

Chapter Title: Caesarea Antiquities: Geographical Background and Historical Introduction  
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Book Title: Ancient Caesarea

Book Subtitle: conservation and development of a heritage site

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Published by: Israel Antiquities Authority / תוקיתעה תושר. (2017)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvb1hqz6.5>

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# CAESAREA ANTIQUITIES: GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

YOSEF PORATH

His notice was attracted by a town on the coast, called Straton's Tower... This he entirely rebuilt with white stone... (Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War* 1, 408)

Ancient Caesarea was built during the time of Herod, King of Judea, on the Mediterranean coast in the northern part of the Sharon plain, with a large artificial harbor. The city was called Caesarea in honor of Herod's patron, Octavian Caesar, and the harbor was named Sebastos, Greek for the title 'Augustus.' The city and the harbor were built in twelve years on the site of the Hellenistic city of Straton's Tower (Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities* 15, 331–341), midway between 'Akko and Jaffa.

The western Sharon plain has three *kurkar* (calcareous sandstone) ridges parallel to the coast, between which are shallow troughs. The westernmost ridge, which touches the sea, was partially destroyed by wave abrasion. In the northern part of the Sharon coastline, a few islands and peninsulas of the westernmost ridge still remain. These allowed a fairly convenient anchorage for Straton's Tower, Caesarea's predecessor. A few of these islands were incorporated into the construction of the artificial harbor at the time of Herod.

The climate in the area of Caesarea is typically Mediterranean: hot, humid summers and moderate, rainy

winters (multiannual average rainfall about 550 mm), with transition seasons in between. The aquifer is close to the surface near the troughs and the beach. Next to the water line are a number of freshwater springs that were once exploited.

The soil in the area is sandy, caused by the penetration of dunes through the breach made by Naḥal Ḥadera through the *kurkar* ridges. The fertile soil outside the walls of the city was exploited for rain-fed or irrigated agriculture, while the poor-quality soil (sand or *kurkar*) was left for city cemeteries. In the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, agricultural areas were created by covering the sandy ground with a layer of fertile soil (0.5–1.0 m thick) brought from the city's refuse piles, and irrigating it. During the Early Islamic period, the dunes north of the Naḥal Ḥadera mouth were prepared for farming by the *muwasi* method.

Caesarea was connected to its surroundings by a network of paved roads: northward to Dor and 'Akko, southward to Jaffa and eastward to Shuni and Megiddo or to Neapolis (Shekhem) and Antipatris (Afeq) (Roll 1996). A few milestones from the road northward have survived, and from the road to Megiddo and Shuni, a paved segment remains, as well as a bridge over Naḥal 'Ada (now within the modern-day city of Or 'Aqiva).

Abutting on the harbor were houses, also of white stone, and upon it converged the streets of the town, laid at equal distances apart. On the eminence facing the harbor-mouth stood Caesar's temple, remarkable for its beauty and grand proportions... The city Herod dedicated to the province, the harbour to navigators in those waters, to Caesar the glory of this new foundation,





[3] Ancient Caesarea, aerial view looking north, 2000 (Yaakov Saar, Government Press Office).

to which he accordingly gave the name of Caesarea (Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War* 1, 414–417).

The city of Caesarea and its artificial harbor, Sebastos, were built during the reign of King Herod (37–4 BCE), replacing the Hellenistic city of Straton's Tower (third–first centuries BCE). The archaeological excavations revealed fragments of clay vessels showing that the site was settled as early as the late Iron Age (seventh century BCE) and the Persian period (sixth–fourth centuries BCE), but its name at that time was not preserved.

The inauguration festivities for Caesarea were held in 10 BCE, after 12 years of construction. The city was planned according to the best architectural principles known at the time, including a network of parallel and intersecting streets. The historian Josephus Flavius, who describes the construction (*The Jewish War* 1, 408–414; *Jewish Antiquities* 15, 331–341) relates that in addition to dwellings, public buildings were constructed in the city, including a theater, a circus (hippodrome, in Greek), a magnificent royal palace, a pagan temple in honor of Rome and Augustus and market squares (agora, forum). Of these structures, archaeological excavations up to the time of this publication have so far uncovered and identified the theater, the circus (which Josephus calls an amphitheater) and the temple (Nos. 9, 11, 14). The city had a wall, portions of which were uncovered in the northwestern and southwestern parts of the city.

The city was built next to a large artificial harbor, which was constructed using advanced technology and the best materials. An inscription on a coin from the time of Agrippa indicates that the harbor of Sebastos was separate from the city. Jetties were built at the harbor that protected the inner

basin, which afforded a year-round safe haven (see below, *Ancient Harbors and Anchorages in Caesarea*).

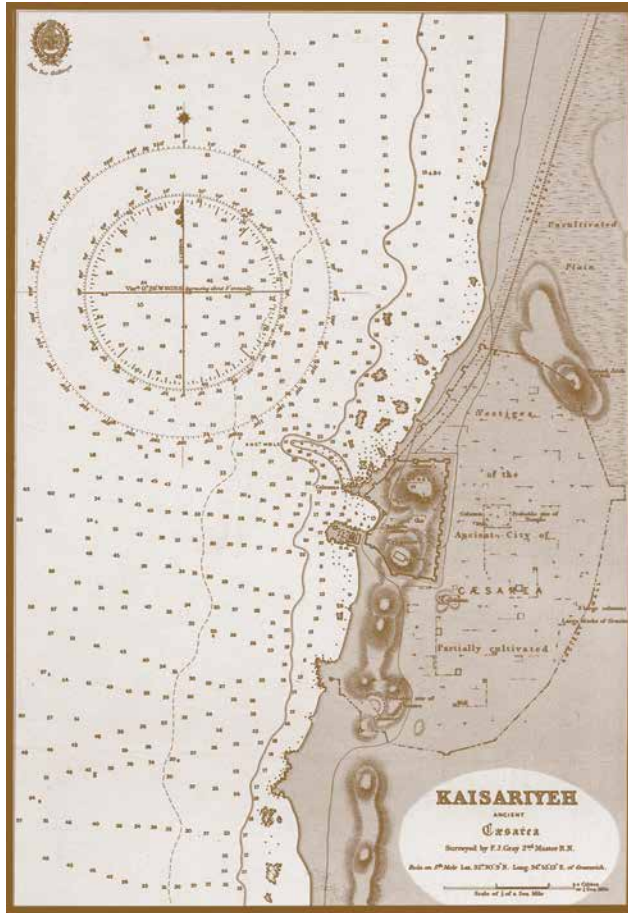
After Herod died, his kingdom was divided among his three sons. Caesarea was included in the allocation to Archelaus, who ruled Judea proper, as well as Idumaea and Samaria. In 6 CE, Archelaus was deposed and a Roman procurator took over, ruling from Caesarea rather than Jerusalem. Thus, Caesarea was transformed from a vibrant harbor city to the political and economic capital of the country, a role it played until the Muslim conquest of 640 CE.

During the Roman period, diverse eastern Mediterranean ethnic groups lived in the city, belonging to a variety of religions: Jews, Samaritans, pagans and Christians. Relations among these groups changed over time. In 66 CE, the large Jewish community suffered a pogrom and the entire community fled to Nabata. The city's Jewish community slowly revived, and later, in the Roman period it flourished economically and culturally. In the third century CE, it was led by Rabbi Abahu and his fellow sages.

Caesarea rose in importance after the suppression of the Great Revolt of the Jews against the Romans and the destruction of Jerusalem (70 CE). The built area of the city was expanded, a sophisticated water system based on springs beyond the city (the high-level aqueduct, the low-level aqueduct and a clay pipe from the south) was built; the theater was rebuilt and renovated, Herod's Circus was replaced with a larger circus east of the city (No. 8), and a Colosseum-like amphitheater was built on the northeast (No. 4).

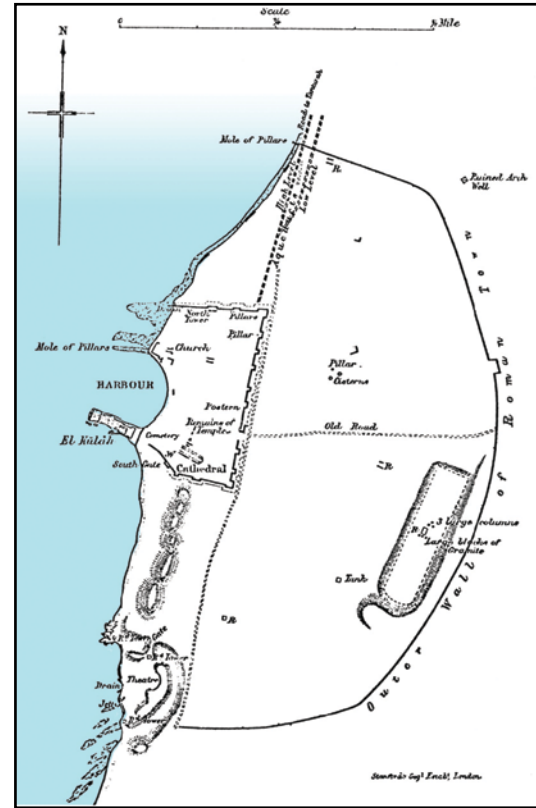
The city continued to prosper in the Byzantine period, after Christianity became the official state





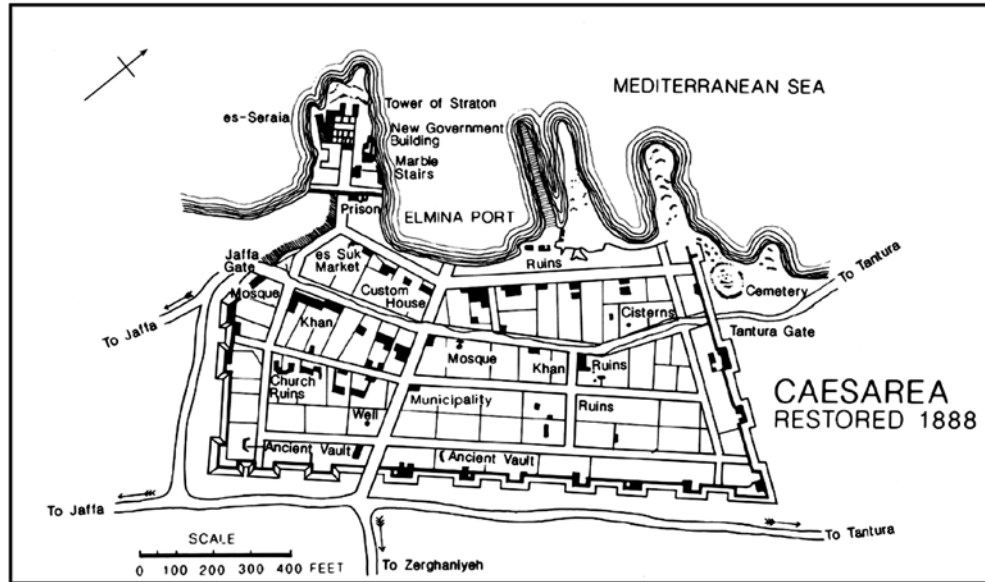
[4] Detailed maritime map of the Caesarea coastline, 1863.

religion. Pilgrims to the Holy Land encouraged economic prosperity. Christian literature mentions structures and sites from the early days of Christianity (the first century CE): the house of the apostle Phillip and his daughters, the place where Cornelius has his vision and the prison



[5] Plan of Caesarea, the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1882.

where the apostle Paul was held. Schools operated in the city under the leadership of the Christian sages Origen and Eusebius in the third and fourth centuries CE, and a large, magnificent church replaced the pagan temple built by Herod. Of these structures, only the church, octagonal in plan, was found and excavated (No. 9). In the sixth century CE, Caesarea was surrounded by a wall, which marked the largest contiguous built extent of the



[6] Plan of the Bosnian village within the Crusader fortifications, 1888 (after Schumacher's map).

city at any time in its history (about 150 hectares, with a population of about 45,000). At the end of the sixth and the early seventh centuries CE, villas began to be built outside the wall, as yet another extension of the city. But this process of municipal evolution was cut off by the Muslim conquest of Caesarea in 640 CE.

The Muslim conquest led to an all-out crisis in Caesarea: it lost its political status as the province's capital, the Byzantine fleet raided coastal cities, maritime trade slowed and Christian pilgrimage ceased. In the wake of this crisis most of the city's inhabitants left and large parts of the Byzantine city were abandoned. The empty structures began a long process of dismantling and recycling of construction materials. The settlement became limited to

the area east of the harbor, from which a small city grew up that was fortified in the eighth century CE.

Muslim Caesarea was protected by a wall only from the land side. The Crusaders captured it from the sea in 1101 CE, in cooperation with Genoese ships. During the Crusader period, Caesarea functioned as the center of the feudal holding of the Garnier family. During the crusade of King Louis IX of France, Caesarea was fortified by a wall and a moat (1251–1252). The fortifications did not help the city, and it fell to the Mamluks in 1265. The Mamluks razed the city intentionally, and banned renewed permanent settlement there to prevent Christian invaders from gaining a foothold. The area remained abandoned until the nineteenth century.





[7] The Bosnian village above the remains of the Crusader city, 1938  
(photography: Matson Collection, Library of Congress).

After the Mamluk conquest, the stones of Caesarea were used for various construction projects, from Alexandria in the south to Beirut in the north. During the rule of Jassar Pasha in 'Akko (1775–1804), stones brought from Caesarea were used to construct the Great Mosque in the city (1781) and Khan al-'Umdan (1784). These monuments, which still stand today in 'Akko, reveal the grandeur of Caesarea's past.

The ruins of Caesarea are mentioned in descriptions of travelers who visited the site. As time passed, the

writings and drawings of Europeans who visited Caesarea in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including R. Pococke, U. Seetzen and V. Guérin, became historical documents serving an important foundation for archaeological research. In 1863, A. Mansell published a maritime map of the Caesarea coast, and in 1873, members of the Palestine Exploration Fund, headed by C. Conder and H. Kitchener, surveyed Caesarea's ruins. The plan the P.E.F. published in 1882 contained *inter alia* the walls of the Byzantine city (mistakenly labeled

“Roman”), as well as the Crusader wall, the harbor, the aqueducts, the theater and the Eastern Circus.

In 1884, the Ottoman government settled among the ruins a group of refugees from Bosnia, who had fled their homeland after Turkey lost it to Austria. The refugees occupied the ruins of the city from the Crusader period and made their living from farming, fishing and selling ancient stones. The Jewish Colonization Association and its successor, the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association (PICA), founded by Baron Rothschild, purchased a great deal of land around Caesarea and Mount Carmel on the eve of and following World War I. In 1940, the founders of Kibbutz Sedot Yam settled on PICA lands at Caesarea, while Arabs from the

surroundings joined the Bosnian community; the latter was abandoned in 1948.

In 1952, PICA established the Caesarea Development Corporation to develop the area for homes, industry, commerce and tourism. When PICA ended its activities in 1958, the lands came under the joint management of the State of Israel and the Rothschild family. In 1965, the Caesarea Development Corporation established the luxury neighborhood of modern Caesarea, east of the antiquities. The company continues to develop the site for tourism and commerce, especially within the Crusader city walls. In 1968, the Caesarea antiquities were declared a national park, which is now managed by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (formerly the National Parks Authority).

