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THE CULT OF SERAPIS IN THE DECAPOLIS DURING THE ROMAN PERIOD

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Abstract:

This article examines the cult of Serapis in the Decapolis during the Roman period, specifically emphasizing the widespread veneration and worship dedicated to this deity. Notably, the cult of Serapis in the Decapolis demonstrated an intriguing syncretistic tendency, as the god was often amalgamated with Zeus-Helios-Megas, and potentially Hades/Pluto in some cities of the Decapolis. The syncretistic nature of the cult of Serapis, exemplified by its fusion with other prominent deities, offers a unique lens through which to understand the complex dynamics of religious syncretism during the Roman period.

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1. Introduction

The Decapolis was the name of "a group of ten cities" established by Pompey after the occupation of Syria in 63 BC, located on the present-day territories of southern Syria, northern Palestine, and eastern Jordan [1]. Initially, it was believed that the Decapolis was some sort of league of ten free cities [2,3]. However, Parker and Wenning rejected the term union or confederation of the Decapolis concept in the second half of the first century AD because there is no clear evidence to support the existence of such a league [4, 5]. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Decapolis was not a fixed entity, denoting any political or administrative alliance in nature. The purpose of this political statement was to keep the cities of the Decapolis out of the hands of neighboring client kings; by emphasizing their membership in the Decapolis, the cities declared their affiliation with the province of Syria or the Roman Empire (which had only geographical significance) [4]. These cities included Abila, Damascus, Dion, Gerasa, Gadara, Hippos, Pella, Philadelphia, Capitolias, and Scythopolis, fig. (1) [6]. Although their number increased with the annexation of other cities, the name of the Decapolis remained for long periods [7]. Most cities in the Decapolis region were inhabited during the Bronze Age. In 334 BC, Alexander the Great launched an extensive campaign against the Persian king Darius III, which ended with the defeat of Darius at Gaugamela in 331 BC. Since then, Syria has been administered as a satrapy from Damascus [5]. After Alexander's death, the Ptolemies and Seleucids fought for control of the region, with southern Syria falling under Ptolemaic rule. However, the Seleucids eventually took over the region around 200 BC [8]. When the power of the Seleucids declined over the centuries, some cities of the Decapolis were seized by different rulers; the Hasmonean leader Alexander Jannaeus conquered Gerasa, Abila, Dion, Gadara, Pella, and Scythopolis after defeating Antiochus XII. In 87 BC, the Nabatean king Aretas III took control of the region. In 64/63 BC, Pompey invaded the region and incorporated the Decapolis cities into the newly founded province of Syria after their liberation from the Hasmoneans, the Nabataeans, and other rulers [9]. From the second century AD, they were incorporated into the Roman provinces of Syria, Syria-Palaestina, and Arabia [4]. The archaeological findings of these cities in the Hellenistic period are limited, but extensive expansion was established in many places during the Roman Empire, suggesting flourishing city centers based on Hellenistic-Roman culture [1,10].

Figure (1) map of Decapolis. (*After: Riedl, 2003*).

2. Methodological Study

The research encompasses a range of valuable sources regarding the cult of Serapis in the cities of Gerasa, Gadara, Pella, and Scythopolis, focusing on sculptural and epigraphic evidence. By closely examining of these diverse materials, including statues, reliefs, inscriptions, and dedicatory plaques, the study aims to reveal the religious practices, beliefs, and broader societal significance associated with the cult of Serapis in the Decapolis region.

2.1. *Gerasa*

The Alexandrian god Serapis, whose origin and nature have been the subject of intense debate, is a composite deity with an Egyptian theological background and Greek iconography [11-13]. He was created during the reign of the earliest Ptolemies, and his origins can be traced back to the cult of the Apis bull. This cult was traditionally associated with Pharaonic royalty and centered on the Temple of Ptah in Memphis [14]. The worship of the Apis bull continued even after his death, since at least the New Kingdom, with rituals still taking place at Saqqara's necropolis [12]. At that time, the deity was known as *Wsir-Ḥb* (Osiris-Apis) and was rep-resented as either a bull with a sun disc between its horns or as an anthropomorphic figure with the head of a bull, wearing the sun disc [15,16]. The identification of the fou-nder of the cult of Serapis in Alexandria remained uncertain; despite debate between Ptolemy I Soter and Ptolemy II Philadelphus [12-15]. However, the inscriptions found within the Serapeum, the center of worship for Serapis in Alex-andria, imply that the cult of Serapis was already established during the reign of Ptolemy II. This creation is often con-sidered an act accomplished within the framework of an official religious policy tending to federate the Greeks of Egypt, newcomers and formerly settled, or even to unite Greeks and Egyptians in the same worship [15]. However, it is evident that the new god Serapis emerged early on as a patron of the Ptolemaic dynasty. The Greek rulers best-owed Serapis, the successor of Osiris-Apis, with a Greek iconography that drew inspiration from deities such as, Zeus, Asclepius, and Hades [12-14]. By the early 3rd century BC, the god Serapis was depicted as a bearded man with curly hair, wearing a basket-shaped headdress (kalathos). He was dressed in the chiton and the himation and was often portrayed standing or seated on a throne, holding a scepter in his left hand and resting his right hand on Kerberos, the three-headed dog of the Underworld. A wife was attributed to him, Isis, sister-wife of Osiris, as well as a child, Harpocrates, whose name was transcribed in Greek from the Egyptian theonym *Ḥr-pȝ-ḫrd*, meaning "Horus the child". This Isiac family became a divine model, portraying a Greek royal family seeking to legitimize their power in a non-Greek land [17]. The majority of documents related to the Alexandrian God Serapis in the Decapolis come mainly from Gerasa (modern-day Jerash); two inscriptions provide evidence of the veneration of Serapis under the epithet "Zeus Helios Megas Serapis". The first inscription, dating from 142-143 AD, was found broken into seven blocks scattered throughout the ancient Gerasa area. Currently, only four of the seven blocks are still visible [18-20]. The inscription reads:

"ὑπὲρ σωτ[ηρί]ας τῶν κυρίων Αὐτοκράτ[ορο]ς Καίσαρος Τ(ίτου) Αἰλίου [Ἁ]δριανοῦ Ἀντωνείνου Εὐ[σ]εβοῦς Σεβαστ[οῦ] καὶ τέκνων αὐτοῦ καὶ ὁμονοίας καὶ ε[ὐ]δαιμονίας βουλῆς [κ]αὶ δήμου τῆς κυρίας πατ[ρ]ίδος, Διὸς Ἡλίου μεγάλου Σαράπιδος καὶ Ἴσιδος καὶ Νεωτέρας τ[ῶ]ν συννάων θεῶν Μάλχος Δημητρίου τοῦ Μάλχου τῇ κυρίᾳ πατρίδι ἐξ ἐπανγελίας αὐτοῦ τὰ ἀγάλματα ἀνέθηκεν σὺ[ν] κρηπειδώματ[ι] καὶ βάσεσιν αὐτῶν, ἔτους εσ΄ Ξαν[δ]ικοῦ βκ΄ ἀφιερωθέντα ἱερωμένου πρώτως καὶ π[ρο]βαίνοντος τοῦ Μάλχου ἐ[πὶ] Αἰμιλίου Κάρου πρεσβ(ευτοῦ) Σεβασ[τοῦ ἀντ]ιστ[ρατή]γου".

"For the salvation of Emperors Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Pius Augusts and his sons, and for the concord and prosperity of the council and people of the glorious hometown. The statues of Zeus Helios Megas Serapis, Isis and Neotera of the Synnaoi Theoi, Malchus, son of Demetrios, and grandson of Malchus, were consecrated with their bases and pedestals as dedications to the glorious hometown, on the 22nd of Xandikos of the Year 205, when Malchus was the imperial priest for the first time and continued to do so happily, during the tenure of Aemilius Carus, legatus Augusti pro praetore" [18-20].

According to the inscription, the dedicant Malchus donated cult statues of these gods, along with crepidoma and bases, indicating a sanctuary or shrine for the Egyptian gods that existed at least since 143 AD. Lichtenberger stated that no specific local expression from the Gerasa context explained this inscription. The Alexandrian god Serapis was a supreme deity who could merge with many other gods, and "Zeus Helios Megas Serapis" was one of his most common epithets throughout the Roman Empire. As a result, Lichtenberger excluded the existence of a separate sanctuary for the Egy-

ptian gods in Gerasa [10]. On the contrary, Riedl assumed that the presence of the two dedications proved that the god Serapis had at least his own temple in Gerasa, albeit possibly connected with another sanctuary [8]. Weber emphasized that the statuary group mentioned in the inscription represented a cult image, which could indicate the existence of a temple dedicated to Serapis [21]. It is worth noting that Gerasa had two major sanctuaries—one dedicated to the god Zeus Olympios and the other to the goddess Artemis [22]. Therefore, it is possible that the Egyptian gods mentioned in the inscription had a particular structure or shrine inside the temple of Zeus in Gerasa. Since the second century BC, there had been a connection between Serapis and Helios, giving the Egyptian-Hellenistic Serapis the attributes of the sun god. Many researchers have attempted to demonstrate that the Serapis-Helios association had its roots in ancient Egyptian theology [23-25]. This assimilation was widespread and gained general importance during the Roman period, as supported by numerous inscriptions and archaeological findings [26]. For example, Serapis is shown embraced by Helios in several decorated lamp scenes [27]. In addition, Serapis was often depicted with attributes associated with Helios; for instance, a basalt disc, now preserved in the British Museum, fig. (2), portrays a bust of Serapis adorned with the kalathos on its head. This bust is surrounded by six solar rays above the disc, and a seventh solar ray is partially visible, likely concealed behind the kalathos [28].

Figure (2) a basalt disc of Serapis-Helios, the British Museum, Inv., No., 1929, 0419.1. (*After: Tallet, 2020*)

On the other hand, the association of Zeus and Serapis was still comparatively uncommon during the Hellenistic period, but this changed in Roman times [26]. Alexandrian bronze drachms from the time of Neron, in which Zeus and Serapis were regarded as the protective gods of the emperor, showed a pictorial amalgamation of the two gods. This relationship had been firmly established since the reign of Vespasian [29]. Under the rule of the emperor Trajan and even more during the reign of Hadrian, the close association of Zeus Helios Serapis took on a definitive form with the appearance of the god "Zeus Helios Megas Serapis". The cult of this deity is well-attested in Alexandria, Canopus, and quickly spread even throughout the Eastern Desert, including Mons Claudianus and Mons Porphyrites [30,31]. Nevertheless, the cult was not exclusive to the roads of the Eastern Desert but also became prevalent in the major cities of the Nile Valley, such as Luxor, Antinopolis, and Akoris, where substantial garrisons were stationed. Tallet suggested that this particular form of the great god "Zeus Helios Megas Serapis" was elaborated to please the Roman garrison stationed in Nikopolis, located between Alexandria and Canopus [31,32]. It is worthy to note that Legio XXII Deiotariana was stationed there until Hadrian, Legio III Cyrenaica from the time of Augustus to Trajan or Hadrian, and Legio II Traiana during Hadrian's reign. According to Hornbostel, the first inscription from Gerasa represented the earliest evidence of the association of Serapis with Helios, along with other gods, under the title "Zeus Helios Megas Serapis" [28]. However, this association can be found earlier in Egypt [27]. Many other inscriptions dedicated to the god "Zeus Helios Megas Serapis" were also discovered outside Egypt, including in Mytilene, Ankyra, Adada, Rome, Praeneste, Ostia, Portus Ostia, and Leptis Magna [30,33]. This god was often represented, especially in small bronze statuettes, such as the one preserved in the British Museum, depicting "Zeus Helios Megas Serapis" enthroned and radiating like Helios, fig. (3). The figure shows the left hand raised, holding a scepter, and the lowered right hand was originally placed above the dog Kerberos, although the animal is now missing. On the other side of the throne, the attribute of Zeus, the eagle with outstretched wings, is depicted [29

Figure (3) a bronze figurine of Zeus Helios Megas Serapis, British Museum, Inv. No. GRA 1772, 0302.172 (After*: Tallet, 2020*).

The identity of Neotera "the younger", mentioned in the inscription, remains a matter of speculation. Nonetheless, the epithet "Neotera" seems associated with several deities such as Isis, Kore/Persephone, Aphrodite-Hathor, and Nephtys [11,36-38]. A stela dated to 98 AD was discovered in the enclosure of the great temple of Dendera, dedicated to the goddess Aphrodite-Hathor with the epithet "Neotera Thea" [39]. Additionally, a papyrus from Oxyrhynchus XII, 1449, dated to 213-217 AD, mentioned at least one place of worship for Neotera and described votive offerings that included the portrait of the imperial family and some representations of the goddess. There is also a small gem made of green and red-brown jasper, fig. (4), formerly owned by

Henri Seyrig before entering the collections of the Cabinet des Médailles de Paris, which associates the goddess called 'Neotera' with the Egyptian god Serapis. On one side of the gem, Serapis is mentioned as "Great is the name of Lord Serapis", accompanied by a lunar crescent, while the other bears the inscription "Great is the fortune of Neotera, the invincible", followed by a star. However, the real identity of the goddess remains unknown [39,40]. In later testimony, Athanasius of Alexandria railed against the pagans, mentioning [41]: "Isis, Kore, and Neotera among the Egyptians, and so with Aphrodite among other people". Neotera was frequently associated with members of the Isiac family. Hence, the inscription from Gerasa was not an isolated example. Furthermore, the epithet "Neotera" appeared on some coins of Cleopatra VII, especially in some coins minted in 36 BC in Phoenicia, Cyrenaica, and Chalcis, as well as an inscription from Cyprus [42]. The epithet "Neotera" was also found in Egypt related to Cleopatra VII; a papyrus from Herakleopolis dated 35 BC showed Cleopatra VII as "Neotera"[43].

Figure (4) a jasper gem, collections of the Cabinet des Médailles de Paris (*After: Veymier, 2014*).

Abel suggested that "Neotera" in Gerasa could refer to Faustina, *i.e*., the wife of Antoninus Pius, who died in 140 AD. [44]. Although there was no evidence supporting this connection, Riedl pointed out that Abel's assumption was based mainly on the date of the temple's dedication, which occurred a few years after the death of Faustina [8]. Meanwhile, Moretti proposed that Neotera was an independent goddess who represented the *Interpretatio Graeca* of the Egyptian goddess Nephthys, the younger sister of Isis [45], who used to accompany Isis in the festivals that commemorated the death of Osiris. However, Nephthys did not belong to the circle of Serapis, and her funerary character in the first place did not fit the Malchus inscription. In addition, an inscription from the area of Beirut, Deir el-Qal'a, applies to "Neotera-Hera", who, due to the context, was addressed as the daughter of the gods Zeus-Baal and Hera-Juno [46]. It is worth noting that the epithet "Neotera" was associated with the goddess Kore in three inscriptions from Eleusis, one dating back to the end of the 4th century BC and the others from the imperial period [39]. Furthermore, a dedication on a mosaic mentioning "Neotera" decorated the temple floor in the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore on the northern slope of Acrocorinth, dated to the end of the second century or the beginning of the third century AD. [39]. Therefore, it seems likely that the goddess Kore is shown here in the inscription of Gerasa, where a dedication from the second century AD that mentions Kore was discovered (a father and his two sons serve as *"archibomistai"*, *i.e.*, responsible for the altars of Apollo and Kore) [47]. The second inscription mentioning "Zeus Helios Megas Serapis" is written on a cylindrical base found near the east thermal baths in Gerasa and dated to the 2nd-3rd centuries AD. The inscription mentions:

Διι` Ηλῷ με[γάλω] Σαράπιδι Αὐγάς Μαλχίωνος ευξά-μενος Τὸ ξῷδιον ἀνέθηκεν

"Zeus Helios Megas Serapis" "Augas, son of Malchion, set up the statuette for Zeus Helios Megas Serapis on the basis of a vow"[19,33,48].

This inscription and expression bear similarities with an epigraph found in the small Sarapieion of Luxor. In that inscription, the dedicant Gaius Julius Antoninus, who served as a *neokoros* (temple attendant) of Serapis, rebuilt the small temple at his own expense and consecrated a statue of the god "Zeus Helios Megas Serapis", as a result of a vow [49]. The Luxor inscription is dated to the year 10 of Hadrian, January 24, 126 AD., the day of the emperor's birthday [32, 34]. Bianchi suggested that based on the sculptures discovered in the Temple of Luxor during the excavations of 1950-1951, there was a shrine dedicated to the Egyptian deities [50]. As in the case of the shrine of Tyche from San Martino ai Monti near Rome, which dates to the Antonine period, the principal statue of Tyche inside the shrine was accompanied by images of gods, including Serapis [50]. It is plausible that the dedicant of Gerasa Augas built a small temple or shrine for the god “Zeus Helios Megas Serapis”, although there is no concrete evidence to support this hypothesis. Furthermore, a bronze statuette found in Gerasa represents the god Serapis, fig. (5-a & b). The god is depicted seated upright, with his gaze directed slightly to the right. The right arm is lowered, and its function remains unclear, while the left arm is raised, once holding a scepter but now missing. The right foot is advanced, and the left is drawn back, both resting upon a box-like footstool. The god wears a short-sleeved chiton and a wide cloak that drapes around the front of the thighs and diagonally across the back, extending to the left shoulder at the rear. He is depicted with a full beard and long hair curls, reaching down to the shoulders. He wears the kalathos, although its precise shape can no longer be recognized. The figurine seems to follow the well-known type of Serapis sitting on the throne. The position of the right hand—now lost—resembles the gesture seen in similar statuettes, where the god is depicted touching the head of the dog Kerberos, which is probably lost in this statuette along with the throne on which Serapis was originally seated [51].

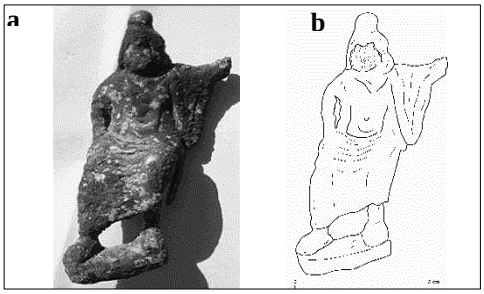

Figure (5) **a.** a bronze statuette from Gerasa, the DOAJ in Tababor, Amman, Inv. No. G.139. (*After: Vaelske, 2011*), **b.** a drwaing by Abd El-Halim.

Moreover, two objects that associate the god Serapis with Ammon come from Gerasa. The first object is a small limestone head; found in a pottery storeroom, fig. (6); despite its bad condition, the subject can be easily identified as Serapis-Zeus-Ammon. The head had a relatively straight break in the base of the neck, except for the chin area to the lower lip. Unfortunately, the entire face, including the skullcap, was destroyed [10,52]. However, traces of hair design can still be seen on the beard and the back of the head; the individual curls are clearly separated, and the strands are divided by incised lines. The upper lip was covered by a mustache, and the beard was split into two strands. While the beard shape is characteristic of Serapis depictions, the twisted ram's horn reproduced in the temple area represented an iconographic reference to the god Ammon. The presence of a round recess at the top of the head suggests that it was likely used to attach a kalathos made of a different material, commonly observed in Serapis depictions. The dating of the head remains uncertain, but researchers believe the piece dates from the 2nd century AD to the early 3rd century AD, a time in which many repetitions of the classic Ammon portrait can be dated [52].

Figure (6) a limestone head of Serapis-Zeus-Ammon, Gerasa, DOAJ, Inv. No. Magazin im Artemision, 1990, H 9.7 cm (*After: Weber, 2002*).

The second object is a lamp decorated with an image of a bust of Serapis-Ammon, fig. (7-a & b), discovered in pottery debris in Gerasa. The central disc of the lamp is decorated with an animal standing facing to the left and flanked by a palm branch. Above the animal, a bust of Serapis-Ammon is depicted, recognizable by his kalathos and the ram's horns on his temples. The god's face also facing to the left, is shown in complete profile, while the shoulders appear to be in a three-quarter view. The head and kalathos protrude beyond the edge of the disc onto the shoulder of the lamp [53]. Vaelske suggested that the depicted animal on the lamp is more likely a Billy goat than a ram due to the shape of the horns. He added that the lamp was a local object made in a workshop in Gerasa, and the craftsmen and clients most likely wanted a representation based directly on the Alexandrian type, but for some inexplicable reason, perhaps they did not have an artistic model of a ram [51]. This decoration was unusual, and no direct parallel showing a profile view of the Serapis-Ammon bust could be found. The god Serapis's association with the ram (the animal sacred to Ammon) was well attested on the Alexandrian coin issues between the 20th year of Hadrian and the 24th year of Antoninus Pius, where a bust of the god is represented over the animal, fig. (7-c). Therefore, it seems very probable that the unusual scene on the lamp of Gerasa was inspired by the Alexandrian coins [34]. Serapis had been associated with Ammon and Zeus since the Hellenistic period [32]. Herodotus mentioned that Ammon was the Egyptian name for Zeus. Accordingly, it was normal to associate Zeus-Serapis with Ammon [54]. In a hymn to Anubis from Cius in Bithynia, Asia Minor, Zeus, Ammon, Osiris, and Serapis were all identified as the same god [32]. It is worth mentioning that Zeus-Ammon was the tutelary god of the Legio III Cyrenaica, which was stationed in Bostra, 108 km south of Damascus, and established a sanctuary of Zeus-Ammon in the city, as attested by numerous documents [55,56]. The cult of Serapis also found its way into the city of Bostra through the members of the legion, as shown by private letters from a soldier sent to his parents at home in Egypt, in which his close relationship with Serapis is expressed [57]. Additionally, among the coins minted locally by the city of Bostra, five issues feature reverse images depicting Serapis-Zeus-Ammon, four of which date to the reign of Trajan Decius. Another emission from Bostra under Elagabalus showed on the reverse that the god Serapis-Zeus-Ammon was standing inside a temple with a podium, his face turned to the left, wearing the kalathos, dressed in a short chiton and himation, holding a *phiale* in his right hand and a long scepter in the left. A small animal, possibly a small ram, was depicted to the left of his feet [56,58]. He also appeared as a bust on the reverse of a coin of Philip Arab, on which the draped and cuirassed god, wearing the kalathos and girded with the ribbon, appeared with the ram's horn on his temple [58]. Kindler stated in his study of the Bostra coinage that the god on the coins of Bostra should be understood as the emblem of the Legio III Cyrenaica [56].

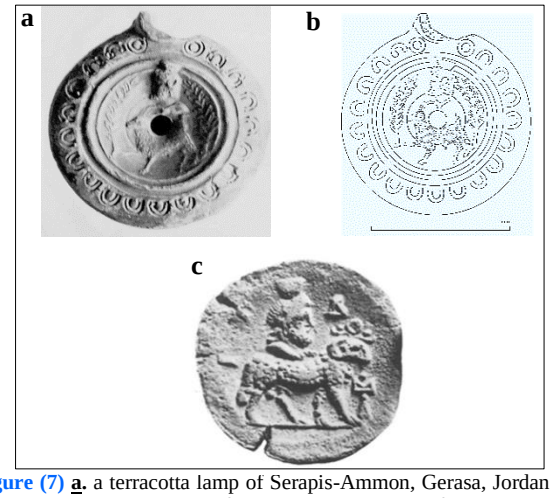

Figure (7) **a.** a terracotta lamp of Serapis-Ammon, Gerasa, Jordan Arc. Museum, Amman (formerly Jerusalem, Rockefeller Arc. Museum 38.1769) (*After: Rosenthal-Heginbottom, 1981*), **b.** a drawing by Abd El-Halim, **c.** Alexandrian coin of Antoninus Pius (*After: Hornbostel, 1973*).

2.2. *Gadara*

A white marble head of Serapis was found in Gadara (modern-day Umm Qais), fig. (8-a & b), to which stucco was added to the back of the head, possibly an Alexandrian work from the late Antonine or early Severan period. The face is framed by rich hair and a full beard, and the hair is worked in two sections: nine single or double-curved locks around the face in the front, of which five stand out above the forehead; the second row of hair locks cannot be differentiated in number; and the beard is divided from the middle. The head was not intended to be viewed in the round; the back is flattened like a mask and attached at an angle with a pointed iron [8,10,52,59]. Weber convincingly interpreted the marble head as an Alexandrian work of the 2nd century AD; he assumed that the head belonged to the group of the so-called "travel god images", documented by numerous monuments, which had been made in the area of the Serapeum of Alexandria since the Hellenistic times and sold to pilgrims; they were widely used as portable devotional objects [52]. However, the size of the head and the heavyweight are incompatible with this opinion. Serapis was widespread not only in the Jordanian area but also throughout the entire Syro-Phoenician region. Another bronze statuette from Gadara represents Serapis sitting on the throne, fig. (8-c). He wears a long, short-sleeved chiton and a himation that runs across the back and hangs down on the left shoulder. The right arm is slightly raised; but now missing; it possibly held a patera and was not lowered to the Kerberos dog, whereas the left hand is raised, holding a scepter. The hairstyle is shown in detail, including the forehead fringes and the corkscrew curls of the chin beard; he wears the kalathos on his head [51]. The position of the legs and the folds' direction are entirely different. In the statues of the enthroned Serapis, the right leg is consistently presented as a response to the raised left arm, but here it is withdrawn. The movement of the legs and the folds of the garments are very similar to the statue of Jupiter Capitolinus in the Munich Collection of Antiquities, fig. (8-d) [51]. However, the iconography of Serapis seated on the throne, dressed in a chiton and cloak, with his right hand on Kerberos' head and his left hand holding a scepter, was well-established in the Levant. For example, a bronze statuette of Serapis is kept in the National Museum of Damascus, fig. (8-e), which probably comes from southern Syria and represents the same iconographic type [27,34,60]. Another parallel can be found in a marble statuette of Serapis enthroned from Khirbet Ramadan in Syria, now preserved in the National Museum of Damascus, fig. (8-f) [60]. It is probable that these bronze figurines, distributed throughout the Roman Empire, were imported from Egypt, considering the discovery of numerous similar examples [33]. The huge number of bronzes and little statues representing Serapis sitting on the throne were considered miniature copies of the Alexandrian original cult statue of Serapis kept in the Serapeum of Alexandria, sculpted by the famous Carian artist Bryaxis [34]. Ancient and early Christian written evidence informs us in detail about the colored appearance of this statue. Rufinus, who lived in Alexandria and was contemporaneous with the destruction of the temple of Serapeum at the end of the 4th century AD, states that at the end of the Serapeum, there was a colossal statue of Serapis made of various kinds of wood and metal. Above his head, the god wore the kalathos, the symbol of agricultural fertility. He was sitting on a throne and holding the scepter in his left hand while his right hand touched the three-headed dog Kerberos sitting next to him [61].

Figure (8) **a.** a white marble head of Serapis from Gadara, Jordan Arch. Museum Amman, Inv. No. J. 9529, H. 29 cm, **b.** a drawing by Abd El-Halim, **c.** a bronze statuette of Serapis, Gadara (*After: Vaelske, 2011*), **d.** a bronze statue of Jupiter Capitolinus, the Munich Collection of Antiquities (*After: Vaelske, 2011*), **e.** a bronze statuette of Serapis, the National Museum of Damascus (*After: Weber, 2009*), **f.** a figurine of Serapis, Khirbet Ramadan, the National Museum of Damascus, Inv. No., 2504/5066 (*After: Hornbostel, 1973*).

2.3. *Pella*

A fragment of a life-size seated statue, made of black blue slate, was discovered in Pella (modern-day Tabaqat Fahl), fig. (9-a & b). The fragment was found within the fill of a 7th-cen-tury AD staircase leading to the cathedral in the so-called Civic Complex. Only the thighs, with the robe falling down on either side, have survived. Despite the statue's poor preservation, the distinct positions of the legs are visible: the right lower leg is slightly advanced, while the left one is drawn back. This is also evident from the stump of the left foot, which protrudes from beneath the

mass of fabric on the underside of the fragment, and three large folds of the himation run down the thighs. Above the left knee, an additional, much higher fold indicates the starting point of the actual puff of the himation [53,62-63]. Based on factors such as the origin, material color, robe design, and type of statue depicting a seated male figure in Greek attire, Weber concluded that it was likely a statue of Serapis enthroned. This led him to regard the artifact as evidence of Serapis' cult in Pella [63]. One could not fail to notice the distinctive stepped folds of the himation, which were quite prominent. They run horizontally over the tops of the relatively widespread thighs, sagging deeply in the lap and stretching between the shins to form thin ridges of folds from the top right to the bottom left. These specific features of the draped mantle were characteristic of the famous Alexandrian cult image of the enthroned Serapis. It is worth noting that dark blue slate, basalt, and porphyry were all native to Egypt, where they can be found in the quarries of Wadi Hammamat. Thus, it could be concluded that the piece was imported from Egypt [34]. Weber suggested that the statue of Serapis might have been brought to Pella either overland from the south or through one of the nearby Mediterranean ports [63]. The influence of Egypt, both politically and culturally, had been apparent in these regions even during the pre-Hellenistic and Ptolemaic periods. The fragment of the Serapis statue might indicate that these relationships, especially with Alexandria, continued beyond the Hellenistic period. The statue, which was somewhat larger than life-size, could have stood in a sanctuary, perhaps within the Wadi or on the slope of one of the surrounding hills. This figure dates from the late Hadrianic to the early Antonine periods, when the Serapis cult flourished [8,10,29]. A comparison can be drawn between this statue and the porphyry statue at Caesarea Maritima in Palestine, fig. (9-c). The latter represented a seated male draped in a tunic and himation, interpreted as an imperial cult image of Emperor Hadrian [64,65]. Weber mentioned that the dark red color of the expensive Egyptian stone gave the impression of Phoenician purple, which, according to ancient Oriental customs, was reserved for kings [63]. It is worth noting that nearby springs located in the center of the ancient city of Pella continue to provide water to this day. This observation has led to the consideration of a potential connection between the existence of the Serapis cult and these springs [63]. A thermal spring 2 kilometers north of the city had already been suspected as the cult place for the Sidonian god of healing, Asclepius-Eshmun, depicted on the city's coins. Accordingly, many scholars related the cult of Serapis to that of Asclepius-Eshmun [8,10]. It should be pointed out that a very similar but more complete statue of Serapis, made of schist or dark blue marble, was found in the baths of Bostra, fig. (9-d), preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Bostra; and dates back to the first half of the 2nd century AD [66]. The figure was discovered in 1999 during the Syrian excavations under the direction of Riyadh al-Muqdad in the Bostra Baths. The statue depicts a male figure seated on a throne and dressed in an undergarment chiton and a himation that drapes the lower body. On the left side of the throne, one can identify the dog Kerberos, which originally had three heads but is now broken. This arrangement can be interpreted as a representation of Serapis-Hades. Due to the absence of the stone type used in Syria, it is deduced that this statue was imported from Egypt. Some scholars proposed that it might have been brought from Alexandria by members or veterans of the Legio III Cyrenaica after 106 AD. [66]. It is conceivable that this statue was venerated in a local Serapeion. This hypothesis gains support from the presence of architectural elements of Egyptian origin crafted from black schist, including a column reused in one of the late shops along the north-south street, situated just opposite these baths [66]. Indeed, water played an indispensable role in the worship of Serapis, who was venerated as a fertility deity. During the Hellenistic period, cultural practices associated with Isis and Serapis entailed the utilization of water, often channeled into subterranean constructions inspired by the ancient Egyptian Nilometers [67]. For instance, within the Serapeum of Alexandria, water was collected within an underground basin through an extensive subterranean aqueduct extending over 570 meters, connected to the Alexandria Canal located south of the Serapeum [67]. Similar structures were recorded outside Egypt, within the Mediterranean region, where the Isiac cult emerged due to commercial, political, and cultural ties with Ptolemaic Egypt [68]. Delos, for example, boasted sanctuaries devoted to Serapis, featuring two documented instances of water-directing crypts and a potential third crypt for which hypotheses are proposed. Serapeum A, situated at the eastern terminus of the sacred enclosure, comprises an underground structure flooded by the waters of the Inopus River, channeled through an eastward trench adjacent to the central temple [67]. Within the boundaries of the Roman Empire, substantiated examples of subterranean structures also existed. Constructed during the Hellenistic period and subsequently restored during the Roman period, these structures mirrored the configuration of Pharaonic Egyptian Nilometers. A particularly illustrative instance is located at the Iseum of Pompeii, where the crypt designed for lustral water lies to the southeast of the central temple [67].

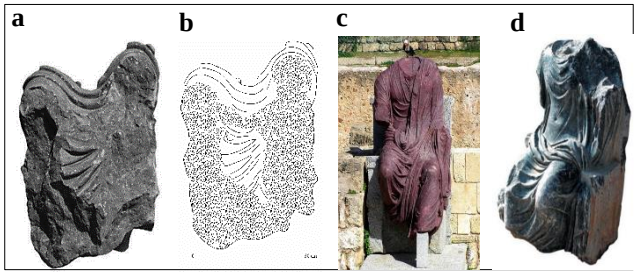

Figure (9) **a.** a statue of Serapis, Pella, Depot of the University of Sydney Archaeological Mission at Tabaqat Fahil/Pella – DOAJ, Inv. No. 45325, H. 74.1 cm, w. 55cm. (*After: Weber, 2002*), **b.** a drawing by Abd El-Halim, **c.** a porphyry statue at Caesarea Maritima (*After: Fischer, 2019*), **d.** a statue of Serapis from Bostra, the Archaeological Museum of Bostra, Inv. No., 72, H: 77cm (*After: Weber, 2007*).

2.4. *Scythopolis*

A Greek inscription on an altar, dated to the middle of the 3rd century AD, was found in the center of Scythopolis (modern-day Beit She'an), dedicated to Serapis. Of this inscription today, only a translation in English is available: "I, Seleucus, son of Ariston, keeper of the ointments, have dedicated this

beautiful altar as a sign of piety, having accomplished work in honor of holy Serapis". The dedicant Seleucus described himself as the "guardian of the ointments" and probably held a corresponding office in the gymnasium. In the city of Scythopolis, two other dedications by the same person were discovered: the first on a statue base bearing the date 303 AD and the other on an altar dedicated to several deities and bearing the date 299, corresponding to 235/6 AD [33]. The epithet "ἅγιος" or "Sanctus" means “holy” was occupied by several inscriptions for Serapis; however, most of these documents came from the western countries of the Roman Empire [32]: Portus, Ostia, Asturica (Spain), Eburacum (England), Novae (Moesia), and Malliana (Algeria) [32]. Riedl mentioned that the epithet "Sanctus" could be traced back in the inscription in Scythopolis to oriental origins: it is a transmission of the Semitic Qadosh, a term denoting the state of ritual purity and thus sanctity that is unique to divine beings in a special way. Accordingly, oriental deities were repeatedly assigned this adjective. Three inscriptions are known from Gerasa that designate Pakeidas, the Arabian god, and Baal Bosoros as "Sanctus"[8].

3. Results

The following points were concluded from the paper: **1)** The cult of Serapis is attested in Gerasa under the epithet Zeus-Helios-Megas-Serapis. **2)** The syncretism of Serapis with Helios highlights the integration of solar aspects and celestial symbolism into the cult. This syncretistic association likely emphasized Serapis' connection to the sun and his role as a cosmic deity. **3)** The amalgamation of Serapis with Zeus points to the cult's incorporation of attributes of supreme authority and kingship, endowing the deity with an elevated status within the religious landscape of the Decapolis. **4)** The Roman army played a significant role in promoting and supporting the worship of Serapis, particularly in connection with the ruling authorities. **5)** The Serapis cult in Pella might have been influenced by the cult of Asclepius-Eshmun, as evidenced by a nearby thermal spring. **6)** The term "Sanctus" in connection with Serapis in the Scythopolis inscription suggests a potential Oriental influence on the cult.

4. Discussion

Numerous archaeological findings have provided substantial proof of the widespread veneration of Serapis within the Decapolis region during the Roman period. Small temples or shrines dedicated to Serapis, the Greco-Egyptian deity associated with healing and fertility, were discovered throughout several Decapolis cities, highlighting the significant role played by this deity in the religious practices of the local population. Additionally, the goddess Isis held a prominent presence in the Decapolis, particularly in Gerasa. For example, a marble statue of Isis-Selene, larger than life-size, was found in Gerasa and is now preserved in front of the Archaeological Museum of the University of Jordan, Amman [69]. Another remarkable find from Gerasa was a terracotta figurine of Isis adorned with attributes associated with the Greek goddess Tyche. This figurine was discovered in a tomb, indicating not only the worship of Isis in the private sphere but also the belief in her role as the protector of the deceased [8]. The presence of such a figurine suggests the hope placed in Isis's divine protection to ensure a blissful existence in the afterlife. Moreover, Harpocrates, the son of Isis and Osiris, was exclusively represented in the Decapolis region through coroplastic products. In Gerasa, lamps featuring Harpocrates emphasized his aspect of fertility [70]. Conversely, a terracotta depiction of Harpocrates from Gadara combined the widespread image of Harpocrates on horseback with features inspired by the caravan gods worshipped in the Syrian-Arab region [8]. In addition, Nilus, the personification of the Nile, appeared in a floor mosaic inside a private house in Scythopolis that belonged to a Jewish individual named Kyrios Leontis Kloubas and is preserved in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. The mosaic consists of three panels arranged one behind the other: the Homeric story of Odysseus and the Sirens; beribboned parrots surrounding a dedication inscription; the Nile God, Nilometer, the city of Alexandria, and a Nilotic landscape [71,72].

5. Conclusion

The cult of Serapis in the Decapolis, particularly in cities like Gerasa and Pella, offered significant insights into the syncretism and cultural exchange between Egyptian and Hellenistic religious traditions during the Roman period. It demonstrated the assimilation and adaptation of Egyptian gods into the Roman religious landscape; while reflecting the unique local expressions and practices within the Decapolis cities. Notably, a group of cult images of Zeus-Helios-Megas-Serapis, Isis, and Neotera in Gerasa, only attested by inscripiptions, was closely based on Egyptian mythology in composition. In addition, the possible connection between the existence of the Serapis cult in Pella and the presence of nearby springs further highlighted the religious significance attributed to natural water sources. This association might have been influenced by the parallel cult of Asclepius-Eshmun, as suggested by the presence of a suspected thermal spring in the vicinity. By studying the cult of Serapis in the Decapolis, we gain deeper insights into the complexities of religious syncretism, the cultural exchange, and the diverse religious landscape of the Roman period. While direct evidence of the syncretism of Serapis may be lacking in some Decapolis cities, it is reasonable to assume that similar processes occurred throughout the region. The widespread influence of syncretistic tendencies during the Roman period indicated that the fusion of Serapis with other deities likely extended beyond the documented cases. The interconnected nature of the Decapolis as a network of culturally linked cities would have facilitated the exchange of religious ideas and practices, including the syncretism of Serapis with local or regional deities.

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