

A SURVEY OF ROMAN SCULPTURE  
IN THE DECAPOLIS\*  
PRELIMINARY REPORT

by  
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The geographical area of the ancient *Decapolis*<sup>1</sup> today comprises the southern territories of the modern Arab Republic of Syria and the northern half of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Only one of these Graeco-Roman city states, Scythopolis, is located beyond the western bank of the River Jordan. The sculpture in this region has been widely ignored; only a few catalogues can be cited dealing with this topic<sup>2</sup>. A considerable number of funeral portrait busts found in the tombs of Scythopolis and of the neighbouring

Samaritan capital of Sebasteia were exhaustively studied in a thesis by I. Skupinska Løvset<sup>3</sup>. A critical review of her conclusions and further observations were subsequently contributed by R. Wenning<sup>4</sup> and K. Parlasca<sup>5</sup> to the scientific discussion on Roman sculpture in eastern Palestine and southern Syria. Very few other analytical articles<sup>6</sup> about this subject have been published.

In 1987 the German Protestant Institute for Archaeology, Amman, in close cooperation with the Liebieghaus, the Gal-

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\* The survey of Roman Sculpture of the Decapolis was initiated by a permit generously issued by Dr. Ghazi Bisheh, Director General of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, in Autumn 1988. All research was done within the facilities of the German Protestant Institute, Amman. I gratefully acknowledge the support of this project by the Department of Antiquities as well as by other Jordanian and foreign institutions and individuals, such as Jumanah al-Assad, Siham Balgar, H.E. Dr. Herwig Bartels, Prof. Basil Hennessy, Prof. Dr. Moawiyah Ibrahim, Widad Kawar, Dr. Lutfi A. Khalil, 'Ammar Khamash, Wajeeh Karasneh, Dr. Birgit Mershen, 'Aida Nagaway, Dr. Mohammed al-Najjar, Eman Oweis, Omar Reshaidat, Ghazi Sa'udi, Ahmad Saidi, Jacques Seigne, Sultan Shraideh, Hekmat Taani, Prof. Safwan Tall and Musa Zayyat for their kindness in making items accessible for scientific research. I further acknowledge the help of A. McQuitty and R. Schick in improving the English of this article.

1. For the Decapolis see H. Bietenhard, 'Die Syrische Dekapolis von Pompeius bis Trajan', *ZDPV* 79 (1977), p. 24ff. *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II 8, H. Temporini W. Hase (eds.), Berlin - New York, 1977, p. 220ff.; S. Th. Parker, 'The Decapolis Reviewed', *J. Bib. Lit.* 94 (1975), p. 437 ff.; B. Isaac, 'The Decapolis in Syria - a Neglected Inscription', *ZPE* 44 (1981), p. 67ff.; P.L. Gattier, 'Décapole et Coelé-Syrie: deux inscriptions nouvelles,' *Syria* 67 (1990), p. 204f.
2. S. and A. Abdul-Hak, *Catalogue illustré du Département des Antiquités Greco-Romaines au Musée de Damas*. Damascus, 1951; M.

Dunand, *Le Musée de Soueida - Inscriptions et monuments figurés*, *Bibl. Arch. Hist.* XX, Paris, 1934; S. Diebner, 'Bosra: Die Skulpturen in Hof der Zitadelle', *Rivista di Archeologia* 6 (1982), p. 52ff.

3. I. Skupinska-Løvset, *Funerary Portraiture of Roman Palestine. An Analysis of the Production in its Culture - Historical Context*, *Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology* XXI, Gothenburg, 1983.
4. R. Wenning, 'Eine römische Grabbüste aus Palästina in Münster', *Boreas* 9 (1986), p. 221ff.; *idem*, 'Review of Skupinska-Løvset', *Gnomon* 56 (1984), p. 754ff.
5. K. Parlasca, 'Eine Frühkaiserzeitliche Grabbüste aus Gadara', in: *Praestant Interna*, Festschrift U. Hausmann. Tübingen 1982, p. 148ff.
6. Cf. M. Avi-Yonah, 'Oriental Elements in the Art of Palestine in the Roman and Byzantine Periods,' *QDAP* 10 (1940), p. 105ff.; G. Bolelli, 'La Ronde-Bosse de caractère indigène', in: *Hauran I: Recherches archéologiques sur la Syrie du Sud à l'époque Hellénistique*, J.-M. Dentzer (ed.), *Bibl. Archeol. Hist.* CXXIV, Paris, 1986, p. 311ff.; M. C. Bitti, 'An Example of Local Sculpture at Jerash', *ADAJ* 30 (1986), p. 207ff.; cf. K. Parlasca, *Syrische Grabreliefs Hellenistischer und Römischer Zeit*. 3. Trierer Winkelmannsprogramm 1981. Mainz, 1981; *idem*, 'La sculpture Grecque et la sculpture de l'époque Romaine imperiale en Syrie', in: *Archéologie et Histoire de la Syrie II: La Syrie de l'époque Achéménide à l'avènement de l'Islam*, J.-M. Dentzer and W. Orthmann (eds.), *Schriften zur Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* I. Saarbrücken, 1989, p. 537 ff.

lery of Ancient Sculpture at the City of Frankfurt am Main, developed the idea to initiate research into the style, iconography and purpose of Roman sculpture found in the Decapolis. In this context it was agreed that catalogue work should be confined to Jordan since the Hashemite Kingdom nowadays covers the core territories of these Graeco-Roman city states. The promoters of this project, P.C. Bol and the author, aim to present the results to a wider public within the framework of a joint Jordanian-German exhibition, scheduled for 1993 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. As an immediate consequence of these considerations, the Liebieghaus participated in archaeological fieldwork at Umm Qeis, financed by funds provided by the magistrate of the city of Frankfurt am Main and headed by P.C. Bol in the area of the so-called "Nymphaeum" at Gadara of the Decapolis.<sup>7</sup> During these excavations not only were architectural structures of an important public building retrieved within the urban settlement of Gadara, but also many fragments of fine sculpture came to light. Among these one should draw attention to marbles representing the Ephesian Artemis (Pl. I, 1)<sup>8</sup> and participants at the Dionysiac *thiasos*.

After a preliminary evaluation of marble sculptures known to date in Jordan, a good deal of other statuary types from Gadara focused interest, such as the en-

throned Zeus found at the northern theatre<sup>9</sup> and a fragmentary head of Dionysus, now on display in the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> It can be concluded at the present stage of knowledge, that most of such marbles may have been imported — the majority probably from Asia Minor — to the cities of the Decapolis during the Roman Imperial period. All these imports have, in terms of iconography, a mainly official character: gods and mythological persons, emperors and officials, philosophers, athletes and notables of public life, all of them adjusted to the Hellenized taste of a multinational urban society by means of honorary dedications. Especially from Gerasa, various statues are known, some of them showing Roman citizens in their typical garment, the *toga* (Pl. I, 2).<sup>11</sup> One of the Gerasene marbles bears an inscription of a certain Antoneinus, son of Antiochus. He was by profession a sculptor originating from Alexandria. It is a difficult problem to decide how far individual artists might have been active in the cities of the Decapolis in casting statues in bronze<sup>12</sup> or sculpting imported stone materials, such as Greek and western Anatolian marble or red, black and green Egyptian granite. If this is true, there should have been a direct impact by such sculptors on those ateliers working with stones from local quarries.

In contrast to Nabataean art, which

7. Cf. P.C. Bol, A. Hoffmann, Th. Weber and contributors, 'Gadara in der Dekapolis. Zwischenbericht über die Deutschen Ausgrabungen in Umm Qais/Nordwestjordanien in den Jahren 1986 bis 1988', *Archäol. Anz.* 1990 (forthcoming).
8. For the type see R. Fleischer, *Artemis von Ephesos und verwandte Kultstatuen aus Anatolien und Syrien. Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain* XXXV, Rome, 1973.
9. Found in 1974 on the artificial terrace beyond the northern theatre; Th. Weber and R.G. Khouri, *Umm Qais - Gadara of the Decapolis. A Brief Guide to the Antiquities*. Amman, 1989, p. 36; Bol, Hoffmann, Weber, *loc. cit.*, Fig. 39.
10. See *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Clas-*

*sicae* III. Zürich-München, 1986, 518 s.v. 'Dionysos' [in *Peripheria Orientali* (Ch. Augé and P. Linant de Bellefonds)] Pl. 410, 36. I extend my gratitude to R. Wenning, Münster, for this reference.

11. On this topic now: H.R. Goette, *Studien zu Römischen Togadarstellungen*. Beiträge zur Erschließung hellenistischer und kaiserzeitlicher Skulptur und Architektur, X. Mainz, 1990.
12. The evidence for metal sculpture is rather scanty for Jordan: there is a fragment of a draped life-size statue, made from copper alloy, found in a Hellenistic-Roman context at Pella (Reg.-Nr. 80251, area XXIII plot A locus 22 level 5) and a hollow cast bronze torso of Artemis, found at Petra, Wadi Siyagh, cf. P. Parr, 'Recent Discoveries at Petra', *PEQ* 89 (1957), p. 15 No. 25.

even for official representations used local stone, such as sandstone in the south or basalt in the north,<sup>13</sup> the sphere of public art in the Decapolis was obviously ruled by foreign imports.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, the cities of the Decapolis displayed numerous products of local sculpture ateliers.<sup>15</sup> The majority of them were confined to architectural ornamentation or to the private sepulchral sector: funerary busts, found in chamber tombs, representing more or less abstract portraits of the deceased (Pl. II, 1-2). All these busts are made of locally quarried stone, such as limestone and basalt. Even though a considerable number have been preserved without provenances, it is possible to attribute individual specimens to specific cities due to their stone types. For instance, the chalk-like soft white limestone portraits from Abila/Qweilbeh (Pl. II, 1) and the busts of greyish-blue basalt from Gadara/Umm Qeis (Pl. II, 2) are distinctive. Only a few examples are known from Gerasa and Philadelphia, and they are clearly distinguishable from the Abilene and Gadarene portraits by their reddish-brown and yellow-ochre lime-

stone.

Most of the busts are carved in a rather expressive manner, neglecting proportions and details of human physiognomy. Symbols of social status, such as book scrolls — education (Pl. II, 2) or jewellery — wealth (Pl. II, 1), are often emphasized. Despite their crude appearance, these funerary portraits of the Decapolis gain historical value because of the light they shed on the ability of local craftsmanship, demography and the political-religious backgrounds.

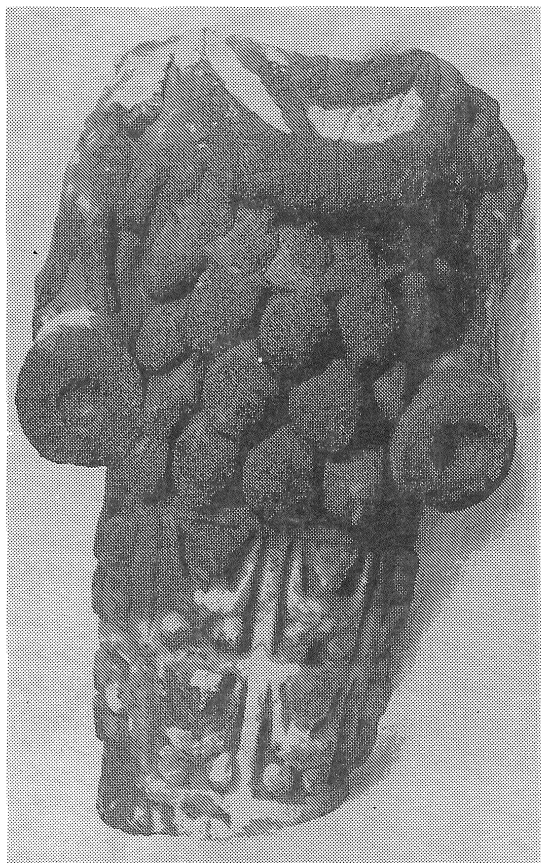
It is a challenge for future research to approach the vast, but hitherto widely ignored field of sculpture in eastern Palestine in order to define more precisely the interdependence of local and foreign styles, and to investigate the tension between human representation in oriental art and anti-pictorial tendencies in Semitic religions of the ancient Near East.<sup>16</sup>

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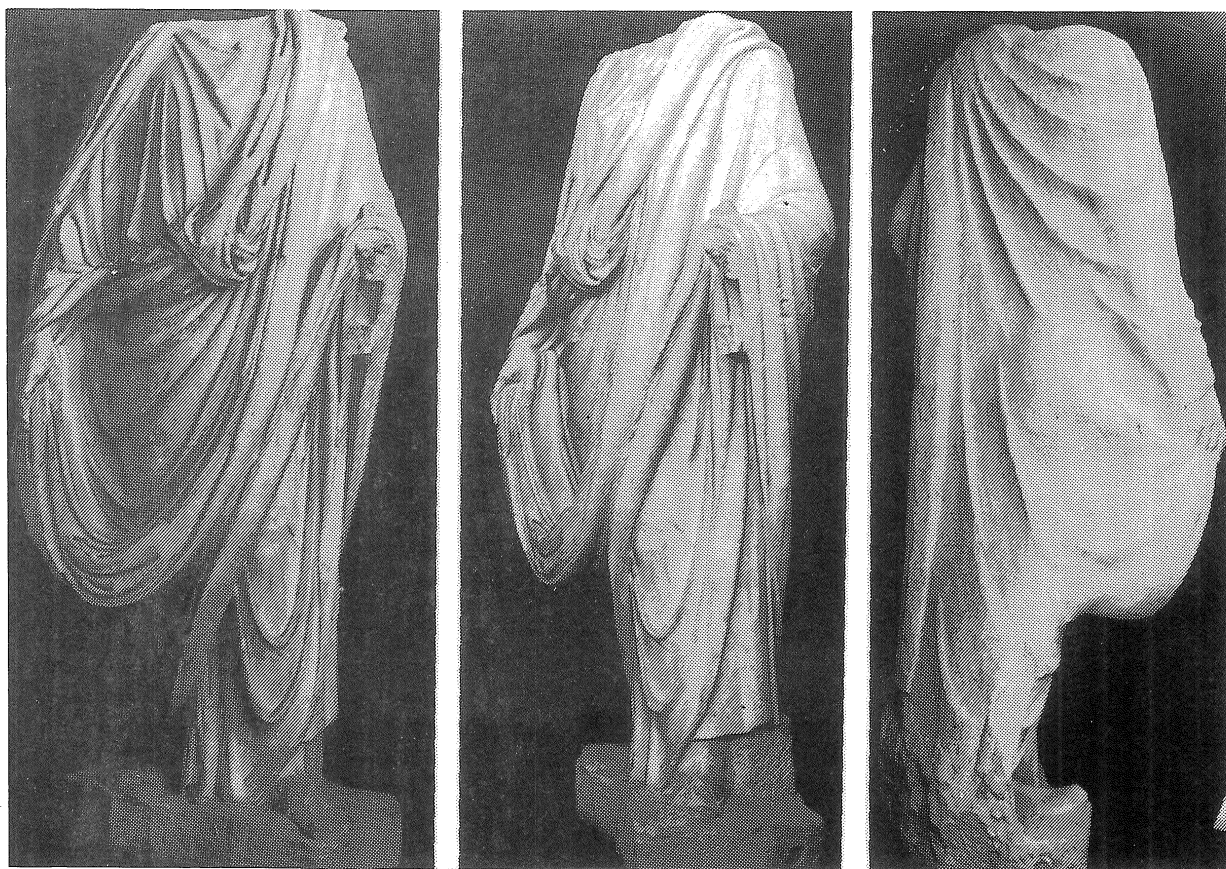
13. Cf. N. Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins*. London, 1965, p. 86, 91, 211, 227 etc. See also the signatures of Nabataean sculptors: Z.T. Feima and R.N. Jones, 'A Nabataean Sculptor's Signature from Petra', *ADAJ* 30 (1986), p. 329ff; A. Schmidt-Colinet, 'A Nabataean Family of Sculptors at Hegra', *Berytus* 31 (1983), p. 95ff; *idem*, 'Zur Nabatäischen Felsnekropole von Hegra/Medain-Saleh in Saudi-Arabien', *Antike Welt* 18 (1987), p. 29ff; *idem*, 'The Mason's Workshop of Hegra, its Relations to Petra, and the Tomb of Syllaios', in: *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* III, A. Hadidi (ed.), Amman, 1987, p. 143 ff.
14. For marble statues from the Decapolis see F. Brommer, *Denkmälerlisten zur Griechischen*

*Heldensage* III. Marburg, 1976, p. 59 s.v. Daidalos-Ikaros No. 1 (with further references); K. Stemmer, 'Ein Asklepios-Kopf in Amman', *ADAJ* 21 (1976), p. 33ff.; F. Fakharani, 'Das Theater von Amman in Jordanien', *Archäol. Anz.* (1975), p. 399ff.; V.A. Clark, 'The Archaeology of the Roman Theatre', in: *Jerash Archaeological Project I.: 1981-1983*. F. Zayadine (ed.), Amman, 1986, p. 264 Pl. XXII; F.C. Albertson, 'A Portrait of Marcus Aurelius from Syrio-Palestine', *Damaszener Mitt.* 3 (1988), p. 1ff.

15. Cf. Wenning, *Boreas loc. cit.* p. 224f.
16. For this topic in general cf. S. Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder*. Orbis Biblicus Orientalis LXXIV. Fribourg/Sw.-Göttingen, 1987.



1. Umm Qeis, Beit Rusan, Reg.-Nr. XVIII. B. 24. From the area of the "Nymphaeum": marble statuette of the Ephesian Artemis. (Photo Th. Weber).



2. Amman, Jordan Archaeological Museum Inv. J. 262. From Gerasa, found in the environs of the eastern thermae: Roman marble statue of a *togatus*. (Photo Th. Weber).



1. Amman, Jordan Archaeological Museum, without Nr. Provenance unknown. Female funerary bust, named in a Greek inscription "Arista", made of limestone, probably from Abila. (Photo Th. Weber).



2. Amman, Jordan University, Archaeology Museum Inv. U. 837. From Gadara/Umm Qeis: anonymous male funerary bust made of basalt. (Photo Th. Weber).