

Sport During the Byzantine Era

By:

Tanya Carr

Karen Sheppard

Angela Welch

Thesis Statement

This research looks at chariot racing as the only sport during the Byzantine era.

Sources

“... in spite of the longevity of the Byzantine Empire, and the importance attached to sport by its inhabitants, little has been written about that period in sport history references.” (Schrodt, 1981, p.40)

The resources that are available are limited due to the 4th crusade and the Ottoman Turkish invasion. Artifacts and scrolls (documentation) were destroyed, leaving us with scarce resources. (Schrodt, 1981) To further complicate the lack of resources was the grand perspective laid down by Edward Gibbons in his historic collection of the Roman Empire. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* shaped the ideologies of subsequent historical research which led to historians focusing more on the Roman Empire itself and the West; “When Gibbon published *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in the late 1700’s, his uncomplimentary views of the Byzantine Empire had a strongly deterrent effect on Byzantine historical studies. He described the annals of the Eastern Empire as a tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery, and concluded that Byzantium contributed nothing to the history, philosophy, or literature of the Roman civilization. This attitude of contempt was adopted and reinforced by later historians, and the writing of specific histories was delayed until the middle of the nineteenth century.” (Schrodt, 1981, p. 40)

We have accessed both primary and secondary sources and the validity of the sources were taken into account. Many records of history must be called into question and analyzed and not taken at face value. The context of the material, the historian, the event itself all must be analyzed in order to ensure that an accurate account of history is recorded. For example, when interpreting historical records one must be aware that much of recorded history was in fact completed by dominant white men of the past. (Tosh, 2006)

The following sources were used:

Carr, Dr. Karen. (2009). *Medieval Games*. Retrieved 02-24-10, from: <http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/medieval/games/index.htm>. p.1.

Cirus Maximus. (2009) BibliOdyssey. Retrieved 03-18-10, from: <http://bibliodyssey.blogspot.com/>.

Greek Thesaurus. (nd). Olympia sports - Discus – Javelin. Retrieved 02-21-10, from: <http://www.greek-thesaurus.gr/Olympia-sports-discus-javelin.html>.

Guttmann, Allen. (1981). *Sport Spectators From Antiquity To The Renaissance*. Journal Of Sport History, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 5-27.

Hemingway, Collette. (2010). *Athletics in Ancient Greece*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art . Retrieved 02-21-10, from: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/athl/hd_athl.htm.

Karayannakos, Elias. (2008). *Ancient Greek Theatre*. Retrieved 02-21-10, from: <http://www.greektheatre.gr/>.

Kazhdan, Aleksandr Petrovich and Giles Constable. *People and power in Byzantium: an introduction to modern Byzantine studies*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996.

Kyle, Don. (1983). *Directions In Ancient Sport History*. Journal Of Sport History, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 7-34.

McManus, Barbara F. (2003) *The Circus: Roman Chariot Racing*. Retrieved 18-03-2010. From <http://www.vroma.org/~bmcmanus/circus.html>.

Medieval Life and Times. (nd). Medieval Sports. Retrieved 02-22-10, from: <http://www.medieval-life-and-times.info/medieval-life/medieval-sports.htm>.

National Jousting Association. (2004). *History Of Jousting*. Retrieved 02-24-10, from: <http://www.nationaljousting.com/history/history.htm>.

Pankration Totally Explained (2010). *Pankration – The Facts: No More, No Less*. Retrieved 02-24-10, from: <http://pankration.totallyexplained.com>.

Persus Digital Library Project, Classics Department. (2004). *The Ancient Olympics*. Retrieved 02-23-10, from: www.perseus.tufts.edu/olympics.

Psahnoudis-Attreides, Ted. (2010). *A Brief History of Pankration*. Retrieved 02-21-10 from: www.completehumanbeing.com/history-of-pankration.html.

Schrodt, Barbara. (1981). *Sports Of The Byzantine Empire*. Journal Of Sport History, Vol. 8, No. 3, p. 40-59.

Tadlock, Caterina. (2005). *The History of Jousting*. The Ultimate Horse Site. Retrieved 02-21-10, from: http://www.ultimatehorsesite.com/articles/ctadlock_jousting.html.

The Middle Ages Website. (nd) *History of Jousting*. Retrieved 02-21-10, from: <http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/history-of-jousting.htm>.

Tosh, John with Sean Lang. (2006) *The Pursuit Of History*. Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited.

Argument

It is without question that chariot racing was the most celebrated sport event of the Byzantine era. Influenced by Oriental cultures, the Greeks and Romans, chariot racing is one, if not the most highly recognized sport of the Byzantine Empire. Chariot racing was unique in the Byzantine Empire because of its approach to the sport. Unlike their counterparts in the West, chariot racing adopted a less tolerant interpretation of the sport with no less grandeur. It was seen to be a sport enjoyed by men, allowing women of the imperial court to view the sport unseen. The emperor's immediate family and those with high - ranking status sat with him in the *kathisma* (a private seating area that led to the imperial palace), which was another unique feature of Byzantine chariot racing. With its strong ties to the imperial court, the circus and a Christian influence, chariot racing depicted a time that became known as the, 'Golden Age' of chariot racing. "By the fifth century, when the Golden Age of chariot racing had arrived, it was

clearly the race of the Roman circus that was seen in the hippodrome of Constantinople.” (Schrodt, 1981, p.41)

The races during the Byzantine Empire differed from those that existed in the Roman and Greek chariot races. The Byzantines provided an opportunity for a challenge to be called by the charioteer who won the morning race against the looser to be held in the afternoon. What made this so important is that the charioteers would switch horses and chariots, which was known as *diversium*.

This was significant because it allowed the charioteer to publicly prove to the people that it was he (no women participants) who won the race and not his horse or chariot. He was victorious and if he was victorious so was the emperor; “We ask for equal share of your victory that comes from God, an equal share of your victory, Master, the faith of the kings prevails.” (Schrodt, 1981, p.46)

Following the race heats held in the morning by the three classes: boys under seventeen, youth seventeen to twenty and men over twenty, a circus performance would take center place in the hippodrome to perform then more racing followed in the afternoon. Races drew most of the populous to the hippodrome to view the races and entertainment performed by members of the circus; gambling, roistering and eating was also a highlight. The men chose one of four colours, red, white, blue or green that they would choose to support and cheer on with no preexisting ties to the colour. “The spectator chose a circus colour, and supported it for the sake of the supporting; and he shoved, screamed and lost his temper for the pleasure of it, for the intoxication of taking sides. As a colour partisan, the Byzantine gambled his self-esteem on the outcome of the race, and this enthusiastic backing of a racing colour gave him an opportunity for

contest, rivalry, and risk that was otherwise denied him in an increasingly authoritarian society". (Schrodt, 1981, p.44)

This could be seen as a very intelligent move for the emperor because it allowed spectators the freedom to rally behind a charioteer of their choosing, releasing pent up emotions from the increasing authoritarian society in which they lived. It also gave most of the Byzantine populous a focal point of common ground both literally and figuratively, which helped the emperor to unify and control his people according to his wishes as the representative chosen by God to rule. "One of the main purposes of the religious side of the hippodrome ceremonial was to serve as an incentive to religious solidarity; to create and foster the all important theme of an emperor appointed by God as the protector of the faithful and champion of orthodoxy." (Schrodt, 1981, p.46)

The circus was not only entertainment, but was also an integral part of the imperial Liturgy of the Empire. Due to the rowdy nature of their predecessors, the theatre claqueurs who had performed in the provincial cities forced the emperor to bring them under his control and fund them. Support from the emperor thus led to the reserved support from the Christian Church. All of this resulted in amalgamation, "a four – part guild of public entertainers with an administrative hierarchy appointed by imperial authorities, and with each part assigned one of the traditional circus colours." (Schrodt, 1981, p.9) This appointment appears to be one of the main driving influences that allowed for the increase control by the emperor and his increase reign over his people as an absolute monarch of 'near divine status' as chosen by God. This amalgamation brought about a new form of chariot racing: "... the circus fans became a rowdy but official part of the imperial

ceremonies, and because the state administered and financed the chariot races, it was able to exert a form of control that went beyond mere support. The result was bureaucratic centralization that can best be described as a medieval version of “nationalized sport.” (Schrodt, 1981, p.17)

The strong influence chariot racing provided within the Byzantine Empire explains why it is seen as the “Golden Age of chariot racing.” Chariot racing encompassed both the Imperial and Christian ideologies of the time and led to a unification of the Byzantine people that may not have been accomplished otherwise. The glorification of the sport appears to be a means to an end for those involved. Victory for the charioteer meant victory for the emperor, which was a victory for God. The people were entertained and able to displace some freedom of choice reinforcing their sense of dedication to the emperor and the Empire. Chariot racing helped to facilitate the support of the Byzantine people both socially and politically creating an Empire that was highly effective, thus paving the way for its eventual downfall.

Research however suggests that other sports existed but in a lesser light. Sports of the Byzantium period consisted mainly of individual contests and for the most part excluded team competitions.



The above depicts a victorious charioteer, being congratulated by Imperial representative.

Boxing and Wrestling

There are many differences between what we know and understand about boxing and wrestling when compared to the Byzantine era. Arguably the biggest distinction would be the fact that there were no weight classes and people were paired randomly within the defined divisions of boys and men. There were also no rounds involved in boxing so the match went on until one man was knocked out or admitted defeat, for wrestling three throws were needed to win a game. The games were quite a bit more violent than today's version, for example, in boxing hitting your opponent when they were down was permitted and in wrestling breaking their fingers was allowed. (Persus Digital Library Project, 2004)

Pankration

The word pankration has Greek origins which when translated means “all powers.” It is very similar to what we know as boxing and wrestling, with more techniques allowed such as: kicking, striking with open hand and closed fist, and grabbing. It excluded biting and eye gouging but many of the matches ended with a person being knocked out, admitting defeat or even death. Again with this sport there were no weight divisions or time limits to a match, “the referees were armed with stout rods or switches to enforce the rules.” (Pankration Totally Explained, 2010, p.2) Most of the matches took place in a tournament setting and were not really part of the Olympic Games. If officials happened to have an odd number of participants than each round someone would have a bye, prestige came from winning these tournaments without having one, which would mean the possibility of taking part in, on average, four rounds. It is hypothesized that regional qualification tournaments took place to select individuals to represent the area during the major tournaments.

Along with the Olympics, Pankration was banned by the Emperor in the early Byzantine era, however it continued to be practiced in secrecy as a martial art. During the mid Byzantine era information of the Pankratiasts approach was given to the Byzantine Imperial Army to bolster fighting skills. Before the fall of the period it is interesting to note that the Pankratiasts preserved their knowledge and techniques by hiding in the Greek mountains after the fourth Crusade. They then became “freedom fighters” in Anatolia when the Byzantine era finally fell to the Turks in 1453.



The above depicts a picture of Byzantine athletes engrossed in pankration.

Jousting

Jousting emerged in the 10th century but did not gain widespread popularity until the 12th century. Originally, jousting was practiced as a means for knights to settle disputes between one another. It was a quick way for an unknown knight to make a name for himself and become wealthy. Knights raced towards each other on horses, trying to unhorse their opponent using a lance. The photo below depicts a typical jousting match between two knights.



The above picture illustrates a typical joust of the Byzantine era.

Jousting tournaments were held as military exercises that began as a means for knights to practice their horsemanship and weapons skills. Over the course of the years, three types of tournaments emerged. The first tournament was the 'melee' or tourney proper tournament. These tournaments were popular during the 12th and 13th century and often turned into bloody battles, frequently resulting in brutal deaths. Near the end of the 13th century, a more civilized and sport-oriented tournament called individual tournaments emerged. Knights wore protective armour and used lances with blunted tips. The goal now was to knock the opponent off of their horse or to break a lance while attempting to knock him off, as opposed to harming or killing him. The number of lances a knight broke

was an indication of the force of his charge, and consequently, of his horsemanship skills. The more lances a knight broke, the more respect and prestige he earned. The third tournament that emerged was the practice tournament. Practice tournaments were simply just that; for practice. Rings were used to practice accuracy skills and quintains were used to practice speed skills. While riding, knights would try to spear a ring a few inches in diameter that was suspended from a rope with the tip of their lance. The other form of practice involved quintains, which were dummies with wooden targets mounted in one hand and a counterweight in the other. Once the targets were hit, the quintain would swing and unseat the knight if he was not fast enough. (National Jousting Association, 2003)

Additional Sports

The other sports that existed during the Byzantine era continued with the individualistic theme. Contests included events such as discus and javelin throwing, long jump, foot races, wrestling and pentathlon (a combination of the previous five sports). Greek's originally used the javelin for hunting. It then became a weapon for fighting, and eventually it progressed to athletic competitions where research suggests they were the first to practice javelin throwing as a sporting event.

The discus was considered a "symbol of the highest ideals of Greek athletics." (Greek Thesaurus, nd) Given this one would expect that it would be one of the most popular sports and more heavily researched.

Archery contests were especially popular and were the most typical sports event of the later Middle Ages. (Guttmann, 1981) Originally used for hunting purposes, the military gravitated to this form of artillery for combat. It eventually descended from the military and developed into a game where bows were used to shoot arrows at a target; the person nearest to the bulls' eye declared victory.

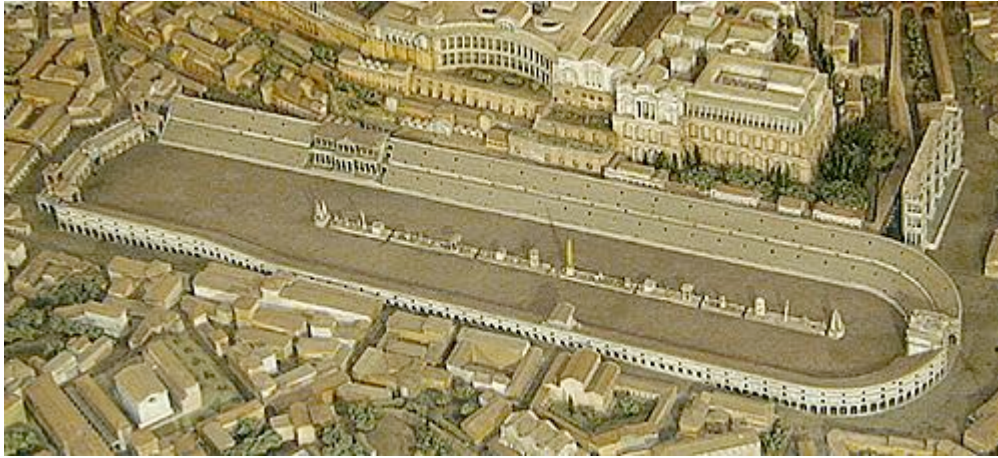
Polo is another sport that has not been given much attention by historians.

Played by noblemen and emperors, it became popular in the twelfth century as a competitive game on horseback. (Kazhdan & Constable, 1996)

Gladiator games were recognized as one of the most popular and influential sporting events but were banned early during the Byzantine era due to their violent nature and indoctrination of Christian ideologies.

Since many of the above sports were part of the original Olympic Games which were banned in 393 A.D., it is plausible to infer that they may have taken place as individual contests despite this fact.

Below is a picture of the Hippodrome where most of the public games took place during the Byzantine era.



The above picture illustrates the Hippodrome where the public games were played during the Byzantine era.

Relations

Sports of the Byzantine Empire played a role in the continuum of sports of modern day. Even with the abolishment of the Olympic Games early in the Byzantine era, other sports continued and are still played today with modifications. For example the UFC (ultimate fighting championships) can be compared to the pankration games of the Byzantium era. The competitors of today are put into a ring with virtually no rules and fight until someone surrenders or is knocked out. Pankration also had what we call today “regional play downs,” where teams or individual compete and the best team of the region represents the area at a major (provincial) tournament. Similarly, chariot racing does not exist today but it is comparable to current racing sports such as horse racing, NASCAR, and Motorcross. Over the centuries, the role of spectators has grown

more and more important as these sports would not exist today without the support of them.

The Byzantine era appears to have contributed to the notion of sportsmanship. Sports with violence and/or violent spectators were banned or altered to create a more morally accountable game. Today, many of these sports are still played but they have been tailored to eliminate extreme violence. Sports and sporting events have sustained criticism over the centuries, however as ideologies have adapted to modern times so has the notion of sports and sportsmanship (i.e. the return of the Olympic Games and gymnasiums).

Conclusion

In the light of the sources researched, chariot racing may have been the dominant sport of the Byzantine era but it certainly was not the only one worth recognizing. Chariot racing overshadowed other sports like polo, archery and jousting due to its political and social influences within the Empire. Due to the nature of violent activity surrounding sporting events involving both participants and spectators, and the influence of Christianity, many organized sports gradually dissolved.