

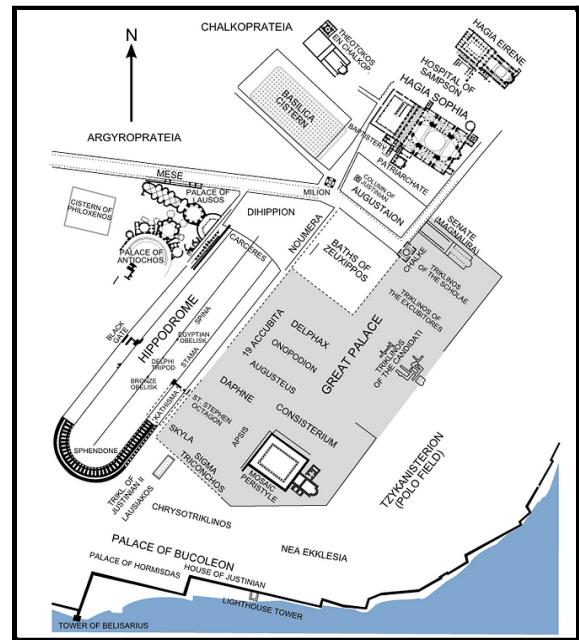
Ancient venues: How horse racing developed political, cultural, and religious
prestige in the Roman Empire.

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Although the building ceased to exist as it once did, the construction of the Hippodrome of Constantinople marked a shift in the heart of the Roman Empire and became a beacon of significant imperial political power. The site exemplified Byzantine public life and was a symbol of cultural influence; it historically served as the heart of all major public events and ceremonies within the city. It was one of the most impressive buildings located in the center of the city and was the home of various prestigious monuments and artworks. Even though its form has transformed profoundly from its original grandeur, many of its prestigious monuments exist today.



came to be under the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus (r.193-211 CE) following a regional revolt that had left the city in ruin.² The site's structure was much less

² Engin Akyurek, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, Cambridge Elements in the History of Constantinople. (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

significant in comparison to what it eventually became under the reign of Emperor Constantine I (r. 306-337 CE) after proclaiming the city of Constantinople (then Byzantium) as the new capital of the Roman Empire. The form of the original

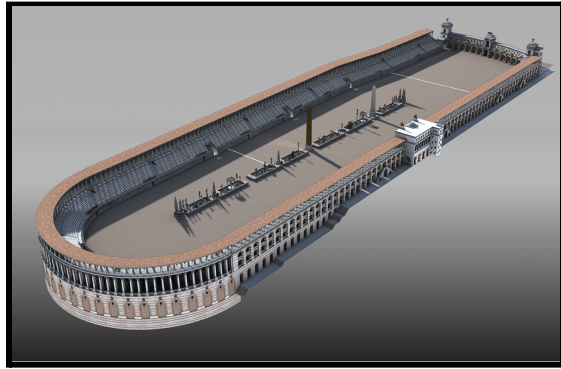


Figure 2: Restitution of the Hippodrome, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, (Cambridge: Engin Akyurek, 2021).

hippodrome had either been incomplete or was far too simple for the city's newfound significance. Regardless, Constantine saw fit to model the new building off of the magnificent Circus Maximus of Rome to transfer the prestige of the new capital to that of the old. A

byzantine era source states, "he [Constantine]

also completed the Hippodrome, adorning it with works in bronze and with every excellence, and made in it a box for imperial viewing in likeness of the one which is in Rome..."³ Prominent monuments and artworks of immense cultural spectacle from all over the Roman world were moved to the Hippodrome⁴; another act to elevate the prestige of the site and city. Many of these art pieces found a home in the spina.

In light of all of this, the Hippodrome came to prominence as a beacon of significant political power and prestige. The emperor's presence at any of the Hippodrome's events was typical as the Great Palace was built adjacent to the building. The emperor would observe his royal enclosure, the imperial box, which was located in the center of the eastern bleachers.⁵ Due to this, emperors had the reputation for hosting ceremonies that served to support imperial power and legitimacy over the

³ *Chronicon Paschale*, 284-628 A.D., translated by Michael Whitby and Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).

⁴ Sarah Guberti Bassett, *The Antiquities in the Hippodrome of Constantinople*, Vol. 45. (Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 1991), 87-96.

⁵ Engin Akyurek, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, Cambridge Elements in the History of Constantinople. (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

masses. The successes of emperors and their commanders after military campaigns would be one such notable parade; the spoils of war represented by a long train of loot and captured slaves would often be marched around the spina. "Justinian I (r. 527-565 CE), always partial to a bit of public spectacle, rewarded his gifted general Belisarius with a triumph for his victories against the Vandals in North Africa in 533 CE. This was a great honor as no one outside the imperial family had been allowed to celebrate a Roman triumph since 19 BCE, and it was to be held in the Hippodrome..."⁶ Belisarius's triumph was celebrated due to his successes in reconquering provinces that were lost to barbarian invasions following the disillusionment of the western Roman empire. This specific ceremony in particular exemplifies the magnificence that this venue had encompassed in its ancient glory; rare occasions of vast importance were brought to this specific arena to be celebrated to promote the cult of the emperor. The hippodrome wasn't simply a venue for commemoration, as enemies of the emperor would be brutally punished for their political, and civil disruptions as well. A notable insurrection occurred during Constantine V's reign, "Constantine V (r. 741-775 CE) had faced a coup at the beginning of his reign when a military governor named Artabasdos, backed by the bishop of Constantinople Anastasios, took over the capital in 743 CE. Constantine's army quickly quashed the rebellion and retook Constantinople for the emperor. As punishment, Anastasios was publicly whipped and sent naked around the Hippodrome riding backward on a donkey. Artabasdos fared even worse and was blinded along with his two sons in a public ceremony held, again, in the Hippodrome."⁷ These public displays of gruesome punishments would be used to set a precedent for disobedience

⁶ Mark Cartwright. "The Hippodrome of Constantinople," *World History Encyclopedia*. November 28, 2017. <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1158/the-hippodrome-of-constantinople/>.

⁷ Mark Cartwright. "The Hippodrome of Constantinople."

against the state and the disruption of its welfare. Chariot races and other such aforementioned celebrations would be held for ambassadors of foreign lands that were visiting the empire. "During the reign of Constantine VII (913-59), a festival was organized in the Hippodrome and chariot races were held for the Arab (Saracen) mission which was visiting Constantinople to discuss a peace treaty and an exchange of prisoners... After the chariot races, dancers performed accompanied by music."⁸ The emperor would use the prestigious architecture of the venue as a spot to impress foreigners with Roman ceremonies. One could only imagine the wonder and awe the spectacle of these ceremonies would invoke upon these non-native attendees.

It is apparent that ceremonies of all occasions were held at the Hippodrome; In fact, all major public events were hosted there, and its central location would draw in people from all over the city. There were three important social, and cultural centers in Constantinople: the church of Hagia Sophia, the Imperial Palace, and the Hippodrome. The hippodrome, of course representing imperial prowess, would also represent the populace of the city. The ancient site would encompass a massive attendance as the bleachers bolstered a seating capacity of approximately 30,000 to 60,000 people.⁹ Naturally, a large public presence at sporting events, such as chariot races, would spawn a culture similar to our contemporary cult of sportsmanship. Factions, reminiscent of our modern sports teams, called the reds, whites, greens, and blues were created to support their racers. Each team was said to have represented an element: earth, wind, fire, water, and air. Although with time, the reds and whites would lose relevancy and be absorbed by the greens and blues. They originally existed as

⁸ Engin Akyurek, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, Cambridge Elements in the History of Constantinople. (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁹ Mark Cartwright. "The Hippodrome of Constantinople."

independent parties that possessed their chariots, horses, stables, and racers; yet they eventually became heavily influenced by the state, as it would come to fund the expenses of these teams and their races. With imperial support, these factions eventually served a greater purpose than just fanship; they developed to serve a greater social and political role in society. These roles included organizing chariot races and other events alongside the imperial court and protecting the city as an urban militia when the city faced imminent danger. These same factions would unfortunately grow in influence to be the source of great political insurrection as well. One of the greatest revolts was again during the reign of Justinian I; the Nika revolts of January 532 CE were based on the factions' dissatisfaction with imperial autocracy and its refusal to pardon supporters of the blues and greens for violent behaviors within the hippodrome. "The trouble began with Justinian's appearance in the Hippodrome on the occasion of the opening races of the games. The crowd turned on their emperor, the races were abandoned and the rioters spilt out of the Hippodrome to rampage through the city. They left an impressive trail of destruction wherever they marched, burning down the Church of Hagia Sophia..."¹⁰ Justinian would maintain his position on the throne and restore peace by brutally putting down the carnage within the Hippodrome. The chariot races historically had a reputation for violence and would on occasion be sources of immense chaos; this powder keg of civil dissidence would fade as the factions were slowly stripped of their influence across later Byzantine history. Nonetheless, the culture of chariot races hosted in the hippodrome created influential teams that would play an interesting role in the city's history as both patrons and antagonists.

¹⁰ Mark Cartwright. "The Hippodrome of Constantinople."

The cult of the emperor would not be the sole illustration of the city's culture. The monuments that found a home within the Hippodrome were unequivocally the best representations of what Roman culture encompassed. Hundreds of these significant



Figure 3: Obelisk of Thutmose III, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, (World History Encyclopedia, Mark Cartwright, 2017).

Roman works were collected and brought to the venue; these included statues of mythical heroes, historical figures, pagan figures, and other such monuments. These included bronze sculptures of past Roman emperors such as Augustus, Diocletian, and Justinian.¹¹ These would serve as a reminder of imperial prestige and further push the cult of the emperor. Sculptures of eagles, the pagan demi-god hero Herakles, and famous chariot racers, Porphyrius, Faustinus, and Julian¹² all served to represent triumph and victory. “Also overturned was Herakles, mighty in his mightiness...he was an incomparable masterpiece fashioned...”¹³ These were very befitting of the themes of sportsmanship and prestige fostered in and out of the venue and empire. A monument depicting the founding myth of Rome, the Roman wolf with Romulus and Remus, would invoke the ancient history of the old capital and the empire itself. “In the reenactment of the Lupercalia, Rome's foundation festival, Constantinople appropriated the old capital's history. The statue of the wolf with the

¹¹ Edwin Augustus Grosvenor, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople and its still existing monuments*. (London, Printed by Sir Joseph Causton & sons, 1889).

¹² Engin Akyurek, *The Hippodrome of Constantinople*, Cambridge Elements in the History of Constantinople. (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹³ *Accounts of Medieval Constantinople, The Patria*. Translated by Albrecht Berger. London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

twins was a permanent acknowledgement of this act of assimilation.”¹⁴ Ancient ceremonies were moved from Rome and designated for Constantinople's Hippodrome, making it a beacon of Roman culture. Unfortunately, large portions of the collection would be lost to time with only three of the most ancient structures standing on the Hippodrome's remaining spina today: the Serpent Column, the Theodosian Obelisk, and the Built Obelisk (Figure 3). These three monuments are reminiscent of those that occupied the spina of the Circus Maximus of Rome.

The Hippodrome of Constantinople dated back to the fourth century, and symbolized the heart of Rome's imperial might, culture, and urban public life throughout its long and arduous history. It was the home of political power and prestige of the empire. It was the home of chariot races, imperial presence, breathtaking ceremonies, and even brutal civil insurrection. It was the home of artworks and monuments from all over the Roman world. It was truly the center of Constantinople for centuries. Although very little of the structure remains to this day, its immense history and stories are not lost.

¹⁴ Sarah Guberti Bassett, *The Antiquities in the Hippodrome of Constantinople*, Vol. 45. (Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 1991), 87-96.

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