

Achim Lichtenberger: *Kulte und Kultur der Dekapolis. Untersuchungen zu numismatischen, archäologischen und epigraphischen Zeugnissen. Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins, Band 29.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003. xi + 455 pp, 22 plates + 1 loose map. Euro 138. ISBN: 3-447-04806-9.

The book here under discussion, a doctoral thesis from the Eberhard-Karls-Universität at Tübingen, is the first ever comprehensive overview of religious life in the cities of the Syrian Decapolis as a whole. It presents an “Untersuchung der Kulte und Heiligtümer der Dekapolis-Städte in römischer Zeit vor dem Hintergrund lokaler Traditionen und römisch-hellenistischer Kultur” (1). It manages to fill an obvious gap and is an extremely welcome contribution to the study of the religious history of the Near East in the Graeco-Roman period. Until now studies were either on the cults of a particular city, or on one category of source material only.<sup>1</sup> There has been plenty of discussion of what actually was ‘the Decapolis’, but it seems at least to be clear that it was not created in the Hellenistic period as a league as such. Hard evidence that ‘the Decapolis’ referred to a specific form of organisation (within the province of Syria) does not appear before the end of the first century AD. After the creation of Arabia in AD 106, when the various cities were divided over three different Roman provinces, the term can have had only geographical implications.<sup>2</sup>

It cannot be emphasised enough that most of our evidence for religion in the cities of the Decapolis dates to the second and third century AD, when the Decapolis as such had ceased to function as whatever sort of administrative unit it may at some point have been.<sup>3</sup> This is true both for the archaeological remains of the relevant cities, for the epigraphic and sculptural sources they reveal, and for the coins the cities issued. The numismatic evidence stands out because, in contrast to most of the other material, it came from a city as a collectivity. It could be argued that it is precisely the parallel evidence from

- 1 The classic paper by H. Seyrig: *Temples, cultes et souvenirs historiques de la Décapole.* Syria 36, 1959, 60–78, is based mainly on coins and deals with five of the cities. Cf. C. Augé: *Divinités et mythologies sur les monnaies de la Decapole.* Le Monde de la Bible 22, 1982, 43–47. For a recent overview of the Decapolis, with further references to individual case studies, see A. Hoffmann and S. Kerner (eds.): *Gadara – Gerasa und die Dekapolis.* Mainz 2002.
- 2 Cf. “Dekapolis bezeichnete somit niemals einen freien Städtebund, sondern immer nur eine Verwaltungseinheit der römischen Provinz Syria. In diesem Sinn kann er von Pompeius bis 106 n. Chr. verwendet werden, wobei der genaue Zeitpunkt der Bezeichnung als Dekapolis nicht sicher zu ermitteln ist” (20).
- 3 See T. Kaizer: *Some remarks about religious life in the Decapolis.* Hallesche Beiträge zur Orientwissenschaft 36, 2004 (forthcoming), a paper written in anticipation of Lichtenberger’s overview.

the coins issued by the various Decapolis cities in the second and third centuries that contributes most to our impression of a continuing cultural cohesion between the former members of the unit, and thus makes a study of religion in the Decapolis as a whole a legitimate undertaking.

From that point of view it is understandable that Lichtenberger makes the numismatic evidence “die Quellenbasis der Untersuchung” (1). He starts from the principle that depictions on coins are relevant for the city which issues them, and “dass die Motive bewusst von Bürgern der Polis ausgewählt wurden und . . . in einem direkten lokalgeschichtlichen Bezug zu der Stadt stehen” (1). When one is interested in a city as a collectivity, coinage is indeed more significant than individual dedications. Nevertheless, one ought to be aware that the evidence for cults on a city’s coinage does not provide us with a complete and impartial view of the various aspects of worship in that city, but presents a mere civic facade of religious life.

It is of course unclear which cities actually belonged to the Decapolis, and this is not solely a modern problem. Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History* (5, 74), acknowledged that “the region was so called from the number of its towns, though not all writers keep to the same towns in the list”. The geographer Ptolemy, in the second century AD, grouped together eighteen cities as belonging to “Koile Syria and the Decapolis” (*Geogr.* 5, 14, 18), two terms which are both interpreted by Lichtenberger as originally “synonym mit der administrativen Untereinheit der Provinz Syria” (19).<sup>4</sup> The longer list of cities which Ptolemy gives is the result of the latter’s confusion of “die späthellenistische Bezeichnung Koile Syrien mit einem späteren Begriff, der . . . das Gebiet zwischen Libanon und Antilibanon benennt” (16). The number eighteen is also often encountered in modern numismatic studies, dealing with the coinage of the Decapolis and of *provincia* Arabia.<sup>5</sup> Every choice of cities to be studied is, to a degree, ultimately arbitrary. But it is surprising that Lichtenberger opts to include only nine of them in his overview. The nine are the “westlichen Dekapolis-Städte . . . , die mit ihren Stadtterritorien ein zusammenhängendes Gebiet bilden” (20): Hippos, Dion, Abila, Gadara and Capitolias in the north, Scythopolis and Pella in the Jordan valley, and Gerasa and Philadelphia in the south. Lichtenberger’s Enneapolis excludes those places located further north-

4 Cf. “Denn Dekapolis und Koile Syrien bezeichneten tatsächlich eine Zeit lang dasselbe Gebiet, und es ist anzunehmen, dass die Dekapolis aus der Strategie Koile Syrien, die 47 v. Chr. an Herodes gegeben wurde, hervorgegangen ist” (16).

5 The standard collection is by A. Spijkerman: *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*, ed. by M. Piccirillo. Jerusalem 1978. Cf. C. Augé: *La place des monnaies de Décapole et d’Arabie dans la numismatique du Proche-Orient à l’époque romaine*, in id. and F. Dyrat (eds.): *Les monnayages syriens. Quel apport pour l’histoire du Proche-Orient hellénistique et romain?* Beirut 2002, 153–166.

east, such as Kanatha and Damascus (mentioned both by Pliny and by Ptolemy), “die räumlich, aber auch kulturell von den anderen getrennt waren” (20), but also Adra’a (in Ptolemy’s list), situated immediately east of Capitolia and Abila. Especially inclusion of the coinage from Adra’a, which in the second century depicts a betyl with accompanying inscription referring to “Dusares, god of the Adraènoi”<sup>6</sup>, could have put the evidence from the other places in perspective, e.g. an altar dedicated to this deity (in Greek) at Hippos (42–43), and the intriguing attestation of the cult of a so-called ‘Arab deity’ (Θεός Ἀραβικός) at Gerasa (221–225). The remarks made thus far are not meant to be picky, but they are made because the exclusion of those sites whose evidence reveals different spheres of influence has assisted in bringing out not only a cultural cohesion between the Decapolis cities, but also common origins of their main cults. If the sources from other cities, which in the Roman period appeared at least in some lists relating to the Decapolis, are less consonant with an overall unequivocal thesis and complicate matters only further, so be it. Cultural borders and separations within the wider region of the Near East were maybe not as fixed as we would sometimes like them to have been.

This criticism does not diminish my appreciation of the learning which went into this book, and of the exhaustive discussion of the sources. The introduction sets the tone, by giving full details and references as regards the ancient sources on the Decapolis. The main body of the work consists of two parts. The largest one (‘Analytische Materialvorlage’) is an encyclopedic catalogue of the evidence for religion in the nine cities which are dealt with. Each city is introduced by a topographical and historical overview, followed by a presentation and discussion of the gods and sanctuaries which are depicted on that city’s coinage (in chronological order). A similar section then follows on the gods and sanctuaries according to non-numismatic evidence, starting with those deities who also appear on the coins. The other part (‘Auswertung’) is divided in three sections, on gods, sanctuaries and cities (including their ‘Selbstdarstellung’ with respect to the Graeco-Roman world at large). A concluding chapter is followed by a long bibliography, five indices, maps and plans of the Decapolis cities, and splendid reproductions of the variety of coins discussed. A fold-out map of the region is attached. Throughout the book, a smaller letter type is applied to designate the detailed argumentation that could interrupt the flow of reading.

The most important thesis of the book is that the divine worlds of the nine Decapolis cities “massiv von phönikischen Kulturen geprägt waren” (357), and that this Phoenician influence goes back at least to the Hellenistic period.<sup>7</sup> It is

6 Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis*, n<sup>os</sup>1–3.

7 It is interesting to see that not too long ago a similar claim was made with regard to the core of the divine world of Palmyra, by G. Garbini: *Gli dèi fenici di Palmira*. *Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rendiconti ser.*

also argued, in contrast, that the so-called ‘Arab’ nature of many of the cults of the Decapolis is not supported by ancient sources. Lichtenberger is particularly good in distinguishing different ‘types’ of a deity, as appearing on coins, and he explains them in terms of different religious traditions, rather than as mere alternatives of representation. Hence the co-existence of the various forms of Zeus in the Decapolis cities goes back to the introduction of the main god of the Seleucids, Zeus Olympios, into a divine world where he is worshipped alongside local gods who are also – thanks to *interpretatio Graeca* – called Zeus: “Gerade das Verhältnis von *interpretatio Graeca* zu nicht-synkretistischen Gottheiten zeigt, dass die Städte zutiefst vorderorientalisch geprägt und nur an der Oberfläche – die allerdings das Bild prägte – hellenisiert waren” (331).

A new division of the gods worshipped in the Decapolis according to their origins is a major step, but it does not say very much about the contemporary meaning attached to the cults in the second and third century AD.<sup>8</sup> And even about the origins one cannot always be certain. In the Roman Near East, the goddess Leukothea is especially attested in the region of the Hermon and Tyr. But does that make the Leukothea who received a cult in Gerasa and near Scythopolis ‘Phoenician’? According to Cicero (nat. deor. 3, 39), a goddess with that name was worshipped ‘throughout the whole of Greece’ (*cuncta Graecia*). As regards Pella, Lichtenberger suggests that the Phoenician god Eshmun is portrayed on the city’s coins. It is clear that the relevant figure on the coins is not depicted in a standard Graeco-Roman fashion, and it is understandable that he is explained as an ‘Oriental’ or ‘indigenous’ god. But identification with the healing god who is known above all from his sanctuary outside Sidon, where he was identified in Classical times with Asclepius, rests not on an accompanying inscription, but only on interpretation of motives which were not confined to Eshmun. Finally, the appearance of Heracles and Dionysos figures in the Decapolis is not necessarily evidence for “die Bedeutung der jugendlichen Gottheiten” which leads to “der Entdeckung der tiefgreifenden phönikischen Prägung der Städte” (357). Some of the main deities can indeed be explained as being ‘Phoenician’ in origin (e. g. Melqart, but it ought to be stressed that he is not worshipped under that name in the Decapolis), but even then it cannot be automatically concluded that ‘Phoenicians’ founded or settled the cities of the Decapolis.<sup>9</sup> Divine names were not restricted to one ethnic or cultural

9, vol. 9, 1998, 23–37. For a different interpretation of that material, see T. Kaizer: *The Religious Life of Palmyra*. Stuttgart 2002 (Plekos 5,2003,143–146 [<http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2003/rkaizer.pdf>]).

8 Cf. K. Butcher: *Roman Syria and the Near East*. London 2003, 289: “It is not enough simply to point to the local, regional or Graeco-Roman origins of a particular form; what is more important is the meaning of the form in the period of Roman rule.”

9 Cf. “Vielleicht seit vorhellenistischer Zeit scheint die Dekapolis unter phöniki-

group, and could lose their original sense of affiliation when becoming the focus of worship elsewhere. Like other cultural elements, deities could over time become authentic parts of any local or regional civilization of which they became part, and as such they underwent a continuous process of renegotiation, leaving the modern scholar only seldom with a hint on their ‘real nature’.<sup>10</sup> If certain requisites and attributes of a divine figure are also known from the Phoenician world, that figure will still have had a local character elsewhere, even if that is not longer recognizable for us.

The considerations offered here are the result of the stimulus that is Lichtenberger’s major collection and discussion of sources for religious life in the Decapolis. His book comes at a time when the individual cities continue to be explored by archaeological missions, and further evidence will no doubt appear to add to our picture.<sup>11</sup> A similar approach to the remaining cities of the Oktôkaidekapolis is still a desideratum, but Lichtenberger deserves praise for his exemplary and thought-provoking treatment of the cults of the most typical half.

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schem Einfluss gestanden zu haben. Möglicherweise wurden einige Siedlungen von Phönikern gegründet, oder Phöniker liessen sich in ihnen nieder. Die Dekapolis war phönikisches Hinterland” (358).

- 10 This argument is set out in full in T. Kaizer: The “Heracles figure” at Hatra and Palmyra: problems of interpretation. *Iraq* 62, 2000, 219-232.
- 11 See especially Th. M. Weber: *Gadara - Umm Qēs I. Gadara Decapolitana. Untersuchungen zur Topographie, Geschichte, Architektur und Bildenden Kunst einer “Polis Hellenis” im Ostjordanland.* ADPV 30, Wiesbaden 2002, with a catalogue of sculptures from other Decapolis sites, p. 463–555.
- 12 Thanks are due to the British Academy for support through the award of a Postdoctoral Fellowship.