

Camels, Soldiers, and Pilgrims in Sixth Century Nessana¹

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Introduction

Some of our most detailed evidence for the social lives of Roman soldiers at the end of antiquity comes from the papyri dating between ca. AD 500 and 700 which were recovered from Nessana, a village in the Negev in southern Israel. The soldiers left behind a number of documents that illuminate their actions in the wider community. These documents are significant, for most surviving papyri from late antiquity hail from Egypt, and our evidence for the southern Levant tends to be restricted to physical evidence from a few excavated fortresses, and occasional remarks in the literary sources. Despite the inestimable value of the Nessana papyri to our understanding of social aspects of the late Roman military, they have not attracted as much attention as they should have. Before this can be undertaken, however, there are still some outstanding details about the archive and the soldiers that need clarification. There are four issues in particular that we will focus on here: 1. whether the name usually ascribed to this unit, the ‘*arithmos* of the most loyal Theodosians’, is appropriate; 2. whether one of the papyri from the collection, *P. Ness.* 3.35, really does provide evidence of two different kinds of camel at the site; 3. whether we should consider the so-called “soldiers archive”, the name given to the papyri numbered 14-30 in the collection, an official archive; 4. and whether the term *kastron*, found in a number of papyri, should be associated with the fortified enclosure at Nessana, and from that whether the space was exclusively military in nature. An examination of these four points should allow us to clarify the character and identify of the military community within sixth-century Nessana, especially with respect to the connection between the soldiers and late antique pilgrimage, a point to which we will return near the end of this paper.²

¹ I would like to thank a number of people for improving this paper: the audience at the Classical Association of the Canadian West (Winnipeg, 2015) panel in which this paper was presented; Michael MacKinnon, who helped me with a query on camel bones; Matt Gibbs and Mike Sampson, who gave me valuable advice on papyrological matters; Philip Rance, who provided detailed criticism on an earlier draft; and the two readers (the latter being the editor Ben Isaac) at *SCI*, who improved this paper immensely. All translations from the Greek are mine unless otherwise specified. With respect to names, I have opted for the conventional English spelling where one exists (hence Stephan, not Stephanos), Latinized forms where these are familiar, and transliterated the Greek where no conventional English or Latin forms exist.

² Note I am only considering the period when the town was under Roman control, at least as represented in the papyri (i.e. 6th c.).

The Most Loyal Theodosians

The first issue to discuss is the unit's alleged name. There is still some debate over whether the alleged unit at Nessana should be called 'the *arithmos* of the Most Loyal Theodosians'.³ That name appears in but one papyrus dated to 512, *P. Ness.* 3.15, and involves two soldiers, a Flavius Stephan and a Flavius Aws. Although the papyrus was recovered at Nessana, and even though the two soldiers claim that they were from Nessana (ἀπ[ὸ] κώμης Νεσσάνων), the mention of a different locale has led to claims that the name provided in *P. Ness.* 3.15 does not apply to the unit at Nessana.⁴ Indeed, it so happens that the papyrus says that the two men now reside in Rhinocorura (τῶν ἐνταῦθα ἐπὶ τῆς Ῥινοκοροριτῶν ἔχ[ο]ντες), a town on the Mediterranean coast. Rhinocorura, modern El Arish, is easily reached from Nessana. There was a road from Nessana to Raphia, and from there it was not far along the coast to Rhinocorura. Now, it is entirely possible that the unit was based in Nessana and that detachments, of which these men might have comprised a part, carried out a variety of operations from a location a bit further away, such as Rhinocorura. On the other hand, a document such as this papyrus, which was found in one location, Nessana, listing a military unit in operation in a different location, Rhinocorura, is no proof that the unit was based at the initial findspot (Nessana). Ultimately, we lack definitive evidence to state conclusively whether or not the title, 'Most Loyal Theodosians', should be applied to the presumed unit of the soldiers we find in abundance in Nessana. As it stands, the evidence only makes it clear that some personnel of such a unit was based in Rhinocorura, not Nessana. Without additional evidence, we are not likely ever to know what the title of the unit at Nessana was.

What might the name of the unit have been? Isaac has made an interesting suggestion based on the unit names found in the *Notitia Dignitatum*. Isaac notes that there are several units of local horsemen in the east, with four in Palestine alone termed the *equites sagittarii indigenae*;⁵ he adds that they were identified by their locality. On this basis, he postulates that had the unit at Nessana featured in the *Notitia Dignitatum* it would have been called the '*equites sagittarii indigenae*, Nessana'.⁶ It is a plausible suggestion, but we lack evidence to support Isaac's claim. Indeed, the name '*equites sagittarii indigenae*' found in the *Notitia Dignitatum* might instead be a generic description for a unit type rather than a specific title, which means that the unit at Nessana could have been both a unit of '*equites sagittarii indigenae*' while also being a 'Most Loyal Unit of Theodosians' (its possible "official" title). One additional point: we are also in the dark about what kind or class of unit was based at Nessana, and in the absence of any other evidence this too must remain speculation.

³ See too Caner (2010), 11-12; Mayerson (2010), 225; Ward (2015), 117.

⁴ Negev (1990), 343-344; Isaac (1995), 145, n. 92; Rubin (1997), 65. See too Negev 1988: 1-2.

⁵ Isaac (1995), 145

⁶ Isaac (1995), 145.

P. Ness. 3.35, 37, and Camels in Antiquity

The next issue is a larger one, though it has garnered hardly any attention. On the basis of two papyri, *P. Ness. 3.35* and *P. Ness. 3.37*, scholars have claimed that the unit at Nessana was camel-based.⁷ That first papyrus, which dates to the sixth century, has been characterized as a camel levy, while the latter papyrus, which dates to 560-580, has been characterized as an account of military camels. This is all straightforward enough. Where things get more complicated, however, is when we look more closely at the two respective lists and the terminology that they use for camels. *P. Ness. 3.37* provides a list of names of soldiers, and assigns each of them a camel, κάμηλος, and occasionally a destination, like Egypt. For instance, line 33 gives a personal name, a camel, a number, and provides ‘to Egypt’: ‘[Γ]εόργις Ζονενου κά(μηλος) α εις ἔγυπτον’. The same word, namely κάμηλος, is used consistently in the list for camel. Things are a little more complicated, however, in *P. Ness. 3.35*, the so-called camel levy. There we find a mixture of personal names, positions, and places in one column, and, in the second column, at least in all the readings I have seen, a list of camels and the number involved besides each name/position/place. Besides the addition of positions and places, the other principal addition in this papyrus is the use of two different terms for camels. As we see below, we find a mixture of δρομεδάριος and κάμηλος:⁸

δηληγα(τίων). . . ἀπ[ὸ] Νεσάνων **κα(μήλων)** λ (καὶ) **δρο(μεδαρίων)** λδ
 ἀφ’ (ὄν) πριμικηρ(ίω) δρο(μεδάριοι) β
 πρίορ(σι) **δρο(μεδάριοι)** ς
 ((unintelligible)) Σαδος Ἀβρααμίου **δρο(μεδάριος)** α
 ((unintelligible)) Ἀζίζος Στεφάνου **κά(μηλος)** α
 ((unintelligible)) Εὐλόγις Ἀγγαίου **δρο(μεδάριος)** α
 ((unintelligible)) Σέργις Στεφάνου **κά(μηλος)** α
 πεζοαθαι Μηναῖς Λουκιανῶ **δρο(μεδάριος)** α
 δουκικοῖς **δρο(μεδάριοι)** ε
 10 κούρσορ(σι) **δρο(μεδάριοι)** β
 ἀγ(ίους) Γεωργιωργις καὶ . . . μαίρα
 Χαραχμούβων **δρο(μεδάριοι)** β
 ἀγ(ία) ἐκκλησία τοῦ κάστρου **δρο(μεδάριος)** α
 Φεσανης πρεσβύτερος **κά(μηλος)** α
 (καὶ) ἐν τῷ ἐγρητιῶ **κά(μηλοι)** ἰδ **δρο(μεδάριοι)** γ
 (ὄμοῦ) **κά(μηλοι)** (καὶ) **δρο(μεδάριοι)** [-ca.?-]
 [-ca.?-]. **κά(μηλοι)** [. .] **δρο(μεδάριοι)** κγ [-ca.?-]

delegatio . . . from Nessana of 30 **camels** and 34 **camel-riders/dromedarii**
 of those 2 **camel-riders/dromedarii** to the *primicerius*
 for the *priores* 6 **camel-riders/dromedarii**
 (?) Sa’d son of Abraham 1 **camel-rider/dromedarius**
 (?) ‘Aziz son of **Stephan 1 camel**
 (?) Eulogis son of Haggaios 1 **camel-rider/dromedarius**
 (?) Sergis son of Stephan 1 **camel**

⁷ Note, for instance, the comments of Isaac ([1990], 209).

⁸ This is the text of *P. Ness. 3.35* in its entirety (from Kraemer (1958), 108-109), along with my translation.

...Menas son of Lucian 1 **camel-rider/dromedarius**
 for the staff members of the duke 5 camel-riders/*dromedarii*
 for the couriers 2 **camel-riders/dromedarii**
 for Saints George and ...Charachmobos 2 **camel-riders/dromedarii**
 for the holy church of the camp 1 **camel-rider/dromedarius**
 Faysan the priest 1 **camel**
 And in the (?) *expeditus* (?) 14 **camels** and 3 **camel-riders/dromedarii**
 Altogether (?) **camels** and (?) **camel-riders/dromedarii**
 ...**camels**...**camel-riders/dromedarii** 23

The editor – and translator – of the papyrus, Kraemer, translated the first term, δρομεδάριος, as dromedary and the latter, κάμηλος, as camel.⁹ While on the surface this would seem to make sense, a closer examination reveals something else.

There are, in fact, two species of camel, the Arabian camel, the 1-humped dromedary, with the scientific name of *camelus dromedarius*, and the two-humped Bactrian camel, with the scientific name *camelus bactrianus*. Knowledge of two distinct species is not unique to the modern world; in fact, knowledge goes back at least to Aristotle.¹⁰ Pliny the Elder too was aware of this distinction and commented on it. In fact, he even notes that the two kinds were those of Arabia and Bactria: ‘*camelos...duo genera, Bactriae et Arabiae*’.¹¹ When it comes to the physical record, things get a bit more complicated, for the bones of these animals are not as distinct as we might well have imagined. More often than not we cannot determine the species of a camel on the basis of the osteometric data alone, though they can, obviously, let us know the relative sizes of camels at a particular site. For instance, at el-Lejjun in Jordan, a late antique military fortress, camel bones have been found that date to all periods of occupation and they point towards camels of two sizes, larger baggage camels and smaller riding camels.¹² As Toplyn states, however, this does not necessarily mean that both Bactrian and Arabian camels were present at the site.¹³ Indeed, the conditions at el-Lejjun were not ideal for Bactrian camels, and so the different sizes of camel bones might mean that we only have Arabian camels on site. The excavation reports from Nessana are far less comprehensive than that from el-Lejjun. They do reveal, unsurprisingly, that camels were present; but that is all we get.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the conditions are broadly similar, and so what holds for el-Lejjun, at least in this regard, should hold for Nessana too, and the fact is that the conditions at Nessana are not well suited to Bactrian camels. Only one species of camel, then, was probably present at these sites.¹⁵

As we have noted, there are two species of camels, one of which is not suitable to the climactic conditions of Nessana. Ancient Greeks and Romans seem to have been aware of the two species, but this distinction does not materialize in the physical record. A lone papyrus from Nessana seems to give the names of two different camels, the dromedary and the camel. And, on the surface at least, Kraemer’s rendering of κάμηλος and

⁹ Kraemer (1958), 109.

¹⁰ Arist. *De an.* 498b 5.

¹¹ Plin. *HN* 8.67.

¹² Toplyn (2006), 491.

¹³ Toplyn (2006), 491.

¹⁴ Colt (1962), 67; Klenck (2004), 158-159.

¹⁵ Indeed, note the comments of Klenck (2004), 159.

δρομεδάριος does have a kind of logic. The current scientific name of one species of camel is, as noted earlier, *camelus dromedarius*, and moderns regularly call that species of camel a dromedary. Unfortunately, however, a comparative analysis of the ancient evidence reveals something else.¹⁶ While κάμηλος is widely used in Greek from the classical period through late antiquity to denote a camel, this papyrus, as it stands and as interpreted, is the only instance that we have where δρομεδάριος is used to refer to a species of camel. The term, or some variant, though found in the *LSJ*, does not refer, as given, to a camel; moreover, a search of the *TLG* has revealed that the term, or again some variant, is never used in any of the texts found in the database to refer to a camel. We can go further. A search of papyri.info, which contains most published papyri, reveals, again, that the term or some variant does not refer to camel in any of the papyri in the database. The only piece of evidence that uses a form of δρομεδάριος to refer to a species of camel is this papyrus from Nessana. It is also worth noting that the other papyri from Nessana that list camels, *P. Ness.* 3.37, *P. Ness.* 3.74, *P. Ness.* 3.89, and *P. Ness.* 3.160, either use the term κάμηλος alone, or what might be a diminutive (καμήλιον) (*P. Ness.* 3.74, 3.89, 3.160). If we do have a diminutive, this would suggest an awareness of differences in size of camel, but not species. Again, as presently understood, this papyrus would seem to be unique.

The possible exception to this pattern and evidence of comparable terminology comes from some earlier, imperial era, texts, which use some form of the phrase δρομάς καμήλος. Diodorus Siculus, for instance, does on the surface seem to use the phrase δρομάδας καμήλους,¹⁷ as well as δρομάδες on its own,¹⁸ to refer to “dromedaries”. Strabo’s use of the phrase δρομάδων καμήλων in his *Geography* has been translated as ‘dromedary’. It comes in the context of a discussion of the route of Alexander as he marched into Bactria. In this light, it could well mean that the adjective δρομάδος was included to flag the distinction between this kind of camel and the Bactrian camels found in the region. On the other hand, given that the term can also mean ‘wildly roaming’ and ‘frantic’ besides the sense of ‘running’ or ‘swift’, the case for translating δρομάδων καμήλων as dromedary is not conclusive. Indeed, in Strabo’s passage he is specifically remarking on the speed of the travellers, and it strikes me that ‘swift camels’ would convey that sense better than ‘dromedaries’. Josephus, in his *Jewish Antiquities*,¹⁹ uses a variant of the phrase, in his case δρομάσι καμήλοις, that could refer to dromedaries, though as with Strabo there is considerable ambiguity, for speed is again how we should understand δρομάσι in this context. In the former, the Biblical David only escaped by getting on δρομάσι καμήλοις and fleeing. Indeed, the sense of ‘swift’ seems to be how Plutarch uses the phrase when he delves into the meaning of Gaugamela and mentions a mysterious earlier king who fled on a καμήλου δρομάδος, that is a ‘swift camel’.²⁰ Dromedaries might very well be swift, but in the majority of these instances the adjective is being used to describe the speed of the camel rather than its species type.

¹⁶ An analysis undertaken using papyri.info, the *TLG*, and the *LSJ*.

¹⁷ Diod. Sic. 19.37.

¹⁸ Diod. Sic. 2.6.

¹⁹ Jos. *AJ* 6.14.6.

²⁰ Plut. *Alex.* 31.3.

Regardless of how we should understand the word *δρομάδος*, the ambiguity is telling, and provides a clue as to how we should understand *δρομεδάριος*. Indeed, I would argue that we should translate *δρομεδάριος* as found in *P. Ness.* 3.35 not as dromedary, that is as a species of camel, but as camel rider. For while there is no evidence for *δρομεδάριος* meaning camel in any other surviving piece of classical or late antique evidence, there is plenty of evidence, especially from late antiquity, for *δρομεδάριος*, in Greek or Latin, as camel rider, particularly amongst the Egyptian papyri and ostraka that deal with military matters, though we also find the term used in a comparable way in the late antique list of political and military offices called the *Notitia Dignitatum*. Indeed, although *dromedarius* might have originally referred to camel-riders alone, it was not long before the term came to be used in military contexts.²¹ In fact, there was a long history of camel usage in the Roman military, with references to camel usage dating back to the earlier imperial period.²² They seem to have been widely used, especially as a means of transporting goods, in Roman occupied desert regions. For instance, there is plenty of evidence for their presence and use as a means of transporting goods by the military in the deserts of Egypt.²³ If we move ahead a bit later in time, we find all sorts of evidence for the presence of camels amongst the soldiers based at Dura Europos in Syria in the third century. Although not specifically called a camel corps, most scholars assume that the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum* was just that.²⁴ *P. Dura* 82,²⁵ a so-called morning report for the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum* that dates to AD 223-235, mentions *dromedarii*. Although the unit was not comprised solely of camel riders, they undoubtedly were a significant part of the unit's cohort of soldiers.

As noted, if we shift to late antiquity, we find both the Latin and the Greek forms being used in military contexts to refer to camel riders, including the *Notitia Dignitatum*. There are three units of *dromedarii* found in the *Notitia Dignitatum*: the *ala Antana dromedariorum* found in Palestine;²⁶ and the *ala tertia dromedariorum* and the *ala secunda Herculia dromedariorum* both found in the Thebaid.²⁷ It is worth noting that it is in the Thebaid that the bulk of the earlier attestations of *dromedarii* in Egypt are found. There are also a number of ostraka that attest to the presence of *dromedarii* in the deserts of Egypt, also in the Thebaid.²⁸ There is then plenty of evidence from late antiquity for a form of *dromedarius* meaning camel rider in military contexts, and this is how we should understand and translate the *δρομεδάριος* found in the Nessana papyrus.²⁹ The papyrus in question, then, is less a document that shows different kinds of camels being distributed by different classes of people, and more a document that illustrates the organization of the supply of camels and their riders from the village of Nessana. Whether this means that we should consider the unit at Nessana as comprised

²¹ cf. Dabrowa (1991).

²² Note the brief overview of Rance (2015).

²³ Adams (2007), 49-56, 196-219.

²⁴ Spaul (2000), 434-436; James (2004), 19; Toplyn (2006), 489.

²⁵ Fink *RMR* 47.

²⁶ *Not. Dign. or.* 34.33.

²⁷ *Not. Dign. or.* 31.48, 54.

²⁸ *O. Douch.* 1.53; 3.198, 266; 4.375, 406, 467; 5.551, 582, 598, 609, 618, 624, 625, 630.

²⁹ *P. Ness.* 3.34.35.

of camel riders — Kraemer himself did call them *dromedarii*³⁰ — is another matter. Although this new reading of *P. Ness.* 3.35 does point in that direction (it was a unit of *dromedarii*), this is far from certain. After all, the unit was based in a region where camel usage was widespread, so we should not be surprised to find camel usage amongst the regional soldiers, regardless of whether camel riding was their particular function. In addition, now that it is clear that the document does not refer to camels alone, we should no longer understand it as a camel levy; rather, it is better characterized as a camel and camel-rider assignment, or even distribution, something which the term *delegatio* itself, found on the papyrus, implies. Before we turn to the implications of the reading of the papyrus offered here, a few comments on the “soldiers archive” are in order.

The so-called “Soldiers’ Archive”

A significant chunk of the Nessana papyri, running from numbers 14-30, has been called the “soldiers’ archive” since their initial publication. In Kraemer’s estimation, the papyri are ‘so distinctive in form and content that they are certainly to be regarded as an archive’.³¹ He also comments on their formal nature, and suggests that the military headquarters might have served as a repository for important papers, such as these. And yet, as R. Stroumsa, who wrote a dissertation on identity at Nessana, noted,³² the bulk of the texts from the archive deal with civilian matters. Thus, while the texts in the archive certainly involve soldiers and could be considered formal insofar as they deal with important documents to those involved, such as marriage contracts,³³ property divisions,³⁴ and inheritances,³⁵ why they would then be stashed in the headquarters — an official location,³⁶ and presumably, then, their original location — is another matter. In fact, the papyri were found at churches in Nessana, and the bulk of the papyri that made up the co-called “Soldiers’ Archive” were found in Room 3 of the Church of Mary Mother of God (South Church), which was not directly adjacent to the fortified citadel, and the rest were found in the Church of saints Sergius and Bacchus (North Church).³⁷ The recovery of papyri from churches is not itself unusual. The papyri from Petra, which constitute the other major collection of papyri from the late antique near east outside of Egypt, were also found in a room (Room 1) attached to a church.³⁸ Thus, while the recovery of the Nessana papyri from a church is not proof that they might not have been stored in the headquarters at some stage, it is curious. So too is the fact that this alleged

³⁰ Kraemer (1958), 20-21. Note the comments of Rance ((2015), 125).

³¹ Kraemer (1958), 5.

³² Stroumsa (2008), 52-53.

³³ *P. Ness.* 3.20.

³⁴ *P. Ness.* 3.21.

³⁵ *P. Ness.* 3.22.

³⁶ There was a cellar (*aerarium*) under the *sacellum*, the shrine of the standards, in the legionary fortresses of the principate, which held an iron-bound box that for all intents and purposes was the soldiers’ bank, and which might well have been where documentation such as this was kept too. I owe this point (pers. comm.) to Benjamin Isaac. See too Webster ((1998), 194).

³⁷ Kraemer (1958), 3-4.

³⁸ Fiema 2007a.

archive was found in two different structures.³⁹ There are only three documents amongst the papyri that could be considered official, at least in terms of military administration, the aforementioned *P. Ness.* 3.35 and 3.37, as well as *P. Ness.* 3.36; but these are not included in the archive.⁴⁰ Though the quest for official information might seem anachronistic, especially if we are looking for the kind of detail we find in the documentary record of modern militaries, the fact is we have other collections of papyri, or at least documentary material, that could be considered official, at least with respect to what they have to say about the management of a military unit – and even though they are all a bit earlier (late first through mid-fourth centuries). There are the Vindolanda Tablets, which include documents that cover a range of subject matter from requests for leave⁴¹ to reports on the military character of Britons.⁴² There are the ubiquitous reports from Dura Europos, including its well-known strength and morning reports,⁴³ and the Abinnaeus archive, which though concerned with the career of one man, does include more of the sorts of documents that we expect would be useful for those administering a military unit, such as official letters of complaint from concerned citizens.⁴⁴ We find none of the sorts of documents that we have in those collections in the archive from Nessana. What we have instead is a host of papyri that involve soldiers who are, for the most part, acting in an unofficial capacity — they would seem to be a private archive, perhaps more along the lines of the Patermuthis archive at Elephantine.⁴⁵ Soldiers archive though it may be, it is, as R. Stroumsa noted, in no way connected to the running of a military unit.

The *Kastron* of Nessana and the Citadel

Ostensibly, a fundamental component of the military identity of the site is the presence of the fortified structure on the acropolis, which may or may not be connected to the *kastron* named, or at least referred to, regularly in the papyri. Before we examine the presumed military character of the citadel, some clarification about the meaning of the term *kastron* as found in the papyri is in order.

Kastron was used in a variety of ways in sites across the eastern empire in late antiquity.⁴⁶ By some reckoning, in the sixth century a *kastron* could refer either to a smaller fortified settlement, or it could be synonymous with *polis*.⁴⁷ If we look at other late antique sites we find that Mango calls the barracks at Androna *kastron*,⁴⁸ while Millar simply notes that a particular building at Androna, called a *kastron*, is secular in

³⁹ See Ruffini ([2011], 207).

⁴⁰ Note Isaac's ([1990], 209) description of the archive.

⁴¹ *T. Vindol.* 2.175.

⁴² *T. Vindol.* 2.164.

⁴³ *P. Dura* 82 = Fink, *RMR* 47.

⁴⁴ *P. Abinn.* 18.

⁴⁵ Porten (1996).

⁴⁶ On the varied meanings of the Latin *castra* in fourth century Arabia see Isaac ([1990], 173).

⁴⁷ Fiema (2007b), 315.

⁴⁸ Mango (1998), 1.

character.⁴⁹ Holum uses *kastron* at Caesarea to refer to the fortified part of the city.⁵⁰ Some have argued that the *kastron* at Nicopolis ad Istrum in the Balkans was associated with a religious space.⁵¹ *Kastron* is also used as part of the full name of some sites. The World Heritage Site Umm er-Rasas, also known as *Kastron Mefa'a*, was a military encampment in the fourth century,⁵² which might have housed Arab federates in the sixth century,⁵³ while in the Petra papyri we find individuals associated with *Kastron Ammatha*, such as a Flavius Dousarios, who was an ex-prefect of said *Kastron Ammatha*.⁵⁴ The design of the fortified enclosure at Nessana, which might be associated with the term *kastron*, does share features with known forts in the east, which are often irregular.⁵⁵ It resembles in some ways the fortified structure at Qaşr Bshir, for instance, conveniently called *castra praetorii Mobeni* (the name is in the ablative) in an inscription.⁵⁶ Yet it also resembles a late Roman villa in the Balkans, particularly Mogorjelo off Caplijina in Bosnia.⁵⁷ As this sweeping survey shows, a straightforward definition for *kastron* in the sixth century is hard to come by. This also means that making a connection between the *kastron* of the papyri with the fortified enclosure at Nessana is fraught with difficulty. If we focus on the enclosure first, not all scholars have accepted the purely military identification of this fortified space.⁵⁸ Lewin, for instance, has said that what is labelled as the fort at Nessana is in fact little more than the fortified citadel of the upper portion of the village.⁵⁹ Isaac made the same observation a little earlier.⁶⁰

Some form of *kastron* appears in fifteen papyri from Nessana.⁶¹ Of those, eleven are concerned with matters involving soldiers and date to the sixth century, the period when Nessana had a garrison of Roman soldiers.⁶² In these instances, *kastron* almost without fail conveys the sense that the term refers to a specifically military space, or at least designation. For instance, we find *kastron*, invariably in the genitive, in a phrase along the lines of: ‘such and such a **soldier from the camp there** [στρατ(ιώτης) τοῦ ἐνθάδε

⁴⁹ Millar (2013), 44. See too Millar (2008), 72-82, who discusses sites on the Middle Euphrates, and so occasionally mentions those structures and cities called *kastra*.

⁵⁰ Holum (2005), 104.

⁵¹ Niewöhner (2007), 141. Cf. Dunn (1994).

⁵² Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 128.21-23. See too Lewin (2001), Kennedy ([2004], 137-140), and Millar ([2013], 46-48).

⁵³ Lewin (2007), 474-77. See too Lewin ([2011], 255-56).

⁵⁴ Fiema (2002), 230. Cf. Gagos and Frösén (1998), 475.

⁵⁵ Note the discussion in Sarantis ([2013], 338-360).

⁵⁶ *AE* 1897, 125. Cf. *CIL* III.14149. See the discussion of Isaac ([1990], 172-173), who calls the structure a fortified road-station, and Kennedy ([2004], 148-149), who calls it a fort.

⁵⁷ Note the plan at the bottom of the webpage at http://kons.gov.ba/main.php?id_struct=50&lang=4&action=view&id=186.

⁵⁸ Fiema ([2007], 315) notes that Nessana is called both a *kastron* and a *kome* in the papyri.

⁵⁹ Lewin (2007), 470.

⁶⁰ Isaac (1995), 146.

⁶¹ *P. Ness.* 3.16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 29, 35, 36.

⁶² The unit was disbanded at the end of the sixth century or beginning of the seventh. *P. Ness.* 3.29, which dates to December 23, 590, attests the presence of soldiers at Nessana at least that late. See too Isaac ([1990], 209, n. 213).

κάστρου]'.⁶³ There are four exceptions. One is *P. Ness.* 3.31, a papyrus which we cannot date precisely, where *kastron* would seem to denote the fortified citadel (or at least the raised position of the *kastron*): ὄρος τοῦ κάστρου, or 'hill of the camp'.⁶⁴ Two date to the seventh century, when the word *kastron* now seems to mean *kōmē* (like we noted above with *Kastron Mefa'a*), that is a settlement or village. Those seventh century papyri are *P. Ness.* 3.46 and *P. Ness.* 3.55, where we find, among other things, ἀπὸ κάστρου Νεσσάνων. The outstanding papyrus is *P. Ness.* 3.141, which survives as little more than a line, and so is no help in this matter. As noted, in those surviving papyri which refer to a form of *kastron* and which date to the sixth century, when there was a clear Roman military presence, the term has a military association (soldiers are invariably named and singled out). The term also may allude to the fortified citadel, though at first glance the evidence is insufficient.

There is, however, some additional support for the connection between the soldiers, the citadel, and *kastron*. Seven of the securely datable sixth-century papyri that we have already discussed in this section mention both terms, *kastron* and *kōmē*: *P. Ness.* 3.16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, and 26. In all seven, and as suggested above, *kastron* is used to designate a particular space within the village of Nessana (ἐν κώμῃ Νεσσάνοις).⁶⁵ Indeed, the fact that we frequently find the distinction, 'soldier of the camp **here** [στρατιώτης τοῦ ἐνθάδε κάστρου]', is suggestive, for the implication is that *kastron* is a distinct space inside Nessana. The word ἐνθάδε appears six times in the collection, and in all six papyri, *P. Ness.* 3.18, 20, 21, 22, 24, and 26, the word is used to single out the location of the *kastron* within Nessana: τοῦ ἐνθάδε κάστρου. The most likely location for the *kastron* in Nessana is the citadel, which, as noted above, shares many architectural features with the fortified enclosures we find on other sixth-century eastern Mediterranean military sites.

What we also find is that what *kastron* cannot do is replace some form of *kōmē*, which is the official designation for Nessana in all but one⁶⁶ of the twelve surviving, and securely datable, sixth-century papyri in which the term appears.⁶⁷ In most previous papyri, when Nessana is given its official title,⁶⁸ a form of *kōmē* is used. *Kastron*, as used in sixth century papyri from Nessana, is connected with the attendant soldiery based in the village; moreover, it undoubtedly refers to some sort of military space, and most likely the fortified enclosure or citadel. In the seventh century, *kastron* came to be used in the same way that *kōmē* was in those sixth-century papyri in which it appeared alongside Nessana.

Given the links we have proposed between Nessana's soldiers, the *kastron*, and the fortified enclosure, does this make the *kastron* an exclusively military space? Probably not. At Nessana the papyri point towards the close interaction between soldiers and civilians, long a fact of life on Roman frontiers. It seems too that this interaction

⁶³ The example given is from *P. Ness.* 3.22, line 6.

⁶⁴ See Kraemer ((1958), 98-100).

⁶⁵ The Greek is from *P. Ness.* 3.16.

⁶⁶ *P. Ness.* 3.31.

⁶⁷ *P. Ness.* 3.15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 30.

⁶⁸ The official designation seems to have been, "Nessana Village, Elusa City District", κώμη Νεσσάνοις ὀρίου πόλεως] [Ἐλούση], which we find in *P. Ness.* 3.20, for example.

extended to a wide variety of different parts of the village. Indeed, regardless of whether the *kastron* in the papyri from Nessana is to be identified with the fortified enclosure, that citadel might have operated in the same way as the *kastron* mentioned in Ammonius' *Relatio*, which, though earlier and set in the mid-fourth century, involves monks at Rhaithou who fled into the town's *kastron* in the wake of a Blemmyes attack.⁶⁹

Indeed, there is not much in the way of evidence that supports an exclusively military character for the citadel. Some imagery that could be considered military was found at Nessana, though it is limited in number. A cement cork with a human figure holding a spear and a snake from a jar was uncovered in the fortified area.⁷⁰ There is a piece of chalk with a drawing of a man and a horse, and the man seems to be in military dress.⁷¹ Finally, there are also a handful of graffiti, a number of which depict what could be described as cataphracts, or at least mounted warriors.⁷² One graffito even seems to depict a *dromedarius* — that is a camel rider.⁷³ If we focus on the citadel alone, we find that there are no published military finds from the enclosure, though this is not, in itself, surprising.

The citadel at Nessana does not seem to have been used exclusively by the military, for members of the church likely made use of it too, an issue to which we now turn. Indeed, it seems likely that the citadel had a number of functions, one of which we will discuss in the next section.⁷⁴ There is no doubt that the military was well-integrated into village life.⁷⁵ The papyri also seem to suggest that the soldiers likely lived in the village. If they were actively involved in the pilgrimage industry, which we argue they were below, they might well have carried out some or most of their duties in Nessana itself connected to that industry in that enclosure, which is the space most strongly connected to the soldiers in the papyri.⁷⁶

Soldiers and Pilgrims

The garrison from Nessana has long been considered well integrated into village life, and if anything the paper to this point seems to reinforce such a view. So far as we know, the garrison did not have the official-sounding name found in *P. Ness.* 3.15. The papyrus, *P. Ness.* 3.35, which had seemed to show differentiation in camel apportioning in Nessana, shows instead that the village was responsible for providing both men and beasts for a wide variety of duties. The soldiers archive is far less official than it is often made out to be. And, the *kastron* might not have been used exclusively by the military. Indeed, there are a few more points worth making in relation to that last comment, which demonstrate

⁶⁹ Ammonius Monachus, *Relatio* (CPA), fol. 32; (Greek) 20. Cf. Ward ([2015], 98) on Ammonius and this attack, and Dijkstra (2014) on the Blemmyes.

⁷⁰ Urman (2004), 28, Fig. 29.

⁷¹ Colt (1962), 170, n. 85. Cf. plate xxvii, n. 10.

⁷² Colt (1962), plate xxvii, n. 7, 12, 13, and 14.

⁷³ Colt (1962), plate xxvii, n. 11.

⁷⁴ See Isaac ([1990], 207).

⁷⁵ Isaac (1990), 209; Rubin (1997).

⁷⁶ Note the comments of Ruffini ([2011], 202).

further the garrison's connection to the wider community, and its role in one of that community's most important activities.

There is every indication that the fortified enclosure at Nessana was connected to the religious community, for religious buildings were constructed adjacent to the fortified enclosure at various points in the village's late antique history, including when the *kastron* was originally built, possibly in the late fourth century, and during the period when a significant number of the papyri were written, the sixth century.⁷⁷ In addition, there is a possible allusion to the soldiers' activities in an independent source, namely in the account written by the Piacenza Pilgrim in the sixth century. Therein we find a reference to a fort, at the twentieth milestone in the desert from Elusa, which is connected to a guesthouse of St. George.⁷⁸ Although we lack definitive evidence for its identification with Nessana, Caner, for one, has made a strong case for identifying the pilgrim's *castrum* with Nessana.⁷⁹ That identification hinges on the presence of the *kastron* and a caravanserai at Nessana, on its location in relation to Elusa (mentioned in the text), and on the discovery of a copy of the *Acts of St. George* at the site.⁸⁰ Caner, later supported by Ward, goes on to argue that some of the papyri support this impression that Nessana played an important role in pilgrim traffic in the region.⁸¹ Ward extends this line of inquiry further, and claims that this was the function of a host of the forts in the region, that is as a means of protection for pilgrims — and caravans, for that matter.⁸² Although soldiers are not mentioned specifically in the context of Nessana (or what could be Nessana) in the Piacenza Pilgrim's *Travelogue*, they do feature when the discussion turns to Pharan in the Sinai.⁸³ The travelogue is short on detail in a number of spots, and it is easy enough to imagine the soldiers being left out of the discussion. In other words, their absence in the text need not mean that they were absent from the pilgrimage industry in reality.

There is some additional support for this view, for Di Segni has made a strong case for connecting the *Beersheba Edicts*, and the taxes referred to therein, to the military's role in this pilgrimage activity. On the basis of her analysis of those tax edicts she argues that the taxes listed were aimed at the landowning and military communities mentioned in the inscription, and that the purpose of the tax was to provide funding so that the commanding officer, a *dux*, 'an officer — one for each large area, comprising several

⁷⁷ Urman (2004), 114-115.

⁷⁸ Piac. 35: Ad XX milia est *castrum*, in quo eo xenodochium sancti Georgi, in quo habent quasi refugium transeuntes vel eremitae stipendia.

⁷⁹ Caner (2010), 255, n. 13.

⁸⁰ The remains of the copy of the *Acts of St. George* are found in *P. Ness.* 2.6. It is worth noting that Qasr Bshir, the plan of which, as we noted above, resembles the *kastron* at Nessana, might have functioned in the same way as Nessana. In other words, they both might have been 'halting-stations'. See Isaac ([1990], 173).

⁸¹ Caner (2010), 267; Ward (2015), 62. Cf. *P. Ness.* 3.72, 73, 89.

⁸² Ward (2015), 120.

⁸³ *Travels*, 40. The relevant portions of the passage read: 'Eighty garrison men serve the state with their wives, receiving state-issued supplies and uniforms from Egypt...everyday they patrol the desert, each on a Saracen horse (for which they receive straw and barley as fodder from the state) as a guard for the monasteries and hermits, on account of attacks by Saracens' (trans. Caner). See too Di Segni (2004), 147.

villages — who would have been in charge of supervising and coordinating the work of small units of camel drivers acting as carriers, escorts and guides for the caravans', could pay for the upkeep of those involved in the pilgrimage industry.⁸⁴ In fact, if we look more closely at the papyri in the collection at Nessana that detail in some way the activities of soldiers, and if we exclude marriage contracts, property divisions, and the like, we find that the very few we have might be connected in some way with this pilgrimage industry. The aforementioned *P. Ness.* 3.35, for instance, refers to both priests and the church of the *kastron* (Nessana). One camel rider (*dromedarius*) is set aside for the holy church of the *kastron*, and one camel for the priest Faysan. There is also the reference of two *dromedarii* for the saints George and, possibly, a Charachmobos. If nothing else, it seems that church officials — assuming Faysan should be attached to a local church and the obscure saints are also connected — are in need of camels and camel riders for some unknown activities, and it is tempting, given the overall context, to associate these activities with pilgrimage. Furthermore, several of those papyri from before the Islamic conquest that do not deal with personal business (marriages, loans, transfers, etc.) are concerned with church business, or at least involve church officials, in some way or other.⁸⁵ Along the same lines, some have connected the mysterious *P. Ness.* 3.39, which Kramer called an 'account of allotments by villages',⁸⁶ to the tax collection detailed in the *Beersheba Edicts*.⁸⁷ Ultimately, the physical connection of the *kastron* to some of Nessana's principal religious buildings was not arbitrary, for there is good reason to argue that the soldiers at Nessana were intimately involved with the pilgrimage industry.

Conclusion

There is quite a lot of evidence for the presence of soldiers, who were intimately involved in village affairs,⁸⁸ in Nessana in the sixth century. What we should hesitate to do, however, is identify the unit as the Most Loyal Theodosians on the basis of one papyrus, which itself is ambiguous. Camels did play a part in day-to-day life at Nessana, and they very well might have been involved with the soldiers (the presence of a *dromedarius* graffito and this new reading of *P. Ness.* 3.35 are suggestive), though only one species of camel is firmly attested in the documentary evidence, not two. Nessana does seem to have provided camels for a variety of functions, but also camel riders, which is what *P. Ness.* 3.35 actually states. The papyri involving soldiers at Nessana almost without fail deal with civilian matters, not official military ones, which is, perhaps, unsurprising. In other words, though the presence of soldiers is not in doubt, the military character of the village deserves reconsideration. This interpretation is reinforced when we look more closely at the physical remains from the village, especially those connected to the *kastron*, and when we try to situate Nessana within the broader regional context, and the pilgrimage industry in particular. To close, on the basis

⁸⁴ Di Segni (2004), 150-151.

⁸⁵ Note, for example, *P. Ness.* 3.50-53.

⁸⁶ Kraemer (1958), 119.

⁸⁷ Negev (1990), 146-151. Though note the comments of Di Segni (2004), 141-43.

⁸⁸ cf. Ruffini (2011).

of this analysis, Nessana seems to have been a base for men and materials often deployed or dispatched elsewhere, some of which might have performed military duties, and a good deal of which were likely involved with the pilgrimage industry.

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