

# Sport and Physical Recreation in the Byzantine Empire

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The Byzantine Empire has received little attention from sport historians writing in the English language. Harris included a chapter on Byzantine chariot racing in *Sport in Greece and Rome*, and Cameron has published two excellent books on chariot racing that give valuable insight into the social and political importance of this sport; but, by and large, Byzantium has been ignored in sport history literature. This parallels the inadequate treatment of Byzantine history in general, partially caused by a relative scarcity of evidence. Also, until this century, western historians, influenced by Gibbon, attached little importance to the Eastern Roman Empire.

The paper reviews the many and varied sport and physical recreation activities for which there is evidence: chariot racing, polo, hunting, athletics, the baths, equestrian sports, and other miscellaneous recreations. The political and religious functions of these activities are discussed, particularly those of chariot racing, the most important sport in Byzantium. The cult of the Emperor in chariot racing is examined, and some comparisons are made between the Eastern and Western Roman Empires.

Chariot races were the chief social recreation of the people of the Byzantine Empire, particularly in the city of Constantinople, and outstanding charioteers were widely acclaimed as folk heroes. At various times, the pre-eminent charioteer was second in importance only to the Emperor. Racing companies were often used by emperors and politicians to manipulate the populace and to attain political objectives. During the early centuries of the Empire, the Christian Church tried to eliminate the races but was not successful until much later.