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BUILDINGS FOR MASS ENTERTAINMENT IN THE CITIES OF THE DECAPOLIS

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The cities of the Decapolis, with their monumental public buildings, show clear signs of the proliferation of Greco-Roman culture in the region. The beauty and splendor of such structures, whose massive presence in antiquity was most probably felt when one passed under their looming shadows, undoubtedly served as a source of pride and patriotism for the local citizens. These impressive buildings are the theaters and hippodromes visible today at many excavated sites throughout the Decapolis. It was Herod the Great who introduced games and spectacles to the Roman East. His construction of buildings to house these activities – a grandiose expression of his desire to maintain a positive rapport with Rome and to integrate Roman cultural patterns into his realm – revolutionized the leisure habits of the indigenous populations in ancient Palestine.

Each of the known buildings for mass entertainment in the Decapolis, some of which are relatively well preserved, was studied independently and described in the limited format of excavation reports, assorted articles, or monographs; at times several structures found in one locale were treated as one unit. More importantly, none of these earlier publications perceived these buildings as a distinct group with specific cultural affinities that would attest to the leisure habits of the local population in these cities.

This paper will focus on four issues regarding those buildings that stood in the Decapolis in the Roman and Early Byzantine periods: their distribution, chronology, location within a city's boundaries, and the types of performances held therein. Although these buildings differ in their architecture and function, it is believed that a synthesized study of all the structures in one region will allow for an assessment of the role of public spectacles and competitions in the cities of the Decapolis, their cultural impact upon the local citizens, and the extent of Greco-Roman influence in the region.

DISTRIBUTION

Like elsewhere in ancient Palestine, theaters were the most common public entertainment buildings in the Decapolis. More than one such building existed

in almost every city – Hippos, Abila, Capitolias, Pella, Dium, and Canatha each had one theater;[1] Philadelphia had two, and Gadara (fig. 1) and Gerasa each had three, one of which was a small-sized theater in the suburbs (Hammat Gader and Birketein, respectively);[2] Scythopolis's civic center had two, or, as recently proposed, three theaters of different sizes.[3]

The hippodrome, which was sometimes also called a stadium, was used in Herodian Palestine and the first centuries CE for both horse races and athletic competitions; elsewhere in the Roman Empire, each of these activities was

[1] Hippos: Arthur Segal, "The Odeion," in *Hippos-Sussita: Eleventh Season of Excavations (July 2010)*, ed. Mark Schuler and Michael Eisenberg (Haifa, University of Haifa, 2010), 9–23. Abila: John D. Wineland, *Ancient Abila: An Archaeological History*, B.A.R. International Series 989 (Oxford: Hadrian Books, 2001), 35–37; Capitolias: Ahmad J. al-Shami, "A New Discovery at Bayt Rās/Capitolias–Irbid," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 49 (2005), 509–19; Pella: Anthony McNicoll, Robert H. Smith, and Basil Hennessy, *Pella in Jordan*, I (Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1982), 77–82; Robert H. Smith and Leslie P. Day, *Pella of the Decapolis*, II: *Final Report on the College of Wooster Excavations in Area IX, the Civic Complex, 1979–1985* (Wooster: College of Wooster, 1989), 20–28; Dium: Gottlieb Schumacher, "Unsere Arbeiten im Ostjordanland," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palaestina-Vereins* 37 (1914), 125; Canatha: Klaus S. Freyberger, "The Roman Kanatha: Results of the Campaigns in 1997/1998," in *Proceedings of the First International Congress on the Archaeology of the Near East, Rome, May 18th–23rd, 1998* (Rome: Università degli studi di Roma "La Sapienza," 2000), 497–99. Damascus also boasted a theater: despite the fact that it was listed by both Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy, the city is usually omitted from the discussion of the Decapolis: See Klaus S. Freyberger, "The Theatre of Herod the Great in Damascus: Chronology, Function and Significance," *Bayt al-'Aqqad: The History and Restoration of a House in Old Damascus*, ed. Peder Mortensen, Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus 4 (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005), 181–210.

[2] Philadelphia: Fawzi el-Fakharani, "Das Theater von Amman in Jordanien," *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 90/3 (1975), 377–403; Arthur Segal, *Theatres in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 85–87; Gadara and Hammat Gader: Thomas M. Weber, *Gadara-Umm Qēs*, I*: Gadara Capolitana. Untersuchungen zur Topographie, Geschichte, Artchitektur und der Bildenden Kunst einer "Polis Hellenis" im Ostjordanland*, Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins 30 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 134–38, 337–43, 388; Gerasa and Birketein: Frank Sear, "The South Theatre at Jarash, 1994 Campaign," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 40 (1996), 217–30; Frank Sear and Andrew Hutson, "The South Theatre at Jarash," *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 8 (2004), 389–95; John D. Stewart, "The Architecture of the Roman Theatre," *Jerash Archaeological Project 1981–1983*, ed. F. Zayadine (Amman: Department of Antiquities of Jordan, 1986), 206–29; Jacques Seigne and Sandrine Agusta-Boularot, "Le théâtre nord de Gerasa/Jerash (Jordanie): fonctions et chronologie," *Topoi* 12–13 (2005), 339–57; Chester C. McCown, "The Festival Theater at the Birketein," *Gerasa: City of the Decapolis*, ed. Carl H. Kraeling (New Haven: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1938), 159–67.

[3] Shimon Applebaum, "The Roman Theatre of Scythopolis," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 4 (1978), 77–103; Asher Ovadiah and Carla Gomez de Silva, "Some Notes on the Roman Theatre of Beth-Shean (Scythopolis)," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 6 (1981–1982), 85–97; Walid Atrash, "Entertainment Structures in the Civic Center of Nysa-Scythopolis (Beth-She'an) during the Roman and Byzantine Periods," Ph.D. diss. (University of Haifa, 2006), 49–138 (Hebrew); Gabriel Mazor and Arfan Najjar, *Nysa-Scythopolis: The Caesareum and the Odeum*, Israel Antiquities Authority Reports 33 (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2007), 21–70, 193–206.

housed in a separate structure.[4] Hippodromes were found in Scythopolis, Gerasa (fig. 2), and Gadara, however, construction at the last site was never completed.[5] Based on an archaeological survey, it has recently been suggested that a hippodrome may have stood in Hippos, too, on a wide rectangular plateau surrounded by steep ravines north of the city.[6]

Amphitheaters constructed initially as oval buildings, as per the Roman model, did not exist in the Decapolis but in the regions outside these cities; only Bostra, the capital of Provincia Arabia, boasted an oval amphitheater.[7] The few buildings in the Decapolis that were modified for performances resembling those held in the amphitheater were built on a scale that would accommodate a relatively different capacity (see below). Other than the orchestra in the northern theater at Gadara, which was converted into an oval arena during the Byzantine period using construction materials taken from the *scaenae* being dismantled at that time,[8] no other theaters in the Decapolis had the orchestra, its on a low level surrounded by a high podium built around it, which was the practice in the Greek world.[9]

In Scythopolis (fig. 3) and Gerasa, the hippodromes, which were no longer in use, were converted at some stage into amphitheaters.[10] In Scythopolis this had occurred by the mid-fourth century or later, and in Gerasa it happened some time in the fourth century, when the southern part of the building had become damaged. A semicircular ring vault, comprising several perpendicular vaults built of ashlars, was constructed across the arena in Scythopolis and was

[4] John H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1986), 535-39.

[5] Scythopolis; Yoram Tsafrir and Gideon Foerster, "Urbanism at Scythopolis – Beth Shean in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997), 99, 133–34; Gerasa: Antoni A. Ostrasz, "The Hippodrome of Gerasa: A Report on Excavations and Research 1982–1987," *Syria* 66 (1989), 51–77; idem, "The Excavation and Restoration of the Hippodrome at Jerash: A Synopsis," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 35 (1991), 237–50; Ina Kehrberg and Antoni A. Ostrasz, "A History of Occupational Changes at the Site of the Hippodrome of Gerasa," *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 6 (1997), 167–73; Gadara: Weber, *Gadara-Umm Qēs*, 138–39, 358–59.

[6] Arthur Segal and Michael Eisenberg, "Hippos-Sussita of the Decapolis – First Five Years of Excavations," *Qadmoniot* 129 (2005), 20.

[7] Ryad al-Mougdad, Pierre-Marie Blanc, and Jean-Marie Dentzer, "Un amphithéâtre à Bostra?," *Syria* 67 (1990), 201–204. Contour lines of an oval building were identified in Palmyra in an aerial photograph from 1930, thus suggesting that an amphitheater was constructed at some point within the city's boundaries; see Estelle Villeneuve, "Palmyra avait aussi son 'Colisée'," *Le Monde de la Bible* 185 (2008), 48–49.

[8] Claudia Bührig, "Gadara/Umm Qais (Jordanien)," *Archäologische Anzeiger* (2007/2), 308–309.

[9] Jean-Claude Golvin, *L'amphithéâtre romain: essai sur la théorisation de sa forme et de ses fonctions*, Publications du Centre Pierre, Paris 18 (Paris: De Boccard, 1988), I, 239–46; Katherine E. Welch, *The Roman Amphitheatre: From Its Origins to the Colosseum* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 163–85.

[10] Scythopolis: Tsafrir and Foerster, "Urbanism at Scythopolis," 133–35; Gerasa: Ostrasz, "Hippodrome," 73–74.

well integrated into the layout of the original building, while its central vault was transformed into the main entrance to the arena. In Gerasa, however, the wall enclosing the northern side of the building was poorly built and resembled a terrace. The partially preserved barrier running down the center of the hippodrome held three basins. At first glance it looked like the subterranean galleries (*hypogea*) found in the western hippodrome in Caesarea and in the amphitheater in Bet Guvrin, thereby showing some affinity with an amphitheater. Accordingly, this may suggest that amphitheatrical performances were held in the building even at an early stage.[11]

Nevertheless, the archaeological evidence clearly indicates that this architectural feature in Gerasa was designated first and foremost as the *euripus*, i.e., the barrier with basins dividing the two sides of the race course, and had nothing to do with the subterranean galleries typifying the amphitheater. One should note that the unique size and complexity of the subterranean galleries in Caesarea and Bet Guvrin distinguish them entirely from the basins in Gerasa; each includes an additional gallery positioned perpendicular to the amphitheater's central corridor and running across one side of the arena, toward the *cavea* and beneath it. This additional subterranean gallery, completely absent in Gerasa, facilitated the safe and direct movements of the animals into the arena. Furthermore, the three basins in Gerasa are located on the projected line of the barrier, which was placed parallel to the building's long axis. Its location at a considerable distance from the *carceres* conforms to the plans of other imperial hippodromes, where the righthand track was enlarged to allow equal entry for every charioteer coming out of the *carceres* onto the race course. The angle of the concave moulding of the socle at the bottom of the podium wall, which served as a buffer for chariot wheels, corresponds to the presumed length of the *euripus*, whereas the molding of the socle in the podium wall close to the *carceres* and the semicircular sections at the opposite end of the hippodrome were left vertical.[12] In addition, several stones with sockets for wooden or metal posts were found in conjunction with the *euripus*, though not in situ. These were apparently part of the *metae*, each composed of three stones to hold a wooden post positioned at either end of the *euripus* to indicate the turning points on the race course.[13]

[11] Cf. Caesarea: Yosef Porath, "Theatre, Racing, and Athletic Installations in Caesarea," *Qadmoniot* 125 (2003), 37–39 (Hebrew); Bet Guvrin: Amos Kloner and Alain Hübsch, "The Roman Amphitheater of Bet Guvrin: A Preliminary Report on the 1992, 1993, and 1994 Seasons," *'Atiqot* 30 (1996), 89–92.

[12] Antoni A. Ostrasz, "The Hippodrome of Gerasa: A Case of the Dichotomy of Art and Building Technology," *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 5 (1995), 184–87.

[13] Ostrasz, "Excavation and Restoration of the Hippodrome," 239–40. Similar stones serving the same purpose were found in the hippodrome in Scythopolis. See Tsafrir and Foerster, "Urbanism at Scythopolis," 134.

The new oval shape of the buildings at Scythopolis and Gerasa at first glance resembles that of a Roman amphitheater. Although this may suggest that amphitheatrical performances were occasionally also held in some cities of the Decapolis, each and every case must be considered separately, and in comparison to similar phenomena in the region and beyond, before reaching any overall conclusions. For instance, the well-constructed semicircular wall across the arena at Scythopolis resembles the changes introduced at Neapolis, while the same wall at Gerasa, though poorly built, looks more like a barrier installed to fence off the northern part of the hippodrome alongside the damaged southern section. The conversion of the buildings in Scythopolis and Gerasa, as well as the alterations made in the northern theater in Gadara, might resemble the modifications made in Neapolis and the hippo-stadium in Caesarea Maritima.[14] However, chronologically speaking, these changes occurred in the cities of the Decapolis almost a century later, when gladiatorial combats were no longer appealing to the masses and gave way to other performances, such as exhibitions of exotic animals, animal combats, and animal baiting (*venationes*), all of which were probably more suited to the cultural tastes and Christian code of behavior in late antique society.[15]

CHRONOLOGY

Based on an archaeological analysis of the finds at Scythopolis, the southern theater was the earliest building to be constructed in the cities of the Decapolis; it appears that it was first founded, although on a smaller scale, in the early first century CE.[16] The northern theater in Gadara was constructed immediately after this, in the first half of the first century CE.[17]

All the other public entertainment buildings sprung up later, from the end of the first century CE onwards. At first only theaters were built, but later on, in the course of the second century, hippodromes were erected as well. Gerasa's southern theater was the first, and was followed by the theaters or *odea* in Philadelphia, Hippos and Pella.[18] At the turn of the first century CE and throughout

[14] Neapolis: Yitzhak Magen, *Flavia Neapolis: Shechem in the Roman Period*, Judea and Samaria Publications 5 (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2005), 179–216 (Hebrew); Caesarea: Porath, "Theatre, Racing, and Athletic Installations," 37–39.

[15] Similar changes, occurring approximately at the same time, in the mid-fourth century CE, were recognized in the stadium in Aphrodisias and elsewhere; it is assumed that *venationes* were the major performances exhibited there; see Katherine E. Welch, "The Stadium at Aphrodisias," *American Journal of Archaeology* 102 (1998), 565–69.

[16] Atrash, "Entertainment Structures," 49–50, 83–85.

[17] Bührig, "Gadara/Umm Qais," 308.

[18] Gerasa: Jean Pouilloux, "Deux inscriptions au théâtre sud de Gérasa," *Liber Annuus* 27 (1977), 246–54; idem, "Une troisième dédicace au théâtre de Gérasa," *Liber Annuus* 29 (1979), 276–78; Sear, "South Theatre at Jarash," 222; Philadelphia: el-Fakharani, "Das Theater von

the second, additional buildings were constructed in Philadelphia and the *odeon* was built in Scythopolis.[19] In the second half of the second century, or shortly thereafter, theaters were erected in Gerasa – whose northern theater served as an *odeon* in its first stage – as well as in Capitolias, Abila, and Hammat Gader.[20] The hippodromes in Scythopolis and Gerasa were also built at this time,[21] and the rest of the buildings were constructed in the Severan era, at the end of the second and in the first half of the third centuries CE.[22] The final stage of construction witnessed the conversion of one theater and two hippodromes for amphitheatrical performances in the fourth century CE, although these alterations, as noted, were the result of the reality that materialized in the early Byzantine period.

LOCATION WITHIN THE CITY BOUNDARIES

Like everywhere else in ancient Palestine, the theaters in the cities of the Decapolis were incorporated into the urban infrastructure. They were usually located in the civic center, beside other public buildings and close to one of its main thoroughfares – the *cardo*, *decumanus*, or some other important street. Such was the case in Scythopolis and Gadara, where convenient access to the building aided the large crowds attending its performances.[23]

The hippodrome was located outside the populated area, but still within the city limits, and was usually built to the side of the road leading to and from the city.[24]

Amman," 400–403; Hippos: Segal, *Hippos-Sussita*, 23; Pella: Smith and Day, *Pella of the Decapolis*, 27–29.

[19] Philadelphia: Adnan Hadidi, "The Excavation of the Roman Forum at Amman (Philadelphia), 1964–1967," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 19 (1974), 24–30; Scythopolis: Mazor and Najjar, *Nysa-Scythopolis*, 181, 193–206.

[20] Stewart, "Architecture of the Roman Theatre," 229; Seigne and Agusta-Boularot, "Le théâtre nord de Gerasa/Jerash," 348–50; Capitolias: al-Shami, "New Discovery at Bayt Rās/Capitolias-Irbid," 512; Abila: W. Harold Mare, "Abila of the Decapolis in the Roman Period: A Time of Revitalization and Expansion," *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 7 (2001), 502. According to Hirschfeld, the theater at Hammat Gader was built at the same time as the baths, in the mid-second century CE; see Yizhar Hirschfeld, "The History and Town Plan of Ancient Hammat Gader," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palaestina-Vereins* 103 (1987), 103–104, 111–12; Weber (*Gadara-Umm Qēs*, 358) dates it without pinpointing the second or third century CE.

[21] Scythopolis: Tsafrir and Foerster, "Urbanism at Scythopolis," 99; Gerasa: Ostrasz, "Excavation and Restoration of the Hippodrome," 240–41.

[22] The theaters in Gadara (west), Canatha, and Scythopolis (north) were built at this time; a similar date was proposed for the small building at Birketein, north of Gerasa. See Gadara: Weber, *Gadara-Umm Qēs*, 135, 343; Canatha: Freyberger, "Roman Kanatha," 499; Scythopolis: Atrash, "Entertainment Structures," 68; Birketein: McCown, "Festival Theater," 167.

[23] William L. MacDonald, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire*, Yale Publications in the History of Art 35 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), II, 130–33.

[24] Zeev Weiss, "Adopting a Novelty: The Jews and the Roman Games in Palestine," in *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Recent Archaeological Research*, II, ed. J. H. Humphrey, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supp. 31 (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1999), 23–25.

Situating the hippodrome next to the main thoroughfares provided easy access both for the city's inhabitants and for those from the nearby villages who came to see the races and competitions. In Scythopolis it was built beside the road running southward out of the city towards "the Gate of Campon until Haqla Hivrata," as indicated in the Rehov inscription.[25] In Gadara it was located beside the road west of the city, coming from Tiberias. This fact should not be surprising, as building such a large structure would require an expansive tract of land that could be found only in the open area outside the city, close to stone quarries, agricultural installations, and burial caves that were also hewn alongside the main roads leading to and from the cities.

The architectural landscape of the cities of the Decapolis, greatly resembling other urban layouts in the Roman world, was influenced by several factors.[26] The large number of theaters in the Decapolis bears silent testimony to the fact that, culturally speaking, the local inhabitants favored theatrical performances far more than any other spectacle of mass entertainment, and therefore the theater was the first entertainment structure to be built in the cities. Theaters did not require a very large public space, and they were usually built when a city was founded or refounded, when other public buildings were also being erected in its center. The decision to build the theater first – whether because of the popularity of theatrical performances or because the construction of other buildings incurred greater expenses – was not the only factor responsible for the location of the theater inside the city and others outside it.

The hippodrome was a sizeable structure whose construction required the procurement of a very large tract of land, which in the center of the city would probably be earmarked for other public buildings. As mentioned earlier, it was added to the city only at a later stage, and its incorporation in the existing layout, especially in the civic center, would have necessitated the destruction of other buildings in the area.[27] The allocation of a large expanse of land in the center of the city for a structure whose use would be relatively infrequent would undoubtedly come at the expense of other, more essential, buildings in the lives of the citizens. Furthermore, its construction would cause disruptions

[25] Idem, "New Light on the Rehov Inscription: Identifying 'The Gate of Campon' at Bet Shean," in *What Athens Has to Do with Jerusalem: Essays on Classical, Jewish, and Early Christian Art and Archaeology in Honor of Gideon Foerster*, ed. Leonard V. Rutgers, Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 1 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 211–33.

[26] Eddie J. Owens, *The City in the Greek and Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1991); Edmond Frézouls, "Les monuments des spectacles dans la ville: théâtre et amphithéâtre," in *Spectacula*, I: *Gladiateurs et amphithéâtres. Actes du colloque tenu à Toulouse et à Lattes les 26–29 mai 1987*, ed. Claude Domergue, Christian Landes, and Jean-Marie Pailler (Paris: Imago; Lattes: Musée archéologique Henri Prades, 1990), 77–92.

[27] The incorporation of the amphitheater into the city plan of Dura Europos came at the expense of the destruction of the old bathhouse that stood there. See Michael I. Rostovtzeff et al. (eds.), *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Preliminary Report of the Sixth Season of Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), 68–77.

in the daily life and order of the city. The performances in the hippodrome attracted large crowds, at times twice or more than the number of theatergoers; thus, the large crowds of spectators streaming out of the building all at once onto the nearby streets would have caused a great tumult and congestion in the civic center, where other activities were being routinely conducted. Therefore, locating the hippodrome outside of the city would have been an ideal solution for many reasons, including easy access, freeing up the space around them, and controlling the mob frequenting the races and competitions. It was there that the people gathered before entering the building, and it was from there that the crowds dispersed at the end of the performances.

TYPES OF PERFORMANCES

Each of the various buildings found in the cities of the Decapolis was designated for specific activities; theatrical and musical performances were held in the theater, whereas chariot races and athletic competitions took place in the hippodrome. Based on the epigraphical evidence, it is possible to outline the nature of the events and types of entertainment made available to the local inhabitants of these cities during festivals and other days.

Although theaters outnumbered hippodromes, and despite the undoubted popularity of their performances in the region in the first centuries of the Common Era, only scattered evidence has remained to testify to the nature of these performances or to inform us about the actors who performed on stage in the cities of the Decapolis.

- One inscription from the southern theater in Gerasa tells of a group of local actors in the service of Dionysus and the Emperor Trajan, who donated a statue in honor of Titus Flavius Gerrenus, the city's first *agonothetes*, superintendent of public games.[28]
- Marcus Aurelios P[ilades] was a pantomimist who performed in Ostia in the mid-third century CE, during the reign of Gallienus Caesar; he came from Scythopolis and it is assumed that his first steps on stage were made in his hometown.[29]

[28] Charles B. Welles, "The Inscriptions," in *Gerasa: City of the Decapolis*, ed. Carl H. Kraeling (New Haven: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1938), 442–44, no. 192. On the relationship between emperors and local performance associations, see Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World (31 BC–AD 337)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 458–63.

[29] Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, XIV, supp. 4624; and see also: Rosa Last, "Pantomimus from Judea: A Commentary on a New Fragment of an Inscription from Ostia," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 9/B I, 27–32 (Hebrew).

- Evidence for pantomime in the early Byzantine period comes from the baths of Hammat Gader. Two inscriptions made on marble slabs in Hall E mention actresses: Nicasius the pantomimist (ὀρχιστής) and Euphemia the dancer (θυμελική). A third inscription refers to Tigranes the piper (καλαμαύλις) whose music supposedly accompanied the dancing, as was customary in pantomime.[30]
- Four reliefs with musical iconography found in the northern theater at Gerasa further attest to music and musical performances being held in this building, as elsewhere.[31]

Beyond this fragmentary material and epigraphic evidence, the bulk of information for ancient Palestine comes from literary sources, mainly Talmudic literature, and it is assumed that the same applies to the cities of the Decapolis.[32] Classical comedies, tragedies, and satires were rarely staged in the Roman theater. However, mimes and pantomimes of a merrier and lighter bent were very popular in imperial Rome and were widely held in ancient Palestine as well.[33] The mime as a secular art form took a critical and derisive stance toward religion; parodies of the gods were often presented, Jews and Judaism were mocked on stage, and in the course of time Christianity also became a rich source of material for mimes. In addition, agonistic, or athletic, performances, as well as acts by acrobats, jugglers, and clowns, were presented from time to time in the theater, although we have no direct evidence of this in the cities of the Decapolis.[34]

Cities in second- and third-century Roman Palestine periodically organized games, sometimes attracting the best athletes from other cities of the Eastern provinces. Athletic contests were held in early second-century Gerasa in honor of Trajan; Aelius Aurelius Menander from Aphrodisias participated in combat sports held in several ancient Palestinian cities, including Scythopolis and Philadelphia, and in the early third century, Aurelius Septimius Irenaeus from Laodicea engaged in similar performances in Scythopolis.[35]

[30] Leah Di Segni, "The Greek Inscriptions of Hammat Gader," in Yizhar Hirschfeld, *The Roman Baths of Hammat Gader* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1997), nos. 6, 10, and 19.

[31] Alexandra Retzleff and Abdel M. Mjely, "Figural Relief Sculpture from Jarash," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 47 (2003), 75–82.

[32] Weiss, "Adopting a Novelty," 26–33; idem, "The Jews of Ancient Palestine and the Roman Games: Rabbinic Dicta vs. Communal Practice," *Zion* 66 (2001), 439–43 (Hebrew).

[33] Richard C. Beacham, *The Roman Theatre and Its Audience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 129–40; E. J. Jory, "The Drama of the Dance: Prolegomena to an Iconography of Imperial Pantomime," in *Roman Theater and Society: E. Togo Salmon Papers*, I, ed. William J. Slater (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 1–27.

[34] E. J. Jory, "Continuity and Change in the Roman Theatre," in *Studies in Honour of T. B. L. Webster*, ed. John H. Betts, James T. Hooker, and John R. Green (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1986), I, 145–46.

[35] Gerasa: Welles, "Inscriptions," 442–44, no. 192; Luigi Moretti, *Iscrizioni agonistiche greche*, Studi pubblicati dall'Istituto italiano per la storia antica 12 (Rome: A. Signorelli, 1953), nos. 72, 79.

An assortment of inscriptions pertaining to agonistic events that were found in Gerasa, a city that also boasted a hippodrome, presents a unique opportunity to learn about the athletic contests and equestrian races held in this one locale over the years. Unparalleled in the other cities of the Decapolis, or even in the immediate region, this evidence provides important information about the nature of the games and also testifies to the dual use of the city's hippodrome for both horse races and athletic competitions. Such use of the hippodrome is not unique to Gerasa, but also characterizes later buildings in other cities of the region that emulated Herod the Great's innovative compound at Caesarea Maritima, where the king constructed a hippo-stadium, a multifunctional building designed to accommodate a variety of shows during the games he initiated in the city in honor of Augustus.[36] In the ensuing period, other cities in the region adopted the king's architectural model of the hippodrome for their own horse races and athletic competitions.

Two inscriptions from Gerasa refer to a gymnasiarch, indicating that the city may have had a gymnasium for training athletes.[37] Such athletes were grouped in an association headed by a ξυσταρχής.[38] The various contests conducted in the city during the second and third centuries CE were directed by the αγωνοθέτης, or superintendent, who was responsible for their organization and execution.[39] His qualifications, according to the inscription installed in the city's southern theater in honor of Titus Flavius Quirina Gerrenus, were a prerequisite for the success of the games. Two additional inscriptions found in conjunction with the *propylaea* of the temple of Artemis, although not in situ, list the winners of games held in the city over the years. Wrestling and *pankration* – a combination of boxing and wrestling – are mentioned among the combat sports,[40] as

[36] Yosef Porath, "Herod's 'Amphitheater' at Caesarea: A Multipurpose Entertainment Building," in *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*, ed. John H. Humphrey, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 14 (Ann Arbor: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1995), 15–27; idem, "Theatre, Racing, and Athletic Installations," 31–33; Joseph Patrich, "The *Carceres* of the Herodian Hippodrome/Stadium at Caesarea Maritima and the Connection with the Circus Maximus," *Journal of Roman Studies* 14 (2001), 268–83. On the name of the building in light of the terminology used by Josephus as well as the archaeological finds, see John H. Humphrey, "'Amphitheatrical' Hippo-Stadia," in *Caesarea Maritima: Retrospective after Two Millennia*, ed. Avner Raban and Kenneth G. Holum (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 121-29; Yosef Porath, "Why did Josephus Name the Chariot-Racing Facility at Caesarea 'Amphitheater'?" *Scripta Classica Israelica* 23 (2004), 63–67. For a discussion of Herodian hippodromes and stadia in our region, see Weiss, "Adopting a Novelty," 34–35; Ehud Netzer, *The Architecture of Herod, the Great Builder* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 277–81.

[37] Welles, "Inscriptions," 374–75, nos. 3–4.

[38] A noble *xystarch* from Antioch-on-the-Orontes visited Gerasa in the second or early third century CE, in connection with athletic contests held in the city; see ibid., 434, no. 170. On the *xystarch*, see Clarence A. Forbes, "Ancient Athletic Guilds," *Classical Philology* 50 (1955), 238–52; Henri W. Pleket, "Some Aspects of the History of the Athletic Guilds," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 10 (1973), 197–227.

[39] Welles, "Inscriptions," 425, 442–44, nos. 144, 192.

[40] Wrestling: ibid., 445, no. 194; *pankration*: ibid., 444, no. 193.

are running races over various distances. One Alexandrian athlete won the *diaulos* and *hoplithes* races, while another competed and succeeded in the *pentathlon*.[41] Two winning charioteers are listed among the athletes, indicating that chariot racing according to the Hellenistic tradition was included in the list of contests held in the city.[42] The games held in Gerasa were most probably organized for the benefit of the local population, though at times they also attracted participants from abroad, such as those from Alexandria listed in the two above-mentioned inscriptions.[43] Similar events most probably took place in other cities that had hippodromes or held games, as we learn from several inscriptions glorifying some of the victors.

CONCLUSIONS

The introduction of buildings for public entertainment in the first century CE reshaped the urban landscape of the cities in the Decapolis and changed the leisure habits of their local populations. The theater was the first building for mass entertainment to be established in the Decapolis, while during the first three centuries of the Common Era, theatrical performances were the most popular in the region. The overall number of theaters compared to other structures is especially large and their distribution over the region is wide and fairly uniform; the resultant cultural impact was therefore powerful and significant. The large cities had at least two theaters each, one of sizeable dimensions and another, smaller one, usually regarded as an *odeon*; other cities had a single building with varying dimensions from place to place.

Unlike the theaters, hippodromes were found in only a few locales in the Decapolis. The variance in the numbers of these two institutions does not imply that chariot races or athletic competitions were less popular in the region or that they reflected the local population's cultural preferences. Rather, it appears that the financial costs of the construction and long-term maintenance of the hippodrome and its ongoing performances, in addition to the costs of constructing other local public buildings, went far beyond the means of most cities in the Decapolis.

[41] Ibid., 444, no. 193; *pentathlon*, ibid., 445, no. 194.

[42] Ibid., 445, no. 194; see also: Arnold H. M. Jones, "Inscriptions from Jerash," *Journal of Roman Studies* 18 (1928), 174. Chariot racing in Palestine during the first centuries CE followed the tradition that was prevalent in the Hellenistic period. Races were financed by private benefactors, and participation in them was not restricted to certain groups; see Harold A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 73–212. Only later, in the Byzantine period, were factions introduced into ancient Palestine, considerably changing the character and organization of competitions in the region; see Alan Cameron, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 201–29; Yaron Dan, "Circus Factions (Blues and Greens) in Byzantine Palestine," in *The Jerusalem Cathedra*, ed. Lee I. Levine (Jerusalem and Detroit: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi and Wayne State University, 1981), I, 105–19.

[43] Welles, "Inscriptions," 444–45, nos. 193–94.

The absence of Roman amphitheaters in the Decapolis stands in sharp contrast to the existence of other buildings, which in many cases are very well preserved. One should not assume that the excavation of amphitheaters has been exhaustive, especially not in Transjordan, where many buildings, including those for mass entertainment, have yet to be uncovered. Furthermore, neither the amphitheater and its performances nor even its participants are mentioned in any inscriptions discovered in the region, nor are the games depicted in the local art, whether in reliefs, mosaics, or small finds. The almost complete absence of such finds in the region attests that, during at least the first three centuries of the Common Era, the people of the Decapolis did not entirely embrace the Roman-style performances that had become so vital in the life of many communities of the Western Empire.[44]

The modifications in the orchestra of the northern theater in Gadara, and the conversion of the hippodrome into an amphitheater in Scythopolis and Gerasa, represent a different phenomenon resulting from the exigencies of a new reality that had materialized in the early Byzantine period. Gladiatorial combats, a genuinely Roman type of entertainment, were not held in the remodeled building, as these events had begun to lose popularity by the early fourth century CE. Rather, the buildings were now designated for the exhibitions of exotic animals, animal combats, and animal baiting (*venationes*) that had prevailed throughout the early Byzantine period.[45] Such performances were very expensive and were controlled in this period by the governor, who also financed the shows in the provincial capital. The financial outlay and the need to procure an assortment of wild beasts undoubtedly affected the frequency of such events; such performances were probably more common in Scythopolis, the capital of Palaestina Secunda where the governor in charge resided, than in Gerasa or Gadara, which were geographically off the beaten path and therefore seemingly less important. Distance from the center, the lack of resources and the infrequency of performances may very well explain why the inhabitants of Gerasa, for example, invested less in modifying their hippodrome to accommodate such spectacles, while the population of Scythopolis, enjoying a special status, placed great importance on converting its hippodrome into an amphitheater.

[44] Oval amphitheaters were constructed in only a few cities in the region, in those that, as far as we know, had a definite Roman presence, such as Caesarea, Eleutheropolis, and Bostra; see Werner Eck, "The Language of Power: Latin in the Inscriptions of Iudaea/Syria Palaestina," in *Semitic Papyrology in Context: A Climate of Creativity. Papers from a New York University Conference Marking the Retirement of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 123–44; Kloner and Hübsch, "Roman Amphitheater of Bet Guvrin," 85–106; Benjamin H. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 118.

[45] Helen G. Saradi, *The Byzantine City in the Sixth Century: Literary Images and Historical Reality* (Athens: Perpinia, 2006; distrib. by the Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies), 295–306.

The later history of the buildings for public spectacles in the cities of the Decapolis is rather enigmatic, though it is clear that by the sixth century CE most of them had fallen out of use. The various performances that once characterized the vibrant cultural life of every city in the Decapolis came to an end, and the monumental buildings that once served as a source of pride for their citizens diminished over time, leaving behind the past glory that is still visible amid the missing stones.

Fig. 1. Gadara, the western theater (Photo: Zeev Weiss).

Fig. 2. Gerasa, the hippodrome, looking south (Photo: Zeev Weiss).

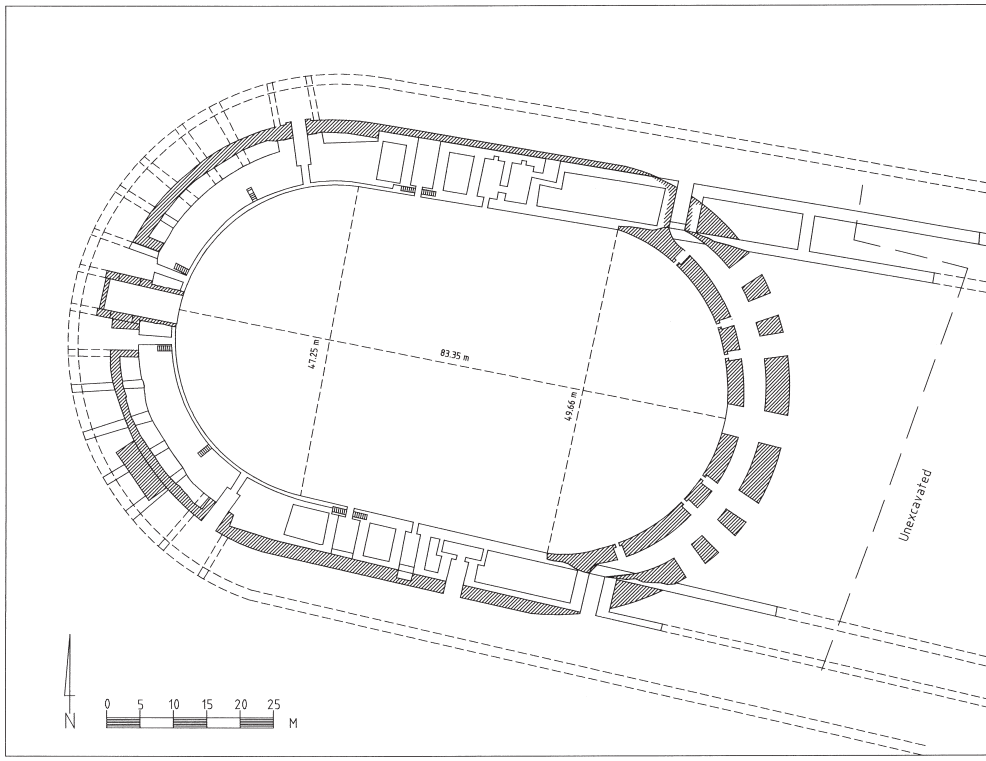

Fig. 3. Scythopolis, plan of the hippodrome that was transformed into an amphitheater some time during the fourth century CE (Courtesy of Yoram Tsafrir, after: Yoram Tsafrir and Gideon Foerster, "Urbanism at Scythopolis – Beth Shean in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries," *DOP* 51 (1997), Fig. E).