SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

Hippodrome of Byzantium

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Little is left today of the great hippodrome of Byzantium. The hippodrome was built in 203 CE by Septimus Severus. The only reminder of the original structure still standing are the ruins of the supporting wall of the Sphendone, the curved end of the racetrack opposite the carceres. The best way to see it is to drive along the Bosporus and then go up hill towards the city center. However, the viewing the Sphendone ruins is not worth fighting the local traffic considering also that the Triumphal Arch, a common presence in most chariot racing arenas, is absent in Byzantium. The arch was probably not built because the flat top of the hill ends at the Sphendone.

 Three columns of the many columns and statues that once adorned the euripus are preserved and still occupy the same location where they were originally erected, see the pictures below. Euripus, commonly known today as the spina, is the barrier situated in the middle of the racetrack.

The three columns are the Egyptian obelisk, the Serpentine column and the Constantine column. They are visible in the left picture, although due to its small size, the Serpentine column, barely higher than the crowd, may be difficult to pinpoint. Check below for a better picture of the Serpentine column. The picture on the right was taken from the end of the carceres. The building in the back is a school and an administrative office. It occupies approximately 1/3 of the original racetrack and is the only structure built on the grounds of the hippodrome.

The picture shows the original site of the hippodrome. Today the site is a modern downtown square, center of visitors' activities. The only motorized traffic allowed is tourist buses. They must depart as soon as passengers are dropped off.

The most important Istanbul monuments surround the square: the famous cistern of Constantinople is located behind the now gone carceres, the Blue Mosque was built where Kathisma (Emperors' lodge) and Emperor’s Palace once stood; Hagia Sophia, built on the orders of Emperor Justinian, is nearby.

The Serpentine column was originally fabricated by the Greeks in the 5th century BCE by melting the bronze collected from the defeated Persians after the battle of Salamis. It was placed in front of the Apollo temple in Delphi. Emperor Constantine brought it to Constantinople to adorn the hippodrome. The column represents three entwined serpents. Upper portion on one serpent's head is preserved today in the Istanbul Archeological museum, see picture above. The top of the column, the two other heads and the lower jaw of the preserved head are missing. The rest of the column and the heads were likely plundered and melted by the Venetians in 1204 to make coins, which is the fate of other bronze statues they found in the hippodrome (see Porphyrius the Charioteer Book Review). We ought to consider ourselves lucky that the 4 horses that sat on top on the tower situated in the middle of the carceres were taken to Venice and can be enjoyed today in the San Marco museum.

The plaque located on the square is on the left, the museum sign is on the right.

The Egyptian obelisk is also known as the Obelisk of Theodosius. It is a granite monolith erected in Egypt in the 15 century BCE It was sent as a present to emperor Theodosius in the year 390 CE The original obelsik was taller than the current one. Maybe it broke off or was intentionally cut for ease of transportation.

An Egyptian obelisk represented the cult of the sun, one of the many symbols associated with chariot racing. Most racing arenas had an obelisk erected on the euripus.

The picture above left is the Egyptian obelisk. The image in the middle depicts the original marble base. The surface of the square is approximately 9 feet above the lower portion of the base. The base has bas-reliefs on all four sides showing Emperor Theodosius in various stages: receiving gifts, watching the erection of the column, watching the races and getting ready to hand a wreath. To a race winner? Has a wreath replaced the traditional palm frond by the end of the fourth century?

The sculpture in relief on the base shows Emperor Theodosius watching the races with a wreath in his hand. The picture in the middle is the bas-relief located on the pedestal below the marble base depicting the erection of the column. The two pictures on the right are a composition of the left and right side of the same pedestal and show a chariot race.

The Constantine column is made of stones, as it can be clearly seen in picture above left. It was probably erected in the 3rd or 4th century, but the details are unknown. The inscription, see middle picture, refers to Constantine Porphyrogenetus and the column is known today by his name because he restored it in the 10th century. It is believed that the surface of the column was covered in bronze plaques as ornament. The plaques themselves were engraved, but the details are unknown, although it is believed that some bronze pieces are in Venice today.

The last image is an enlarged picture of a was stamp containing the engraving of a chariot race. It is currently located in the Archeological Museum of Istanbul.

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