CHAPTER SEVEN

HEROD’S HIPPODROME/STADIUM AT CAESAREA
AND THE GAMES CONDUCTED THEREIN

An arena for chariot races and other games uncovered in the archaeological excavations conducted at Caesarea in the years 1982–88 (Fig. 94)\(^1\) is identified with the “amphitheater” mentioned by Josephus Flavius:

Herod also built a theater of stone in the city, and on the south side of the harbor, farther back, an amphitheater large enough to hold a great crowd of people and conveniently situated for a view of the sea.\(^2\)

And indeed, the location on the seashore, and the architecture of the structure exposed, befit this description. The structure, U-shaped, was built on a north–south axis, parallel to the coastline (Fig. 95). The local kurkar stone served as the exclusive building material. The arena was about 300 m long and 50.5 m wide. The seats (cavea), holding 12 rows with a seating capacity for c. 10,000 spectators,\(^3\) enclosed it on the east, south, and west. They were arranged in 18 segments (12 of which are still preserved), and were set on top of a podium wall 1.1 m high above the arena level (Fig. 96). The southern gallery (sphendone), semicircular in shape, had an arched entranceway, 3 m wide, in its center. The starting gates (carceres) enclosed the arena on the north.

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\(^1\) The structure was excavated by two expeditions. One, on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, directed by Y. Porath, had exposed most of the cavea and the arena. The second, on behalf of the University of Haifa directed by the present author, had exposed the starting gates and the adjacent arena. For preliminary reports, see Porath 1994; 1995a; 1996b—an update to the 1995 excavations; Patrich 2001b.

\(^2\) Ant. 15.9, 6, 341; War 1.21, 8, 415 mentions only the amphitheater. In the period under discussion, the term amphitheater was used indifferently to designate a stadium, or a hippodrome, rather than an oval Roman amphitheatrum, known in the first century BCE as spectaculum. See Etienne 1966. Such is also the case in the writing of Josephus Flavius, when he is speaking about the hippodrome/amphitheater at Jerusalem, and Jericho. See Jeremias 1931; Humphrey 1996.

\(^3\) Porath 1996b: 96, estimated it to be 7,000–8,000 spectators (assuming that the western side did not have seats). A careful analysis by the conservation works architect, Daniel Abu Hatzeira (interim publication), presents the following estimations for the maximum number of spectators, assuming that there were 12 rows of seats in the west as well: 10,250 (according to a 55 cm seat width), 9,410 (according to a 60 cm seat width), and 8,684 (according to a 65 cm seat width).
The dimensions, and the existence of starting gates, indicate that the structure served as a hippodrome. But locally it was known as the “great stadium,” or just the “stadium” of Caesarea. Hence the name of the structure in the title of this chapter.

A trench separated the hippodrome from the higher kurkar ridge and its continuation northward. Access to the top of the gallery was thus prevented from the east, and in a later period (in the days of Nero) the trench was filled with earth, on top of which a double colonnaded portico was built.

A passageway—vomitorium—located about 115 m from the southern gate, ran across the entire width of the eastern gallery, split farther away to two inclined vaults, leading after two successive 90° turns to a platform for the dignitaries (pulvinar). This loggia was usually located opposite the finish line of the chariot races that was marked in lime across the right side of the arena. The face of the podium wall was coated with plaster and frescoes that were renewed from time to time.

At the southern end of the arena, about 25 m north of the southern entrance, remains were preserved of the turning post—the meta prima (see below). Several architectural phases were discerned here. Two parallel subterranean walls, standing 1.7 m apart, ran from near the meta prima northward, forming an underground drainage channel. In a later stage, when the arena was shortened and the hippodrome/stadium was converted to an amphitheater, underground amphitheatrical tunnels were installed (Fig. 39). The southernmost transversal tunnel was connected by a narrower underground passage with a rock-cut

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4 War 2.9, 3, 172; in Ant. 18.3, 1, 57, simply a stadium is mentioned. The context suggests that the event took place near the Roman praetorium on the site of Herod’s palace, namely, in the Herodian entertainment structure under discussion.

5 Eusebius, History of The martyrs in Palestine, ed. Cureton 1861: 21–23 (Syr.), 19–21 (Eng.); 51 (Syr.), 47 (Eng.); de Mart. Pal. VI.3–7, ed. Bardy 1967: 139–40 (Gr.). Eusebius, a resident of Caesarea, speaks about events to which he and other citizens were eye witnesses, therefore his testimony as for the identification of the structure as a stadium by the locals is of utmost significance. Christian martyrs were thrown into the stadium as prey for the wild beast. The reality of hunt scenes (venationes), conducted in a stadium, is also familiar in the rabbinic sources. See: M Bava Qamma 4: 4; cf. M ‘Avodah Zarah 1, 7.

6 One of the layers, in the section preserved south of the dignitaries’ platform, presents a scene of wild animals running, as well as vegetation. Porath attributes this layer of frescos to a late phase, when the hippodrome was shortened (see below). In another layer that was preserved in the curved section between the eastern and southern sides, geometric patterns were preserved. Additional sections of plaster were also found opposite it, on the western side. Porath 2000b.