

## THE ROMAN AMPHITHEATER OF BET GUVRIN: A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 1992, 1993, AND 1994 SEASONS

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The Roman amphitheater of Bet Guvrin was first identified in 1981 during a survey of the city. Several exploratory soundings were undertaken in 1982–1986 (Kloner 1988); large-scale excavation and earth removal was begun under the auspices of the Israel Antiquities Authority in 1990–1991, with additional soundings in the summer of 1992 (Kloner and Assaf 1995). The present report concerns the excavations carried out in the amphitheater in November 1992–December 1993, and May to December 1994.<sup>1</sup>

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The amphitheater was built on flat land on the northwest outskirts of the city of Bet Guvrin

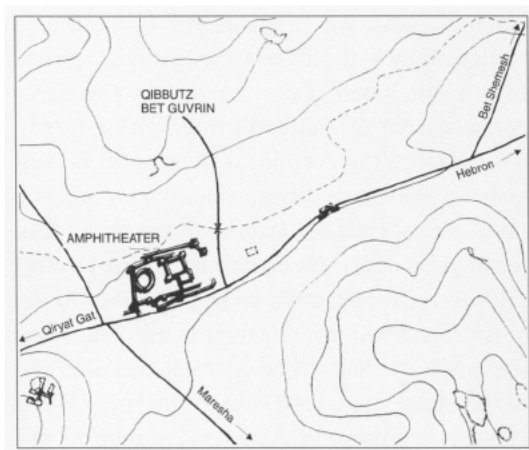


Fig. 1. Map of Bet Guvrin.



Fig. 2. General view of the site at the end of the 1994 season, looking east.

(renamed Eleutheropolis in 200 CE), in a previously unoccupied area of natural reddish-brown alluvial soil washed down from the Hebron hills. The elliptical structure has maximum dimensions of  $71 \times 56$  m; its total area is 3000 sq m (Figs. 1, 2; Plans 1, 2).

The building was constructed with large rectangular limestone ashlars, locally quarried from the hard *nari* crust which forms on the local Eocene chalk. The amphitheater consists of a walled arena with subterranean galleries, girded by a rather small cavea resting on a series of connected barrel vaults which form a large service corridor. The corridor is interrupted at both ends of the major (north–south) axis by two large access galleries leading to the arena. Ten rectangular doorways lead from the service corridor to the arena, three arched openings to the outside, and two low openings connect the service corridor with the tribunes located at each end of the minor (east–west) axis of the arena. Four vaulted vomitoria admitted the public to the cavea.

The excavation results suggest that the structure was erected during the second half of the

second century CE and served its original function for about 200 years, until the late fourth century CE, presumably falling into disuse in the wake of the severe earthquake of May 363 CE. Architectural alterations ascribed to the Byzantine period indicate that the structure was adapted for use as a public building. Dismantling of the cavea seats probably started in the Byzantine period and was completed by the Early Islamic period (seventh–eighth centuries CE). In medieval to Ottoman times the building served mainly as a stable, as well as for industrial purposes.

#### THE FACADE (OUTER WALL) OF THE AMPHITHEATER

The facade was built in *opus quadratum* of well-dressed large limestone ashlars (about  $1 \times 0.6 \times 0.6$  m). The outer wall of the amphitheater (1.8–2 m thick) was well preserved: seven to nine courses, reaching a height of about 5.4 m on the eastern side, can be seen today. Most of the lower courses are joined together with small stone chips—possibly debris from the stone-cut-

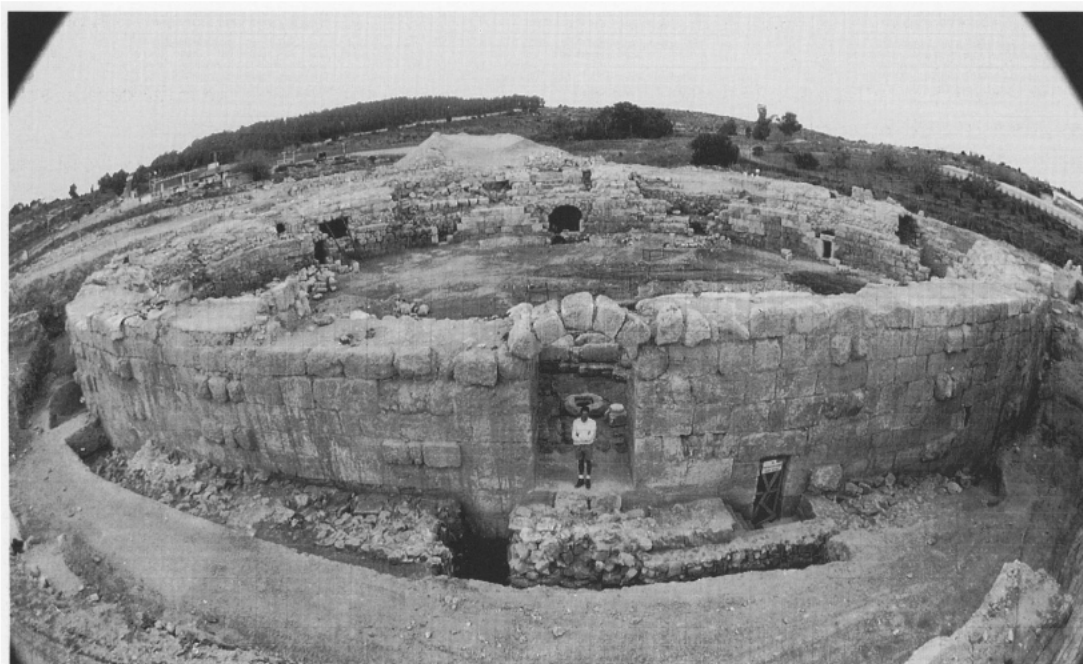


Fig. 3. General view of the amphitheater, looking west, at the end of the 1993 season. View of the entrance to the eastern tribune. Opposite it is the western tribune with the chapel (*sacellum*) located below it.



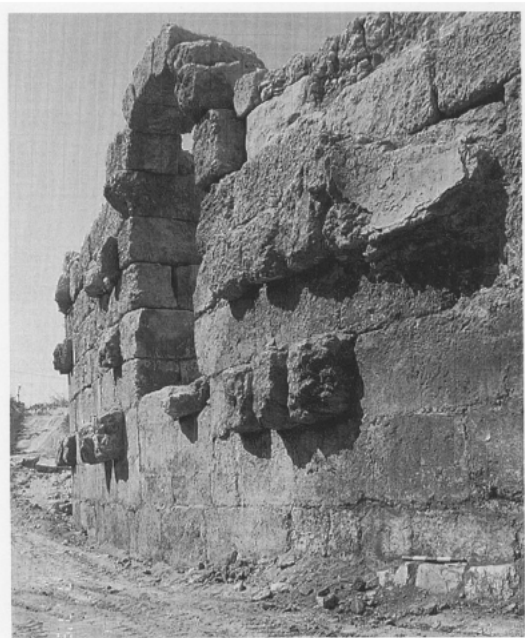


Fig. 4. The eastern outer wall (W611) showing protruding stones and the entrance to the eastern vomitorium (615). Looking south.

ting carried out during construction. Beige-colored mortar covered the stone chips, as part of the original construction. The appearance of the outer wall was particularly austere, little attenuated by the various openings and large gates of the amphitheater (Figs. 3, 4).

The outer wall of the amphitheater presents the unusual phenomenon of large roughly-cut limestone blocks protruding from the facade. These are arranged in groups of two or three, at intervals of about 4 m, and are irregularly and asymmetrically spaced. While it might be suggested that these features should be interpreted as evidence for planned building extensions, it is more probable that the protrusions were intended to break the monotony of the facade. They should be regarded as a stylistic device, and not as evidence that the outer wall was left in an unfinished state (Fig. 4).

During the 1993 season three small trial probes were dug against the southwestern outer wall, exposing the foundations of the amphitheater. These were built of large roughly-cut limestone blocks ( $1 \times 0.6 \times 0.65$  m), joined with small and medium-sized fieldstones and grayish

mortar. The foundations rested on a layer of grayish mortar mixed with a great quantity of charcoal, laid on the reddish-brown soil.

Two limited excavations against the southern wall of the amphitheater exposed a floor bed laid on the natural soil at the supposed original occupation level outside the amphitheater (L461 and L462). There is no firm evidence regarding the nature of the surface outside the amphitheater.

#### THE ARENA AND ARENA WALL

Surrounded by a 2.6 m high stone wall, the arena was the venue for gladiatorial combats (*munera*), hunts (*venationes*), and other forms of entertainment. In addition, it most probably served as a military training ground and drill and parade area. During the course of excavation, the arena was cleared completely to its original occupation level, though nothing of the original arena floor was found. Intrusive wells, whose upper portions were dated to the Ottoman period and lower portions to the medieval or Early Islamic period (Kloner 1993), were dismantled (Fig. 5). It is assumed that the floor was made of packed earth, laid on the reddish-brown soil which was exposed in some places about 0.3 m below the supposed floor level. The floor overlay a subterranean complex situated along the central axes of the arena (Fig. 6 and below).

The arena's maximum length was 56 m, and its maximal width was 41 m. The arena wall (2.3 m thick, 3.9 m high) was built of six courses of



Fig. 5. Clearing the eastern half of the arena in 1991. The Ottoman well is at left (foreground).

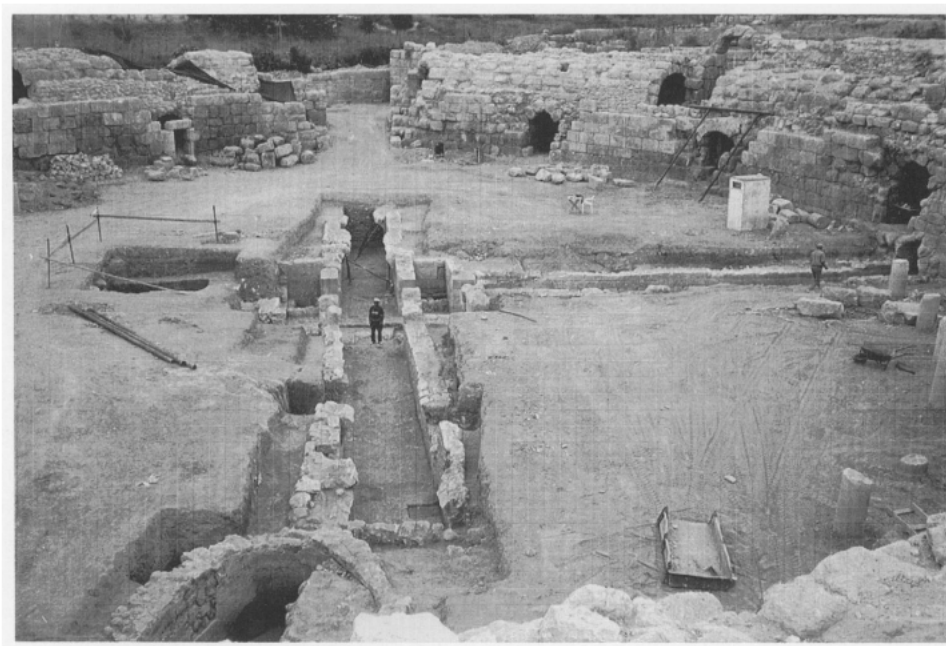


Fig. 6: General view of the interior of the amphitheater, showing the subterranean structures at the end of the 1994 season. The medieval cistern (534) is on the lower left. Looking north.

large rectangular limestone blocks (average size  $1.1 \times 0.6 \times 0.6$  m). It was covered with painted plaster, small patches of which have survived. These show reddish-brown colors and beige stripes, but no identifiable motif. Below the painted plaster, a layer of red paint was applied directly on the masonry. The wall is crowned by a nicely cut cornice. There is no trace of the channel (*euripus*) usually installed at the base of the arena wall to collect rainwater from the cavea and arena (Grenier 1958:579–589). However, a depression at the base of the arena wall may have directed rainwater to a built drain (552), 0.8–0.9 m wide, running northwest beneath the service corridor and out towards Nahal Guvrin.

The foundations of the arena wall were exposed in a small trial probe excavated near the eastern arena wall, south of the subterranean gallery. Built of large rough limestone blocks joined with grayish-black mortar (which was also poured on the foundation stones), the wall rests on natural soil, about 1.3 m below the arena level. As observed in several other soundings—between the amphitheater and the Roman wall

(421) to its south, in the service corridor, and in the subterranean structures—the trial probe did not reveal a clear foundation trench. Apparently, the builders refilled whatever trench there was with the same reddish-brown alluvial soil from which it was excavated.

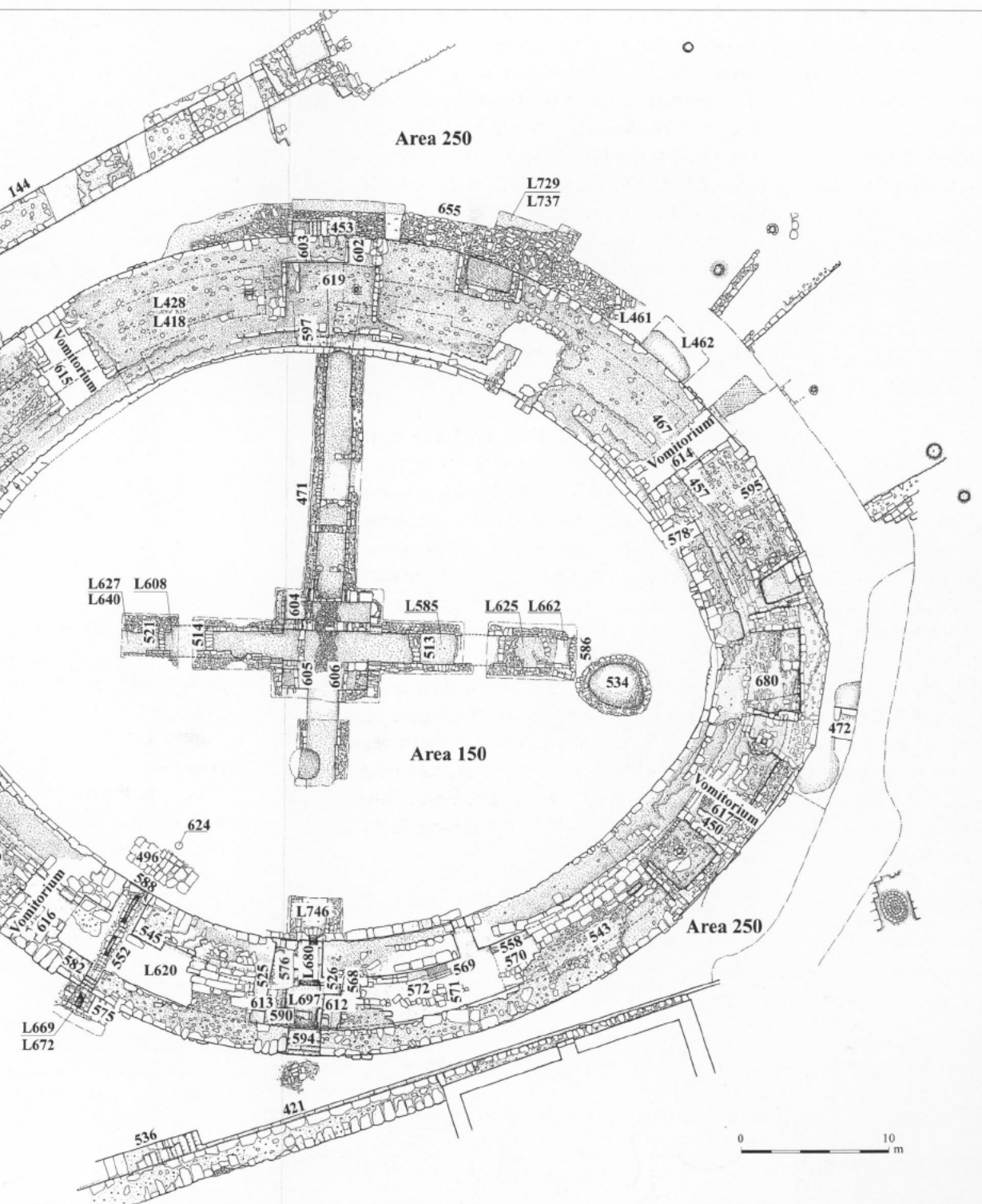
At the northwest corner of the arena, 3.3 m from the arena wall, a limestone column 1.7 m in height and 0.48 m in diameter (624) was found, and near it a pavement of square and rectangular limestone flags (496; Fig. 7). Similar columns and a pavement were discovered in the south-



Fig. 7. Byzantine paving stones (496) and pillar (624) in the arena, looking northwest. Arena wall with blocked doorway (588) in background.



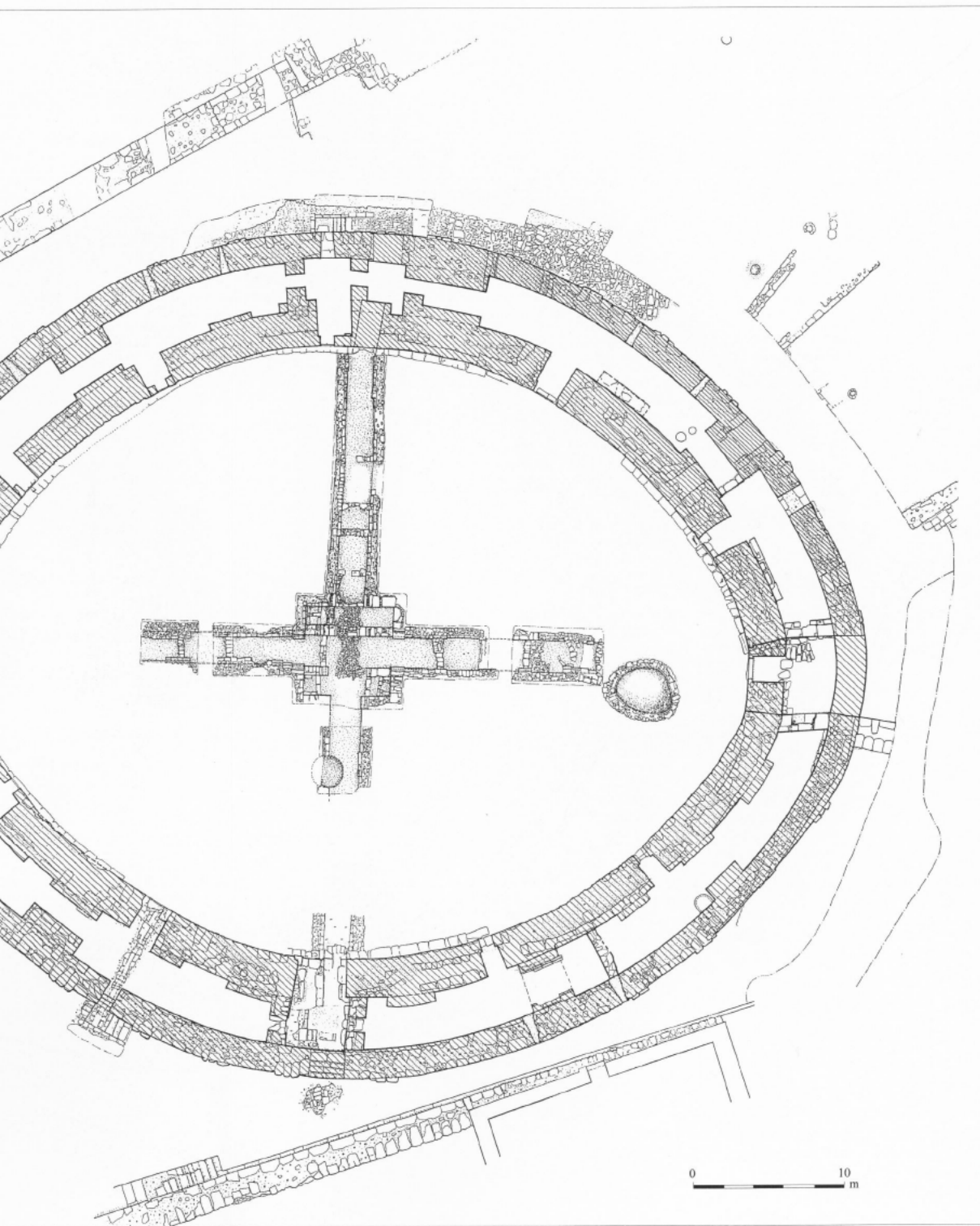




Plan 1. General plan of the amphitheater at the end of the 1994 season.







Plan 2. General Plan, showing the cavea substructure.



eastern part of the arena in 1991. The columns and pavement are dated by ceramic material to the late Byzantine period, and indicate that the amphitheater was adapted to serve a new public function, possibly as a marketplace. The arena would have been circled by a roofed gallery with the service corridor housing shops or store-rooms.

The depiction of Eleutheropolis in the sixth century Madaba map mosaic includes a domed and colonnaded circular building (Avi-Yonah 1954). It is not inconceivable that this building could have been intended to represent the amphitheater, transformed into a public building with a roofed portico during the Byzantine period.

#### *The Access Galleries (Entrance Gates) to the Arena*

Two large entrance gates at the extremities of the major axis led to the arena (Fig. 8). The entrances, 7.5 m long and 4.5–4.8 m wide, inclined downward to the arena and it may be assumed that originally both were paved. Doorways on either side of the entrance provided access to the service corridor beneath the cavea. The walls separating the entrances from the corridor were almost completely dismantled after the amphitheater went out of use. Although there is no evidence for vaulting over the access galleries, we may assume that as in most amphitheaters, the cavea was not interrupted.

Each gate had a double wooden door opening inward. It was through these gates that the inaugural procession (*pompa*) entered the arena. The southern entrance (680) was the main entrance of the arena, the *porta triumphalis* facing the city. The northern entrance (600) may have been the *porta libitinesis*, from where the bodies of slain gladiators were removed. This entrance was flanked by two rooms, about  $2.5 \times 3$  m in size. The function of such rooms is a matter of conjecture (Golvin 1988:325): One could have been used as a *spoliarium*, a chamber used to receive the bodies of injured or slain gladiators.

#### *The Subterranean Galleries*

Discovered at the end of the 1993 season, the cruciform subterranean structure beneath the arena was almost completely excavated in 1994 (Fig. 14). It consists of two long vaulted galleries situated on the major and minor axes of the amphitheater, which intersect in the center of the arena. Thirty-one meters of the gallery situated on the major axis were uncovered (total length 42 m). The underground gallery on the minor axis was 39 m long, of which 32 m were excavated as of 1994 (Fig. 9). The upper portions of the walls and vaults of the subterranean galleries were built of chalk blocks ( $0.45 \times 0.20 \times 0.20$  m), while the lower courses were of limestone blocks ( $0.5 \times 0.3 \times 0.3$  m) joined with grayish mortar.

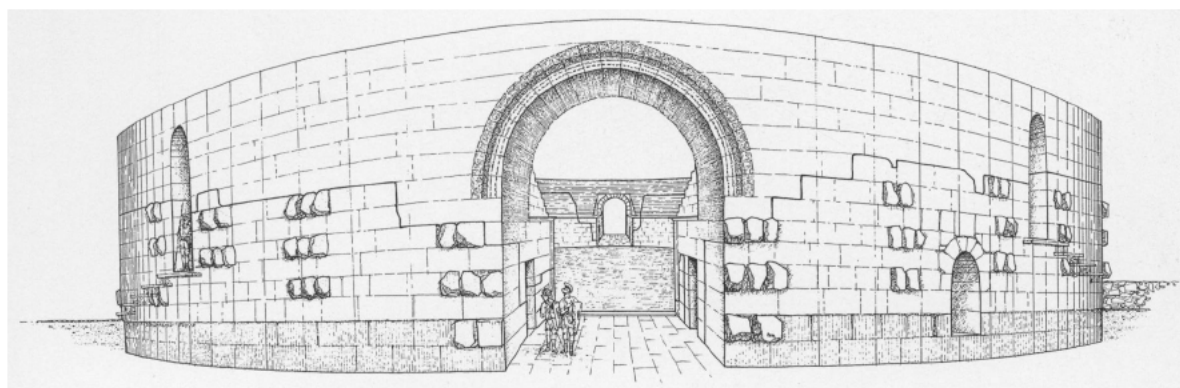


Fig. 8. Reconstruction of the southern gate of the arena. Bold line indicates present level of preservation.

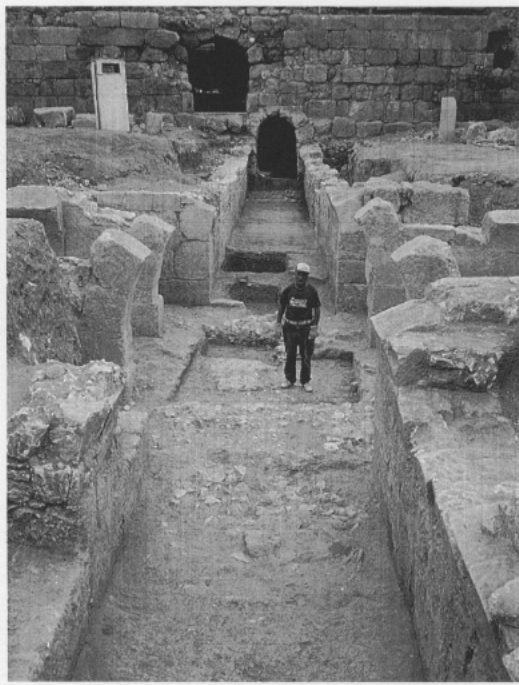


Fig. 9. The east–west gallery at the end of the 1994 season. The worker stands at the juncture of the four tunnels. Looking east.

The subterranean vaults are interrupted by eight shafts or openings, each  $2.90 \times 2.05$  m and about 2.70 m deep. These would have been covered by wooden trap-doors (Fig. 10). Large rectangular limestone blocks ( $1.05 \times 0.60 \times 0.38$  m) were found, which were originally laid atop the subterranean walls. Square notches ( $0.24 \times 0.15 \times 0.18$  m) cut into their upper surface appear to have supported the wooden beams, and may also have anchored the machinery (*pegmata*) of the arena (Fig. 11, 12). The stones were found in the southern and eastern galleries in secondary use, in Byzantine separating walls. Access to the arena would have been by means of wooden ramps (Golvin 1988:331).

The four subterranean galleries meet in a central  $5.9 \times 5.9$  m square. This was subdivided by walls and arches built along the major axis, forming small rooms in the corners of the square (Fig. 13). The arches and walls supported the wooden floor of the arena above.

The subterranean structures were connected on the minor axis to the *sacellum* beneath the western tribune (see below). The eastern gallery on the minor axis came to a dead end and no connection with the room below the eastern trib-

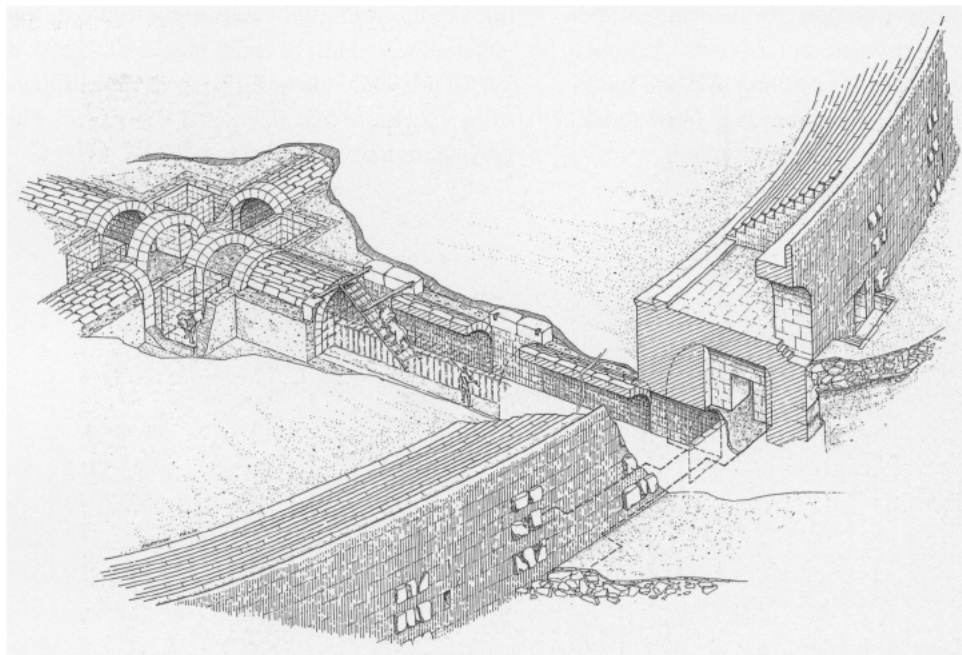


Fig. 10. Artist's reconstruction of the eastern subterranean gallery of the arena. Note vertical shafts and notched stones supporting trap-doors.



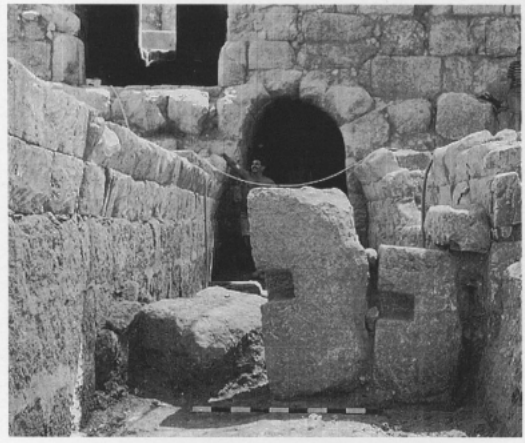


Fig. 11. Two notched stones from the subterranean gallery shafts, in secondary use as part of a partition wall (471) within the eastern gallery. Looking east.

une was established. The north–south gallery is terminated on the south by a stone wall (W586).

The nature of the floor of the subterranean structures was not clearly established. No paving was found in the excavations, although in a few places (L625, L662, and L746) a few remains of a packed chalk floor were exposed, laid on the natural reddish-brown soil. Also, no sewage or drainage system was discovered in the underground system.



Fig. 12. One of the capstones of the shaft walls, showing notches which held wooden beams.

After the amphitheater ceased to fulfil its original function, during the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods, numerous partition walls between the two walls of the underground galleries were built on the original occupation level. These walls were constructed with chalk blocks taken from the dismantled upper courses of the walls and vault of the subterranean structures of the arena (W513, W514, and W521). Other walls were erected using the large notched limestone blocks that had anchored the machinery and wooden flooring of the arena (Fig. 11). The function of the small installations exposed in three of the four rooms of the central area



Fig. 13. Central area of the subterranean structures of the arena at the end of the 1994 season. Looking north.

(northeast, northwest, and southwest rooms) are difficult to understand. Likewise, the function of the subterranean structures during the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods is still unclear.

More than 650 bronze coins were found in a layer of grayish-brown alluvial soil in the central area of the underground system. All were in very poor condition (some parts of the structures may have been flooded), and were dated to the later part of the fourth century CE. Most of the coins were found over a possible floor bedding consisting of chalky irregular stones, also dated by coins to the fourth century CE. It is suggested that the large number of coins in the fill represent the last period of use of the amphitheater, towards the end of the fourth century CE, following the severe earthquake of 363 CE.

The difference between the masonry of the subterranean structures and that of the remainder of the amphitheater suggests that it represents the final stage of original construction. The great quantity of Byzantine pottery from the sixth to seventh centuries CE which was found in the fills of the northern and southern galleries is evidence that the subterranean structures were no longer in use by the late Byzantine or Early Islamic period (L585, L640, L627, and L608).

#### THE CAVEA

The small cavea, 7.5 m wide, is one of the peculiarities of the amphitheater of Bet Guvrin/ Eleutheropolis. Its size is a result of an alteration in the original plan of the amphitheater, described below. The cavea was completely cleared in 1992–1993; only meager traces of the seating were revealed and remains of later structures built directly on its supporting vault. The former consisted of thick remains of concrete (cement mixed with limestone), into which the stairs and seats were sunk. The latter, intrusive, features in the southwestern part of the cavea indicate use as a service or dwelling area, after the stripping of the seats was completed.

Four vaulted vomitoria (about 2 m in width and 3.35 m in height) admitted the public to the cavea. Three of the vomitoria have been fully

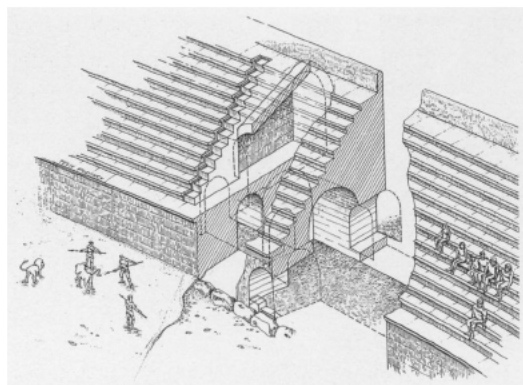


Fig. 14. Isometric reconstruction of the cavea and southern vomitorium.

excavated; a fourth vomitorium (616) was identified in the northern facade, but could not be cleared because the outer wall of the building is still unexcavated. Some time after their construction, two of the vomitoria (617 on the west and 615 on the east) were modified; their entrances were narrowed to 2.1 m and raised from street level to a height of 1.3 m and 2 m respectively. The vomitorium in the southern facade (614) does not show any sign of modification, but its entrance was also about 2.4 m above street level. Thus, the vomitoria could only have been reached by means of ramps, probably wooden. The public entered the cavea at its lowest level, in contrast to most amphitheaters and theaters, where the vomitoria ascend to a higher level, more convenient for the distribution of the spectators. Two tribunes (*pulvinaria* or boxes of honor), situated on either side of the minor axis, interrupted the cavea. These will be discussed further below.

The cavea most probably consisted of only one *maenianum*, or bank of seating, and no evidence of a podium was found behind the arena wall (Fig. 14). Because of the poor preservation of the cavea and the looting of the seating tiers it is difficult to provide an accurate estimate of the seating capacity. Seven or eight rows of seats appear to be represented in the eastern part of the cavea, between the vomitorium (615) and the eastern tribune, where the concrete is best preserved. Each seat was about 0.65 m long by 0.60 m wide by 0.45 m high. Assuming an origi-



nal total of 9–11 rows, the seating capacity of the cavea is estimated at 3500 persons. This figure is slightly lower than that of a previous calculation (Kloner 1988:22).

As the uppermost part of the facade was not preserved, there is no indication as to whether the cavea was furnished with a protective awning (*velarium*).

#### *The Tribunes*

The tribunes, or *pulvinaria*, were well situated, but of small size and capacity. The eastern tribune ( $6.1 \times 3.6$  m) was approached through an arched entrance (602; 2 m wide and 3.5 m high) set high in the outer wall of the amphitheater. It is assumed that a wooden construction originally led to the tribune, later replaced by a ramp (655) and staircase (453) built of chalk. The tribune was connected to a room in the service corridor below it and thence to the arena through an opening (603) and a staircase. There were many traces of later alterations in the tribune, such as the building of a wall facing the arena and the remains of a chalk pavement dated to the Early Islamic–Medieval periods.

The western tribune ( $6.5 \times 3.1$  m) was also approached by an elevated external entrance (about 2 m above the supposed street level), which must have been reached by means of a wooden ramp or staircase. A flight of steps (594), each step measuring  $2.3 \times 0.4 \times 0.4$  m, led from the outer facade to the tribune (Fig. 14). The vault supporting the western tribune was partly preserved, but presented a safety hazard and needed to be dismantled in order to excavate the chambers situated beneath it. This tribune also exhibited traces of later occupation, dated to the Ottoman period.

Although there was no direct connection between the western tribune and the *sacellum* beneath it, evidence from other amphitheaters suggests a functional relationship between them. The more important tribune would have been that located on the east, facing the city and in direct communication with other public buildings, such as the large bathhouse presently under excavation.

#### *The Sacellum*

The vaulted room ( $3.8 \times 3.2$  m) excavated beneath the western tribune during the 1994 season was identified as the *sacellum* (chapel) of the amphitheater (Figs. 14, 15). In the small chamber beneath this room two votive Roman altars were discovered, along with nearly one hundred complete oil lamps and fragments of hundreds more; these provided a clue to the function of the room above (Fig. 16). It is assumed that a wooden floor separated the altar room from the subterranean room; when this collapsed, after the amphitheater went out of use, the altars fell into the lamp-filled chamber below.

A rectangular niche ( $1.2 \times 0.68 \times 0.5$  m) probably intended for a statue (possibly a divinity) was built in the western wall of the room. The walls of the *sacellum* were covered by a layer of beige-colored plaster, attesting to its importance.

The cultic room had a doorway leading to the arena (576), and two openings (612 and 613) leading to the service corridor. Access to the tribune would have been indirect, by way of the north service corridor, doorway 582, and the external ramp. The subterranean galleries of the arena would have been reached by way of stairway 590 (made of large limestone ashlar), the *sacellum* sub-chamber, and a short tunnel (2.5 m long) passing beneath the arena wall. The communication between the western tribune, the *sacellum*, and the arena suggests that admission to the cultic room was intended for the gladiators and functionaries of the cult and contests (*munera*).<sup>2</sup>

A similar relationship also existed between the eastern tribune and a vaulted rectangular room beneath it, approached by way of an opening (603) and a staircase (453). A doorway (597) led from the chamber to the arena, and another (619) led to a small square room ( $2.6 \times 2.5$  m). There was no connection between this room and the subterranean structures; its function remains uncertain.

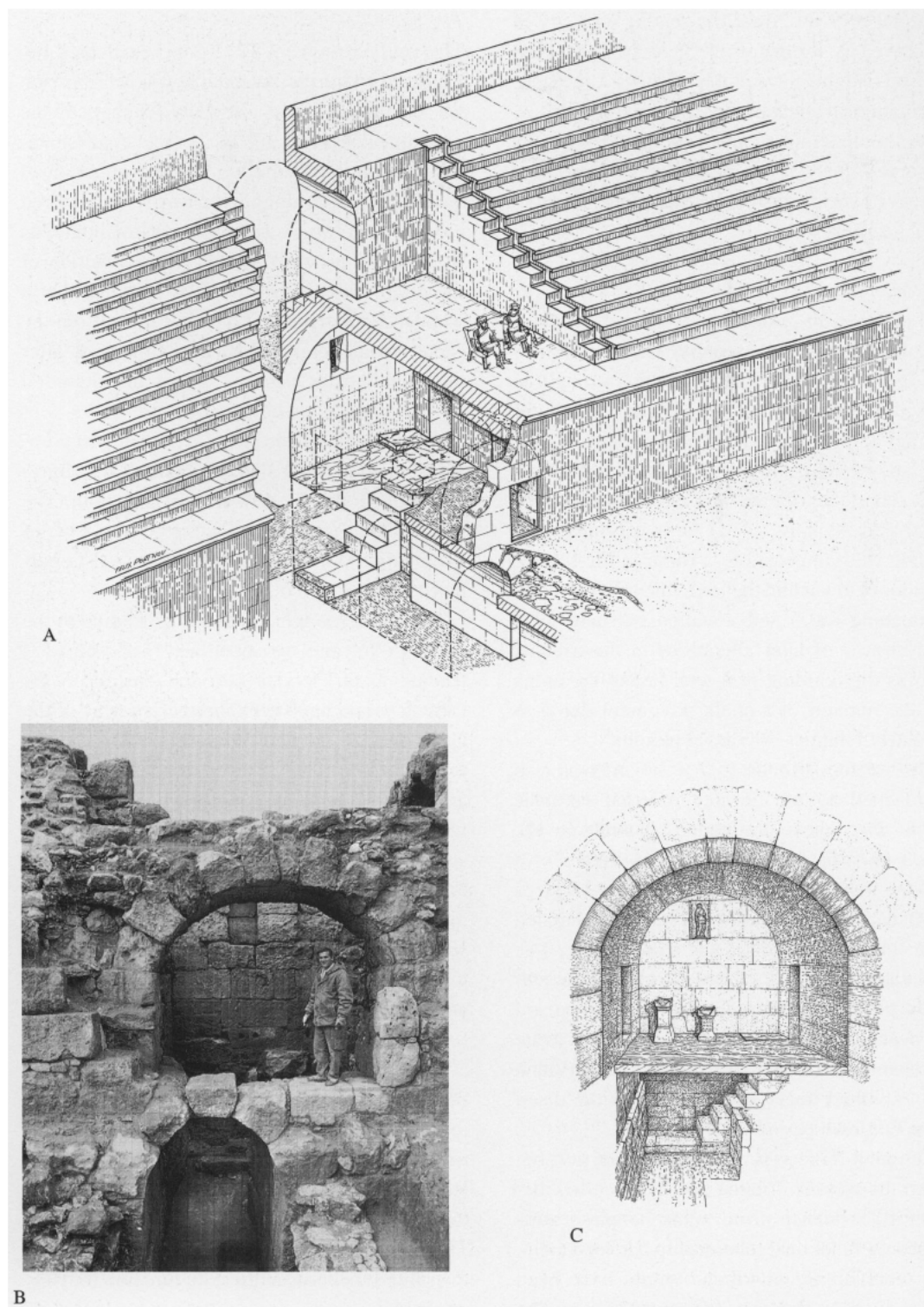


Fig. 15. (A) Isometric reconstruction of the western tribune, *sacellum* and sub-chamber.  
 (B) View of the *sacellum*, looking west, with the tunnel from the subterranean structures  
 of the arena leading to the room beneath it. Above the *sacellum*, the floor of the western tribune.  
 (C) Artist's reconstruction of the *sacellum*, with altars.





Fig. 16. The two altars *in situ*, in the *sacellum* sub-chamber, looking south.

#### THE VAULTED SERVICE CORRIDOR

The vaulted service corridor was completely excavated to the original occupation level (Figs. 17, 18), except for a small area in the northern part of the structure where a Mameluke kiln (509) was discovered. It was built in segments of 5.5 to 6 m in length, as can be discerned by the slight angles observable in the masonry of the curved walls and vault. This method of construction would have enabled several teams of builders to work at the same time.

The function of the corridor, symmetrically disposed on either side of the major axis, was to provide service areas for the arena. Access was through ten short tunnels situated in the arena wall, each 1.58 m high, 0.95 m wide and 2.3 m long. Three vaulted doorways (598, north, 580, east, and 595, south) led outside the structure, and two low rectangular openings (582, north-west, and 603, east) connected the service corridor with the tribunes. This area of the amphitheater was used by the gladiators before and during combat, and by the officers in charge of the monument.

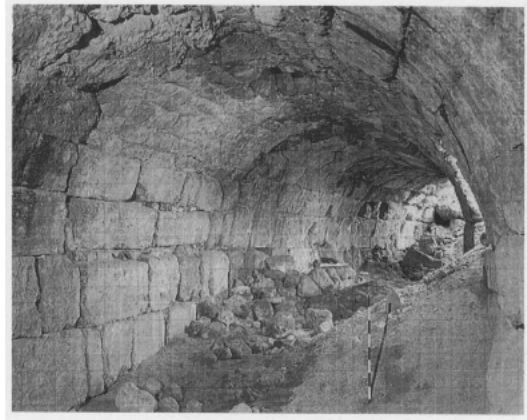


Fig. 17. The western service corridor before excavations, looking north.

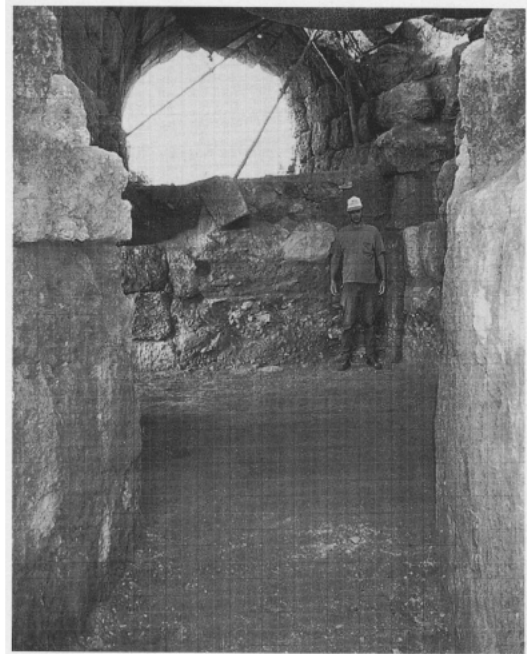


Fig 18. The northern service corridor at the end of the 1994 season, looking west.

Some internal divisions were observed in the service corridor: two sub-vaults leading to the two rooms situated on both sides of the northern gate leading to the arena; and another vault (now completely dismantled) in the western part of the service corridor. In addition, the corridor was interrupted by the chambers located beneath the two tribunes.

The service corridor, though not totally dark, was poorly lighted by six small rectangular win-

dows, each  $0.4 \times 0.3$  m, which pierced the outer wall of the amphitheater.

Two points deserve special attention: first, the unusually large dimensions of the vault (5 m high and 3–3.2 m wide); and second, the evidence for the construction of the service corridor in two stages: first the inner wall, and then the outer wall and vault. The main result of this two-phase construction was to reduce the dimensions of the cavea and the seating capacity. A horizontal seam observable at the base of the vault (see section; Fig. 19) suggests that, as originally planned, the service corridor was to be approximately 2.8 m high with radial walls and additional vaults supporting a much larger cavea. Nine piers (each approximately 2.9 m long and 2.15 m high) protruding from the service corridor inner wall were probably intended to support nine vomitoria planned during the first phase of construction. The absence of matching walls from the outer wall of the service corridor testifies again to the change in the initial plan, the reduction in the size of the cavea entailing a reduction in the number of vomitoria to only four.

#### *Occupation History of the Service Corridor*

The service corridor shows evidence of continuous use from the time of its construction in the Roman period, into the Byzantine period, when it seems to have been adapted for commercial use, and through Early Islamic, medieval, Ottoman, and modern times, when parts of it functioned as stables and storage areas.

*Roman and Early Byzantine Periods.*—A relatively small amount of pottery and very few coins can be attributed to the late second and early third centuries CE, the initial period of activity in the amphitheater. This is not unusual in public buildings of this kind. The earliest finds are the late second–early third century altars found in the cultic room (*sacellum*), and these certainly date to the period of use of the amphitheater, and possibly to its earliest use.

The late Roman period (third–fourth centuries CE) is represented by the concentration of com-

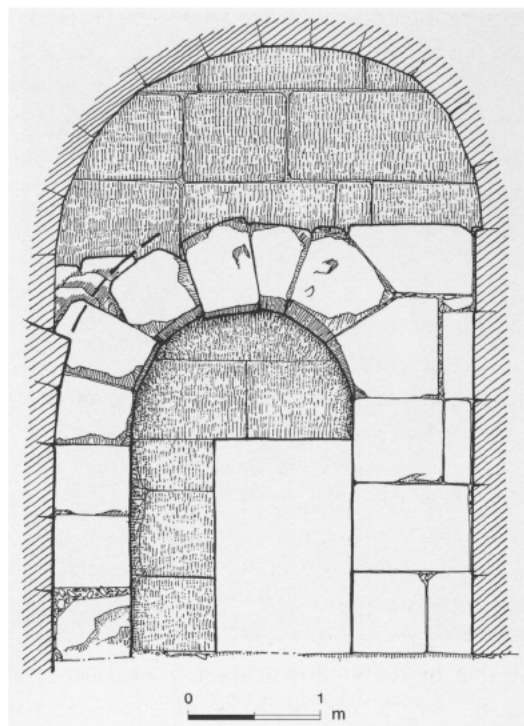


Fig. 19. Cross-section of vaulted service corridor (hatched), showing modification of vault. Behind, a sub-vault and doorway within the corridor.

plete Beit Nattif lamps of the mid-third/fourth century CE (together with an enormous quantity of broken lamps) found alongside the altars in the substructure of the *sacellum*. Also, a great quantity of late Roman pottery and numerous coins found above the original occupation level in the *sacellum* and dated mostly to the fourth century CE indicate a fill deposited in the later part of the fourth century or in the beginning of the fifth century CE, apparently after the amphitheater went out of use.

Deep soundings dug in the eastern service corridor exposed the foundations of the inner arena wall (4 m wide and 1.8 m deep below the walking level of the service corridor) and the outer wall of the service corridor/amphitheater (1.8 m wide and 1.3 m deep below the walking level of the service corridor).

Both foundations were built of large, roughly cut local limestone blocks joined with grayish cut mortar, resting on virgin soil. These trial probes revealed a fill composed of broken chalk stones,



a great quantity of roof tiles mixed with mostly Byzantine and late Roman potsherds, and fourth to fifth century CE coins, penetrating deeply into virgin soil. The massive excavation and re-fill are difficult to explain, but seem to indicate a major renovation in the service corridor during the Byzantine period.

*Later Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods.*— An abundance of Byzantine pottery (mostly sixth century CE) was found in the eastern part of the vaulted service corridor (L418); the northern part of the corridor (L620 and L689) revealed a great quantity of Byzantine pottery dated to the fifth–seventh centuries CE, including many roof tiles, which undoubtedly originated in the covered portico apparently built in the arena in the late Byzantine period.

The Early Islamic period saw the continued use of the vaulted structures. The dismantling of some parts of the service corridor, such as the walls supporting the vomitoria, probably occurred at the end of the Byzantine period or the beginning of the Early Islamic period. Numerous walls such as W464, closing the eastern service corridor from the northern entrance, and W457 in the southern service corridor below the vomitorium (W614), are dated to the Early Islamic period. Troughs built of dismantled stones were found in the western part of the service corridor (558, 568, and 569) and in the northern area (545), indicating their transformation into stables and service areas. Although the eastern part of the service corridor did not show any traces of building activity, it is not unlikely that the whole of the building was adapted for these uses.

*Crusader and Mameluke Periods.*— In medieval times the vaulted service corridor continued to serve as a stable, utilizing the troughs built during the Early Islamic period, and as an industrial area. Evidence for Crusader occupation of the service corridor is very weak. Neither characteristic Crusader pottery nor items such as coins or weapons were found in the course of excavation. Two Mameluke silos and an uniden-

tified industrial installation (467) were revealed in the northern (497) and western (450) areas of the service corridor, both built on the original occupation level. A Mameluke kiln (509) was built on a Byzantine/Early Islamic fill.

Remains of a stone pavement of medieval date (570, 571, and 572) were uncovered in the western part of the service corridor. The pavement was made of rectangular paving stones ( $0.50 \times 0.45 \times 0.15$  m). The pottery on the pavement dated to the Mameluke period. Numerous walls, dated by associated pottery to the Mameluke period, divided the service corridor. Walls were built on dismantled original walls of the *sacellum* (W612 and W613), which was used as a stable during the Mameluke period. These changes all attest to intensive use of the building in the medieval period.

*Ottoman and Mandate Periods.*— This phase is characterized by a thick layer of debris consisting of earth, building materials and a great quantity of black Gaza ware pottery. Poor dividing walls built of reused building materials and fieldstones rested on the debris. These features, which are particularly abundant in the western part of the service corridor, indicate its conversion into a dwelling and service area/stable, occupied until the mid-twentieth century CE (i.e., 1948).

#### ARCHITECTURAL EXTENSIONS TO THE AMPHITHEATER

The access ramp to the eastern tribune (655) was about 30 m long, 2–4 m wide and about 1.85 m high, and ended in a well-built staircase (453) connecting the service corridor entrance (602) to the tribune (Fig. 20). The ramp was built of both rectangular and irregular chalk blocks taken from dismantled buildings in the vicinity, and laid on the supposed original occupation level outside the amphitheater (L461). It should thus be dated to the last period of use of the amphitheater, replacing the presumed wooden constructions of the earlier phase.



Fig. 20. Access ramp (655) between the service corridor entrance and the eastern tribune. External fill level is 1–2 m above original street level. Looking south.

The ramp revealed almost no ceramic material except for a few broken Byzantine roof tiles. A small trial probe (L729 and L737) on the south-eastern side of the ramp revealed the foundations (about 4 m wide) laid directly on the reddish natural soil. This small sounding exposed late Roman potsherds. The whole construction, consisting of the ramp (655) and the staircase (453), is dated to the Late Roman/Early Byzantine periods.

North of the western tribune, in front of a service-corridor entrance (582), a staircase (575) was exposed along the outer wall of the amphitheater. The staircase was certainly intended to connect the service corridor and the *sacellum* to the western tribune by means of a ramp; however, no remains of such a construction were found. Though of rather more careless construction than its eastern counterpart, the staircase should also be attributed to the last phase of use of the amphitheater (late fourth century CE).

During the 1993 season a massive wall (W444) was uncovered between the amphitheater and the Roman wall north of it. A trial probe

between the amphitheater and this massive wall in Area 250 exposed the remains of a dismantled chalk-stone wall (W522). Due to the limited size of the excavation, the relationship between W522 and the amphitheater could not be clarified, though they seem to have been coeval.

#### MASSIVE WALLS AROUND THE AMPHITHEATER

Wall 421 (preserved to a height of 4.5 m) and Wall 440 (2.7 m high) both appear to be contemporary with the amphitheater. Their masonry is characterized by the use of Severan dressing—ashlars ( $1.1 \times 0.5 \times 0.6$  m) with wide smooth margins, surrounding a roughly shaped flat boss. In W421 some ashlar are joined with limestone chips or with brown mortar, similar to that used on the facade of the amphitheater. In W440, the outer face consists of courses of large roughly cut limestone blocks, joined by brown mortar and small field stones. These may be interpreted as repairs carried out between the Byzantine and Mameluke periods (Fig. 21).

Along the inner side of W421, a flight of steps (536) leads directly to a tower where W421 and W440 meet (not excavated as of 1994). No floor or occupation level was associated with the building of the wall, and therefore the exact construction date cannot be determined. Another tower (452;  $6 \times 3$  m) was partially uncovered at the northeastern end of W440, approached by a rectangular doorway (541; 1 m wide and 2.2 m high). The tower seems to postdate the wall. W440 and W421 defined the boundaries of the northwestern precinct of Bet Guvrin/Eleuthropolis, which included the amphitheater and other public buildings.

Walls 477 and 472 are north-south wall segments founded on virgin soil and abutting the foundations of the amphitheater at either end of its major axis. W477, situated between W440 and the western corner of the northern arena gate, was completely dismantled in antiquity. The foundation, surviving to a height of 1.65 m, consisted of large roughly-cut irregular limestone blocks ( $1 \times 0.5 \times 0.5$  m), with small and





Fig. 21. Roman wall (440) north of the amphitheater, with traces of repairs on its outer face. Looking west.

medium-sized stones in the interstices. Grayish mortar was poured on and in between the large stones.

Wall 472, similar to W477, was built against the foundations of the western corner of the southern gate of the amphitheater. Preserved to a height of 2.5 m, the wall was built of large irregular limestone blocks ( $0.9 \times 0.5 \times 0.4$  m) joined with small limestone field stones and grayish mortar, mixed with flecks of charcoal. Both faces, in the lowest course, bear some red-painted signs, possibly masons' marks, similar to marks previously discovered on the foundations of the amphitheater and on W477.

Wall 444 is a massive wall, oriented north-south, abutting the inner face of the Roman wall W440, north of the amphitheater. The wall, 18 m long, 3 m wide and 6.5 m high, was constructed of large ashlar (about  $1 \times 0.5 \times 0.6$  m), taken from dismantled buildings. The stones were joined with grayish mortar mixed with charcoal. The wall was fully excavated on its western side, and a foundation trench was traced at its base, containing late Roman and Byzantine pottery. A probe excavated in 1994 between W444 and the amphitheater established that the former post-

dates the latter, and should therefore be dated to the Byzantine period.

Wall 144 is a massive fortification wall (breadth 2.6 m; height 3.5 m), oriented north-south, with a sloped west face. Two to three courses of large smoothed stones and reused building materials are preserved, set in earth-and-stone mortar. The wall was exposed to a length of about 40 m, and is dated to medieval times.

#### POOL AND CISTERN

An almost entirely preserved pool (494) 9 m in length and 4.7 m in width, was found between the late wall W144 and the outer wall of the amphitheater. The pool's wall and floor were covered with reddish plaster, incorporating many broken Byzantine potsherds. There were two small openings, 8 cm in diameter, in the western wall of the pool and remains of a water channel in the southern wall. The pool was dismantled at the beginning of the 1994 season, exposing a fill composed of layers of brown earth and broken chalk stones, mixed with Byzantine and Early Islamic pottery which provided

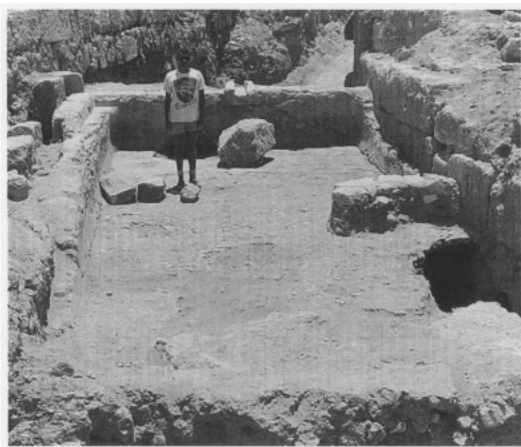


Fig. 22. Early Islamic period pool (494) located between the amphitheater and W144. Looking southeast.

a *terminus post quem* for its construction (Fig. 22).

A well-preserved cistern (534;  $4 \times 3.1 \times 2.3$ m) was discovered at the southern end of the arena. Its walls were covered with a layer of reddish plaster, incorporating Byzantine and Early Islamic potsherds. After the cistern went out of use, a fieldstone dividing wall (W535) was built inside it. Dark brown earth mixed with a great quantity of black Gaza ware filled the cistern down to its crushed chalk floor. The construction of the cistern is dated to medieval times.

#### PAINTED INSCRIPTIONS AND MARKS

Various signs and inscriptions in red paint were discovered in and around the amphitheater during the 1992–1994 seasons of excavations. Most of the signs were found on the foundations of the amphitheater (L428), in the substructure of the arena wall, and on the foundations of W477 and W472. All the signs could be interpreted as masons' marks, but at present they are still undeciphered. The signs were painted directly on the stone, in red, and most of them consist of the same design. On wall W444 two illegible inscriptions were discovered. On the lowest course of Wall 472, a Roman numeral (XIII) was painted in red.

#### SELECTED FINDS FROM THE AMPHITHEATER

##### *The Two Roman Altars*

Discovered together in the substructure of the *sacellum*, the two incense-altars have been numbered 3339/1 and 3339/2. Both were found broken and subsequently restored.

Altar 1 (Fig. 23), carved of a single block of local limestone, is 68 cm high and 42 cm wide. Soot-marks on the top of the altar testify to its original use. It is composed of socket (19 cm high and 42 cm wide), body (30 cm high and 28 cm wide), and cornice (21 cm high and 40 cm wide), and bears an eight-line inscription in Greek, read and translated by Leah Di Segni:

|   |              |                                  |
|---|--------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | [Ἀγαθῇ τύχῃ] | <i>With good luck:</i>           |
| 2 | Ὑπὲρ σω      | <i>For the sa-</i>               |
| 3 | τηρίας       | <i>lvation</i>                   |
| 4 | Κομόδ(ου)    | <i>(of) Commodus</i>             |
| 5 | τοῦ κυρ(ίου) | <i>the Lord,</i>                 |
| 6 | θεῷ Ἡλι-     | <i>to the god (Zeus) Heli-</i>   |
| 7 | οπολε[ίτ]η   | <i>opolites,</i>                 |
| 8 | Ἐλκ[ίας ?]   | <i>Elk[ias?] (has dedicated)</i> |

The inscription begins at the base of the cornice and continues on the body to the upper part of the socket. It was simply incised by an unskilled carver, the space between the letters not being well calculated. Traces of red paint can be seen in the writing.

Altar 2 (Fig. 24) was also carved from a single block of limestone, and consisted of a socket (36 cm high and 40 cm wide), elongated body (36 cm high and 28 cm wide), and molded cornice (30 cm high and 35 cm wide).

Both altars were freestanding, elegantly but simply executed. They are of a well-known second–third century CE type. *Lord Commodus* is undoubtedly Emperor Commodus (180–192 CE). Assuming the *sacellum* to be the original location of the altars,<sup>3</sup> this reference suggests a *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the amphitheater. The dedicator Elkias (?) may have been an official in charge of cult or of gladiatorial contests. The





Fig. 23. Roman altar 1, bearing the Greek inscription.



Fig. 24. Roman altar 2, after restoration.

god Zeus-Heliopolites, very popular throughout Palestine, was a composite of the Greek Zeus and the Syrian thunder-god Hadad-Rimmon (Meshorer 1985:13). His image also appears on coins minted in Bet Guvrin/ Eleutheropolis (Meshorer 1984:64, Spijkermann 1972:376, 381–382).

#### *The Lamps from the Sacellum*

The 97 complete or nearly complete lamps and the enormous amount of lamp fragments found beneath the *sacellum* date to the mid-third and fourth centuries CE. These lamps (Fig. 25) generally correspond to the Beit Nat̄tif type common in the southern part of the country (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978:99–110). Typological variants include ovoid lamps with large filling holes and round lamps with a decorated discus and bow-shaped nozzles. These were decorated with a great variety of patterns such as interlacing lines; guilloche; scallop shells; amphorae; grapes and other floral and geometrical designs. Two lamp fragments were decorated with a seven-branched candlestick (*menorah*). Most of the lamps were red-painted and all of them showed signs of use.

The lamps were apparently used during the rituals observed by the gladiators and venators

before and during the entertainments. They were stored either in the *sacellum* or in the chamber below. It can be assumed that the lamps relate to the last period of use of the amphitheater.

#### *Lead Tablets*

Three rolled lead tablets (7 cm long, 1.8 cm wide and 1.5 cm in diameter) were found in the subterranean structures of the arena.<sup>4</sup> One of the tablets was folded at both ends. Such tablets, often found in amphitheaters (e.g., in the subterranean structures at Carthage and Trier: Audollent 1904; Wunsch 1911), are associated with *tabellae defixionum*—“cursing tablets,” which bore signs and magical formulae. Through the *tabellae defixionum* we know that magic had a part to play in the amphitheaters, usually involving imprecations directed at gladiators and venators.

#### CHRONOLOGY AND SUMMARY

The presence of the two Roman altars in the *sacellum* are evidence that the building functioned as an amphitheater in the second century CE. The lamps found near the altars attest to the continuation of gladiatorial contests until the late Roman period. The abundant ceramic finds

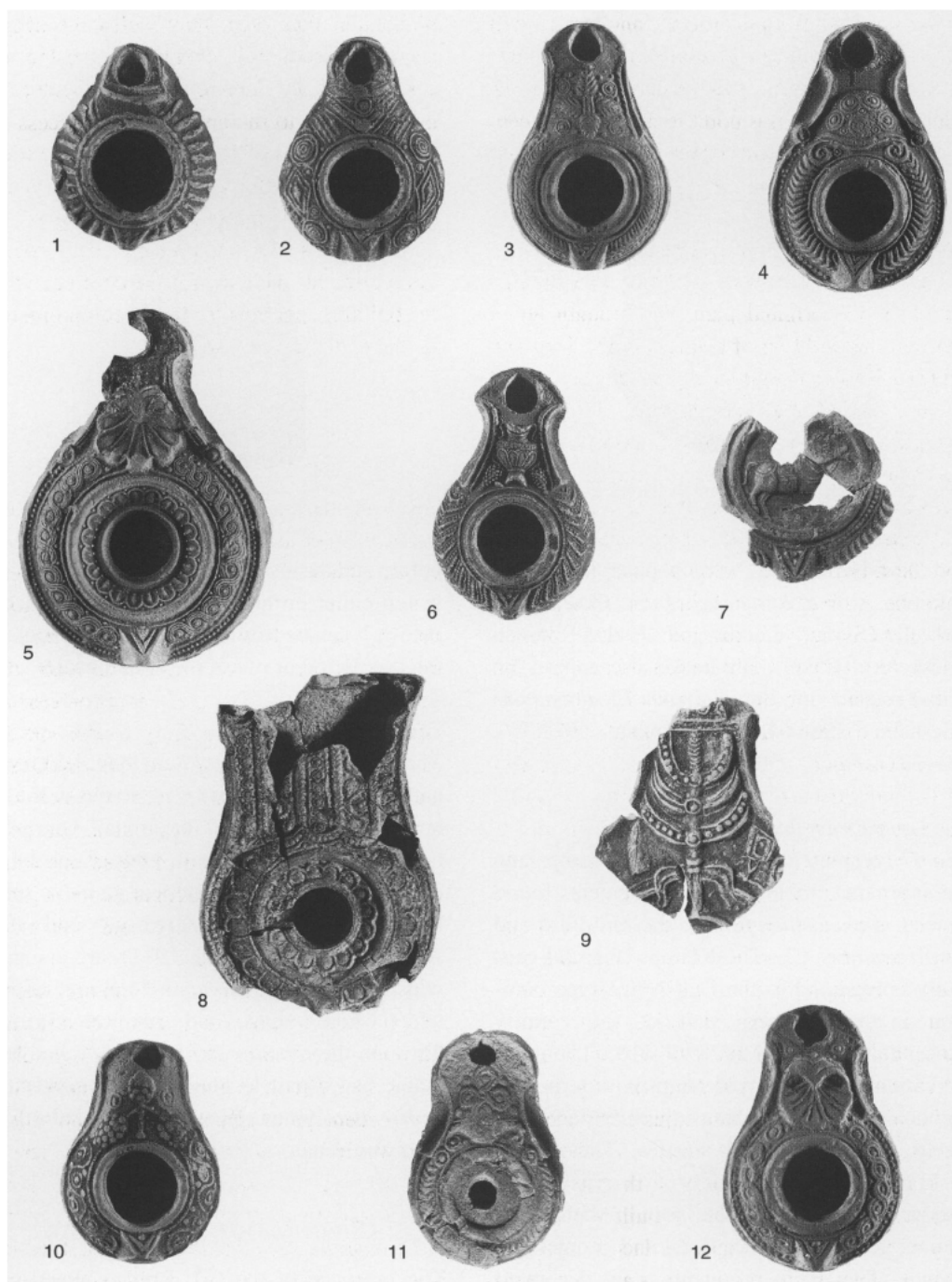


Fig. 25. A selection of Beit Nattif lamps from the lower chamber of the *sacellum*.



exposed in the *sacellum* are dated to the mid-third and fourth centuries CE. Numerous coins in the *sacellum* from the middle and second half of the fourth century CE, along with the 650 late fourth century coins from the central area of the subterranean galleries point to a late fourth century *terminus ad quem* for the last period of use of the amphitheater as such.

#### *Modifications to the Amphitheater*

As previously described, the first major modification to the original plan was brought about through the building of a single high (5 m) and wide (3.2 m) vault supporting the cavea, instead of the intended small service corridor (about 2.8 m high) to which radial walls supporting a larger cavea and a greater number of vomitoria would have been added. The fact that no communication existed between the subterranean structure and the room situated below the eastern tribune could be attributed to the changes that occurred during the building of the amphitheater. An additional important modification was the raising of the entrances to the vomitoria in the western (617) and eastern (615) parts of the facade.

Further minor modifications in the amphitheater certainly occurred during the time of its use. For example, the two doorjambs of the northern entrance (600) were replaced, one of them with a third century CE pedestal. The ten service doorways leading from the service corridor to the arena also present differing features and signs of modifications. In addition, some difficulties occurred during the building and/or layout of the arena wall. An irregularity in the arena wall was observed west of the northern gate. The radius of the curvature was adjusted by the construction of the opening leading to the arena (W577) and the modification of the arena wall. Generally, irregularities in the building (for example, opening W578) and the lack of symmetry in the disposition of doorways and vomitoria must be seen as signs of a lack of skill on the part of the builders.

The earthquake that struck Palestine in 363 CE is reported to have destroyed more than half of the houses of Eleutheropolis (Brook 1977;

Russell 1980). Although no heavy earthquake damage or collapse could be detected in the amphitheater, that event may well have triggered social and economic changes which led to the cessation of activities in the amphitheater. Various additions to the amphitheater (access ramp 655 and staircase 575) are attributed to the late Roman period or the beginning of the Byzantine period. Since a more precise dating of these additions is so far not possible, they could be interpreted as evidence for the continued use of the building, perhaps for light entertainment, after the earthquake of 363 CE.

#### THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE AMPHITHEATER

The Roman army was stationed either in the city or its vicinity after the crushing of the Bar Kochba revolt in 132–135 CE.<sup>5</sup> As the city began to prosper, with the Roman army still stationed nearby, the need for an amphitheater may have become apparent. An impressive bath of the same period is currently being exposed east of the amphitheater below the Early Islamic/medieval fortress. The construction of the amphitheater and other public buildings are evidence for intense urbanization and Romanization of the area as early as the second half of the second century CE, before Emperor Septimus Severus granted the city the *ius italicum* and renamed it Eleutheropolis in 200 CE.

It is generally accepted that the spectator potential for amphitheater games included all the inhabitants of a city and its surrounding villages. It is very difficult, however, to estimate the actual percentage of city inhabitants and villagers who would have attended such games. The limited size of the amphitheater in Bet Guvrin/ Eleutheropolis (3500 persons maximum) seems to confirm the idea that there was no direct relation between the capacity of the monument and the population of the city and its environs.

It may be suggested that the Bet Guvrin amphitheater was a military construction, built and mainly used by the Roman legion stationed in Bet Guvrin for training and entertainment. This

was a common phenomenon wherever the Roman army was stationed, either permanently or temporarily (Golvin 1988: 148–156).

In the case of a military amphitheater, the number of seats would reflect the number of troops stationed in the city (and the importance of their units as well). It is clear that our amphitheater shares the small size, simplicity of design, use of modest material, relatively large arena, and small cavea of typical Roman military amphitheaters (*amphitheatrum castrense*). Its location in the northwestern corner of the city could either demonstrate an aspect of municipal urban planning, or reflect the intention of the builders to allocate this area for military purposes.

A mid-fourth century CE relief on a frieze was found in 1981 along the assumed *decumanus maximus* of Eleutheropolis, about 200 m east of the amphitheater (Dagan, Fischer and Tsafir 1985; Kloner 1993). The relief represents either a hunting scene, showing figures of winged *erotes* armed with spears imitating human activities, or parodies of *venationes* and wild animals in typical scenes of the arena (Robert 1940:330–331). Although the frieze with scrolls combining human and animal figures was a widespread architectural feature in the Roman period, the relief from Eleutheropolis may well be evidence for continued activity in the amphitheater during the Late Roman period.

Further evidence for the impact of the amphitheater on the life of the inhabitants of the area during the third and fourth centuries CE may be provided by discoveries such as a fourth century CE mosaic floor with hunting scenes in nearby Beit Jibrin (Vincent 1922; Abel 1924); lamps bearing scenes of a gladiator in combat and a venator fighting a leopard discovered in Beit Naṭṭif (Baramki 1936); or a crudely scratched drawing of fighting gladiators found in a late third century CE Roman burial cave in Tell 'Eitun (Tsafir 1982; Kloner 1985: 42–43).

#### TYPOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE AMPHITHEATER

Amphitheaters are generally classified into two large groups: buildings in which the cavea is supported by earthen embankments (*à structure pleine*); and buildings in which the cavea is supported by substructures or barrel vaults (*à structure creuse*) (Golvin 1988:71–278). The Bet Guvrin amphitheater belongs to the second group (*à structure creuse*). Its architecture could be described as utilitarian and functional, but prestigious enough to satisfy the needs of a city garrison. The *opus quadratum* construction is a Hellenistic tradition adopted during the Roman period in the Levant. This building concept is generally observed in the architecture of entertainment structures such as theaters, amphitheaters, and hippodromes built in the Eastern Roman Empire. Its use in the Bet Guvrin amphitheater demonstrates the evident care with which this monument was built.

Of all the known amphitheaters in the country, visible and excavated, the amphitheater at Bet Guvrin was the only one conceived and built as such; it is, in fact, a Roman amphitheater in its canonical form. A building located in the northeastern quarter of Caesarea was identified as an amphitheater (Reifenberg 1950–1951:24; Roller 1982); however, it is not sufficiently excavated and its remains are too scanty to allow comparisons with our amphitheater. In like manner, the Dura-Europos amphitheater, built on the remains of an earlier bath and dated to 216 CE, is a small structure connected with a small garrison (Rostovzeff et al. 1932–1933:72–77).

It appears that “amphitheater” and “hippodrome” are terms used interchangeably to describe the same building in which “chariot races” and combats between gladiators, animal hunts, and beast-fights were held.

Such non-canonical structures include “Herod’s amphitheater or multipurpose entertainment building” currently being excavated at Caesarea (Porath 1995:15–27, Figs. 269–272). The amphitheater in Jerusalem mentioned by Josephus (*Ant.* 15.268) was, we suggest, a multi-functional



building with the appearance of a hippodrome, which could have been situated in the Vale of Hinnom ("the Sultan's Pool"), west of the Old City of Jerusalem. The two hippodromes in Bet She'an/Scythopolis (Tsafrir and Foerster 1995:93–116) and Shechem/Neapolis (Magen 1993:1357–8) are converted hippodromes which were transformed into amphitheaters through the truncation of their arenas. These adaptations occurred at the end of the second century or beginning of the third century CE. The hippodrome at Jericho, referred to as an amphitheater by Josephus (*Ant.* 17.194–5; *War* 1.33.8) and partly excavated (Netzer 1980:104–107), was also a multipurpose entertainment building. The hippodrome of Gerasa (Ostrasz 1989:51–77) appears to have been adapted for use as an amphitheater. A vast elliptical structure recently exposed in the city of Bostra, Syria, appears to be an amphitheater (Al-Mougdad et al. 1990:201–204).

Amphitheaters are sometimes classified regionally; i.e., Romano-British or North African. The Bet Guvrin amphitheater might be included in a Syro-Palestinian group dated to the middle of the second or early third century CE, including the amphitheaters of Bet She'an, Shechem, Bostra and Dura-Europos. To this list we might add the "Reifenberg" amphitheater in Caesarea and the amphitheater of Gerasa. There are some similarities between these buildings, for example, their modest dimensions and limited seating capacity. However, considering the current state of excavation and research, global assertions or comprehensive analyses can hardly be made at this time. The conclusion can be drawn, however, that there is a correlation between the presence of Roman military, urban prosperity, and an increase in amphitheater construction during the second century CE and the first half of the third century.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The excavations (IAA excavation licenses 52/92; 8/93; 11/94) were directed by Amos Kloner of the Israel Antiquities Authority, with the participation of Alain Hubsch as area supervisor, assisted by Rami Chen, Alex Zilberbod (1992 and 1993 seasons) and Reviva Atar (1994 season). The following also participated in the work: Felix Portnow (plans and reconstructions), Alexander Pechuro (artist), Moshe Kedem (administrator), Sando Mandrea (photographer) and Rachel Barkai (numismatist). Coins and metal objects were cleaned by Ella Altmark. Sherry Whetstone assisted in the editing and correction of the text. The work was carried out by approximately 25 workers from Qiryat Gat and Bet Shemesh.

<sup>2</sup> The fundamental and functional relationship between the *sacellum*, the tribune, and the arena has been discussed by Golvin 1988:337–340. There is no proof, however, that the functionaries of the cult (the

priests seated in the tribunes) were active in the *sacellum*. The devotions performed by the gladiators before combat could have been acts of individual piety, not requiring the ministrations of a priest.

<sup>3</sup> There is some uncertainty as to whether both altars originally stood in the *sacellum*. Altar 2 bears traces of cutting on one face, which may have been intended to adapt it to the *sacellum*. Thus, at least this altar may have been moved from another public building in the vicinity of the amphitheater.

<sup>4</sup> The tablets had yet to be unrolled at the time this report was written.

<sup>5</sup> The presence of the Roman army in the Bet Guvrin area is attested to by a limestone *tabula ansata* said to have been found in the vicinity of Bet Guvrin (Iliffe 1933). The tablet, dated to the mid-second century CE, mentions a unit of the Sixth Legion (Ferrata) stationed in the region.

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