. I use the following abbreviations:

I.Ness. = Colt, H. D. ed. 1962. *Excavations at Nessana. Volume I*. London: British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem.

P.Ness. = Kraemer, C. J. Jr. ed. 1958. *Excavations at Nessana. Volume III: Non-Literary Papyri*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

All dates are C.E., unless otherwise indicated.

study of the evidence from Nessana will challenge that view, and show that the driving engine of social change in late antique Nessana was family power. The appropriate analytical lens for understanding Nessana is the network of social connections linking families to each other and to the church, and driving those families to compete with one another for social prestige.

From the sixth to the early eighth century, Nessana, although never a large village, experienced a period of remarkable growth. In rapid succession, the village saw the construction of four large churches and two monasteries. In each case, the driving forces behind each institution—the architects, the patrons, and the managing personnel—came from distinct families, for example, the family of Sergios and the East Church, and the family of Patrikios and the North Church or church of Saint Sergios. Similarly, institutions of village governance were consistently the domain of individual families. The family of Hanun served on the village's panel of eight and made some of the village's largest tax contributions. The family of Khalaf Allah held village office and served as prominent moneylenders. The family of Patrikios provided Nessana's *dioikētēs* and representative to the outside world. In a number of cases, the visibility of these families in the surviving record seems attributable to the desire to memorialize their accomplishments in ongoing competition with one another, a competition inscribed in Nessana's topography through successive waves of ecclesiastical architecture.

Nessana had a long settlement history in antiquity, dating back to its period as a Nabatean caravanserai in the second century B.C.E.[1] However, lack of third- and fourth-century remains suggest a much-diminished site in that period. The course of Nessana's development in late antiquity has been obscured by difficulties dating the Roman fort built on its heights and manned by local recruits.[2] Colt, the site's original twentieth-century excavator, thought the fort fifth-century, and the military unit stationed therein the Very Loyal Theodosians mentioned in the Nessana papyri.[3] Lewis's and Negev's more recent analyses have preferred to date the military unit to the

[1] For the site's settlement history, see Colt 1962: 1–25; Mayerson 1963; Shereshevski 1991: 50; Urman 2004: 113–16.

[2] See Isaac 1995: 147–48 for the Nessana soldiers as professional military men, locally recruited and owning local property.

[3] *P.Ness.* 15.3, where Flavius Stephanos is described as a στρ]ατιώτη[ς] ἀριθμοῦ τῶν καθοσιωμ(ένων) Θεοδοσι̣άκ̣ω̃ν. But given the absence of other references to this unit in the Nessana papyri, doubts have been raised about the accuracy of this identification: siding with Negev (see the following note) against Colt and Kraemer, e.g., Isaac 1995: 145n92 and Di Segni 1997: 769n4. On the translation of the name of the unit, see Welles 1959: 286.

reign of Theodosios I and the fort to the fourth century.[4] This reinterpretation has since been confirmed by further excavation of the fort, which provided ceramic and numismatic confirmation of a late fourth-century date for the fort's construction (Urman 2004: 29).

Nessana's dominant topographical feature is the plateau upon which that fort was constructed.[5] That plateau, in the village's northwest quadrant, was home to two of Nessana's major churches, the so-called North Church, also known as the church of Saints Sergios and Bakchos, and the South Church, also known as the Saint Mary Church.[6] The bulk of the papyri found at Nessana comes from the North Church, with a smaller find coming from the South Church. A residential structure immediately to the southeast of the South Church is believed to have been that church's priestly residence (Urman 2004: 40–53). In the center of the village plain to the southeast of the plateau, the Ben-Gurion University excavations in the late twentieth century unearthed a large church now designated the Central Church.[7] A final church, the so-called East Church, was reported by visitors to the site prior to World War I, but was so badly damaged that later visitors have had to rely on earlier drawings of the structure (Colt 1962: 3–4).

Estimates of Nessana's population have varied widely since the beginning of interest in the site.[8] Shereshevski cites without comment an estimate by Huntington—made one hundred years ago, before the papyri or detailed excavations could provide contradicting evidence—that the population was as high as 9,000 to 10,000 people.[9] Scholars since Huntington have recognized this estimate to be much too high. Mayerson pointed to two crucial texts: *P.Ness.* 76, an incomplete poll-tax register, and *P.Ness.* 69, a wheat account for the Arab military *rizq* tax. He concluded that both a figure of 1,500, the village's "possible maximum" population based on the former text, and a figure of 1,000, based on his own earlier estimates of the latter text, were likely to

[4] Negev 1990: 339, 343. Urman 2004: 24 attributes a similar opinion to Naphtali Lewis, without citation, but lists Lewis 1948 in his bibliography. Shereshevsky 1991 is agnostic on this debate.

[5] See Colt 1962; Mayerson 1963; Shereshevski 1991: 49–60 for a general survey of the structures of the site; Urman 2004 for a synthesis of discoveries from the 1987–1995 excavations.

[6] For a more detailed plan of the North Church, see Shereshevski 1991, Plate 27.

[7] See extended discussion of the central church at Urman 2004: 69–101.

[8] See also Hirschfield 1997: 39 for recent estimates of Nessana's land area.

[9] Shereshevski 1991: 49, providing no other estimates.

be slightly too high.[10] Other estimates put the village population at "no more than two to three thousand at its peak."[11]

Several factors indicate that Nessana enjoyed considerable prosperity in late antiquity. *P.Ness.* 39, a list of nine towns and villages in southern Palestine apparently recording relative tax burdens, shows Nessana to be "astonishingly high on the list, far above the metropolis of Elusa" (Stroumsa 2008: 39). In addition to its importance as a military site, Nessana stood on the route to Mount Sinai. Its papyri record the importance of pilgrimage traffic, and attest to the presence of a local guest-house.[12] *P.Ness.* 90 and 91 are extensive accounts of date sales, and *P.Ness.* 89 is an account of a trading company which presumably did local business.[13] Nessana "then had some potential for the creation of economic differences" (Stroumsa 2008: 40). The active rate of church construction throughout the period, which we will discuss in what follows, is further evidence for the village's economic strength.

The initial study of the Nessana papyri was that of Casper Kraemer, in his 1958 introduction to the *editio princeps* of the texts found by the Colt expedition. Although Kraemer was unable to match the papyri he published with the excavation's original records, he argued that the papyri could be divided into five distinct groups: 1) the soldiers' archive, involving members of the unit stationed at the Nessana army camp; 2) the early seventh-century archive of the church of Saint Sergios (the North Church); 3) the archive of Georgios son of Patrikios; 4) the Arab "archive," a more disparate group of texts from a later period; and 5) an "archive" of disparate literary texts brought together merely through the circumstances of their disposal (Kraemer 1958: 5–9). Not everyone has accepted Kraemer's formal typology of Nessana's archives (Stroumsa 2008: 52), but his general outlines have held, largely owing to the absence of a close social and prosopographical study of the texts.

Indeed, Fergus Millar called the Nessana papyri generally "still extraordinarily neglected" as recently as 1996.[14] Nessana earns mention in textbooks

[10] Mayerson 1967: 41. Concurring: Stroumsa 2008: 38, citing estimates from 900 to 1,500. Dissenting: Negev 1990: 345, citing estimates of 3,180 and 4,000 people.

[11] Tsafrir 1999: 601.

[12] See the references to the *hagion oros* (Mount Sinai) at *P.Ness.* 72.7–8 and 89.23–25. Guest-house: see *P.Ness.* 31.33–34, with introd.

[13] While not locals themselves, the merchants in *P.Ness.* 89 mention the village and address local counter-parties in the text: see introd. to *ed. pr.*

[14] Miller 1996: 295. Consider also the lack of interest in Nessana in the articles collected in King and Cameron, eds. 1994 and Lewin and Pellegrini, eds. 2006. For a summary of the contents of the Nessana papyri, see Cotton et al. 1995: 233–35. Stroumsa 2008: 10n17 reports a venture planned by Constantin Zuckerman to reedit and republish the Nessana papyri.

of and guides to late antiquity, but these references rarely go beyond the archaeological publications themselves.[15] General studies of urbanization in the Negev do little more than summarize the results of the major excavations by the Colt Expedition in the 1930s and the Ben-Gurion University expeditions from 1987 on (e.g., Shereshevski 1991: 49–60). The documentary papyri are at times cited in specialized studies of specific topics, for example, Byzantine testamentary practices (Amelotti 1969), divorce (Steinwenter 1943), Palestinian Christianity (Schick 1995: 420–22), monasticism (Figueras 1995: 425–30), Byzantine military strength in the Negev,[16] or the chronology and structure of taxation at Nessana.[17] Other studies focus on correcting interpretations of individual Nessana papyri.[18] Thus, much of the work on the Nessana papyri treats them in isolation from the social and cultural context of the village's larger archaeological corpus. Only in 2008 was the first full-length study dedicated to the Nessana papyri completed, Rachel Stroumsa's dissertation on multilingualism and identity in Nessana.

The few exceptions to this general neglect of Nessana generally frame discussion either in terms of the ethnic puzzles its written records pose or in terms of the village's relation to the state. First, the language and ethnicity of Nessana villagers. Wasserstein draws attention to the dominance of Greek in the written record, despite the considerable onomastic evidence for an ethnically Arab population.[19] Mayerson uses passing references in the Nessana papyri to discuss the role of Saracens in southern Palestine (1989: 73). Negev addresses the Nessana onomastic repertoire for evidence of the "mixed nature of the population at Nessana" (1981: 86). Drawing attention to the "predominance of western and biblical names" among clergy in contrast to the frequency of Arab names among Nessana's military, Negev writes that this "needs no further comment" (1981: 87). The implication is, presumably, that putative ethnic differentiation clarifies the social differentiation between various strata of Nessana's population.

[15] Thus, e.g., Moorhead 2001 and Mitchell 2007. The half-page article at Tsafrir 1999 gives a brief summary of the contents of the papyri and inscriptions, and on social structures includes the note that the "leaders of the village were the abbots of the monastery."

[16] Negev 1990's use of *P.Ness.* 36 and 39. See also Isaac 1995: 139–51 and, in passing, Alston 2002: 401.

[17] Bell 1960 on *entagia* and el-Abbadi 1984 on the *rizq*.

[18] E.g., the use of *P.Ness.* 57 in Christophilopoulos 1947, of *P.Ness.* 39 in Casson 1952, and of *P.Ness.* 92 in Kennedy 1989, as well as Katzoff and Lewis 1990 and Daniel 1998.

[19] Wasserstein 2003: 257–62. Likewise Rémondon 1961: xv: "sous le vernis unicolore de cet hellénisme byzantin, transparaît une réalité nabatéenne préservant son onomastique."

Rachel Stroumsa's recent dissertation focuses primarily on the linguistic and ethnic identity of its inhabitants, and is thus the latest word in this aspect of the debate about Nessana. Stroumsa stresses that there is no real evidence of tribal affiliation as a functional organizational concept during the period represented by the papyri (Stroumsa 2008 *passim*, particularly 180). She describes "trying to pin down 'who' these people were" as a futile exercise, arguing that "[t]here is no answer to be found here, and the very posing of the question shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the community in Nessana" (2008: 182). Instead of defining themselves by ethnic, political, or linguistic categories, the Nessana villagers formed allegiances "of locality and social and economic classes" (2008: 249).

Second, Nessana's relationship to the state. The papyri are thus often adduced in the heated debate over the nature of the late Byzantine and early Islamic states: for example, how strong was the Byzantine state in the worldview of the villagers? Was the Islamic state a continuation of Byzantine administrative practice, or did it achieve bureaucratic complexity only in the time of Abd el-Malik?[20] Stroumsa for her part thinks (2008: 113) that the state was not a pervasive presence in Nessana: 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.

Rehav Rubin's 1997 article in the *Mediterranean Historical Review* is, to my knowledge, the only recent study of the social organization and social institutions of the late antique Negev. While he includes Nessana in his purview, he too uses the Nessana papyri to highlight specific issues (e.g., the integration of the military into Nessana's social life) rather than attempt a synthetic social history of the village.[21] Rubin's analytical framework for the Negev, and thus for Nessana, is clear from the start. In his own words,

[20] See, e.g., Johns 2003: 421–24, arguing for the latter position against Foss, with comments on this debate at Hoyland 2006: 395. Hoyland 2006: 400 argues—quite rightly—that the Nessana papyri do not lend themselves to precise dates, and thus criticizes Johns for leaning too heavily on Nessana evidence that is much less precise than the "circa" dates in the *ed. pr.* by Kraemer suggest.

[21] Rubin 1997: 71 cites his own Hebrew-language work, Rubin 1990, for some such synthesis, e.g., on the family of Patrikios (compare my discussion below). I am unable to consult Hebrew material.

"[t]hree agencies of the Byzantine state will be viewed—the administration, the army and the church."[22] The administration, the army, and the church, "acting as direct agents of the state, were the key, and the backbone, of the flourishing settlements in the desert" (Rubin 1997: 74). Missing from this analytical framework is, of course, the agency of the villagers themselves. Indeed, this flaw is not Rubin's alone, but seems inescapable given modern historiography's twin focuses only on who these villagers were and how the state impinged on their lives.

What follows will provide a direct challenge to these two approaches by focusing on the people of Nessana themselves. The archival nature of a large portion of Nessana's textual finds distorts our knowledge of these people: the family of Patrikios, whose activities in Nessana public life spanned nearly two centuries, dominates our view, and consequently will receive the bulk of our attention here. But the epigraphic and papyrological evidence attests to several other Nessana families with various characteristics in common with that of Patrikios. Several of these families have demonstrable leadership and patronage ties to religious institutions either founded or expanded in our period. Since Nessana's religious institutions were the defining feature of its physical landscape, and because that landscape came into being precisely in this late antique period, the following conclusion seems inescapable. The driving engine of growth and change in late antique Nessana was not the state, but the family. To understand the history of Nessana in late antiquity, we must first reconstruct its families.

This process is harder to do in earlier periods of the documentation. Kraemer identified a discrete subgroup in the so-called "soldiers' archive" deposited separately from the rest of the archive, in the storage room (Room 3) in the South or Mary Mother of God Church.[23] According to Kraemer, "The name Elias recurs frequently in this archive and suggests that it may have been the papers of a family group" (Kraemer 1958: 4). It is not clear why one portion of the soldiers' archive should have been separated from the rest, which was ultimately found in the church of Saint Sergios, the North Church. There is "surprisingly little duplication of persons" in the Saint Sergios portion of the soldiers' archive, leading to the conclusion that the archive as a whole was not

[22] Rubin 1997: 59. A similar attitude towards Negev urbanization appears in Rubin 1996; see, e.g., p. 57, where he writes that the Negev's "flourishing of desert settlement and agriculture ... did not occur as an internal process ... but was strongly influenced by the Roman-Byzantine Empire, its interests, institutions, and civilization."

[23] Kraemer 1958: 3–4, listing papyri 16, 18, 21, 22, 23, 28, 31, 37, 104, 114, 121, 122, 126, 127, 139, 140, and 144.

the collection of a single family, but "a number of family groups" (Kraemer 1958: 20). This may strengthen the assertion that the separate Mary Church material belongs to a single family, perhaps removed from the rest of the soldiers' archive for storage convenience.

Recurrence of a single name is a slender thread, and so the "Elias family" of sixth-century Nessana must remain hypothetical.[24] In *P.Ness.* 18 (537 C.E.), Flavius al-Ubayy, son of Elias, gives his daughter ʿĀniyah in marriage to Flavius Valens, son of al-ʿUbayd. The editor suggests that a child from this marriage can be found in *P.Ness*. 26 (570 C.E.), where we see an unnamed son of Valens, grandson of al-Ubayy, described as a *prior* of Camp Nessana. In *P.Ness.* 21 (562 C.E.) a women named Mulaika marries Flavius Sergios, whose father and son by his first wife are both named Elias. Mulaika herself is described as well-born (εὐγ̣ (ενεστάτης)), an indicator of higher status perhaps appropriate for a distant in-law of the camp *prior*. Certainly, in a village dominated by its military installation, we would expect higher-ranking military families to play a prominent role in village social hierarchies.

We are on rather more secure footing with the family of Khalaf Allah, which takes us from the late sixth into the early seventh century.[25] Two papyri from the South Church portion of the soldiers' archive mention members of this family. The first, *P.Ness*. 27 (570–571 C.E.), records fragments of a loan made by a soldier named Faysan son of Khalaf Allah, himself perhaps a son of another Elias.[26] The second, *P.Ness.* 37 (560–580 C.E.?), an account of military camels, records a Faysan son of Khalaf Allah—presumably the same man—listed under his *dekarch* Stephanos son of Zunayn in line 39. Another text, *P.Ness.* 40 (early 7th c.), an account of the disposition of wheat, mentions a Khalaf Allah son of Faysan five times in its 23 preserved entries.[27]

These names are not among Nessana's most common, and the editor was presumably right to suppose that Khalaf Allah, Faysan, and Khalaf Allah represent three generations of the same family in the late sixth and early seventh

[24] See the two stemmata at *P.Ness.* 18 and 21, with no apparent connections between the two groups. Kraemer 1958: 6 also draws attention to "the recurrence of the names Ania and Sergius" in this Mary Church sub-group of the soldiers' archive.

[25] See the reconstruction proposed in the introd. to *P.Ness.* 40.

[26] See line 3 with the address to Φεσανη Αλαφαλλ̣[ου]ʾḤ̣λ̣[ί]o̯[υ? χαίρειν. The reading of Elias is highly difficult: autopsy confirms two vertical strokes for the top of the eta, the lower left stroke of the lambda, and a trace of ink for the putative omicron, enough to say only that the remains are consistent with the reading given.

[27] Lines 3 and 23 by restoration, line 19 almost entirely, and lines 15 and 17 entirely preserved.

centuries. An unnamed son of Stephanos appearing in *P.Ness.* 120, the other side of *P.Ness.* 40, may also be a relative. Further prosopographical ties between these figures come from two limestone inscriptions found at unknown locations at Nessana. *I.Ness.* 112, now lost, records the death on 27 October 541 of Stephanos son of Khalaf Allah, aged twelve, and the deaths—perhaps at a later date—of Dorotheos and Sara(?).[28] *I.Ness.* 123, found in Nessana's lower town, records the death of another Stephanos son of Khalaf Allah. *P.Ness.* 40, the early seventh-century wheat account already mentioned, records after an entry for Khalaf Allah son of Faysan an entry for his son Stephanos.[29] As the text's editor notes, this Stephanos son of Khalaf Allah cannot, in the early seventh century, be the twelve-year-old who died in 541, but it could well be the person with the same name in *I.Ness.* 123. Stephanos, son and great-grandson of a Khalaf Allah, would then be the fourth generation of his family on record.

Under this reconstruction, the family of Khalaf Allah presents a middling socio-economic picture. Faysan is only a subordinate in the camp's camel corps in the 560s–580s, but well enough off financially to be a lender—of how much, we do not know—in 570–571. Already an adult in this period, he was presumably born before 550 C.E., and could easily be a brother of the Stephanos son of Khalaf Allah who died in 541. This means his father could afford to commission an inscribed tombstone, if only on cheaper material, Nessana's local limestone. His son, the Khalaf Allah from the wheat account in the early seventh century, must also have had some modest means. When Patrikios, the scribe of that account, refers to the entries "as our receipts for salary"[30] he implicitly describes Khalaf Allah to be one of his colleagues; indeed, Khalaf Allah's entries show him handling payments at times larger than Patrikios's own.[31] If he is the same Khalaf Allah found in *I.Ness.* 123, his son Stephanos is also commemorated on local limestone.

His family's connection to Patrikios, the scribe of the wheat account, is crucial. If the reconstruction that follows is correct, Patrikios represents the third generation of a family we can trace at Nessana for seven generations,

[28] *I.Ness.* 1.12 = Di Segni 1997, no. 311, preferring [? Tham]ara to [? S]ara.

[29] Line 20, agrammatically, δ(ιὰ) [Στεφ]άνου υἱ(ὸ)ς.

[30] E.g., *P.Ness.* 40.18 (following an entry for Khalaf Allah in line 17), δ(ιὰ) Πα̣τρικίου εἰς λή(μματα) ἡμῶν [εἰ]ς τροφῖα σ̣ί̣τ̣ο̣υ̣ μό(δια) ιβ.

[31] Compare, e.g., Patrikios's entry "for a sale" (εἰς πρᾶσιν) in line 14 of 10 *modii* to Khalaf Allah's entry "for a sale" in line 15 of 32 *modii* or in line 17 of 21 *modii*. Unfortunately, most of the rest of the account is too fragmentary to allow for extensive comparisons between these two men and the few others named therein.

throughout the sixth and seventh centuries.[32] Where the family of Khalaf Allah may represent a second-tier family with a modest role in Nessana affairs, Patrikios, who apparently knew and worked with them, represents one of the dominant family forces in Nessana history.[33] While the family of Khalaf Allah disappears during the seventh century, the family of Patrikios succeeds and affects profound change on the shape of the village.

The family of Patrikios has been recognized as one of Nessana's central elite families since the original epigraphic and papyrological publications (see Figure 1). While admitting that we know little about the origins of Nessana's local aristocrats, C. Bradford Welles thought that "it may reasonably be conjectured that such a house [as that of Patrikios] was of foreign origin" (*I.Ness.* p. 132). There is in truth little to support this conjecture, based as it is on the colonialist presupposition that the region's Arabs were best governed by foreign elites. Welles remarked in the very next sentence that "[w]ith the gradual removal or discouragement of this organizing [i.e., foreign] element in the town after the Arab conquest, the rest of the population [i.e., its Arabic component] reverted by degrees to its former state." What an unbiased look at the family of Patrikios shows instead is a family of local elites with considerable dominance in local affairs and some ability to project its influence onto a larger stage.

The evidence for reconstructing the family of Patrikios comes from several inscriptions and what Kraemer considered to be two distinct papyrological

[32] This reconstruction of Patrikios relies on the following assumptions: 1) that the same scribe is responsible for *P.Ness.* 44, 47, and 53: Kraemer's introduction to the last text describes them as all "unmistakably in the same hand," identified as that of Patrikios in 44; 2) that the scribe of *P.Ness.* 40, who identifies himself as Patrikios in line 13, is the same as the scribe of *P.Ness.* 79: Kraemer described the former text as in a hand with "considerable resemblance" to that of the latter, and autopsy confirms this connection: the scribe's kappa, nu, and phi are virtually identical in each text, and his rho quite similar; and 3) that both sets of texts are the work of the same Patrikios: Kraemer gives no comment about the relationship between the two sets of hands. Autopsy shows that the two sets of hands produce both similarities and differences. Both hands have a similarly flourished phi; vowels of virtually the same shape and size; and rather tall epsilons. But *P.Ness.* 44, for example, is rather more ligatured than *P.Ness.* 40, while the latter has prominent right curves on the descending strokes of pi and tau lacking in the former. The differences are not enough to exclude a shared scribe. Other scribes have been shown to produce far more wide-ranging hands. Consider one of the best-documented late antique examples, Dioskoros of Aphrodito, whose large surviving corpus of autograph texts includes several distinct hands; see del Corso 2008 for the most recent treatment.

[33] *P.Ness.* 44 may provide another connection between the two families: it is just barely possible that the soldier named Stephanos who receives a one-solidus loan from Patrikios is a member of Khalaf Allah's family as well.

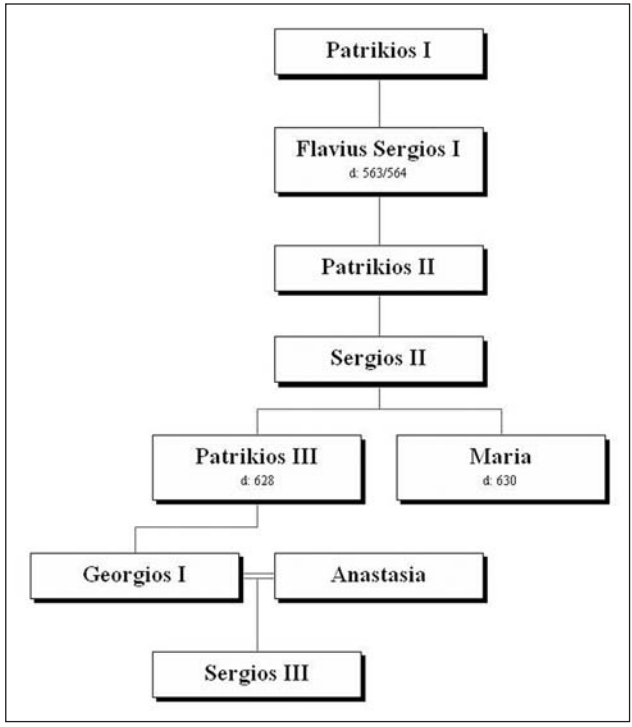

Figure 1. Genealogy of the Patrikios family. Diagram Giovanni Ruffini.

archives.[34] *I.Ness.* 117, now lost, is the tombstone of a Flavius Sergios son of Patrikios from 563–564 (= Di Segni 1997, no. 316). The use of the name "Flavius" in late antiquity "was by and large a designation attesting that an individual belonged to a service class of imperial administrators, civil servants and soldiers."[35] This Flaviate status makes it likely that this man—Sergios I son of Patrikios I, for clarity—had some attachment to the camp at Nessana, and presumably some connection to the family of Elias outlined above.[36] We have no direct proof connecting him to later generations of the family.[37]

[34] Taking the stemma in the introd. to *P.Ness*. 44 with the archival discussion at Kraemer 1958: 6–7 and the introd. to *P.Ness.* 56. For more recent discussion of this family, see Stroumsa 2008: 63–66 and Rubin 1997: 71, citing Rubin 1990 (Hebrew) "for a full discussion of this family."

[35] Keenan 1974: 302.

[36] For the name Sergios in this period, see Fowden 1999: 101–5 and Meimaris 1986: 116–19.

[37] Di Segni 1997: 805 notes only that the Sergios in *I.Ness.* 117 "may have been a member of the same prominent family" as the Sergios in *I.Ness.* 12.

Nonetheless, recurrence of these names suggests a direct link to *I.Ness.* 12, a limestone slab found in the north aisle of Saint Sergios, the North Church (= Di Segni 1997, no. 305 A-B). That slab is the tombstone first of a Sergios son of Patrikios who died in 592, and secondly of a Patrikios son of Sergios who died in 628. This is clearly a father-and-son team. The first man—Sergios II son of Patrikios II (and putative grandson of Sergios I)—is described as priest and father-superior, presumably of Saint Sergios itself.[38] The second man—Patrikios III son of Sergios II—is described with the same titles in 628.[39] Earlier in his career, Patrikios III appears only as father-superior (602) and father-superior and reader (605), and presumably became a priest only after 605.[40] His sister Maria, daughter of Sergios II and grand-daughter of Patrikios II, died in 630, and was buried elsewhere in the same church as her brother and father (*I.Ness*. 14 = Di Segni 1997, no. 306).

The family is well represented in later generations as well. *I.Ness.* 77, a small marble column, was inscribed: "For the salvation of Georgios son of Patrikios, father-superior."[41] If Patrikios is the same man as Patrikios III, then this Georgios I is the third member of the family to hold the title of father-superior. The find-spot of the column is unknown, but the editors thought it likely to have come from the North Church, as did Patrikios's tombstone.[42] Anastasia, the daughter of Alexandros also recorded with Georgios on the marble column, was likely his wife.[43]

This Georgios I and his son Sergios—for us, Sergios III—appear together in *P.Ness.* 55, a tax receipt perhaps dating to 682.[44] In that text, tax officials from Gaza acknowledge tax payments made by Georgios I on behalf of an-

[38] Concerning the title of father-superior (*hēgoumenos*) in Palestine in this period, see Meimaris 1986: 239–46 for a collection of references.

[39] Although difficulty with case endings creates some ambiguity here. Sergios II is described as ὁ μακάρ(ιος) Σέγριος | Πατρικίου πρεσβ(ύτερος) κ(αὶ) ἡγουμέ|νου, and Patrikios III as ὁ μακάριος | Πατρικίου Σεργίου πρεσβ(ύτερος) | κ(αὶ) ἡγούμενος.

[40] *P.Ness.* 44 introd. with stemma, citing *P.Ness*. 45 and 46, respectively. Patrikios III: *P.Ness.* 44, a receipt he issues in 598; *P.Ness.* 53, written in the same hand prior to 608 (?); and *P.Ness.* 147, "six small fragments of a canceled contract" in a hand much like his.

[41] ὑπὲρ σωτερ(ίας) | Γεωργ(ίου) Πατρικ(ίου) | ἡγουμέ(νου).

[42] Commentary to *ed. pr*.: "Hänsler's report makes it probable that this column was found in the church" (with apparent reference to the North Church).

[43] Commentary to *ed. pr.*

[44] Kraemer dated the tenth indiction in *P.Ness.* 55 by reference to *P.Ness.* 56 and 57, texts from the 680s in which the same scribe appears, although 667 or 697 cannot be excluded. This paragraph follows Kraemer's identifications in *P.Ness.* 55 introd., identifications most recently accepted by Stroumsa 2008: 63 with n59.

other resident of Nessana, Sergios son of Menas. His son Sergios III is the scribe of the receipt, and appears as a witness in *P.Ness.* 56 and 57 as well, his distinctive hand the same in all three pieces.[45] In *P.Ness.* 56, he explicitly describes himself as "Sergios son of Georgios son of Patrikios," making his place as Georgios's son and the seventh and final representative of this family all but certain. In *P.Ness.* 57, Sergios describes himself as a priest, presumably continuing the family tradition of association with the North Church or church of Saint Sergios.[46]

Modern scholars have disagreed over the significance of his father Georgios I's apparently secular role in Nessana tax collection. He reprises his role as an intermediary in *P.Ness.* 55 on behalf of a Nessana resident named Sergios in payments to tax collectors in Gaza in *P.Ness.* 59.[47] In the introduction to the first text featuring Georgios, Kraemer notes only that "There is no way of determining whether or not he is the George, the *dioecetes* of Nessana of [*P.Ness.*] **68–70** and elsewhere." That Georgios is the recipient of three letters addressed to "Lord Georgios *dioikētēs* of Nessana," *P.Ness.* 68, 70, and 74 (from the 680s?),[48] and may therefore have been involved in the drafting of an account of the *rizq* or food tax for Arab troops in *P.Ness.* 69, on the verso of 68. Because the amounts in that account are similar to those demanded of Nessana in the *entagia* from the 670s (*P.Ness.* 60–63, 65–67), Kraemer suggested that the same Georgios might have been the actual recipient of those *entagia* as well, otherwise generally addressed τοῖς ἀπὸ Νεστάνων.[49]

[45] Confirmed by autopsy. There are some slight variations in hand between the three texts, but the similarities are striking: the epsilons written in two separated strokes, the long strokes to the left in letters with descenders, the hooks on each rho, and the general right-leaning slant of the hand throughout are consistent in each case.

[46] The father-son pair also appear in *P.Ness.* 76, the partial register of Nessana poll-tax payers.

[47] Note also the introd. to the *ed. pr.* of *P.Ness.* 59, which observes that its scribe writes in a hand that "strongly resembles" that of Sergios himself. Autopsy confirms this resemblance, which the editor took as "a reminder of the standardization of handwriting in schools." Both hands write rho with a little hook on the descender, and have a general right-leaning slant. But the hand in *P.Ness.* 59 seems somewhat more elaborate, with loops on the ascenders of some letters, particularly with certain ligatured pairs. A match between the two hands cannot however be excluded with certainty.

[48] κυρ(ί)ῳ Γεωργίῳ διοικ(η)τ(ῇ) Νεστάνο(ν) (as abbreviated in *P.Ness.* 70) or Νεστάνον (as spelled in full in *P.Ness.* 74), with the reading less secure in *P.Ness.* 68 than in the other two examples.

[49] Kraemer took the Georgios of Nessana ordered by the governor to provide a guide in *P.Ness.* 72 to be the same man (see introd. to *ed. pr.*) and thought it just "possible" that

The identification of Nessana's *dioikētēs* Georgios with our family's Georgios I the father-superior is likely, if not certain, despite the objections of some scholars.[50] First, there is no difficulty with the position of *dioikētēs*, "connected with building projects and in general ... concerned with the city treasury,"[51] being held by a religious figure. The author of *P.Ness.* 54, drafted in (nearby?) Chaphrea, was both *presbyteros* and *dioikētēs* in the late sixth or early seventh century. Second, the actual papyri mentioning Georgios the *dioikētēs*—found, we must remember, in Georgios I's North Church (Saint Sergios)—detail the affairs of that church as well. *P.Ness.* 70 and 74, both letters addressed to the *dioikētēs* from superiors in Gaza,[52] have accounts on their backs. *P.Ness.* 80, the back of 70, is an "account of donations to Saint Sergios in the thirteenth indiction."[53] *P.Ness.* 81, a similar if somewhat more meticulous account of grain for unknown purposes, was written in the same hand.[54] The coincidence—of a *dioikētēs* Georgios receiving instructions later found in the Saint Sergios church on the other side of business affairs of that church, contemporary to the career of a Georgios who ran that church—is compelling.

The story continues with Sergios III, whom we have already seen in conjunction with his father. *P.Ness.* 58, datable only to the late seventh century, is a receipt issued to Sergios son of Georgios for payment of 37.5 solidi "due from the property given you by our lord the Governor, Muslim, from the land-holding of the bani War."[55] The receipt is issued by an Abraamios son of Mousaios, *archōn*, along with seven other Nessana residents, "and others of our native town Nestana."[56] What *archōn* means in the context of Nessana is unclear; this text is the only attestation of the term at Nessana. Kraemer's

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the *kyrios* Georgios addressed in the highly fragmentary *P.Ness.* 158 was the same man as well. It is also possible that the Georgios in *P.Ness.* 146 (6th/7th c.), who "judging by the honorifics, occupied a high rank in Nessana's clerical hierarchy," was the same man.

[50] Dissent on Georgios and *P.Ness.* 60–67: Hoyland 2006: 400n28 disputes that Georgios received 60–67. See also *ibid.* for doubts on the dating of *P.Ness.* 68, 70, and 74.

[51] *P.Ness.* 54.2 note, citing Welles 1938. More recently on religious *dioikētai*, see Wipszycka 1972: 141–42, citing Egyptian comparanda, e.g., *P.Michael.* 41.

[52] See the introd. to both texts; Kraemer proposes Caesarea as a less likely possibility for *P.Ness.* 74.

[53] λ(ό)γ(ος) τῶν εὐλογιῶν τοῦ ἁγί(ου) Σεργί(ου) ἐπὶ τῖς ἰνδ(ικτίωνος) ιγ [*sic*: read τῶν εὐλογιῶν and τῆς ἰνδ(ικτίωνος)].

[54] Confirmed by autopsy: matching letter sizes and general vertical orientation, with the same mild right curves at the end of the longer descenders. Note particularly the identical ligatures in the first three letters of the *sitou* that appears throughout both texts.

[55] ἐκ τῶν δοθέντο<ν> συ ἐκ τοῦ δεσπότου ὑμῶν | Μεσλεμ συμβούλου ἐκ τῆς γεομορίας τ[ῶν] | β(αν)υ Ουαρ.

[56] καὶ εἱ λιπὶ τοῦ χορίου ὑμῶν Νεστάνο[ν].

commentary is surely not far off: he imagines the *archōn*, the other seven on the "committee of eight," and the "others" as something like the *koinon* or *koinotēs* of *prōtokōmētai* or village headmen known from Oxyrhynchos and Aphrodito.[57] Stroumsa has described this group of eight as a "grassroots" panel of local Nessana notables (Stroumsa 2008: 60). Assuming that each of the men on this committee comes from different families and comparing their number to a register of Nessana poll-tax payers, these eight families acknowledging Sergios's payment represent about 1/14 of the village families, an interesting glimpse into what might constitute the size of the local elite.[58]

The history of the family of Sergios III over the course of two centuries demonstrates upward mobility.[59] It emerges in the first half of the sixth century with no visible power greater than putative association with the local military unit.[60] By the end of the sixth and start of the seventh century they have become the leading ecclesiastical figures at what has been called "apparently the most sumptuous and probably the most important [church] of the town" (Figueras 1995: 425). The first epigraphic evidence for their family history is found on local limestone; the later evidence on imported and more expensive marble. Their church underwent several phases of renovation; the baptistery included an inscription dating to 602, a period contemporary to much of the rapid construction elsewhere in Nessana. During one of these periods of expansion, both the church itself and the baptistery were decorated with marble slabs as long as two meters with decorative porphyry and marble inlay. The initial excavation's architectural report noted that "[t]he floor is evidence of the great care and wealth bestowed on the church in its later period, since this is imported material and Auja [= Nessana] is 82 km. from the nearest seaport, Gaza."[61] In the generations after this expensive renovation, the family's representatives include the village *dioikētēs* and a leading representative of the village elite interacting with governing Arab authorities.

[57] *P.Ness.* 58.1–5 note, although Stroumsa 2008: 61 finds this analogy strained. For the term *archōn* in this context, see also Di Segni 1995: 316 with n9 and Piccirillo 1987: 185.

[58] *P.Ness.* 76: see its introd., pp. 217–18, calculating on the basis of the surviving portions of the list that the original text named some 174 individuals representing 116 families.

[59] For another potential member of the family, see the Georgios son of Patrikios doubtfully read in *P.Ness.* 38, which the editors date to the sixth century. Georgios appears therein as a *dek()*, which the editor resolved by comparison to *P.Ness.* 37 as *dek(archos)*, thus taking the text to be part of Nessana's military archive and so providing the rough date. Autopsy of the patronymic Patrikios largely confirms the word as read, although the second iota more properly belongs within the brackets.

[60] And that military unit is presumably gone by the end of the sixth century: Isaac 1995: 148–49.

[61] *I.Ness.* p. 37.

Further light on the prominence and social connections of the family of Patrikios may be shed by the evidence for the family of Biktor the architect (*oikodomos*). An inscription from an unknown location at Nessana was erected in 605 "for the salvation of Flavius Sergios son of Biktor the architect, and of Biktor his son."[62] Sergios's Flaviate status indicates his position as a high office-holder. His son Biktor may be the addressee of *P.Ness.* 51, Biktor son of Sergios.[63] The letter, dated to the early seventh century on palaeographical grounds, is an instruction from Mouses, bishop of Aela, to make gifts on his behalf to the churches of Saint Sergios of Nessana and Saint Sergios of Elusa.

If Biktor complied with the request, we may suppose some connection between him and Patrikios III, under whose authority the baptistery and other renovations were likely undertaken at Saint Sergios. The inscription for his family's salvation records the completion of some work on the given date with the phrase ἐγήνετο τοῦ|τω τὸ ἔργον. The editor of *P.Ness.* 51 understood this to refer to the erection of a complete building in the family's memory. But without a find-spot for the inscription, the work in question may well have been renovation of an existing structure. Its editor pointed to the contemporaneity of the baptistery. This may be sheer coincidence, but it could point to a further connection between the family of Biktor and the family of Patrikios, one known to the bishop of Aela.

By the late seventh century, other families emerge as important players in Nessana. The family of Hanun in particular seems to have been another with working connections to the family of Patrikios and the social circle of the Saint Sergios church. Two sons of Hanun, Stephanos and Georgios, appear in consecutive entries in *P.Ness.* 81, an account of receipts in kind dated to c. 685(?).[64] The account is short, listing only seven discrete individuals making eight payments between them. Georgios for his part makes the largest payment in the account of 65 *modii* of wheat. While admitting the possibility that the account, like *P.Ness.* 80, in the same hand, was a list of church offerings, the editor leaned toward "the impression made by the list ... that the men recorded in it are tax officials ... reporting collections."[65] Georgios reprises his role in

[62] *I.Ness.* 72 = Di Segni 1997, no. 303: ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας Φλ(αουίου) Σεργ(ίου) | Βίκτωρος οἰκοδόμου | κ(αὶ) Βίκτορος αὐτοῦ υἱοῦ.

[63] An identification accepted at Di Segni 1997: 785.

[64] Its scribe is the same as that of *P.Ness.* 80, assigned the same date by virtue of its appearance on the reverse of *P.Ness.* 70, an order issued to Georgios the Nessana *dioikētēs* known from the 680s: see the arguments in the introd. to *P.Ness.* 69.

[65] Introd. to *ed. pr.*

P.Ness. 83 (684/685?), in which he makes the largest of five named payments in an account of threshed grain.[66] Perhaps Stephanos was the older of the two brothers, or died before Georgios, as he is absent from *P.Ness.* 76, a register of Nessana's poll tax payers (689?). Georgios appears therein with a son named Ioannes, the family's next generation.[67]

Stephanos, Georgios's brother, appears twice in contexts solidifying his family's connections to that of Patrikios. We see him in *P.Ness.* 58 (late 7th c.) as a member of the so-called "commission of eight." While that papyrus, a receipt mentioned above issued to Sergios III, does not state clearly the commission's role in Nessana, its members act on behalf of the village and must therefore be among its elite. We see him again in *P.Ness.* 80 (c. 685?) as a contributor of wheat to the church of Saint Sergios.[68] That donation, apparently made during Georgios I's tenure at that church, is recorded on the reverse of a letter addressed to Georgios the *dioikētēs*, argued above to be the same man.[69] The family of Hanun was thus presumably well known to the family of Patrikios, whose religious institution was in part supported by them.

But such emphasis on the family of Patrikios and the social connections of its church of Saint Sergios—natural given the provenance of so many of the papyri—hides other families and their churches from view. The so-called East Church provides a crucial example. This structure in the village plain, destroyed by Turkish occupation, included a mosaic with a dedicatory inscrip-

[66] The table in the *ed. pr.* only lists Georgios's first appearance, for 115 *modii* of wheat, second to Alaouael's 150 *modii* in lines 3–4; but see also lines 9 and 11, where entries not in the standard format record another 75 and 37.5 *modii* in Georgios's name. The introd. to the *ed. pr*. notes that the hand of *P.Ness.* 83 "closely resembles" that of *P.Ness.* 80 and 81, for which see n53 above. Autopsy confirms the similarity: all three texts are written in the same brown ink, a color not found in any of the other Nessana papyri I examined, and the slight curves at the end of descending strokes in iota, pi, and rho are present in all three hands. Note also the ligatures of the first three letters in one instance of *sitou* in *P.Ness.* 83, identical to the style of the hand in 80 and 81. The three texts are plausibly in the same hand.

[67] *P.Ness.* 85, an account of expenditures, records in line 11 an entry for the "freight of provisions brought by Stephan and Hanun" (ναύλων σιταρχίας δ(ιὰ) Στεφάνου (καὶ) δ(ιὰ) Ανωνες), which may also refer to members of the same family.

[68] Georgios Rokeos (i.e., son of Raqi') appears with him in both *P.Ness.* 58 and *P.Ness.* 80.

[69] Likewise, Georgios son of Hanun's appearance in the account of threshed grain (*P.Ness.* 83) is recorded in a hand similar to that of *P.Ness.* 80 and 81, the former of which also pertains to Saint Sergios. Further, *P.Ness.* 83 is on the verso of *P.Ness.* 73, an order from the governor *tois apo Nesanōn* in perhaps the same hand as *P.Ness.* 72, an order also from the governor, addressed to Georgios *dioikētēs*, likely identical to Georgios I.

tion over three meters wide.[70] This text, *I.Ness.* 94, dates to the early seventh century,[71] and is a succinct glimpse at the connections between Nessana and the elite of the wider late antique east. Laid "for the salvation of the benefactors" (ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας τῶν καρποφορησάντων), the mosaic names Sergios, a monk and ex-assessor (ἀπὸ συμπόνου), his sister Pallos and her son Ioannes, a deacon and leading citizen (πρωτεύοντ(ος)) from Syrian Emesa.

Modern scholars have explained this family's presence in Nessana by virtue of its central role in the pilgrimage route through the Negev to Mount Sinai (Figueras 1995: 429). Kirk and Welles saw Sergios's benefaction to the East Church as part of his transition to a monastic life. Legal restrictions on the curial class required that its members could become monks only if they left someone designated to fulfill their financial obligations; thus Ioannes inherited his uncle's curial mantle.[72] Di Segni has more recently argued that *prōteuontes* does not indicate curial status for the family, but instead that they were "members of a restricted body of prominent citizens" directing affairs in Emesa (Di Segni 1997: 793). While it is not clear whether this family had permanently relocated to Nessana, it seems likely that "they all spent enough time in the town or surroundings as to see the completion and dedication of their rich foundation" (Figueras 1995: 429).

Why Sergios and his family should support the construction of the East Church raises interesting questions about ecclesiastical patronage at Nessana. The East Church was hardly a necessary choice. As several scholars have noted, the end of the sixth and the dawn of the seventh century saw considerable construction activity in Nessana, most of it ecclesiastical.[73] The South or so-called Mary Church, conceived with local styles and constructed all at once (with limestone) and little altered with time, was a product of the first decade of the seventh century, contemporary to the construction at the East Church.[74] The architect named Sergios son of Biktor dedicated his own work on the construction of a building—presumably a church, given the wording of the text—in 605.[75] Meanwhile, at the Church of Saint Sergios itself, the baptistery

[70] *I.Ness*. 94 with Plate 32.1; cf. Di Segni 1997, no. 308.

[71] Figueras 1995 gives the date 609, with an unhelpful note, but this is presumably a simple error for 601, the date given by *I.Ness*. 94 and Di Segni 1997, no. 308. For discussion of this text and the family mentioned therein, see Figueras 1995: 427–29.

[72] Commentary to *I.Ness*. 94.

[73] With the initial archaeological publications, *I.Ness*. p. 21 and more recently Urman 2004: 115.

[74] *I.Ness.* 92 = Di Segni 1997, no. 307, a limestone abacus found at the South Church, dates to 601/602.

[75] *I.Ness.* 72 = Di Segni 1997, no. 303; see above.

received construction work—and presumably an infusion of new financing to accompany it—in 601/602.[76]

In short, there seems to have been a veritable glut on Nessana's philanthropic market at the start of the seventh century. In a village of Nessana's size, we may suppose that any new ecclesiastical construction would have been known to more or less everyone. Sergios and his family from Emesa may well have found such institutions as Saint Sergios—as we have seen, itself one well connected to the outside world—to have been already flush with funds and in no need of their support.

Alternatively, the lines of philanthropy and ecclesiastical patronage may mirror Nessana's social fault lines. One may reasonably ask how many churches a given population might need. The construction boom at the start of the seventh century may be due less to an increase in demographic demand and more to philanthropic competition between Nessana's elites. Put another way, Sergios's decision to invest in the construction of the East Church might mean that the philanthropic doors to the Mary and Sergios Churches were already closed to him. Equally, the wholesale construction at the Mary Church or the addition of the baptistery at Saint Sergios might have been inspired by donors eyeing the work going on elsewhere in town, and impressed by the public impact the donations had on the donors' reputation.

All of this is purely speculative. It is possible to imagine other explanations for the remarkable growth spurt on Nessana's ecclesiastical landscape. These projects are most understandable in the context of a village undergoing extended economic growth. Perhaps they were the result of collective decision-making on the part of some otherwise unseen collective village body. Perhaps they were instead the result of decisions taken by Palestine's larger church hierarchy, directing external resources towards Nessana's churches for reasons unknown to us. But such explanations lack support in the textual remains.

A model based instead on family power and competition between families and their factions for authority and resources provides ample comparanda.[77] It also provides an interpretative framework for understanding future evidence from Nessana. Renewed attention to the site by the Urman-Shereshevski team sponsored by Ben-Gurion University, which began work on the site in 1987, uncovered new epigraphic material, suggesting that the site is not yet

[76] *I.Ness.* 17 = Di Segni 1997, no. 302; see above.

[77] Families: Ruffini 2008b. Factionalism: Ruffini 2008c. For church foundations in rural Palestine as local efforts rather than the products of external planning, see Bar 2003, particularly p. 409 (similarly Bar 2005: 56 for the "high degree of involvement the local monks had in the communal life" of Nessana). See also the discussion below of villages in Jordan in the same period.

dry.[78] The most significant discovery was that in 1989 of a basilica complex in the lower town, designated the Central Church. This structure "is one of the largest to have been discovered to date in any of the Byzantine sites in the Negev," at 45 by 36.5 meters (Urman 2004: 69).

An inscription found on a meter-long slab of white-gray marble is believed to be the dedication to the church's altar (Figueras 2004: 232–35). The text is highly fragmentary, but mentions "the donors" (κα]ρποφορο[ύντων), including one named Gadimos. The inscription's editor draws attention to the appearance of men named Gadimos in the Nessana papyri *P.Ness.* 46 (605) and 80 (c. 685?), and suggests that the "man named Gadimos might have belonged to a family well established in Nessana" (Figueras 2004: 234). The church receiving Gadimos's offering was constructed in the late seventh or early eighth century.[79]

To understand the importance of the construction of the Central Church, we must remember the significance of this timing. Planning for and construction of the Central Church would have begun while the church of Saint Sergios and the other churches in the village were still in active use.[80] Georgios I, the most important figure at Saint Sergios, and arguably the village's leading representative to the outside world, appears to have died in the 680s.[81] His son Sergios III is active presumably throughout the rest of the seventh century, when we see him acting as the main contact person for the village *archōn* and Nessana's commission of eight. Without impugning Gadimos or questioning his motives, we may well imagine the tension inherent in the situation. A family long dominant in Nessana—and looking out upon it from the commanding heights of its church upon the village plateau—would now be faced with the construction of a new church in the plains below, larger than its own and strengthened by patronage to match. This potential tension between churches and the individuals and families behind them may have been precisely what sparked Nessana's construction boom nearly a century before.

[78] Shereshevski 1991: 50 and Figueras 2004. Stroumsa 2008: 3 notes that the inscriptions found in the recent excavations are housed in Beer Sheva at the Ben-Gurion University, and that despite the fact that most of the new epigraphic material remains unpublished, she knows of no plans to publish.

[79] Urman 2004: 99 and 101, citing a forthcoming full archaeological report.

[80] For the Central Church, see Urman 2004: 69–101, with remarks on dating at 100–1. Pottery sherds and glassware fragments "indicate that it was not built before the late seventh or early eighth century" (101). The other chief sites at Nessana were not abandoned until the mid-eighth century: Urman 2004: 116 with Colt 1962: 23.

[81] An assumption based on the emergence of his son Sergios III in prominent roles from this point on.

The state and Nessana's relationship to it do not enter into this picture and are the incorrect framework for analyzing this village. As Stroumsa points out, "the hand of the Byzantine bureaucracy lay lightly on Nessana. We have little evidence of disputes being resolved officially" (Stroumsa 2008: 113). Rather, the family is the correct unit of analysis for the society of late antique Nessana. The villagers themselves knew this. When a local scribe drafted *P.Ness.* 76 (in 689?) as a means to register local poll-tax payers, he organized the list by heads of family: thus Abraamis son of Stephanos in line 2 precedes his brother in line 3 and Georgis son of Anones in line 39 precedes his son Ioannes in line 40.[82] Above these other, more obscure Nessana families loom the local worthies: we can assume everyone knew who they were, and if not, they insisted on referring to themselves and each other as well-born, *eugenestatoi*.[83]

The phenomena on display at Nessana are visible, at least in outline, at other sites in late antique Palestine.[84] Samra and Rihab, two villages in Jordan with at least twenty-two churches between them, have produced 150 Greek inscriptions and, in the case of Samra, 800 crucifix-inscribed stelae (Bauzou et al. 1998). Much of the construction of Samra's churches of Saint Petros, Saint Georgios, and Saint Ioannes—or at least their decoration with dedicatory mosaics—took place in a wave of activity in the 630s.[85] Three of Rihab's churches came in the span of a generation, starting in the 590s. The editor of their dedicatory inscriptions noted that "all this church building was the result of local zeal" (Avi-Yonah 1947–48: 71). Such a concentrated dose of village-level funding for church construction at these two sites could easily parallel the model of local elite competition presented for Nessana.

Um er-Rasas in Jordan—like Nessana, closely associated with an army camp—was home to a late antique church to Saint Stephanos Protodeacon

[82] For the arrangement of this register, see the introd. to the *ed. pr*.

[83] See *P.Ness.* 2, 22, and 46, as well as above.

[84] In addition to the examples presented in the text above, Ghor es-Safi in Jordan's Wadi Arabah, known as Zoora in the Byzantine period, has produced hundreds of Greek inscriptions, for which see Meimaris and Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou 2005. The nature of these epigraphic finds —purely funerary, rather than dedicatory, as with our examples from Nessana—makes it harder to identify Ghor es-Safi's elite and their ties to local institutions. But consider inscriptions 162, 184, and 231 and the potential elite family documented in those tombstones, including a subdeacon and the site's only attested *primicerius* (see Meimaris and Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou 2005: 31–32 for a reconstruction). For excavations on the site more generally, see Politis 1998 and Politis et al. 2005.

[85] See Bauzou et al. 1998: 362–63 for a discussion of the dating of the texts and their churches to the episcopate of Theodoros through his appearance in Samra inscriptions 72, 76, 79, and 81.

and Protomartyr decorated with mosaics of striking beauty that contained 46 Greek inscriptions (Piccirillo 1987). The only two dated inscriptions—from 756 and 785—record men named Elias son of Samouel son of Lexos and Ioannes son of Isakios son of Lexos; the men are perhaps cousins (Piccirillo 1987, nos. 2 and 4). A third inscription records a Petros son of Isakios son of Lexos (Piccirillo 1987, no. 6). Both Ioannes and Petros—we may suppose them to be brothers—were religious, the first a deacon, the second an archdeacon. For these three grandsons of Lexos, financial support for the church of Saint Stephanos in Um er-Rasas would appear to have been a family business.[86]

Highlighting the importance of local families to village life may seem banal in certain contexts. But in the late antique east, a localizing model of family power is a challenge to much of the standard model of provincial economy and society. Stroumsa's dissertation agrees with this paper's main contention, that "the nuclear family is indeed the basic building block" of Nessana, but puts the ultimate emphasis elsewhere, arguing that the network "we see [in Nessana] 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" (Stroumsa 2008: 82). I have identified just such a network elsewhere in the late antique world, in my study of the social networks of Byzantine Aphrodito, where local elites built strong face-to-face networks and actively asserted their autonomy in the face of state authority (Ruffini 2008a, Chs. 3 and 4).

The evidence from Aphrodito, in southern Egypt—complementary to that of Nessana in many ways—presents a dynamic and independent peasant society.[87] Aphrodito shows that at the village level, competition, factionalism, and family power shape village history in the late antique east. Yet, this evidence continues to be misinterpreted in more wide-ranging works—e.g., Peter Sarris (2006) on the age of Justinian—which imagine the late antique east to be a world of nothing but great estates and powerful aristocrats (cf. Ruffini 2009). This feudalizing model paints the late antique village as a victim of economic elites who themselves usurped central imperial authority. Nessana, a world driven by small-scale competition between local families, now stands with Aphrodito to present an alternative vision of the late antique village.

[86] See Piccirillo and Alliata, eds. 1994 for a full publication of Saint Stephanos, with color plates of the mosaics in question. Inscriptions 2, 4, and 6 from Piccirillo 1987 are republished therein as numbers 1b, 2, and 4. For the relationship between Ioannes and Petros, see Piccirillo and Alliata 1994, eds: 247; for Lexos as either a personal or potentially a tribal name, see Piccirillo and Alliata 1994, eds: 243. For more detail on the mosaics themselves, see Ognibene 2002.

[87] See, e.g., Keenan 1980; Gagos and van Minnen 1994; Ruffini 2008a, 2008b.

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