Excavations in the village of Nessana, in southern Israel/Palestine, by the American Colt Expedition in the 1930s brought to light a corpus of papyri that comprise almost 200 documents as well as a number of literary and theological items. They were found in two caches in two separate churches, that of the Theotokos in the south of the village and that of Saints Sergius and Bacchus to the north. The texts span the sixth and seventh centuries and so are able to reveal to us aspects of the life of this community both before and after the Arab conquests. There are about 40 papyri pertaining to the Islamic period, dealing with taxation, compulsory service, farming, provisioning of the army, and personal matters. One of the papyri, numbered 77, was mislaid and so was not transported to America with the rest of the corpus. The Greek text (Fig. 2.1) on one side of it was published on the basis of a photograph, but the Arabic text (Fig. 2.2) that was on the other side was not published, though the editors do not explain why. Presumably it made its way to the Rockefeller Museum, where most ancient artifacts were stored at that time, and there slumbered in obscurity until it was rediscovered by Professor Hannah Cotton in the course of a cataloging exercise (see appendix below). The Arabic text comprises two letters, the significance of which I shall first discuss before proceeding to present their edition and translation.

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1 I dedicate this paper affectionately to Patricia whose enthusiastic and inspired teaching was what first drew me to the field of Islamic history. I am very grateful to Hannah Cotton, Werner Diem, Geoffrey Khan, Marie Legendre, Lucian Reinfandt, Irfan Shahid, Petra Sijpesteijn, and Khalid Younes, who have discussed this papyrus with me and offered helpful comments.

2 Excavations at Nessana, 3.222–5, though in the section on P. Nessana 56 there is a brief allusion to the contents of the Arabic part of P. Nessana 77, principally because Yazid ibn Fā'id features in both texts (ibid., 159).
The Relationship and Nature of the Arabic and Greek Texts

As noted above, there is writing on both sides of this papyrus, in Greek on one side and in Arabic on the other. The Greek side records tax payments made by a number of Nessana residents and it has no connection at all with the content of the Arabic side, which comprises correspondence between a superior official and some of his subordinates. The Arabic texts are written across/perpendicular to the fibers of the papyrus, which had become the prevailing practice for letters since at least the sixth century, whereas the Greek text is written along/parallel to the fibers. This on its own would seem to indicate that the Arabic precedes the Greek, but it is worth also considering the nature of the texts.

The presence of two letters on the Arabic side and the lack of any address suggest that they were not actually sent. Probably they were copies of the originals (which had been sent) kept for some legal or administrative purpose. Yazīd ibn Fāʾid was a government agent with some sort of authority (probably fiscal) over Nessana and so it is not surprising that correspondence involving him might be copied and kept at Nessana, especially as one of the letters made clear that the Nessanites were protected against despoliation by such agents. The Greek text is of purely local interest – an informal record of tax payments of some Nessana residents – and so it is possible that it was written on the back of the Arabic text when the latter had lost its importance. There are in fact a number of papyri which follow this pattern; that is, a formal text written across the fibers and on the other side a less formal set of accounts written along the

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3 Fournet, “Esquisse,” esp. 29–31; Grob, Documentary Arabic, 173 (but also see p. 175 regarding “other formats”). It is the prevalent practice in the Islamic-period Nessana papyri – thus in P. Nessana 55–76 the writing is always across the fibers.

4 Gonis, “Fiscal Documents,” 198, gives the example of documents that contain entagia (tax demands) "written consecutively on the same sheet of papyrus, but not cut up, which implies that the entagia were probably never dispatched." However, Khan, Arabic Papyri, 99–102, publishes a papyrus that bears two quittances from the same person and appears to understand that it was sent (my thanks to Marie Legendre for this reference).

5 This may explain the omission of ammā baʿda in the first letter, which is a fundamental epistolary formula, and the first name of Ibn Ḥusayn in the second letter; they were presumably omitted by mistake, but in a copy it would not be crucial to correct it.

6 It is the same sender in both letters, so one might argue that they belong to his archive, but since he was most likely the governor in Gaza (or at least at some official headquarters of the Muslim regime) it is hard to see how a papyrus from his archive would then have ended up in Nessana, which was not a Muslim administrative center at this time.