

The circus at Colchester (*Colonia Victricensis*)

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Colchester was founded in c.A.D. 49 as the first colony (*Colonia Victricensis*) of the new province of *Britannia*. The discovery in the 19th and 20th c. of glass and pottery vessels decorated with scenes from chariot races¹ indicated that some of the inhabitants of Roman Colchester were interested in the events that took place in circuses. However, despite much archaeological work in the town over a long period, nothing structural had been found to hint at the presence of such a structure. All this changed late in 2004 when the remains of a monumental stone circus were recognised during major archaeological work not far south of the walled part of the Roman town. It is a significant discovery because it is the first circus to be positively identified in Britain.

The circus was 448.2 m long and 71.1-74.2 m wide (excluding buttresses). It compares well with circuses known elsewhere, being quite long (at the upper end of the normal range) though narrow. It lay c.400 m south of the walled town on what is effectively the closest piece of flat land to the town centre. Its foundation and use presumably were intimately linked with the practices of the Imperial Cult.² Although not part of a monumental complex containing the Temple of Claudius,³ along the lines, for example, of the cult temple and circus in Tarragona,⁴ the configuration of streets is such that a suitably direct processional route doubtless existed between the two (fig. 1).

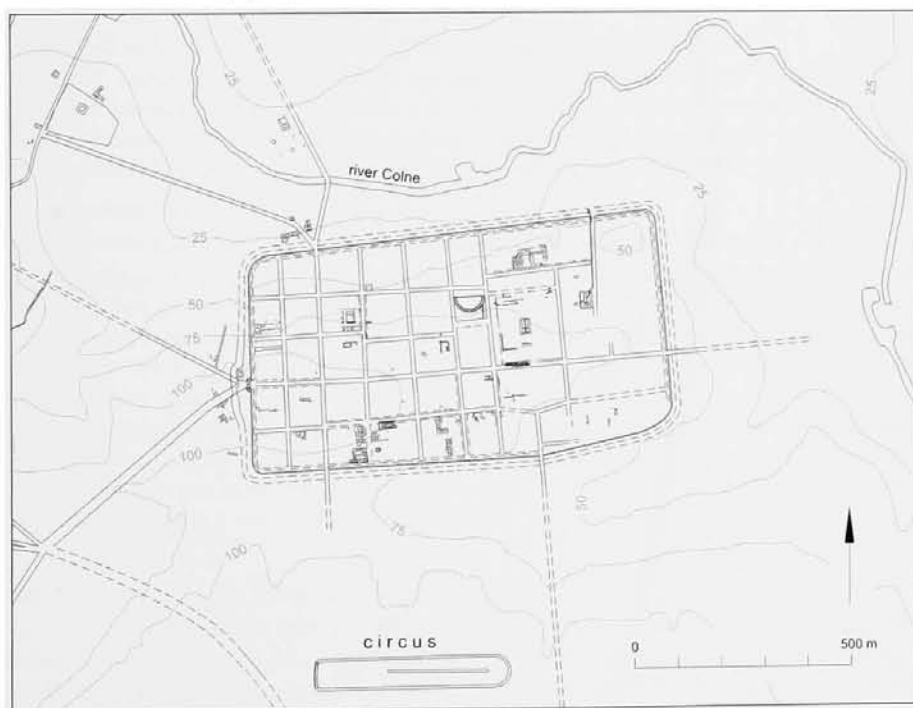


Fig. 1. The circus at Colchester in relation to the Roman town (contours are in imperial feet).

- 1 H. E. M. Cool and J. Price, *Roman vessel glass from excavations in Colchester, 1971-85* (Colchester Arch. Rep. 8, 1995) 42-47; R. Jackson, *Gladiators and Caesars. The power of spectacle in ancient Rome* (Eng. edition of book edited by E. Köhne and C. Ewigleben) (London 2000) 96, fig. 106.
- 2 D. Fishwick, *The imperial cult in the Latin West III: provincial cult part 3* (Leiden 2004) 135-48.
- 3 M. R. Hull, *Roman Colchester* (London 1958) 160-69; P. Crummy, "The temples of Roman Colchester," in W. Rodwell (ed.), *Temples, churches and religion: recent research in Roman Britain* (BAR 77, Oxford 1980) 243-48.
- 4 J. Ruiz de Arbulo and R. Mar, "El Circo de Tarraco, un monumento provincial," in T. Nogales Basarrate and F. J. Sánchez-Palencia (edd.), *El circo en Hispania romana* (Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida 2001) 141-54.