# THE DECAPOLIS REVIEWED

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THE author of Matthew, describing the great crowds following Jesus during the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, notes that they come "from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan" (4:25). The author of Mark twice mentions the Decapolis. The first instance concerns the healed Gerasene demoniac, who proclaimed Jesus' miracle "in the Decapolis" (5:20). Later, describing the travels of Jesus, the author notes that he passed "through the region of the Decapolis" (7:31). Mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, the significance of the Decapolis (ἡ Δεκάπολις, "the ten cities") to biblical studies is relatively slight. But its mere appearance in the gospels and other ancient sources has long interested scholars.

This group of cities in eastern Palestine and southeastern Syria has always been something of an enigma, though nearly all scholars have agreed that it was some sort of league or confederation. G. A. Smith, in his *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, stated that the Decapolis was "a League of Greek Cities against the Semitic influences east and west of Jordan."[1] This concept of the Decapolis as a league was also put forth by Emil Schürer in the nineteenth century,[2] and has been reaffirmed down through the years by such scholars as F.-M. Abel, C. H. Kraeling, A. H. M. Jones, and M. Avi-Yonah.[3] But even though this position has remained unchallenged, several of these scholars have admitted a scarcity of evidence about the so-called league. Kraeling, for example, calls the Decapolis a "confederation of free cities," but then observes that "what the nature and purpose of this confederation was is still as uncertain as the date of its formation."[4] Avi-Yonah also follows the accepted line, calling the Decapolis a "strong

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[1] G. A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1894) 596.

[2] *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (New York: Scribner, 1896), 2. 1, 94-96. Cf. I. Benzinger, "Dekapolis," *PW*, 4. 2415-17; C. H. Hunzinger, "Dekapolis," *RGG³*, 2. 72.

[3] F.-M. Abel, *Géographie de la Palestine* (Paris: Gabalda, 1967), 2. 146; C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa: City of the Decapolis* (New Haven: ASOR, 1936) 34; A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces* (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 259. M. Avi-Yonah, *The Holy Land: From the Persian to the Arab Conquest* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966) 81. But H. Guthe ("Die griechisch-römischen Städte des Ost-Jordanlandes," *Das Land der Bibel* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1918], 2. 24-41) took no position on the question and refrained from describing the Decapolis as a league. For the fullest treatment in recent years, see H. Bietenhard ("Die Dekapolis von Pompeius bis Trajan," *ZDPV* 79 [1963] 24-58), who reaffirms the traditional interpretation.

[4] *Gerasa*, 34.

league," but then admits that "we know practically nothing of its constitution and little enough of its membership."[5]

To what, then, did the term Decapolis refer?  Let us examine the sources and attempt to judge whether the term "league" or "confederation" is a justifiable title.  The use of the term in the Gospel of Mark is apparently the earliest reference in ancient literature.  The writer states that Jesus went through τῶν ὁρίων Δεκαπόλεως (7:31).  This is usually translated as "the region of the Decapolis," implying that the term is used in a strictly geographical sense.  A similar meaning is intended in Mark 5:20, in which the healed demoniac proclaimed Jesus' miracle ἐν τῇ Δεκαπόλει.  As noted above, the author of Matthew also mentions the term (4:25), but reveals nothing further.  The longest passage concerning the Decapolis in ancient literature is found in Pliny's *Natural History*:

> Adjoining Judaea on the side of Syria is the region of the Decapolis, so called from the number of its towns, though not all writers keep to the same list; most however include Damascus, with its fertile water-meadows that drain the river Chrysorrhoe, Philadelphia, Raphana (all these three withdrawn towards Arabia), Scythopolis (formerly Nysa, after Father Liber's nurse, whom he buried there) where a colony of Scythians are settled; Gadara, past which flows the river Yarmuk; Hippo mentioned already, Dion, Pella rich with its waters, Galasa, Canatha.[6]

Pliny describes the Decapolis as a *regio*, meaning "region," "territory," or "district."  Significantly, he does not use a term like *foedus* or *societas*, which could mean league.

The last first-century literary source is Josephus, who mentions the Decapolis four times in his writings.  Three of the references are in his *Life* and concern οἱ τῶν δέκα πόλεων ἔνοικοι, "the inhabitants of the Decapolis," who complained to Vespasian during the Jewish revolt about the attacks of Jewish insurgents.[7] A more interesting reference to the Decapolis is found in his *Jewish War*, where he states that Scythopolis was "the largest city of the Decapolis."[8]

It is rather surprising that our first-century sources do not include Strabo's *Geography*, since it is generally assumed that he had access to official sources of the Roman government.  Strabo describes both Syria and Palestine at some length, and even names several of the Decapolis cities: Damascus, Gadara, Philadelphia, and Scythopolis.[9]  This silence is even more curious when we recall Strabo's interest in the Lycian League, a federation of 23 cities in western Asia Minor organized and supervised by the Romans.[10]

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[5] *The Holy Land*, 81.

[6] *Natural History* 5.74 (LCL translation).  "Hippo" should be read as "Hippos," and "Galasa" should be "Gerasa."  For a discussion of Pliny's sources, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities*, 503-8.

[7] *Life* 65 §341-342; 74 §410.

[8] *JW* 3.9,7 §446.

[9] *Geography* 16.2, 20, 29, 34, 40, 45.

[10] *Geography* 14.3, 2-3.  For a discussion of the Lycian League, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities*, 101-9.

Moving to second-century sources, we come to the geographer Ptolemy, who provides the only other list of Decapolis towns. The names of nine new cities in addition to the nine mentioned by Pliny point to an expansion of the Decapolis.[11] Other than their names, however, Ptolemy supplies little additional information.

A few more scattered references are found in writers of the fourth century and later. Eusebius mentions the Decapolis in a geographical sense: αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐπὶ τῇ Περαίᾳ κειμένη ἀμφὶ τὴν Ἵππον καὶ Πέλλαν καὶ Γαδάραν, "this (the Decapolis) is situated near Peraea around Hippos, Pella, and Gadara."[12] A similar reference is found in Epiphanius.[13] The latest mention of the Decapolis is found in the *Ethnica* of Stephanus of Byzantium, who states that Gerasa is a "city of Coele-Syria, of the Decapolis."[14]

Non-literary evidence is even less abundant. One inscription found near Palmyra in Syria from the reign of Hadrian mentions Ἀγαθάγγελος Ἀβιληνὸς τῆς Δεκαπόλεως, "the good-messenger-Abila of the Decapolis."[15] No other epigraphical references are known, even though inscriptions from the various cities are fairly abundant.[16] The title "Decapolis" is also absent from the coinage of the cities.[17] Archaeological excavation, which has been considerable at several sites of member cities, has shed a great deal of light on individual towns but little on the Decapolis as a whole.[18]

Though the creation of the Decapolis is usually ascribed by numismatists to Pompey ca. 63 B.C. as part of his settlement of the east, there is no direct

[11] *Geography*, 5.14, 22. The nine new cities are Heliopolis, Abila, Saana, Hina, Abila Lysanius, Capitolias, Edrei, Gadora, and Samulis. Of the original ten cities mentioned by Pliny, only Raphana is missing, though it is considered by some to be identical with Capitolias (E. Schürer, *A History*, 2. 1, 106). For Ptolemy's sources, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities*, 509-13. But L. Bagrow ("The Origin of Ptolemy's Geographia," *Geografiska Annaler* 27 [1945] 318-87) believes that the present form and content of Ptolemy's work is a Byzantine compilation of the tenth or eleventh century.

[12] *Onomasticon* 1. 16.

[13] *Panarion haer.* 29. 7.

[14] *Ethnica* (ed. G. Reimer) 203.

[15] R. L. V. Cagnat, *Inscriptiones graecae ad res romanas pertinentes* (Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 1964), 3. §1057. It is dated to A.D. 134.

[16] Gerasa alone has yielded 361 inscriptions (C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa*, 353-494).

[17] B. V. Head, *Historia numorum* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911) 787; G. F. Hill, *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Palestine* (London: British Museum, 1914) 75-78; G. F. Hill, *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Persia* (London: British Museum, 1922) 28, 31-32, 37-41; A. R. Bellinger, *Coins from Jerash, 1928-1934* (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1938); C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa*, 497-98.

[18] C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa*; A. Rowe, *The Topography and History of Beth-Shan* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University, 1930) for Scythopolis; G. Schumacher, *Abila of the Decapolis* (London: PEF, 1889); R. H. Smith, *Pella of the Decapolis* (Wooster: College of Wooster, 1973); R. W. Funk and H. N. Richardson, "The 1958 Sounding at Pella" *BA* 21 (1958) 82-94; H. Seyrig, "Temples, cultes, souvenirs historiques de la Décapolis," *Syria* 36 (1959) 60-78.

evidence for this position.[19]    The Pompeian era on the coinage of many of the cities merely points to their gratitude for their liberation from Hasmonean domination.[20]    It should also be remembered that two of the towns (Hippos and Gadara) were assigned by Augustus to Herod's kingdom about 30 B.C.,[21] and it is difficult to believe that any independent league of Greek cities could have functioned while several of its members were ruled by a Jewish client-king.

To summarize our knowledge of the Decapolis strictly from the sources, we may safely assume only that the Decapolis was a geographical region in southern Syria and northeastern Palestine composed of the territories of member cities. It was in existence by the first half of the first century A.D.[22]    As indicated by the name, the number of cities was originally ten, but the number could vary. During the last half of the first century Scythopolis, the only member city west of the Jordan, was perhaps the largest city.[23]    The citizens could, apparently, appeal complaints to the Roman authorities.    The Decapolis was attached to the province of Syria, and during the second century many of the cities could mint their own coins.[24]

This is a far cry from any sort of "league" or "confederation."    In fact, no word meaning "league" or any other word with a similar connotation is ever used to describe the Decapolis in the ancient sources.    There is no evidence that there were any special political, military, or commercial arrangements among the members, nor was there any sort of federal governmental machinery.    To be sure, the cities were all apparently Greco-Roman culturally and probably shared a common religious and cultural identity.    But even when their very lives were threatened during the Jewish Revolt of A.D. 66-70, there is no hint in our abundant evidence that the Decapolis cities united against their common enemy, the Jews.    Many of the Decapolis cities were attacked at the outset of the war, but, apart from the massacre of the Jewish minority in their midst, there was little

[19] See E. Bammel, "Die Neuordnung des Pompeius und das römisch-jüdische Bündnis," *ZDPV* 79 (1959) 76-82; M. Avi-Yonah, *The Holy Land*, 81; H. Bietenhard, "Die Dekapolis," 33-39.    Josephus (*Ant.* 14.4,4 §74-76; *JW* 1.7,7 §155-156) states that the Greek cities were freed by Pompey from Hasmonean control, restored to their original (i.e., Hellenized) inhabitants, and attached to the province of Syria.    There is no mention of the Decapolis or of the formation of any organization of cities in these passages.

[20] B. V. Head, *Historia numorum*, 787.    The cities had suffered severely from the Hasmoneans.    Some had even been destroyed.    But at least one Decapolis city (Damascus) did *not* adopt the dating system of the Pompeian era, but retained the Seleucid.

[21] *Ant.* 15.7,3 §217; *JW* 1.20,3 §396.    Both cities remained under Jewish control until Herod's death in 4 B.C., when Augustus returned them to the supervision of the governor of Syria (*Ant.* 17.11,4 §320; *JW* 2.7,6 §97).

[22] Assuming that the statements in Mark and Matthew reflect an accurate tradition.

[23] *JW* 3.9,7 §446.    This statement has often been questioned, since Damascus was almost certainly larger than Scythopolis.    E. Schürer (*A History*, 2. 1, 97-98) argues that Damascus was under Nabatean control at this time (first Jewish Revolt) and thus not part of the Decapolis.

[24] C. H. Kraeling (*Gerasa*, 497-98) notes that Philadelphia first began to mint under Titus (A.D. 79-81), while most of the other cities began under Hadrian (A.D. 117-138).

joint response.[25]    In short, the term "Decapolis" in antiquity simply served as a convenient appellation for the group of Greek cities east of the Jordan from Damascus in the north to Philadelphia in the south.[26]

[25] *JW* 2.17,1 §458-60; 2.17,3 §466-68; 2.17,5 §478; 2.20,2 §559-61; *Life* 9 §42. When the Romans assembled their forces to quell the revolt, no Decapolis contingent nor even troops from individual cities are mentioned (*JW* 2.18,9 §499-502; 3.4,2 §64-69). Only one small offensive action was undertaken by a member city (Gadara) during the revolt, against the Jewish village of Gischala.    This attack was mounted in conjunction with three other Greek cities (Tyre, Sogane, Gabara) but, significantly, none of these three were of the Decapolis (*Life* 10 §43-45).

[26] A similar use of a like term to denote a group of Greek cities by a convenient title is the Tetrapolis of northern Syria (Strabo, *Geography*, 16.2, 4), which consisted of Seleucus, Antioch, Apamea, and Laodicea.    All these cities were founded by Seleucus I and initially used the Seleucid era in dating, just as the Decapolis towns were liberated by Pompey and thus used the Pompeian era.    As with the Decapolis, the Tetrapolis formed no league or confederation, but was merely a convenient geographical title.