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New data on the Epigraphy of the Northern Decapolis (North-Western Jordan)

Jean-Baptiste Yon, Nabil Bader

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New Data on the Epigraphy of the Northern Decapolis (North-Western Jordan)

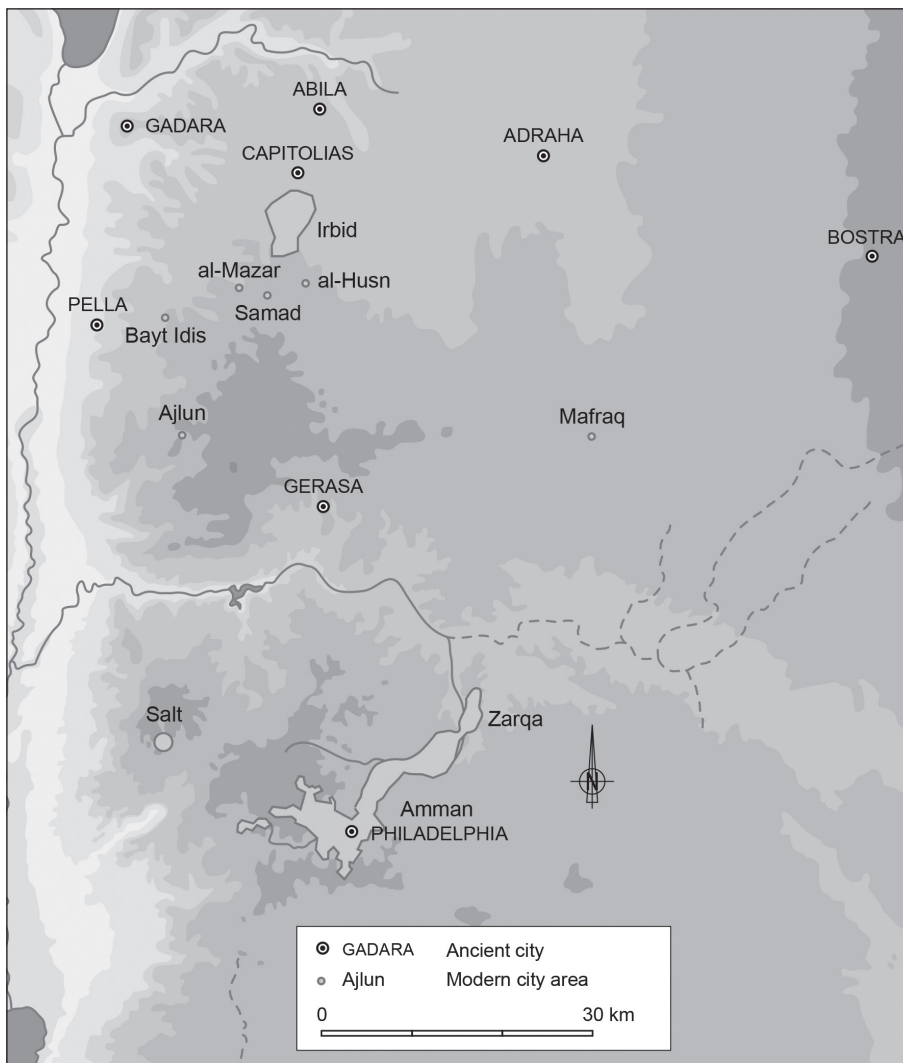
Our work in Jordan is part of the Inscriptions de la Jordanie Project (Greek and Latin Inscriptions in Jordan), conducted under the supervision of Dr. Pierre-Louis Gatier (CNRS Lyon) and Prof. Nabil Bader (Yarmouk University), in agreement with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. The basic goal of the project is to gather published and unpublished material together, as well as examining Greek and Latin inscriptions in order to bring new discoveries to light. This article provides the first results of a fruitful cooperation which began in 2013, and has since then experienced new developments. For the sake of simplicity, the Inscriptions de la Jordanie Project has divided the northern part of the country in smaller zones to achieve quicker results.

The present authors (Prof. Nabil Bader and Dr. Jean-Baptiste Yon) have responsibility for the North-Western area of the project, including the hinterland of modern-day Irbid and the ancient cities of Abila, Gadara and Pella; the latter three included in the Graeco-Roman Northern Decapolis. We shall commence with a general overview of the epigraphic documentation, with examples of relevant

material, and then present some new results from our work, specifically an inscription from Capitolias/ Bayt Rās.

The Greek cities of modern North-Western Jordan belonged in antiquity to an ill-defined group of settlements known in the literature as the Decapolis (Ten cities). They are referred to in two documents, one by Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* V.74.1) and the other by Ptolemy the geographer (*Geography* V.15.22–23); however, each of them includes more than ten cities. As is evidenced by the map (FIG.1), the list should be supplemented by many sites and villages. Inscriptions have been found from at least fifty sites.

Our main objective is to produce a catalogue of all previously known inscriptions, taking the great diversity of material into consideration; for example, the painted text found in a tomb at Abila, published by one of the project supervisors, P.-L. Gatier (Gatier 1994: 37, nr.1, fig.1 = *SEG* 44, 1379). Gadara has so far been the most prolific site, with more than fifty texts, most of which have been published in *Gadara Decapolitana*, by Prof. Thomas Weber (Weber 2002). At Gadara, as at other sites, a



1. Map of North Western Jordan.

variety of inscriptions have been found, such as mosaics from churches, official or public texts, testimonies on the impact of the Roman army, and dedications to emperors, all of which contribute to our knowledge of Jordan in antiquity. A very important category provides evidence of religious or cultic practice, both pagan and Christian; for example, a dedication to a celestial Arabic god found at Pella (*SEG* 41, 1567). As usual, funerary inscriptions are the most frequent, either on wall paintings such as those found in the tombs of the Necropolis at Abila, or engraved on tombs or funerary stelas, which are ubiquitous in other parts of the Near East. A particularly interesting funerary mosaic, due to its rarity, is from a Christian tomb found at Gadara, which includes the names of three members of a family (?), who were buried there

(Weber 2002: 302, nr.IS 47).

All in all, with the major exception of Gadara, no site is exceptionally rich in inscriptions. It is true for both Pella and another of the Decapolis cities, Capitolias, a few kilometers north of Irbid. Until major archaeological excavations took place in the 1980's and at the beginning of the present millennium, its coinage was almost the only extant evidence for the ancient city (Lenzen and Knauf 1987; Bowsher 2011). Capitolias is not mentioned in the list of Pliny, but is included in that of Ptolemy, which concurs with what we know of the local era. The foundation of the city of Capitolias was either 97 or 98 AD, as evidenced by its coinage, at some point between Marcus Aurelius and Macrinus. Its name, Capitolias, attests it was a Roman foundation. The most important recent

discovery has been that of a theater, excavated in 2002, situated on the eastern edge of the modern village of Bayt Rās. The site has been extensively dug, and structural remains of the monument are impressive. On the eastern side, one of the corridors (a *parodos*) was blocked during secondary usage, using the entrance of a tomb, together with its lintel and doors. Even more interesting are the remains of a Greek inscription in a *tabula ansata* high above ground level. This inscription was badly defaced soon after its discovery almost fifteen years ago and has never been published. This paper for the 2016 *ICHAJ* Conference is the perfect setting to rectify this, thanks to a copy kept by Nabil Bader in his archive. Even at the time of the discovery, the inscription was not completely preserved; a tentative reading is proposed here:

Υ[π]έρ [σω]τηρίας καὶ νείκη[ς]
 το[ῦ] κυ[ρίου] ἡμῶν Γαλλιανοῦ.
 [Σε]β[αστοῦ] ὑπατε[ύ]ντος Νουμηρίου
 4 Σεου[ή]ρου ἐργοδιωκ[τοῦ]ντος
 Α<ῦ>ρηλίου Ἀνδρομάχου *vac.*
 τοῦ κρατίστου καὶ λογιστοῦ
vac. ἐκτίσθη, ἔτι ρξγ´. *vac.*

“For the salvation and the victory of our Lord Gallienus Augustus, when Numerius Severus was governor and Aurelius Andromachos, *vir egregius* and *curator*, oversaw the work, (this) has been built, in the year 163.”

As the local era began either AD 97 or 98, the adjusted date would fall between 259 and 261. As Gallienus’ reign started in 260, 259 can be excluded. A provisional date of 260/261 can be proposed.

Our inscription is very similar to other texts from the same period found in the province of Arabia; for example, an inscription found at Adraha (modern Dera’; see *IGLS* XIV, 13-17), or another found at Irbid, which is even closer to Capitolias. The inscription, which was discovered at an unspecified location near the modern city of Irbid *ca.* 1905, related to the construction of a city wall: Irbid. Limestone block 56×66×8.5cm.

Whicher and Clermont-Ganneau 1906: fig. 1 (*AE* 1907, 67; Pflaum 1952: 315-316; Meimaris *et al.* 1992: 168, with fn.27). *cf.* Pflaum 1952: 307, fn. 2; *IGLS* XIV, *ad* nr.17.

Ἀγαθῆ Τύχη.

Υπὲρ σωτηρίας τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν αὐτοκράτορος Μάρκου Ἀντωνίου Γορδιανοῦ Σεβ[αστοῦ]

4 ἐπὶ Δομιπτίου Οὐαλεριανοῦ τοῦ λαμ[προτάτου] ὑπατι-

κοῦ, ἐφεστῶτος Καλ[πορνίου] Σατορνεῖνου χειλιάρχου,

προεδρείας Θεοδώρου Βάσσου, ἐπισκοπευόν-

των Αὐρ[ηλίων] Σαβεῖνου Νεαγίου καὶ Σαβεῖνου Βάσ-

8 σου τῶν βουλευτῶν, καὶ Ζηνοδώρου Ἀπολινα-

ρίου συνβ[ουλεύοντος], διαταγῆ Φλ[αυίου] Οὐήρου ἐκ δημοσίου

πήχ[εις] ρλ´. ἔτ[ε]ι ρλγ´.

“To the Good Fortune. For the salvation of our Lord the Emperor Marcus Antonius Gordianus Augustus, when the illustrious Domitius Valerianus was governor, under the direction of the tribune Calpurnius Saturninus, during the proedry of Theodoros son of Bassus, with the councillors Aurelius Sabinus son of Neagios and Aurelius Sabinus son of Bassus (serving) as inspectors, and the advice of Zenodoros son of Apolinarius, according to the testament of Flavius Verus, with public funding. 130 cubits. Year 133.”

According to the era of the Provincia Arabia, 133 can be interpreted as AD 239 (133 + 106), which fits perfectly with the reign of Gordianus III (AD 238-244). This would not be the case if dating was calculated from the foundation of Capitolias, as the date would fall during the reign of Severus Alexander (AD 222-235).

Similarities with the text of Capitolias are self-evident: for the salvation of the emperor a building was constructed under the supervision of a governor and with the work of local magistrates or notables. At Adraha,

the construction was a city wall. At Capitolias, it is difficult to state definitively if the stone with the inscription was later reused in a wall. Alternatively, it could be evidence for the transformation of the theater into a part of the defensive wall of the city at the time of Emperor Gallienus.

The significant difference between Capitolias and Irbid is the use of the era of the province of Arabia. Gadara and Pella were already included in the Roman province of Syria-Palaestina in the third century, and Capitolias belonged to the province of Palaestina II in the fourth century. This difference could be used as evidence that Capitolias was not part of Arabia in the period following the annexation of the former Nabataean Kingdom (after 106), and that Irbid did not lie within the territorial boundaries of Capitolias, since the chronological framework used there does not correlate with the foundation in 97-98.

Indeed, one of the main problems with the Decapolis cities is to determine the extent of their civic territories. The use of different eras is a very useful criterion for that purpose. It has been argued, with good reason that the inscriptions found at al-Mazār (Bader and Habash 2005: 191-192, nr.1), Şamad (or Khirbat Banī Mālik, Meimaris *et al.* 1992: 170, nr.31) and al-Ḥuṣun (*SEG* 47, 2064) could be dated according to the era of the province of Arabia, thereby proving that these localities were not located within the territory of Capitolias. As Capitolias is roughly located between Abila and Gadara in the north, with Irbid and the *provincia Arabia* to the east and south respectively, one could argue that its territory extended to the south-west in the direction of Pella. Indeed, there are some indications that this is correct; at Bayt ʿĪdis, a few kilometers east of Pella, but farther from Irbid, a mosaic inscription from a church was dated to the year 507 and Indiction 7 (Melhem and al-Husan 2001: 47; *SEG* 51, 2060). If calculated according to the era of either the *provincia Arabia* or that of Pella,

there is no agreement between the year and the indiction. However, if the chronological dating relating to Capitolias, which was founded in AD 97 or 98 is used, the adjusted date would be AD 604, which is in agreement with Indiction 7. In this case, Bayt ʿĪdis would have belonged to Capitolias, whose territory encompassed a rather surprising extension towards Gadara and Pella in the west.

Another important point to note is that Numerius Severus did not appear in the lists of Roman provincial governors, neither in *provincia Arabia* nor in Syria Palaestina (the latter a likelier location for Capitolias). As a matter of fact, very few of the governors for these two provinces can be identified during this period (Thomasson 1984: 326; Davenport 2010: 351). As for the *curator* Aurelius Andromachos, one Andromachos was *dioiketes* (that is, the chief financial official) in Egypt (*P.Oxy* 10.1264, dated AD 272; *cf. PIR*² A587). He had the same rank of *egregius*, or *kratistos* in Greek, and could possibly be the same individual.

Taking the evidence presented above into account, initial results from our collaborative research contribute to a better understanding of the region in antiquity, particularly with regard to the territorial boundaries of the cities of the Decapolis in the Roman Period. Surprisingly, the territory of Capitolias, present-day Bayt Rās, extended far to the west, whilst the eastern border extended to the immediate vicinity of Irbid. With the help of the Department of Antiquities, further fieldwork is bound to enrich the corpus of Greek and Latin inscriptions in this area, and our knowledge of the history of Jordan during the Greek and the Roman Periods.

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ETHICS IN ARCHAEOLOGY**

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