Qisarya

Qisarya, also known as Caesarea, was a Palestinian coastal village in the Haifa Subdistrict. It stood on the Mediterranean shore, approximately 37 kilometres south of Haifa, and its lands covered 31,786 dunams. The village was occupied by a Palmach unit on 15 February 1948, and most of its inhabitants were displaced. Thirty houses were demolished five days later.

Basic Information

Item	Information
Subdistrict	Haifa
Distance from district center	37 km southwest of Haifa

Item	Information
Average Elevation	25 meters above sea level
Population in 1931	706 inhabitants, including Barrat Qisarya
Number of Houses in 1931	143 houses, including Barrat Qisarya
Population in 1944/1945	1,120 inhabitants: 960 Arabs and 160 Jews
Estimated Population in 1948	Approximately 1,114 inhabitants, including 160 Jews – a later demographic estimate, not an official census
Total Land Area in 1945	31,786 dunams
Attack and Depopulation	A campaign of terror and attacks preceded the final occupation; after the 31 January 1948 ambush of a bus leaving the village, Palmach forces occupied Qisarya on 15 February and the remaining inhabitants were expelled or fled
Final Israeli Control	15 February 1948
Military Operation	Coastal Clearing
Military Unit	A Palmach unit of the Haganah
Cause of Depopulation	Expulsion by Zionist forces amid military assault and intimidation
Settlements Documented on Village Lands	Sedot Yam (1940), Or Akiva (1951), and the Israeli rural locality of Caesarea, officially recognized in 1977

The village followed the shoreline in a north–south direction. Its houses were built of stone bonded with mud or cement, while some Bedouin residents of the surrounding area lived in tents. An elementary school for boys was established around 1884. The inhabitants obtained domestic water from several wells and relied primarily on agriculture. Archaeological excavations have revealed remains from numerous historical periods.

Economic Life in Qisarya

The inhabitants obtained water for domestic use from several wells, and agriculture formed the basis of the village economy. In 1944/45, 18 dunams of Palestinian-owned land were devoted to citrus and bananas, 1,020 dunams to cereal cultivation, and 108 dunams were irrigated or used for orchards. Across the entire statistical unit, including Jewish-owned and public land, 2,193 dunams were used for cereals and 2,319 dunams were classified as cultivable.

Land Ownership in Qisarya

Ownership category	Area (dunams)*
Palestinian ownership	20,959
Jewish ownership	874
Public land	9,953
Total	**31,786**

* One dunam equals approximately 1,000 square metres.

Land Use in Qisarya, 1944/45

Land-use category	Palestinian ownership (dunams)*	Jewish ownership (dunams)*	Public land (dunams)*	Total (dunams)*
Citrus and bananas	18	0	0	18
Irrigated land and orchards	108	0	0	108
Cereal cultivation	1,020	787	386	2,193
Cultivable land	**1,146**	**787**	**386**	**2,319**

Land-use category	Palestinian ownership (dunams)*	Jewish ownership (dunams)*	Public land (dunams)*	Total (dunams)*
Built-up area	28	83	0	111
Uncultivated land	19,785	4	9,567	29,356
Total land area	**20,959**	**874**	**9,953**	**31,786**

* One dunam equals approximately 1,000 square metres.

Population of Qisarya

The 1922 census recorded 346 inhabitants. In 1931, Qisarya and Barrat Qisarya had 706 inhabitants living in 143 houses. The official 1945 statistics recorded 930 Muslims, 30 Christians, and 160 Jews, for a total of 1,120. The Arab population therefore numbered 960. Later demographic estimates give a total of approximately 1,114 in 1948, including 160 Jews, but this was not an official census. The number of Palestinian refugees from Qisarya and their descendants was estimated at 6,839 in 1998.

Population Figures for Qisarya

Year	Population*	Recorded composition
1922	346	Not stated here
1931	706	Predominantly Arab Muslims and Christians
1945	1,120	930 Muslims, 30 Christians, and 160 Jews
1948 estimate	Approximately 1,114	Reported as including 160 Jews

Year	Population*	Recorded composition
Estimated Palestinian refugees and descendants, 1998	6,839	Retrospective estimate

* The 1931 figure includes Barrat Qisarya. The 1948 and 1998 figures are later estimates rather than official census totals.

Number of Houses in Qisarya

Year	Number of houses
1931	143
1948 estimate	225

* The 1931 figure includes Barrat Qisarya and comes from the official census. The 1948 figure is a later estimate.

Education in Qisarya

A boys' elementary school was established in the village around 1884 during Ottoman rule.

History of Qisarya

The village stood within the ruins of an ancient port city originally known as Strato's Tower. The settlement was established in the late fourth century BCE by Strato, ruler of Sidon, as a Phoenician trading colony. Between 22 and 10 BCE, Herod the Great rebuilt it as a major port and named it Caesarea in honour of his patron, Augustus Caesar. The city later flourished under Roman and Byzantine rule and passed into Arab Muslim hands around 640 CE. Its long history also included Crusader and Mamluk periods before a modern Muslim community was re-

established there by Bosnian settlers in 1878.

Archaeological Sites in Qisarya

Qisarya is an archaeological site of exceptional historical importance. Its remains include the ancient harbour, Roman and Byzantine city walls, aqueducts, a theatre, a hippodrome, storage vaults, foundations, architectural fragments, rock-cut features, channels, and a later Crusader fortress. The site preserves material from the Phoenician, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, and Crusader periods. Large-scale excavations by Italian, American, and Israeli teams have exposed and restored substantial parts of the ancient city for tourism.

Occupation and Depopulation of Qisarya

Israeli historian Benny Morris describes Qisarya as the first Arab community subjected to a pre-planned, organized expulsion by the Haganah in 1948. A Palmach unit captured the village on 15 February. Some residents had already left out of fear of attack; the remaining inhabitants fled or were ordered to leave. When approximately twenty residents insisted on staying, a Palmach unit demolished village houses on 20 February. Thirty houses were destroyed, while six were reportedly spared because the unit lacked sufficient explosives. The demolition formed part of broader Haganah operations to clear Palestinian communities from the coastal plain north of Tel Aviv.

Occupation and Depopulation Chronology

Stage	Date	Details
Bus ambush and accelerated flight	31 January 1948	Lehi / the Stern Gang ambushed a bus leaving Qisarya on the Haifa road, killing two passengers and injuring others; the attack accelerated the departure of much of the population.

Stage	Date	Details
Decision to demolish the village	Early February 1948	The Haganah General Staff decided to demolish the village houses before the final occupation.
Final occupation and expulsion	15 February 1948	A Palmach unit occupied the village. Some residents had already left out of fear of attack; those who remained fled or were ordered to leave after the occupation.
Demolition of houses	20 February 1948	A Palmach unit returned and demolished about 30 houses; six were left standing because explosives ran out. The demolition formed part of a wider campaign to clear Palestinian villages from the coastal plain north of Tel Aviv.

Qisarya Today

Sedot Yam had been established on Qisarya's traditional lands in 1940, approximately one kilometre south of the village site. Or Akiva was founded northeast of the village in 1951 and later expanded onto village lands. The Israeli rural locality of Caesarea was officially recognized in 1977.

Most village houses were demolished. The archaeological site was extensively excavated and developed as a tourist area. Published field descriptions report that most of the few surviving houses were converted into restaurants and that the village mosque was repurposed as a bar.

Sources

- Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question (PalQuest): Qisarya.
- Government of Palestine, Village Statistics, April 1945, reproduced by Palestine Remembered.