

# Gerasa - Jerash Ancient Roman Decapolis

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**G**erasa is truly an overwhelming site and one of the most important and best preserved Roman cities in the Near East. With 25,000 inhabitants in the 2nd century AD it was an important center of Roman life, trade and politics. It was also one of the ten members of Levant's free city federation called Decapolis.

Gerasa was also called in antiquity Antioch on the Chrysorhoas, meaning "Golden River", which was running right through the middle of Gerasa, with all its public buildings on the west river bank and residential areas on the east. Please be aware that Antioch on the Orontes was another important capital at the time further north in Syria.

Like any other town or city in the Near East

and Levant about 2,000 years ago Gerasa was influenced in its beginnings by Hellenistic and later dominated by Roman culture, architecture and politics. The influences of Ptolemy Egypt, Hasmonian Palestine and Seleucid Syria were very short lived and left little traces.

Nevertheless the Nabataean rule of Damascus from 84-72BC and its dominating trading activities over the next 200 years left many inscriptions and a temple dedicated to their main deity Dushara. In Byzantine times the Gerasa cathedral was erected on its ancient site.

But let's step back and have a quick look at the early history of Gerasa.



North portion of columned main boulevard



North theatre stage



Theatre stages always looked like palace entrances

First Neolithic traces date back to 6,000BC and Bronze and Iron Age settlement remains from 3,200-1,200BC were found around one of the Gerasa springs. There is also proof of Ammonite tribes in the area and the practice of the pagan Baal Shamin cult.

But there is no proven settlement for over 400 years after 7th century BC until Hellenistic times. So who were the real founders and creators of the impressive ruins of Gerasa?

With regards to the founders there are three major players at the time, who possibly all shared some of the glory. First there was Greek Alexander the Great and his General Perdicas, who in

334BC extended the village into a town. In 301BC Egyptian Ptolemy II took control of Philadelphia, today's Amman, and converted it into a Hellenistic city.

Gerasa being only 48km away also profited from this upswing. Later during the rule of Seleucid King Antiochus IV from 175-164BC the town seems to have become more of a city.

The first mention of Gerasa in ancient sources was by Semitic historian Flavius Josephus who recorded an interesting story. Theodorus a tyrant ruler of Philadelphia at the time moved his treasure to the Zeus temple in close by Gerasa, as this temple was so holy a place and considered

as untouchable. But this hope was short lived as Gerasa was conquered by Hasmonian high priest and ruler of Jerusalem Alexander Jannaeus who was in power between 102-76 BC.

Different from Nabataean Petra and Palmyra, Gerasa was not involved in any wars, nor are there any reports of huge military activities and aspirations of territorial expansion, nor the existence of a strong Gerasa army.

The regional wars at the time seemed to be fought in other areas far away from Gerasa. With the arrival of the Roman Emperor Pompey in the Near East in 63BC every thing changed.



Infront Zeus temple With rare oval plaza & south part of main boulevard

Gerasa became part of the Roman Province Syria and the famous peace treaty "Pax Romana" created enormous growth in trade and revenue for Gerasa.

For the next 170 years Gerasa accumulated wealth and grew to a sizable city, but not yet into what you see today. A 3,500m long and 2.5m thick city wall with over 100 towers and 4 city gates was built between 50-75AD and included a city area of approximately 800,000sqm.

But a huge drive in Gerasa building activities started around 106AD when Roman Emperor Trajan conquered Nabataean Petra. This was supported by the Roman construction of a regional

road network, linking Gerasa with the other regional centers of Philadelphia, Pella, Dion and Bosra and connecting Gerasa to the rest of the important trading centers and ports in the Near East.

An ancient merchant traveler to Gerasa might have reported this:

*"After a hot one day long journey from Philadelphia on camel back on the paved Roman built Via Trajana to Antioch on the Golden River I knew we were approaching this bustling city, as more and more chariots loaded with produce and all kinds of goods were moving in the same direction.*

*Soon we could see on top of a*

*slope an impressively over 20m high and elaborately decorated triple arched gate I have not seen before. It's 11m tall and 6m wide double winged central gate was opening the way onto a 500m long boulevard flanked by a horse shoe formed hippodrome for chariot races and other sportive competitions.*

*It was offering 15,000 seats along it's 250m sides and a new suburb was to be built in honor of the visit of Roman Emperor Hadrian, I was told by a passing official I recognized by his fine chiton and typical coat he was wearing.*

*Different to normal use the dedication to Hadrian was inscribed on the inside facade*



Central gate on main boulevard



Artemis Temple



Artemis Temple

and not the outside of the gate and again repeated on the south gate at the end of the boulevard.

The south gate was the old entrance I knew, directly leading to the unique oval plaza surrounded by 160 Ionic columns and with a diameter of 80m this forum plaza was huge. It was filled with well dressed people standing around talking and buying wares from the merchants situated on the side walks behind the tall columns.

Women were wearing fine chitons and jewelry demonstrating the wealth of Gerasa inhabitants matching the impressive public buildings and high level of decor on many local temples, various theatres and baths, as well as the different type of markets."

"The first duty of every returning traveler was to worship the all mighty god father Zeus for having arrived save and for future health. Therefore I entered through the triple gated entrance hall on the left of the oval forum the most holy place in Gerasa, the temple of Zeus with it's court yard measuring 80x35m and again surrounded

10m high  
colonnades  
with pilasters  
and artfully

colored frescos on the perimeter tenemos walls.

In the middle there was a big open air altar on a small platform, similar to those Arab altars used in Nabataea. I kneeled, prayed and presented my offerings of fruit and incense at the foot of the altar together with many people permanently coming and going.

The altar top was reserved for priests performing various sacrifices during the many holy days spread over the year. The temple central sanctuary, the cella, was reserved for the high priests and contained an immense multicolored statue of Zeus, which I once could see through the opening double winged finely carved wooden doors, when the priest entered.

Thereafter I proceeded to one of the two main baths at the end of the colonnaded cardo or main street. There was no other more impressive cardo I have ever seen anywhere, as a far traveled merchant.

The Gerasa cardo had two huge tetrapylon gates over 10m high on the crossings of the major side streets and was flanked by official buildings, numerous shops and few residences of important



Artemis Temple



Hadrian's Gate



Way to Artemis Temple



South Amphitheatre

families. 800m long and about 80m wide with over 500 Corinthian columns and a drainage system underneath its massive paving it took me some while to get there.

On my way I passed the macellum, an octagon shaped double storey fresh produce market, with various fountain basins, from which women choose their live fish for dinner, in the fifty meter wide court yard.

I quickly went in and was, as usual, impressed by the daily offer and choice of goods and I bought a small quantity of strong smelling black pepper grains costing me a fortune of a few silver coins. The price of pepper was higher than that of gold, as pepper came from India via the Silk Road and was a rare spice only used by the rich in Rome and beyond.

I was lucky that my Nabataean silver coins depicting King Aretas IV were accepted and I did not

have to use the money changer in the corner, who would have taken his additional cut.

I fully agreed with Romans who for hygiene and other reasons had since long separated markets for different products. Returning to the cardo I stopped at the immense double storey domed nymphaeum, a highly decorated public fountain with many niches and statues of gods and dignitaries, to take a fresh sip of cold water out of the huge basin supplied with water from a near spring, which was sprayed by lion heads creating a refreshing moist air in the afternoon heat.

Thereafter I went quickly for the west bath, which started to fill up in the late afternoon with men to meet and bath jointly to discuss last night's theatre performance and city politics.

It was not open to every body, but to a selected number of important members of the city and operated

more like a club, than a public bath. It offered me all amenities needed after a long trip, such as warm and hot water baths, steam room, cold water baths and cold air room.

The water supply came from the close Ain Kervan spring. All these sections had specific names, such as: apodyterium, vestarium, caldarium, frigidarium, loutron, tepidarium and praefurnium. After this relaxing experience I was now ready to visit the most important building complex in Gerasa the Artemis temple.

It was necessary to arrive before sun set at the 34,000sqm temple complex to worship Artemis or Diana as the Romans called this mother deity and goddess of nature, fertility and hunting, a daughter of Zeus and twin sister of Apollo.

I quickly passed the 120m wide double storey shopping



South Gate



Hadrian Gate

arcade and entered through the centrally situated impressive triple gated entrance with 16m high colossal columns with drums weighing up to 40 tons.

The first temple plaza with an open air altar in the middle was for normal citizens to worship, but I was allowed to take the monumental 120m wide stairs to the upper colonnaded tenemos again with huge dimensions of 160x120m.

The main temple cella was situated in the center. A plaque on the side wall indicated that a Diodoros, son of Zebedas was the architect and finished this part in 28AD. The cella was placed on a 40x23m platform surrounded by 32 columns 13m high, this was twice the heights of my double floored house. During festivities I have seen many times the high priests performing holy ceremonies on the temple roof to demonstrate the closeness to higher powers, as well as addressing and reaching them this way."

This account translated into more modern day language is based on information from various ancient sources and recent research results give us a better picture of the various important buildings in Gerasa and how daily life must have been at the time.

We also know that Gerasa had an active social life with many performances at the two city amphitheatres. The south theatre had 32 rows and offered 4,000 numbered seats with VIP marble seating and awnings giving shade during day light performances. The smaller later built north theatre had only 800 seats

and it is assumed it served more as a bouleuterium, a people's assembly.

Later it was extended to 1,600 seats and possibly used as an odeum. The stages of both theatres were designed in typical Roman form. The main south theatre stage included an impressive double storey building with a fore leaning roof structure and with three columned entrances and four niches and various statues.

It is important to note that most public buildings were financed or donated by wealth Gerasa citizens. For example a Zabdion and Aristonas donated the Zeus temple or parts of it. In the 1st century AD the city was totally redesigned and rebuilt to typical Roman standards adding many new public buildings, only the Zeus temple was left untouched and therefore it was not in line with the rectangular city block system with the main street running north south. But the glory was not forever and with the demise of the Roman Empire so did Gerasa decline.

Its second lease on life Gerasa experienced with the growing importance of Byzantine. By 350AD a large Christian community started building more and more churches in Gerasa over the next 200 years.

With 15 churches Gerasa was different to many other ancient cities in the region as these churches were well decorated with many mosaics depicting the personified seasons, all sorts of animals, important persons and typical city scenes. For unknown reasons the cities depicted were mostly Egyptian Alexandria and Memphis.

The most important church was the combined complex of the so-called cathedral and Theodore church. Both were built as basilicas with three ships behind each other, including atrium, side chapels and narthex. Between them was a court yard with a famous well and myth around it.



Temple entrance next to Nymphaeum



Cypriot Bishop Epiphanius described this myth in ancient sources as the well dispensing wine during specific annual religious festivities which were linked by some researches to the fact, that the church was built on the ancient site of the Nabataean Dushara temple, an Arab main deity linked also to Dionysos the god of wine and drink, later also known as Bacchus.

Another important church complex was that of the three churches sharing one common structure and side walls. All three, dedicated to holy Kosmas and Damian, George, as well as John, were basilicas with 3 ships, sharing one baptisterium, and with numerous excellently crafted mosaics, some of which only survived the Islamic destruction of human depictions, because some of the churches had already collapsed in various earthquakes shaking the region from time to time.

Other basilicas were those of the 32m long Peter and Paul, that of Bishop Genesis, the so-called church of the prophets, apostles and martyrs, the propylaeum church, plus those of Isaias, Elias, Marie, Soreg, Procopius and the synagogue. The latter was the only Jewish house of worship found in Gerasa.

Everything that happened thereafter led to the further decline of once beautiful and vibrant Gerasa. In 614AD the Persians invaded the city, followed in 635AD by the Islamic conquest.

As the city has been reduced to a small town or even village by that time only few churches were converted to mosques. During  
c r u s a d e r                      t i m e s  
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Artemis temple was converted to a fortress and taken and destroyed in 1121AD by Baldwin II of Jerusalem.

But today Gerasa or modern Jerash is worth the visit and will reward you with impressive partly rebuilt ruins and excellent views from the top seats of the south theatre high up on the hill side.

Walking down the colonnaded main street still with over 500 Ionic and Corinthian columns in situ and all over 10m high gives you the impression of the magnitude of Gerasa architecture.



How the Nymphaeum fountain looked like in antiquity



Nymphaeum fountain