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The ‘Eastern City Area’ of Gadara (Umm Qays): Preliminary Results on the Urban and Functional Structures Between the Hellenistic and Byzantine Periods

As a result of research work conducted at Gadara (Umm Qays) over approximately three decades, the transformation of the Hellenistic hilltop settlement into a Roman urban centre is comparatively well understood. In contrast, our understanding of urban development during the transition to Late Antiquity is relatively incomplete. It is only with recent excavations, conducted over the past decade, that the state of archaeological knowledge has markedly improved.

This contribution attempts to reconstruct Gadara’s development from Hellenistic-Roman times up to the Byzantine period. The account is based upon the results of research projects conducted by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, a Danish team and several German teams.

The forthcoming paper is based on the results of the German research project “Gadara - on the urban and cultural development of the ancient city”. This project is being conducted by the Oriental Department of the German Archaeological Institute and the State Museums in Berlin, directed by Günther Schauerte and the author.¹ All ancient ruins are marked on our Topographical Map of the archaeological site of Gadara (Umm Qays) (FIG. 1).

The main objective of the above-mentioned project is to carry out a comprehensive analysis of settlement development in the eastern part of the ancient city of Gadara. These include the buildings in the area of the city’s main sanctuary complex and the North Theatre, hereafter referred to as the ‘Eastern City Area’ (FIG. 3).

Urban Development in the Hellenistic and Roman Period

The nucleus of Gadara consists of the fortified Hel-

lenistic settlement which dates from the early second century BC (Hoffmann 2000: 180-210; FIG. 1 no. 3). The settlement is situated on a hilltop at the edge of a fertile plain, bordering the eastern Jordan Valley. Owing to its prominent, strategically advantageous location and its bountiful environment the hilltop was a favoured place for settlement.

The phases of urban development, especially those of the ‘Eastern City Area’, can be subdivided into five phases. The aim is to present an overview of the phases of urban development within the ‘Eastern City Area’, and to introduce and analyse continuity and discontinuity within the urban structure of this area, which lies to the north-east of the Hellenistic settlement on Acropolis Hill.

The First Phase of Urban Development

The initial enlargement of the Hellenistic hilltop community included a terrace that extended to the north-east of Acropolis Hill. There, at the ‘eastern entrance’ to the city of Gadara, a temple district with the city’s main sanctuary was constructed on a spacious, artificially levelled area (Hoffmann 1999: 795-831; FIG. 1 no. 5; FIG. 2).

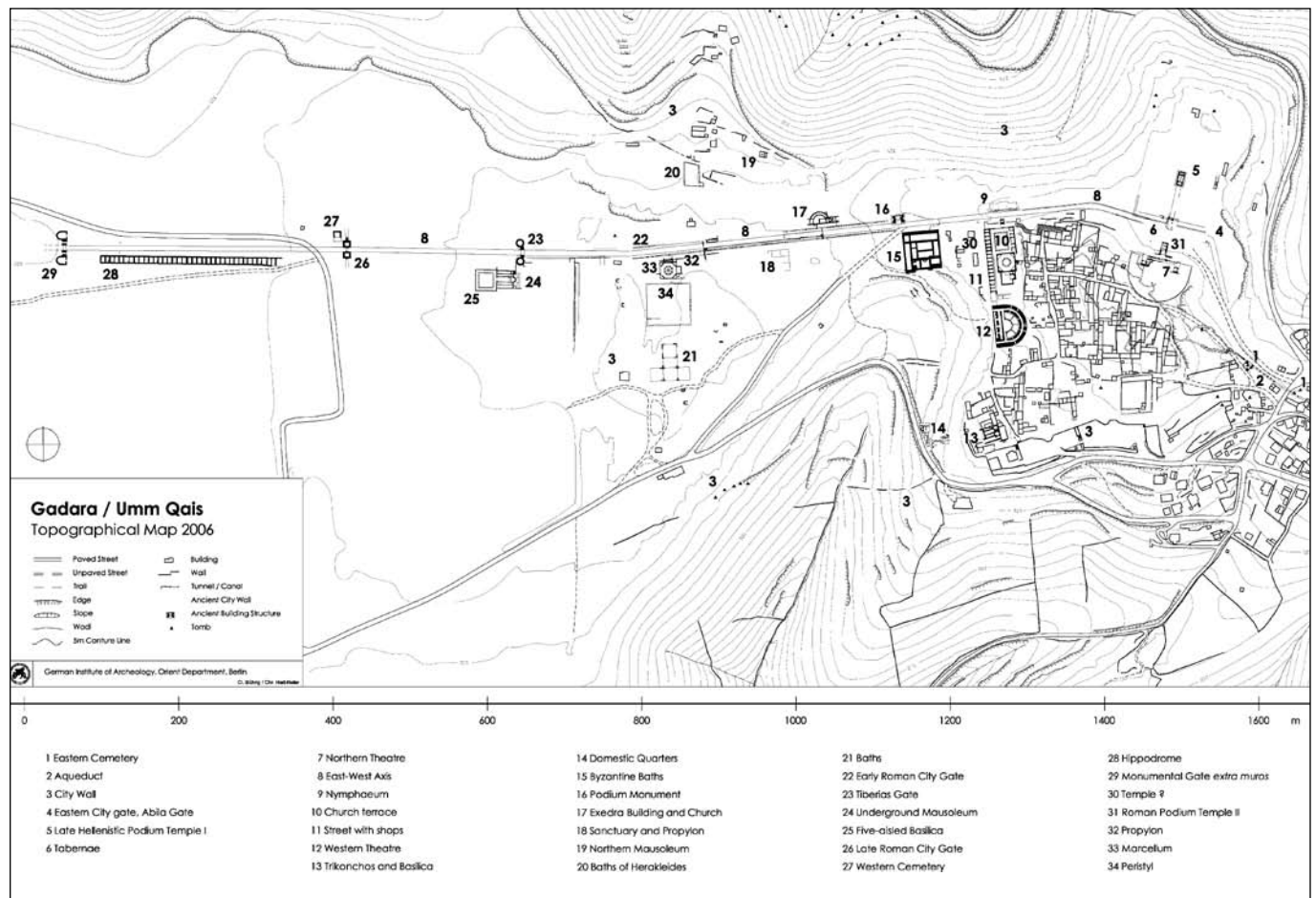
The 92m to 106m wide temple district dates from the first half of the second century to the beginning of the first century BC. The associated Podium Temple I was probably dedicated to Zeus Olympios (Riedl 2005: 102-112). The entrances to the Podium Temple I faced south from the main road through the Propylon I (FIG. 1 no. 6). Propylon and Temple I are situated on one centre-line.

The Second Phase of Urban Development

At the beginning of the first century AD, the North

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1. Topographical map (2006) of Gadara (Umm Qais) (C. Bührig and Chr. Hartl-Reiter).



2. View from north of the 'Eastern City Area', showing the main sanctuary in the foreground and the North Theatre at the settlement hill in the background (C. Bührig).

Theatre was erected on the south side of the temple district (FIG. 1 no. 7; FIG. 2). On this side, the North Theatre nestles against the slope of the settlement hill, bounded by the Hellenistic-Roman city wall to the east. The North Theatre is orientated to the Late Hellenistic Podium Temple I (FIG. 1 nos. 5, 7).

The ornate north façade of the scene building

forms the external right side and main façade of the North Theatre, giving way to a public square in front which is located between the public complex in the north and city wall in the east. Two passageways in the middle lead up to the scene building and two external passageways lead off to the tower gallery of the *cavea* (FIG. 4).

THE 'EASTERN CITY AREA' OF GADARA (UMM QAYS)



3. View from south of the 'Eastern City Area', showing the North Theatre in the foreground and the main sanctuary in the background (C. Bührig).



4. View from the north to one of the passageways in the main façade of the North Theatre scene building, showing the niche-wall in the foreground (C. Bührig).

The large open space between the North Theatre and the district of Podium Temple I was transected from the main street by an axis running in an east-west direction, the so-called east-west axis (FIG. 1 no. 8). The space borders the Late Hellenistic city wall and the Abila Gate in the east (FIG. 1 no. 4). The exact course of the main street and the details of how these spaces were designed at the beginning of the first century AD is still unknown. In sum, topographical and geomorphological conditions only allowed for an expansion of the city to the west.

Whilst the Hellenistic settlement was restricted to the Acropolis, the main street-axis ran in an east-west direction and formed the city's 'backbone' during the Roman Imperial period (Bührig 2008, 2003: 5-62).

In the early Imperial period, some time after the middle of the first century AD, the city expanded to the west and was enclosed by a fortification. The total area of the city was now about 30 hectares, five times larger than the Hellenistic hilltop settlement.²

² For the early Imperial city fortifications see Hoffmann 2000: 175-

233, in particular 211-224 and 228-233.

The Third Phase of Urban Development

The location of the ‘Eastern City Area’ changed after the destruction of the Late Hellenistic Podium Temple I during the First Jewish War, between 66 and 70/74AD).

So far there is no archaeological evidence for the rebuilding of this major monument. There are only references to the preservation of the podium, with the foundations underneath. One exception is the construction activity on the south side of the temenos wall during Flavian times (end of the first century AD). Here the architectural remains have been built over, slightly further to the north, with chamber structures lying parallel to the east-west axis and orientated with the new Propylon II (Hoffmann 1999: 795-831; FIG. 1 no. 6).

The central axis of this new Propylon II was relocated approximately two metres to the west of the old Hellenistic axis, but was now precisely centred on the North Theatre. Furthermore, the open space in front of the North Theatre was ‘framed’ in architectural terms. At the end of the first century AD, a niche-wall was erected 4m from and parallel to the scene building, thereby delineating the square to the south (FIGS. 3 and 4). Between the scene building and niche-wall, a side alley was created to channel the streams of visitors coming to the North Theatre from the east, from the direction of the Abila Gate.

Details of access and the road network outside

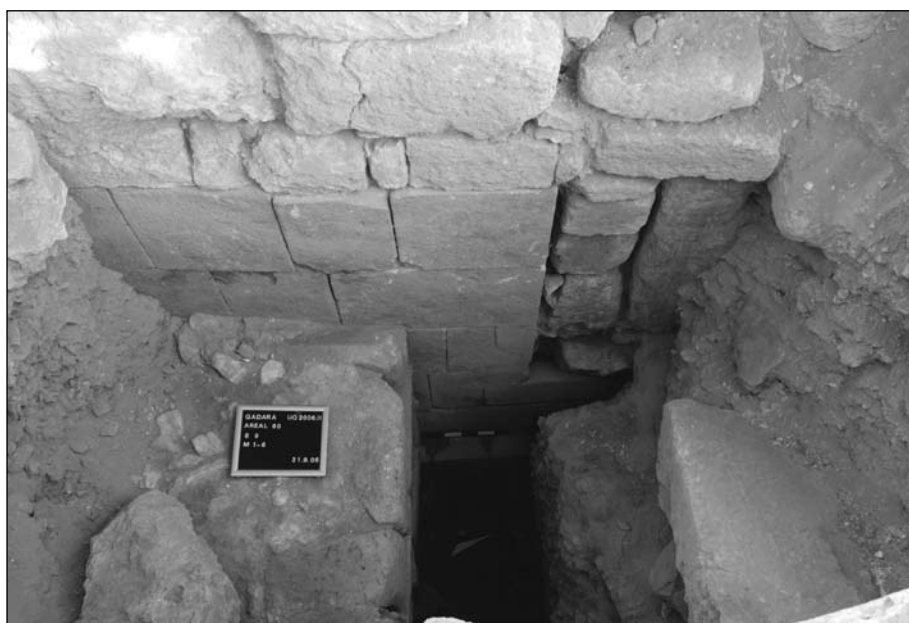
the cavea have yet to be clarified. On the east side, between the North Theatre and city wall, we can demonstrate a direct entrance to the *cavea*³ (FIG. 5).

Along the main east-west axis, the tabernae structure with a passageway to the old district of Podium Temple I was established, thereby delineating the square to the north. This arrangement orientated the North Theatre, square and Propylon II on the same axis. A new functional urban space and mercantile centre was built.

It is remarkable that this urban expansion during the second half of the first century AD was contemporaneous with other building work within Gadara and elsewhere, e.g. the erection of the Tiberias Gate (Weber 2002: 106-108, 326-330; FIG. 1 no. 23) and the completion of parts of the colonnaded street, both located in the western part of the city.

Since the second half of the second century AD, Rome had promoted intensive urbanisation in the eastern provinces. Like Gerasa, Philadelphia and Scythopolis, Gadara benefited from this policy and consequently experienced an economic boom. This was manifested by several public buildings along the colonnaded main street which accentuate individual urban sections, such as the market basilica on the north-western terrace, the West Theatre and the Nymphaeum (Bührig 2008; FIG. 1 nos. 9-11).

The colonnades were constructed gradually and, like Roman fora, constituted the lifeblood of the



5. Entrance to the *cavea* in the outer wall of the North Theatre; view from the East (C. Bührig).

³ This entrance, known as T5, was blocked in Early Byzantine times

when the North Theatre was converted into an amphitheatre.

city. They flanked and enclosed the main street, and pedestals for statues and honorary monuments were erected between the columns and on the wide estrade in front of the colonnade.

The Fourth Phase of Urban Development

In the second century AD, a new phase of development can be defined in the 'Eastern City Area'. A new Podium Temple II, measuring 8.30m by 16m, was erected in front of the scene building, interlocking with and adjoining the niche-wall (FIG. 1 no. 31; FIG. 6). The surrounding square in the 'Eastern City Area' was enclosed by tabernae in the north and the niche-wall in the south.

The new Podium Temple II is located precisely on the central axis with the North Theatre and Propylon II. Temple II was orientated towards the old district of Temple I (FIG. 1 no. 5-7, 31). It can be assumed that the old podium of Temple I was also part of the cultic district and was probably used as

an altar for Podium Temple II. The open space connecting these two building complexes was bisected by the east-west street axis. The 'Eastern City Area' had developed again and now included the city's main cultic and public centres.

During the Roman Imperial period, Gadara expanded continuously to the west along the east-west axis, in the direction of the fertile plain known as Arḍ al-'Alā (FIG. 7). In the early third century AD, the city reached its maximum extent with the main street attaining a length of approximately 1.7km. Its westernmost point is marked by the Monumental Gate extra muros (Bührig 2008; FIG. 1 no. 29).

Situated at the city's western boundary, the Monumental Gate extra muros served not only as a link between the city and its hinterland, but also as an impressive and representative marker of the city's entrance and exit. At the same time, a commercial area was established around the Monumental Gate and hippodrome (FIG. 1 no. 28, 29).

Urban Development During Late Antiquity (Byzantine Period)

The establishment of the Byzantine Empire in the fourth century AD marked the beginning of a long-lasting period of peace, growth and economic prosperity in the region (Walmsley 1996: 130-131; MacAdam 2003: 49-93, in particular 53-68 and 76-77). As early as the fourth century AD, Gadara became a diocese within the Holy Land.

Like Pella, Scythopolis and Gerasa, during the following three centuries the city experienced a new period of prosperity to which various building projects along the east-west axis bear witness. According to available evidence, the Byzantine expansion of Gadara seems to have taken place in two stages. During the initial stage, at the beginning of the fourth century AD, various building projects were undertaken. Apparently this represented some kind of transitional period in the formation of the settlement structure. It was probably at this time, that the main sanctuary in the north-east of the city lost its function in the urban context of Gadara.

During this first, i.e. fourth century, stage in the development of the Byzantine city, the cityscape was characterised by the following building projects: a large bath complex (Nielsen *et al.* 1993, in particular 147; Holm-Nielsen *et al.* 1986: 219-232; FIG. 1 no. 15) and a church complex with a five-aisled basilica (Al-Daire 2001: 87-95, 103-104; Weber 2000: 81, 129-131, 359-373; FIG. 1 no. 25).



6. View from the North, showing the more recent Podium Temple II (C. Bührig).



7. Aerial view along the east-west axis, looking west towards the Arḍ al-'Alā (G. Schauerte).

The Fifth Phase of Urban Development

By the end of the third century or beginning of the fourth century AD, the North Theatre was converted into an amphitheatre (Bührig and Liesen 2006: 524-527; Bührig 2005: 246-247; FIG. 1 no. 7).

In this context, the *scaenae frons* was completely dismantled down to its foundations, upon which the northern enclosure wall of the newly developed arena was constructed using reused building stones from the *scaenae*. In this way, the orchestra was extended to the north in the direction of the dismantled stage and *scaenae frons*.

In the western part of the amphitheatre enclosure wall, three locks have been identified (FIG. 8) which allow direct access to the orchestra. Similar openings are assumed to have existed on the east side. In contrast, the *cavea* was integrated into this new complex without major modification. The direct entrance to the *cavea* on the east side, between the North Theatre and city wall, was blocked in the early Byzantine period.

Structural and functional modifications of Roman theatres were common during the Byzantine period (Claude 1969: 74-76). Such rebuilding emphasises the importance and wealth of the city of

Gadara at the beginning of the fourth century. On the basis of our recent work, the area under consideration lost its significance as Gadara's urban centre by the end of the sixth century or during the first half of the seventh century.⁴

The second stage in the Byzantine city's expansion had begun by the middle of the fifth century AD, following destruction caused by one of the earthquakes attested in the fourth and fifth centuries. This second stage can be viewed as an exercise in rebuilding and reflects the increasing influence of the Christian faith upon urban planning. Whether the rebuilding of the North Theatre was carried out before the earthquake or whether it was part of the subsequent reconstructions cannot yet be verified. Additional churches were constructed within the city, including a centralised monument with an atrium and three-aisled basilica at the south-western corner of the ancient settlement hill (Vriezen *et al.* 2001: 537-545; Wagner - Lux and Vriezen no date: 139-153, in particular 140-144, FIG. 1 no. 10). It is likely that further buildings were still in use or newly-constructed during the Byzantine period.

Apart from religious buildings, which can be seen as an expression of Byzantine urban build-

⁴ The earthquakes are listed in Amiran, Arieḥ and Turcotte 1994:

265; Russell 1985: 42 Tab. 1.



8. View from the south-west to the amphitheatre enclosure wall with locks and the *scaenae frons* (C. Bührig).

ing policy, there is also evidence for modification of secular monuments in the city. For example, there is evidence for the rebuilding of structures along the main street, along with the rows of shops that flanked the street (Tawalbeh 2002: 622-623). Nevertheless, it can be stated that the significance of the east-west axis as a 'linear forum' or 'urban backbone' was maintained during Late Antiquity (Walmsley 1996: 144-145; Claude 1969: 224-229).

Secular as well as religious buildings continued to be oriented towards the street and were accentuated by elaborate entrance façades. The east-west axis with its flanking rows of shops played a major role in the social and economical life of the city.

The defeat of the Byzantine army by the Umayyads at the River Yarmouk in 636AD marked the end of the Byzantine period. However, there was no major building work or damage to the city in the

aftermath of this event.

A devastating earthquake some time in the middle of the eighth century destroyed large parts of the city and interrupted the settlement's further development.⁵ Henceforth, urban life went into decline and the population of Gadara became sparse.

Summary and Outlook

Our research has shed light on the chronological order of functional and structural changes in the urban development of Gadara, particularly in the 'Eastern City Area'. As early as the end of the second century BC, the 'Eastern City Area' with its main sanctuary dedicated to Zeus Olympios was one of Gadara's main cultic and urban spaces, a state of affairs that continued until the end of the third century AD.

Because of the continuous use of the North Theatre and Podium Temples I and II, the sanctuary as a whole and the 'Eastern City Area' would have had a close formal and functional relationship. Details of their use and the question of typological inspiration have yet to be determined. A gradual and continuous expansion of the city to include public, cultic and economic areas can be observed in the 'Eastern City Area' of Gadara. This arrangement was the architectural expression of the highly developed self-image of the citizens of Gadara.

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⁵ The destruction layers at Gadara are probably not attributable to the Muslim conquest but to a subsequent series of earthquakes

during the 8th century, cf. Russell 1985: 49 pl. 1. For Gadara in the Islamic period see Weber 2000: 83-87.

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