

# Building Power

By Kenneth G. Holum

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In 44 C.E., the Jewish king Agrippa, king of Judea, stood in the theater of Caesarea, clothed in a garment woven of silver threads that glittered in the first rays of sunlight. To those who looked upon him, he seemed awesome and terrible. The spectators were the leading men of the kingdom. Everyone in positions of authority had gathered in Caesarea to celebrate athletic contests founded by Agrippa's grandfather, Herod the Great, who had built the city two generations earlier. The king's flatterers chanted with one voice, "Be merciful to us," adding, "for if before we feared you as a man, now and henceforth we confess that you are more than human." Agrippa did not reject this adulation, which dangerously approached idolatry, nor did he admonish his flatterers for their explicit impiety. Hence God punished him with a sharp pain in his belly, from which he died in agony five days later.



That, at any rate, is the account of the contemporary Jewish historian Josephus, who may have witnessed the event in the Caesarea theater and later recounted the story in his *Jewish Antiquities* (19:343–51).

In the New Testament, the author of the Acts of the Apostles recounts the same event, but in his retelling King Agrippa, wearing his royal garment, appears seated upon a tribunal (an elevated platform) while he addresses the crowd, and it is not just the "flatterers," or the elite, but the entire people who respond with blasphemous words: "It is a god speaking, not a man" (*Acts 12:23*). That the same event is told in two independent and near-contemporary texts increases our confidence that the event actually occurred.

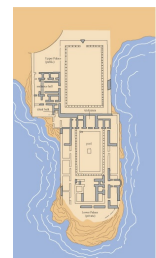


Visiting the archaeological excavations today at Caesarea, a glorious seaside site 30 miles north of modern Tel Aviv, one would do well to recall the episode with Agrippa, for it explains so much of what is now visible there.

Ancient Caesarea was not like modern cities, and in some ways it was different even from other cities of its day. Today we tend to think of cities foremost as residential centers or as beehives of commerce and industry, characterized by shopping malls, high-rise office buildings and factories for light or heavy manufacture. We love to enter the ruined houses of the ancients, as at Pompeii, and learn more about their domestic arrangements and the details of their private lives. Or we enjoy visiting the ancient marketplace at Pompeii or Corinth, in Greece, or the impressive colonnaded streets with street-front shops at Jarash, in Jordan, or Beth-Shean, in Israel. But other than mountains of ancient pottery, few details of domestic life have come to light at Caesarea, and what does survive comes from a relatively late period. Commercial facilities surely existed at Caesarea, but no archaeologist has had the good fortune to uncover them. Nor have the excavators of Caesarea located ruins of the spacious and elegant public baths (though we know they existed), typical of all ancient Mediterranean cities, roughly the equivalent of the public parks and swimming pools that enhance public spaces in our cities today.

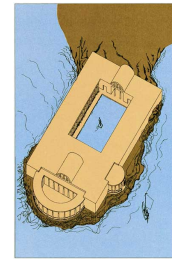
Instead, what the earth has yielded at Caesarea—apart from city walls, streets and sewers, the commonplace and therefore less interesting infrastructure of ancient cities—has been primarily what we consider mass entertainment facilities (described in detail by Yosef Porath in the preceding article). One goes to Caesarea to see the theater, amphitheater and circus, roughly the equivalent of our movie houses, concert halls and sports arenas. Yet, as the texts about King Agrippa's death make clear, there was far more to these facilities than entertainment. They were above all instruments of royal representation.

Agrippa's grandfather Herod had built the theater so he could sponsor dramas and musical performances in them, what the ancients called "spectacles" (in Greek, *theoriai*), and thus win the applause and affection of the crowd. Herod and his descendants would appear often in the theater wearing their stately regalia to be hymned for their royal qualities by squads of rehearsed cheerleaders. In the absence of modern television, radio and daily newspapers, which offer the opportunity for mass public addresses and paid political announcements, it was the theaters, other entertainment facilities and the city itself that were the most effective instruments of displaying political power. In them thousands of royal subjects assembled not only to be entertained but also to be harangued, inspired and persuaded. Indeed, kings built cities in large part because they provided a ready-made crowd. The audience came primarily from the city, because their homes were within easy walking distance, but the important festivals attracted the elite and even ordinary folk from surrounding villages, towns and, during major festivals, even from the entire kingdom. Hence Agrippa's appearance in Caesarea's theater was typical of



cities—a quintessential urban moment!

Archaeologists at Caesarea long considered Herod's theater, like the theaters in many Roman cities, to be a solitary building constructed on the periphery near the city wall to simplify crowd control. The major exception was Ehud Netzer, of Hebrew University, a specialist in the architectural projects of Herod the Great, who suspected that another royal building once existed nearby. He observed that a rocky promontory jutting westward into the sea displayed cuttings in the rock around a large rectangular pool and conjectured that this might have been Herod's palace at Caesarea, a palace frequently mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles and by Josephus. From the excavation of other palaces of Herod—at Jericho, Herodion and Masada—Netzer was well acquainted with Herod's fondness for swimming pools and his love of building palaces in difficult settings with spectacular vistas. Netzer's hunch would prove correct. His excavations in 1976, and further work in 1992, exposed five rectangular rooms east of the pool; the central room, paved with a geometric mosaic similar to the floor of a dining room in Herod's palace at Jericho, likely served as the dining room for the Caesarea palace. The room opened towards the west through a pair of columns onto the pool, an appropriately spectacular view for entertaining Herod's most distinguished guests.<sup>3</sup> The structure soon came to be called the Promontory Palace.



Despite this structure's sumptuous setting, some archaeologists, especially those working on Caesarea's harbor, resisted the palace theory and insisted that the pool was just a fish market! Further excavation settled the issue. In 1993 and 1994 Kathryn Gleason and Barbara Burrell, on behalf of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, extended Netzer's excavation onto an upper terrace above and to the east of the Promontory Palace. This fruitful excavation, shortly to be fully published, brought to light column bases and partial columns of a spacious peristyle courtyard (a courtyard surrounded by columns) measuring 140 by 215 feet and with a range of buildings flanking it on the north. (Any buildings that might have been on the south were long since destroyed by the encroaching sea.) Among the buildings on the north of the peristyle were a Jewish ritual bath, or *mikveh*, like those in other Herodian palaces, and a large audience hall, similar to one in Herod's palace at Jericho, that had a roof supported by columns. Constructed around 15–10 B.C.E., the upper terrace at Caesarea accommodated official functions that were more open and public than the formal dinners in the lower palace. These functions included occasions when Herod or his successors sat in judgment over criminals. The most famous such "criminal" was the Apostle Paul, who was judged by a Roman governor on this very spot two generations later.



In 1992 the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), under the energetic leadership of Amir Drori, a retired general, organized large-scale, year-round excavations at Caesarea and other archaeological sites throughout the country. Funding to support the work came mostly from local agencies, but the Labor Ministry provided willing excavators from among thousands of immigrants newly arrived from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. The new excavations, designated for convenience simply as "The Project," were to be followed by a large-scale conservation and restoration program organized by the IAA.



Representing the IAA at Caesarea was Yosef Porath, now of Hebrew University, who excavated along the coast north of the theater and the Promontory Palace. Just landward from the shore, low sand dunes were thought to conceal massive ancient ruins, perhaps a warehouse for storing trade goods passing in and out of the harbor, but before long the excavators uncovered a genuine archaeological surprise, the well-preserved stone seats of another mass-entertainment facility. Despite the use year-round of a corps of hand excavators, as well as power loaders and heavy trucks, the entire structure was not exposed until 1998. It proved to be a stone-built hippodrome dating to the time of Herod and designed for horse racing—in Latin, a *circus*. (Josephus called it the "amphitheater" or "Great Stadium." In his day, apparently, the proper terminology had not yet been settled.)



Porath describes the hippodrome/circus in detail in his article, but another archaeological team, led by Joseph Patrich, then of the University of Haifa, discovered a critical component of the hippodrome—the *carceres*, or starting gates. These were twelve "stalls" in a curved row, each designed to accommodate a chariot and a team of horses that would be let go simultaneously with the others by means of a gate that opened mechanically. The gates were parallel to each other and, following the Greek style of horse racing, the teams would race straight ahead to a turning post planted in the sand near the far end; then they would race around this turning post and back around another at the nearer end, until the prescribed number of laps (normally seven) had been reached.



According to Josephus, Herod first built the hippodrome/circus and the nearby theater to host contests that he organized

in 10/9 B.C.E., during the 192nd Olympiad.<sup>1</sup> Josephus also relates that these contests were to be repeated, like the ancient and modern Olympiads, every fourth year.<sup>2</sup> The contests included musical competitions in the theater (singers, choirs, mimes), but also athletic competitions (for example, foot races, javelin, boxing), trained hunters fighting wild beasts, gladiators fighting each other and chariot races—all in the hippodrome/circus. A multitude came to Caesarea, Josephus confirms, and Herod entertained them lavishly with lodging and feasting. It was at one of the recurring celebrations of this festival, in 44 C.E.,<sup>3</sup> that Herod's grandson Agrippa appeared fatefully in Caesarea's theater.

Thus in its southern part, just inside the fortification walls, Herod's Caesarea consisted mainly of three large monumental buildings designed for the king's own purposes—the Promontory Palace, the theater and hippodrome/circus. During festivals, he would appear as royal patron of musical events, dramas and athletic competitions, as the unique source of benefits for the people of his kingdom, and as a trusted friend of the great Caesar Augustus himself, for whom he had named Caesarea. In the palace he would entertain the ranking men of his kingdom, elevating them to places of authority in society by displaying their intimacy with the king, and he would exercise his power to punish criminals and issue royal decrees from his seat of judgment in the audience hall.

A glance at the map confirms this impression of Herod's original design for Caesarea (see plan). The builders integrated the palace and the hippodrome/circus into a single royal complex, abutting one building to the other at right angles. Further, as Kathryn Gleason has noted, a line drawn through the axis of the theater bisects the lower terrace of the Promontory Palace, so the theater, too, likely formed part of the original integrated concept. These signs of deliberate arrangement indicate a master plan in the minds of King Herod and his royal architects, a plan to build a showplace city for the display of royal power before as many subjects as possible.

Another glance at the map reveals a second integrated royal complex to the north, near the city's ancient center, consisting of Caesarea's celebrated ancient harbor and, to the east of it, on an artificial<sup>4</sup> hill, King Herod's great temple to Roma and Augustus. Today this second complex is more difficult to appreciate. Most of Herod's harbor has sunk beneath the sea, while the temple has been virtually obliterated by stone quarrying and by later religious monuments.

The task of recovering Herod's ancient harbor began a quarter century ago, when underwater archaeologists from the University of Haifa received a contract to explore the ancient site's geology and archaeology in preparation for the construction of the huge coal-fired electricity plant that now dominates Caesarea's southern skyline. Since then, exploration of the harbor has been connected above all with the name of Avner Raban, long a senior member of the University of Haifa's Recanati Institute for Maritime Studies, who died earlier this year.<sup>5</sup>

The results of two decades of underwater exploration correspond neatly with two texts of Josephus, *Jewish War* (1.408-413) and *Jewish Antiquities* (15.331-338), in which the historian recounts how Herod founded Caesarea, devoting most of his attention to the harbor. According to Josephus, Herod named the harbor Sebastos, Greek for Augustus, so city and harbor had the same namesake, Herod's patron Caesar Augustus. An entirely manmade harbor, Sebastos consisted of two massive breakwaters, or moles, that extended 500 yards into the Mediterranean from the shore and contained outer and inner basins of protected water where ships could tie up along the inner sides of the moles to load or unload cargo. The remarkable techniques employed by Herod's engineers to build the harbor, one of the greatest achievements of the ancient world, are described in the [sidebar](#).



According to Josephus, warehouses roofed with barrel vaults were built on the breakwaters, as well as promenades that gave access to ships tied up in the harbor basin. Herod's engineers also built an outer breakwater (*prokumation*) to diminish the immense force of<sup>6</sup> the sea surge before it struck the moles. At the entrance to the harbor from the sea, and perhaps designed to be navigational aids, stood two towers with their foundations on the sea floor, probably bearing statues of Augustus and other members of the imperial family.

Herod no doubt built this great harbor to satisfy a practical need, for there was no other sheltered anchorage along the route from Alexandria, in Egypt, to the ports of Syria and Asia Minor. Herod also expected to bring in a nice profit from harbor tolls and customs that would help finance his building schemes. Yet there was another element at work as well, as noted by Josephus. The historian appears to have recorded the exact language of Nicholas of Damascus, a contemporary of Herod and a member of the royal court—the minister of propaganda, in effect. Josephus (and Nicholas) wrote that Herod built the harbor in order to display “the innate greatness of his character” and because, in thrusting the massive breakwaters far out into the sea, the king displayed the ambition to “conquer nature herself.” We find a hint of megalomania here, as in the conduct of King Agrippa two generations later, but such megalomania, displayed in enormous building projects, was one of the qualities that contemporaries expected in a king.



Just to the east of the inner harbor—now landlocked and incongruously planted with zeusia grass—rises the artificial hill

that those of us excavating at Caesarea call the Temple Platform, in a conscious attempt to link it with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. As with the Temple Mount, Herod's architects at Caesarea expanded a natural bedrock ridge, possibly the site of an earlier temple, by erecting massive retaining walls and filling the voids between bedrock and retaining walls with tons of sand, upon which they then laid the stone pavements of an expansive esplanade. Like the Temple Mount, Caesarea's Temple Platform would have been enclosed at least on the north, east and south by columned porticoes marking the sacred precinct (the *temenos*), and in the center, upon a high podium, would have risen the temple that Herod dedicated to the goddess Roma, embodiment of imperial Rome, and to the god-king Augustus. According to Josephus colossal statues of the two deities occupied the temple's enclosed hall (the *cella*),<sup>4</sup> the statue of Roma equal to the Hera at Argos, Greece, and that of Augustus reminiscent of the Zeus at Olympia, two of the most celebrated cult images of the ancient world.

Since 1989, under my direction and sponsored by the University of Maryland, the Combined Caesarea Expedition has excavated the Temple Platform, employing an international team of volunteer excavators. We discovered that after the temple was pulled down in about 400 C.E., most of the stone in the temple was cannibalized for use in other buildings, but we did uncover the temple's deep foundations and were able to reconstruct the building's general plan and dimensions. We also found that enough carved architectural fragments survived the quarrying to enable us to reconstruct the temple's colonnades and architraves. Measuring 95 by 150 feet and towering perhaps 100 feet from the column bases to the peak of its pediments, the temple at Caesarea ranked among the most grandiose in the Late Hellenistic world. Herod's temple was made of local sandstone, known as kurkar, and was coated with a hard, white stucco to protect the stone from dissolving in the winter rains. Large fragments of this stucco have traces of color, indicating that some of the architectural elements were painted in gaudy reds and blues.

A glance at the map of Caesarea shows that the temple to Roma and Augustus and the harbor were two parts of a tightly integrated complex designed and built for royal purposes. The temple's pronaos, or front porch, was on the west, so it opened toward the harbor. The temple's east-west axis was also the harbor's axis, and it formed an acute angle with the east-west direction of the city's streets. From contemporary parallels we deduce that Herod's architects designed the Temple Platform with projecting wings on the north and south that embraced the inner harbor and welded temple and harbor into a single unit. We have discovered, moreover, a massive concrete foundation at the center of the harbor's eastern end that was the foundation of a monumental staircase that led up to the temple from the harbor quays.

On festival days, bulls were slaughtered and their parts burned on the altar of the Caesarea temple in celebration of Augustus and Roma, and choirs sang hymns of praise for Herod and his imperial patron. On such occasions Caesarea's urban crowd, gathered on the harbor quays, swelled also to include the ship captains, crews, dockhands and other personnel of the port, emphasizing the maritime link between Herod's kingdom and Rome. These festivals, too, were quintessential urban moments.

Herod died in 4 B.C.E. His son Archelaus proved incompetent, so in 6 C.E. the Roman emperors took direct control of the Jewish kingdom—except for the period 41–44 C.E., when Herod's grandson, Agrippa, a favorite of Emperor Claudius, was permitted to rule part of it. To govern the new province of Judea, the emperors had Roman officers called prefects stationed at Caesarea, among them Pontius Pilate, who in about 30 C.E. condemned Jesus of Nazareth to crucifixion. Another famous governor of Judaea was M. Porcius Festus, who imprisoned St. Paul at Caesarea in about 60 C.E. and then, when Paul appealed to Caesar, sent him by ship to Rome and his death.

The Roman governors, including Pilate and Festus, adopted Herod's Promontory Palace as their governor's palace, or praetorium; the New Testament calls it "Herod's praetorium" (*Acts 23:35*). One can visit this praetorium today and stand in the same audience hall where St. Paul once stood before Festus. Later, after the First Jewish Revolt against Rome (66–70 C.E.), Emperor Vespasian refounded Caesarea as a Roman colony; the city had a Roman constitution and all its citizens were citizens of Rome. The governors who occupied the Promontory Palace, or "Herod's praetorium," were promoted in rank to legate and received first one and then two legions to help keep the restive province quiet. After the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome (led by Bar-Kokhba in 132–135 C.E.), Emperor Hadrian renamed the province Palestine (to efface the name of the Jews), but Caesarea remained the seat of the governors. The rabbis considered the city hostile, dubbing it "daughter of Edom," Israel's ancient enemy, a code name for "daughter of Rome," and they declared that if Caesarea was rising, Jerusalem was in decline, and that if Caesarea was declining, Jerusalem would rise.

By the mid-second century C.E., Caesarea, founded by a Jewish king, had become the most Roman of all cities in the land. Many of the public inscriptions discovered at the site were in Latin. We know from these inscriptions that from the time of Vespasian and Hadrian Roman army veterans received estates in Caesarea's hinterland upon their retirements and became members of the colony's aristocracy. Yet Caesarea still remained essentially the showplace that its founder had conceived. The Roman authorities inherited not only the Promontory Palace but kept the associated theater and converted Herod's hippodrome into a Roman-style circus. The Romans, like Herod and his descendants, prized the public buildings at Caesarea not only for their entertainment purposes, but also as facilities for organizing power—in this case, to display loyalty to, and identify with, Rome.

Footnotes:



- a. See Barbara Burrell, Kathryn Gleason and Ehud Netzer, “Uncovering Herod’s Seaside Palace.” **BAR**, May/June 1993.
- b. See “Avner Raban: An Appreciation.” **BAR**, July/August 2004.

Endnotes:

1. *Jewish War* 1.415.
2. *Jewish Antiquities* 16.136-41.
3. *Jewish War* 1.414, *Jewish Antiquities* 15.340.

SIDEBAR

## Caesarea’s Mighty Harbor

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## Caesarea’s Mighty Harbor



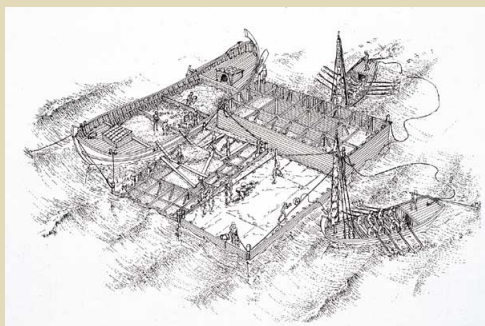
Herod named the Caesarea harbor *Sebastos*, Greek for Augustus—an extraordinary monument to the emperor and to Herod’s patron. But the harbor also a monument to Roman engineering prowess.

The harbor was formed by two massive breakwaters or moles that extended nearly 1,600 feet into the sea from the shore and formed two basins in which ships could tie up and load or unload cargo. The longer, southern breakwater curved around to approach the shorter, northern one, which was straight (both are visible in the photo). Both breakwaters were wide enough (at 150 and 200 feet, respectively) to accommodate warehouses built on top and to give

access to ships inside the harbor. The 60-foot gap between the two breakwaters served as the harbor entrance. Three large concrete islands supporting monumental sculpture—perhaps for use as navigational aids—straddled the entrance. Next to the shore of the harbor was an inner basin (at left in the photo) formed by another barrier that provided additional dock space.



Underwater excavators, such as those shown, have spent decades studying Caesarea’s harbor. Herod’s men built the breakwaters by laying a series of immense concrete blocks on the sea bottom, forming a chain of artificial islands that were then joined by more conventional masonry. This was made possible by the Roman invention of hydraulic concrete, a mixture of mortar and large particles of *pozzolana* (which is volcanic sand imported from Italy) pumice and lime. Being three times denser than water, the mixture could harden beneath the ocean surface.

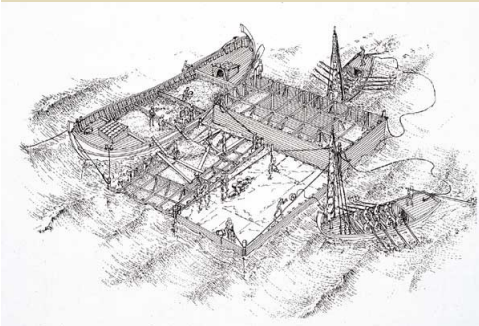


The first step in the process of building the breakwaters was to construct 50-foot-long rectangular wooden boxes that were floated into place and then sunk, creating forms for the hydraulic concrete. Once the forms were in place on the sea bottom, concrete was poured into them through a large wooden tube with flexible leather joints. The tube was held close to the bottom of the form that the mouth of the tube would remain beneath the rising surface of the concrete, which kept the mixture from dissipating in the water before it could fill the form and harden. Several pouring tubes were probably used at once, held by people standing either on the upper level of the already-built portion of the breakwater or perhaps in barges anchored nearby (as shown in the artist’s rendition).

The concrete islands were then connected by parallel masonry walls; the open space between was left for the sea to fill with sand over the course of a few years. Once filled, the walls were topped and paved to hold the sand in position. Atop the breakwaters stood large barrel-vaulted warehouses and promenades that gave access to ships tied in the harbor.



Garo Nalbandian



Chris Brandon

Building Power

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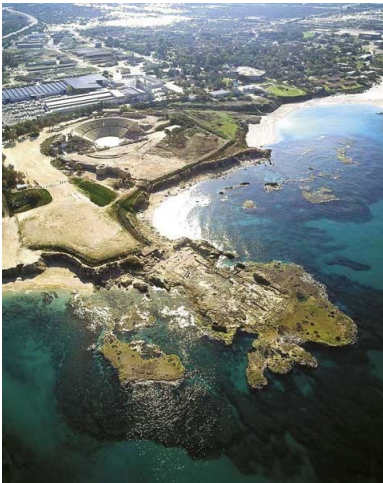
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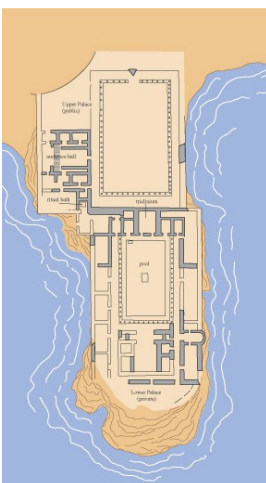
Robert Teringo/National Geographic Society

*The glory—and the power—of ancient Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea, is conveyed in the artist's drawing, which feature the manmade harbor (the largest in the ancient world), the temple to Roma and Augustus (at left) and a lighthouse (at right). Herod's taste for drama and theater are on display even in his choice of an address, a promontory leading out into the Mediterranean.*



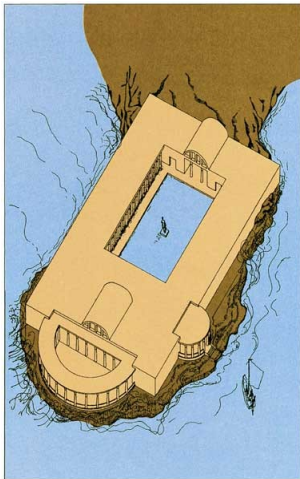
Duby Tal/Albatross

*The photo shows the promontory on which his palace was built and which has now been excavated.*



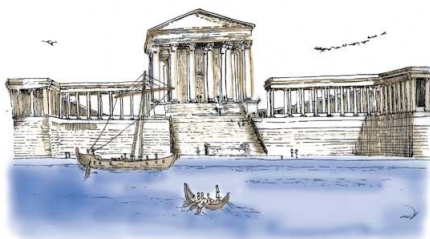
J.H. Williams and Kathryn Gleason

*The palace once boasted sumptuous dining halls and pools, not to mention stunning views. According to author Kenneth G. Holm, the architecture at Caesarea reflects the city's primary purpose: to glorify Herod and Rome.*



Anna lamim

*The sprawling ruins pictured above contain the remains of Caesarea's temple complex. The temple, dedicated by Herod to Roma, the personification of Rome, and to the Emperor Augustus, was one of the most grandiose in the late Hellenistic world. On festival days bulls were slaughtered and burned on the altar, and choirs sang hymns in praise of Herod and his imperial patron. The temple was an integral part of the harbor complex, creating a single unit that linked both structures to the glory of Rome. The temple faced the harbor, and monumental steps led up from the water's edge to the temple.*



Anna lamim



*The sprawling ruins pictured above contain the remains of Caesarea's temple complex.*



Aaron Levin

*The photo shows excavators working at the temple's foundation.*



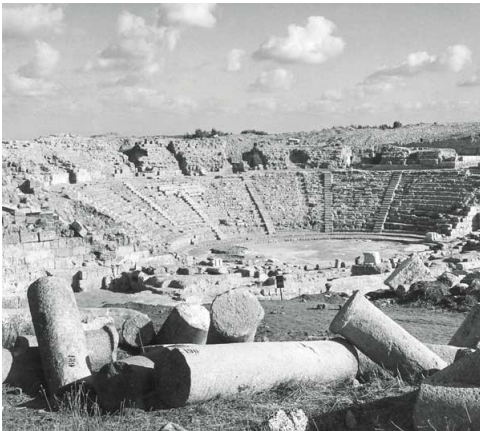
Lisa Helfert

*TEMPLE PILLARS. Excavators found fragments of massive columns that once supported the temple roof 100 feet above their base. The column cores were made of local sandstone that was coated with a hard, white stucco. The photo shows a slab of the recovered stucco. Traces of color on the excavated architectural elements indicate that they were originally painted in bright reds and blues.*



Anna Iamim and Edna Amos

*The highlighted sections of the drawing indicate pieces recovered by the excavators, including the slab of stucco (near the center of the column).*



David Harris

*This photo was taken in 1961, before the restoration.*



David Harris

*The bright lights of Caesarea. The ancient city's theater once again plays host to artistic performances, thanks to restoration efforts undertaken in recent decades. An audience enjoys a musical performance in the restored theater.*

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