

Points of View: The Theodosian Obelisk Base in Context

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THE OBELISK with its sculpted base in the former Hippodrome of Constantinople (PLATES 1–3) is well known as a rare datable work of Late Antique art.¹ A sixth-century source puts the raising of the obelisk in the year 390,² and Greek and Latin epigrams on the plinth (the lower part of the base) credit Theodosius I and the urban prefect Proclus with this feat.³ The inscriptions lack punctuation and their precise translation is difficult, but the sense is clear enough. The Latin (PLATES 2, 4) may be rendered as:

Formerly difficult, I was ordered to obey the peaceful masters
and to raise

¹ The only major monograph on the obelisk base is G. Bruns, *Der Obelisk und seine Basis auf dem Hippodrom zu Konstantinopel* (=IstForsch 7 [Istanbul 1935]), reviewed by H. Kähler, *PhilWoch* 59 (1939) 93–99; J. Kollwitz, *Gnomon* 13 (1937) 423–27; E. Weigand, *BZ* 37 (1937) 452–58; T. G. Allen, *AJA* 41 (1937) 157ff; see also A. W. Byvanck, *De Obelisk van Constantinopel* (=MedAmsterdam N.R. 23 11 [Amsterdam 1960]); R. Janin, *Constantinople byzantine*² (Paris 1964); G. DAGRON, *Naissance d'une capitale. Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451* (Paris 1974: hereafter 'Dagron'); E. Iversen, *Obelisks in Exile* (Copenhagen 1972) II 9–33. The obelisk base figures in most surveys of Early Christian and Byzantine art as well as many textbooks of history. Bibliography on specific aspects of the base is given in succeeding footnotes.

² Marcellinus Comes, in T. Mommsen, ed., *Chron. Min.* II (=MGH, AA 11) 62.

³ *CIL* III 737 (*ILS* 821; PLATE 4): *difficilis quondam, dominis parere serenis/iussus et extinctis palmam portare tyrannis./ omnia Theodosio cedunt subolique perenni./ ter denis sic victus ego domitusque diebus./ iudice sub Proclo superas elatus ad auras*; *CIG* IV 8612 (W. R. Paton, *The Greek Anthology* III [Loeb edition (London 1925)] 9.682; PLATE 5): *κίονα τετρά- πλευρον αἰεὶ χθόνι κείμενον ἄχθος/ μῶνος ἀναστῆσαι Θεοδοσιος βασιλεὺς/ τολμήσας· Πρόκλος ἐπεκέκλετο, καὶ τόσος ἔστη/ κίων ἠελίοις ἐν τριάκοντα δύο.* For the literature on the inscriptions see esp. C. Mango, "The Byzantine Inscriptions of Constantinople: A Bibliographical Survey," *AJA* 55 (1951) 62; A. Cameron, "A Biographical Note on Claudian," *Athenaeum* 44 (1966) 32–40.

the palm after the tyrants were dead. Everything gives way to
Theodosius
and his eternal offspring. In this way conquered and
mastered in three
times ten days, under Proclus the Prefect, I was raised to the
high air.

The Greek inscription (PLATES 3, 5) records:

Only Emperor Theodosius dared to erect the four-sided
column which had
lain heavy on the earth for a long time. Proclus was summoned,
and this
so enormous column was put up in thirty-two suns.

The content of the inscriptions is investigated in greater detail below, but for now it is sufficient to note that the name Proclus has been effaced and then rather clumsily re-inscribed. This emendation must have occurred between 392, when Proclus was removed from office, and 395, when his opponent fell from power.⁴ There is thus no significant debate about either the date of the work, early in the last decade of the fourth century, or its motivation, celebration of Theodosius' victory over "the tyrants," no doubt Maximus Magnus and his son Victor.⁵ The lack of specificity in the inscriptions is not surprising, as unsuccessful usurpers were never mentioned by name in inscriptions put up by the victors.⁶

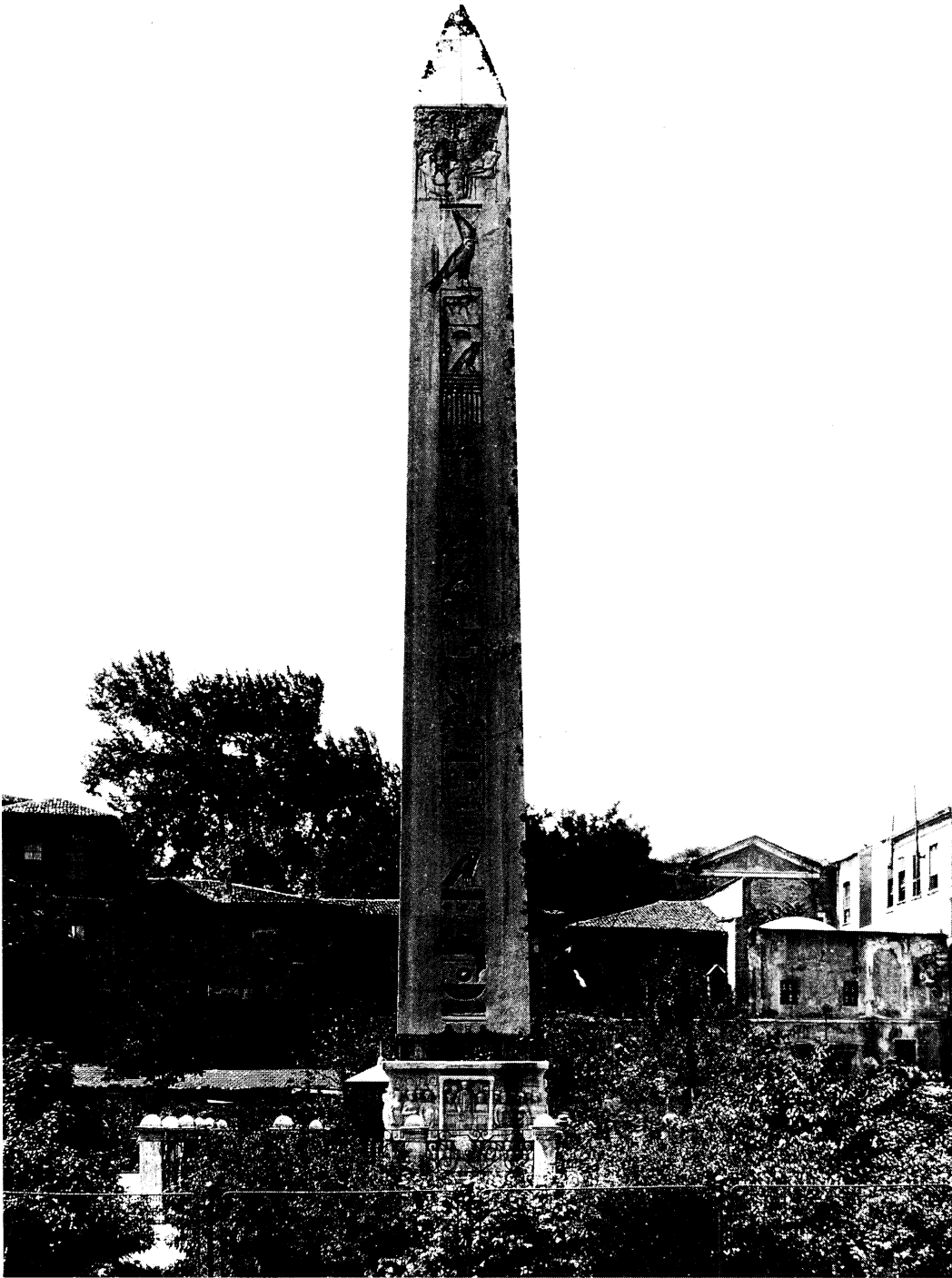
Nor is there any real confusion about the essential iconography: all four sides of the upper base show members of the imperial house in an architectural setting generally identified as the *kathisma*, the imperial loge of the Great Palace adjoining the Hippodrome. The imperial suite, flanked by various functionaries, overlooks either simple tiers of spectators on the southwest (PLATE 6) and northeast (PLATE 7), or spectators supplemented by musicians and dancers on the southeast

⁴ On the controversy among Proclus, his father Tatian, and Rufinus see S. Rebenich, "Beobachtungen zum Sturz des Tatianus und des Proculus," *ZPE* 76 (1989) 153–65.

⁵ See C. V. E. Nixon, tr., *Pacatus, Panegyric to the Emperor Theodosius* (Liverpool 1987).

⁶ "It was an almost universally observed principle that one never mentioned an unsuccessful usurper by name. It was always enough to refer to him contemptuously just as 'tyrannus'; this principle is well illustrated by Claudian's panegyrics to Theodosius: A. Cameron, "Some Prefects Called Julian," *Byzantion* 47 (1977) 62, citing R. MacMullen, "The Roman Concept Robber-Pretender," *RIDA* SER. 3 10 (1963) 221–225.

SAFRAN PLATE 1



Old photograph of the Theodosian obelisk and upper part of base from the southeast.

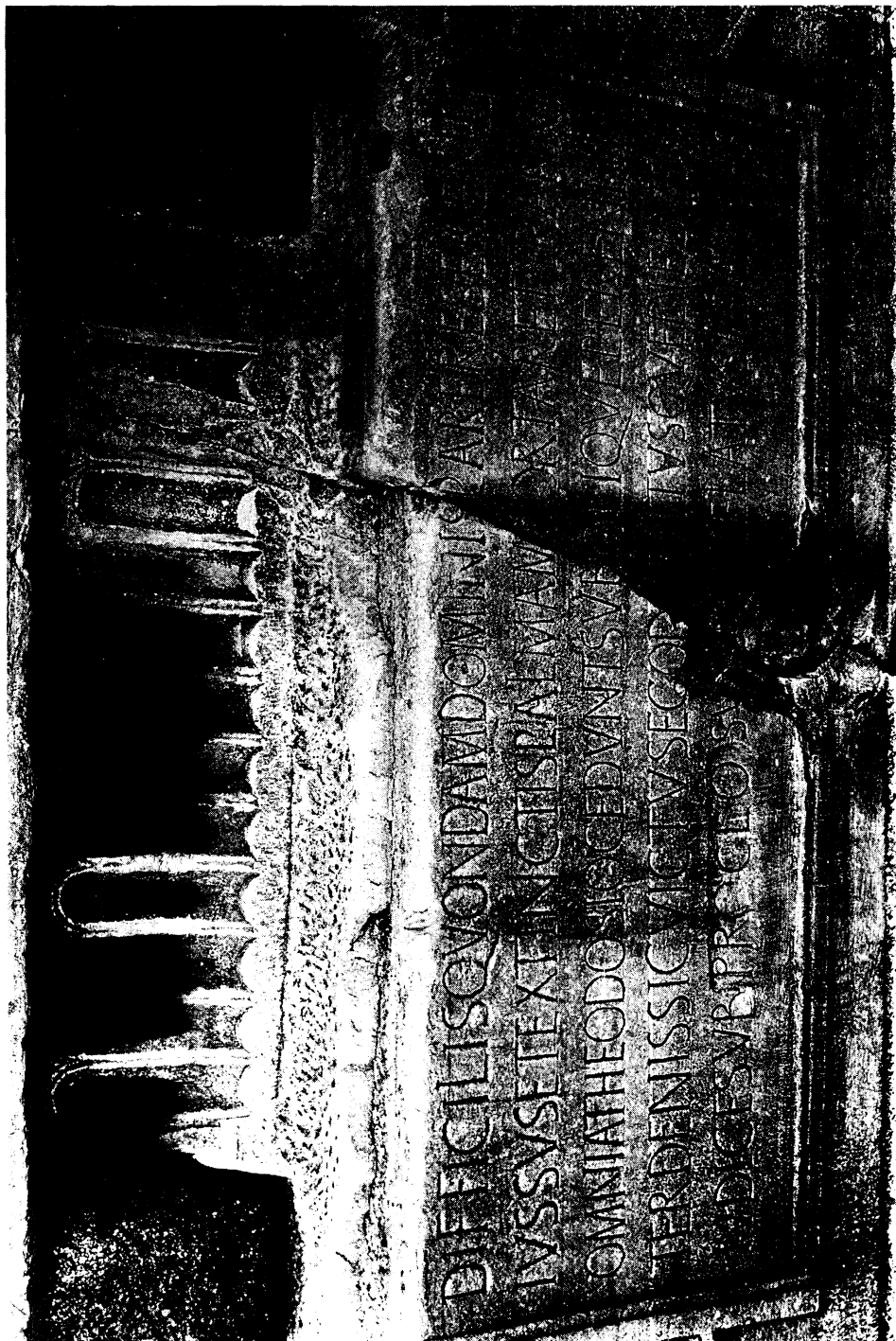
PLATE 2 SAFRAN



Old photograph of the Theodosian obelisk base from the south, showing southwest (left) and southeast (right) sides.



Old photograph of the Theodosian obelisk base from the north, showing northeast (left) and northwest (right) sides.

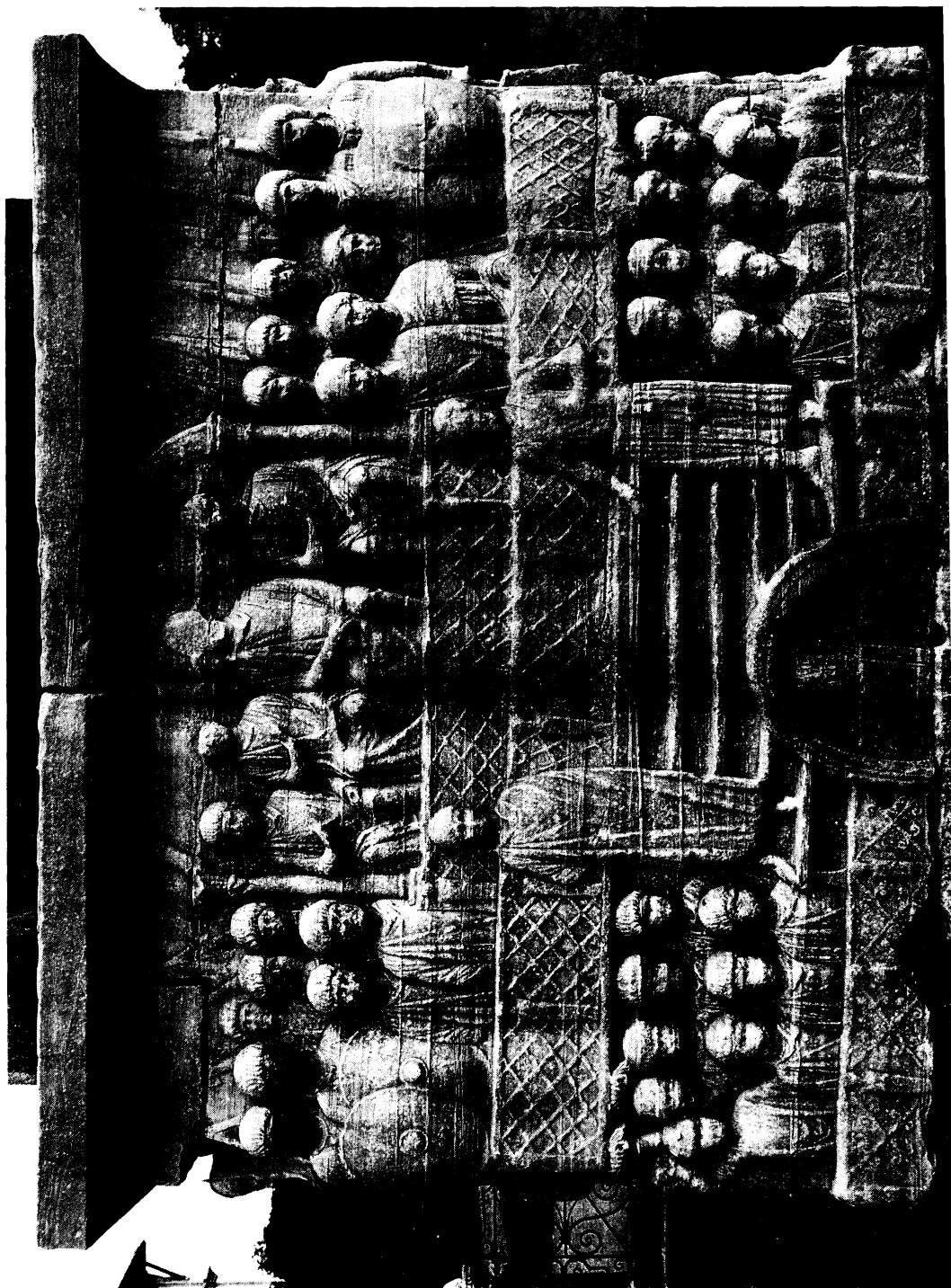


Latin inscription on the southeast side of the base of the Theodosian obelisk.

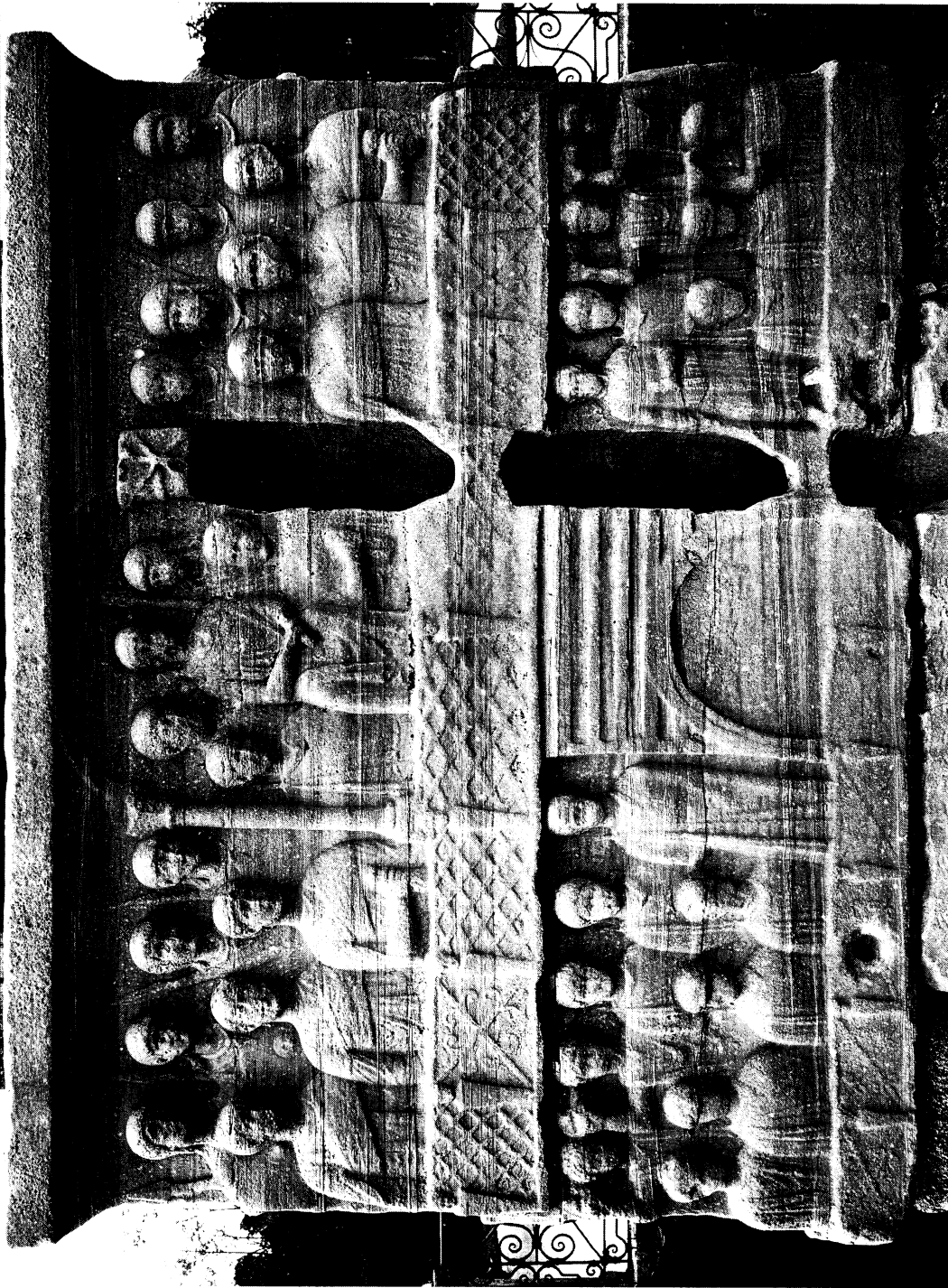


Greek inscription on the northwest side of the base of the Theodosian obelisk.

PLATE 6 SAFRAN



Southwest side of the base of the Theodosian obelisk, upper part.
Photo by P. Steyer, 1964.



Northeast side of the base of the Theodosian obelisk, upper part.
Photo by P. Steyer, 1964.

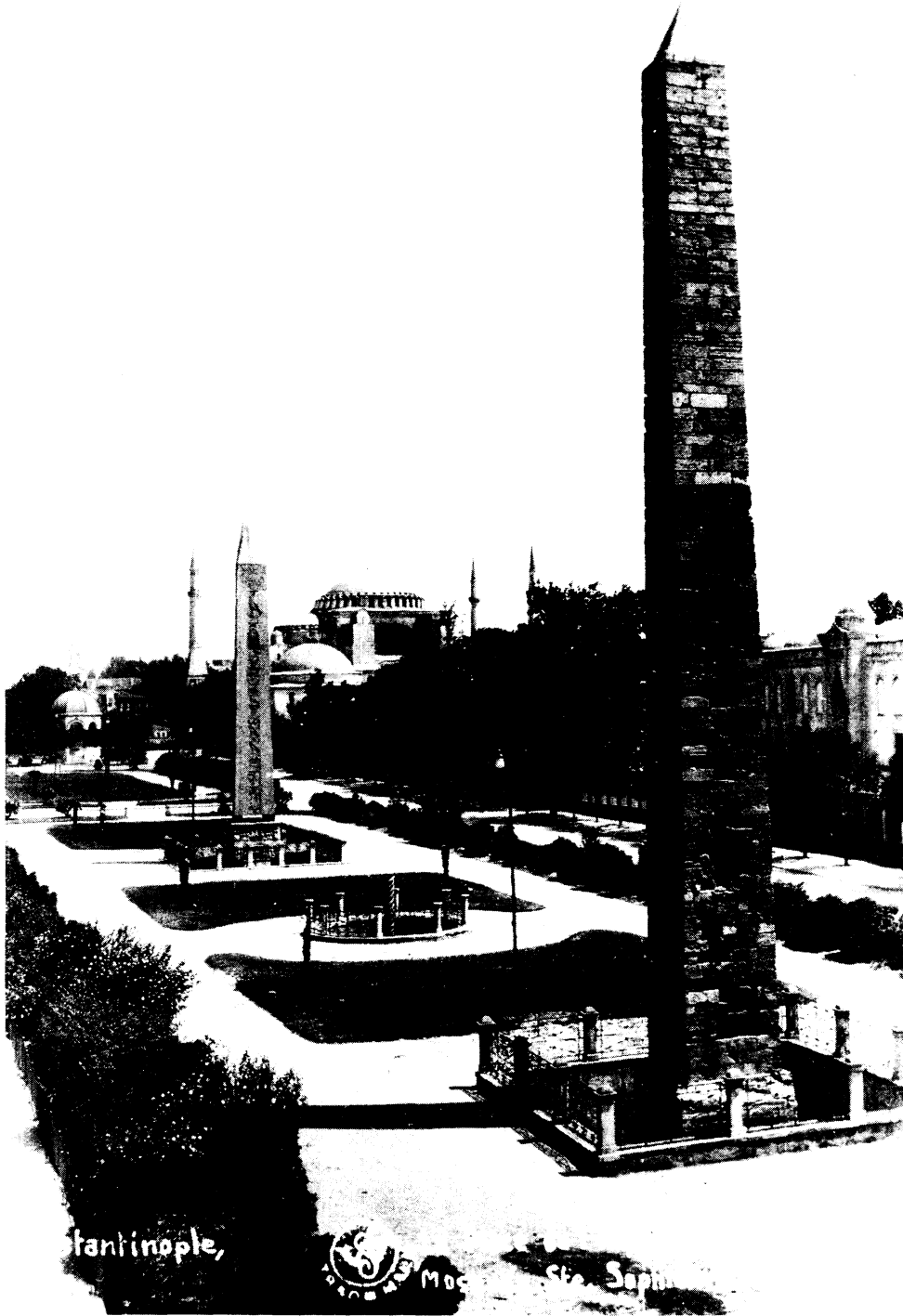


Southeast side of the base of the Theodosian obelisk, upper part.

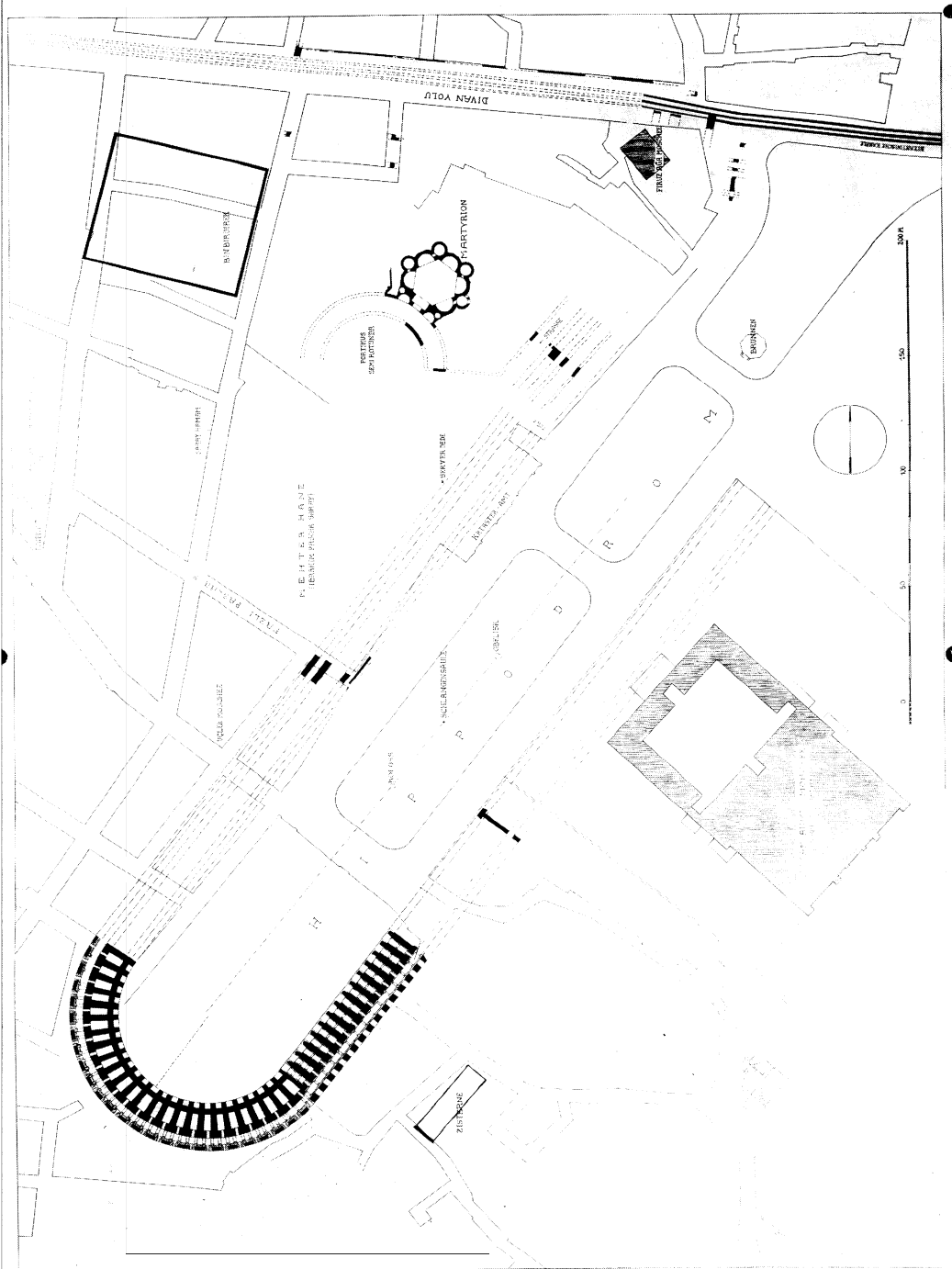


Northwest side of the base of the Theodosian obelisk, upper part.
Photo by D. Johannes, 1993.

PLATE 10 SAFRAN



Old view of the Hippodrome at Constantinople from the southwest, showing the Built Obelisk, the Serpent Column, and the Theodosian obelisk and base, with Hagia Sophia in the distance.



Plan of the Hippodrome at Constantinople and surrounding area in the 1920s. Surviving Byzantine masonry, including the *sphendone* and parts of the *cavea*, is in black.

(PLATE 8) or by kneeling barbarians on the northwest (PLATE 9). The sides of the base with these more narrative elements, the southeast and northwest, are above the two sides of the plinth that bear inscriptions in Greek or Latin. The sides of the base that depict only functionaries and spectators (the southwest and northeast) are above the sides of the plinth that contain narrative scenes of chariot-racing and obelisk-raising. Whether or not such a two-level base was planned from the outset,⁷ the two parts were certainly installed simultaneously in the last decade of the fourth century, when the obstinate obelisk was finally conquered by Theodosius and raised by his urban prefect.

The obelisk base has often been studied from the perspective of style. It has served as the key monument in identifying a so-called Theodosian court style, which is usually described as a "renaissance" of earlier Roman classicism.⁸ Both more and less hieratic modes of representation, however, are used on the base, even on a single side. An example is the southeast side of the upper base (PLATE 8), with the stiffly posed imperial suite above and the sketchily rendered musicians and dancers below. The reliefs on the northeast and southwest plinth (PLATES 2, 3) are also done in this less hieratic, even 'impressionistic', style. Therefore, if there was a Theodosian court style, it varied so

⁷ According to A. Effenberger's unpublished theory, the plinth was originally the sole base for the obelisk, but when the obelisk was broken, the carved base was interposed to make up for the lost height. This suggests a precise desired height for the whole obelisk-cum-base ensemble. I owe this information to Dr Albrecht Berger.

⁸ See A. Taylor, "Stylistic Variety in Constantinopolitan Stone Relief of the Theodosian Period," *ByzSt* 10.2 (1983) 184-201; E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making* (London 1977) 32ff, and "A Marble Relief from the Theodosian Period," *DOP* 14 (1960) 17-42; J. Kollwitz, *Oströmische Plastik der theodosianischen Zeit* (Berlin 1941); S. Sande, "Some New Fragments from the Column of Theodosius," *ActaAArtHist* n.s. 1 (1981) 1-78, with some serious misstatements about the spectators' relationship to the obelisk base; H.-G. Severin, "Oströmische Plastik unter Valens und Theodosius I," *JBerlMus* 12 (1970) 211-52; B. Brenk, "Zwei Reliefs des späten 4. Jahrhunderts," *ActaAArtHist* 4 (1969) 51-60; P. Angiolini-Martinelli, "Tradizione e rinnovamento nelle sculture della base dell'obelisco di Teodosio a Costantinopoli," *CorsiRavenna* 22 (1975) 47-62. The base was originally dated on stylistic grounds to the time of Constantine: A. J. B. Wace and R. Traquair, "The Base of the Obelisk of Theodosius," *JHS* 29 (1909) 60-69.

widely in its representation of figures that the label is not very useful.⁹

The base has received similar attention in terms of iconography. It has been of great interest to those who interpret some, or indeed many, of the sculpted figures as portraits. Scholars have attempted with differing results to identify the imperial figures and their neighbors as specific members of the Theodosian house or the Constantinopolitan aristocracy.¹⁰ Various Hippodrome and civic functionaries have been categorized on the basis of their clothing and attributes. The base has also been examined from the viewpoint of realistic architecture, with the reliefs used to reconstruct the appearance of the *kathisma* and the Hippodrome.¹¹ It has been considered a reservoir of information about material culture, depicting as it does different clothing options, a variety of musical instruments, and even tools demonstrating Roman technological know-how.¹² Finally, ethnographic information has been read into the base, with the kneeling barbarians on the northwest side (PLATE 9) and the imperial Gothic bodyguards on all four sides distinguished by their costume and physiognomy. A historiographic inquiry into

⁹ The best stylistic comparison for the narrative style on the plinth certainly postdates it, according to all recent scholarship. This is the fifth- or sixth-century "Kugelspiel" found in the Hippodrome and now in Berlin. It depicts circus scenes and perhaps the *kathisma* door, but the patronage and audience for this portable work cannot be ascertained. See A. Effenberger and H.-G. Severin, *Das Museum für spätantike und byzantinische Kunst* (Mainz 1992) 116ff; A. Cameron, *Porphyrius the Charioteer* (Oxford 1973) 33f, 58ff.

¹⁰ Most recently S. Rebenich, "Zum Theodosiusobelisken in Konstantinopel," *IstMitt* 41 (1991) 447–76; Kollwitz (*supra* n.1) 423–27; H. Wrede, "Zur Errichtung des Theodosiusobelisken in Istanbul," *IstMitt* 16 (1966) 178–98; H. P. L'Orange, "Zum Alter der Postamentreliefs des Theodosius-Obelisken in Konstantinopel," *Likeness and Icon. Selected Studies* (Odense 1973) 206–209, and *Studien zur Geschichte des spätantiken Porträts* (Oslo 1933) 66–70; J. C. Balty, "Hiérarchie de l'empire et image du monde. La face nord-ouest de l'obélisque théodosien à Constantinople," *Byzantion* 52 (1982) 60–71; E. Demougeot, "Obélisques égyptiens transférés à Rome en 357 et à Constantinople en 390," in *id.*, *L'Empire romain et les Barbares d'Occident, IV^e–VII^e siècle. Scripta varia* (Paris 1988) 253–72.

¹¹ R. GUILLAND, *Études de topographie de Constantinople byzantine I* (Berlin 1969: hereafter 'Guilland'); Cameron (*supra* n.9); A. Piganiol, "La loge impériale de l'Hippodrome de Byzance et le problème de l'Hippodrome couvert," *Byzantion* 11 (1936) 383–90; G. Egger, "Die Architekturdarstellung im spätantiken Relief," *JKSW* 55 (1959) 1–30.

¹² H. Kähler, "Der Sockel des Theodosiusobelisken in Konstantinopel als Denkmal der Spätantike," *ActaAArtHist* 6 (1975) 45–55.

the scholarly literature on the base would doubtless yield interesting insights into scholarly fashions, trends, and agendas over the past century.

This paper will not address any of the stylistic or iconographic issues that have fueled scholarship to date. Instead, it will attempt to redress a serious omission by placing the obelisk base in its original context, the late fourth-century Hippodrome of Constantinople. With a capacity estimated at 100,000 people,¹³ the Hippodrome was the city's public gathering place par excellence. It will be shown that the obelisk base was designed and positioned in a particular way to relate to its heterogeneous public, to communicate certain messages and to elicit certain responses. Today recontextualization is difficult, given the state of preservation of the Hippodrome, but it is an essential task if one hopes to approach an understanding of the messages and combinations of meaning on the four sides of the base. Some of these messages were constructed by the emperor or his advisors and their craftsmen; other meanings were brought to the base by the audiences on each side. Both authorial intent and audience response deserve consideration in attempts to grasp the meanings of a Late Antique work.

To understand intent and response, it is first necessary to establish as closely as possible the composition of the audiences in the late fourth century. For this we have a few literary sources as well as limited archaeological and art historical evidence. Unfortunately, much later material is irrelevant: the rôle of the Hippodrome in urban life changed markedly in the late fifth and sixth centuries, and later sources have to be used with great caution, if at all, in reconstructing the fourth-century situation. We can supplement the meager sources by applying some general principles derived from reader-response criticism and reception aesthetics as formulated in recent decades in the field of literary criticism. Studies in visual theory and the psychology of perception offer additional perspectives. Although these methods constitute useful new tools for the historian of art, the objective remains a traditional one: a better understanding of the monument, including its original context, its patronage, and its audiences.

¹³ A. Cameron, *Circus Factions* (Oxford 1976) 236.

I

The obelisk base is almost always discussed and photographed in close-up, corresponding to modern interests in its iconographic and stylistic details. But the base was never intended to be seen that way; probably only a small team of sculptors ever had that perspective and only for a short span of time. The Late Antique audiences in the Hippodrome would have seen the monument in completely different ways. First of all, they saw an *entire* monument—the obelisk and its two-part base—dominating the other objects on the barrier that divided the two tracks of the circus (PLATES 1, 10). The obelisk base was only one among many possible visual foci in the Hippodrome, and its visibility was regularly obscured by chariots racing past. An individual spectator could see only one or two sides of the carved and inscribed base, never three or four. It was far away from some viewers and nearer, but never really close, to many others.

The four sides of the obelisk base faced different sides of the circus, and there were different spectators on each side (PLATE 11). This fact probably dictated certain considerations in the production of the work. While this seems logical, even obvious, it has not been discussed—it has barely even been noted—in the secondary literature.¹⁴ This is especially surprising if, as seems probable, the sculpture was carved in situ in the Hippodrome, with full cognizance of the encircling seating patterns.¹⁵ At the very least the inscriptions, which record how many days it took to raise the obelisk, could only have been carved once the obelisk was up.

The first problem is to differentiate the audiences and determine who sat where in the Hippodrome. There are no contemporary sources, but the sixth-century historian John Malalas records a change in seating patterns only a few years later in the reign of Theodosius II; there are scattered references in other historians; and the *Book of Ceremonies* includes earlier as well as contemporary tenth-century information on Hippodrome

¹⁴ A. Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin* (Paris 1936) 66, noted that two sides of the base were more visible than the others.

¹⁵ Suggested by Allen (*supra* n.1) 157ff; Kähler (*supra* n.12) 46.

ceremonial.¹⁶ In addition, the archaeological evidence from circuses throughout the Roman world, and artistic depictions of these in many media, prove the consistency and conservatism of the circus as a building type.¹⁷ The Circus Maximus in Rome was clearly the chief exemplar and model, but consistent features are recorded in third- and fourth-century mosaics, as well as in reliefs and on such portable objects as gems and lamps. Some later ivory diptychs also show circus scenes. Only a few of these, however, depict the *cavea*, the seating area of the circus, with any detail (Humphrey 243).

On the basis of textual, art historical, and archaeological evidence, we can be sure that the emperor and his retinue sat on the southeast side in the *kathisma* box connecting the Hippodrome with the Great Palace (Fig. 1). In Rome's Circus Maximus, the equivalent royal box was similarly located along the left-hand track, looking from the viewpoint of the *carceres* (starting gates; Humphrey figs. 53–54). In the fourth-century Circus of Maxentius in Rome, the royal box was also on the left side, although closer to the starting gates (Humphrey fig. 278). This was also the location of the tribunal in smaller provincial circuses.¹⁸

The precise location of the *kathisma* at Constantinople is unknown, and it is not clear whether it directly faced the Theodosian obelisk, which may have marked the physical center of the Hippodrome or perhaps the center of the barrier dividing the two tracks (PLATE 11).¹⁹ Judicial archives were housed

¹⁶ Malalas, ch. 351, in E. and M. Jeffreys and R. Scott, trr., *The Chronicle of John Malalas* (= *Byzantina Australiensia* 4 [Melbourne 1986]) 191; Guiland 371–595 *passim*.

¹⁷ See now the comprehensive study by J. H. HUMPHREY, *Roman Circuses. Arenas for Chariot Racing* (London 1986: hereafter 'Humphrey') with earlier bibliography.

¹⁸ On the *kathisma* see Cameron (*supra* n.9) 50ff; Guiland 462–98; Humphrey 78ff. At Sirmium, Milan, and Thessaloniki, exceptionally, the royal box seems to have been situated on the right side of the circus: Humphrey 636ff.

¹⁹ Augustus' obelisk in the Circus Maximus (now in the Piazza del Popolo) marked the midpoint of the barrier; Constantius' erected in 357 (now in front of the Lateran) marked the midpoint of the entire Circus. On these obelisks see Iversen (*supra* n.1) I 55–75. A barrier must have existed despite the absence of any traces (see S. Casson, "The Excavations," in Casson *et al.*, *Preliminary Report Upon the Excavations Carried Out in the Hippodrome of Constantinople in 1927* [London 1928] 9f), but its height in the fourth century cannot be determined; in the thirteenth century according to Robert of Clari it was

under the *kathisma* and, because the urban prefect and senatorial commissions sometimes made judgments in the Hippodrome, it is likely that they had offices, and therefore seats, somewhere along the southeast side.²⁰

On the northwest side, facing the *kathisma*, the partisans of the four racing colors sat in separate wooden grandstands (Fig. 1). At the end of the fourth century the Blues were directly opposite the *kathisma*, as proved by the reshuffling of seats in 400 by Theodosius II, who preferred looking across at his fellow Green supporters (Malalas ch. 351 [Jeffreys 191]). The details of the so-called factions and their rôles in later Byzantine history need not concern us here. But as Cameron has shown, these fans were not just ordinary citizens, but young men with the leisure to indulge their intense interest in chariot racing and—especially in later centuries—in mischief. Loud as they no doubt were, they represented but a tiny proportion of the race-viewing population as whole. In 602, the only year for which precise numbers are recorded, there were 1,500 Greens and 900 Blues in a population numbering between 500,000 and 750,000.²¹ There is no reason to suspect a larger number of partisans two centuries earlier, when the population of Constantinople was smaller, probably closer to 250,000.²²

The fans were a part, *to meros*, of the whole *demos*. That the young men had a distinct seating area, at least in later centuries, is further suggested by a reference to sculpture located “in the place called Neolaia,” the “young men’s area” of the Hippodrome.²³ Also on the northwest side, seated alongside the circus partisans, were members of the garrison troops; they occupied six sections of the grandstands (Malalas ch. 351). Appropriately enough, these most avid fans were closest to the finishing line, which in most circuses was near the center of the right-hand

“a good fifteen feet” high, and this has been widely repeated (e.g. Cameron [*supra* n.9] 181). See also C. Mango, “L’euripe de l’hippodrome de Constantinople,” *REByz* 7 (1949) 180–93.

²⁰ Malalas ch. 340 (Jeffreys 185); Dagron 239, 317.

²¹ Cameron (*supra* n.13) 20, 120, citing Theoph. Sim. *Hist.* 8.7.11.

²² Dagron 518–25; see also D. Jacoby, “La population de Constantinople à l’époque byzantine: un problème de démographie urbaine,” *Byzantion* 31 (1961) 81–109. John Chrysostom says there were 100,000 Christians in the city ca 400: *In Act. Apost. Hom.* 11.3, Migne, *PG* LX 96ff.

²³ A. Cameron and J. Herrin, trr., *Constantinople in the Early Eighth Century: The Parastaseis syntomai chronikai* (Leiden 1984) 60f, 171f.

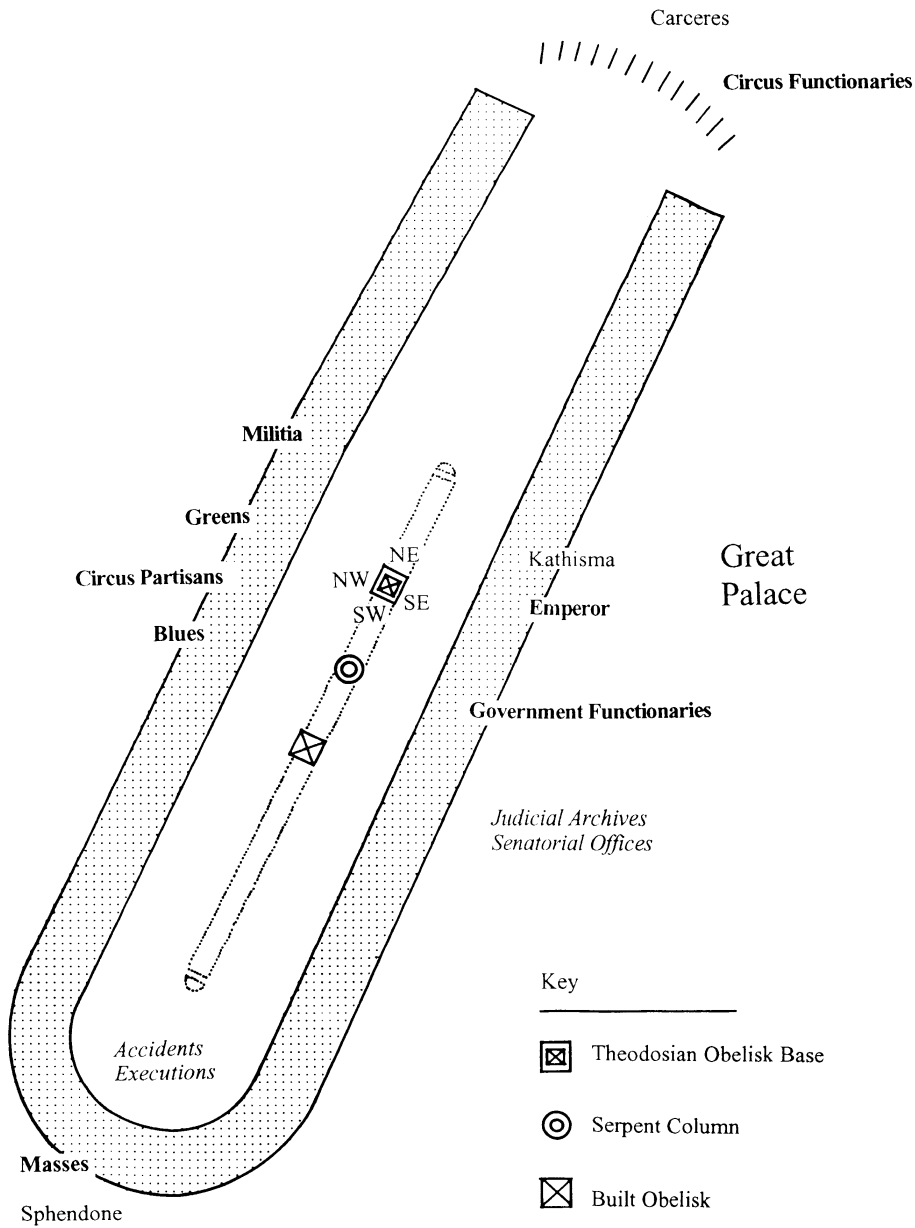


Figure 1: Diagram of the Hippodrome at Constantinople, showing parts of the circus, relative location of monuments on the central barrier, seating arrangements (boldface), and activities by location (italics). Drawing by R. A. Fellerman.

track; such early third-century mosaics as those in Lyon and Silin (Libya) show the finishing line.²⁴ The adjacent white line depicted in the Lyon mosaic is the break line, at which the chariots could leave the lanes assigned to them at the starting gate in order to move to the inside position.

To the southwest, along the curved end of the Hippodrome called the *sphendone*, executions were occasionally staged; the emperor Valentinian watched his chief eunuch burn alive there in 370.²⁵ But mostly the chariots would pile up in serious accidents here,²⁶ as depicted in many circus mosaics, including Silin and Piazza Armerina.²⁷ The *sphendone*, including the extremes of the two long flanks of the Hippodrome, probably housed the 'cheap seats', as in a modern football stadium. These spectators were far away from the emperor, from the most avid partisans, from the starting gates, and from the finish line (*cf.* Guillard 376); nevertheless, their occupants no doubt voiced loud support for their favorite charioteers. The highest seats were surely reserved for the lowest classes of the population, the non-citizens and slaves (Humphrey 122).

Finally, it is unlikely that any sizeable group watched from the *carceres* to the northeast, housing the starting gates at ground level and utilitarian spaces for the charioteers, circus functionaries, and organizers of the races above. In the fourth-century Piazza Armerina mosaic, the *cavea* is interrupted by the *carceres* and a circus magistrate is depicted alone in his upper-story box (Humphrey fig. 112). Only an early third-century mosaic from Carthage shows seating completely around the circus, including over the *carceres*, but this mosaic seems heavily influenced by the iconography of amphitheaters in which the seating completely encircled an oval arena (Humphrey 210 and fig. 63).

From the Theodosian and Justinianic law codes it can be inferred that women and clergy were sometimes a part of the Hippodrome audience. In the fourth century they might have

²⁴ Humphrey 84ff, figs. 36 (Lyon), 107 (Silin).

²⁵ Malalas ch. 340 (Jeffreys 185); Cameron (*supra* n.13) 172; later examples of executions and mutilations in Guillard 375ff.

²⁶ Guillard 375; Dagron 333.

²⁷ Humphrey 211ff (Silin), 223ff, fig. 112 (Piazza Armerina) with additional bibliography. The Piazza Armerina mosaic surely represents the Circus Maximus, whereas the Silin example shows more generic circus iconography: Humphrey 230.

been seated on any of the three sides for spectators, although females of imperial rank probably viewed the proceedings from the upper levels of the *kathisma*.²⁸ Women are not identifiable, however, in any of the surviving artistic representations of circus scenes, including the relatively detailed mosaics at Piazza Armerina and at Gafsa, a late fifth- or early sixth-century site in Tunisia (Humphrey fig. 72).

II

The obelisk base confirms the textual and material evidence for seating in the Hippodrome. Most significantly, the two inscriptions on the southeast and northwest sides correspond to the most important and most distinctive groups of spectators. This can hardly be accidental. Why orient the inscriptions in this manner, or indeed have inscriptions at all, if they could not be seen and appreciated in some way? And in fact, the *languages* of the inscriptions appear to correspond with the literacy of the two audiences.

On the southeast, facing the *kathisma*, is the inscription in Latin (PLATE 4 and Fig. 1)—the language of power, the language used in the fourth century only by the court, the bureaucracy, and the army.²⁹ Latin was also the language of the law, which would correspond to the presence of judges on the southeast near the judicial archives. Most people in Constantinople spoke Greek, the lingua franca of the eastern Roman Empire and the language of the inscription on the northwest facing the circus partisans (PLATE 5 and Fig. 1). The absence of inscriptions on the southwest and northeast sides may well reflect the illiteracy of the masses, which was certainly common in the fourth century.³⁰ There is another possibility as well. Inhabitants of

²⁸ Women sat with men in the Circus at Rome: J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* (New York 1969) 258f. Women and priests evidently infiltrated the Hippodrome. In the sixth century a wife's presence there was grounds for divorce, and ecclesiastics had to be explicitly prohibited from attending: *Cod. Iust.* 1.4.34.3, *Nov. Iust.* 117, cited in O. Pasquato, *Gli spettacoli in S. Giovanni Crisostomo* (= *OrChrAn* 201 [Rome 1976]) 93.

²⁹ G. Dagron, "Aux origines de la civilisation byzantine: Langue de culture et langue d'État," *RHist* 241 (1969) 23–56, esp. 25, 36, 39.

³⁰ In general see W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1989), who notes that illiterates could serve as decurions by the end of the third century (292) and that all types of honorific and commemorative inscriptions,

Constantinople, a cosmopolitan city, spoke Gothic, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Syriac, and probably other tongues in addition to Greek; all these languages were used in preaching.³¹ Perhaps this multilingualism militated against an inscription in one of the two most prominent local languages. In addition, the presence or absence of inscriptions indicates an awareness of the setting, including the spectators' relative distances from the obelisk base (further discussed below).

It has been argued that the content of the Theodosian inscriptions echoes that on Constantius' obelisk erected at Rome in the Circus Maximus in 357.³² Although both Latin inscriptions allude to an unnamed tyrant, the texts are not that close. Very few would have recognized competition between the Old and New Rome in the form of textual emulation. More significant is the change of language in the later obelisk base. The Roman inscription in Latin contrasts with those in Latin and Greek intended for a polyglot audience. Further, images supplement the Constantinopolitan inscriptions and may explain their relative brevity.

The Latin inscription of the base, written from the viewpoint of the obelisk, almost takes the form of a riddle. This is good classical epigrammatic style: a quick look at the *Anthologia Graeca* reveals a large number of inanimate objects—houses, fountains, baths, even mosquito nets—presenting themselves in the first person.³³ The text communicates power with the repetition of such words as “ordered,” “obey,” “conquered,” and “mastered.” The alliteration of *dominis* and *domitusque* echoes and reinforces this sense of mastery. It also argues against a suggestion that *domitusque* is a cutter's error for *duobusque*, which would have reconciled the thirty days needed to raise the obelisk here with the thirty-two days recorded in the Greek inscription.³⁴ We should interpret this inconsistency

including otherwise numerous papyri, declined in number during the fourth century (298, 317).

³¹ R. Browning, “The Language of Byzantine Literature,” in *id.*, *History, Language and Literacy in the Byzantine World* (Northampton 1989) XV (108).

³² Wrede (*supra* n.10) 188ff; Iversen (*supra* n.1) I 57f.

³³ Paton (*supra* n.3) 9.631, 651ff, 667, 764 *et al.*

³⁴ Suggested by Cameron (*supra* n.3) 34, but Janin (*supra* n.1: 190) already replaced the clearly legible *domitusque* in line 4 with *duobusque*. I owe this observation to Lee F. Sherry.

partly as a product of choosing oblique and pedantic Latin hexameters that are epic in form and content. Such stock phrases as "three times ten days" have been adopted from famous Latin authors, including Vergil.

Where the Latin text is generalized, the Greek text is specific. Instead of the epic conceit of the speaking obelisk, we find a straightforward third-person narrative in pentameter about a four-sided column. Although the translation is somewhat unclear, the specificity of thirty-two suns, or thirty-two days, or the morning of the thirty-second day is very different from the Vergilian "three times ten." Both the epic and elegiac meters would be familiar to such a highly literate audience as the imperial court, but the factual specificity of the Greek text may have had greater appeal to a less epically inclined audience. It is worth noting that the name of Theodosius is centralized both visually and textually in both the Latin and Greek inscriptions (PLATES 4, 5).

Regardless of the degree to which its contents could be understood, the mere fact of an inscription was significant. MacMullen has demonstrated that "the epigraphic habit ... was taken seriously," and although the height of the epigraphical fashion antedated the Theodosian obelisk base by some two centuries, the implications of a formal inscription in stone must still have been clear. The ability to erect an inscription was proof of social status in antiquity, a status naturally held by the emperor and his representative, the urban prefect. An inscription was important; it commanded attention and respect; and it was usually addressed to a whole community,³⁵ even if its contents were not accessible to all or even most members of its audience. The same must be even more true for a large-scale work of public art that so prominently incorporates inscriptions.

Besides the language of the inscriptions, the artistic language of each side of the base can be linked to its intended audience. As noted above, the iconography is repetitive but it is also differentiated on each side. The quality of the reliefs also differs on each side. This is not a question of diverse styles or of stylistic 'modes', which are indeed present on the base; nor is it a product of different degrees of wear or weathering. There is no such thing as an objective aesthetic judgment, but generally

³⁵ R. MacMullen, "The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire," *AJP* 103 (1982) 244, 246.

agreed-upon qualitative criteria do exist and observations made in situ can be supplemented by old photographs (PLATES 6–9).

The southeast side facing the imperial box—surely the best carved (PLATE 8)—has both the greatest number and highest degree of individualized figures and faces. Here we see the most varied draperies, the sharpest relief, and the most solid-looking architecture with the most inventive grillework. The next-best-carved side, the northwest facing the circus partisans (PLATE 9), also has some sensitive portraits. Only on these two sides is there some compositional modulation—some of the Gothic guards turn away from the emperor, adding variety to the otherwise centrifugal and static poses. Nevertheless, the carving of the architecture on the northwest is a little less fine than on the opposite side of the base: the *kathisma* arch seems squeezed into the available space and the balustrade curves up at the left side.

In contrast to the high artistic quality of the southeast and northwest sides, the figures on the southwest—all with identical wavy-cap hairstyles—are very monotonous (PLATE 6). But the carving on the northeast is the least accomplished of all (PLATE 7): the relief is very flat and the figures outside the *kathisma* are all cookie-cutter repetitions, frontal and stiff. The presence of a vertical channel, which made the base into a fountain, also shows that this was perceived as the least important side, even if the channel was originally less conspicuous. This hydraulic function was probably planned along with the reliefs and was not a later addition, because the overall upper-base composition of *kathisma* and flanking functionaries has been maintained and no figures have been destroyed.³⁶

Byvanck noted that the northeast face differed from the others and attributed it to a change in style during the reign of Theodosius' son Arcadius.³⁷ But the idea that the sides of the obelisk base were carved at different times is problematic. A change in ruler is unlikely to alter sculptural quality or even style. The obelisk base was not such a huge project that its completion required many years; we know of no specific historical circumstances that might have mandated a delay; and it is so centrally and publicly located that its unfinished state

³⁶ Scholars disagree about when this was done and how the fountain would have looked: cf. Bruns (*supra* n.1) 18ff with F. Krauss' appendix (85f). The circus barrier was typically composed of water basins and fountains, hence the name "euripos" channel.

³⁷ A. W. Byvanck, *L'art de Constantinople* (Leiden 1977) 45.

might well have been a dynastic embarrassment. It is difficult to agree with Bruns that the southeast and southwest sides were carved under Theodosius and the northwest and northeast sides under Arcadius. This assumption led Bruns to label the south sides (PLATE 2) as A1 and A2 and the north sides (PLATE 3) as B1 and B2.³⁸ These labels introduced highly tenuous notions of style and patronage that have attained the status of fact through frequent repetition in the secondary literature. The sculptor of the high-quality southeast side, however, is unlikely to have executed the mediocre southwest face and the sculptor of the northwest did not carve the weak northeast side. Instead, better artists were most likely responsible for the southeast and northwest sides, which face the most important spectators.

III

At this point we must return to the fundamental question of context. How visible were the iconographic and qualitative differences to their respective audiences? Could the spectators on different sides of the circus see and appreciate the nuances of epigraphical and artistic language? First we shall address the question of visibility and legibility, then assess the different viewers' responses.

The best visibility is clearly from the long sides of the Hippodrome, the sides closest to the base—in other words, the sides occupied by the imperial retinue on the southeast and the circus partisans on the northwest. In his recent study of Roman circuses, Humphrey calculated (588) that the minimum adequate single-track width was just under 30 m., which can support twelve chariot teams at a breadth of 2.5 m. per team. The average width of Late Antique circuses was 67–79 m., including the two tracks plus the width of the central barrier with its water basins and statuary (Humphrey 635). The interior width of the Hippodrome at Constantinople, based on the surviving dimensions of the *sphendone* established by twentieth-century excavation and supplemented by Hero of Byzantium's tenth-century calculations, is approximately 80 m.³⁹ Dividing by two to determine the width of each track and subtracting the width

³⁸ Bruns (*supra* n.1) *passim*, already criticized by Kollwitz (*supra* n.1) 427 and Wrede (*supra* n.10) 192.

³⁹ Dagron 328; *cf.* Casson (*supra* n.19) Plan II.

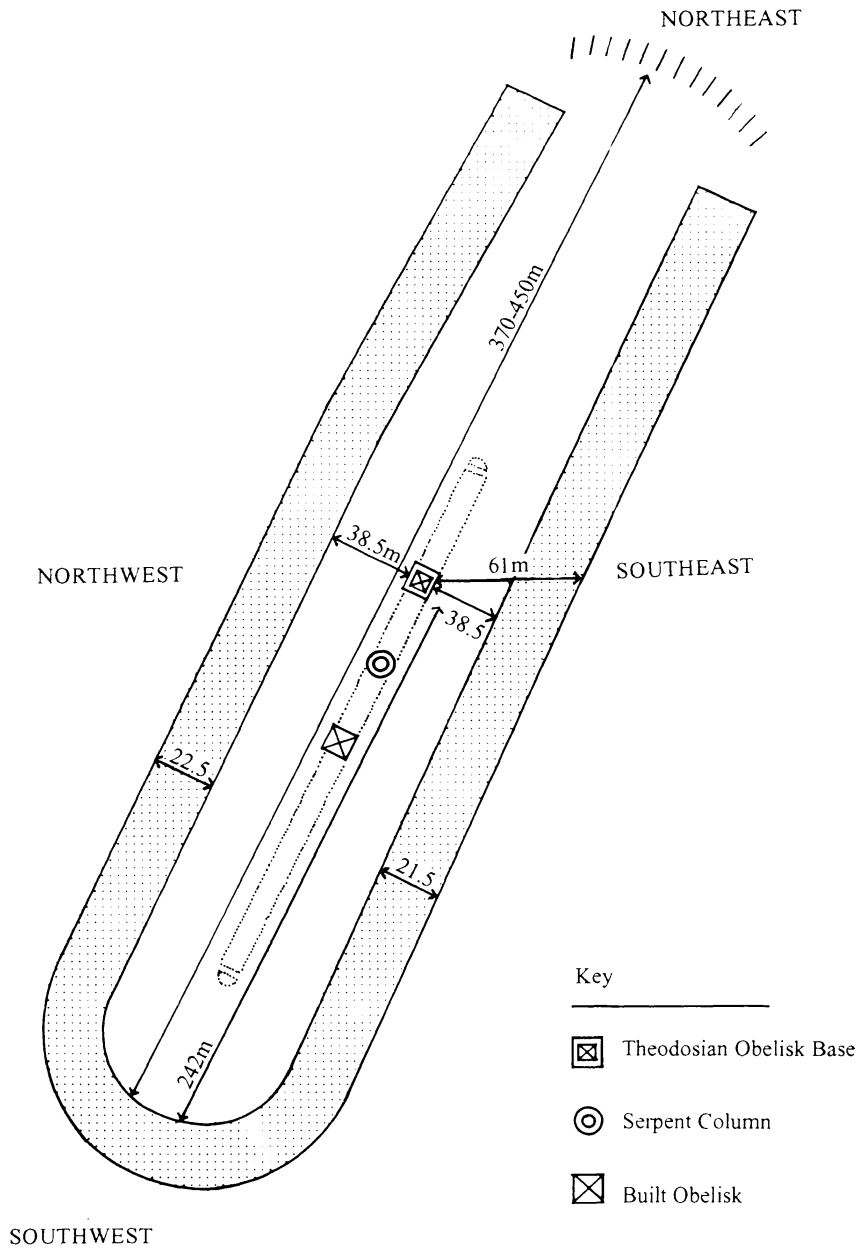


Figure 2: Diagram of the Hippodrome at Constantinople, showing dimensions of the arena and *cavea*, and relative distances between the base of Theodosian obelisk and spectators on all sides. Drawing by R. A. Fellerman.

of the obelisk base, we can deduce that the *nearest* spectators—on the southeast and northwest—sat about 38.5 m. from the base at track level (*Fig. 2* and *PLATE 11*).

Spectators seated in the upper tiers of seats along those sides are obviously farther away. To calculate this distance we must know the depth of the seating area, which is the width of the preserved *sphendone*, approximately 22 m.,⁴⁰ and the height of the seats. Robert of Clari, who saw the Hippodrome as a crusader in the early thirteenth century, attests thirty or forty rows of seats.⁴¹ We may estimate a height of approximately 35 cm. per row, based on the relatively intact and well-excavated circus of Lepcis Magna and the Circus of Maxentius at Rome (Humphrey 33, 591). Both of these were smaller than the Hippodrome at Constantinople, but this would affect the number of rows rather than the heights of individual tiers. The simple calculation $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ yields the distance of the seats farthest from the obelisk base at the center of the southeast and northwest sides: these spectators were approximately 61 m. from the base (*Fig. 2*).

Can the reliefs and inscriptions be seen from a distance of 38.5 m., let alone 61 m.? Investigation is hampered by the impossibility of obtaining a clear view of the base and its plinth from those distances today; they are partly below the current ground level and further obscured by protective fences (*PLATE 10*). Nevertheless, field testing, proportional observations, and professional manuals on visibility indicate that the reliefs would have been visible to fourth-century audiences on the southeast and northwest, and that these spectators should also have had little trouble reading the inscriptions.⁴² By analogy with other

⁴⁰ Dagron 328; Casson (*supra* n.19) Plan II.

⁴¹ Janin (*supra* n.1) 186; Dagron 327.

⁴² Many physical and psychological factors can have an impact on visibility and perception, but I assume, *arguendo*, an 'ideal' viewer with normal eyesight: see J. Follis and D. Hammer, *Architectural Signing and Graphics* (New York 1979) 18f. To test the legibility of the inscriptions the following experiments were performed. (1) A series of smaller carved inscriptions at Dumbarton Oaks were surveyed at proportionately reduced distances. These were all readable, especially when sunlight produced strong contrasts of light and shade. (2) In Istanbul the first word of the Greek inscription was drawn to scale and read by several people without difficulty from 38.5 m.; the glare of the sun on white paper was the only problem. Illustrating this, however, is difficult: what was visible to the eye was small and far away in the camera lens, and this distortion is only increased by reproducing photographs or pro-

ancient relief sculpture, the reliefs on the obelisk base were certainly augmented with paint and possibly with gilding or metal attachments. Such coloristic treatment would render all of the carvings significantly more legible, and sculptural details are still visible today at 38.5 m. The inscription fields (PLATES 4, 5), in the form of a *tabula ansata*, measure about 100 cm. high and the letters, approximately 10 cm. tall, are separated enough to offer clear legibility at 38.5 m. In all likelihood these too were originally colored, making them more legible at even greater distances. Spectators seated in the upper tiers and those who were less literate could still *see* the epigrams and recognize their power and weight as inscriptions even if they could not read them.

What about the more distant audiences, those in the *sphendone* seats and the charioteers and others in the *carceres*? The average interior or arena length for Late Roman circuses is close to 450 m.⁴³ The length of the Hippodrome in Constantinople is not certain because the *carceres* have not been excavated, but it was between 370 and 450 m.; Müller-Wiener gives a length of 400 to 420 m.⁴⁴ From the inner edge of the *sphendone* to the obelisk base is 242 m., according to the excavation plan of the 1920s (*cf.* PLATE 11). By other calculations the distance is less, but in any case too far for the inscriptions to be legible even if the *sphendone* audience were literate, which is doubtful. At 242 m. the reliefs can still be seen, though not very well, and not by

jecting slides. (3) Because many art historians prefer to see first-hand observation bolstered by reliance on a text, manuals on graphics standards used by architectural signage firms and by such organizations as the U.S. Department of Transportation were consulted. One such manual indicates that one-inch (2.54 cm.) letters can be read from a distance of 50 ft. (15.24 m.); it seems reasonable to extrapolate that letters of 10 cm. should be readable from a distance of 61 m. (Follis 18, 21; I am grateful to George Sexton and Jerry Moore for discussion of this topic). Theoretically, then, the closest and most important spectators, those on the southeast and northwest, should have had little trouble reading the inscriptions. And their distance presented no problem at all in 'reading' the reliefs: even small sculptural details are clearly visible at 38.5 and 61 m.

⁴³ Roman circuses range in exterior length from 244 m. at Gerasa to the 620-m.-long Circus Maximus: see Humphrey *passim*.

⁴⁴ Dagron 328; W. Müller-Wiener, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbul* (Tübingen 1977) 64. With conviction not borne out by evidence, Pasquato (*supra* n.28: 88) gives dimensions of 500 × 125 m. for the Hippodrome.

those whose view was blocked by other monuments on the barrier.⁴⁵

Compensating somewhat for the distance from the *sphendone* and the *carceres*, the width of the obelisk base on the southwest and northeast is about 36 cm. greater than that of the two flanking sides. If this is deliberate—that is, if the discrepancy does more than just echo the irregular shape of the lower edge of the obelisk—then it belongs to a long Roman tradition of optical compensation for distance. For example, Trajan's Column, erected in 113, has spiral relief bands 1.25 m. high at the top versus 0.89 m. at the bottom; on the column of Marcus Aurelius (*ca* 180) the spiral relief bands are all the same height, but the depth of carving is greater at the top. Both of these solutions help compensate for the increasing distance from the viewers below.⁴⁶

Another significant way in which the obelisk may have related to specific Hippodrome audiences is in the shadow it cast at different times. Races went on all day and throughout the year, but at certain times the obelisk shadow must have pointed to, or even fallen on, the emperor in the *kathisma*. This potential is evident in situ in the Hippodrome and its effect of pointing at the emperor can perhaps be connected with the possible use of the obelisk as a sundial, a function of obelisks in the Roman world since the time of the first Roman emperor. Augustus' obelisk in the Campus Martius was purportedly the gnomon of a sundial that pointed to the altar of the Ara Pacis on the emperor's birthday.⁴⁷ If we knew the precise location of the *kathisma* in Constantinople, we might be able to determine the significant anniversary of Theodosius.

⁴⁵ Visibility from the *sphendone* in situ cannot be tested because of the presence of a modern edifice halfway between the obelisk and the end of the *sphendone*. Two hundred forty-two meters in the other direction, however, towards the original *carceres*, corresponds to a vantage point just past the fountain of William II (*cf.* PLATE 11).

⁴⁶ Platner-Ashby 243; R. Bianchi-Bandinelli, *Rom. Das Zentrum der Macht* (Munich 1970) 240f.

⁴⁷ E. Buchner, "Solarium Augusti und Ara Pacis," *RM* 83 (1976) 319–65, and "Horologium Solarium Augusti, Vorbericht über die Ausgrabungen 1979/80," *RM* 87 (1980) 355–73.

IV

The particular placement of the obelisk base clearly shows an awareness of the social status, the literacy, and the distances of its audiences. But what did the programmers or patrons of the work want to communicate, and what did the audiences bring to it? Of course we shall never know the entire range of responses to a Late Antique work. Surely there were individual differences, just as there would be today; an example might be the furor over the Louvre pyramid in Paris or the Vietnam memorial in Washington, both works that are highly praised by some and harshly criticized by others. All we can hope to do is generalize about patterns or middle ranges of response from each group of spectators.

Jauss' formulation of reception aesthetics suggests that each social group has a distinct "horizon of expectations."⁴⁸ In the fourth century this horizon was affected by familiarity with sculpture in Constantinople in general and in the Hippodrome in particular, including imperial and non-imperial imagery. Thus all viewers were familiar with large, impressive monuments like the column of Constantine and the new monuments erected in Theodosius' Forum Tauri between 386 and 394. These no longer survive, but they included an equestrian statue and a column with spiraling reliefs. The Theodosian column, the first such monument in Constantinople, must have been a striking addition to the urban topography, whether or not observers recognized the Roman antecedents.⁴⁹ In a similar way, the new obelisk in the Hippodrome would command particular attention as the first such object in the city.

⁴⁸ H.-R. Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, tr. M. Shaw (Minneapolis 1982), and *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, tr. T. Bahti (Minneapolis 1982); reiterated by M. Kemp, "Seeing and Signs. E. H. Gombrich in Retrospect," *Art History* 7 (1984) 239: "There is actually no way in practice that we can operate as artists or judge as spectators outside a context of expectation. It simply is not possible.... The artist and spectator inevitably work within a series of cultural contexts, in which theoretical, historical and institutional factors all impinge upon and help articulate our judgments." See also J. P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism* (Baltimore 1980).

⁴⁹ On the column of Theodosius, soon supplemented by that of his son Arcadius, identical in conception and similar in iconography, see G. Becatti, *La colonna coclide istoriata* (Rome 1960) 83-150, and Sande (*supra* n.8).

Sculpture was definitely a part of the everyday environment in Constantinople.⁵⁰ Relief sculpture may have been exceptional, however, as most works listed in the eighth-century *Parastaseis syntomoi chronikai* were evidently freestanding. In the absence of any contemporary inventory, determining what was present in the fourth-century Hippodrome is impossible. The Serpent Column dates from Constantine's era,⁵¹ but the date for erection of the cut-stone obelisk at the southern end of the barrier (PLATE 10) is unclear.⁵² There were statues of Herakles, Augustus, and other deities and emperors,⁵³ but all of them could not have been on the barrier. In general the Hippodrome became more crowded with sculpture as the Byzantine centuries progressed; for example, the four bronze horses over the *carceres* installed under Theodosius II (probably the group that now dominates the entry to San Marco in Venice) were not a distraction when the obelisk and base were erected.⁵⁴

At the beginning of the twentieth century, scientists studying how the visual world is perceived invented a means of photographing eye movement.⁵⁵ This technology showed that the eye goes to the center, then jumps about to fixate on areas of greatest information. We can imagine this unconscious process at work in the Hippodrome. Whether the Theodosian obelisk was at the center of the Hippodrome or the center of the barrier, it was a monument to catch the eye. From any seat in the circus its centrality was powerful: the vertical axis of the obelisk and base created a tension with the horizontal axes of the barrier and the circus. The power of the center would be

⁵⁰ See C. Mango, "Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder," *DOP* 17 (1963) 53–75.

⁵¹ Euseb. V.C. 3.54.2; see now T. F. Madden, "The Serpent Column of Delphi in Constantinople: Placement, Purposes, and Mutilations," *ByzMGSt* 16 (1992) 111–45.

⁵² Müller-Wiener (*supra* n.44: 65), Wrede (*supra* n.10: 187ff), and Dagron (324) suggest that it was put up by Constantius II or Theodosius I.

⁵³ Cameron and Herrin (*supra* n.23) 48–51, 136f, 248ff. S. Guberti Bassett, "The Antiquities in the Hippodrome of Constantinople," *DOP* 45 (1991) 88, summarizes the antique statues in the Hippodrome as apotropaia, victory monuments, public figures, and images of Rome.

⁵⁴ Cameron and Herrin (*supra* n.23) 160f.

⁵⁵ R. Dodge, "Five Types of Eye Movement," *American Journal of Physiology* 8 (1902) 307–29; more recently, A. L. Yarbus, *Eye Movements and Vision* (New York 1967); K. T. Spoehr and S. W. Lehmkuhle, *Visual Information Processing* (New York 1982) esp. 163–66.

reinforced by the well-known cosmological symbolism of the circus, in which the obelisk represents the sun—it was said to be shaped like a sunbeam—while the chariots, sporting four different colors representing the four seasons, race seven laps suggestive of the days of the week, and so on.⁵⁶ The power of the center also operates on the obelisk base: on every side of the base the viewer's eye surely goes first to the emperor, who is centralized and framed by architecture. The center is emblematic of authority (PLATES 1, 6–9).⁵⁷

Objects in the visual field that attract the most attention—in other words, the longest involuntary fixation of the eyes—are those that are the least expected. As is well known, repeated exposure to a stimulus renders it practically invisible and everyday things fail to be noticed. But spectators on their initial view of the obelisk base were probably surprised to see the emperor in the *kathisma* implicitly presiding at the games. In fact, no earlier examples of this subject survive (Dagron 311). This striking innovation imitates reality by integrating the spectators with the setting and fusing real and represented space. This fusion or elision of image and prototype underlies the power of images in Late Antiquity, when insulting a statue of the emperor was equivalent to insulting the emperor himself.⁵⁸ Despite the novelties of form and presentation, much of the visual and textual information presented on the base would have seemed compellingly familiar to the Hippodrome audiences.

The obelisk's indisputably imperial and triumphal character is reinforced on every side of the base.⁵⁹ Such tangible evidence of victory was an especially important aspect of imperial propaganda after the Goths' crushing defeat of the Romans at Adrianople in 378. As McCormick has shown, six triumphs were

⁵⁶ Humphrey 269ff; Dagron 330ff. This symbolism was especially well developed in the sixth century: P. Willeumier, "Cirque et astrologie," *MélRome* 44 (1927) 184–209; A. Cameron, "Corippus' Poem on Justin II: A Terminus of Antique Art?" *AnnPisa* 5 (1975) 156 with n.138.

⁵⁷ R. Arnheim, *The Power of the Center* (Berkeley 1988).

⁵⁸ Basil. *In Isaiam* 13, Migne, *PG* XXX 589A–B; E. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," *DOP* 8 (1954) 83–150 (=id., *The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West* [Bloomington 1976] 90–156); see also D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago 1989) 318ff; 392.

⁵⁹ See esp. S. McCormick, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1981) 56–67; Balty (*supra* n.10); Wrede (*supra* n.10).

celebrated in the ten years after Adrianople, compared with less than two per decade in the preceding seventy years. Even minor victories, like that of Theodosius over the unnamed tyrants of the Latin inscription, were magnified to mitigate the Romans' psychological devastation.⁶⁰

Most viewers were probably unaware of the Platonic and Aristotelian view that artistic works were supposed to inspire certain reactions and behaviors, but the principle of mimesis was certainly operating in the obelisk base. Looking from the *kathisma* at the southeast side (PLATES 1–2, 8), the emperor saw himself immortalized as victorious, regardless of whether he is giving or receiving the crown of victory.⁶¹ He saw before him representatives of all social classes from government officials to dancers; his courtiers also saw him and recognized themselves. The emperor could read the Latin inscription (PLATE 4) that names him and stresses his conquest and mastery of the tyrants and the obelisk: both had formerly been obstinate, but the one has now fallen and the other was successfully and very visibly raised aloft. In addition, the emperor saw the best-quality carving available; perhaps he appreciated the different stylistic 'modes' employed for the different classes of figures. The 'front' of the obelisk with its original dedication to Pharaoh Thutmosis III—probably not by accident—faced its new master on the southeast: the most important side of the monument in 1471 B.C. retained its significance in the 390s.⁶²

On the northwest side (PLATES 3, 9), the circus partisans and militia would have seen the emperor to whom they owed loyalty. In both life and art he looks out at them, a direct communication between master and subjects. Eye contact between figures in a work of art and its spectators creates an important bond; indeed Arnheim (*supra* n.57: 44) posits a kind of visual energy emanating from the work to the viewer. The spectators on the northwest saw the representatives of the emperor's orderly government and subjugated barbarians from

⁶⁰ M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory* (Cambridge 1986) 41ff.

⁶¹ This debate is summarized in MacCormack (*supra* n.59) 299 n. 220.

⁶² To what degree the hieroglyphs were comprehensible to a fourth-century audience is uncertain. Some recognition or at least interest appears in Amm. Marc. 17.4, who provides a Greek translation of the hieroglyphs of Constantius' obelisk in Rome.

all over the world as evidence of his power.⁶³ Perhaps some spectators had fought such foreigners and would share a sense of successful involvement that could mitigate the still vivid memory of Adrianople. Others might recognize the message of submission to authority. In addition, many could both see and read the Greek inscription (PLATE 5), in which references to the tyrants were probably omitted because the western usurpers had never touched the lives of most Constantinopolitans. Instead the inscription encourages a focus on dignitaries present in the Hippodrome and responsible for the erection of its largest and most distinctive monument. The specific, almost didactic, information in the epigram identifies *this* enormous four-sided column as the one raised in precisely thirty-two days. Even if the circus partisans were no more literate than their fellow citizens in the *sphendone*, they would recognize the power of the written word coupled with the self-evident power of the emperor.

The repetitive figures of government functionaries on the southwest (PLATES 2, 6) and northeast (3, 7) sides also communicated triumph, stability, and order. Orderliness was hardly the impression of the Hippodrome given by contemporary critics like John Chrysostom and Amphilochius of Iconium, who wrote vicious diatribes against the circus.⁶⁴ Although these sermons perhaps kept some potential spectators away, circusgoers probably remained quite unconcerned about the effects of races on their souls.

The distant viewers in the *sphendone* were brought into closer connection with the events before them because the silentaries depicted on the southwest stairs seem to address their remarks directly to these spectators (PLATE 6). Those on the southwest with very good eyesight may have appreciated the lively narrative quality of the reliefs on the plinth (2) and their realistic and familiar scenes. Indeed, circus workers in the *carceres* probably helped raise the obelisk, as depicted on the northeast plinth (3); viewers on the southwest saw a chariot race, echoing the real ones unfolding regularly before their

⁶³ H. Gabelmann, *Antike Audienz- und Tribunalszenen* (Darmstadt 1984) 206f.

⁶⁴ E.g. J. Chr. *Contra circenses, ludos et theatra*, Migne, PG LVI 263ff; J. Bareille, tr., *Oeuvres complètes de S. Jean Chrysostom X* (Paris 1867) 484–94; Amphilochius of Iconium, *Iambi ad Seleucam* (=E. Oberg, ed., *Patristische Texte und Studien* 9 [Berlin 1969]) lines 150–80.

eyes. It is unclear whether the two obelisks seen on the barrier in the racing scene represent the two now visible in the Hippodrome—the one supported by the base and the cut-stone version at the southern end (10–11)—or whether the artist merely reproduced from some model the disposition of two obelisks in the Circus Maximus at Rome. The nuances of the higher-quality sculpture found on the flanking sides of the base would have been lost on the *sphendone* audience because of the distance of these seats.

V

The Theodosian obelisk base is a fully realized work of public art and all evidence points to the careful placement of the base to correlate with its expected viewership. The programmers of the base were aware of both the general context for the work, the Hippodrome, and the specific audiences on each side. The commemorative inscriptions, and possibly the narrative reliefs on the plinth, were carved just after the obelisk was erected. Differences of the Greek and Latin inscriptions in content and character reinforce the likelihood that different audiences saw each side and were not disturbed by discrepancies they could not see. The discrepancy in the number of days needed to raise the obelisk is troubling to modern viewers who look at the base as a four-sided unit available for examination at close range, whereas the original audiences could never compare the two inscriptions. The emperor and his retinue always watched from the southeast side, the partisans from the northwest; they never exchanged seats.

An interest in audiences is evident in fourth-century and later mosaic pavements that depict the circus (Humphrey 246). Whereas earlier representations show only the race and the barrier in any detail, in later works the seating areas and especially the spectators became legitimate artistic subjects, beginning with the Piazza Armerina mosaic in the first half of the fourth century and continuing through the example at Gafsa in the late fifth or early sixth. One wonders whether the Late Antique artists' interest in the circus audience parallels the interest in the audience evinced by the planners of the obelisk base. Similarly, the awareness of and exploitation of different

vantage points is a general characteristic of Late Antique mosaic pavements.⁶⁵

The meaningful placement of large-scale sculpture, clearly important to the planners of the obelisk base, has some precedents in earlier Roman art. The Arch of Trajan at Benevento has reliefs relating to town and country facing the appropriate sides, and the Arch of Constantine in Rome shows the sun rising on the east and the moon setting on the west, providing a cosmic setting for Constantine's actions. The obelisk base in Constantinople takes these precedents further by exploiting the multifaceted context of the Hippodrome in a more particularized way, making the audiences on each side responsible in some measure for the content. Later audiences would have very different "horizons of expectation" in looking at the obelisk base, because Hippodrome spectacle and ceremonial changed over the centuries, and so did the quantity and types of sculpture in the city. These later responses need to be distinguished from those of the original viewers.

Such public art as the obelisk base served a variety of functions. It provided a place and a prop for imperial messages; it recorded events; and it worked as a mimetic agent, capable of recreating events in the minds of viewers.⁶⁶ Although it cannot be proved, a panegyric delivered at the unveiling, like that presented to Theodosius at Rome in 389, probably further mediated the messages on the obelisk base.⁶⁷ The erection of the obelisk seems a likely occasion for a panegyric.

The obelisk base was meant to be seen, and could be seen, from a number of distinct points of view. This fact has important implications for the visibility and the interpretation of other large public monuments of the Late Roman and Byzantine eras. Art historians and other scholars err in looking at sculptural details divorced from their spatial, temporal, and social contexts. A consideration of the viewpoints of the

⁶⁵ See C. Dauphin, "Mosaic Pavements as an Index of Prosperity and Fashion," *Levant* 12 (1980) 112-34.

⁶⁶ These remarks on function are derived from C. Kondoleon and B. Bergmann's introduction to the session on "Ancient and Medieval Spectacle," College Art Association Conference, Seattle, February, 1993.

⁶⁷ See Nixon (*supra* n.5).

original audiences can help inform our own and bring new meaning to familiar works of art.⁶⁸

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