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**SPORT AND ENTERTAINMENT FACILITIES  
IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL  
AND IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD**

**Introduction**

Today, as in the past, the distinction between sport and entertainment is not always a clear or unambiguous one. Theatrical events, for example, are classed as entertainment since this implies an audience that is seated within an area suited for this purpose, and that views actors presenting the play before it.<sup>1</sup> Sport activities on the other hand, are related above all to the competitors themselves. Sportsmen can carry out their activities without an audience, but the Greeks, who were the first to institutionalize both the various kinds of theatrical events and sport events, provided them from the very outset with a well-organized and competitive framework. The main sport events in which the Greeks engaged were not numerous: running, throwing the discus and javelin, long jumps, professional wrestling and boxing, and finally chariot races.<sup>2</sup>

Sport events, like theatrical events, were conducted within a municipal framework, financed by the *polis* for the benefit of its citizens. An additional framework in which plays were performed or sport events were held were the pan-Hellenic (all-Greek) festivals which usually took place every four

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<sup>1</sup> On the ancient theatre, see: Bieber 1961; Hartmoll 1972; Leacroft 1984.

<sup>2</sup> On sport in the Graeco-Roman world, see: Harris 1972; Sansone 1988; Miller 1991; Olivova 1984; Miller 2004; Auguet 1994.

years in sanctuaries in Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, and Isthmia. In archaic and classical periods it was only in these four sanctuaries where, within the framework of the various religious-cultic events, sport competitions were also held. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, in addition to these four festivals there were numerous other festivals that were celebrated throughout the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>3</sup>

Both theatrical and sport events were conducted before an audience, and it did not matter whether the events were held in the framework of festivals in pan-Hellenic sanctuaries such as the ones in Olympia or Delphi or within an urban framework. This means that in the Greek world since earliest times even sport events were considered as a performance and competition watched by thousands of spectators. Furthermore, like the theatre, sport was associated from the very start with cultic rites. The theatre was known for its links with the cult of Dionysus, while sport competitions such as those that took place in Olympia were an inseparable part of the Zeus cult.<sup>4</sup> With the passage of time, especially during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the link between theatrical events and the Dionysian cult gradually weakened.<sup>5</sup> This applied to sport events as well, for which the link between them and the cult of the gods grew weaker, although it should be said that even during Hellenistic and Roman times this link did not entirely disappear.

We have pointed out how difficult it is to make a distinction between sport and entertainment. This difficulty is mainly with regard to the type of events that were held not in theaters or stadiums but in amphitheaters and circuses, and this will be dealt with later. In this study we wish to discuss the sport and entertainment facilities in the Land of Israel in ancient times, i.e. in the theatres, amphitheatres, circuses and stadiums that have been excavated in this country. But before doing so, we must define their essential nature and cultural significance, and the way they functioned in the Graeco-Roman world in which they emerged, took shape and were defined both from a formal-ideational standpoint and from an architectural one.

<sup>3</sup> On the Olympic games, see: Finley, Pleket 1976; Schobel 1966; Yalouris 1979a; Rasche 1988; Sinn 2000.

<sup>4</sup> On the interrelations between cult and sport in the Graeco-Roman world, see: Andronicos 1979, p. 66–73; Yalouris 1979b, p. 88–103; Mallwitz 1972; Yalavanis 2004.

<sup>5</sup> On the interrelations between the theatre and the cult of Dionysus, see: Pickard-Cambridge 1968; Hanson 1959.

## I. Sport and Entertainment Facilities in the Graeco-Roman World

### a. Theatre

The earliest entertainment facility in the ancient world that was given an architectural definition is the theatre (in Greek: *θέατρον*). Even if it is difficult to reconstruct the earliest stages in the process of its architectural form, it is well known that, already at the end of the archaic period, plays were performed in the *orchestra*, the circular leveled area at the centre of the Athenian *agora*. At first the spectators did not have fixed seating area, but later, probably in the first half of the fifth century BCE, theatrical events were transferred from the *agora* to the foot of the southeastern slope of the Acropolis, near the sanctuary of Dionysus.<sup>6</sup> Here began the process of the architectural formation of the earliest of all theatres in the ancient world. Initially, it was the *orchestra* that was devised, and later stepped tiers of wooden benches were set up on the natural slope to seat the spectators. These were later replaced by permanent stepped tiers of seats made of stone. During the fifth century BCE it was the practice to set up a temporary structure (*skene*), initially a shed, in which the actors could rest and change their clothes, and which was placed beyond the circular *orchestra*, facing the centre of the seating area (*koilon*). This temporary construction would later on, during the course of the Hellenistic period (3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE), turn into a permanent structure, a stage building (*skene*) built of stone and rising to height of two floors. The stage (*proskenion* or *logeion*) appears only during the Hellenistic period (late 4<sup>th</sup>, early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE). It looked like long and narrow platform, extending along the front of the stage building (*skene*) and facing the *orchestra*. But even at the end of this long and complex process described here very briefly, the three components of the theatre: the seating area (*koilon*), the orchestra and the stage building (*skene*), did not have a unified form.<sup>7</sup>

The Romans continued the development of the Hellenistic theatre. The earliest of the Roman theatres is that of Pompeii.<sup>8</sup> Romans were the first to combine the seating area (*cavea* or *auditorium*) with the stage building (*scaena*) and by doing so, completed the process that was begun during the

<sup>6</sup> On the theatre of Dionysus in Athens, see: Bieber 1961, p. 55–68, figs. 223–224, 226–229, 237, 254–261; Travlos 1971, p. 537–552, figs. 676–690; Pickard-Cambridge 1946.

<sup>7</sup> The theatre in Priene in Asia Minor is the best example of a Hellenistic theatre. See: Bieber 1961, p. 108–111, figs. 416–425; Schede 1964, p. 70–79, figs. 84–92.

<sup>8</sup> On the theatre of Pompeii, see: Bieber 1961, p. 170–175, figs. 605–615.

Hellenistic period. The unification of these two components was achieved by means of structures erected on both sides of the stage building which are called the stage wings or *versurae* in Latin. These two wings connected the *cavea* with the *scaena* and in this way a continuous and unified architectural space was formed. This process led to changes in the shape of the *orchestra*, which was circular in the Greek theatre, while in the Roman theatre it was semi-circular in shape. The same applied to the seating area itself: in the Roman theatre it was semi-circular, while in the Greek theatre the seating area extended beyond the halfway line of the *orchestra*.<sup>9</sup>

The obvious difference between the Greek and Roman theatres is in the relationship between the seating area and the stage building. In the Roman theatre, since the stage building was connected to the seating area and formed one unity, both the stage building (*scaena*) and the seating area (*cavea*) were of the same height. The front wall of the stage building (*scaenae frons*) facing the *orchestra* and the audience was designed as a permanent decoration. By means of a vertical supporters (columns, pillars and pilasters) and horizontal beams (entablature) placed above each other, with niches containing statues, the *scaenae frons* was given an exceptionally rich and spectacular appearance.<sup>10</sup> Another essential difference between the Greek and the Roman theatres is in their location. The Greek theatres were always built on a natural slope in order to place the seating area on it, and were therefore totally dependent on topography.<sup>11</sup> The Romans, on the other hand, because of their engineering ability to create artificial slopes by means of a system of slanting barrel vaults intersecting with large semi-circular vaults (*ambulacra*), were not dependent on topography at all, and could erect theatres wherever they wanted. Thus, most of the Roman theatres were spatially integrated within the road network in various cities.<sup>12</sup>

This brief survey is only meant to indicate the main points in the history of the architectural development of theatre structures in the Graeco-Roman world. It is unnecessary to note that this development is the result of far-reaching changes that occurred in the theatrical arts themselves. The essential changes in the design of the stage in the Greek theatre and subsequently in the Roman theatre are all spatial-architectural expressions for the ascending importance of the actor and the decline of the choir (in Greek: *chorus*). At the same time, a further essential change occurred in the taste and demands of the audience.

<sup>9</sup> On the design of the Roman theatre, see: Izenour 1977; Small 1983, p. 55–68.

<sup>10</sup> The most perfect example of a design for a stage façade (*scaenae frons*) can be found in the theatre in Sabratha in Libya, North Africa. See: Caputo 1959.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the theatre in the sanctuary of Epidauros in the Peloponnesos: Bieber 1961, p. 71–73, figs. 271–275; Gerkan 1961.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the theatre in *Leptis Magna* in Libya, North Africa: Caputo 1987.

Events such as the Persian wars, the emergence of Athenian democracy, the decline of the *polis*, and the ascendancy of the Hellenistic kingdoms, all these must have had their impress upon the theatrical arts. The decline of tragedy and the rise of the new comedy, the even greater popularity of the mime and pantomime all these necessitated changes and adaptations in the structure of the theatre.<sup>13</sup>

### b. Amphitheatre

In spite of its Greek name, the amphitheatre was, both in its function as the place for the events that are held there, and in its design and construction methods, a clearly Roman structure.<sup>14</sup> The amphitheatre (in Latin: *amphitheatrum*) was an oval structure in the centre of which there was a flat surface of pressed earth (*arena*) surrounded by a high protective wall. All around the *arena* there were tiers of stepped seats (*cavea* or *auditorium*). It was this shape that was responsible for the name given to it by the Romans – the *amphitheatrum*, which means literally a double theatre.

There were two kinds of events held in the amphitheatre:

1. *Munera* (sing. *munus*) which are combats between professional gladiators who were specially trained for this. They staged battles in which they appeared in pairs or groups, each armed with a different kind of weapon.
2. *Venationes* (sing. *venatio*), which are staged hunting scenes in which various wild beasts appeared fighting against each other or were hunted.<sup>15</sup>

The amphitheatre entertainments were widely enjoyed in Italy and in the regions conquered by the Romans that had undergone an intensive process of Romanization. This explains why we find scores of amphitheatres scattered throughout Italy, France, Spain and North Africa, and only a few isolated ones in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. The amphitheatre in Pompeii is considered as one of the very earliest ones. It is dated to the first quarter of the first century BCE.<sup>16</sup> Compared with the structure

<sup>13</sup> Kitto 1970; Ferguson 1972; Taplin 1978; Cornford 1970; Sandback 1977.

<sup>14</sup> On the leisure and entertainment culture in Rome, see: Balsdon 1968; Friedlander 1968.

<sup>15</sup> On the type of events that were held in the amphitheatres, see: Huizinga 1970; Jennison 1937; Toynbee 1973; Honle, Henze 1981; Grant 1967; Plass 1995; Golvin, Landes 1990; Auguet 1994.

<sup>16</sup> On the amphitheatre in Pompeii and other amphitheatres throughout the Roman Empire, see the detailed and comprehensive study by Golvin 1988.

of the theater, which had undergone a process of hundreds of years in its formation and architectural design, the amphitheatre was designed from the very start as an elliptical structure with an *arena* and the stepped tiers of seats enclosing the *arena* on all sides. The changes in its plan and structure are reflected in the method of construction, that is to say the way in which the artificial slope that carried the tiers of stepped seats were created.

The largest amphitheatre in the Roman world is the Colosseum in Rome (its correct name: *Amphitheatrum Flavium*).<sup>17</sup> Its construction was begun in 70 CE and it was inaugurated in 80 CE during the reign of Titus. Amphitheatres differ from each other in their size and degree of sophistication in their underground installations beneath the *arena* where the animals were held before being brought up in cages and sent directly into that *arena*. These sophisticated installations were found only in the larger amphitheatres. In a number of them there was also the possibility of flooding the *arena* with water to turn it into an artificial lake in which staged sea battles (*naumachia* in Greek) could be waged.<sup>18</sup>

### c. Hippodrome/Circus

Horse-drawn chariot races have had a long tradition in the Greek world, and its roots are embedded in the Homeric period. When the Olympic games were first held (776 BCE), chariot races were included as one of the competitive events.<sup>19</sup> These races were held in the hippodrome (in Greek: *ἵπποδρομος*), which is a broad expanse of pressed earth. The hippodrome in Olympia and in similar facilities throughout the Greek world was not actually defined architecturally. What this means is that there were no existing rules that precisely limited the measurements of a hippodrome and there was no division between the track, which the Greeks called *dromos* and the seating area. At the same time, the Greeks installed a device to provide a uniform starting gates for the chariots so as to ensure fair competition. We know that an installation of this kind already existed in Olympia in the fifth century BCE (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, VI, 20, 14).

The Romans, like the Greeks, were very enthusiastic about horse-drawn chariot races, but in their typical manner they gave the hippodrome (*circus*

<sup>17</sup> On the Colosseum, see: Travlos 1968, p. 17–25, figs. 5–14; Pearson 1973; Gabucci 2001.

<sup>18</sup> On the *naumachia*, see: Golvin, Redde 1990, p. 165–177. In general, on water entertainments in theatres and amphitheatres, see: Traversari 1960; Gilula 1994, p. 41–50 [Hebrew].

<sup>19</sup> On chariot races in the Greek world, see: Palaeologos 1976. On chariot races in the Roman world, see: Rawson 1981, p. 1–16.

in Latin) a precise architectural definition. A typical *circus* was a large-sized rectangular structure with an average length of about 450 m. and about 70 m. in width. It mainly consisted of a track of pressed earth bounded by a high protective wall. This track, which was also called an *arena*, had a curved end, while at the other end there were 10 or 12 starting gates that were called *carceres*. A low wall, called the *spina*, ran down the center of the *arena*, dividing it into two so as to ensure that the chariots did not clash frontally with each other. Ranged around the protective wall, that is to say, along the entire length of the wall and at the curved end of the circus were tiers of stepped seats (*cavea* or *auditorium*).<sup>20</sup>

The largest and most famous of all Roman circuses was the *Circus Maximus*, which is located in the heart of Rome, at the foot of the Palatine Hill (*Palatinus Mons*) on which the palaces of the Emperors stood. The origins of this *circus*, which measures 650 m. in length, are to be found in the Etruscan period, and it was built of stone as a permanent facility at the end of the fourth century BCE. During the imperial period it was restored and renovated several times. Its magnificent architectural decorations and the grandeur of the events that were held there were legendary.<sup>21</sup> The *circus* was highly popular in the Roman world, and beginning with the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, the chariot races became the most widespread of mass entertainments. The well-known slogan "bread and circuses" (*panem et circenses*) (Juvenalis, *Satires*, 10, 81) is a faithful expression of the popularity of this entertainment facility. Another expression of this are the "factions" (*factiones* in Latin), that is to say, the fan groups or supporters, who were called according to their colours – the "greens", the "blues", the "reds" and the "whites". In the chariot competitions, extreme and violent expression was given to the rivalries and social pressures that characterized Roman society on all levels.<sup>22</sup>

#### d. Stadium

The stadium (in Greek: *στάδιον*, in Latin: *stadium*) is a measure of length for 200 m. This was the name given by the Greeks for the facility in which they conducted athletic competitions that were included in the Olympic Games.

The earliest stadium in the Greek world is that of Olympia. In its present form, as we know it today, it dates from the Hellenistic period, yet

<sup>20</sup> On the different kinds of circuses scattered throughout the Roman world, see Humphrey's detailed and comprehensive book: Humphrey 1986, p. 1–16.

<sup>21</sup> On the *Circus Maximus*, see: Nash 1968, p. 236–240, figs. 271–279.

<sup>22</sup> On the unique aspect of the *circus* as the main entertainment for the masses in Roman Italy and in Byzantium, and on the "factions", see: Cameron 1976.

it must have undoubtedly originated in the archaic period. In contrast to the facilities that were described above, the stadium is not an entertainment facility but clearly one of sport. The stadium has a rectangular shape, with a length of about 200 m. and a width between 30 to 40 m. During the archaic and classical periods the stadium did not actually have any architectural definition, and it was only in the Hellenistic period that seating arrangements were made for spectators, first of wood and later of stone. Stepped tiers of stone seats like those found in the stadiums (*stadia*) at Delphi or Epidauros, for example, extended parallel to the two longer sides of the stadium. However, in Olympia itself, no seats were ever installed and the spectators stood or sat on the sloping banks that enclosed the stadium.<sup>23</sup>

In the Greek world, the stadiums were associated with sanctuaries in which sport events were held similar to those in Olympia, Delphi or Epidauros. Another place where stadiums were set up was the gymnasium (in Greek: *γυμνάσιον*) that could be found in every Greek city to serve as schools for the younger citizens of the *polis*. The most attractive and perfect example of a municipal stadium of this kind was set up near the gymnasium in Priene in Asia Minor.<sup>24</sup> Here the gymnasium is built as a structure with a central enclosed courtyard surrounded by columns (*palaistra*) that served for various physical exercises. All around the courtyard were rooms and halls, including the *ephebeion*, the central instruction hall. Extending alongside the gymnasium was the stadium in which athletic competitions were held, mainly in running, and in discus and javelin throwing.

From what was said above, it appears that in the Greek world, the stadium was linked both to the athletic and competitive activities of the Olympic games, as well as to the gymnasium, which was the educational institution that symbolized above all else the spirit of the *polis*. When the *polis* declined during the Hellenistic period, and more especially during the Roman period when the Greek world was entirely incorporated within the Roman Empire, the status and importance of the gymnasium was reduced, and the various sport events also diminished in value in comparison with the classical and Hellenistic periods. During the Roman period, the mass entertainment that was provided in the amphitheatres and circuses appears of far greater interest and popularity than the events held in stadiums. It should probably be mentioned at this point that in all of Rome only one stadium was built, the *Stadium Domitiani*, which was erected at the end of the first century CE.<sup>25</sup> This fact is enough to indicate that, for the Romans, athletics was never warmly sponsored either as a sport-competitive activity or as entertainment.

<sup>23</sup> On the *stadia* in the main sanctuaries, see: Mussche 1963, p. 28–29, figs. 92–94.

<sup>24</sup> On the gymnasium and stadium in Priene, see: Schede 1964, p. 80–89, figs. 93–102.

<sup>25</sup> On the *Stadium Domitiani* in Rome, see: Nash 1968, p. 387–390, figs. 1174–1179.

## II. Sport and Entertainment Facilities in the Land of Israel

In the following discussion of the sport and entertainment facilities in the Land of Israel during ancient times, we shall retain the same subject divisions used for the Graeco-Roman world. This means that we shall first discuss the theatres, and then the amphitheatres, circuses, and finally the stadiums.

### a. Theatres

In spite of the fact that the Land of Israel was, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, exposed to classical culture, and that from the 4<sup>th</sup> century it was ruled directly by the Hellenistic kingdoms, the first theatre erected there was by Herod the Great, King of Iudaea, at the end of the first century BCE. At this period the Jews constituted the majority of the population in the country, but it also contained Nabataeans as well as a Hellenized Syrio-Phoenician population that lived for the most part in coastal cities and in the *Decapolis*. It should be mentioned that the degree of exposure of these three populations to classical culture was not uniform. The coastal cities were the first to be exposed to it, while the Jewish population, especially those living in the interior regions of the country, was far less exposed to it.

The theatres were apparently erected in Iudaea, Nabataea, as well as in the Hellenized cities of the *Decapolis*.<sup>26</sup> Before going on to discuss the 30 theatres so far excavated on both sides of the Jordan, it should be noted that in addition to the geographical aspect, i.e. the location of the theatres in the different population areas, the chronological aspect is also of great importance.

#### Herodian Theatres

During the reign of Herod the Great (37–4 BCE), three theatres were built in Iudaea: in Jerusalem, in Jericho and in Caesarea. The one in Jerusalem has not yet been located. It may have been erected as a temporary structure and then dismantled, because it would be difficult to suppose that

<sup>26</sup> On the theatres in Hellenistic and Roman Palestine, see: Frezouls 1952, p. 46–100; Frezouls 1959, p. 202–227; Segal 1989, p. 145–165; Segal 1995.

in Jerusalem at the end of the first century BCE there would have been an audience that might enjoy theatrical events.<sup>27</sup> The theatre in Jericho was built as part of an outstanding and original complex that included, in addition to the theatre, a hippodrome and perhaps also a gymnasium.<sup>28</sup> This complex should be seen as part of the palace compound that the Hasmoneans constructed and which was expanded by Herod. The building of a theatre in Caesarea can be explained by the political and cultural intentions of Herod who wanted to turn the kingdom of Iudaea into a Hellenistic kingdom in the framework of the "new order" that was being imposed in the Mediterranean Basin during the Augustan period.<sup>29</sup> It seems that the son of Herod, Antipas, built an additional theatre in Sepphoris.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps Antipas constructed this theatre for the same reasons that led his father to construct theatres in Caesarea, Jericho and Jerusalem. What is common among the theatres that were built by Herod and his son is that the initiative came from the rulers and therefore one cannot suppose that they reflected the real cultural needs of most of the Jewish and non-Jewish population in the area ruled by Herod the Great and Antipas.

#### Theatres in the Nabataean Kingdom

During the period from the end of the first century BCE to the end of the first century CE, five theatres were built in the Nabataean kingdom.<sup>31</sup> The most northerly one of them is found in Sahr in the Trachonitis (Southern Syria today), while southernmost one is in Wadi Sabra south of Petra. The very presence of theatres in Nabataean kingdom is perhaps even more surprising than their existence in the area of the Herodian kingdom, because it is difficult to assume that the Nabataean population of this period could be considered as having a classical culture. This suggests that the theatres of the Nabataeans were not used for purely theatrical events but for other purposes such as cultic ceremonies for the dead. Indeed, most of the Nabataean theatres were constructed in connection with sanctuaries

<sup>27</sup> On the erection of a theatre in Jerusalem, see: *AJ* 15: 268; in Jericho: *AJ* 17: 161; in Caesarea: *BJ*, I: 415.

<sup>28</sup> Netzer 1980, p. 104–107 [Hebrew].

<sup>29</sup> Segal 1992, p. 145–156 [Hebrew]; Segal 1995, p. 4–5; Frova 1966, p. 57–192; Levine 1975, p. 23–26.

<sup>30</sup> Segal 1995, p. 41–43, figs. 10–14; Waterman 1937, p. 6–12, figs. 3–5; Meyers, Netzer, Meyers 1992, p. 30–33.

<sup>31</sup> On Nabataean theatres, see: Segal 1989, p. 150–151, notes 14–20. On the large theatre in Petra, see: Hammond 1965. On the theatre in Wadi Sabra, see: Linder 1982, p. 231–242; Negev 1981, p. 122–128 [Hebrew]. On the theatre in Sahr in the Trachonitis, see: Segal 1995, p. 38–39, fig. 2; Butler 1919, p. 441–446.

or cemeteries. However, one should not reject the possibility that even the Nabataean kings, like Herod the Great and his sons, wanted to demonstrate their enthusiasm for classical culture, and that their aim was similar to that of Herod, to become integrated with general Hellenistic culture under the leadership of Rome.

### Theatres in Hellenized Cities

The earliest among the theatres in the Hellenized cities was the southern theatre in Gerasa (today: Jerash in Jordan) that was built in 92 CE.<sup>32</sup> The very construction of this theatre is of great importance to our discussion in view of the fact that, unlike the other theatres that were built by Herod the Great or by the Nabataean kings, the theatre in Gerasa was built by municipal initiative, that is to say, both the funding and the audience came from the city itself. It is safe to assume, therefore, that the facility erected by municipal initiative for the sake of the citizens, faithfully reflects the true needs of the population of the area in which it was built.

The theatres in the Hellenized cities were built over a long period of time, from the end of the first century to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. The greater majority of the 30 theatres that have so far been excavated in the region under discussion were built in the Hellenized cities during this period. It is worth considering the location of these theatres. Some of them, such as the theatres in Hammat-Gader, Shuni or in Birketein, north of Gerasa, can be defined as cultic theatres because they were not built within the cities but in sanctuaries in the vicinity of the cities, while the other theatres were built within the cities themselves.<sup>33</sup>

All the theatres in the Land of Israel are Roman theatres in respect of plan, design and architecture, and do not differ essentially from the theatres that were built in the first centuries of the Christian era in other provinces of the Roman Empire.<sup>34</sup> In the theatres that were built in the Land of Israel, there is evidence of construction methods and architectural solutions that indicate a high level of engineering and architectural skills. The various

<sup>32</sup> On the southern theatre in Gerasa, see: Segal 1995, p. 75–77, figs. 94–103; Kraeling 1938, p. 19–20; Browning 1982, p. 125–131, figs. 62–66; Segal 1988, p. 23, figs. 49–51, notes 26, 27.

<sup>33</sup> On the theatre in Hammat-Gader, see: Segal 1995, p. 45–46, figs. 20–22; Sukenik 1935, p. 27–30, fig. 7. On the theatre in Shuni/Shumi, see: Shenhav 1990, p. 58–62 [Hebrew]; Segal 1995, p. 69–70, figs. 72–78. On the theatre in Birketein, see: Segal 1995, p. 71, figs. 79–83; Kraeling 1938, p. 159–167, fig. 2; p. 161, pls. XXXIII–XXXV.

<sup>34</sup> On the differences between the Greek and Roman theatres regarding plans, methods of construction and decoration, see: Bieber 1961, p. 187–189; Robertson 1974, p. 271–283; Boëthius, Ward-Perkins 1970, p. 373–378, fig. 145.

types of building methods are mainly reflected in the construction of artificial slopes on which the *cavea* was placed. As for architectural decoration, the theatres in the Land of Israel are not essentially different from those in other regions of the Roman world. Most of the decoration efforts were focused on the façade of the stage structure (*scaenae frons*), which faces the stage and the audience, and is decorated with two or three stories of marble and granite columns, pillar and pilasters in a variety of colours that support horizontal beams (entablature) and statues placed within the niches. The largest theatre in our region is the one in Philadelphia (today Amman, capital of the kingdom of Jordan) in which there were 8000 seats, while the smallest one is in Sahr in trachonitis (today in southern Syria) where only 400 spectators can be seated, but on average the theatres in our region contain 5000 seats.

### The Cultural Aspect

Very little is known to us on what took place at the scores of theatres in the Land of Israel. From the small amount of information gleaned from Josephus, Talmudic literature and church sources we learn that mime and pantomime performances were the more common forms of entertainment in the theatres of this region.<sup>35</sup> Even events of another type, such as acrobatic performances and boxing matches were presented at the theatres, and in some theatres such as the one in Caesarea, it was possible to flood the orchestra with water and to present “water-theatre”, a type of entertainment that was highly dubious.<sup>36</sup> All this shows that it is difficult to assume that classical drama was presented in the theatres of the Land of Israel. The substance and import of the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides or Aristophanes that were meant for the Athenian audience were not apparently transmitted within the compass of the theatre in our region. The content, ideas and language of the classical Greek plays in all their various forms were alien to the local audience which was apparently satisfied with light and simple entertainment generously provided by mime, pantomime and “water-theatre”.

<sup>35</sup> On leisure culture in the Land of Israel in ancient times, see: Weiss 1995, p. 2–19 [Hebrew]. On mime and pantomime in the ancient theatre, see: Segal 1989, p. 145–165. On the position of the Church regarding various theatrical events, see: Ashkenazi 1994, p. 95–102 [Hebrew]. On Talmudic sources regarding various theatrical events, see: Dvorjetski 1994, p. 51–68 [Hebrew].

<sup>36</sup> On water theatre in the Land of Israel and the classical world, see: Gilula 1994, p. 41–50 [Hebrew].

### b. Amphitheatres

We have already noted the essential difference in the character of events held in theatres as compared with those held in amphitheatres.<sup>37</sup> Gladiatorial combats and hunting scenes did not appeal to Semitic audiences in the Roman East, and amphitheatres are rarely found even in Asia Minor and in Greece.<sup>38</sup> In the Land of Israel, four amphitheatres have so far been found, all of them west of Jordan: Beth-Shean (Scythopolis), Beth-Guvrin (Eleutheropolis), Shechem (Neapolis) and Caesarea. The last of these has not yet been investigated but the other three amphitheatres have been excavated to some degree over the last two decades.<sup>39</sup>

It seems likely that the very existence of amphitheatres in this region of the Roman world must be seen in connection with the presence of the legionnaires who, together with their families, constituted the main clients of amphitheatre entertainments.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, if we consider the distribution of amphitheatres in the Roman world, we see that compared with more than a hundred amphitheatres known to us in Italy and in the western provinces, and more than 40 amphitheatres in North Africa, they are extremely rare in Greece, Asia Minor and in the Roman East. The existence of four amphitheatres in the Land of Israel, within a relatively small area west of the Jordan River, indicates a considerable concentration of people by whom this type of amusement was favored. As we have said, it is quite probable that it was mainly the soldiers of the Roman legions who were comprised the main audience for this kind of entertainment.

We should, however, take into account other factors that might have led the cities to the decision to build amphitheatres in their areas. The construction of the amphitheatre in Caesarea by Herod the Great was an integral part of a whole complex of buildings, including entertainment facilities that the king had erected in his kingdom and outside it.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand,

<sup>37</sup> On amphitheatre entertainments, see above, notes 15–18.

<sup>38</sup> On the location and status of the amphitheatre in the Hellenistic-Roman East in general and among the Jewish population in particular, see: Robert 1940.

<sup>39</sup> It is possible that the structure located nearby, to the west of the *circus* in Bosra (the capital of *Provincia Arabia*, today Southern Syria), is actually an amphitheatre. Its location in the capital of the province which was also the permanent base of the *Legio Tertia Cyrenaica*, indicates that, like the amphitheatre in Beth-Guvrin, it was primarily used for the legionnaires. See: Mougdad, Blanc, Dentzer 1990, p. 201–204.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the amphitheatre in Dura-Europos on the Euphrates (today in Syria), which in the third century CE was an important military base of the Romans. This small amphitheatre was built by the soldiers that were stationed there within a bathhouse that was no longer in use. See: Rostovtzeff et al. 1936.

<sup>41</sup> On the amphitheatre in Caesarea, see: Levine 1975, p. 27–29; Reifenberg 1951, p. 20–32, fig. 1. The amphitheatre in Caesarea, located in the north part of the city, has not yet been researched, and it should be mentioned that at this stage there is no evidence for the date of its construction.

the construction of amphitheatres in cities such as Beth-Shean, Beth-Guvrin and Shechem, seem to imply that these cities, which flourished in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE, wished to demonstrate their wealth and loyalty to Roman provincial authorities by erecting facilities that best expressed the cultural traditions of Rome.

The amphitheatres of Shechem and Beth-Shean are worth special attention because they were actually constructed within circuses when these were no longer in use.<sup>42</sup>

We are faced with a phenomenon which is not unique to the Land of Israel but which is well known to us in the Roman Empire as a whole. In fact, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, theatres and stadiums, and even a few circuses, had their original function altered and were adapted for the purpose of conducting amphitheatre events. This process took place in most of the theatres, in which the stage and lower level tiers of seats were eliminated, and a protective wall was erected around the *orchestra*, turning it into an *arena*. In this way the conditions for holding gladiatorial combats or staged hunting games were created.<sup>43</sup> In order to adapt the stadiums and circuses for amphitheatre events, a much larger investment of effort was necessary. The circular area opposite the starting gates in the *circus*, or the starting line (*meta*) in the stadium were utilized for creating the *arena*. In this area, a semi-circular wall was built facing the curved end which disconnected that area from the rest of the stadium or *circus*.<sup>44</sup> Every visitor to the amphitheatres of Shechem or Beth-Shean will easily notice those added constructions.

The amphitheatre of Caesarea has not yet been excavated, although its existence is known to researchers by the analysis of aerial photographs.<sup>45</sup> But there is no doubt that we have here an amphitheatre that was erected from the very start as an amphitheatre. The amphitheatre in Beth-Guvrin, the excavation and the partial reconstruction of which has recently been completed, was also originally built as such.<sup>46</sup>

It is quite probable that the structure that was located by G. Schumacher in Legio, a camp city that was set up for the soldiers of the Sixth Legion in the first quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, served as an amphitheatre.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> On the amphitheatre of Beth-Shean (Scythopolis), see: Tsafir, Foerster 1990, p. 7–45; Tsafir, Foerster 1993, p. 3–32; Tsafir, Foerster 1997, p. 85–146. On the amphitheatre in Shechem, see: Magen 1994, p. 1357–1358.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, the theatre in Aphrodisias in Caria, Western Turkey today: Smith, Erim 1991, p. 31–39, fig. 1, p. 30.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, the stadium in Aphrodisias: Erim 1992, p. 27–29, figs. 31–32.

<sup>45</sup> See above, note 41.

<sup>46</sup> On the amphitheatre of Beth-Guvrin, see: Kloner 1988, p. 15–24; Kloner, Hübsch 1996, p. 85–106.

<sup>47</sup> On the theatre/amphitheatre in Legio (today, in the area of Kibbutz Megiddo), see: Segal 1995, p. 52–53, figs. 35–37; Schumacher 1908, p. 173–177, plate 1.

Schumacher defines it as a theatre, but because of the unusual shape of the structure (not yet excavated), it would not be wrong to assume that it may have also served as an amphitheatre. Amalgamated structures such as these, in which theatre and amphitheatre are combined, are well known to us throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>48</sup>

### c. Circuses

The horse-drawn chariot races have a long tradition in Greek culture. They were a part of the Olympic Games and were frequently mentioned in the Homeric epics.<sup>49</sup>

However, the Greeks never formulated an architectural definition for what they used to call a hippodrome (in Greek: *ἵπποδρομος*), although chariot races competitions in the Greek world during the archaic and classical periods, and even in the Hellenistic one, were held in wide expanses of pressed earth. The Romans called the hippodrome a *circus*, and by the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, had already given it a precise architectural definition.<sup>50</sup> The *circus* (the heir of the Greek hippodrome) was a large and impressive facility that was usually set up outside the city area. So far, seven circuses have been located in the cities of Southern Syria and the Land of Israel: Bosra, Gadara, Beth-Shean, Caesarea (two), and Shechem. Other circuses have been found in Tyre, Beirut (today in Lebanon) and Latakia (today in Syria).<sup>51</sup> A facility of a unique kind was excavated in Herodian Jericho, and it may be the only one of those we mentioned earlier that could be called

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, the theatre/amphitheatre in Verulamium (today, St. Albans) in England: Kenyon 1935, p. 213–261.

<sup>49</sup> See above, notes 2–3, 19–20.

<sup>50</sup> On the hippodrome and on the history of the architectural formation of the *circus*, see: Humphrey 1986, p. 1–24.

<sup>51</sup> On circuses in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, see the book by Humphrey 1986, p. 438–539. On the *circus* in Bosra (Southern Syria), see: Butler 1914, p. 275–276. [Our knowledge of the *circus* in Bosra is based on a survey only. The facility has not yet been excavated].

On the *circus* in Gadara, see: Wagner-Lux et al. 1978, p. 135–144, pls. 11–17; Wagner-Lux, Vriezen 1980, p. 157–161; Weber 1989, p. 597–611.

On the *circus* in Gerasa, see: Kraeling 1938, p. 85–100; Ostrasz 1989, p. 329–336, fig. 4.

On the *circus*/amphitheatre in Beth-Shean, see above, note 42.

On the *circus* in Shechem, see above, note 42.

On the *circus* in Tyre, see: Boutros 1981, p. 103–115, figs. 219–235.

On the *circus* in Beirut, see: Humphrey 1986, p. 491–492, notes 69–72.

On the *circus* in Latakia (which is Hellenistic and Roman Laodicea) in Northern Syria, see: Humphrey 1986, p. 492, notes 73–74. I heard from Dr. M. Hartal that the remains of a large *circus* have recently been located in Tiberias.

a hippodrome and not a circus.<sup>52</sup> The earliest circus that was built in Iudaea is the one that was recently excavated in Caesarea.<sup>53</sup> In his description of the founding of Caesarea by Herod the Great, Josephus mentions the amphitheatre that was built “south of the port” (*AJ* 17: 341, *BJ*, I, 21: 8). It appears that Josephus confused the circus with the *amphitheatrum* (and he was not the only historian of that period who confused the various entertainment facilities), because what was found near the shores of Caesarea, south of the port and north of the theatre, was not an amphitheatre but a *circus*, an unmistakable Roman facility intended for horse-drawn chariot races.<sup>54</sup> The *circus* of Herod the Great has the typical U shape, with long walls parallel to the line of the shore, and with its curved end towards the south. The measurements of the *arena* were: 300 × 50 m.

All the other circuses that were built in the cities of Southern Syria and the Land of Israel were constructed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE, during the reign of the Antonine and Severan emperors. Two of them: the ones in Gerasa and Gadara, are the smallest of all that were ever built. Their length was less than 250 m. while the circuses of Bosra, Caesarea (the eastern circus), like those of Tyre, Beirut and Latakia, had an average length of more than 400 m. The latter belong to a group of large circuses that, in their design and proportions, resemble those in Italy and North Africa.

In contrast with the shows of the amphitheatre, the chariot races won great popularity in the Roman East. At the end of the Roman period and during the Byzantine era, when the popularity of amphitheatre shows was in decline, the chariot races became the most favored form of mass entertainment. Just as in Rome and Constantinople, we find that even in the Land of Israel there were fights, occasionally violent ones, between rival circus factions (*factiones*), mainly between the “blues” and the “greens”, which testifies to the great popularity of chariot races in our region.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> On the hippodrome in Jericho, see: Netzer 1980, p. 104–107 [Hebrew]. The structure that was excavated by Prof. E. Netzer in Jericho lacks a seating system and also has no starting gates (*carceres*) or a central dividing wall (*spina*), and therefore, unlike the other facilities that have so far been excavated in the Land of Israel, it can be defined as a hippodrome and not a *circus*.

<sup>53</sup> The circus of Herod was excavated by a team of the Antiquities Authority headed by Dr. J. Porath (with the exception of the northern end, the area of the *carceres*, which was excavated by team headed by Prof. J. Patrich), between the years 1992–2002. See: Porath 2003, p. 451–455.

<sup>54</sup> Porath 2004, p. 63–67.

<sup>55</sup> Cameron 1976.

#### d. Stadiums

As already mentioned above, the *stadium* (pl. *stadia*) is an outstanding sport facility that is found in sanctuaries such as Olympia, Delphi or Epidauros, but they are also to be found in gymnasiums.<sup>56</sup> Competitive activities are held in stadiums in the framework of the Olympic Games as well as training in various athletic professions. The stadium is a Greek facility and is rarely found in the Roman world, since as we have already emphasized, athletic competitions were not favored by the Romans, who preferred watching entertaining spectacles displayed in amphitheatres and circuses.<sup>57</sup> The stadiums found in gymnasiums were an integral part of those educational institutions that characterized above all the spirit of the polis. All citizens were required to send their children to the gymnasium in which theoretical studies were combined with a variety of bodily activities.

So far only one stadium has been excavated in the Land of Israel, the stadium in Samaria (Sebaste).<sup>58</sup> This stadium was erected in the northeast area of the city, near the wall, utilizing the convenient valley that runs to the north of the forum. The stadium, which measures 230 × 60 m., is rectangular in shape and is surrounded by walls on all four sides. Parallel to these walls there are porticos that apparently bore single-sloped roofs to provide shade all along the walls. It is safe to assume that the stadium of Samaria served the local gymnasium, which has not yet been discovered. The very existence of a stadium in a city such as Samaria (Sebaste) sheds light on the cultural character of the city and on the composition of its population.

#### e. Conclusions

The Land of Israel with its different areas and variety of population was already been exposed to classical culture in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Beginning with the 4<sup>th</sup> century it came under the direct rule of the Hellenistic kingdoms, first by the Ptolemies and then by the Seleucids. The degree of exposure for the inhabitants of the coastal cities was certainly much greater than those living in the rural hinterland. In addition, the depth to which classical culture had penetrated was dependent to some extent on the readiness of the various populations to accept it. For the Syrio-Phoenician inhabitants

<sup>56</sup> See above, notes 2-3, 23-25.

<sup>57</sup> See above, note 2.

<sup>58</sup> On the stadium in Samaria (Sebaste), see: Crowfoot, Kenyon, Sukenik 1942, p. 41-50. I was told by word of mouth by the excavation team at Beth-Shean, that a Greek inscription was recently found on site in which the municipal gymnasium is mentioned, but the building itself has not yet been located. This inscription has not yet been published.

who then comprised the majority of the population living in the coastal cities, the encounter with the Greek language, religion and literature was more natural and easy than for the Jews or the Nabataeans. The process of Hellenization was complex and not a uniform one for the different kinds of population living in the Land of Israel.

In the history of the country, there were periods in which the ruling authorities encouraged and promoted those strata of society that were interested in adopting the municipal style of life as conducted in a Greek *polis*. Seleucid rule or the overt policy of King Herod the Great show how complex and complicated these processes actually were. Roman provincial rule encouraged the process of urbanization and thus exposed ever larger numbers of inhabitants, both Jews and non-Jews, to the framework characteristic of a Greek *polis*, and for many of them during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE, this became their preferred style of life. In these cities, with their institutions and facilities, the pattern of life that gradually took shape hardly differed from that of the inhabitants in other provincial cities throughout the Roman Empire.

Here it should be mentioned that what was most typical of the Roman Empire at the height of its powers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE was its cultural uniformity. The long period of peace and stability brought about unprecedented economic prosperity as well as trade and cultural ties, open borders and the total freedom of movement. The Empire was ruled at that time by wise and efficient imperial and provincial administration. This period of prosperity created a cultural uniformity both the Latin west and the Greek east, where the citizens of the cities enjoyed a framework of life that seemed natural to any civilized person wherever he might be.

The various entertainment facilities were an inseparable part of the various public institutions, and there was hardly a city in the Land of Israel in that period which did not have at least one such facility. In many cities, besides the theatre as the most common of such entertainment facilities, there were also amphitheatres and/or circuses. The proliferation of such facilities at the end of the Second Temple period, and mainly during the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods (3<sup>rd</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> c. CE), ensured that theatrical events of all kinds, as well as chariot races, though to a lesser extent *munera* and *venationes*, were acceptable forms of entertainment that were favored by the urban population in the Land of Israel. The censures against these amusements, both in Talmudic literature and in the writings of the Church Fathers, are evidence of how deep an influence they had on the urban population. Mime, pantomime and water-theatre, as well as of chariot races, were highly popular among Jews and non-Jews alike. These forms of simple, spontaneous folk entertainment faithfully reflected the real cultural needs of most of the urban population in the both the western and eastern provinces of the Roman Empire.

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## Obiekty sportowe i rozrywkowe na terenie Izraela i w pozostałych częściach świata grecko-rzymskiego

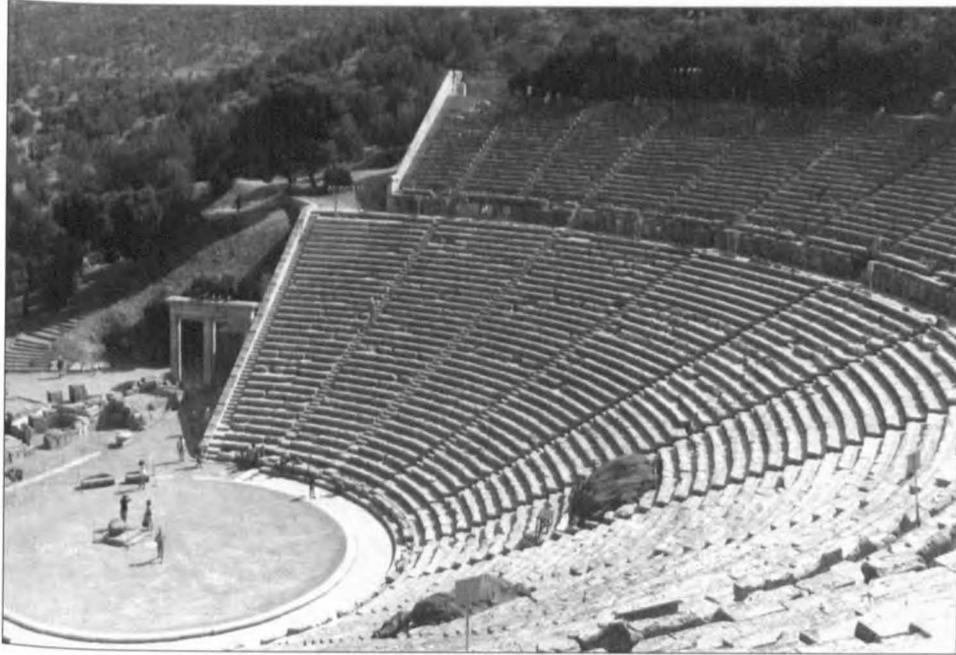
### Streszczenie

Wpływy kultury klasycznej obserwujemy na terytorium starożytnego Izraela już w VI w. p.n.e., lecz dopiero w okresie hellenistycznym, kiedy to obszary te stanowiły część monarchii Ptolemeusza, a potem Seleukidów, wpływy te są lepiej dostrzegalne. Są one wyraźne w strefie nadbrzeżnej, mniej silne – na terenach śródlądowych. Proces helenizacji najwyraźniej uzależniony był od czynników socjoekonomicznych. W pewnych okresach władza wspierała miejski styl życia, lecz – jak wskazują dane z okresu Seleukidów i panowania Heroda Wielkiego – działania te nie były łatwe.

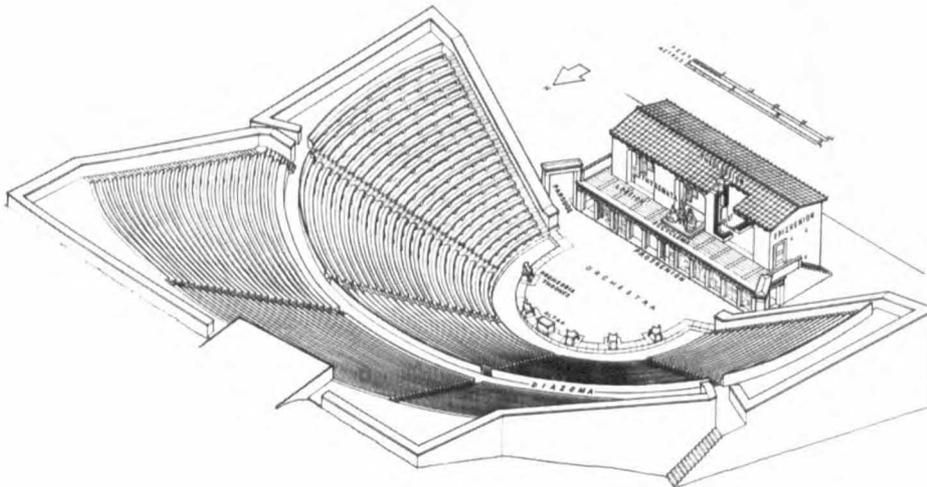
Natomiast w okresie II i III w. n.e. życie miejskie jest sposobem życia preferowanym przez większość obywateli. Pax Romana wprowadził prosperitę ekonomiczną, otwarte granice umożliwiły przepływ ludności. Imperium było rządzone przez kompetentną administrację, która wprowadzała zasadę jedności kulturowej. Różne formy ludyczne były ważną częścią programu na polu kultury, a w Izraelu nie było chyba miasta, które nie posiadałoby chociaż jednego obiektu służącego temu celowi. W wielu miastach oprócz teatru znajdował się amfiteatr i cyrk.

Fundacja takich budowli w okresie Drugiej Świątyni, a głównie Miszny i Talmudu (III–V w. n.e.), sprawiła, że wydarzenia teatralne, wyścigi rydwanów, a także w mniejszym stopniu munera i venationes stały się powszechnie dostępne. Wystąpienia przeciwko takim rozrywkom w literaturze talmudycznej i w pismach Ojców Kościoła wskazują na to, że mieszkańcy miast byli głęboko zaangażowani w tego typu rozrywkę. Widowiska mimiczne, szczególnie pantonima, spektakle na wodzie, jak i wyścigi rydwanów były wysoce popularne wśród pogan, chrześcijan i żydów.

Te formy prostej, spontanicznej rozrywki wiernie odzwierciedlają potrzeby kulturalne głównie miejskiej ludności omawianych okresów.



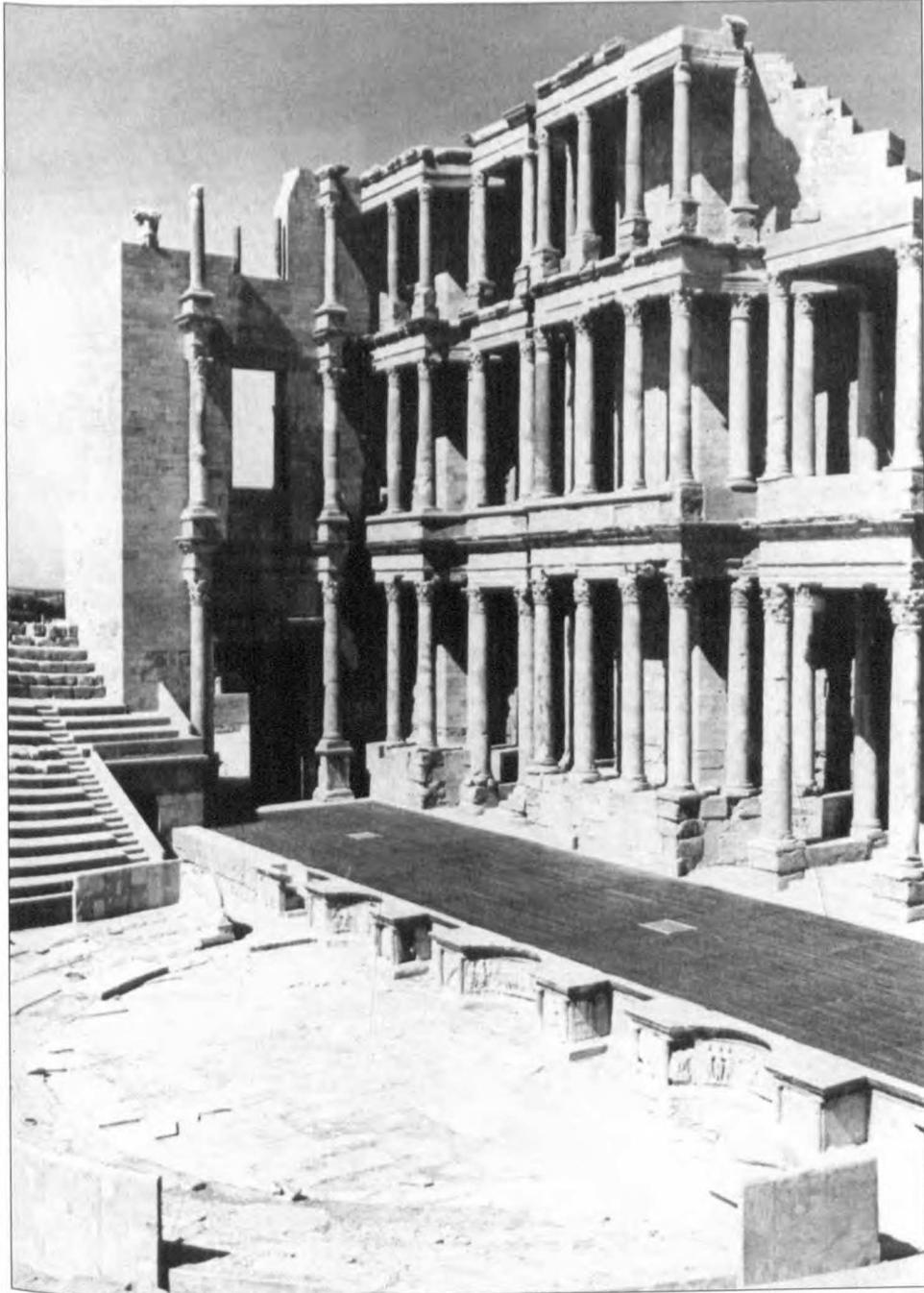
1. Epidauros, theatre, late 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. General view of the *koilon* and the *orchestra*  
(From: author's collection)



2. Priene, theatre, suggested reconstruction, 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE  
(From: Leacroft 1984, p. 24, fig. 47)



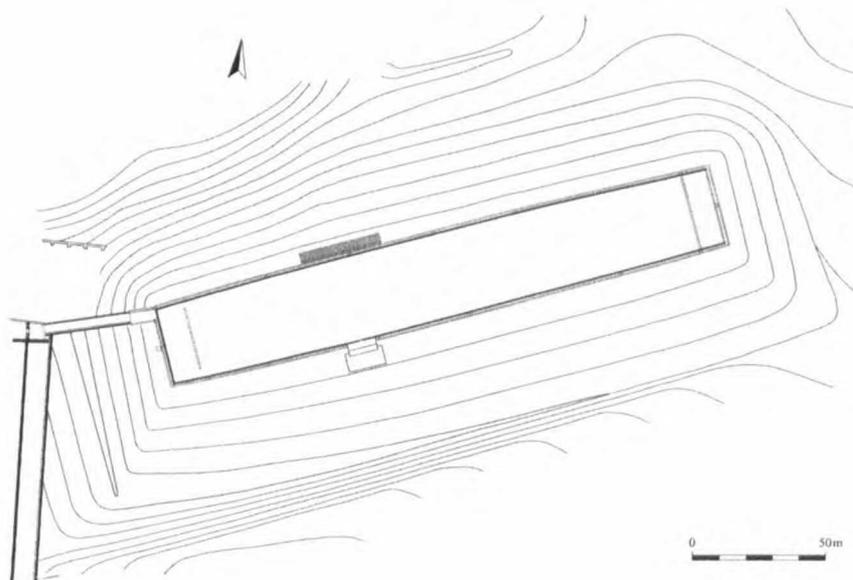
3. Rome, theatre of Marcellus, late 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE  
(From: Nash 1968, vol. II, p. 419, fig. 211)



4. Sabratha, theatre, last quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE. Note the partially reconstructed *scaenae frons*  
(From: Ward-Perkins 1981, p. 380, fig. 249)



5. Pompeii, amphitheatre, first quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE. Note the massive pilasters and vaults supporting the *cavea*  
(From: author's collection)



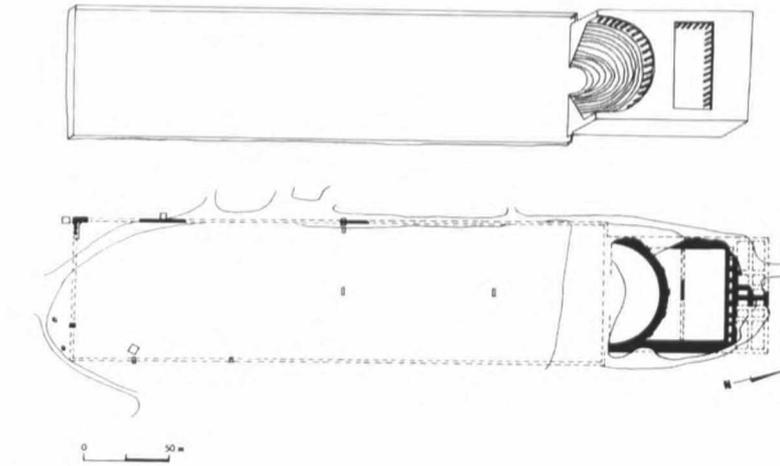
6. Olympia, stadium, 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE  
(From: author's collection)



7. Caesarea, theatre, late 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE. General view before the restoration  
(From: author's collection)



8. Perge [Pamphylia], Stadium late 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE  
(From: author's collection)



9. Jericho, theatre combined with hippodrome, late 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE. Plan and suggested reconstruction  
 (From: Netzer 1980, p. 105)



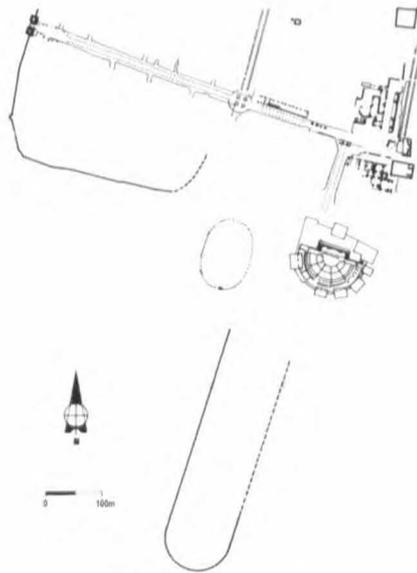
10. Sepphoris, theatre, 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE, following the excavation and partial restoration, aerial view  
 [Phot. Mr. M. Eisenberg]  
 (From: author's collection)



11. Petra, theatre, early 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE. Note the partially reconstructed *scaena* building.  
[Phot. Dr. H. Dodge]  
(From: author's collection)



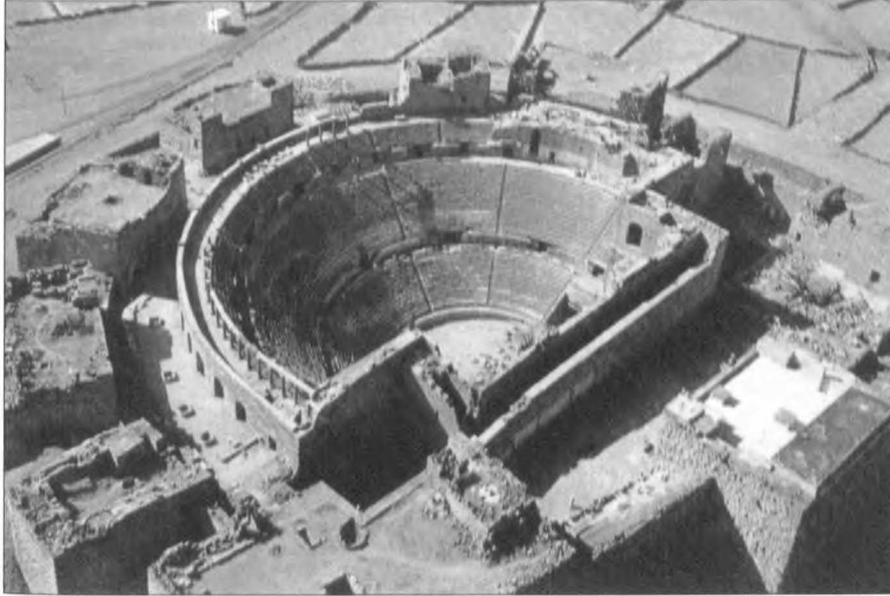
12. Gerasa [Jerash], south theatre, late 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE. View from the east towards the partially reconstructed *proscenium*, *pulpitum* and the *scaenae frons*. [Phot. W. Jerke]  
(From: author's collection)



13. Southern part of Bosra [Bostra], schematic plan. Note of location of the theatre the amphitheatre and the circus  
 (From: author's collection)



14. Bosra [Bostra], theatre, early 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE. General view from the *cavea* towards the partially restored *scaenae frons*. [Phot. W. Jerke]  
 (From: author's collection)



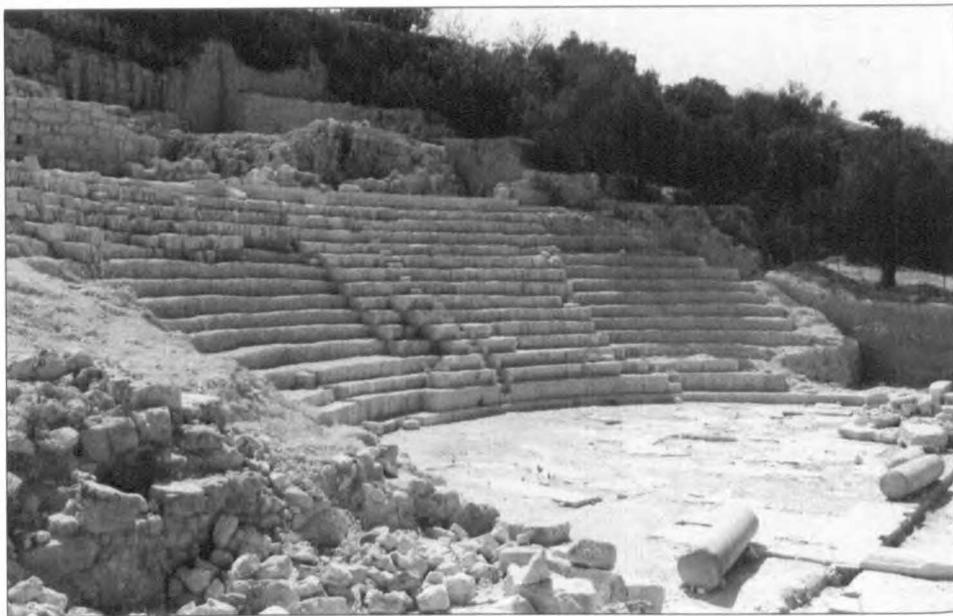
15. Bosra [Bostra], theatre, early 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE, aerial photograph  
(From: author's collection)



16. Philadelphia [Amman], the large theatre, second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE. General view after the restoration. [Phot. Dr. M. Luz]  
(From: author's collection)



17. Philadelphia [Amman], the small theatre [*odeum?*], second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE. Note the recently reconstructed *cavea* and one of the *aditus maximi*. [Phot. Mr. H. Panet]  
(From: author's collection)



18. Samaria [Sebaste], theatre, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE. General view from the *orchestra* towards the *cavea*  
(From: author's collection)



19. Beth-Shean [Scythopolis], theatre, late 2<sup>nd</sup> – early 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, aerial photograph  
(From: author's collection)



20. Antipatris [Aphek], theatre, late 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE. General view towards the partially preserved *scaena*,  
the *orchestra* and the *cavea*. [Phot. Mr. M. Weinberg]  
(From: Institute of Archaeology, Tel-Aviv University; with kind permission of Prof. M. Kochavi)