

# While contemplating the 'Aurige' of Delphi

The 'Pythic Games' organized at Delphi in homage to Apollo, ran at the same time than those of Olympia, and were also held in the intermediary years of the Olympic Games. These Games left less artistic relics than those dedicated to Zeus.

The first thing that catches the eye when entering the Delphi Museum is the famous statue of *The Aurige* in green bronze, miraculously preserved from looting and destruction. At that time, about two thousand statues which bordered the 'Sacred Way' leading to the temple of Apollo where the Pytho-ness gave out her sibylline oracles, were transferred to Byzance. Later on the Romans took over a thousand more statues away. Pline Junior recorded that there were still some three thousand statues in existence in Greece at that time. Without drinking at the *Kassotis* fountain, which is supposed to give inspiration, one can easily imagine how many of these masterpieces represented athletes and sports in general.

The *Aurige* (See enclosed photo page 39) pictures a driver leading a racing four-in hand chariot, which represents the only trace left of a complete quadriga, this statue was placed near the temple's entrance and formed part of a monument eight metres high, which reveals the cleverness of the sculptor who, in order to avoid an effect of perspective which would have shortened the body, lengthened unduly the hanging of the folded tunic in keeping with the doric column.

The guide, an archaeologist whose profound knowledge filled us with admiration, made the following comments:

'The *Aurige (Driver)* leads the horses but his master stands beside him on the chariot. The driver you see has been dazzled by his victory, and he is pictured leading his quadriga in triumph round the hippodrome. He holds the reins in his right hand, whereas, the left hand, which obviously was resting on the edge of the chariot, has been broken and has not been found again, for nothing is left of this marvellous statue but the driver as well as three of the horses hooves and a piece of the horse's tail which relics you will see in this show-case. Contrary to the tradition which dictated that all marble statues were always to be painted, bronze

statues were left in their original state, but in order to give more animation and life to the eyes, these were made of glass and onyx. The hand and the feet (although hidden by the chariot) prove how conscientious the artist was, as they are perfect gems of modelling and surprisingly real.'

At that stage we allowed ourselves a few remarks:

'In our opinion, the *aurige* was not driving in state around the hippodrome at the moment described by the artist. Still dazzled by his triumphant race, he had just stopped his four-in hand. You will see that he had not yet been crowned with the wreath of pink laurels which was the reward of the winner (whereas in Olympia, champions were crowned with a wreath of laurel leaves). His right hand holds three reins, the thumb is raised, the index supports the reins assisted by the remaining fingers; the driver has not yet brought his horses to a stand-still; his feet are resting flat but not cambered as they should be during the jolting run of a racing chariot; the hooves of the horses are also resting lying flat in a stand-still position. The upper body of the *aurige* leans back very slightly and is straightened again *after* the effort made to slacken the pace of the galloping horses. What is left of the left arm has not the same tilting than that of the right arm, this of course could not happen if the hand was resting on the edge of the chariot. That hand certainly held the fourth rein and the whip, for it is hard to believe that a quadriga could be driven in a race without a whip. Since the master stood at the right hand side of the *aurige*, it is obvious that the latter handled the whip with the left-hand in order not to flick the whip in front of his master...'

The old guardian, who for the last forty years spent his life beside the *aurige*, told us that every morning, he went through the same rite, placed behind the statue, he spends a few minutes in meditation in giving thanks to God (or the 'gods' who knows?) for the joy of living in the shade of so much beauty! In reply to our comments, the learned guides look at each other, incredulous, shaking their heads and smiling gently while saying: '...yes, we daresay!...'

A. P.



*L'AURIGE (Musée de Delphes). (Voir texte dans ce bulletin.)*