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P. NESS. 58 AND TWO *VATICINIA EX EVENTU* IN HEBREW

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P. Ness. 58 and Two Vaticinia ex Eventu in Hebrew

A recent article on the impact of the Arab conquest on agriculture has brought to the attention of this writer—quite by chance—two *vaticinia ex eventu*, written in Hebrew, on the coming of the Arabs to Palestine.¹ The two texts brought to mind *P. Ness. 58*, a post-Conquest document having to do with a sum of money for "γεωμετρία of the Saracens" and γεωμορία of an Arab tribe called the bani Ouar. The editor of the papyrus, C.J. Kraemer, Jr., dated the piece to the late seventh century and believed that it represented a receipt for tax on assigned land. To give an understanding of the document as a whole, he paraphrased it as follows: "You, Sergius, have given us, the collectors 37^{1/2} solidi which you owe following the Arab survey. The money is due on lands formerly listed as belonging to the Beni War but transferred to you by order of the Governor" (*P. Ness. III* [Princeton 1958] p.169).

P. Ness. 58, along with some 40 other documents—about half of all the Nessana papyrus—and archaeological data fall within the Umayyad period (660-750), a period during which the new ruling dynasty adopted not only the political but also the economic infrastructure of the pre-Islamic world. Agriculture was one aspect of that economic organization which the Umayyads actively fostered and encouraged.² Although the inhabitants of the conquered lands continued to call the invaders "Saracens" and "Ishmaelites" they were not the nomadic raiders often cited under those names in the Roman-Byzantine sources. As F.M. Donner has pointed out, Muhammad and his successors had rigorously subordinated the nomadic tribes to the sedentary ruling elite of the Hijaz, and that to become a Muslim, one had to lead a settled life (*The Early Islamic Conquests* [Princeton 1981] 79-80).

It is against this background, which has been generalized mostly from source material concerning Syria and Iraq, that *P. Ness. 58* provides the evidence, in its particularity, for an action taken by the Muslims to settle on land in a rural community in the semi-arid Negev of Southern Palestine. As for the Hebrew *vaticinia*, they provide parallels for the two technical

¹ B.Z. Kedar, "The Arab Conquests and Agriculture: A Seventh-Century Apocalypse, Satellite Imagery, and Palynology," *Asian and African Studies* 9 (1985) 3-4.

² O. Grabar, summarizing the work of J. Sauvaget on the *Châteaux Ommeyyades de Syrie*, states that the so-called "palaces" were centers for agricultural exploitation and that these centers "literally cover the whole area between the desert and sown extending northwest or west of a line drawn from the Euphrates around Raqqah to Damascus through Palmyra and through the mountains of Hawran down to the Gulf of 'Aqabah in an ill-defined fashion approximated by a straight line from the present oasis of Azraq to the modern town of 'Aqabah" (*Studia Islamica* 18 [1963] 8). On the western bank of the Wadi 'Arabah, I have been shown an Umayyad qanat system, which has been published (Y. Porath, *Qadmoniot* 20 [1987] 106-115 [Hebrew]), and other work in progress on Umayyad agricultural settlements. Y.D. Nevo has collected and published a large number of Umayyad inscriptions in Arabic in the settled region of the Negev (*Papers presented to the 3rd International Colloquium: From Jahiliyya to Islam* [1985]).

terms γεωμετρία and γεωμορία that are central to a new understanding of the Nessana document.

The unknown writers of these two prophecies, have cloaked themselves with the authority of renowned and legendary rabbis of the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. (Eliezer the Great, Ishmael ben Elisha, and Simon ben Yokhay) and present an apocalyptic vision of the coming of a messiah, a deliverer who will establish an eternal kingdom. The historical context, however, is the 8th century, the post-Conquest period of the Umayyads, during which time the new rulers settled Muslims on Jewish lands. The deliverer that was sought by the Jews was one who would free them from the Umayyad caliphs.

In the relevant portion from *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* (The Chapters of R. Eliezer), dated variously from the eighth to the early ninth century, there is this "prophetic" vision:

Rabbi Ishmael says, Fifteen things are the Children of Ishmael going to do in the Land (of Israel) in the latter days, and they are as follows: They will measure the land with ropes, and make the cemetery into a dunghill where the flock rests, and they will measure them upon the tops of the mountains, and falsehood will multiply...

The historian H. Graetz claimed that the above passage was derived from an earlier Hebrew "prophesy," *Nisterot Rabbi Shim'on ben Yokhay* (The Secrets of R. Simon b. Yokhay), which he dates between August and October 750.³

Also, Rabbi Simon used to say that he heard Rabbi Ishmael (say), when he heard that the Kingdom of Ishmael was approaching. "They are going to measure the land with ropes, as it is said, 'and he shall divide the land for a price' (Dan. 11:39). And they make cemeteries into pasture for flocks. And when one of them dies, they bury him wherever they find a place, and later they plough the grave and sow over it."

Both statements attributed to Rabbi Ishmael mention that the invaders will "measure the land with ropes" and in the *Nisterot* there is added the biblical citations from the Book of Daniel "and he shall divide the land for a price."⁴ There can be little doubt that measuring the land with ropes by the Ishmaelites is the equivalent of γεωμετρία τῶν Σαρακηνῶν in *P. Ness.* 58 and that dividing the land is the same as γεωμορία.

Kraemer, relying mostly on early parallels from Egypt, viewed the money given for γεωμετρία of the Saracens as a tax on land rather than a fee for the survey of property. He was also led by the difficulties in interpreting lines 9-11 to take γεωμορία as "land-holding" and to suggest further that the land owned by the bani Ouar had been presented or assigned to Sergius by the order of the governor and that Sergius was paying the tax on the property.

³ The date has not gone unchallenged. See Kedar (above, n. 1) p. 4, fn. 10.

⁴ What R. Ishmael had in mind by the biblical phrase "for a price" is not clear, although from his apocalyptic utterance it would appear that he meant that Jews would have to pay the cost for dividing the land. Since the phrase is not used with measuring the land with ropes, it is possible that the land was taken away by "eminent domain" for less than its real value.

The two *vaticinia*, taken together with the policy of the Umayyads in encouraging settlement on the newly conquered lands, give us a new insight into developments that were taking place in Nessana in the late seventh century. The two activities of survey and division are interrelated. The document records a sum of money for a survey, and, in a modern real estate term, for a sub-division of the property that had been surveyed. The text of the receipt can hardly be said to be good Byzantine Greek; nevertheless the writer considered that he was composing a legal document and he indulged in a bit of legal redundancy in lines 8-10.

The core of *P. Ness. 58*, lines 6-11, is as follows: --- ἔχομεν ---

6 παρὰ σοῦ κύρω Σεργίου Γεωργίου τὰ δοθέν-
τα ὑμῖν χρικοῦ νομίματα ν[ο(μ).] λζ Ϛ ἀρ(ί)θ(μια)
8 ἐκ τῆς γεωμετρίας τῶν Σαρακινῶν +
ἐκ τῶν δοθέντων σοι ἐκ τοῦ δεσπότου ὑμῶν
Μεσλεμ κυμβούλου, ἐκ τῆς γεωμορίας τ[ῶν]
β(αν)υ Ουαρ +

6 κυρίου 7 ἡμῖν(?), χρικοῦ 8 γεωμετρίας τῶν Σαρακηνῶν 9 τῶν
δοθέντων σοι, ἡμῶν(?) 10 γεωμορίας τ[ῶν]

The commission, representing the community (of landholders and taxpayers?) of Nessana affirms that it has received "from you, Sergius son of George Esq., the 37^{1/2} gold nomismata that were given to us in consequence of the land survey of the Saracens; (and) in consequence of the moneys given you by our lord Meslem the governor in consequence of the sub-division of the property of the bani Ouar."

Lines 7-8 attest only that the commission has received the 37^{1/2} solidi from Sergius for the survey; lines 9-11 attest that the money was given to Sergius by the governor and that it covered the sub-division of property connected with the bani Ouar. The writer of the receipt unfortunately did not make crystal clear that the sum of money given to the commission by Sergius covered both the survey and the sub-division of the property. However, there seems to be no question that the receipt contained all aspects for which the money was given, and that the money was given to Sergius by the governor. Hence, *P. Ness. 58* cannot be viewed as a receipt for tax on assigned land.

If the above presentation is on the right track, it may be possible to reassemble some of the elements that led to the move of the Umayyad governor to survey and sub-divide property at Nessana. The town of Nessana was an economically viable community in semi-arid Southern Palestine. Despite limited amounts of rainfall and no perennial springs, the town sustained itself agriculturally by diverting run-off to plots of land in the numerous wadis surrounding the town.⁵ Cereals and olives were grown in sufficient quantity not only to feed the inhabitants but also to furnish, as the Nessana *entagia* (*P. Ness. 60-63; 65-67*) show, supplies of wheat and olive oil that were requisitioned by the Umayyad administration. It is

⁵ For a description of the hydrological system and the Nessana papyri relating to agriculture, see P. Mayerson in *Excavations at Nessana I*, H.D. Colt, ed. (London 1962) 231-246; 227-231; 259-263).

also more than probable that the vineyards of the town supplied the grapes that help make the name of Gaza famous for its wine (P. Mayerson, *BASOR* 257 [1985] 75-80). Yet another source of income was derived from pilgrim traffic to Mount Sinai which continued unabated under the Umayyads (*idem*, *Israel Expl. Journal* 32 [1982] 44-57). *P. Ness.* 72-73, dated to 684? and 683?, represent orders from the Arab governor to provide the services of a guide to escort two individuals to the Holy Mountain. Additional revenues were also possible, if, as *P. Ness.* 92 and 93 suggest, an Arab garrison or military command had been posted to Nessana—the town had a Roman fort and a *numerus* had been stationed there during the fifth and sixth centuries.

The Sergius of *P. Ness.* 58 had risen from presbyter to father-superior of the monastic community, and as such was one of the town's leading men, if not the leading man as is indicated by the honorific title of κύριος in line 6.⁶ It was he to whom the governor Meslem, presumably of Gaza, gave the sum of money with instructions for the town to conduct a survey and a sub-division. Whose money was involved is of course not known: it may have been provided by the governor to purchase land for the bani Ouar, or it may have been payed to the governor by the tribe. It is also quite possible that the "survey of the Saracens" was on a large scale and not intended solely for the bani Ouar but for settling other tribes as well on the surveyed land. Equally unknown is the kind of land that was surveyed: abandoned land? land taken by force? by treaty with the town? purchased for Muslim settlement?⁷ We cannot say other than to point out that productive tillable land in this region required long lines of stone walls, somewhat similar to terrace walls, to secure sufficient moisture for growing crops. Land previously cultivated would have been the most desirable. All that can be assumed is that the survey was conducted by the town and the Sergius was turning over the money to the commission to dispense it as had been agreed upon. As for the sub-division, whether for part or all the land surveyed, it surely concerned the tribe, since for tax purposes the land given to or purchased by the bani Ouar had to be sub-divided in order to determine which individual was to be responsible for the tax on the land assigned to him.

It appears evident that *P. Ness.* 58 fits neatly into the picture of Umayyad settlement in Palestine. Apart from the two *vaticinia*, the scores of Umayyad inscriptions that are found throughout the Negev, and the archaeological material that is being brought to light—all of which attest to the Umayyad policy of settlement on newly conquered lands—the Nessana document is unique in that it provides direct evidence of a transaction that put that policy into effect.

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⁶ Sergius is a presbyter in *P. Ness.* 57, dated to 689; in *P. Ness.* 77, dated to c. 685-690, he is ἡγούμενος. See also *P. Ness.* III pp. 6-7. In *P. Ness.* 68,70,74, all dated prior to 686, the same honorific title is given to George, the *dioecetes* of Nessana. It appears that Sergius took over this administrative post having to do with finances, and as *dioecetes* he would be in communication with the governor.

⁷ See F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquest* (Princeton 1981) 240.