


## THE POMPEIAN ERA OF THE DEKAPOLIS AS A CONSEQUENCE OF HASMONAEAN POLICIES

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### Abstract

It is well established that the *poleis* of the Dekapolis employed a Pompeian era and widely assumed that they adopted it when they were released from Hasmonaeen subjection and granted semi-autonomy. Numismatic evidence from Nysa-Skythopolis has shown that its Pompeian era was only formally endorsed in the early years of the Roman Principate. Here, evidence is produced to indicate that a similar situation pertained to Gadara, and probably to the other members of the Dekapolis. This relatively late adoption of a Pompeian era is explained.

**Keywords:** Dekapolis, Hasmonaeans, Roman Provincial Coinage, Pompeian Era.

### 1. Historical background

The Wars of the Maccabees are presented in Books 1 and 2 of the Maccabees as a series of campaigns, primarily directed against “the Gentiles.”<sup>1</sup> Especially targeted by the Maccabees and their Hasmonaeen successors were the Greek or, more correctly, Hellenised Gentile cities (which we shall henceforth refer to as *poleis*) of Palestine.<sup>2</sup> It is

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<sup>1</sup> The actual Greek term used for Gentiles in the Books of the Maccabees is ἔθνη (*ethnē*), with the connotation of “alien peoples.” Rajak believes that the origins of this hostility to non-Jews lie, at least in part, in the civil conflicts between Hellenised and traditionalist parties within the Judaeen population (Rajak 1990, 271–272). On the use of the term *ethnos* by ancient writers, see Isaac 2011, 495–496.

<sup>2</sup> On the policies of the Hasmonaeans towards the “Greek” cities and their effects, see Dąbrowa 2010, 149–150. The population of the *poleis* in the southern Levant in late Hellenistic and early Roman periods was a heterogeneous mixture of native Phoenician, Aramaic, Arabic and Greek speakers, united, to a lesser

not difficult to see why these cities bore the brunt of the hostility of the Jewish militants. Cities served as cult centres and their civic institutions maintained distinctive cultural and political functions linked to their polytheistic practices, which were anathema to the Maccabees. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that when a force led by Judas the Maccabee entered the Philistine town of Azotus, they proceeded to tear down its altars and burn their cult images.<sup>3</sup>

A reading of the Books of the Maccabees paints a picture of conquests that were focused on removing “Gentile pollution,” with attempts to destroy the *poleis* and uproot of their non-Jewish populations or to judaize them.<sup>4</sup> 1 and 2 Maccabees, no doubt, exaggerate the actuality, as often occurs in ancient sources, especially when, like these texts, they have an apologetic purpose. However, our sources do provide some explicit examples of this zealous policy in action. We are informed that Judas set fire to the port of Joppa and its ships and did the same to the harbour and fleet at Jamnia to the south.<sup>5</sup> Later, his brother Simon sent one of his generals back to Joppa and expelled its non-Jewish inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> He refortified the city, making it ready for repopulation by Jews.<sup>7</sup>

Similar ethnic cleansing was carried out at Gezer (Gazara). We are told that its population was expelled by Simon, its polytheistic shrines were expunged, and the town was resettled with Jews.<sup>8</sup> Further north, Nysa-Skythopolis escaped a similar fate for a time, thanks to the intervention of its Jewish inhabitants, who attested to the harmonious relationship they had long enjoyed with their Gentile neighbours. On that occasion, Judas and his men were assuaged but they issued a caution to the Gentile majority to continue its amicable relationship with the Jewish people in the future.<sup>9</sup> Years later, under John Hyrcanus, the Hasmonaeans conquered Skythopolis during their campaign against Samaria.<sup>10</sup> This conquest was probably accompanied by the destruction of that city’s polytheistic altars and temples.<sup>11</sup>

Josephus informs us that the Transjordanian city of Pella was largely demolished by Alexander Jannaeus after its inhabitants refused to adopt Judaism.<sup>12</sup> Like Nysa-Skythopolis, Pella was revived by Pompey after being detached from the Hasmonaean kingdom.<sup>13</sup> Later, it joined the administrative grouping known as the Dekapolis, probably during

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or greater extent, by a Greek lifestyle, cultic practices and civic institutions (Kasher 1990, 24–26; Hengel 1974, 43). A son of the *polis* of Gadara was the renowned poet, Meleager, who flourished in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. His native tongue was a dialect of Arabic. He received his education in Phoenician Tyre and ended his life on the Greek island of Kos (*Anth. Pal.* 7.417–419; cf. Isaac 2011, 494–495).

<sup>3</sup> 1 Macc 5:68.

<sup>4</sup> As summarised in Rajak 1990, 273.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Macc 12:6–9.

<sup>6</sup> The harsh treatment meted out to the Gentile inhabitants of Joppa appears to have been a reprisal for an earlier atrocity perpetrated in Judas’ day, involving the drowning of that city’s Jews at the hands of their Gentile neighbours (2 Macc 12:3–4; cf. Rajak 1990, 272–273).

<sup>7</sup> 1 Macc 13:11; 14:34.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Macc 13:47–48; cf. Rajak 1990, 273.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Macc 12:29–31.

<sup>10</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.65–66; *AJ* 13.280–281.

<sup>11</sup> Kasher 1990, 131.

<sup>12</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.104; *AJ* 13.397; see Dąbrowa 2020, 286–287, n. 11. Rajak (1990, 276) has queried whether the same Judaization demand was made of the populations of other cities.

<sup>13</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.156; *AJ* 14.75.

the reign of Augustus.<sup>14</sup> As for Gadara, across the River Jordan from Nysa-Skythopolis, we are told that city endured a ten-month military siege before it capitulated to Jannaeus.<sup>15</sup> It was then laid waste and depopulated.<sup>16</sup> Other future members of the Dekapolis that were subjugated by that Hasmonaean monarch were Dium and Gerasa,<sup>17</sup> along with Abila and Hippos.<sup>18</sup>

In the *Antiquities*, Josephus lists 24 cities and towns of “Syria, Phoenicia and Iudamaea,” along with some other places, which were held by the Jews at the death of Alexander Jannaeus.<sup>19</sup> This list, although a partial one, suggests that the territorial extent of Hasmonaean rule just three generations after the outbreak of the Maccabean Revolt was considerable.

The efforts of the Hasmonaean to emasculate the *poleis* were undone almost overnight by Pompey, when his Roman army swept through the southern Levant in 64–63 BCE and imposed a new dispensation on the region. The victorious Roman Emperor stripped Judaea of several of its territorial gains. Cities that had suffered under Hasmonaean domination were rebuilt and received back their previous inhabitants.<sup>20</sup> They had their status as semi-autonomous *poleis* and associated civic institutions restored.<sup>21</sup>

Liberation from Hasmonaean oppression by Pompey was marked by the institution of new eras, which these cities used on their coins. The northern inland group of cities that afterwards came together in the Dekapolis dated their restitution to 64 or 63 BCE (**Tab. 1**), based on numismatic and documentary evidence.<sup>22</sup> This act of liberation was still commemorated more than two centuries later, as indicated by the phrase “of the Pompeian Gadarans” inscribed on that city’s coins.<sup>23</sup> The numismatic evidence from coastal cities and southern towns shows that much of this process of restoration occurred over a number of years, mostly under Pompey’s successors as governors of the Roman province of Syria, after his departure from the region in 63 BCE; see **Tab. 2**. The use of the term “Pompeian era” and its limitations in contemporary scholarship is discussed in the next section.

<sup>14</sup> The date of the formal establishment of the Dekapolis league remains open to debate. We accept the influential views of Graf – Weber (2016, cols. 122, 125) that this civic grouping was formed during the reign of Augustus, and probably after the death of Herod in 4 BCE. This has also been the favoured position of Isaac (1981, 71–72), but with the caveat that the Dekapolis might have been formally established even later, up to the beginning of the Flavian period (Isaac 1981, 72–74).

<sup>15</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.86; *AJ* 13.356. Archaeology seems to confirm the destruction of Gadara’s wall during the Hasmonaean period; Hoffmann 2002, 104–105.

<sup>16</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.155; *AJ* 14.75.

<sup>17</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.104; *AJ* 13.393 (reading “Gerasa” for “Essa”).

<sup>18</sup> Synkellos, 355 (ed. Adler/Tuffin, Synkellos 2002, 416).

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, *AJ* 13.395–397; see Rajak 1990, 276.

<sup>20</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.165–166; *AJ* 14.87–88.

<sup>21</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.155–157; *AJ* 14.74–76; cf. Dąbrowa 2010, 101 with n. 66.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Meimaris 1992, 74–135. Kapitoliās (Beit Ras), which the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE geographer Claudius Ptolemy includes in his list of the cities of “Koilē Syria and the Dekapolis” (Ptol., *Geog.* 5.15.22–23), employed an era of 97 or 98 CE. Whether or not it was ever attached to the Dekapolis, that city only began minting its own coins during the reign of Marcus Aurelius in 165/6 or 166/7 CE.

<sup>23</sup> The words ΠΟΜΠΗΙΩΝ ΓΑΔΑΡΕΩΝ, or variations thereof, appear in inscriptions on coins of Gadara from the reign of Antoninus Pius to that of Gordian III, as listed in *RPC* online, under “Gadara, Syria.”

**Tab. 1.** Eras of nine cities of the Dekapolis that struck coins; dates are BCE

City	Principal Era Employed		
	Farhi – Bachar 2020, 121	Spijkerman 1978	RPC (online)
Abila	64–62	64	64
Dion	64–62	63	63
Gadara	64	64	64
Gerasa	63	64 or 63	63
Hippos	64	64	64
Kanatha	64 or 63	63	64 or 63
Nysa-Skythopolis	64	64	64
Pella	64 or 63	63	64
Philadelphia	64 or 63	63	64 or 63

Even making allowances for exaggeration in the accounts we have of aggression perpetrated against the *poleis* by the Maccabees and their Hasmonaean successors, these actions deepened divisions between Jewish and Gentile communities. This climate of mutual suspicion and hostility persisted for well over a century.

**Tab. 2.** Eras of some cities in the coastal region and adjoining areas; dates are BCE

City	Principal Era Employed	
	Farhi – Bachar 2020, 121	RPC (online)
Demetrias (the future Caesarea?)	63–61	–
Dora	63–61	64
Jamneia	c. 59–58	–
Joppe	–	–
Gaza	61	61
Raphia	60	60
Gaba	60 or 59	61 or 60
Marisa	c. 59–58	–

During his reign, Herod the Great largely managed to keep the lid on inter-communal tensions, although Josephus charts the unhappiness of one of the cities that had been ceded to the Judaeian kingdom by Augustus in 30 BCE, which caused it to forfeit its autonomy.<sup>24</sup> Sometime during 23–21 BCE, a delegation from Gadara visited Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, Augustus' trusted deputy and son-in-law in Mytilene on the island

<sup>24</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.396; *AJ* 15.217.

of Lesbos, where he was then staying, to lodge a complaint against Herod. Agrippa refused to hear their grievances and handed over the accusers to Herod.<sup>25</sup> In 20 BCE, the citizens of that city repeated their grudge to Augustus while he was visiting Syria.<sup>26</sup> They claimed that Herod oppressed them with tyrannical decrees and requested that their city to be put under the direct protection of the province of Syria. Furthermore, they accused Herod of violence, pillage and overthrowing their temples, petitioning Augustus to have his despotic client king called to account before the imperial court. The emperor's reaction convinced the Gadarene notables that their pleas were falling on deaf ears, and, in despair, they committed suicide. Their dramatic deed was construed as sufficient proof of the futility of their suit and Herod was acquitted on all charges. The strong negative response of the Gentile inhabitants of Gadara to their city's annexation to Judaea, was in no small measure due to abiding memories of the Hasmonaean conquest several decades earlier. After Herod's death, his former kingdom was wracked by episodes of unrest and violence. Inter-communal tensions ran high. In 40 CE, Gentile residents of the port city of Jamnia raised an improvised brick altar to Caligula, after learning from visitors to the city that the emperor was seeking divine reverence. This incident attracted the attention of Philo of Alexandria.<sup>27</sup> Jamnia had earlier come under Hasmonaean rule. Jews, who happened to constitute the majority in Jamnia, saw this act as a deliberate provocation against them and a defilement of the Holy Land, so they destroyed the altar. This clash was reported to the emperor Caligula by C. Herennius Capito, the procurator of Imperial estates in Judaea, who mischievously exaggerated the affair. According to Philo's account, this disclosure set in motion Caligula's order for a statue of himself to be erected in the Temple of Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup> About a year later, up the coast at Dora, which had also experienced Hasmonaean rule at some point,<sup>29</sup> local hotheads staged another provocation by planting a statue of the new emperor, Claudius, in the city's synagogue.<sup>30</sup> Swift intervention by King Agrippa I and P. Petronius, the Roman governor of Syria, successfully intervened to calm the situation.<sup>31</sup>

Not long after the death of Agrippa I in 44 CE, armed conflict broke out between the Jewish inhabitants of Peraea and the population of the city of Philadelphia, a member of the Dekapolis.<sup>32</sup> The bone of contention was the border village of Zia. The Peraeans, who had struck the first blow, were censured by Cuspius Fadus, the Roman Procurator of Judaea for instigating the violence and he ordered three of their leaders to be severely punished.

<sup>25</sup> Josephus, *AJ* 15.350–351.

<sup>26</sup> Josephus, *AJ* 15.354–359; Kasher 1990, 195–197.

<sup>27</sup> Philo *Leg.* 199–202. For this episode, see Kasher 1990, 230–233; Schwartz 1990, 80–83. Schwartz offers an ingenious explanation as to why the affair was not mentioned by Josephus.

<sup>28</sup> Philo *Leg.* 203. C. Herennius Capito: *PIR*<sup>2</sup> H103; *PME* H13; Pflaum 1960, 23–26, no. 9; Barrett 2002, 183, n. 27; Schwartz 1990, 63 n. 98; Smallwood 1981, 158–159 n. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Dora is explicitly mentioned by Josephus as one of the cities that Pompey “liberated” (ἐλευθέραις) from the Hasmonaean (BJ 1.156; *AJ* 14.76). However, we have no information as to exactly when and how it came into their possession.

<sup>30</sup> On the possible date of the synagogue desecration at Dora, see Schwartz 1990, 107.

<sup>31</sup> Josephus, *AJ* 19.300–312. For the career of P. Petronius, see Dąbrowa 1998, 42–43.

<sup>32</sup> Josephus, *AJ* 20.2–4.

In the prominent port city of Caesarea Maritima, located south of Dora, tensions between the Jewish and Gentile communities escalated into violent confrontations, ultimately sparking the First Jewish Revolt in 66 CE.<sup>33</sup> As law and order crumbled, the Jewish residents of Caesarea were brutally massacred by their fellow townsmen.

Josephus continues:<sup>34</sup>

The news of the disaster at Caesarea infuriated the whole [Jewish] nation; and parties of Jews sacked the Syrian villages and the neighbouring cities, Philadelphia, Heshbon and its district, Gerasa, Pella and Skythopolis. Next, they fell upon Gadara, Hippos and Gaulanitis, destroying or setting fire to all in their path, and advanced to Kedasa [Kadesh Naphtali], a Tyrian village, Ptolemais, Gaba and Caesarea. Neither Sebaste nor Ascalon withstood their fury; these they burnt to the ground and then razed Anthedon and Gaza. In the vicinity of each of these cities, many villages were pillaged and immense numbers of the inhabitants captured and slaughtered. The Syrians on their side killed no less a number of Jews ... The whole of Syria was a scene of frightful disorder; every city was divided into two camps, and the safety of one party lay in anticipating the other. (transl. by H. S. J. Thackeray, *Josephus II*, Loeb Classical Library)

Among the cities of the Dekapolis, Gerasa stood out as a shining exception at that time. Its Gentile inhabitants refrained from harming their Jewish neighbours and even went so far as to escort those who chose to leave safely to the city's borders.<sup>35</sup>

Steve Mason has identified a significant link between the adoption of the Pompeian era by the cities of the Dekapolis—marking their liberation from Jerusalem—and the hostilities stemming from the Hasmonaean conquest, including that regime's antagonistic policies toward the *poleis* of Palestine.<sup>36</sup> Mason further noted that these tensions remained a powerful undercurrent up to the time of the First Jewish Revolt, as evidenced by the events we have been discussing.

## 2. The adoption of a Pompeian era by cities of the Dekapolis

In a previous study, evidence was presented to demonstrate that Nysa-Skythopolis, a member of the Dekapolis, initially adopted a Caesarean era beginning in 49 or 48 BCE, rather than a Pompeian era. This year reckoning aligned Nysa-Skythopolis with Akko-Ptolemais, which also employed a Caesarean era for a limited period, as attested on its earliest dated coins under Roman rule.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, the coin of Nysa-Skythopolis illustrated in **Fig. 1**, dated “year 10” of its Caesarean era, corresponding to 39–37 BCE, features a discernible portrait of Mark Antony on its obverse. Nysa-Skythopolis continued to use its Caesarean era until at least “year 19” (31–29 BCE).<sup>38</sup> Only coins issued

<sup>33</sup> For a succinct narrative account of these unfolding events at Caesarea, as described by Josephus (*BJ* 2.266–270, 284–292; *AJ* 20.173–178), see Smallwood 1981, 285–289.

<sup>34</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 2.458–462.

<sup>35</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 2.480.

<sup>36</sup> Mason 2016, 236.

<sup>37</sup> Jacobson 2024, 57–62. On the start of the Caesarean era in 49/8 BCE at ‘Akko-Ptolemais, see *RPC* I.1 (1998), 658.

<sup>38</sup> *RPC* I, no. 4828. This coin bears the head of Caesar Octavian on the obverse.

later, beginning with those from the reign of Caligula, marked “year 103” (39/40 CE),<sup>39</sup> indicate a change to a Pompeian era beginning in 64 BCE.



**Fig. 1.** Nysa-Skythopolis, 39–37 BCE, based on a Caesarean era beginning 49 or 48 BCE.  $\text{Æ}$  6.0 g, 22 mm. *Obv.*: Bare head of Mark Antony; *Rev.*: Dionysus in a tunic standing and holding a *kantharos* and sceptre; inscription: ΓΑΒ ΝΥ; Λ Ι (“year 10”) to the right; in exergue, Λ or Α. <https://numismatics.org/search/results?q=2015.20.1718>; *RPC I* online, no. 4827.1. American Numismatic Society (photograph courtesy of David Hendin)

Most Roman Imperial coins from Gadara demonstrably adhere to its Pompeian era, beginning in 64 BCE, which is supported by epigraphic evidence.<sup>40</sup> However, Alla Stein noted that the coins struck in honour of Augustus cannot conform to this same era. These Augustan issues are dated to “year 34” and feature on their obverse the portrait of Augustus along with the legend ΣΕΒΑΣΤΩ ΚΑΙΣΑΡΙ.<sup>41</sup> Stein observed that, if calculated from the start of a Pompeian era beginning in 64 BCE, “year 34” would correspond to 31/30 BCE, as assumed by Spijkerman and the editors of *RPC I*, originally. This date, however, precedes Octavian’s adoption of the title Augustus (σεβαστός) in 27 BCE, creating a chronological inconsistency.<sup>42</sup>

To address this issue, Stein proposed that the era used on these coins is Actian, calculated from Octavian’s decisive naval victory over Mark Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BCE. Under this framework, now endorsed by the authors of *RPC I*,<sup>43</sup> “year 34” would correspond to 3/4 CE, resolving the apparent discrepancy. Stein’s hypothesis was undoubtedly

<sup>39</sup> Issues *RPC I*, nos. 4829, 4830, dated to “year 103” (= 39/40 CE, based on a Pompeian era beginning 64 BCE). Both coins of this date display the laureate head of Caligula on their obverse, accompanied by the legend ΓΑΙΟΥ ΚΑΙΣΑΡΟΣ on the first and ΚΕΒΑΚΤΟΥ on the second.

<sup>40</sup> Meimaris 1992, 79–81.

<sup>41</sup> *RPC I*, no. 4809 = Spijkerman 1978, Gadara no. 9; *RPC I*, no. 4810.

<sup>42</sup> [Kushnir-]Stein 1990, 26–28.

<sup>43</sup> See the revised entries for *RPC I*, nos. 4809 and 4810 on *RPC* online, with the appended note.

influenced by the broader assumption that Gadara's coins, both prior to and after Augustus, were generally dated according to the Pompeian era beginning in 64 BCE. While the Actian era was indeed adopted on the coins of Antioch between 5 BCE and 15 CE,<sup>44</sup> there is no known instances of this era being used elsewhere in the southern Levant.

**Tab. 3.** Early Roman coins of common Gadara, featuring common types, down to the dated coins of Tiberius, and a proposed revision of their chronology

Coin reference	Coin motif		Year and date	
	Obverse	Reverse	Proposed here	Spijkerman/ <i>RPC</i>
Spijkerman, Gadara no. 3	Head of Tyche	Caduceus	“Year 18” = 32–30 BCE*	47/6 BCE** (Spijkerman)
Spijkerman, Gadara no. 4	Head of Tyche	Single cornucopia	“Year 18” = 32–30 BCE*	47/6 BCE** (Spijkerman)
Spijkerman, Gadara no. 5	Head of Tyche	Single cornucopia	“Year 20” = 30–28 BCE*	45/4 BCE** (Spijkerman)
Spijkerman, Gadara no. 6	Head of Tyche	Single cornucopia	“Year 21” = 29–27 BCE*	44/3 BCE** (Spijkerman)
Spijkerman, Gadara no. 7	Head of Tyche	Single cornucopia	“Year 25” = 25–23 BCE*	40/39 BCE** (Spijkerman)
<i>RPC</i> I, no. 4809; Spijkerman, Gadara no. 9	Head of Augustus	Head of Tyche	“Year 34” = 16–14 BCE*	3/4 CE*** ( <i>RPC</i> , revised)
<i>RPC</i> I, no. 4810; Spijkerman, Gadara no. 9	Head of Augustus	Head of Tyche	“Year 34” = 16–14 BCE*	3/4 CE*** ( <i>RPC</i> , revised)
<i>RPC</i> I, no. 4812; Spijkerman, Gadara no. 11	Head of Tiberius	Head of Tyche	“Year 92” = 28/29 CE**	28/9 CE** (Spijkerman/ <i>RPC</i> )
<i>RPC</i> I, no. 4813; Spijkerman, Gadara no. 12	Head of Tiberius	Crossed cornucopias	“Year 92” = 28/29 CE**	28/9 CE** (Spijkerman/ <i>RPC</i> )
<i>RPC</i> I, no. 4814; Spijkerman, Gadara no. 13	Head of Tiberius	Caduceus	“Year 92” = 28/29 CE**	28/9 CE** (Spijkerman/ <i>RPC</i> )
<i>RPC</i> I, no. 4815; Spijkerman, Gadara no. 14 = Clark 2023, no. 1e	Head of Tiberius	Head of Tyche	“Year 101” = 37/38 CE**	37/8 CE** (Spijkerman/ <i>RPC</i> )

\* Based on a Caesarean era of 49 or 48 BCE

\*\* Based on a Pompeian era of 64 BCE

\*\*\* Based on an Actian era of 31 BCE

<sup>44</sup> *RPC* I.1 (1998), 608.

A Caesarean era of 49 or 48 BCE is preferable to an Actian one for the Augustan coins of Gadara because, as demonstrated, the Caesarean era was also used elsewhere in the southern Levant, at Akko-Ptolemais and Nysa-Skythopolis. That being the case, coins marked “year 34” would correspond to 16–14 BCE, aligning perfectly with the title of  $\sigma\epsilon\beta\alpha\sigma\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$  that accompanies the portrait. If, as proposed, the earlier coins of Gadara also followed the Caesarean era, they would fit within the reign of Caesar Octavian / Augustus (post-27 BCE), as shown in **Tab. 3**, which lists Gadara’s early coinage down to Tiberius.<sup>45</sup> It is quite likely, then, that the Caesarean era applies to the entire early series of Gadara coins featuring the head of Tyche on their obverse and lacking any indication of the relevant temporal ruler;<sup>46</sup> see **Fig. 2**. For these early coins, the time gap between the “year 25” and “year 34” issues would shrink by 33 years, from 42 years (assuming an Actian era for *RPC* I, nos. 4809 and 4810) to just 9.

After the coins minted for Augustus in “year 34,” Gadara next produced three coins for Tiberius and marked “year 92.”<sup>47</sup> For these issues, there can be no ambiguity regarding era, because that city’s Pompeian era is the only viable option, dating them to 28/9 CE. In consequence, the interval between “year 34” (of a Caesarean era) and “year 92” (of a Pompeian era) would be approximately 18 years longer than if both dates were to be based on a Pompeian era.



**Fig. 2.** Gadara, 25/4 or 24/3 BCE, based on a Caesarean era of 49 or 48 BCE.  $\text{Æ}$  18 mm, 3.68 g.  
*Obv.*: Veiled and draped bust of Tyche, wearing a mural crown; with a palm frond over her shoulder.  
*Rev.*: Cornucopia; inscription: ΓΑΔΑΑ-ΡΕΩΝ [L] ΕΚ (“year 25”). Spijkerman 1978, Gadara no. 7;  
*CHL*, Gadara no. 8. Photograph by the author

<sup>45</sup> Contrary to *RPC*, Spijkerman 1978 and *CHL* recognise that those issues belong to the corpus of early Roman provincial coins.

<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that numerous provincial mints in the region went on producing pseudo-autonomous bronze coins without an imperial portrait until the end of the Flavian period (Hendin – Bachar 2016, 125).

<sup>47</sup> *RPC* I, nos. 4812–4814; see Tab. 2.

Historical considerations make it unlikely that Nysa-Skythopolis, Gadara and other cities of the Dekapolis used a Pompeian era on their coinage prior to the end of Augustus' reign. The earliest coin series from Nysa-Skythopolis coins are dated "years 8, 10 and 19,"<sup>48</sup> while those of Gadara carry dates of "years 18, 20, 21 and 25."<sup>49</sup> If these dates were based on a Pompeian era starting in 64 BCE, they would correspond to 57–39 BCE. This period includes Pompey the Great's defeat and death in 48 BCE at Pharsalus and spans part of the Second Triumvirate, when the Caesarean faction was dominant.

During those years, Pompey's surviving sons, Gnaeus and Sextus, were serious rivals to the triumvirs, acting as their late father's political heirs. After Gnaeus' death in 45 BCE, Sextus Pompeius remained active until his own death in 35 BCE, posing a continuing challenge to the Second Triumvirate.<sup>50</sup> His popularity with the Senate and Roman public made him a persistent threat.<sup>51</sup> In 43 BCE, the Senate appointed Sextus commander of the fleet and the seacoasts.<sup>52</sup> Later, after being declared an enemy of the state by the triumvirs—alongside the plotters and perpetrators of Julius Caesar's assassination—Sextus established a stronghold in Sicily (42–36 BCE).<sup>53</sup> From there, he used his fleet to blockade Italy, cutting off Rome's corn supply and causing a famine.<sup>54</sup>

Sextus' coinage depicts him as the pious avenger of his father, often featuring Pompey the Great;<sup>55</sup> see **Fig. 3**. In this context, it would have been imprudent for the *poleis* of Koile-Syria to honour Pompey as their liberator by adopting a Pompeian era and to display it on their coins during such a politically fraught period, between 48 BCE and the death of Augustus in 14 CE.<sup>56</sup> Thus, it is improbable that the dates on these early Roman provincial coins refer to a Pompeian era.

<sup>48</sup> *RPC* I, nos. 4828A (online), 4827 and 4828, respectively.

<sup>49</sup> Spijkerman 1978, Gadara nos. 3–7. Lichtenberger and *CHL* add an example of the Tyche and cornucopia type with a date that they read as "year 6" (Lichtenberger 2003, 87, 445, and pl. 15, no. MZ 29; *CHL*, Gadara nos. 1 and 2). However, in a private communication from Dr Yaniv Schauer, Acting Head of Numismatics at the Israel Museum, where these specimens are held, has remarked that the date letter in question seems to be a blundered *kappa* (20) rather than a *digamma* (6).

<sup>50</sup> Welch 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Vell. Pat. 2.79.1; App. *B Civ.* 3.1 [4]; cf. Rosillo-López 2020; Welch 2012, 11.

<sup>52</sup> App. *B Civ.* 3.1.4; Dio Cass. 46.40.3; Vell. Pat. 2.73.2; Welch 2012, 166. Sextus advertised his position as commander of the fleet on his Sicilian coinage, emphasizing that this position had been conferred on him by the Senate, with the wording: PRAEF[ECTUS] CLAS[SIS] ET ORAE MARIT[IMAE] EX S C (*RRC* no. 511/1–4).

<sup>53</sup> Dio Cass. 46.48.4, 48.17.3–4.

<sup>54</sup> App., *B Civ.* 5.8 [67].

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of the coins struck by Sextus Pompey, with a selection, see Rowan 2019, 47–50, 72–76.

<sup>56</sup> Here, the term Koile-Syria (Κοίλη Συρία) is being used in its wider connotation of the whole of southern Syria, including Palestine, as understood by many ancient writers; see, e.g., Hernández 2020; *RE* 11.1, 1050–1052, s.v. "Coele Syria" (G. Beer). Among the corpus of Roman Provincial Coins for the cities of Koile-Syria, there is a coin of Tripolis in Phoenicia of "year 23," which has been dated to 42/41 BCE (*RPC* I, no. 4509). This dating is consistent with the subjects depicted, namely portraits of Mark Antony and Fulvia, his spouse from c. 46 to 40 BCE, and is based on an era beginning 64/63 BCE, categorized as "Pompeian" (*RPC* I.1 [1998], 645; Seyrig 1950, 41–42). The true circumstance of the erstwhile adoption of this era at Tripolis is unknown. It is a one-off occurrence, which was not repeated there, because both before and afterwards, different eras are used on that city's coins (*RPC* I.1 [1998], 645–646).



**Fig. 3.** Sicily, 42 BCE–36 BCE. Aureus, 21 mm, 8.13 g. *Obv.*: Head of Sextus Pompeius head, unshaven within oak wreath border; inscription: MAG·PIVS·IMP·ITER. *Rev.*: Heads of Cn. Pompeius Magnus and Cn. Pompeius junior confronted, with a lituus to the left and tripod to the right; inscription: PRAEF CLAS·ET·ORAE MARIT·EX·S·C. *CRRO*, no. 511/1. <https://numismatics.org/collection/1967.153.34>. American Numismatic Society (in the Public Domain)

Modern studies of the city coinages of Asia Minor, Syria and Judaea often tend to label any era that can be shown to begin in the period from 67 to 60 BCE as “Pompeian,” based on the assumption that Pompey influenced its adoption in each case.<sup>57</sup> However, these attributions are frequently unsupported by tangible evidence directly linking Pompey to the establishment of those eras. Instead, they are often inferred from general observations about that emperor’s movements during his eastern campaign. It is entirely possible that Pompey never set foot in some of the cities that adopted what modern historians have termed a “Pompeian era.”<sup>58</sup>

A rare example of an era that can be directly credited to Pompey is provided by Pompeiopolis in Cilicia Trachaea. That foundation, an initiative of Pompey, is documented in the sources.<sup>59</sup> It involved the resettlement by Pompey of some of the former pirates who had been operating in that region after his successful campaign against them in 67 BCE. The earliest dated issue of Pompeiopolis, formerly Soli, in Cilicia Trachaea is marked “year 84,” corresponding to 18/19 CE, based on its local Pompeian era, generally considered to have begun in 66 (or possibly 65) BCE.<sup>60</sup> However, for the most part, the adoption of a new era was an initiative taken by a city to commemorate their “liberation,” refoundation or reconstitution, whatever the specific cause may have been. This would

<sup>57</sup> Freeman 1994, 160–161, *contra* Seyrig 1950, 19.

<sup>58</sup> Freeman 1994, 164; Meimaris 1992, 74. Y. E. Meimaris has added that the same also might have been true of cities that chose “Caesarean” eras, such as Nysa-Skythopolis, although I had previously been inclined to regard the adoption of a Caesarean era by that city as indicative of a visit there by Julius Caesar (Jacobson 2024, 62).

<sup>59</sup> Strabo 14.5.8 (671); Pomp. Mela 1.71; Plut., *Pomp.* 28; App., *Mithr.* 23.115. Cass. Dio 36.37.5–6.

<sup>60</sup> *RPC* I, no. 4002; cf. Burnett 2024, 132. On the era of Pompeiopolis, see Boyce 1958, 68 n. 6.

account for the variation of starting dates of so-called Pompeian eras and their sporadic adoption across the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>61</sup> It may also help to explain the implementation of a Pompeian era by cities retroactively.<sup>62</sup>

Besides Nysa-Skythopolis and Gadara, the only other city of the Dekapolis known to have struck coins before the death of Augustus in 14 CE is Hippos (Antioch ad Hippum). Its coins feature the head of Tyche wearing her customary mural crown on the obverse and a horse—a canting pun—on the reverse. They are dated to “year 26,”<sup>63</sup> which could just as easily refer to a Caesarean era as to a Pompeian one. If the year date corresponds to a Caesarean era, these coins would date to 24–22 BCE, during Augustus’ reign. The next coins produced by Hippos were under Nero and bear that emperor’s portrait. They are dated to year 13 of his reign, equivalent to 67/8 CE.<sup>64</sup> A Caesarean era rather than a Pompeian one for the Augustan coins would reduce the chronological gap between those two Julio-Claudian issues from 105 years to 89 years. After Nero, coins from Hippos do not display city-era dates again until the reign of Marcus Aurelius. One coin with that emperor’s portrait is marked with the year 229, which must correspond to the Pompeian era, yielding a date of 165/6 CE.<sup>65</sup> All subsequent issues follow suit.

It is possible that Hippos, like Nysa-Skythopolis, and Gadara, had adopted a Pompeian era sometime during the early Roman Principate. Supporting this hypothesis, the first coins of Kanatha—struck under Caligula—also use a Pompeian era, which that city continued to employ thereafter.<sup>66</sup>

Gerasa’s first semi-autonomous Roman coinage is dated to “year 130,” corresponding to 67/68 CE, based on the city’s Pompeian era, which began in 63 BCE.<sup>67</sup> However, a Greek dedicatory inscription from the city’s sanctuary of Zeus Olympios, attributed to a former priest of *sebastos*, is dated to 58 years earlier, to “year 72,” which corresponds to 9/10 CE, assuming the city’s Pompeian era was already in use.<sup>68</sup>

The reinstatement of the coastal and southern *poleis* that had suffered under Hasmonean rule was accomplished over the decade following Pompey’s Syrian campaign, under subsequent Roman governors of Syria. As a result, the circumstances surrounding their adoption of Roman eras may have differed from those influencing the Pompeian eras chosen by the cities of the Dekapolis. For instance, the coastal city of Gaza marked its restitution in 61 BCE, during the governorship of L. Marcius Philippus, and renewed production of its local coinage in “year 10” which is assumed to reference that era.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Freeman 1994, 162–165; Meimaris 1992, 74.

<sup>62</sup> Freeman 1994, 161; Meimaris, 1992, 74.

<sup>63</sup> *RPC* I online, nos. 4806A–B.

<sup>64</sup> *RPC* I online, nos. 4807, 4808.

<sup>65</sup> *RPC* IV.3 online, no. 6573.

<sup>66</sup> *RPC* I, nos. 4836, 4837.

<sup>67</sup> *RPC* I, nos. 4839–4841. Gerasa’s era beginning in 63 BCE is supported by a number of dated inscriptions; see Meimaris 1992, 89–113.

<sup>68</sup> For this inscription and a discussion of its context, see Gatier 2002, 277–281, where it is assumed that “year 72” equates to 9/10 CE based on the city’s Pompeian era.

<sup>69</sup> The early Roman coinage of Gaza is discussed in Farhi 2015, in which he maintains that its era of 61 BCE was operative at least from “year 10.” On L. Marcius Philippus, see Schürer 1973, 245. The early Roman coinage of Gaza is discussed in Farhi 2015, in which he maintains that its era of 61 BCE was

However, it is only its first Imperial issue struck for Augustus that provides the earliest concrete evidence for that era's adoption by Gaza.<sup>70</sup> A bare head that is recognisably that of Augustus Caesar appears on the obverse, along with the abbreviated inscription, KAI. The reverse is a Tyche type accompanied by the date, Λ Ε C Γ Α, ("Year 66, Ga[za]"), corresponding to 5/6 CE with the era beginning in 61 BCE;<sup>71</sup> see Fig. 4. A Caesarean era of 49 or 48 BCE is implausible in this case, as it would yield a date beyond the reign of Augustus. This example underlines the importance of being able to know both the issuing ruler and the year represented when determining the dates of ancient coins. Only when both pieces of information are provided can the relevant era and date of the coin be reliably ascertained.



**Fig. 4.** Gaza, 5/6 CE, based on a Roman era of 61 BCE.  $\text{Æ}$  23 mm, 9.23 g. *Obv.*: Bare head of Caesar Octavian as Augustus; inscription: K AI. *Rev.*: Tyche standing and holding a palm branch with two ears of corn. Inscription: Aramaic “mem” to the left, Λ Ε C Γ Α to the right. *RPC I* online, no. 4894.14; *CGRP*, type 9b. <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/1/4894> (in the Public Domain)

operative at least from “year 10.” On L. Marcius Philippus, see Schürer 1973, 245. The early Roman coinage of Gaza is discussed by Farhi (2015; *CGRP*, 37–38, 53–57), in which he maintains that its era of 61 BCE was operative at least from “year 10.” On L. Marcius Philippus, see Schürer 1973, 245; Glucker 1987, 1.

<sup>70</sup> *RPC I*, no. 4894; *CGRP*, type 9. Burnett (2024, 104) has suggested that the enigmatic coins lacking a placename and simply inscribed Λ Α Ρ Ω Μ Η Σ (“year 1 of Rome;” *HGC* 10, nos. 381–383) originated from what he believes to be “somewhere in modern Jordan” may refer to a new era associated with Pompey’s reorganisation of the southern Levant. If it were ever possible to put Burnett’s suggestion to the test, then it may be possible to confirm that this series of coins is a commemorative issue marking the inaugural year of a Pompeian era (i.e., 64 or 63 BCE) and identify the location of the mint. On these unusual coins and their possible provenance, see Hendin 2024, 445–449.

<sup>71</sup> *CGRP*, 65, 67–69. Given that Gaza produced no coinage during the period of Herodian rule, the palm branch borne by Tyche on the obverse of this issue may be interpreted as an allusion to the city’s recovery of its semi-autonomy as a *polis* following the deposition of Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, in 6 BCE. In the aftermath of his removal and exile, Judaea was placed under direct Roman administration. See *CGRP*, 67.

### 3. Conclusions

While the prevailing assumption among scholars has been that the cities of the Dekapolis employed a Pompeian era from the outset, this study has presented evidence suggesting that such an era was only widely adopted retroactively, beginning in the early Roman Principate. In fact, there is a lack of firm evidence that a Pompeian era was employed by any of these cities prior to that time. As shown in an earlier study by this author, a Caesarean era beginning in 49 or 48 BCE was initially employed on the coins of Nysa-Skythopolis,<sup>72</sup> and this also might have been true of Gadara.

Supporting evidence of the delayed and selective adoption of a Pompeian era across the cities of the Dekapolis can be gleaned from snippets of information provided by Josephus, which suggest that the adoption of this era was often influenced by factors other than direct historical experiences of individual cities. For example, Josephus notes that Skythopolis was rebuilt and repopulated not by Pompey, who operated in the region from 64 to 63 BCE, but by Gabinius, the Legate and Governor of Syria from 57 to 55 BCE.<sup>73</sup> Yet, despite Gabinius's direct involvement, Skythopolis opted for a Pompeian rather than a Gabinian era. Similarly, Josephus records that Gerasa surrendered without a fight to Alexander Jannaeus.<sup>74</sup> As A. Kasher has pointed out, Gerasa therefore did not need to be reconstructed and repopulated, and accordingly it is absent from Josephus's lists of cities restored by Pompey or Gabinius, unlike, say, Gadara, which Josephus specifically includes.<sup>75</sup> Yet, Gerasa, like Gadara, came to adopt a Pompeian era. A comparable situation pertained to Philadelphia. According to Josephus, that city was never occupied by the Hasmonaeans, remaining, instead, under the control of a local tyrant, Zeno Cotylas and his successors. Like Gerasa, it is omitted from Josephus's lists of cities rebuilt by Pompey and Gabinius.<sup>76</sup> Despite this, Philadelphia, too, adopted a Pompeian era after joining the Dekapolis.<sup>77</sup> These examples highlight that the adoption of the Pompeian era across the Dekapolis was not uniformly tied to direct historical experience involving Pompey but was shaped by circumstances specific to the cities concerned.

It is highly plausible that these *poleis* formally instituted a Pompeian era only after the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE, coinciding with their incorporation into the administrative unit known as the Dekapolis.<sup>78</sup> At that time, Augustus carried out a major reorganisation of the late king's realm. Two of its constituent *poleis*, Gadara and Hippos, were detached from the Judean kingdom and made an "annexe" (προσθήκη) of Syria.<sup>79</sup> Their "official" Pompeian era, beginning either in 64 or 63 BCE, would have come into force at a time of escalating inter-communal tensions, as relations between the Gentile

<sup>72</sup> Jacobson 2024, 57–62.

<sup>73</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.166; *AJ* 14.88.

<sup>74</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.104; *AJ* 13.393.

<sup>75</sup> Kasher 1990, 154, n. 106. For the reconstruction of Gadara at the behest of Pompey Josephus, *BJ* 1.155; *AJ* 14.75. Other cities rebuilt by Pompey and Gabinius are listed in *BJ* 1.156, 166; *AJ* 14.76, 88.

<sup>76</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 1.60; *AJ* 13.235.

<sup>77</sup> Schürer 1979, 156 and nn. 380–381.

<sup>78</sup> See n. 14.

<sup>79</sup> Josephus, *BJ* 2.97; *AJ* 17.320; see Isaac 1981, 71–72.

inhabitants of Dekapolis and their Jewish neighbours were deteriorating. The day-to-day use of this era served as a potent symbol evoking the earlier liberation of the *poleis* from Hasmonaean tyranny by the Roman general, Pompey. It also helped to engender a shared identity among the cities of the Dekapolis and signified their loyalty to Rome. The political message behind that collective act is unmistakable.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- CHL* – Y. Meshorer, G. Bijovsky, W. Fischer-Bossert, *Coins of the Holy Land: The Abraham and Marian Sofaer Collection at the American Numismatic Society and the Israel Museum (Ancient Coins in North American Collections 8)*, New York 2013.
- CGRP* – Y. Farhi, *The City of Gaza in the Roman Period: The Numismatic Evidence (First Century BCE–Third Century CE) (Corpus Nummorum Palaestinensium 6)*, Tel Aviv 2025.
- CRRO* – *Coins of the Roman Republic Online*, <https://numismatics.org/crro/>.
- HGC 10* – O. D. Hoover, *The Handbook of Greek Coins*, vol. 10: *Coins of the Southern Levant: Phoenicia, Southern Koile Syria (Including Judaea), and Arabia, Fifth to First Centuries BC*, Lancaster, PA–London 2010.
- PIR*<sup>2</sup> – *Prosopographia Imperii Romani saec. I. II. III.*, ed. by E. Groag *et al.*, Berlin 1933–.
- PME* – H. Devijver, *Prosopographia Militiarum Equestrium quae fuerunt ab Augusto ad Gallienum*, vol. 1–3, Leuven 1976–1980.
- RE* – *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. by A. Pauly *et al.*, Stuttgart–München 1893–1980.
- RPC* – *Roman Provincial Coinage*, <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/>, periodically updated.
- RPC I* – A. Burnett, M. Amandry, P. Ripollès, *Roman Provincial Coinage*, vol. I: *From the Death of Caesar to the Death of Vitellius (44 BC–AD 69)*, parts 1–2, London–Paris (reprint with corrections) 1998 and <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/>.
- RPC IV.3* – *Roman Provincial Coinage*, vol. IV.3: *From Antoninus Pius to Commodus (AD 138–192): Lycia–Pamphylia to Arabia*, <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/>.

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