THE DECAPOLIS: CITY TERRITORIES, VILLAGES AND

BOULEUTAI

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It is obvious that under the Romans as now any community, whether a city or a smaller settlement without the formal status of a polis, would have required some kind of socio-political organisation. Religious, judicial, social and economic affairs would have required regular attention. Even small settlements would have needed specific structures to facilitate the negotiation with neighbouring rural communities of water rights and rights to common pasture, or to maintain relations with the neighbouring polis, the provincial government and the army. Be that as it may, little effort has so far been made to explore the means by which the countryside was administered at this time. This chapter will focus on the administrative relationship between cities and villages in the area known as the Decapolis (“The League of Ten Cities,” a region that included the southern parts of Roman Syria and the northern half of Arabia), paying close attention to the administrative organisation of villages. The Decapolis covers parts of what are now Jordan, Syria and Israel. The modern city of Damascus is here taken to mark its northern boundary and 6 Amman (ancient Philadelphia) its southernmost limit. This area has produced abundant evidence relating to village government, and the study of this material offers an excellent opportunity to examine how villages attempted to cope with the internal and external challenges of political administration. The material ranges from a small number of official documents in Latin and a modestly sized but interesting group of Semitic (mostly Nabatean) texts to a substantial sample of Greek

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1 This chapter is based on parts of my PhD thesis (Department of Ancient History, Leyden), written under the stimulating supervision of Harry Pleket and published in Dutch with an extensive English summary: Moors (1992) 509-25. I am grateful to J.M.C. Bowsher for allowing me access to his paper on Capitolias in advance of publication.
inscriptions. The study of village administration in this region is certainly not new, George McLean Harper's study of the character of village government in the Hawran and surrounding areas having been published as early as 1928. Harper was attracted to the Hawran because it had produced a great deal of epigraphical material for an area of its limited size. Since 1928, and particularly during the last few decades, not only have many more texts been found in this region, but better readings of known inscriptions have made it possible to deduce from this corpus more detailed historical information concerning village government in the Decapolis. The present chapter will deal with a far greater area than was covered by Harper, although since the bulk of the texts found derive from the Hawran and its vicinity references to that area will inevitably predominate. In more recent years M. Sartre and H.I. MacAdam have studied the epigraphical evidence in more detail. The question of the status of villages in relation to poleis has formed an important part of their discussion. What was the usual status of villages? Were they dependent on cities (and if so to what degree?), or are we to assume that they were more or less autonomous? What kind of indicators can provide information about the status of villages and thus about the position of their leading officials vis-à-vis their municipal counterparts?

This issue is of some significance, since it will influence considerably our interpretation of the functions of the wide variety of village officials to be encountered in the Decapolis. My discussion will have a dual purpose. Firstly, I shall be commenting on the territorial (and administrative) relationship between certain poleis and the villages near them. Secondly, I shall be taking a closer look at the bouleutes, the prevalent type of official in this region, paying special attention to evidence relating to the countryside. An understanding of the territorial scope of the cities will be helpful in determining whether the villages were subordinate to cities or operated autonomously. We have three relevant sources of information at our disposal: city calendars, boundary stones and distance markers on milestones. Before we make any attempt to assess the usefulness of these sources, however, it is appropriate to take a closer look at the administrative nature of the whole of the area under consideration. Political changes

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2 Harper (1928).