

El Jem Amphitheatre

On land | Tunisia | about 238 CE | Grades 3-5

Name _____ Date _____

El Jem's amphitheater could hold about 35,000 people, and it still looms over the town today.

Read the story

Around 238 CE, the Roman city of Thysdrus, today's El Jem, was rich from selling olive oil. Its people built a huge amphitheater, one of the largest in the Roman world. It was made of stone blocks, with arches stacked three levels high.

Crowds came to watch shows with trained animals, wild beast hunts and gladiator fights. Under the arena floor were tunnels where animals and performers waited before being lifted up into the light.

The amphitheater may never have been fully finished, because the city was caught up in a revolt and a war between would-be emperors in 238 CE. Later, people used the strong walls as a fortress.

How it ended

After Roman times, the arena became a fortress. In the late 1600s, soldiers blasted a hole in one side with cannons to stop rebels hiding inside. People also took stones for building, but most of the giant ring survived.

Key words

- amphitheater: a round or oval open-air building with seats around a central arena
- arena: the central floor where shows took place, often covered with sand
- gladiator: a trained fighter who performed in Roman shows

Wow facts

- You can walk through the underground tunnels where animals waited before shows.
- The amphitheater appeared in movies, including the film Gladiator.
- Its arches are so well built that three levels are still standing after nearly 1,800 years.

Talk about it

1. How are Roman arena shows like and unlike sports games today?

2. Why do you think cities built such huge buildings for entertainment?

Try this

Draw a map of El Jem Amphitheatre as it looked at its busiest. Label three things people did there.

Quick quiz

Circle the best answer.

1. About how many people could El Jem's amphitheater hold?

- A. 500
- B. 3,500
- C. 35,000
- D. 350,000

2. What made the city of Thysdrus rich?

- A. Olive oil
- B. Gold mines
- C. Silk
- D. Fishing for pearls

3. What was under the arena floor?

- A. A river
- B. Tunnels for animals and performers
- C. A library
- D. A tomb

Go further

Open ruinscape.live/el-jem-amphitheatre/ for photos, the Then and Now picture where there is one, and links to museum collections and research. On the globe, Lyra Kael can fly the class there and answer questions.

Answer key (for teachers)

1. C. It held about 35,000 spectators.
2. A. Thysdrus grew rich selling olive oil.
3. B. Animals and performers waited in tunnels under the floor.