

BOUNDARIES AND LINKAGES

TRANSFORMATIONS OF JERASH, JORDAN

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The city of Jerash, Jordan, is currently undergoing the latest transformation of its urban master plan initiated in the Roman times of Trajan. Building upon this author's extensive study of the geometrical ordering of the Roman master plan of Jerash and the significance of kinetic spatial experience in the public perception of monuments, this paper studies subsequent Christian, Islamic and modern transformations of this historic city.¹

Roman Gerasa

Located between Philadelphia (Amman) and Damascus, Gerasa has been strategically placed both commercially and environmentally from ancient times.² The city was part of a confederation of Hellenistic free cities known as the Decapolis which was created in 63 B.C. Gerasa is positioned about halfway up the valley of the spring-fed Chrysorhoas River and is ringed by tall hills with a dramatic, distant view to the south. While the site had periodic habitation since the Bronze Age and was the Hellenistic city known as Antioch on the Chrysorhoas, it was the subsequent Roman era, beginning with the Trajanic Roman master plan that firmly established the classical city in evidence today (Fig. 1).

Spanning both banks of the river valley within an enclosure of over 200 acres, the city wall has no ideal geometric form but rather responds to the topographic realities of the site. Topographic low spots and saddle points between hills mark natural locations for the city gates. The high points of the city, in building upon Hellenistic traditions, are occupied by two temple sites. While the Temple of Zeus occupies a site at least as old as Hellenistic times, the Roman city expansion established a new Temple of Artemis as the house of the city's principal deity.

The temple sites of Zeus and Artemis provided the dominant points of departure for the ordering of the Roman city plan. A continuous colonnaded *Cardo* directed passage across the city from the North Gate to the oval forum threshold of the Temple of Zeus. Approaching from the south, a Triumphal Arch commemorating the winter stay of Hadrian in 127-128 A.D. is positioned outside the city walls and visually frames the Temple of Artemis located at the other side of the city. Two *Decumani* spanned the valley, linking the two halves of the city, and, together with the *Cardo*, served as a framework to enclose the quarter of the city containing

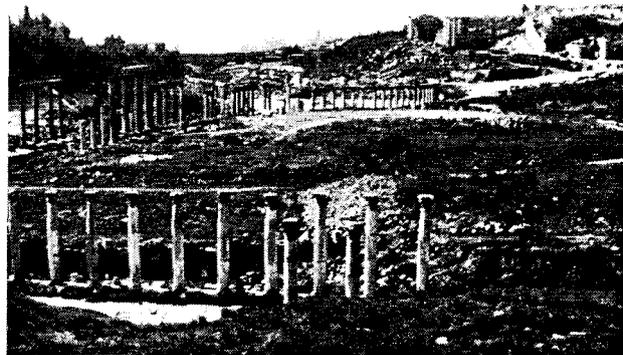


Fig. 1. Gerasa. Present day overview of South Decumanus in foreground and Oval Forum, Temple of Zeus and South Theater in background.

the Temple of Artemis. The continuous colonnaded *Cardo* and *Decumani*, in a manner common to middle eastern classical cities, served as primary armatures. They were evolving, extending, and connecting spines that served to cohere the different portions of the city and to tie the city into the extensive road network of the larger Roman regional colonial infrastructure (Fig. 2).³

In contrast to the primary cross streets of the city, the *Via Sacra* was a special ceremonial way that began at some now undetermined point on the east bank of the city and proceeded to span the river and commence with the most dramatic series of scenographic processional spaces remaining from the Roman era. Following the crossing of the river, the *Via Sacra* proceeded up a flight of broad stairs, through a triple gate, along a segment of elevated colonnaded street to a trapezoidal forecourt with a calculated cone of vision framing the elevation of the Propylaeum of the Temple of Artemis. Proceeding through the propylaeum, one encountered seven broad flights of seven steps each before arriving at a broad terrace containing an altar. Beyond the altar was yet another broad flight of steps leading up to the colonnaded templum enclosing the court of the temple proper.

The Roman master plan of Gerasa was an explicit and dynamic template that married the specifics of the site and its monuments with the universal beliefs and ideology of Roman civilization. Through the orchestration of the

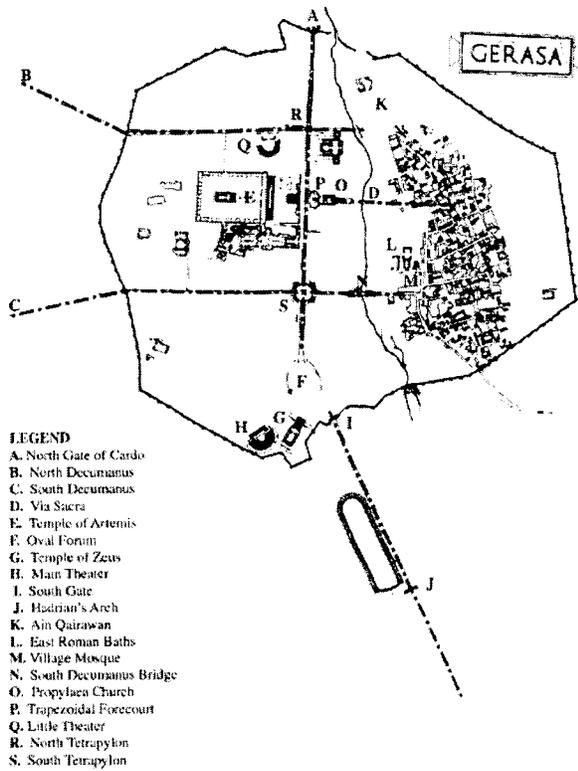


Fig. 2. Early 20th century plan of Gerasa showing Roman monuments and the small Circassian village.

overall masterplan as well as its powerfully coherent series of visual frames, the meaning and reason for the city's existence was spelled out in the dramatic visual presentation of its institutions. By extension, this daily visual presentation implied citizen identification with both the city and the larger Roman civilization of which both citizen and city were a part.

**Christian Transformation:
 The Propylaea Church**

During the early Christian era that began in the 4th century, the all encompassing order of the Roman master plan witnessed a radical assault on both its ideological premises as well as the manner of its physical organization. Operating upon a humble economic base, the Christian actions resulted in a slow, incremental, and accretionary reconfiguration of the Roman city infrastructure. The two visually and socially dominant Roman temples were replaced by numerous local churches within the city. New church construction not only ended the coherent serial Roman scenography of the long processional passages but also redirected the whole emphasis of ceremonial movement from that of a westward movement toward the Temple of Artemis to an eastward movement in the direction of the rising sun and the apses of the newly formed churches.

A particularly dramatic example of the power and ingenuity of the Christian transformation can be found in the 6th century construction of what is known today as

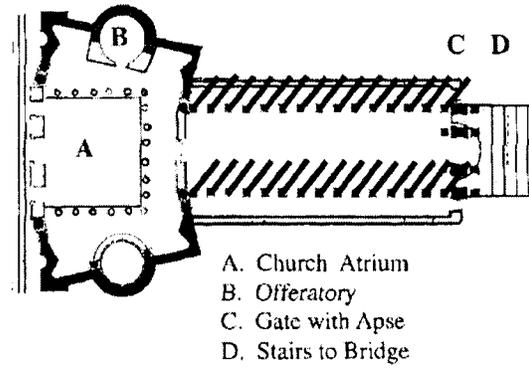


Fig. 3. Propylaea Church.

the Propylaea Church.⁴ Located within a segment of the classical Via Sacra that joins the west end of the river bridge with the trapezoidal forecourt for the Propylaeum of Artemis, this colonnaded street was built upon masonry vaults and elevated to a height above that of the Cardo. This higher elevation permitted the Via Sacra to pass visually unobstructed over the Cardo. The elevated viaduct also isolated this street from its residential surroundings thereby reinforcing its sole purpose as a processional way.

The Christian transformation of the viaduct exhibits a powerful, resourceful and stunningly simple transformation of all of the premises of the Roman Via Sacra (Fig. 3). In the Roman processional scheme, the viaduct sequence begins at the west end of the bridge. A steep flight of stairs connects the west end of the bridge with the artificially elevated level of the viaduct street. Marking the top of the stairs and the beginning of the viaduct street is a triple gate with a large central portal opening upon the wide street and smaller side portals aligned with the covered colonnaded sidewalks. The Christian interpretation of the gateway leading onto a colonnaded street was to see it as an unrealized basilica!

Evidence suggests that a minor earthquake had likely toppled the arch of the central portal prior to its transformation. The Christians simply used the voussoirs of the arch as part of the foundations for an apse. This apse closed the opening between the jambs of the central portal of the triple gate and protruded east toward the stairs of the river bridge. The flanking sidewalk portals were converted into doorways leading to the side aisles of a newly roofed Propylaea Church. The central nave of the church was the former stone-paved street and the two opposing side aisles of the newly formed church accommodated the passageway of men and women respectively in the manner of the early Christian rituals of worship.

The front of the newly formed Propylaea Church utilized the Roman trapezoidal forecourt as the church atrium by inserting a new rectangular colonnade and roofing over the sidewalks of original large open forecourt. One of the fountains embedded into the walls of the forecourt was transformed into the church offeratory.

The product of these simple operations was to break up the powerfully coherent Roman spatial sequence into a collection of isolated, independent spaces that were often linked in indirect or circuitous ways.⁵ The church is also a dramatic illustration of how the archetypal basilica form could be extracted from inherited urban space and not simply the buildings of the prior civilization.

Vernacular Circassian Transformation: The Village Mosque

The combination of a disastrous 8th c earthquake and the changing political and economic forces in the region eventually led to a long period of abandonment of a city left in ruins. It was not until 1878 that Circassian refugees from the Russian Caucasus were settled in Jerash by the Ottoman Turkish Government. Ain Qeirawan, the major spring within the old Roman city walls, was still active and became a determinant in locating the new village on the east bank of the classical site.⁶ The other determinant to the founding of the village was the water channel that led from the spring to the massive ruins of the Roman East Baths. The bath complex constituted the monumental center of the east bank of the Roman city and was a ready-made limestone quarry for Circassian building. The primary needs of fresh water, coupled with the supply of stone and the central location of the bath ruins all logically led to the village creation of its central mosque positioned upon the highest portion of the bath ruins. The dominance of the former bath was supplanted by the minaret of the mosque rising above the main street of the new village (Fig. 4).

Passing from the mosque, the water channel proceeded to feed a series of vernacular Circassian houses that were informally and independently positioned atop fragments of the buried classical substructure. Each home defined its space by a broad enclosing wall to accommodate an outdoor courtyard and perhaps a small garden plot. The village water channel passed through most of the private courtyards and collected many houses like loose beads on a string.

Overall, the Circassian village, like most other rural middle eastern villages, grew in an organic manner that reflected the actions of individual families wishing to live adjacent to others of their clan. The resultant built form possessed independent housing quarters with a maze of passageways characteristic of traditional Islamic settlement. These housing quarters with their totally walled and private domains, were predicated upon opacity and visual privacy. The one visually dominant element of the entire village was the minaret of the mosque.

International Tourist Transformation: The Cardo & Decumanus Redefined

The seeds for the development of Jerash into a world tourist site were sown following the downfall of the Ottoman Turks in World War I and the subsequent oversight of Transjordan by the British. As part of the western interest in the history of the Holy Land, the British facilitated early archeological excavations of many sites, including Jerash. The initial archeological investigations in Jerash naturally surveyed both banks of the classical site. Having only rudimentary Ottoman titles

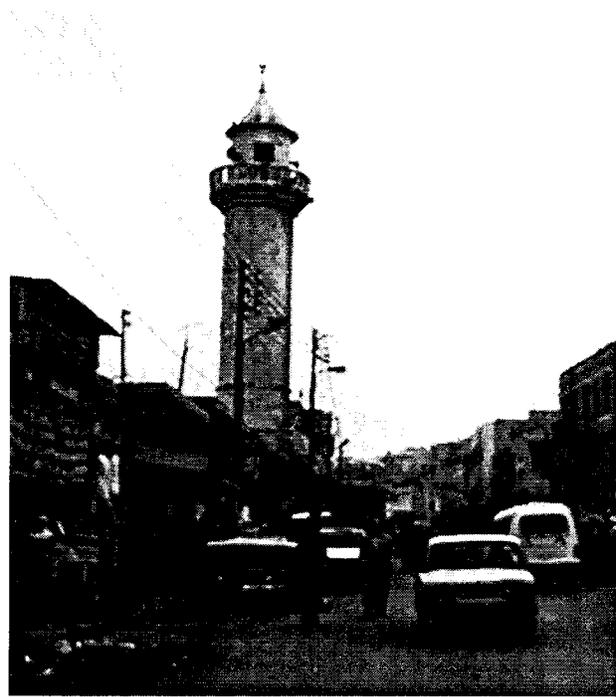


Fig. 4. Minaret of village mosque on Main Street.

to their private property, the Circassians were alarmed at the perceived threat of state confiscation of their homes for purposes of archeological excavation. The oral history of the village recalls stories of elder Circassians deliberately destroying archeological artifacts to avoid the threat of confiscation. By 1930, this uneasy relationship between excavators and the village transitioned into an unwritten but understood agreement that the archeological site was located on the west bank while the village was located on the east bank. Over the decades this tacit understanding has led to the current condition whereby most of the village population has absolutely no realization that the ancient city lies beneath them. For many decades the municipality of Jerash has proceeded to construct new buildings, roads and utilities to suit modern needs with little or no concern for any antiquities that may have been encountered. In the mindset of the municipality, the ancient city is located outside the modern city and the citizens of Jerash do not identify themselves as the latest inhabitants of an ancient site. This political viewpoint is further reinforced by a lack of any cultural identification with either the western classical legacy nor the early Christian churches.

While the municipality of Jerash was largely ignoring the archaeological zone, since the 1970s the national economic and social development plans of the kingdom has targeted the Jerash region as a promising center for tourism development. Jordan, a country critically short of agricultural land and other natural resources, has long required extensive outside economic assistance to meet its needs. Jordan lost 85 percent of its tourism income as a result of the loss of the West Bank and East Jerusalem in the 1967 war.⁷ During the Middle East oil boom of the 1970's the Gulf States helped reestablish Jordanian tourism

through a number of direct and indirect means. In the early 1980s, Jordan's archaeological sites contributed to a tourist trade amounting to 20 percent of the annual national income.⁸

Classical ruins and historic cities have long been major international tourist attractions that can generate sizeable returns for minimum investment. In 1982 the kingdom launched the ambitious Jerash International Project whereby archaeological teams from ten nations were invited to work five years simultaneously excavating and restoring extensive portions of the Roman monuments.⁹ Although budget problems curtailed the work of many nationalities after several years, work has slowly progressed since the eighties and continues to this day. The product of these labors has been the excavation and restoration of many of the city's most important monuments. Largely completed restorations include the forecourt and front elevation of the Temple of Zeus, a basilica found along the south end of the *Cardo* near the oval forum, the Nymphaeum, the Propylaeum of Artemis, the North Tetrapylon and segments of the North *Decumanus* leading west from the North Tetrapylon to the restored Little Theater. A new tourist guest house was constructed outside a restored South Gate of the city and last but not least, the Roman bridge of the South *Decumanus* that originally connected the two banks of the classical city was completely reconstructed (Fig. 5).

Collectively, the entire ensemble of restored Roman Jerash has resulted in the most extensive intact classical city in the Middle East. In anticipation of this fact, the kingdom inaugurated the International Jerash Festival of Culture and Arts in 1981. This annual three-week festival is host to several hundred thousand Jordanians in addition to thousands more regional and international tourists. The festival marked only a small part of the ambitious national plans made for Jerash in the early 1980s. In 1980 The Japanese International Cooperation Agency completed a comprehensive survey of northern Jordan, including the Jerash region.¹⁰

Their plans included a master plan for the city of Jerash for the year 2000. This remarkably one dimensional plan focused entirely upon a city planned for tourists. New municipal growth was to be pushed off to a remote satellite location. Augmenting this scheme was a landscape master plan for Jerash also done in the early 1980s by UNESCO.¹¹ The landscape masterplan called for the municipality to restrict growth to within the original Roman city walls and to establish an extensive greenbelt with tourist amenities surrounding the town. A combination of these two plans is represented in Fig. 6.

These plans were tied into still larger national development plans that included the construction of a new major four lane divided national highway that linked Jordan's port city of Aqaba in the south to the Syrian border to the north. The national highway between Amman and Damascus used to run alongside the river valley of Jerash and severed the archaeological zone from the municipality. The increased motor traffic throughout the kingdom as well as directed to Jerash necessitated a diversion of the new divided national highway to the east of the entire city of Jerash. This rerouting of the national highway, together with the restoration of the South

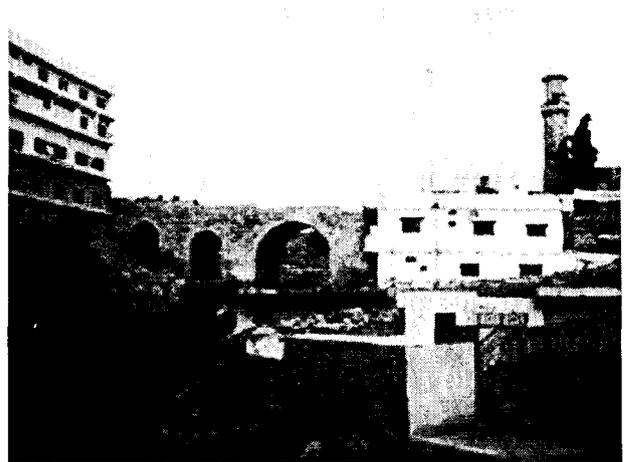


Fig. 5. Reconstructed Roman bridge.

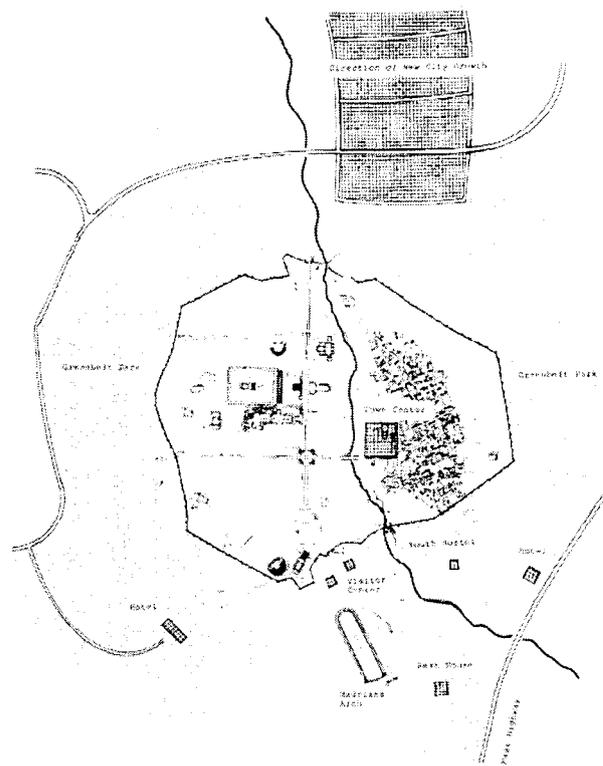


Fig. 6. 1980s national government ideal planning for Jerash called for a surrounding greenbelt. The municipality, with other agendas, has filled the greenbelt with suburban sprawl. The projected overnight tourist accommodations have remained in Amman.

Decumanus bridge, has allowed the two halves of the classical city to begin the process of reconnection.

The history of growth of Jerash in the current decade has witnessed some interesting dialogues between the goals and values of the national development plans and those of the local municipality.¹² Whereas the national strategy of moving the new national highway to the east of the city was intended to attract new growth of the city

away from the archaeological zone, this strategy has been only partially successful. While the national government was spending resources on the restoration of the archaeological zone, the local residents were slowly and independently constructing private residences and speculative mixed use shops and housing in a ring around this zone.

While the national government had hoped that the archaeological zone could develop into a somewhat isolated site, fostering its history of former abandonment and ruins, what is emerging in fact is an archaeological park steadily becoming the new center of the fast growing municipality.

The resultant development of both the archaeological site and the surrounding city has led to an interesting redefinition of the classical *Cardo* and *South Decumanus*. Because Jerash is only a short drive from Amman, most international tourists visit Jerash on a day trip and arrive by vehicle at the visitors center near the South Gate. The classical city is presented to the tourists via their traversing the *Cardo* alongside which nearly all of the restored monuments are located. In opposition to the touristic *Cardo*, the *South Decumanus* is becoming a new pedestrian connector between the old east bank municipality and the new suburban housing to the west of the Roman city. The question now becomes what happens at the crossing of the *Cardo* and *South Decumanus* where the local culture and the internationals intersect? While the restored bridge may also eventually encourage tourists to visit the east bank of the city, little efforts appear to be underway by the municipality to welcome such an event. An uneasiness towards the international tourists by the locals is further enhanced by the presence of a nearby Palestinian refugee camp. When coupled with the recent tourism initiatives between the kingdom and the state of Israel, one begins to sense just how delicate a balance the interactions of local and national interests have become within this historic city.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates how transformations in the urban infrastructure reflect the changing religious and/or political forces within the city. Consistent with its temporal focus, the study of urban transformations yields insights at a number of different levels. From the viewpoint of an historian interested in a particular era, important insights about the underlying power of a given architectural/urban configuration can be understood by observing how subsequent transformations acted upon it. In the case of Jerash, the later developments of the city reveal in a dramatic way just how pervasive, powerful, and most of all, adaptive, the initial Roman urban master plan was and still is. From the viewpoint of the biography of the city, the history of its transformations reveals important common threads running through its history. Such a common thread that touches the very core of the significance of Jerash concerns the primary role of water

to the city's history and its very existence. The most important conclusions of this research, however, must be the deeper understanding of the latent power of the past layers of the city and how, sometimes deliberately, sometimes unconsciously, the deepest aspects of the earlier urban intentions are reemerging in yet another guise, this time to serve the complex political and economic problems of today's Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

NOTES

- ¹ Donald J. Watts and Carol Martin Watts. "The Role of Monuments in the Geometrical Ordering of the Roman Master Plan of Gerasa," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 51, No. 3. (September 1992), pp. 306-314.
- ² Carl H. Kraeling, *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis* (New Haven: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1938). See also: Arthur Segal, "Roman Cities in the Province of Arabia," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40, No. 2, (May 1981); Roberto Parapetti, "Architectural and Urban Space in Roman Gerasa," *Mesopotamia* 19-19 (1983-84), pp. 37-84; Marie Alanen, *Architectural Reuse at Jerash: A Case Study in Transformations of the Urban Fabric, 100 BC-750 AD*, unpublished dissertation in Art History (Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles, 1995).
- ³ William MacDonald, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire, II, An Urban Appraisal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 29.
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- ⁵ Annabel Wharton, *Refiguring the Post Classical City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 69.
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- ¹² Donald Watts, "Lessons from Greco-Roman Gerasa's Monuments in Today's Reconstruction and Reinterpretation of Jerash, Jordan" *Conservation of Architectural Heritage in Jordan and the Arab World* (Amman: The Aga Khan Trust for Culture and Jordan University, 1993), and, Donald Watts, "Tourism as a Catalyst for the Appropriate Development of Jerash, Jordan" *Tourism Environment: Nature, Culture, Economy*, Tej Vir Singh, Mary Fish, Valene Smith and Linda Richter, eds. (New Delhi: Inter-India Press, 1992).