

Chariot Racing: Important Social Behaviour In Byzantine Empire

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Thesis: We will argue that chariot racing in the hippodrome was an important social behaviour during the Byzantine period.

Hypothesis: From the research that we have gathered, we hypothesize that chariot racing played a major role in the social lives of the general population during the Byzantine era.

Sources/Limitations of Study: Although we found a great deal of secondary sources on the Hippodrome and on chariot racing, we found there was a lack of primary sources on the topic. We also realize that our study was done under time constraints, and given more time, we could have delved much deeper into the topic. We also found little in the way of a female perspective, although it is our understanding from our research that women were not allowed to attend the chariot races. It would have been nice, however to have a woman's perspective on this very issue, but we were unable to find it. We also found did not find any sources written from the perspective of a charioteer (or horse racer), or any text written from the common Byzantine racing fan, which would have been an invited perspective for our research.

The sources we did find were reflections from historians or educated peoples from the time, some were primary sources. Often those writing about the chariot races were well educated Byzantine citizens who often spoke ill of the average Byzantine spectator, using the term "hooligan" to describe their love of the sport.

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Argument/Discussion/Evidence

The Byzantine era was well known for many things, but perhaps one of the most impressive marks of the Byzantine era was the Chariot races at the Hippodrome in Constantinople. The Chariot races took place sixty days of the year, and for each race, there was a capacity crowd. Approximately 30,000 people attended each event, so it is very evident that the Chariot races were an extremely important social gathering. The common people who went to the chariot races felt that they were a part of the imperial state. These rituals gave them the feeling of belonging and the illusion that they possessed liberty. (Giatsis p.54)

The Hippodrome was considered the most important building of the Byzantine Empire, and Chariot racing was the most important event in the life of ordinary the Byzantine citizen. Chariot racing was arguably the most popular sport, as it was the sport that took place the most often at the Hippodrome, however one could argue that this did not necessarily make it the most popular. There is no denying however that it was one of the most important sports of the Byzantine Empire (Barbara Schrodt p.44)

For more information about the Hippodrome click on the link below.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjrmvDn2tcA>

The chariot races generated deep anticipation for those who attended, and people held in very high regard their team (colour), and the individual charioteers who rode for that colour. There were four teams, blue, green, red and white, and each team had many adoring fans. The blue and green teams were the most popular. The colour of the team, often reflected a political or religious viewpoint, and so the team one cheered for was a direct reflection of their religious views and politics. (Sport and Leisure and the Civilizing Process Eric Dunning and Chris Rojec) "The rules of the Games were as follows: each race (*væon*) consisted of four chariots and each race was completed in seven laps (*spatia*). The charioteers had to drive in an anti-clock-wise direction around the wooden fence (*Euripus*) of the arena. The charioteer had to drive his chariot without hitting or throwing his opponents off the track, unlike in the Roman circuses. If any of the competitors ran off the track he was disqualified. A competitor was also disqualified if he left his chariot or removed his crash helmet." (Giatsis p.53)

The Hippodrome was a place for sport, but also an area of politics, as the emperor was always in attendance, as well as the (other members of government). Seating arrangement in the Hippodrome was depended on your social or political affiliation in Constantinople. "In Constantinople... (There were) Those associated with the *akta* (acclamations), the hecklers (*krachtes*), occupied the first row, since the second row was occupied by the faction spectators. Above them in the third row, sat the faction leaders (Demarchs) and assistant leaders (Democrats). The common people occupied the fourth

row, called *Anabathra*, and the other open seats of the Hippodrome. Most of the seats on this side of the building were wooden. Here, it has been argued, were put the bodies of those massacred during the riot of Nika in 532AD and for this reason these locations were called the place of death (*Nekra*).” (Giatsis p. 44-45) Often, political protests would occur at races. Due to the extreme fervour of the fans, riots would often break out between rival colours. Vandalism and violence often occurred between colours. The most notable and serious riot was the Nika revolt of 532. 30,000 people were killed in a riot which “began as a typical faction riot, and developed into a major disturbance and finally ended with the ruthless slaughter of 30,000 people trapped in the Hippodrome. (Schrodt p.45) The total number of riots which took place in Byzantine hippodromes was about 20. (Giatsis p.56)

Cheating was a problem, as often people would tamper with the other team’s chariots, loosening wheels, or meddling with them in other ways to weaken them. Cheating became an issue for chariot racing. It became so serious that the Emperor made it against the rules to put a curse on other team’s chariots. (Elias p. 289)

Charioteers were idolized by the public, and great respect was given to the most talented in their sport. Many charioteers however, were slaves, and often the praise would go the slave owners, and not to the racers themselves. (Sport and Leisure and the Civilizing Process Eric Dunning and Chris Rojec p.1) It is safe to say that the most important to the public was the team colour first, then the owner, then the charioteer, and lastly the horse.



Relation

There are many ways that the chariot races were similar to major sporting events of today. People continue to come out in huge numbers for sporting events such as Formula One racing, which has many of the same characteristics as chariot racing, including danger to the racer, speed, and team affiliations to name a few. “It’s amazing how many of the participants, horses and drivers alike, are still known to us by name, a fact that illustrates their importance during their lifetimes.” (Dirk Bennett- p.1)

The fans from the Byzantine Empire and the sports fans of today have many similarities as well. Fans of soccer can often become violent and are so dedicated to their teams that they are referred to as “soccer hooligans”. (Sport and Leisure and the Civilizing Process- Eric Dunning and Chris Rojec- p.145) Also, gambling, eating, and shouting were all typical to a chariot race, and would be common-place at most sporting events today.

The way that athletes are looked upon by the common citizen has changed very little from the Byzantine era to today. Everyday citizens adore their sports heroes, erecting statues of major athletes, such as Michael Jordan. This same practice took place in the Byzantine of famous charioteers as well. Record keeping was a tradition then, as it is now. Our sports and our athletes are of great importance to us, as they were during the Byzantine era.

Contemporary Education

Understanding the social implications of chariot racing in the Byzantine Empire could help students think and understand about their own social environment. Also as an educator you could have students think about the social aspects of sports in Canadian History, for example analyzing the social aspects of hockey on Canadian citizens.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence that we have collected through our research we have come to the conclusion that attendance of chariot racing was a vital part of the social experience of Byzantine citizens. Particularly it was very important social event for the common citizen of Constantinople. Attendance of the events was a way for the people to feel connected politically to the community and a way to get away from their everyday life. The fact that 30 000 people attended these chariot races in the Hippodrome clearly shows that these were important events to the people.