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Zeus Olympios, Hadrian and the Jews of Antiochia-on-the-Chrysorrhoeas-formerly-called-Gerasa

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Introduction

Religious life, beliefs and practices held a central position in the ancient city, and the cities of the Near East were no exception (Blömer *et al.* 2015, which includes a chapter by Graeme Clarke). Religion was not a separate sphere of life in antiquity but rather tied to cultural, political and social aspects of life and vice versa (Raja & Rüpke 2015a). Religious architecture is therefore one of the most obvious places to begin in order to examine continuity and change in religious identities and attitudes (Raja 2015). Of course, several aspects of religious life are not reflected in the remains of the architecture, and this must not be forgotten (Raja & Rüpke 2015b; Raja & Weiss 2015, 2016). In this contribution, evidence from ancient Gerasa, Antiochia-on-the-Chrysorrhoeas, is contextualised to give a nuanced picture of aspects of the religious topography of Gerasene society in the Hadrianic period and to highlight broader issues surrounding emperor Hadrian's attitude towards the Zeus Olympios cult and his tackling of, among other things, the time preceding the Bar Kokhba Revolt in the period 132–135 AD (Kraeling 1938, Lichtenberger 2003, 2008; Raja 2012, 2013).

The cult of Zeus Olympios was strong in the southern Levant in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (Lichtenberger 2008). In many cases, the cult was based on already existing local cults, which worshipped the most important local god that, in turn, was assimilated with either the Hellenistic Zeus Olympios or, later, with the Roman Zeus Olympios/Jupiter Optimus Maximus cult. Earlier cult sites were sometimes reorganised to reflect such developments. However, a direct continuity of earlier local cult practice and Hellenistic/Roman cult practice is often impossible to establish (Freyberger 2015; Sartre 2015).

Simon Price (2012) reminds us that the movement of cults was always dependent on people, whether civilians, military, slaves or ethnic or elective groups, and that the evidence for the movement of cults and religious practice must be set within a broader socio-political context. Reasons for migration or development must be seen in local as well as regional contexts. The Roman Empire depended on connections and networks for the spread of information, and through such networks cults moved and developed (Collar 2007, 2013). However, with the growing application of network theory to archaeological evidence, we have also seen a rise in the number of dots on maps connected by lines, between which there were, in fact, no strong connections; sometimes such maps simply attest the appearance of cults at a certain point in time. Price also points to the fact that variation in urban complexity does not convey much in terms of the actual religious diversity, and he advocates that network theory always works with a set of data which is far from complete on several levels (Price 2012: 10–11).

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