

Feeding Nessus

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 16 Aug 1999

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Roy C. Lackey — 16 Aug 1999, 16:26

John Bishop wrote:

1. Gyll is a big river, which implies a big valley upstream, and allows river transport of bulk cargo like grain. So a large urban population could be fed, even if local productivity is low. There's no mention of significant food shortages that I can recall.<

[snip]

3. How big is Nessus anyway? Much of it is ruined and largely abandoned, and the actual population might be quite small.

I envisioned it as being a large, circular ruin, with small populations living along the river and nearby. And that population doesn't extend the full length of the urban shoreline, as we are told that the abandoned downstream portion of the city is huge. Indeed, we are told the population is declining, and has been so for some time.<

In the fiacre, traveling to the House Azure (I, VIII, p-72) Sev comments:

"These windows are all dark. I don't think there's anyone in this part of the Citadel at all." Roche answers:

"Everything's getting smaller. Not much anybody can do about that. Less food means fewer people until the New Sun comes."

So, due to the encroaching ice and shorter growing season, the population of Nessus is not as large as it once was, but even the inhabited portion of the city is still vast. The Citadel, which was once north of the city, is now on the southern fringe of the inhabited portions of Nessus, in an area now decaying. The living heart of the city is well north of the Citadel, as noted by Cyriaca (III, VI, p-41). And, though Nessus is not as densely populated as it once was, the population is huge. The lochage Sev met on the bridge the night he left the Citadel asked (I, XIV, p-116):

"How many people do you think there are in Nessus?"

"I have no idea."

"No more do I, Torturer. No more does anyone. Every attempt to count them has failed, as has every attempt to tax them systematically. The city grows and changes every night, like writing chalked on a wall. Houses are built in the streets by clever people who take up the cobbles in the dark and claim the ground--did you know that? The exultant Talarican, whose madness manifested itself as a consuming interest in the lowest aspects of human existence, claimed that the persons who live by devouring the garbage of others number two gross thousands. That there are ten thousand begging acrobats, of whom nearly half are women. That if a pauper were to leap from the parapet of this bridge each time we draw breath, we should live forever, because the city breeds and breaks men faster than we respire. Among such a throng, there is

no alternative to peace. Disturbances cannot be tolerated, because disturbances cannot be extinguished. Do you follow me?"

Also, on the night Sev and Dorcas saw the tent cathedral of the Pelerines go up in the sky, she asked (I, XXXII, p-245):

"Do you think," she asked, "that anyone saw it but us?"

I had not considered that, but I said that although the suspension of the building had endured for only a moment, yet it had taken place above the greatest of cities; and that if millions and tens of millions had failed to see it, yet hundreds must still have seen.

Roy