

Destroyed Amphitheaters of Asia Minor

Dr. Ece Çoksolmaz¹

¹<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9951-5834>, ecocoksolmaz@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Asia Minor today encompasses the borders of Anatolia. In the region, many cities from the Hellenistic Period had theater or stadium structures. Adaptations were made to these structures during the Roman Period to accommodate the bloodthirsty performances typical of the era. Amphitheaters were a unique architectural design of the Roman Empire. Despite the spread of Roman urban planning in Asia Minor, the number of amphitheaters that have survived to the present day is fewer compared to the West. The primary reason for this is the insufficient archaeological research conducted in this region. Additionally, due to the transformation of Hellenistic theaters, there might have been a decreased demand for the construction of new amphitheaters. Amphitheaters have not survived well due to various factors, including the influence of Christianity, natural disasters, climatic conditions, the use of building materials, and human destruction. The earliest known amphitheater in Asia Minor was situated in Antioch on the Orontes and was demolished due to the influence of Christianity. The Kyzikos Amphitheater is the largest amphitheater in Asia Minor. However, due to human activity and earthquakes, only the supporting pillars are visible today. Although the Pergamon Amphitheater was subjected to human destruction and abandoned due to climatic conditions, parts of its vaults have survived to this day. The Anazarbos Amphitheater was also dismantled for building materials. Despite significant damage, two supporting pillars and the plan of the structure can still be clearly seen on the site. Recent studies on the Mastaura Amphitheater have increased significantly. The vegetation covering the structure has both preserved and damaged it. It is currently the best-preserved amphitheater in Asia Minor. Five amphitheaters have been identified in this region, but this number could increase to six with further research in Zeugma.

KEYWORDS

Asia Minor, amphitheater, Rome, destruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays Asia Minor is used in reference to Anatolia. This naming was not known to researchers. During Roman times when this region was called Asia, the name referred to the area which is to the north of Taurus mountains. Asia Minor denotation was used during the era of Byzantine Empire (Texier, 2002). In this territory which has hosted many civilizations, many theatre structures are encountered. However, the number of amphitheaters is low.

Before going into the details of amphitheaters, one needs to be able to comprehend some notions. Theatre lexically originates from Theastai which means to see in ancient Greek. Theatron, on the other hand, was used in reference to the place where the audience sit in the ancient Hellenic theaters (Taner et al, 1966). Amphi, in Greek, has the meaning of bidirectional (Hunter & Morris, 1896). Amphitheaters emerged in Italy, probably originating from Etruscan and Samnite civilizations (Galindo et al, 2020). Amphitheatre was first constructed when Gaius Scribonius Curio had two wooden theaters built opposite to each other during the gladiatorial competition he organized on the behalf of his father in B.C 53 or 52 (Pliny, The Natural History 36.). Hereupon amphitheater is a structure formed by two theaters of a semicircular plan (Monti et al, 2018). Additionally, it is a typical arena formed by an elliptic or circular area which is surrounded by stepped sitting areas and used for gladiatorial combats and shows (Davies & Jokiniemi, 2008).

The Roman emperor used amphitheaters as a tool for tour de his own force. However, amphitheaters were not the only structures used for this propaganda. Circuses and theaters also serve this end (Welch, 2007). Moreover, in contrast to what modern researchers assume, the term amphitheater was not used for a single structure during ancient times.

Some epigraphical sources demonstrate that it was also used for theater or stadion (Dodge, 2009). In the ancient city of Assos, it is mentioned in the inscription on the architrave block of the large structure in the lower agora, which belongs to the Hellenistic Period, that an amphitheater was either constructed or restored in the city. However, this statement was used for the existing theater (Arslan et al, 2017). Furthermore, amphitheatron stadion description was used particularly for stadions of double sphendone plans by Strabon (Strabon, 2000, 14.1).¹ There is a confusion about the term amphitheater in the ancient era.

In the territory of Roman Empire, the number of amphitheaters identified hitherto is between 260 and 280. The chronologically first amphitheater partially made of stone became an architectural form during the period from the beginning of B.C 1st century until the midst of the century. During this era, it is observed that many amphitheaters, particularly including Campania, in number were built to the south of Italy (Heath, 2022). The wooden sitting plan of Roman Forum probably inspired the elliptic plan of the permanent amphitheater built in Pompei during the early era (Dodge, 2014). Pompei Amphitheatre is the first to be made of stone (Heath, 2022). From a modern perspective, the archetypal instance is Flavian Amphitheatre which is also called Colosseum in Rome. This structure entered service in A.D. 80. The structure with its 189 x 156 m outer dimensions and with its seating capacity of at least 50.000 people is a colossal amphitheater. This is an exception as most amphitheaters are much smaller. In addition to the increasing number of amphitheaters during the A.D. 2nd century, 250 of them have been identified in Roman territory. During the A.D. 3rd century, a decrease occurred in the construction of amphitheaters. When it comes to the A.D. 4th century, the construction activities ended (Heath 2022).

There was an amphitheater in Byzantion which is not considered as a part of Asia Minor although it is in the territory of our country. In general, it is assumed that public buildings belonging to Roman Era centered around the area in which nowadays Hagia Sophia is located. The theatre and amphitheater must have been located in the eastward part of the city (Lordoğlu, 2019). The amphitheater was built during the times of the Roman Emperor Septimus Severus. We encounter the findings of the lost structure in the coin from Severus Alexander times (Dodge, 2009; Golvin, 1988). I. Constantin also adopted the policy of Septimus Severus and did not make too many changes in the city. However, Emperor Theodosius I undertook the demolition of numerous pagan structures, subsequently repurposing their functions for different uses. This situation probably affected the amphitheater of the city as well (Lordoğlu, 2019).

There were Roman legionary towns in Asia Minor. From a general point of view, it is known that gladiators had training in these towns after B.C. 105 (Stelius, 2016). The military amphitheaters built for legionaries were made a part of the city system. As a result, these structures were used for military purposes like horse training, practices, and parades. However, it is also proposed that the probability that amphitheaters were used for these military purposes is small considering the dimensions of the amphitheaters (Grosser, 2009). In the eastern legionary city of Zeugma, a theater structure is located today to the northwest of Belkıs Hill and to the west of Köşk Hill. Geophysical studies conducted by Gökay and his team on the stage building of the theater revealed an arcuate anomaly. The structure has been proposed as an amphitheater (Gökay, 2017). However, the current studies consider the structure as a theater (Gökay, 2022). Another geophysical study conducted to the southwest of the square called At Meydanı located also in Zeugma identifies a military training area/ amphitheatron in the plain of the terrace pervading the Bahçedere direction. The outer diameter of this elliptic area has been calculated as 35 meters. This area has been considered as amphitheatron (Gökay, 2017). There must be an amphitheater in Zeugma. However, due to the lack of researches, it could not be considered in the context of this subject.

The earliest gladiatorial play in Asia Minor was organized by the Seleucid king Antiochos IV Epiphanes in the city of Daphne, which is currently located in Hatay-Defne (Dodge, 2014). Since a theater structure from the Roman Period was identified in Daphne, it has been determined that the structure had a waterproof floor, and it has been established that the earliest aquatic plays in Anatolia were probably performed in this theater (Kenfield, 2014). It is hard to argue that the first amphitheater in Asia Minor was built here. Probably, as Dodge alleged, gladiatorial plays were held in a temporal arrangement (Dodge, 2014) or we can say that these plays took place in the identified theater.

In the territory of Asia Minor, the earliest amphitheater example known was located in Antiocheia Orontes. Nowadays Antiocheia Orontes city takes place in Hatay-Antakya. The amphitheater of the city, on the other hand, could not endure hitherto. It is believed that the construction of the amphitheater was started by IV. Antiochos Epiphanes. Also, in the slope of Silpios Mountain, an amphitheater was built by Iulius Caesar. The utility function of the amphitheater was narrowed down in the 4th century A.D. The amphitheater was got demolished by I. Theodosius (Sayar & Önder, 2014). The earliest amphitheater sample in the east was of a simple form. It probably did not have any infrastructure for the arena and must have been partially carved into rock. It resembled other amphitheaters of Republic Era in Italy and in the West such as Paestum in

¹Aphrodisias Stadion (Welch, 1998) and Laodikeia Ad Lykus Stadion (Şimşek, 2005) are introduced as stadions of amphitheatron plans.

the south of Italy and Carmona in Spain. It has been conveyed that there was an amphitheater in one of the Asia Minor cities called Comana Cappadocia which is now located in Adana-Şar but that there are no physical evidences (Dodge, 2009). No evidences of the existence of an amphitheater in the city have been identified during researches conducted in the city and the city has a theatre structure

Amphitheaters which were spread on a large area in the territory of Roman Empire are small in number in Eastern Mediterranean (Heath, 2022). Five amphitheaters in Asia Minor have been identified. The small number of amphitheaters in this region is due to the lack of archeological researches and excavations (Dodge 2014). Although researches assumed that gladiatorial combats were not common as it were in the West; tombs of gladiators, plastic artifacts and epigraphic sources indicate that these gladiatorial plays took place quite often in the east of Rome (Dodge, 2009). Gladiatorial plays were quite enjoyed in Asia Minor. Gladiatorial combats were forbidden in the year of A.D 404 due to the weakening of governance and the effect of Christianity (Bridge, 2017). As a result of this effect, amphitheaters were destroyed, disassembled or transformed. The amphitheaters identified in Asia Minor are analyzed in detail and presented (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Map showing the amphitheaters of Asia Minor (Google Earth)

2. AMPHITHEATERS

2.1 Kyzikos Amphitheater

Kyzikos is in the territory which is nowadays called Balıkesir-Erdek. The amphitheater is to the north of the city, outside the city walls and in the northwest direction. The structure was built on Kleite River which is nowadays located between Belkıs and Hamamlı villages (Yaylalı et al, 1996), and was built according to the structure of the valley (Hamilton, 1842). Similar to the Pergamon example, the amphitheater was built on the riverbed. In addition to gladiatorial plays, it was used for naumachia plays as these plays were related to water (Koçhan, 2013; Radt, 1996). Nowadays the structure whose two long piers can be seen is covered by flora. Since the area where the amphitheater is located is used for farming and is a personal property, no excavation has been carried out.

The structure was first described as a circus with small dimensions (Pococke, 1745). The amphitheater is of elliptical form and has 180 x 155 m outer dimensions (Yaylalı et al, 1996). Due to its dimensions, the amphitheater is likened to Colosseum (Koçhan, 2018- Figure 2). A grey mortar mixed with granite was used in the structure (Turner, 1820). The bottoms of seating steps of the cavea in the east and west directions were placed on earth while the ones in the north and south directions were placed on vaults carried by strong piers due to riverbed (Koçhan & Meral, 2010). As a result of the studies conducted in 1989, some benches of the cavea were identified as in situ (Yaylalı, 1991). The studies carried out by Koçhan during 2011 identified 3 marmoreal benches. These benches are of 0.44 x 0.67 m dimensions (Koçhan, 2011). 32 vomitoriums of the amphitheater were detected by Texier (Texier, 2002). It is estimated that the structure has an audience capacity of more than 20000 people (Koçhan & Tercanlıoğlu, 2018).

While 6 or 7 vaults of the amphitheater remained standing in the 18th century (Rustafjaell, 1902), nowadays it is hard to perceive the structure except its haunching. Furthermore, the pier veneering of the amphitheater has been disassembled and extremely exposed to human factors. A well-preserved sample of these vaults is currently in the southeast direction and of 25 m height. The width of the piers is between 6 m and 8 m. Due to this height, it is suggested that the structure is two-fold (Yaylalı et al, 1996) while it is also possible that the structure is three-fold (Yaylalı, 2018 – Figure 3). Although Kyzikos Amphitheater is similar to Colosseum in terms of its dimensions, its height is lower.

Due to opus caementiculus wall construction technique detected on the southeast vault of the amphitheater, the structure dates to Hadrian Era (Yaylalı et al, 1996). The construction of the amphitheater should have started after the earthquake in A.D. 117 (Meral, 2000). It should have been completed or restored after the earthquake affecting Bandırma and its surrounding in A.D. 155 (Soysal et al, 1981; Koçhan, 2018).

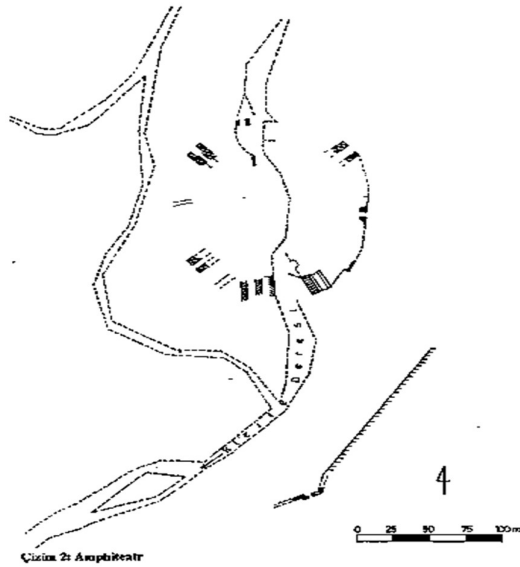


Figure 2. Drawing of the Kyzikos Amphitheater (Yaylı et al., 1996)



Figure 3. Kyzikos Amphitheater (Koçhan, 2018)

2.2 Pergamon Amphitheater

Pergamon is in the territory which is nowadays called İzmir-Bergama. The urban planning of Pergamon in Roman times developed around Musalla Graveyard Hill with a concept similar to Palatino Hill in the capital Rome, and was located close to the theater and stadion. The amphitheater was placed at the west mountainside of the hill and in the east, it was placed in the natural depth area in the east mountainside of Boztepe. Bergama Rivulet flows between the two hills (Pirson et al, 2020). Despite having been researched by travelers, the excavation of the structure continues under the leadership of F. Pirson.

The structure is medium built and of circular form. It is suggested that the rationale behind its circular form lies in both ideological and urban considerations (Baykara, 2024). The approximate diameter of Pergamon Amphitheater is 132 meters. The interior design of the structure is sporadic. The north and south entrances were not built symmetrically (Pirson, 2021). During the construction of the structure, some radial backbone structures were placed to support the benches between the north and south slope (Pirson et al, 2020). Although the benches are tuff-stone, some examples differently made of andesite have been detected as well. Furthermore, an inscription reserved on some of the benches has been identified. As a result, it is concluded that there were places reserved for privileged groups in the city (Pirson, 2023).

Considering that the amphitheater was located in related to the stream, it has been proposed that naumachia plays took place in the structure. In this respect, the excavation in 2018 revealed a waterproof floor with 13 cm in thickness, in the arena of the amphitheater. (Pirson et al, 2020). Moreover, the structure ruins detected to the east of the arena belonged to a plan made of two long rectangular stone blocks containing both ancient and modern sewage and guide channels. These two findings are clear evidences of that some special plays like naumachia took place in the amphitheater. In the following course of time, these ruins lost their functions. A question mark remains on that this structure resembling a pool was used for shows or in the following times (Pirson, 2022).

The research carried out in 2021 detected 6 different construction phases of the amphitheater (Pirson, 2023). The examination carried out by Bohn and Schazmann in 1908 has never been published in detail. The structure dates to the first half of the A.D. 2nd century (Baykara, 2024). Additionally, Galen who was the doctor of gladiators in Pergamon worked in the years between A.D 158 and A.D. 164. The amphitheater was used during this period (Singer, 2019). Excavations detected some ceramic pieces from the late Byzantine times between the material layers in the arena. Thus, it is suggested that the structure was not used after this era (Baykara, 2024). The researches carried out on the edges of the arena identified niche confining the west walls. Due to the detection of lots of shoe nails and residue layers, the floor of the arena has been examined. As a result, it has been concluded that the plays of Roman times may have been ended due to climate factors (Pirson, 2022 – Figure 4-5)

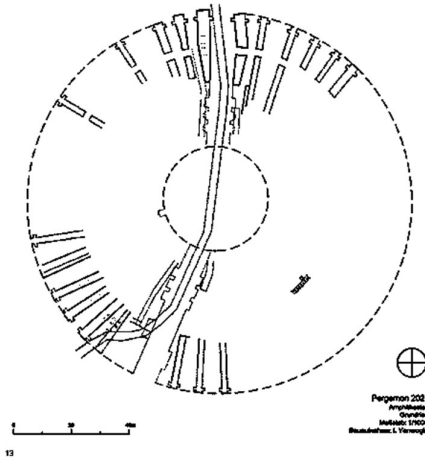


Figure 4. Pergamon Amphitheater Plan (Pirson 2022)



Figure 5. Pergamon Amphitheater (Pirson 2022)

2.3 Mastaura Amphitheater

The city is in the territory of Aydın-Nazilli. The amphitheater is to the west of the river whose ancient name was Khrysaoris (Akkurnaz, 2022a). The amphitheater was placed on the sloping land laying in the northeast-southwest axis (Atmaca & Akkurnaz, 2024). Nowadays the parts except the one to the south are covered with earth and flora (Yaşar, 2021).

While placing the north and the east of the structure on the mountainside, the parts to the south and to the west were built on vaults since they were at the bottom elevation of the slope (Atmaca & Akkurnaz, 2024). The surface exploration carried out in the amphitheater covered by flora identified the dimensions of the outer vaults as 6 m and the gap between the vaults in the inner orchestra as approximately 3.5 m (Akkurnaz, 2020). There are various rooms in the outer walls supporting the benches. Moreover, it is possible to enter the niched room today (Akkurnaz, 2022b). The amphitheater is of elliptical form. The vomitorium is covered by earth in the southeast direction (Akkurnaz, 2022a).

The walls of the amphitheater was constructed using rubble stone locally sourced from gneiss fragments. It is also determined that dust and lime were mixed as plaster. When it comes to the dating of the amphitheater, as a result of its north cavea placed in a sloping land, the possibility that this part belongs to a theater from Hellenistic era has been arisen. It is understood that during the times of Roman Empire, the structure was built by surrounding the whole area including the Hellenistic theater except the north cavea with vaults (Akkurnaz, 2022a – Figure 6).



Figure 6. Mastaura Amphitheater (Atmaca and Akkurnaz, 2024)

2.4 Anazarbos Amphitheater

Anazarbos is in Adana in the territory of Kozan. In the city, the theater, amphitheater, and circus structures are located close to each other. The amphitheater, which we are valuating within the scope of this context, is situated to the southwest of the rock on which one of the circus's stands rests.

Nowadays the elliptical plan of the amphitheater can be noticed (Figure 7). The east part of the cavea was based upon the cliff. Similar to the circus, the benches were carved into the rock and stone was used in some of the benches. The cavea to the west, on the other hand, was built upon vault. During the visitation of Gough, it was asserted that the structure was supported by 22 buttresses. Nowadays 2 piers supporting the cavea can be seen. Gough also detected an underpass (Gough, 1952). This underpass must have been built for the passage of wild animals into the arena (Alanyalı & Çoksolmaz, 2021). The benches can be barely seen. It has been identified that the cavities above benches were built for canopy (Posamentir & Sayar, 2006).

The dimensions of the structure were measured as 62 x 83 m (Gough, 1952). The outer dimension of the amphitheater is about 116 x 94 meters. The structures must have been built during the Roman Imperial period. The stone material of the structure was transported during both the late ancient era and modern times to be used in other constructions.

Surface explorations have been carried out hitherto, but a drilling excavation is found in the southeast corner when the structure was visited (Figure 8). Here, the prohedria seating area of the theater has been revealed and an inscription on them has been documented (Gülşen, 2023). Although the structure has been ravaged, it is appropriate for restoration (Gülşen et al, 2021).

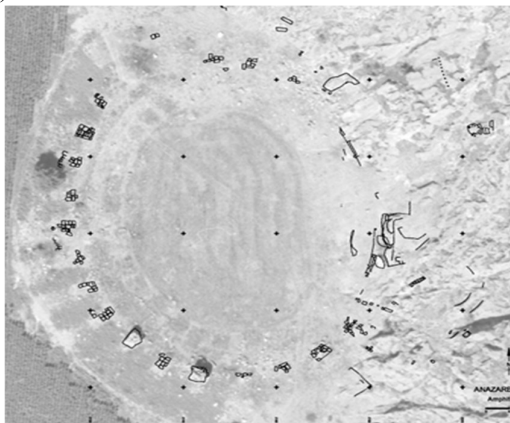


Figure 7. Anazarbos Amphitheater ortho-photo (Posamentir and Sayar, 2006)



Figure 8. Anazarbos Amphitheater (Author's own.)

3. CONCLUSION

Six amphitheaters have been identified in the territory of our country. One amphitheater in Byzantion and five amphitheaters remain within the borders of Asia Minor. Important ancient cities developed in Asia Minor during Roman urban planning. However, the number of amphitheaters is low in comparison to the west. This may be due to the lack of archaeological research in this area.

Considering that Hellenistic cities generally had a theater structure and Rome transformed these structures with its own techniques, the need for amphitheaters should have been less. As a result, gladiatorial and animal combat and water plays could take place in the Hellenistic theaters. Extending the orchestra or stage, raising the cavea, or adding parapet walls are indicators of this situation. Additionally, there are stadion and circus structures in Asia Minor cities. It is encountered that by barricading the sphendone part of the structures, these structures were transformed into arena. Additionally, there are examples of double-turned stadiums similar to the amphitheater plan, such as those in Laodikeia and Aphrodisias. Thus, even though there was a need for amphitheaters, they generally met this need by converting these structures.

Amphitheaters in Asia Minor were destroyed under the influence of Christianity as in the case of Antiocheia Orontes Amphitheater. It is thought that this amphitheater was of a simple form benefitting from the slope of the mountainside. As it is seen in Anazarbos Amphitheater placed partially on the slope of the mountainside and in other examples, a quarry was used, then disassembled so that its materials could be used in other structures. As in the case of Kyzikos example, it has been ravaged by human and natural factors or as in the case of Pergamon Amphitheater, it was deserted due to the climate factors. Kyzikos and Pergamon Amphitheaters enabled water games organized in amphitheaters by being built in riverbeds. The locations of the two structures are the same. Nowadays the piers of Kyzikos Amphitheater can be seen. Some parts of vaults and cavea remain standing in Pergamon Amphitheater.

The amphitheater standing hitherto is located in Mastaura. The current researches revealed that by adding another cavea into the Hellenistic theater, the structure was transformed into an amphitheater. The first example similar to this case is

encountered in Nicopolis Stadion in Greece. Furthermore, the researchers described this structure as a transition from Greek stadion to Roman amphitheater. During Domitian Era, another turn was added to the single-sphendone stadion built in Augustus Era. Both of these implementation on the stadion were a product of Roman times.

The construction techniques of Mastaura and Anazarbos Amphitheaters are similar. Some part of the cavea took advantage of the slope of the mountainside while some other parts were built on vaults. In Anazarbos Amphitheater, some benches were carved into the rock. This technique can be encountered in Hellenistic Era. However, it is hard to say that there is an implementation similar to the one in Mastaura here. Anazarbos also has another theater as in the case of Pergamon. Benefitting from topographical conditions such as the slope of mountainside is a common technique encountered in other structures. Thus, this technique became a characteristic of Asia Minor amphitheaters.

Pergamon Amphitheater is of a circular plan. Other instances are of elliptical form. The circular form of Pergamon Amphitheater is considered to be a result of Pergamon urban planning. In terms of the dimensions of the structures, only Kyzikos Amphitheater has similar dimensions to Clossium. Other structures generally are medium built.

Nowadays excavations continue in Pergamon and Mastaura Amphitheaters. A drilling has been carried out in Anazarbos. No excavation has been carried out in Kyzikos Amphitheaters since it belongs to personal property. As a result of excavations, prohedria area has been encountered in Pergamon and Anazarbos Amphitheaters, which indicates that there was a privileged social class in the city.

Findings of an amphitheater in Zeugma which was an important city in the east for Roman Empire have been found but researches are not sufficient. Zeugma is similar to another legionary city Anazarbos. There is a circus, a theater, and an amphitheater in Anazarbos. Thus, an amphitheater structure must be searched in Zeugma. Asia Minor amphitheaters are hard to detect as they are ravaged. Also excavations and archeological researches are insufficient in this area.

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