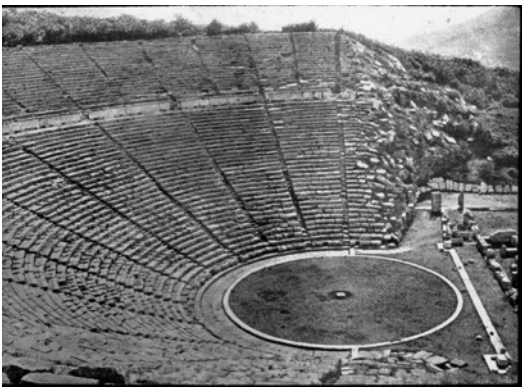


# Ancient Theatres, Amphitheatres and Hippodromes

## [Premodern Digital Cultural Heritage Network](#)

### Teacher's Guide

- Greek and Roman theatres are among the most recognizable structures in an ancient Greek or Roman city, and are found all over the ancient world.
- Unlike modern theatres, ancient theatres were not only places of entertainment but were also associated with religious practice and festivals.
- A **Greek theatre** consists of a circular *orchestra*—a dancing place for the chorus. There is an altar at its centre. The *orchestra* is surrounded by a semi-circular seating area (*theatron* or *cavea*) for the audience. Theatres are usually placed on the slope of a hill to maximise views. The stage (*skene*) is separated from the seating area via two passages (*paradoi*), is typically raised, and has a colonnade.



Epidauros – Theatre. Dörpfeld-Reisch/Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 39131]

- Among the best-preserved Greek theatres is the theatre at Epidauros, in Greece.
- It was built by Polycleitos the Younger, ca. 350 BCE.
- The circular orchestra measures 24 m in diameter. In its centre stood an altar to Dionysos, god of wine and the theatre.
- Epidauros also hosts an [annual international festival](#) of music, dance and theatre.

- **Roman theatres** are directly influenced by their Greek predecessors, but there are some differences. While Greek theatres were open to the air, Roman theatres could have a roof, and were not always built on slopes. The Roman orchestra is semi-circular rather than circular. The back wall of a Roman stage (*scaenae frons*) is as high as the uppermost part of the seating area and is richly decorated, usually with a multi-storied structure.
- While the earliest surviving Greek theatre made of stone dates to the 5th century BCE, for a long time Roman theatres were constructed of perishable materials. The first stone theatre in Rome was built by Pompey in 55 BCE.
- Spectacular Roman theatres made of stone survive in cities around the Mediterranean, for example in Leptis Magna (Libya), Sabratha (Libya) and Bosra (Syria).

#### **Bibliography:**

[Becker, Jeffrey A. "Introduction to ancient Greek architecture," in \*Smarthistory\*, August 8, 2015](#)

Richter, Gisela M.A. *A Handbook of Greek Art*. 9th ed. Oxford: Phaidon, 1987

[Roberts, John. "Theatre Staging, Greek." In \*The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World\*, edited by John Roberts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007](#)

Wheeler, Mortimer. *Roman Art and Architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996

**Materials suitable for:** Classical Studies (Senior Cycle) – Art and Architecture in Greek Society; Roman Art and Architecture.

# Theatres



Leptis Magna (Libya) – theatre. Mohamed Kenawi/Manar al-Athar

The theatre in Leptis Magna was founded by Annobal Rufus and dates to 1-2 CE. The *orchestra* originally had a floor in painted stucco. The marble floor is from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

The marble columns are from the time of Antoninus Pius (138–61 CE).

## More images

[Leptis Magna - theatre](#)



Bosra (Bostra) (Syria) – theatre. Edward Zychowicz-Coghill/Manar al-Athar [ID 87857]

The theatre in Bosra is made of basalt and is one of the largest in Syria; the diameter of the *cavea* is 102 m. It dates to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. The *scaenae frons* was decorated with imported Proconnesian marble and white limestone in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

## More images

[Bosra \(Bostra\) - theatre](#)



Sabratha (Libya) - theatre - facing north. Andrew Wilson/Manar al-Athar [ID 141600]

## More images

[Sabratha - theatre](#)

The theatre in Sabratha dates to the Severan period (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) and it is the best preserved in North Africa. Its spectacular *scaenae frons* in three levels of colonnades was rebuilt in 1937.

Explore Leptis Magna and Sabratha via the Heritage Gazetteer of Libya:

[Sabratha](#)

[Sabratha – Theatre](#)

[Leptis Magna](#)

## Bibliography:

Freyberger, K., and Solange Ory. "Bosra." In *Grove Art Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003

Sear, F. B. "Leptis Magna." In *Grove Art Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003

———. "Sabratha." In *Grove Art Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003

# Theatres



Sabratha - theatre - stage relief - tragedy scene. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 141662]



Athens, National Archaeological Museum. A stone version of a mask used in Greek comic theatre. Contorted features were typical in theatre masks and this one represents a slave. Pentellic marble (2nd century BCE). Found in Athens near the Dipylon Gate. Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 55918]



Naples, National Archaeological Museum. Relief showing a theatre performance. Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 55932]

- It is thought that ancient **actors** were male generally. They wore **masks**, representing both male and female characters.
- The two major genres of drama were tragedy and comedy. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, tragedy became less popular, while audiences preferred comedic performances. From the imperial period onwards, pantomime was also performed.
- In a Roman play, the stage usually depicted a street. Mobile structures represented houses. Roman actors typically performed in Greek costume.

## **Bibliography:**

Roberts, John. "Theatre Staging, Roman." In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, edited by John Roberts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007

# Roman amphitheatres



Pompeii – Amphitheatre. Michael Sanders/HEIR Project [ID 72455]



Rome – Flavian Amphitheatre (Colosseum). Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 44087]



Rome – Flavian Amphitheatre (Colosseum). Wrench & Son/Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 42038]

- Amphitheatres are uniquely Roman oval (sometimes round) structures.
- The seating area encircles the arena, where spectacles like **gladiatorial games** (*munera*) and staged **beast hunts** (*venationes*) took place.
- Earlier amphitheatres most likely were made of wood. The first amphitheatre made of stone was erected in **Pompeii in 80 BCE**.
- One of the most famous examples is the **Flavian Amphitheatre in Rome**, better known as the **Colosseum** after the colossal statue of Nero which was next to it.
- It was built under the emperors of the Flavian dynasty, Vespasian (r. 69–79 CE) and his son Titus, who dedicated it in **80 CE**.
- The Colosseum is a massive structure: 188 x 156 m and 52 m high. It is built of travertine stone. There were two underground levels under the arena for cages, lifts, cells and storage rooms for props, weapons etc.
- It could hold around 45,000 spectators.
- Its exterior consists of three levels of arches flanked by engaged half-columns in the Tuscan (similar to the Doric), Ionic, and Corinthian orders. The fourth uppermost level is decorated with Corinthian pilasters (shallow decorative elements with a base and a capital but only slightly projecting from the wall). Statues of Greek gods and heroes were displayed in the arches on the second and third floors.
- Approximately **two hundred amphitheatres** were built **across the empire**, predominantly in the West.

## **Bibliography:**

[Kyle, Donald G. "Colosseum." In \*The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010](#)

Sear, F. B., and Zilah Quezado Deckker. "Amphitheatre." In *Grove Art Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003

For more images of amphitheatres in Italy, please explore the [HEIR Project](#)

# Roman amphitheatres



*El Djem - amphitheatre. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 40401]*



*Leptis Magna - amphitheatre. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 42320]*



*El Djem - amphitheatre. Sean Leatherbury/Manar al-Athar [ID 40409]*



*Leptis Magna - amphitheatre. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 42318]*

- Well-preserved Roman amphitheatres survive in North Africa.
- A good example is the amphitheatre in **El Djem** (ancient Thysdrus), in modern-day Tunisia. It dates to the **middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE** and it is very large in size, ca. 149 x 124 m.
- **Leptis Magna**, in modern-day Libya, also has a well-preserved **amphitheatre**, dated via an inscription to **56 CE**. In contrast to most amphitheatres, it is **not elliptical** in form but it is characterized by **two semicircles** connected by a short straight section.

## **More images**

[Leptis Magna – amphitheatre](#)

[El Djem - amphitheatre](#)

Explore Leptis Magna via the [Heritage Gazetteer of Libya](#)

## **Bibliography**

[Concannon, Cavan W. "Leptis Magna." In \*The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010](#)

[Sear, F. B., and Zilah Quezado Deckker. "Amphitheatre." In \*Grove Art Online\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003](#)

# Circuses/Hippodromes



Caesarea - Coastal Hippodrome. Emilio Bonfiglio/Manar al-Athar [ID 69967]



Istanbul (Constantinople) – Hippodrome. T. R. R. Stebbing/Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 33475]



Spain, Catalonia, Gerona. Mosaic fragment depicting a chariot race. José de C. Serra Rafols/Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 66122]

- A **circus** or a **hippodrome** (from Greek, *hippos* 'horse' and *dromos* 'course, race') is a longitudinal racetrack for chariot races.
- The chariot could be drawn by two horses (*bigae*) or four horses (*quadrigae*).
- The track (*arena*), which could be from 400 – 600 m long, was divided in the middle by the *spina*. The *spina* was adorned by monuments, such as the obelisks that still stand in the Hippodrome in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).
- The track was surrounded by a seating area (*cavea*).
- Circuses were predominantly built from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century.
- Few Roman circuses survive today.
- A prominent example is the Circus Maximus in Rome.
- A well-preserved example is the coastal hippodrome in Caesarea.

## More images

[Caesarea - Coastal Hippodrome](#)

## Bibliography

[Humphrey, J. H. "Circus, Roman." In \*Grove Art Online\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003](#)

Wheeler, Mortimer. *Roman Art and Architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996

# Exercises

## ***Questions for discussion***

- What is the characteristic shape of a theatre / amphitheatre / hippodrome?
- What types of entertainment took place in each of the three types of buildings?
- Did the Greeks build amphitheatres?
- How are Greek and Roman theatres different from each other?
- How were ancient Greek and Roman actors costumed?
- Which is the most prominent Roman amphitheatre?

## ***Connect / True or False / Correct the mistakes (p.8-9)***

Print the exercises on p. 8 and 9. Ask your students to solve them.

## ***Crossword (p.10)***

Print the exercise on p. 10. Ask your students to fill in the crossword.

The exercises on p. 8-10 are suitable as for in-class work or as homework.

The answers to these exercises are on p. 11.

# Class Exercises

## Connect

Do you recognise these types of buildings? What kinds of entertainment took place there?  
Draw lines to connect each picture with its corresponding building type and the type of entertainment that it was used for.



**Building**

**Entertainment**

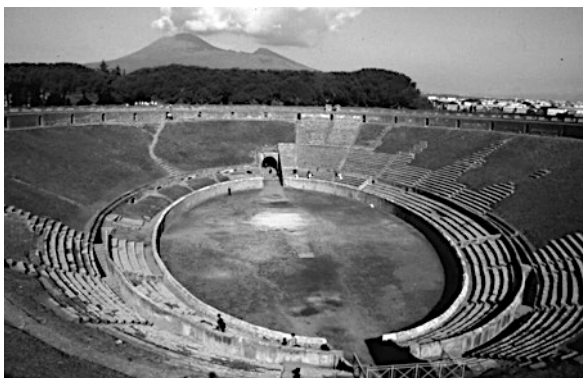
theatre

chariot races



amphitheatre

gladiatorial  
games



hippodrome

comedies and  
tragedies



# Exercises

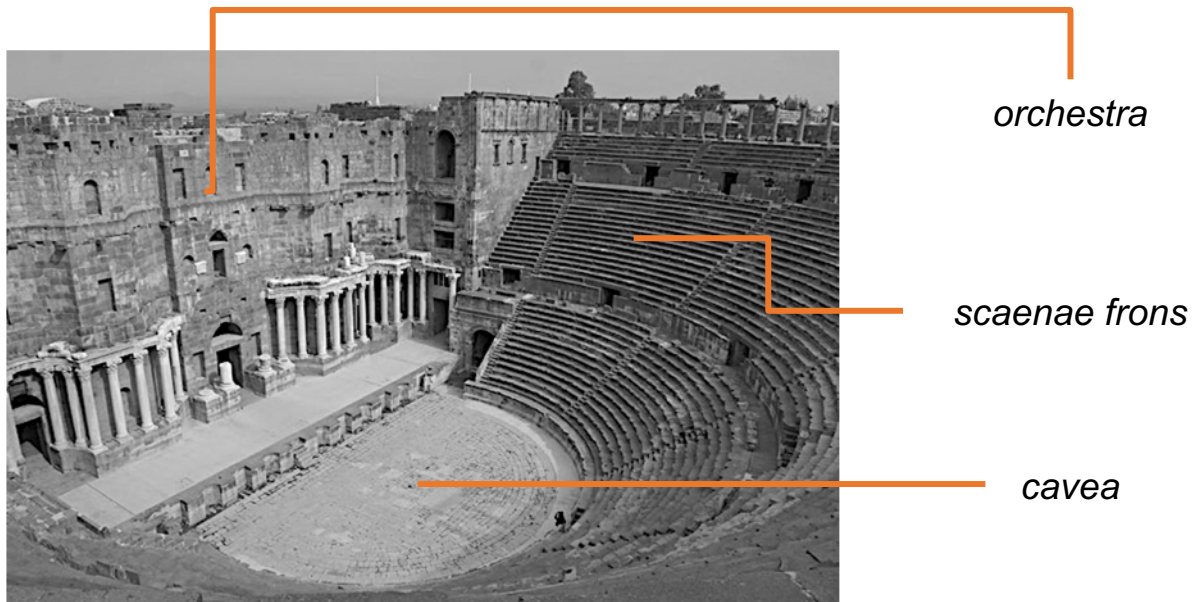
## **True or false**

Are these statements true or false?

	True	False
1. Ancient theatrical performances were for entertainment only.		
2. Chariot races took place in the Colosseum.		
3. Many women performed in ancient theatres.		
4. Ancient actors wore masks.		
5. Animal hunts took place in Roman amphitheatres.		

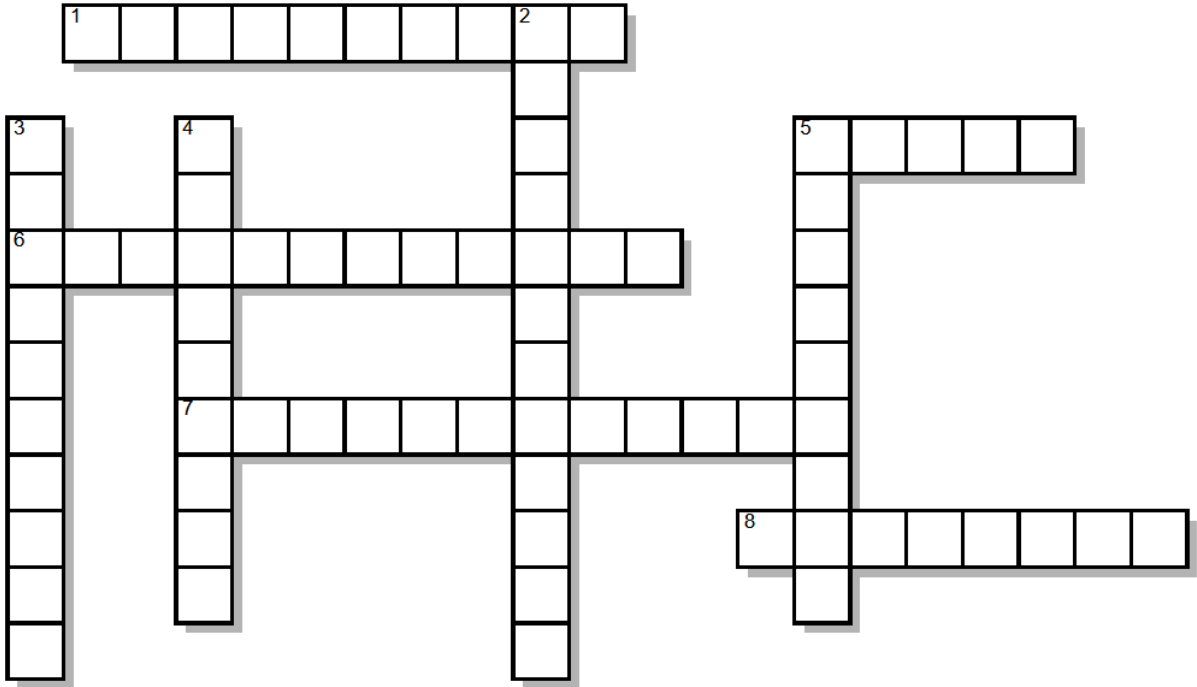
## **Correct the mistakes**

The elements of this Roman theatre have been mislabeled. Can you correct the mistakes?  
(Optional) Where is this theatre?



# Exercises

## Crossword



### ACROSS

- 1 Order of architecture used for the Flavian Amphitheatre
- 5 A seating area in a Roman theatre
- 6 A type of marble used for the theatre in Bosra (Syria)
- 7 The back wall of a Roman stage in a theatre (two words)
- 8 A chariot drawn by four horses

### DOWN

- 2 A usually oval structure where spectacles like gladiatorial games took place
- 3 A racetrack for chariot races. A circus.
- 4 A dancing place for the chorus in a Greco-Roman theatre
- 5 The most famous Roman amphitheatre

# Exercises (Answers)

## Connect (answers)



hippodrome

chariot races



theatre

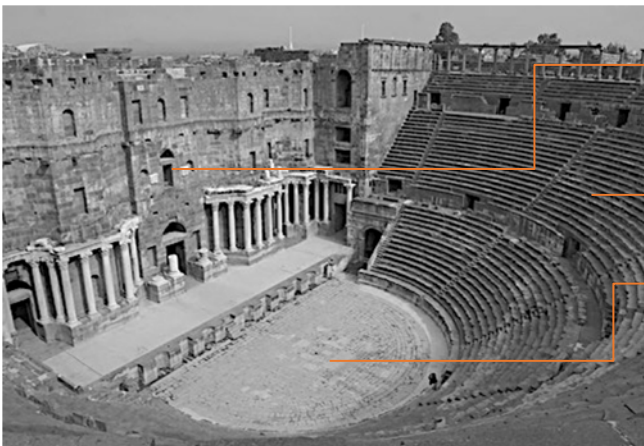
comedies and  
tragedies



amphitheatre

gladiatorial  
games

## Correct the mistakes (answers)



*scaenae frons*

*cavea*

*orchestra*

## True or false (answers)

True: 4, 5; False: 1, 2, 3.

## Crossword (answers)

1. Corinthian; 2. amphitheatre; 3. hippodrome; 4. orchestra; 5. (down) Colosseum; 5. (across) cavea; 6. Proconnesian; 7. scaenae frons; 8. quadriga.