

1 Introduction

The word hippodrome, which derives from the Greek *hippos* (horse) and *drómos* (course, running way), refers to a venue where horse races are held.¹ Today, the word hippodrome is used in many languages to denote a location dedicated to horse races. In the ancient Greek world, horse and chariot races were part of sports competitions organised for various occasions. It was not professional teams but individual athletes who competed in these races. In Homer's epic *Iliad*, one of the earliest recorded horse races was held to honour the funeral of Patroclus. Although the epic dates from very early times, it refers to elements of chariot races which would continue to develop later in the Greek and Roman world: the drawing of lots to determine starting positions, a long track with a turning post at the end, and chariots that ran counter-clockwise.

The first structures – or more accurately the first racing areas – that could be called hippodromes emerged in ancient Greece, and following a long process of evolution, they found their ideal form in Roman civilisation. In Greece, the first hippodromes were generally arranged in a rather simple fashion. There was a long and wide flat where chariots would tour and race. Around or beside this was a zone dedicated to spectators, and there was a setup that allowed the chariots to start the race simultaneously. The oldest known ancient hippodrome is the Olympia hippodrome in Greece mentioned by the Greek traveller and geographer Pausanias (c.110–80 CE). The hippodrome, which no longer exists, was a wide, flat open area about 600 metres long. The competition area featured starting gates, ensuring that competitors began the race at the same time. There was also a barrier with a return point at the end, which would divide the wide area from the middle into two racetracks, as well as a finishing line. In addition, there was a low hill on the north side of the track, and an artificial bank on the southern side, to make it possible for spectators to watch the races more comfortably.² This area, which is assumed to be on the south side of the stadium in Olympia, was completely washed away by the Alpheios River over time, hence no archaeological data have survived to indicate what kind of a structure it was.

In the world of Rome, the hippodrome developed into a typical Roman institution, with its special architecture that could accommodate most citizens of the city, and with its new functions along with chariot races.³ When the tradition of horse chariot races was brought to Rome, hippodromes took on additional social and political functions. These races, featuring chariots known

¹ Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

² John H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (London: Batsford, 1986), 7–9.

³ *Ibid.*, for Roman period hippodromes.

as *quadriga* drawn by four horses, became much more than sports competitions, and turned into entertainment events for masses of spectators organised by professional teams. Eventually they also became part of the imperial ceremonies. In compliance with their new functions, hippodromes emerged as a structure type with specific standards. The race area, reaching 500 metres in length, was split with a barrier in the middle into two tracks, return signs were positioned at either end of this barrier, gates that opened simultaneously were placed at the starting point, and two- or three-floor bleachers surrounding the racetrack from three sides were built to accommodate a huge number of spectators. In Rome, the most prominent example of this new hippodrome architecture is the Circus Maximus. To satisfy the people of Rome, this immense structure was built in 46 BCE by Emperor Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE) on the site of a previous hippodrome from an earlier age. The hippodrome, which featured wooden benches at first, was built permanently in stone during the era of Emperor Trajan (r. 98–117 CE). The course of the Circus Maximus was 550 metres long by 80 metres wide and was divided in two by a barrier called a spina wall, and on this were two obelisks, brought from Egypt, and various statues. On either end of the spina, there were conical turning posts. Dolphin-shaped lap markers would be turned to indicate each lap completed on the track. Race chariots would emerge onto the track through the twelve gates that started the race by opening simultaneously. The Circus Maximus, which could accommodate more than 100,000 spectators, became the new entertainment and ceremony venue of the city of Rome, and gained great popularity among the people. The final chariot race in the Circus Maximus was held in 549 by the Ostrogothic king Totila (r. 541–52 CE), who ruled over Rome at that time. Later, the structure was left to its own devices. The Circus Maximus, which inspired all hippodromes in the empire, became a model for hippodromes later built in many prominent Roman cities. Although the Circus Maximus can be perceived in all its glory in the context of the modern city of Rome, the example that best illustrates the details of the architectural elements of a Roman hippodrome is the Leptis Magna hippodrome near Khoms, Libya, which is in a much better state of preservation. It has survived to the present day with its rows of stone seats, its spina dividing the racetrack, and other architectural details largely intact.⁴

Hippodromes, where various shows and ceremonies such as chariot races, gladiator fights, wild animal fights, pantomimes, and dances were organised, were among the most important public spaces of a Roman city, and one of the most prominent elements of Roman urban design. Roman hippodromes were

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25–40.

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much more than an arena or venue for chariot races, other sports activities, or entertainment; they also became a show of imperial power, and a symbol of the imperial ceremonies and cult, as well as a setting where important proclamations of the emperor were made, where victories were celebrated, and a political and social space where the city population gathered.⁵

The sixth-century Byzantine historian John Malalas (c.490–570s) claims that the first hippodrome in Rome was built by the founder of the city, Romulus. There is no data concerning which hippodrome this is and whether its ruins are still visible. Beyond doubt, the claim written by Malalas centuries after the Romulus legend has no historical validity; however, what he wrote about the rationale for Romulus establishing the hippodrome and the importance of hippodrome symbolism remains valid for his era. According to Malalas, ‘[Romulus] built the hippodrome in Rome, wishing to direct the mass of the people of Rome because they were rioting and attacking him’.⁶ In Rome, during the Festival of the Sun, the first chariot races were again organised by Romulus ‘in honour of the four elements subordinate to it [the Sun], that is earth, sea, fire and air’.⁷ Of the two chariots, the blue one raced on behalf of Poseidon, while the green one raced on behalf of Demeter.

Malalas also states that the symbolism associated with a Roman hippodrome is as significant as its architectural forms, and that both were carried over to Byzantine-era hippodromes, especially to the one in Constantinople, also known as ‘New Rome’. According to Malalas, the structure of the hippodrome was modelled on the regulation of the world, in other words, the sky, the earth, and the seas. The twelve-section starting gate was related to the twelve houses of the zodiac cycle, the racing track symbolised the earth, while the spina represented the sea surrounded by land. Malalas indicates that, of the four chariots that participated in the first race ever organised by Romulus in Rome, the green one symbolised the earth, the blue symbolised the sea, the red symbolised the fire, while the white one symbolised the air.⁸

For a city, the hippodrome was also the proof of ‘Roman’ identity, and an instrument of ‘Romanisation’.⁹ In the second and third centuries, the Roman

⁵ Cyril Mango, Alexander Kazhdan, and Anthony Cutler, ‘Hippodromes’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Alexander Kazhdan et al. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 934–6.

⁶ *The Chronicle of John Malalas*. Translated by Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys, and Roger Scott (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1986), 92 (book 7, 173).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 92 (book 7, 174). ⁸ *Ibid.*, 93 (book 7, 175).

⁹ Gilbert Dagron, ‘Bir Roma’dan Diğeri/From One Rome to the Other’, in *Hippodrom/Atmeydanı: İstanbul’un Tarih Sahnesi/Hippodrome/Atmeydanı: A Stage for Istanbul’s History*, vol. 1, ed. Brigitte Pitarakis (Istanbul: Pera Müzesi Yayınları, 2010), 31.

hippodrome underwent a few negligible changes but spread to all important cities of the empire along with its symbolic elements. Because the lands of the Roman Empire spanned such a wide area, the emperors frequently took up long-term residence in cities outside of Rome. As a token of imperial presence in these cities, they built hippodromes and organised chariot races.¹⁰ Hence, it was emphasised that the emperor was in that city, and that the city was a prominent part of the Roman Empire. Hippodromes existed in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, especially in cities such as Alexandria, Antioch, Berytos, Nicomedia, Thessaloniki, and Tyre where imperial residences were also located.¹¹ Almost all of these were built in the third century, starting from the era of Septimius Severus (r. 193–211). During this time, imperial residences increased in number and spread to various eastern cities, a phenomenon which continued during the era of the Tetrarchs (293–305).

The hippodromes of the Roman period were generally constructed outside the city walls. This was of course because it was quite difficult to find an area of this magnitude within the walls of the city; however, in the period of the Tetrarchs and later, starting in the era of Emperor Constantine I (r. 324–37), hippodromes were built inside city walls, generally attached to the imperial palace as an integral part of palace buildings.¹² In Constantinople, the imperial palace and the hippodrome built by Constantine I were attached to each other, and a direct passage connected the palace to the imperial box inside the hippodrome.¹³ Hippodromes, which were in a sense built as symbols of imperial power, were not considered separate from the imperial residence. Although many of these have vanished without leaving any archaeological traces, it is likely that just like the one in Constantinople, these hippodromes were built attached to the imperial palace or in its vicinity.¹⁴

2 History of the Hippodrome

The Hippodrome of Constantinople was modelled on its prototype, the Circus Maximus in Rome. The hippodrome was built in the centre of the city of Constantinople, in a prominent position on the eastern end of the historical peninsula known today as Sultanahmet (Figure 1). This area, which constituted the core of Byzantine public life, featured three significant building complexes:

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gilbert Dagron, *L'hippodrome de Constantinople: Jeux, peuple et politique*. Bibliothèque des Histoires (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2011), 33; for a list, see Alan Cameron, *Circus Factions, Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 208–9.

¹² Mango, Kazhdan, and Cutler, 'Hippodromes', 935.

¹³ *Chronicle of Malalas*, 174 (book 13, 7).

¹⁴ Cyril Mango, 'Konstantinopolis Hippodromu'nun Tarihiçesi/A History of the Hippodrome of Constantinople', in *Hippodrom/Atmeydanı*, vol. 1, 37.



Figure 1 Aerial view of the Hippodrome, Gabam Archives, photo by G. Tan

Saint Sophia, the cathedral church of Constantinople and the adjacent patriarchal palace; the imperial palace and the Senate building; and the Hippodrome. On its eastern side, the Hippodrome was adjacent to the Great Palace (*Palatium Magnum*). To its north-east was the Zeuxippus, the most important baths of the city, while to its north was Mese, the main avenue of the city, and the Million Stone, the monument that represented the starting point (point zero) of all imperial roads. The Augusteion Square to its north-east was located between the city's cathedral, the Senate building, the imperial palace, and the Hippodrome. Due to this position, the Hippodrome and its vicinity made up the most valuable section of the city, its centre. For many important personalities, having a private palace in the vicinity of the Hippodrome was a status

symbol. Hence, on the north-east side of the Hippodrome, the ruins of the palaces of two important fifth-century state officials, Antiochus and Lausus, have survived. Antiochus, who was of Persian origin, was the highest-ranking eunuch (*praepositus sacri cubiculi*) in the palace of Theodosius II (r. 408–50), and he had his palace built right next to the Hippodrome. In 439, while Antiochus was still alive, the emperor confiscated this palace, and had the round, domed reception hall (*triclinium*) transformed into a church. The structure known today as the Church of Saint Euphemia is the reception hall of this palace.¹⁵ The palace of Lausus was to the north of this, and its round plan *triclinium* and the lower walls of the parts extending west are still visible today.

Who constructed the Hippodrome, Septimius Severus or Constantine I? This issue, which is ambiguous in Byzantine sources, is also a subject of discussion in the modern literature.¹⁶ Some Byzantine sources state that the construction of the Hippodrome of Constantinople was first started by the Romans at the end of the second century. Emperor Septimius Severus organised a campaign against Pescennius Niger, the governor of Syria who was claiming the imperial throne, and in 196, following a two-year siege, Emperor Septimius Severus took Byzantium, and started the reconstruction of the ruined city, as well as the construction of the Hippodrome. In the *Patria*, a tenth-century collection of texts devoted to the history and the monuments of Constantinople, it is stated that the Hippodrome was built by Severus on gardens belonging to two brothers and a widow.¹⁷ Although there is no information on whether the structure was completed or whether it entered service, the *Patria* states that Severus completed one side of the bleachers, but then had to head for Rome upon receiving news that it was being besieged by the Gauls, and the bleachers on the other side were left incomplete.¹⁸ It was Constantine who constructed the other side of the bleachers, the two galleries, the top part of the starting gates, the semi-circular south end called the sphendone, and the benches allocated to the circus factions; he collected important sculptures from many cities and temples of the empire and placed them in the Hippodrome. Among these were twenty sculptures, including the statue of Augustus brought from Rome, and the statue of Emperor Diocletian (r. 284–305) brought from Nicomedia (modern-day Izmit).¹⁹ However, although we find a lot of information about the Hippodrome in the *Patria*, these texts should not be taken as true ‘historical documents’ per se; the

¹⁵ For the Palace of Antiochos and Church of Saint Euphemia, see Rudolf Naumann and Hans Belting, *Die Euphemia-Kirche am Hippodrom zu Istanbul und ihre Fresken, Istanbul Forschungen Band 25* (Berlin: Verlag Gebr. Mann, 1966).

¹⁶ See Dagron, *L'hippodrome de Constantinople*, 37–42.

¹⁷ *Accounts of Medieval Constantinople, The Patria*, translated by Albrecht Berger (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 25 (I, 40).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37 (I, 61–2). ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99–100 (II, 73).

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folkloric side of these texts, full of legends and myths,²⁰ should be taken into account.

The *Chronicon Paschale*, another Byzantine-era source, repeats the same information:

‘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. And made a great palace near the same Hippodrome, and the ascent from the palace to the box in the Hippodrome by way of the *kochlias*, as it is called.’²¹

The same information also appears in Malalas’ chronicle.²² This information from Byzantine sources is widely accepted by many scholars today. According to this, when Emperor Constantine I declared the city of Byzantium the new capital of the Roman Empire in 330 CE and initiated a comprehensive construction effort, he either completed or expanded the Hippodrome of Severus. Cyril Mango, however, does not agree with the view that the first construction of the Hippodrome of Constantinople coincides with the era of Septimius Severus, and instead he attributes it to Constantine.²³ Indeed, if the construction of the Hippodrome was started in 196 by Severus, it does not seem logical that it would only be completed by Constantine I 134 years later in 330. Besides, the fact that no archaeological data that can be dated to the Severan era have been found supports Mango’s claim. It is more plausible that Constantine had the Hippodrome built in the fourth century. As Constantinople, the new imperial capital bearing the founder’s name, was being built, the imperial palace and the adjacent Hippodrome were its first and most important structures. Two explanations can be provided for why some Byzantine records attribute the first building of the Hippodrome to Septimius Severus – either the structure of the Hippodrome commissioned by Severus was too small and simple, and it was rebuilt in a size befitting the new role of the city reconstructed as the new capital of the Roman Empire, or the aim was to prove that the construction date was much earlier as a result of the effort to associate the new capital of the empire with Rome.

The fact that the Hippodrome was built by Constantine I, and that prominent monuments from all over the empire were brought there is no doubt connected

²⁰ Dagron, *L’hippodrome de Constantinople*, 23–4.

²¹ *Chronicon Paschale, 284–628 A.D.*, translated by Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 16 (328).

²² *Chronicle of Malalas*, 174 (book 13, 7–8).

²³ Mango, ‘History of the Hippodrome’, 38–9; Jonathan Bardill, ‘Konstantinopolis Hippodromu’nun Mimarisi ve Arkeolojisi/The Architecture and Archaeology of the Hippodrome in Constantinople’, in *Hippodrom/Atmeydanı*, vol. 1, 94.

with the emperor's declaration of the city as the new capital of the Roman Empire. Constantinople is the 'New Rome', so its hippodrome should be of a magnificence to match the Circus Maximus in Rome. Hence, 'New Rome' was elevated up to the status of 'Old Rome'. On the other hand, the fact that Constantine had his imperial palace built adjacent to the existing hippodrome shows its connection with the cult of the emperor. The imperial box, which was built on the east bleachers of the Hippodrome, had been designed as a direct extension of the palace into the Hippodrome itself.

The Hippodrome of Constantinople has certainly been a key component of the city and has always played a major role throughout its history. They shared the same historical destiny and lived victories and catastrophes together through thick and thin. In particular, the frequent fires and earthquakes that impacted the city and the insurrections that typically started from the Hippodrome and spread to the city caused damage to the Hippodrome in places; however, things were patched up, and the Hippodrome continued to serve its citizens and its emperor. Some of the critical moments of this common destiny have survived to the present day. In 406, a fire devastated most of the city and damaged the entrance section of the Hippodrome as well as some benches. In 407, repairs were undertaken by Emperor Arcadius (r. 395–408) and stairs going to the portico were built.²⁴ Throughout its history, the Hippodrome witnessed many insurrections and riots. The first major insurrection occurred in 445, at the end of the reign of Emperor Theodosius II, but most of the others coincided with the era of Emperor Anastasius I (r. 491–518). Insurrections of various sizes started in the Hippodrome in 493, 498, 499, 501, 507, 514, and 520. During these, the Hippodrome was subjected to some damage, especially to the wooden benches, which were burnt.

However, the Nika Revolt, which broke out in the sixth century during the era of Emperor Justinian (r. 527–65), had serious implications for the history of the Hippodrome as well as that of the city, to which it caused serious damage. In January 532, the protest that the Green and Blue factions started in the Hippodrome eventually turned into the largest insurgence in the history of Constantinople. Because the insurgents were screaming out 'victory' (*nika*), this event came to be known as the Nika Revolt.²⁵ Justinian and his wife Theodora were supporting the Blues among the circus factions, and this caused great discontent among the Greens. As the unrest continued in the

²⁴ *Chronicon Paschale*, 60–1 (406–7).

²⁵ The Nika Revolt was detailed in Byzantine sources. See *Chronicle of Malalas*, 275–81 (book 18, 71); *Chronicon Paschale*, 114–27 (531); Procopius, *The Secret History: With Related Texts*, translated and edited with an introduction by Anthony Kaldellis (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2010), 136–44.

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city streets, one person from each of the Blue and Green factions was arrested and condemned to death, which escalated the situation, and caused the two rival teams to unite. On 13 January, during the chariot races organised in the Hippodrome, the Green and Blue supporters saw Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora in the imperial box across from the bleachers allocated to circus factions, and they demanded the pardon of the two arrested supporters and the removal of the head of the central administration (*praetorian prefect*), John the Cappadocian. The emperor complied with these requests, but this still did not satisfy the insurgents. In the evening, the events grew and went beyond the Hippodrome, and the angry mobs attacked the *praetorium*, the centre of the city prefecture. During these events, the crowd gathered in the Augusteion Square in front of the Saint Sophia Church. The anger of the insurgents was directed towards the imperial palace, the official emperor statues, the patriarchate, and the patriarchal images, and these were vandalised as they were seen as the symbols of authority.²⁶ Thus, the main entrance (Chalke Gate) of the imperial palace located at the eastern edge of the Augusteion Square, the Senate building next to it, the patriarchal palace and Saint Sophia, some residences belonging to the wealthy, the Zeuxippus baths, and the *porticos* in the area all the way to the Forum of Constantine (present-day Çemberlitaş), which were the authority symbols of the city, were burnt and destroyed. The historian Procopius (c.500–70), who witnessed the period, states that the city was damaged as if it had been seized and set ablaze by an enemy.²⁷ The rebels brought Hypatios, the nephew of Anastasius, into the imperial box in the Hippodrome and declared him emperor. While Justinian was making plans to put his gold on a boat and to go by sea to take refuge in Herakleia (modern-day Marmara Ereğlisi), the Empress Theodora persuaded him to stay in the city and fight. One of his faithful generals Belisarius went into the imperial box, arrested Hypatios along with his brother Pompeios and brought them to face Justinian. The next day, both were executed. Belisarius and the commander in chief of the armies (*magister militum*), Mundus, who happened to be in the city at that moment with 1,500 troops, entered the Hippodrome and, according to Procopius, killed about 30,000 to quell the uprising. After this event, chariot races and shows in the Hippodrome were discontinued for a few years. This revolt, which is one of the most important events in the history of Constantinople and the Hippodrome, was widely covered by Procopius, as well as the prominent Byzantine historiographer Theophanes (the Confessor,

²⁶ Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, A.D. 395–400* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 172.

²⁷ Procopius, *Secret History*, 138 (8–9).

c.760–817).²⁸ The wooden benches that were burnt and damaged during this insurgence were later replaced with stone benches by Emperor Justinian. As Hippodrome races and circus factions were increasingly integrated into the imperial ceremonies, the number of insurgences instigated by these parties diminished.

Hippodromes witnessed uprisings against imperial authority not only in the capital Constantinople but in other cities of the empire as well. In 390, while Emperor Theodosius I (r. 378–95) was in Thessaloniki, during the races in the hippodrome, spectators in the bleachers insulted him and a revolt started, during which the archers of Theodosius killed 15,000 – exaggerated for sure – people in the hippodrome.²⁹ Malalas reports an insurgence, from 494 to 495, that Greens and Blues instigated together in Antioch during the reign of Emperor Anastasius.³⁰

Chariot races were held quite frequently during the late Roman–early Byzantine period, but during the seventh and eighth centuries, interest declined all over the empire. During this period, almost all hippodromes in country towns were abandoned, and only the Hippodrome of Constantinople at the centre of the empire continued to exist. Yet, even here the races were no longer the competitive and occasionally violent sport of the late antique era, and turned into grandiose pageants. Except for the scheduled races that were repeated every year, such as those celebrating the foundation of the city, the chariot races were held less frequently, about three to four times a year, on the occasion of an accession to the throne, the birth of a prince, the marriage of the emperor, a celebration of victory, or the welcoming of foreign ambassadors and important guests.³¹ This period of the city’s history, which many historians call ‘the dark age’, witnessed major catastrophes such as earthquakes and plague epidemics,³² and it was quite uninspiring both for life in the capital city and for the Hippodrome.

Much of our knowledge about the use of the Hippodrome in the Middle Ages comes from the tenth-century text *The Book of Ceremonies* by Emperor

²⁸ Ibid., 144 (2.54–6); *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284–813*, translated with introduction and commentary by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 276–80 (182–6). Modern literature also repeats this information: James Allan Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*. Greenwood Guides to Historic Events of the Ancient World (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 15–20.

²⁹ *Chronicle of Malalas*, 188 (book 13, 43). ³⁰ Ibid., 220 (book 16, 2).

³¹ Mango, ‘History of the Hippodrome’, 40–1.

³² The siege of Constantinople by Persian (610), Avar (619 and 626), and Arab (starting in 674 and 714) armies; the earthquake that caused great destruction in the city in 740; and the plague epidemic that killed a considerable part of the city’s population in 747 are several of these calamities.