ARTEMIS AND ZEUS OLYMPIOS IN ROMAN GERASA
AND SELEUCID RELIGIOUS POLICY

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THE TOPOGRAPHY OF THE TWO SANCTUARIES

The well-known Roman city of Gerasa in the Decapolis (in present day Jordan) was dominated by two large sanctuaries: the sanctuary of Zeus Olympios and the sanctuary of Artemis [PLATE XLVIII].

Both temples occupied prominent positions in the city. While the Artemision was located in the city centre at the main thoroughfare (the cardo), the Olympieion was situated on a terrace at the southern end of the Roman city. As the latter did not fit into the overall orthogonal plan of the Roman city, the Oval Forum (southwest of the Olympieion) had—in terms of city planning—an integrating function. However, this slightly peripheral position of the Olympieion was not the original one: the sanctuary of Zeus lies exactly opposite the so-called Camp Hill, on which—as far as we know—the Hellenistic settlement of the city developed. Thus, originally, the Olympieion had been a sanctuary that was placed closely to the central settlement, while the later place of the Roman Artemision was off the centre, or even outside the city. Only with the expansion of the settlement towards the north, the place of the Artemision was pushed into the very centre.

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2 For the topography and archaeology of Gerasa, see Kraeling (1938); Browning (1982); Seigne (1982) and (2002); Lichtenberger (2003), p.191-5 (with further literature). On the term Decapolis, see ibid., p.6-20. For deities and cults in the Decapolis see now also the dissertation by Riedl (2003), cf. http://www.diss.fu-berlin.de/2005/155/.

Zeus Olympios

We know from inscriptions (starting in the early first century AD) that Zeus Olympios was worshipped in the temple in the southern part of the city [PLATE XLIX].\(^4\) Zeus Olympios, the god of Mt Olympus, had his most famous sanctuary in Olympia in Greece. His cult statue was made by Phidias in the fifth century BC.\(^5\) It was the most famous cult statue of Zeus in Antiquity, and showed the god seated with beard, Nike and a sceptre. In the second century BC, under the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163 BC), Zeus Olympios gained importance as dynastic cult of the Seleucids, and the cult of Zeus Olympios seems to have been introduced in some cities of the vast empire.\(^6\) The statue of the Seleucid Zeus Olympios [PLATE L] was modelled on the famous Zeus Olympios of Phidias.\(^7\)

Gerasa was also refounded under the Seleucids and received, as is attested by inscriptions and coins, the name ‘Antioch by the Chrysorrhoas, the former Gerasa’.\(^8\) With the battle at the Panceion (near the source of the Jordan) in 200 BC, Antiochus III (223-187 BC) brought southern Syria under Seleucid control,\(^9\) and sometime in the second century BC the refoundation of Gerasa probably took place.\(^10\) We do not know under which king Gerasa was founded, but the local cult of Zeus Olympios might hint at Antiochus IV. In Gerasa the cult of Zeus Olympios fits well with the name of the city (Antioch) and the position of the temple close to the Hellenistic settlement on Camp Hill. It is fairly likely that Zeus Olympios was the god of ‘Antioch by the Chrysorrhoas, the former Gerasa’. But the full name of the city also shows that, apart from ‘Antioch’, there

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\(^5\) On the Zeus of Phidias in Olympia, see Richter (1966).