

## Why did Josephus Name the Chariot-Racing Facility at Caesarea ‘Amphitheater’?

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One of the public entertainment facilities which King Herod provided in his new city Caesarea Maritima, inaugurated in 10/9 BCE, was an ‘amphitheater’, according to Josephus (*AJ* 15.341, cf. *BJ* 1.415):

κατεσκεύασε δ' ἐν αὐτῇ καὶ θέατρον ἐκ πέτρας καὶ πρὸς τῷ νοτίῳ τοῦ λιμένος ὀπισθεν ἀμφιθέατρον, πολὺν ὄχλον ἀνθρώπων δέχεσθαι δυνάμενον καὶ κείμενον ἐπιτηδείως ἀποπτεύειν εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν.

He built in the city both a theater of stone and, towards the south end of the port, set back,<sup>1</sup> an amphitheater capable of seating a large number of people and advantageously situated to provide a view of the sea.

Josephus is very specific regarding the location of the amphitheater, but he specifies neither its form nor the kind of performances given there.<sup>2</sup>

Modern archaeologists and surveyors have long searched for Herod’s amphitheater at Caesarea without success. Some have suggested that wherever Josephus mentioned ‘amphitheater’ he really meant circus/hippodrome.<sup>3</sup> For this reason the remains of the circus/hippodrome found by Guerin<sup>4</sup> and by Conder and Kitchener in *The Survey of Western Palestine*<sup>5</sup> in the eastern sector of Caesarea (Fig 1:4) were later identified with the Herodian amphitheater, despite the fact that the location did not match Josephus’

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<sup>1</sup> In his translation of this sentence in the Loeb edition R. Marcus noted: ‘What “further back” means here is not clear ...’. J.P. Oleson translated ὀπισθεν ‘set back from the shore’ (J.P. Oleson [ed.], *The Harbours of Caesarea Maritima, Results of the Caesarea Ancient Harbour Project 1980-1985* [Haifa 1989], Appendix I at p. 53), which corresponds better to the results of the recent excavations, see bibliography in n. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus does refer to the games and events Herod gave during the inauguration celebrations of Caesarea (*AJ* 16.136-8; *BJ* 1.415), but without specifying the structures in which they were held.

<sup>3</sup> J. Jeremias, ‘Der Taraxippos im Hippodrome von Caesarea Palestina’, *ZDPV* 54 (1931), 279-89 at 282-3; G. Dalman, *Sacred Sites and Ways: Studies in the Topography of the Gospels*, trans. P. Levertoff (London 1935); J.H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Races* (London 1986), 528-33. The suggestion was reinforced by the results of excavations carried by E. Netzer at Jericho: ‘Two First-Century B.C.E. Sport Installations in the Jericho Valley’, in U. Zimri (ed.), *The Cultivation of the Body in Judaism* (Netanya 1977), 7-14 (Hebrew); id., ‘Tel es Samarat’, in E. Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land III* (Jerusalem 1993), 691-2.

<sup>4</sup> M.V. Guerin, *Description de la Palestine II. Samarie* (Paris 1875), 329.

<sup>5</sup> C.C. Conder and H.H. Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine. Memoirs II* (London 1882), 17.

description.<sup>6</sup> Excavations carried out on the site by the Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima determined that the circus/hippodrome there was constructed not earlier than the second century CE, thus eliminating the possibility that it was the one mentioned by Josephus.<sup>7</sup> A. Reifenberg, looking for a circular or oval facility suitable for *munera* and *venationes* and similar in shape to the Colosseum in Rome, found one on an aerial photograph in the north-eastern sector of the city;<sup>8</sup> yet the probe carried out there by A. Negev neither confirmed nor disproved it.<sup>9</sup>

The enigma was solved in 1992, when the Israel Antiquities Authority excavations at Caesarea uncovered a circus of the Roman style that was constructed in the late first century BCE, exactly at the location mentioned by Josephus.<sup>10</sup> The archaeological evidence dispelled all doubt that the circus/hippodrome was the 'amphitheater' to which Josephus referred in that sector of the city. The certainty of the archaeological find leaves only a linguistic conundrum in Josephus' text. Why did he use the word *amphitheatron*, not *circus* or *hippodrome*, to describe what is clearly a chariot-racing facility?

Of course, with Josephus, there is always a suspicion of inattentive or misinformed writing.<sup>11</sup> But perhaps that is not the best explanation in this case. My suggestion here is that Josephus deliberately used the word *amphitheatron* to describe the Roman-style *circus* at Caesarea in order to indicate linguistically the structural and functional differences between a circus and a hippodrome, in a period when the Greek terminology for Roman architectural structures was still in flux and not long after the Roman circus had been introduced into the eastern provinces.

Modern terminology distinguishes four standard types of facilities for public entertainment in the Roman world: *theater* for dramatic, musical and dance performances, *stadium* for athletic contests, *amphitheater* for *munera* and *venationes*,

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jeremias (above n. 3); L.I. Levine, *Roman Caesarea*, *Qedem* 2 (Jerusalem 1975), 27-8.

<sup>7</sup> J.A. Riley, 'The Pottery from the First Session of Excavation in the Caesarea Hippodrome', *BASOR* 218 (1975), 25-63; J.H. Humphrey, 'A Summary of the 1974 Excavations in the Caesarea Hippodrome', *BASOR* 218 (1975), 1-24; id., *Roman Circuses* (above, n. 3), 477-91.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. Reifenberg, 'Caesarea: A Study in the Decline of a Town', *IEJ* 1 (1950), 20-32 at 25-6, Fig 1:5. Reifenberg noted there that 'the location of an amphitheater in the north-eastern sector of the city cannot afford' a view of the sea, and suggested that 'theater' and 'amphitheater' be switched around in the text; yet there is no warrant for this in the surviving manuscripts, at least according to Niese's apparatus.

<sup>9</sup> A. Negev, 'Roman Caesarea', *Mada* 11 (1966), 144 (Hebrew).

<sup>10</sup> Y. Porath, 'Herod's Amphitheatre at Caesarea: Preliminary Notice', *Atiqot* 25 (1995), 11-19 (Hebrew); id., 'Herod's "Amphitheatre" at Caesarea: A Multipurpose Entertainment Building', *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*. JRA supplementary series 14 (1995), 15-27; id., 'Herod's "Amphitheater" at Caesarea', *Qadmoniot* 29/112 (1996), 93-9 (Hebrew); id., 'Theatre, Racing and Athletic Installations in Caesarea', *Qadmoniot* 36/125 (2003), 25-42. The final IAA report on the excavations, *King Herod's Circus at Caesarea Maritima*, by the present author and others, will soon appear in print.

<sup>11</sup> S.J.D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian* (Leiden 1979), index s.v. 'sloppiness'.

and *circus/hippodrome* for chariot and horse races.<sup>12</sup> In his important and comprehensive study on arenas for chariot-races, J.H. Humphrey determined that the Greek hippodrome in the late Hellenistic and early Roman Imperial periods (second-first centuries BCE) was a temporary facility lacking permanent tiers constructed of stone, and as such differed from the permanent, stone-built structure of the Roman circus.<sup>13</sup> The first Roman-style circus in the eastern Mediterranean was apparently constructed in Antioch in 67 BCE by the Roman proconsul Quintus Marcius Rex.<sup>14</sup> Humphrey wrote about this chariot-racing facility: 'Doubtless it was modeled on the contemporary Circus Maximus, not on the hippodrome at Olympia'.<sup>15</sup>

In line with this development, the excavations at Caesarea have revealed that the Herodian circus was a permanent facility of stone-constructed *cavea*, *carceres* and *spina*. Herod adopted the Roman architectural plan and style of the circus, reflecting his studied imitation of Roman cultural symbols, as well as their general spread throughout the region at that time. The physical features of the chariot-race facility recently discovered at Caesarea correspond to the modern understanding of a *circus* rather than a *hippodrome*.<sup>16</sup> Thus the IAA excavators have named it *Herod's Circus* to avoid any confusion with the later circus, also constructed for chariot races and fashioned in the Roman style of the second to third centuries CE, in the eastern sector of the city; that structure is known as the *Eastern Circus*. Despite the prominence of the two chariot- and horse-racing facilities at Caesarea, no ancient text mentions a hippodrome *per se* in the city.<sup>17</sup>

The Greek term for the Roman circus took quite a while to stabilize, and did so only after the word *amphitheatron* came to refer exclusively to the structure we routinely associate with it. The Greek word κίρκος was in circulation to describe the Roman *circus* (a word closely related to, if not derived from, the Greek) before, during and after Josephus' lifetime,<sup>18</sup> but Josephus never uses it in any of his writings, and the term more often used by Greek writers was ἵππόδρομος. For example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who wrote under the emperor Augustus, uses the term ὁ μέγας ἵππόδρομος to describe

<sup>12</sup> D.S. Robertson, *A Handbook of Greek and Roman Architecture* (London 1929), 185, 271-89; B. Fletcher, *A History of Architecture* (London 1943), 124, 172-83; Humphrey, *Roman Circuses* (above, n. 3), 1-4. It should be noted that each building type, when physically possible, could also accommodate performances usually associated with another type.

<sup>13</sup> Humphrey, *Roman Circuses* (above, n. 3), 1-24.

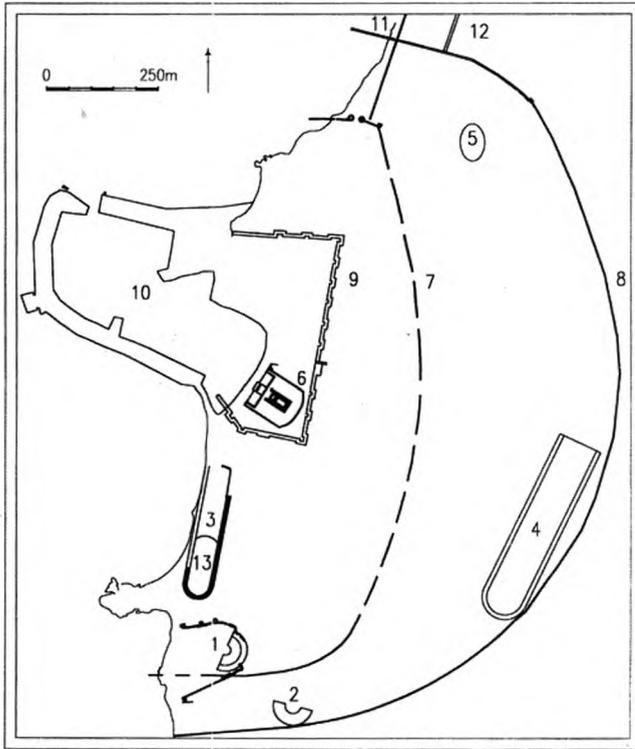
<sup>14</sup> If this is what Malalas, *Chronographia* 9.21 means: ἔκτισε δὲ πρῶην τὸ αὐτὸ παλαιὸν ἵππικὸν καὶ τὸ παλαιὸν παλάτιον ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων Κοίντος Μαρκιανὸς Ῥῆξ Ῥωμαίων.

<sup>15</sup> Humphrey, *Roman Circuses* (above, n. 3), 457. The evolution of the Circus Maximus from its initial stage as a temporary structure erected and re-erected repeatedly by the Etruscans and the Greeks to the permanent, well-constructed facility in the late Republican period can be traced in a relatively full manner, *ibid.* 12-19.

<sup>16</sup> See Humphrey, *Roman Circuses* (above, n. 3).

<sup>17</sup> A circus at Caesarea is mentioned in the late third century by Eusebius (*Martyrs in Palestine* 2.2), again in the fourth century (*Expositio* 31.164-166), and in relation to the Samaritan revolt of 484 (Malalas *Chronographia* 15.93; *Chronicon Paschale* 327). The circus used at Caesarea in the late third century and later was the Eastern Circus, which replaced Herod's Circus in the second century CE.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Polybius 30.22.2, Plutarch *Aem.* 32, Arrian *Epict.* 3.16.14, and see LSJ s.v.



**General plan of Caesarea:**  
 1. Theatre  
 2. Odeum/theatre  
 3. Herod's Circus  
 4. Eastern Circus  
 5. Northeastern amphitheater (Reifenberg's)  
 6. Temple platform  
 7. Herodian city wall  
 8. Byzantine city wall  
 9. Crusader city wall  
 10. Sebastos harbor  
 11. High Level aqueduct  
 12. Low Level aqueduct  
 13. Amphitheater in southern section of Herod's Circus

the Circus Maximus in Rome (*Ant. Rom.* 1.79 and 5.36). But the terminology was not yet standardized in the first century: Dionysius also calls the Circus Maximus an ἀμφιθέατρος ἵπποδρόμος (*ibid.*, 4.44).

It is significant that Dionysius (*Ant. Rom.* 4.44), when describing the Circus Maximus, uses ἀμφιθέατρος as an adjective, meaning ‘having seats all around’, and the same usage is attested in epigraphy.<sup>19</sup> Like Josephus, Strabo 14.1.43 refers to an ‘amphitheater’ constructed over a rushing river at Nysa in Asia Minor; a survey of that facility revealed a plan adhering to that of a stadium with two rounded sides,<sup>20</sup> as seen at Aphrodisias and Perge.

I suggest therefore that Josephus did not err when he described an *amphitheater* in the site at Caesarea where a Roman *circus* has recently been discovered; nor was he ignorant of the facts. Rather, he used a subtle linguistic ploy, in a period when Greek

<sup>19</sup> *IG Rom.* 4.845 and 861: στάδιον ἀμφιθέατρον in Asia Minor. Strabo 17.1.10 mentions an ἀμφιθέατρον καὶ στάδιον at Nicopolis, but the context indicates that two buildings are probably meant.

<sup>20</sup> A. Akurgal, *Ancient Civilizations and Ruins of Turkey* (Istanbul 1985), fig. 87a: 2; but cf. the comment by K. Welch, ‘The Stadium at Aphrodisias’, *AJA* 102 (1996), 547-69 at note 12.

terminology for Roman architecture was not yet standardized, to describe a structure that resembled the familiar hippodrome but differed from it in significant ways.

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