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# Cornelius - the Roman Centurion

By Jim Myers

Now a certain man in Caesarea,  
Cornelius by name, a centurion of the  
band (cohort)  
called the Italian  
(Acts 10:1)

Many verses of our Bibles are loaded with geographical and historical clues that greatly enhance our Bible studies when we take time to examine them, which we will do in this article. First, a man lived in Caesarea. *What do you know about it?*

### Caesarea

Caesarea is located on the Mediterranean coast thirty-three miles north of Joppa and sixty miles northwest of Jerusalem. The Roman emperor, **Caesar Augustus**, gave the site to **Herod the Great**. Between 25 and 13 BCE, Herod constructed his most extensive building project there, a city designed on the Roman model. He named the city in honor of the emperor, and the harbor, **Sebastos**, the Greek equivalent of Augustus.

Herod built his seaport on the site of the old Phoenician city, **Strato's Tower**. The place was given this name after the **king of Sidon, Strato I**, erected a tower as a lighthouse and built a small, fortified port to provide anchorage for ships sailing in the eastern Mediterranean. No natural

ports existed along Israel's coast. During bad weather, this could be a dangerous sector on the major shipping route from **Alexandria to Phoenicia, Syria**, and eventually to **Athens** and **Rome**. To provide a safe haven, Herod created an artificial harbor, constructing large breakwaters.



The city of Caesarea encompassed **165 acres**. It boasted a theater, an

**amphitheater**, a **hippodrome**, **palaces**, **public buildings**, **storerooms**, **residential areas**, and a **sewer system**. The enormous scale of this project is revealed in the dimensions of some of the structures. The hippodrome, seating 20,000 people, was 1500 feet long and 250 feet wide. The theater was three hundred feet in diameter and could accommodate four thousand people. Some of the stones used to build the harbor's breakwater were fifty feet long, eighteen feet wide, and nine feet thick.

Despite its many advantages, there were neither springs nor rivers situated close to the city's location. A **seven-mile aqueduct** brought water to the city from Mount Carmel. Caesarea became the **Roman capital of Judea**. After 6 BCE, when the country became a Roman province, **Roman prefects, or procurators** kept the government seat there. This would also be Pilate's home.

## Centurion

An important clue in this account is provided by the author when he records that Cornelius was a **centurion**. Stationed in Caesarea was a sizeable Roman garrison. Cornelius would have been assigned to it. The Roman army was broken down into different groups to have a clear chain of command during battle. The following chart will provide you with an overview.

1 Contubernium		8 men
10 Contubernia	1 Century	80 Men
2 Centuries	1 Maniple	160 Men
6 Centuries	1 Cohort	480 Men
10 Cohorts + 120 Horsemen	1 Legion	5240 Men

Ten *contubernium* made up a century (only eighty men on average) which was commanded by a **centurion**. Centurions, when it came to marching, had one considerable privilege over their men. Whereas the soldiers moved on foot, centurions rode on horseback. Another significant power they possessed was that of beating their soldiers. For this they would carry a staff, perhaps two or three foot long. Apart from his distinctive armor, this staff was one of the means by which one could recognize a centurion.

One of the remarkable features of centurions is the way in which they were posted from legion to legion and province to province. It appears they were not only highly sought after men, but the army was willing to transport them over considerable distances to reach a new assignment. The most remarkable aspect of the *centurionate* though must be that they were not normally discharged but died in service. Thus, to a centurion the army was truly his life.

## Italian band

We know that an Italian cohort at a later time had its home base in Syria. The time of the events in Acts 10, however, must have been earlier than 41 CE when Agrippa became the king. If the Italian

cohort had been moved to the East at a fairly early date, the soldiers and Cornelius could have easily been of Syrian origin.

## Putting the Pieces Together

Cornelius was Roman military officer who was stationed in Caesarea, probably between 40-50 CE. He was over 80 Roman soldiers and wore a style of military dress that would make his rank easily recognizable.

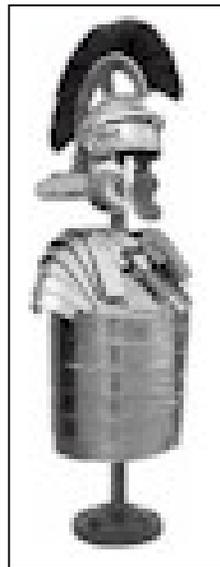
Caesarea was the primary seaport of Judea and on the main caravan route from Tyre to Egypt. It was the hub of activity for merchants and travelers making journeying between Alexandria, Rome, Athens, Syria and the East. Arriving in Caesarea, visitors would find magnificent palaces

and public buildings, a large marble temple to Augustus, an amphitheater, hippodrome, and a theater which was built facing the sea on the southern side of the city.

Caesarea attracted numerous settlers -- both Jews and Hellenized Gentiles from the Coastal Plain. The city's culture was, as a result, a mixture in which one segment of the population zealously clung to the worship of the one God while abhorring the presence of the numerous pagan idols required by the religious practices of the other segment. As you may imagine, the

presence of the **Temple to Augustus** and the associated sacrifices, were abhorred by the Jews who belonged to the monotheistic forms of Judaism and who worshipped at the **Temple in Jerusalem**. The potential threat of conflict between these groups is one of the primary reasons that Cornelius was stationed there. It is probable that on major Jewish holidays we could find Cornelius and his men stationed at the Temple in Jerusalem in order to maintain peace.

Weren't there some great cultural clues in just one verse? Without unlocking them we wouldn't understand the significance of what comes next! But, we will have to wait for that. **BHR**



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