

Caerleon:

An amphitheatre

to make history



The Amphitheatre

A History of the amphitheatre:

- The earliest permanent amphitheatre was built in Pompeii around 75 BC
- Normally round or oval in shape
- Found throughout the Roman Empire, though the uses vary depending on the context



Roman Britain and the Amphitheatre:

- Caerleon is the most well preserved amphitheatre in Roman Britain
- There are very few amphitheatres in Britain
- The invasion of Britain started in 43 AD, though Wales wasn't "conquered" until around 78 AD, because of the conflict with the 'locals'



The Arthurian Legend

One of the reasons the amphitheatre at Caerleon was excavated by Mortimer and Wheeler in 1926, continuing excavations that started in 1908 and funded by the National Museum of Wales, was because this site has been subjected to the speculation that it was the source of the legend of King Arthur's Round Table. This legend was first given to Caerleon by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century.

A reproduction of Evrard d'Espinques' illumination of the Prose Lancelot, depicting King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table

The Amphitheatre

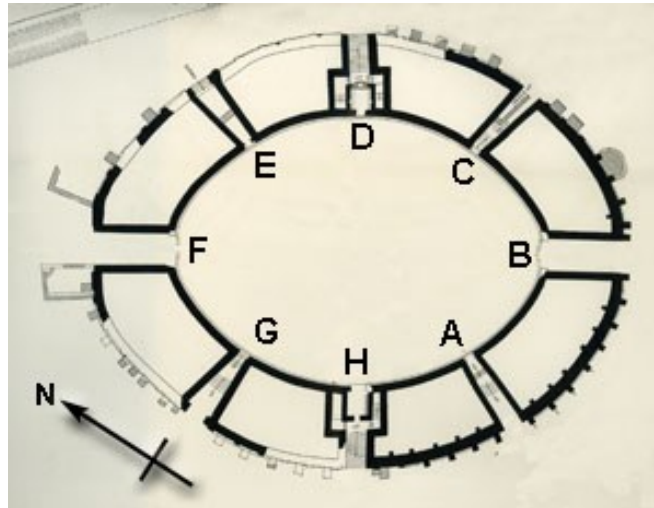


Figure 3—Site plan

Caerleon

The amphitheatre itself measures to 184 feet long by 136 feet wide and is oval in shape. It was built around 90 AD. The amphitheatre itself was built into the ground outside the fortress walls, the area used to build the amphitheatre also contains the remains of a bath house close by, this bath house was not as sophisticated as the bath house within the fortress walls, and it was perhaps more likely to be used by the general public, those who didn't have access to the baths within the fortress. What remains of the theatre now is the stone work at the base of the structure, although when it was being used regularly it would have had large wooden structures on top of the stone base, this would have been the seating areas for the lower class of citizens, while those with more wealth and social standing would be seated nearer that actual arena. The amphitheatre had the potential of, with the addition of the wooden seating areas, having the total capacity of 6,000. It has six "main" entrance ways (figure 3 A, B, C, E, F, G) , two of which are used as processional ways (B,F). These processional entrances are larger than the other two entrances, the smaller entrances were used generally by those attending the event taking place, while the larger were used by the 'entertainment' or the military during a parade and potentially by the individuals sponsoring the event itself. This use of the processional entrance ways by the sponsors was because this would allow for a visible show of wealth and status as an extra to being sat in the boxes separated from the rest of the public. There are two boxes (Figure 3, D, H) that are separated from the rest of the seating, each box has its own entrance, one box has a room underneath that was perhaps used to house the animals used in fight or those individuals that are to be engaged in the fight or perhaps even slaves. The other box has a small nook underneath it that contains a statue within it that is most likely a god. These boxes were reserved for the elite, and especially for those who sponsored the events. The main arena area itself is designed with the centre being slightly elevated with a form of a drainage system around the edge, this allowed it to be used during times when the weather might not permit other activities to take place. This amphitheatre was used differently to those within Roman Italy, it was unlikely that there were regular fights with exotic animals. This is because there wasn't realistic opportunities for this to happen, it would have been incredibly difficult and expensive to transport animals such as lions to Caerleon and even if the native animals from Wales were to be used it would be wolves and bears, these were incredibly hard to track down considering the size of the settlement and the surrounding peoples. This does not mean that there were no fights taking place more that there different to the typical assumption of what happened at an amphitheatre. This amphitheatre was also used by the legion stationed at Caerleon for activities such as parades, this made it even more important for the arena to have ground that was well drained and suitable for such activities as well as the normal entertainment.

The Amphitheatre

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With acknowledgements to:

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