

Chariot Racing
in the Roman Empire

FIK MEIJER

TRANSLATED BY LIZ WATERS

The Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore

Panem et circenses (bread and circuses). It was the poet Juvenal who gave us that famous, often quoted phrase. In his opinion a great many people in Rome were interested in only two things: free handouts of bread, and chariot races in the Circus Maximus.¹ The provision of grain has been described and analyzed at length in contemporary studies, whereas chariot races have received less than their fair share of attention. The number of monographs on the subject is limited,² and the races occupy no more than a few paragraphs in handbooks on ancient history, slotted in next to that other form of entertainment, the gladiator shows.

This scant degree of interest is remarkable because the chariot races in the Circus Maximus captivated just about the entire population. On festival days some 150,000 fans from every social stratum passed through the gates. Emperors, senators, knights, and governors of provincial cities spent the whole day in the company of ordinary citizens, freedmen, and slaves, enthusiastically watching a sport that could undoubtedly be called the greatest of Roman passions.

For ordinary people the Circus Maximus was a place where they put their daily concerns out of their mind and briefly forgot how insignificant they were in the Roman social hierarchy. For the emperor the Circus Maximus had a special significance. Here he stood eye to eye with his people. As soon as he entered, he could gauge his popularity from the noise up in the stands. Cheers and jeers were the crowd's way of letting him know what they thought of him, and in that sense the Circus Maximus functioned as a political barometer. After the official people's assemblies were stripped of their powers at the beginning of

the imperial era, it became the only place where ordinary folk could make their voices heard.

The fact that the elite and the common people of Rome came to watch chariot races together in the Circus Maximus is really rather extraordinary, since in normal life a huge gulf separated them. Outside the stadium, aristocrats displayed nothing but contempt for ordinary people and had nothing good to say about their occupations and pastimes. They made clear to the populace on an almost daily basis that they themselves led very different lives, making far better use of their time in ways that befitted their status. They were proud to have succeeded in striking a proper balance between public life and private pursuits. They could satisfy their political aspirations in the Senate, but since being a senator was not a full-time job, they had plenty of hours to spend on other activities, whether sporting or intellectual. Leading figures who violated the prevailing norms and indulged in excessive greed, indolence, and idleness were reprimanded, since a life that did not match the criteria the elite had formulated for itself was a life not worth living. Intellectuals were especially trenchant in their criticism of useless pastimes, dismissing them as unbecoming to the status of a truly free man. They extolled the virtues of a markedly different existence, one with a central place reserved for science, literature, and the fine arts.

Intellectuals could muster neither sympathy nor understanding for the lower orders and made no imaginative effort to put themselves in their place, simply seeing the plebeians as inferior, incapable of making any real contribution to the state, as people who could not even pay their way but relied for their daily sustenance on the distribution of free grain or on subsidies from the emperor. To cap it all, the townsfolk took pleasure in ephemeral amusements. Some among the intellectual elite even advocated minimizing contact with the masses to avoid being diverted from their own moral standards. They drew a dividing line to separate themselves, with their high status, from the lowly, contemptible people who lived in poverty and could think of nothing better to do than loiter in bars and hang about inside or outside the Circus Maximus and the Colosseum.

Given that this way of thinking was prevalent among the upper ech-

elons of Roman society, it is difficult initially to comprehend why so many of their number abandoned themselves to this particular form of mass entertainment. Looked at realistically, their doing so is not surprising at all. Chariot races were an astonishing phenomenon. They stirred excitement and triggered emotions that few could suppress. The elite succumbed to the atmosphere like everyone else, to the thrills and competitiveness between the walls of the Circus Maximus. Condescending comments from a few opponents of chariot racing stand in sharp contrast to the fervor of the majority. No matter how often Seneca, Pliny the Younger, and Tacitus wrote that chariot races aroused only the most primitive feelings in people, they were ignored. Many Roman aristocrats went along to the Circus Maximus and shouted for their favorite charioteers just as fanatically as the common people did.

What they rarely did, if at all, was write about chariot racing. As authors they cultivated the impression that they appreciated only spiritually uplifting amusements and disapproved of all the diversions enjoyed by ordinary people. This ambivalence, this grappling by the elite with a form of popular entertainment that on ideological grounds they could only look down on yet which gave many of them enormous pleasure, makes chariot racing a particularly fascinating subject today. It becomes even more intriguing when we realize that the vast majority of the charioteers who fired the enthusiasm of spectators were slaves or freedmen, with an even lower status than ordinary folk. Charioteers must have produced some truly extraordinary performances to transform themselves into popular heroes despite this status handicap. Even people who had no interest in chariot racing would have been forced to admit that the utmost skill, dexterity, coolness, patience, and concentration were demanded of the drivers of four-horse teams and that these men were putting into practice the old Roman virtues of dauntlessness, tenacity, and courage. True, a tiny minority, a conservative, purely intellectually inclined segment of the elite, did not regard even all these qualities combined as reason enough to say anything positive about chariot racing. The majority ignored their disapproval, however, throwing themselves into the pandemonium of the Circus Maximus with utter abandon, cheering on their favorites side by side with the common folk and the emperor. Rome was briefly united; all its class

differences briefly fell away. But when evening came and the show was over, the old dividing lines were drawn again, and traditional relationships were restored.

Chariot races, both the sport and its social and political background, are the subject of this book. My story is dominated by Rome, but Constantinople is very much part of the picture. In the fourth century it became the new Rome, taking over not just the political power of the old capital but the great popular entertainment of charioteering.

The Nika Riot

Thirty Thousand Dead in the Hippodrome

Constantinople, early January AD 532. In the “New Rome,” founded by Emperor Constantine in 330, there was a palpable sense of unrest. Justinian, who had now ruled the Byzantine Empire for nearly five years, had failed to convince the residents of the city their interests were in good hands. He had completely destroyed his relationship with the members of the old aristocracy, who believed Justinian had gone too far in curtailing their powers. They were joined in their criticism by townsfolk and farmers who were angry at the emperor for raising taxes drastically and who expressed their rage in mass disturbances of the peace. Gangs rampaged through the city, looting and vandalizing. Justinian was unable to stem the violence. The tension reached fever pitch, brawls and arson became the order of the day, and entire districts of the city were reduced to rubble. The response from the emperor was a long time in coming, but when it finally came, it was devastating: on Monday, 19 January 532, more than thirty thousand people were killed in the Hippodrome.

It was far from incidental that the bloodbath took place in the Hippodrome. The people of Constantinople were treated to thrilling chariot races there on seventy days a year. The audience watched breathlessly as four-horse chariots tore around a track more than five hundred meters long and a hundred meters wide. The Hippodrome had been built by Emperor Septimius Severus in the early third century, when the city was still called Byzantium, and Emperor Constantine had expanded and embellished it when he founded his new city. It was more than simply an arena where people gathered to watch chariot racing. Like the Circus Maximus in Rome, the Hippodrome was a place where all seg-

ments of the population made their grievances known to the emperor and showed him the extent of his popularity. With its tiers of seating for up to eighty thousand spectators, it was an impressive structure, built high on a hill right in the center of the city, close to the royal palace. The emperor sat near the middle, in his emperor's loge (*kathisma*), a kind of balcony that he could reach directly by a flight of steps from his imperial palace. Around him sat the senators on marble seats, and higher up were the rest of the crowd on tiers of simpler seating.

The massacre in the Hippodrome was the disastrous closing chapter to a week of unprecedented chaos and conflict in the city center. On Tuesday, 13 January, six days before the carnage, the Hippodrome was the scene of serious disturbances. The spectators let fly at each other in the stands, and Justinian was unable to find an approach that would calm them down. Fighting and disorder were not uncommon in the Hippodrome. In the two centuries since the founding of Constantinople, there had been several occasions when riots broke out in and around the racetrack, but they had usually been put down fairly promptly, sometimes without bloodshed, sometimes with multiple fatalities. This time the violence seemed impossible to curtail, even though the causes were no different in essence than they were on previous occasions. As was almost always the case, the trouble stemmed from the great rivalry between groups of supporters of the two main stables, the Greens and the Blues, who, dressed in their club colors, were in the habit of hurling the most frightful abuse at each other.

The riots of 13 January were a discharge of tensions between Greens and Blues that had been building to a climax over several weeks. Vendettas were played out everywhere, both in the Hippodrome and in the densely populated urban districts outside. The city militia mobilized repeatedly to restore order, but to no avail. Emperor Justinian was powerless to act, partly because of his innate hesitancy but, more important, because he had openly sided with the Blues. Every time he made a move against the Greens, they interpreted it as favoritism toward their opponents.

A few days before the eruption of violence, the Greens indulged in an outburst of emotion during the chariot races. In their anger and frustration they yelled that the Blues were being shown preferential treatment to a scandalous extent. The emperor did not deign to re-



Emperor Justinian in a mosaic in the San Vitale in Ravenna. (The Yorck Project)

spond to their reproaches personally but left the job to an envoy, whose attempts to deflect criticism with counteraccusations only enflamed the Greens' rage even further. The tension was wound up tighter still when the spokesman for the Greens made it known that yet another of their number had been murdered, the twenty-sixth in a mere few months. When he laid the blame for the killing on Justinian, the Blues, up in arms, shouted that the only murderers in the Hippodrome were to be found among the Greens. The emperor's herald then added fuel to the fire by accusing the Greens of blasphemy. He called them Jews, Samari-

tans, and Manichaeans,¹ even asking himself aloud whether they had been baptized. The Greens, insulted, walked out of the stands hurling abuse at the emperor and the Blues.

In the days that followed there was street fighting between Greens and Blues all over the city. The imperial troops put a stop to the trouble, but according to the Greens they exceeded their authority in doing so and proved they were prejudiced by going after them alone and sparing the Blues. The Greens were increasingly intractable, and large numbers turned violent, both in the streets and in the Hippodrome during the races. When the Blues responded to provocation, the emperor had no choice but to intervene with force against his own side. He sent police to deal with the rioters. An unknown number of people, both Greens and Blues, were arrested and imprisoned. Seven were accused of murder and condemned to death. Four were beheaded immediately while the other three were sentenced to be hanged, but two, a Green and a Blue, escaped the death penalty when the nooses did not work properly and they fell down onto the scaffold. They were taken away by monks from a nearby monastery and given asylum in the Church of St. Lawrence, but the city prefect refused to resign himself to this outcome and cordoned off the church. Then something happened that has a way of happening in our own time: the ringleaders of the Greens and the Blues called off their battle, and together they turned on the police, although they did not succeed in rescuing their fellow supporters.

On Tuesday, 13 January, Emperor Justinian acted as if nothing had happened. He simply went ahead and held chariot races. Perhaps he felt the situation was not particularly explosive, but it is equally likely that he considered it important not to give the troublemakers the idea they could throw everything into disorder. After a fractious day in the Hippodrome, during the twenty-second of the twenty-four races, all the supporters' frustrations surfaced. Both Greens and Blues began asking the emperor to grant clemency to the two supporters who had found refuge in St. Lawrence's Church, but Justinian ignored them and simply refused to respond to their entreaties. To a man the spectators chanted "*nika, nika*" ("conquer, conquer," the cry that usually went up as the crowd cheered on the drivers during the races), and "long live the Blues and the Greens!" The emperor must have felt extremely uncomfortable. He was at a loss as to how to deal with the situation, and he fled

through the special lockable passageway from his loge into the palace.

That evening Greens and Blues marched en masse to the palace of the city prefect and demanded the release of the prisoners. Receiving no answer, they moved on to the prison, forced their way in, and freed all the offenders held there. In an invincible rage they proceeded to the imperial palace and set fire to it. Not even the Hagia Sophia (Church of St. Sophia), built there by Emperor Constantine, was spared. It was lost to the flames.

Justinian continued to underestimate the seriousness of the situation. The following morning he allowed the chariot races planned for that day to go ahead. Perhaps he was hoping that the love of the Greens and Blues for the races would outweigh their rage, but he was wrong. When the racing began, there was no holding the spectators, who set light to the stands. The fire spread to the public Baths of Zeuxippus next door, reducing them to charred ruins.

The rioters quickly gained in self-confidence, especially when they began receiving mass support from dissatisfied farmers in the surrounding countryside. The freeing of the prisoners had become a side issue to the enraged supporters; they were now demanding the resignation of the magistrates, whom they held responsible for the disarray. Justinian, at his wits' end, complied with their request, but despite this concession he was unable to restore law and order. The riots became even more aggressive and violent, the emperor even more indecisive.

The infuriated supporters could tell he was no longer in command of the situation and might bow to pressure at any moment. On Thursday, 15 January, shouting slogans such as "We want a different emperor for the city," they set off for the palace of Probus, a nephew of the previous emperor, Anastasius, intending to proclaim him emperor. Fearing the rage of the populace, however, Probus had already left his house and gone into hiding. So the mob turned its fury on him, too, and set his palace alight before spreading out across the city, looting and burning as it went.

On Friday, 16 January, the chaos reached a new climax. The entire area around the Hagia Sophia was burned to the ground by rioters. The city's police headquarters was among the buildings that fell to the frenzy of the insurrectionists. And still no answer came from the emperor. Justinian finally responded on Saturday, 17 January. Loyal Thra-



Empress Theodora in a mosaic in the San Vitale in Ravenna. (The Yorck Project)

cian troops entered the city and engaged the Blues and Greens in battle, but in the narrow streets and alleyways of Constantinople there was little they could do to defeat the rioters. They were forced to withdraw to barracks adjacent to the imperial palace.

Crisis talks in the palace followed. Justinian now realized that if he could not put an end to the riots his fate was sealed. The following day, Sunday, 18 January, more chariot races were due to take place in the Hippodrome. Justinian took his seat in the emperor's loge with

the Gospels under his arm, presumably to give the supporters tangible evidence that he was feeling merciful and that he regretted some of his decisions of the past few days. Nevertheless, only a tiny minority of the supporters cheered their emperor, shouting slogans like "Justinian, may you triumph." Everyone else greeted him with cries of "You're breaking your oaths of allegiance, scoundrel." Justinian was distraught. He rushed out of the Hippodrome in a panic.

Powerless and desperate, Justinian sent home everyone he did not completely trust, including Hypatius and Pompeius, nephews of his predecessor Anastasius. The historian Procopius, who reports these events, does not tell us whether the emperor removed them because he was afraid they were up to something and suspected the rebels wanted one or another of them on the throne or whether it was pure chance, given that they were dismissed along with a large number of senators. The plan probably originated with Justinian's wife, Theodora, who was the daughter of a bear tamer and a circus acrobat and until her marriage a successful variety artist. She had a reputation as a resolute, tough, and at the same time intelligent woman who was far from easily flustered.

When on the early morning of Monday, 19 January, the people found out that Hypatius and Pompeius had been dismissed by Justinian, they went looking for Hypatius to proclaim him emperor. He showed no great enthusiasm. His wife rejected the plan outright, and when the rebels came to fetch Hypatius, she tried to stop him from leaving, bursting into tears and saying he was going to his doom. Nothing she said did any good. The crowd took her husband away and proclaimed him their emperor in the Forum of Constantine.

Meanwhile, talks in the palace continued. Some people, including Emperor Justinian, wanted to flee to the harbor and seek safety elsewhere, taking bags full of money with them, but Empress Theodora refused to yield. In a fiery speech she argued that it was simply not fitting for an empress, once she had been invested and had worn the purple, to run away. She made it very clear to the emperor that if he wanted to flee he would have to go alone. He had plenty of money, the sea was open, and ships lay ready in the harbor. She would not accompany him on his humiliating retreat. For her there was only one path to take, that of confrontation, even if it led to her downfall. She managed to convince

the emperor. At last he decided to mount an attack on the rebels. His trusted generals Belisarius and Mundus were ordered to send troops to eliminate the ringleaders.

Meanwhile the insurrectionists had gathered in the Hippodrome, where they intended to ratify Hypatius's appointment formally. The stadium was full, almost to capacity. The atmosphere was nervous, the tension palpable. Did those present know they had gone too far and that a response from the emperor was inevitable? The Blues began to regret the fact that they were joining forces with their archenemies the Greens to appoint a new emperor even though they had always enjoyed Justinian's support. Some simply felt it was wrong; others changed their mind after Narses, a sly eunuch and a confidant of Justinian's, started buying them off. The supporters in the Hippodrome resumed their earlier battle.

Hypatius felt extremely uncomfortable amid supporters' groups that no longer knew what they were doing. His position became untenable when troops suddenly stormed in from two sides. First Belisarius cleared a path through the debris from the western side of the Hippodrome and positioned his men to the right of the emperor's loge, the area occupied by the Blues. He considered taking the *kathisma* immediately and dragging Hypatius out but dismissed that idea and decided to deal with the spectators first. Narses must have done a good job of bribing the Blues, since there was no organized resistance from them at all. At that point Mundus's troops appeared from the other side. The supporters were trapped.

The slaughter that followed, carried out by Justinian's troops, defies description. The few words that Procopius and other writers devote to the bloodbath leave no room for doubt that this was a disaster of unprecedented magnitude. The panic in the Hippodrome was immense; as spectators fled in terror, many fell and were trampled underfoot. Those who managed to get out of the way found the exits blocked. They ran around the arena like hunted animals while the soldiers carried on their lethal work. Anyone who came within range of the soldiers' swords, Green or Blue, was mercilessly hacked down. More than thirty thousand people were killed.² It was the biggest supporter bloodbath in history.

The next day Hypatius was executed on Justinian's orders. His de-

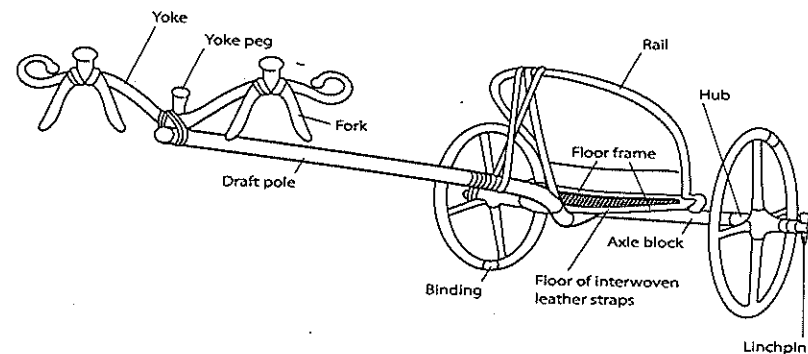
fense, that he had wanted none of this, was noted for the record. It was a long time before lasting peace was restored in the city. The Hippodrome remained closed until, after several years had passed, Justinian calculated that he had built up enough credit once again to organize chariot races without the risk of major riots. A few months later he ordered a start to be made on the reconstruction of the ruined city. For Justinian the quashing of the Nika riot was ultimately the start of a period of unbridled construction, with the new Hagia Sophia as the most tangible symbol of the new spirit of the age. The thirty thousand or more fans who had died became a mere footnote in history.

Chariot Races of the First Century BC and Earlier

The Prelude

The Nika riot took place at a time when chariot racing had developed into an unparalleled mass spectacle with a rich tradition behind it. At the start it was very different. Chariot races began so modestly that we cannot say with any certainty where and when they were first held. All we can be sure of is that the sport of charioteering was introduced rather sooner in some regions than others, depending on the availability of sufficient horses and large empty fields. In the Middle East, with plenty of wide open spaces, chariot races were no doubt held earlier than in mountainous Greece, but wherever they came about, it was only after people had been using wagons and carts for many years for more practical purposes: moving agricultural produce from their farmland to villages and towns and transporting people and goods over longer distances.

Contrary to what we might perhaps expect, the first vehicles were not pulled by domesticated horses but by pack animals, mainly donkeys and mules. As farms became larger and demand in the cities for their produce increased, carts became more diverse, and oxen were hitched to them as well. Although all these animals were slower than horses, they were preferred for their weight, their stamina, and their steady pace, certainly on the steep and heavily broken ground of Greece, where speed was of secondary importance and there was therefore little to be gained by using horses. A horse was a status symbol, a way for its owner to display his wealth. The mere fact that he owned animals he did not need for economic activity won him respect. Horses were hitched to wagons for other reasons, too, for higher purposes in their



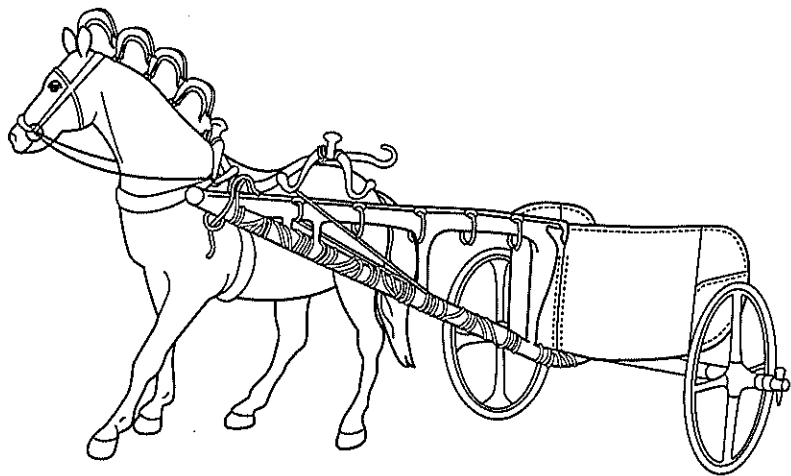
Egyptian war chariot from Thebes of c. 1400 BC, with the most important components marked.

owners' eyes: for wars and for contests between the rich in the form of chariot races.

War chariots were a familiar sight in the Near East in the second millennium BC. The Egyptians, who had probably adopted the concept of the war chariot from the Canaanites, tailored their military tactics to the speed and effectiveness of their vehicles. Under King Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC) the army was made up of infantry units supported on their flanks by war chariots deployed in squadrons of twenty-five. These were lightweight structures on two wheels with four, later sometimes six, spokes.

To the Hittites, whose heartland was in the highlands of Anatolia, war chariots were even more important. Their armies were divided into battalions centered on a large number of chariots, each with a crew of two or three: the driver plus one or two soldiers armed with spears, lances, or javelins. A tough training program was used to select these highly respected elite warriors, and specially bred horses made the chariot into a weapon of war that presented an enormous challenge to an enemy lacking chariots of his own.

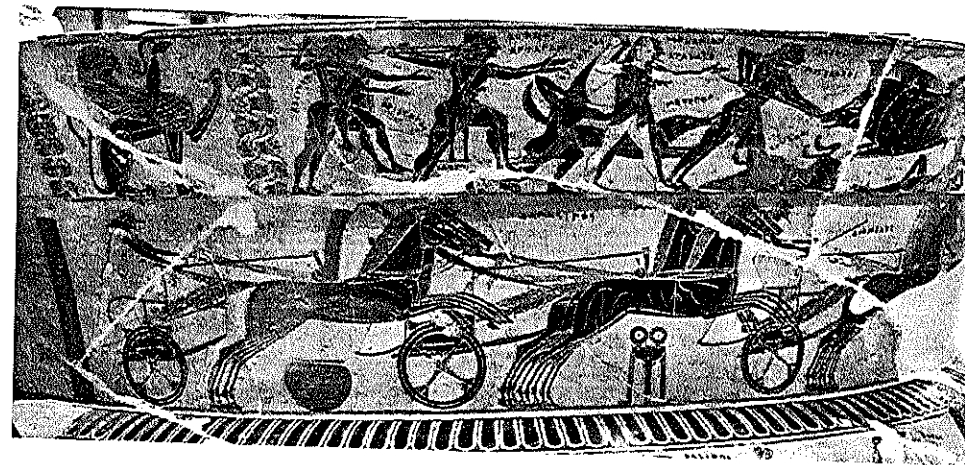
Kings in the Middle East flaunted their ownership of huge numbers of war chariots, which they saw as proof of their power, and the Mycenaean kings of Greece in the second millennium were equally proud of their vehicles. Inscriptions on clay tablets tell of a king in Knossos on Crete who had more than four hundred war chariots, and of one ruler of Pylos on the west coast of the Peloponnesos peninsula who



Reconstruction of a Mycenaean battle chariot of c. 1450–200 BC, designed to be drawn by two horses. The second horse is not shown, allowing details of the draft mechanism to be seen.

commanded more than a hundred. Pictures in Mycenaean palaces show fast, slender vehicles, very much like the war chariots of ancient Egypt. It is impossible to know whether they were ever deployed in organized chariot races.

Around 1100 BC a wind of change swept through the Mediterranean world. Invasions by tribes from the north put an end to the dominance of the charioteer peoples. In Asia Minor the Hittite Empire collapsed, and in Greece the Mycenaean civilization vanished. The war chariot lost its military significance and gradually became an exclusive means of rapid transport as members of the elite were driven to the battlefield by charioteers. While their drivers waited in the chariots, aristocratic warriors engaged the enemy in hand-to-hand combat with spears and swords. When the battle was over, they were driven back to their camps. Greek aristocrats became increasingly intrigued by the speed of their war chariots. It dawned on them that chariot races, in which they could compete against each other in light, sleek, two-wheel vehicles, each drawn by a pair of specially bred horses, offered novel possibilities. The extent to which such races grabbed the imagination is clear from the large number of racing chariots depicted in vase paintings of the eighth century BC.



The chariot race described by Homer, as illustrated, on the François vase of c. 575 BC. The painter clearly knew the story but not the details, since apart from Diomedes the names on the vase are not those of the competitors in Homer's account. (Photograph by Sailko)

Also dating from this period is the first ever written account of a chariot race, in the twenty-third book of the *Iliad* by Homer.¹ Patroclus, a close friend of Achilles', has been killed by Hector the Trojan, and funeral games are to be held in his honor. The program will include a chariot race between vehicles drawn by pairs of horses. On a field near the coast at Troy, just outside the camp of the assembled Greeks, a course is laid out. A starting line is marked, and after drawing lots, the competitors take up their positions. At the far end of the track a six-foot weather-beaten tree trunk has been set into the ground, and the drivers have to pass around it counterclockwise. White stones flanking the post prevent wheels from being smashed against it in the crush. The great difference between these and later chariot races is that the contestants drive only once around the track. Homer does not tell us the distance. Spectators are barely considered at all; the common people, who have walked to Troy to cheer on their Homeric heroes, sit on a hill behind the starting line. From there they have a good view of the start and the finish, but most of the race takes place a long way off.

Homer's report is not an eyewitness account but a beautifully composed, evocative story. The poet begins by enumerating the prizes to

be won: kettles, tripods, horses, cows, mules, slave girls, and valuable iron. He then describes, at some length, the process of drawing lots for the starting order and writes that the name of Antilochus is the first to be pulled out of the helmet, followed by those of Eumelus, Menelaus, Meriones, and, last, Diomedes. Homer has little to say about the start and the first half of the race; all his attention is focused on the denouement in the final few meters.

The way the race is decided in the end may seem strange to us, but Homer's readers were accustomed to the idea that not the participants but the gods would make the decisive moves. They take part in person. When Diomedes' whip is knocked out of his hand by Phoebus Apollo, the goddess Athena intervenes to make sure he gets it back. This is not the end of her involvement. She causes Eumelus's chariot, which is out in front, to crash, so that Diomedes can take the lead. Without any further difficulty, Diomedes races on to victory. A fierce battle for second place develops between Menelaus and Antilochus. The latter takes every conceivable risk, steers his horses dangerously close to the water-filled ditches in the center of the track, and finishes second to Diomedes, whose lead is impossible to make up. Menelaus, cursing and swearing at Antilochus's reckless behavior, comes in third, well ahead of Meriones in fourth place.

Homer's lengthy account indicates that in his time chariot races, far from being unusual, were organized quite regularly and spontaneously, whether on special occasions or as part of ceremonial rites.

Olympic Games

At the time that Homer was writing his epic poems, the Greeks in their independent city-states were beginning to reflect on their shared roots and to organize major festivals. The events in which they expressed their sense of identity most strongly were the great stephanitic games at Olympia, Delphi, Corinth, and Nemea. These were Panhellenic festivals, where Greeks from all points of the compass came together to match themselves against one another at wrestling, boxing, athletics, and chariot racing and later in the skills of rhetoric and musical performance as well. They received only a garland (*stephanos*) for victory; the stephanitic games are therefore sometimes referred to as the "wreath

games." The Olympic Games were the most prestigious of the four, and tradition has it that they were first organized in 776 BC in a district called Elis on the Peloponnesos peninsula, at Olympia, which lies at the confluence of the rivers Cladeus and Alpheus. But stories about their beginnings go back much further than that, into the era of myth.

Among the Greeks, various stories circulated about the origin of the games. According to the most ancient myth, they had first been held in the far distant past to commemorate Zeus's overthrow in battle of his father, Cronus. Another version makes a connection between the games and the demigod Herakles, son of Zeus and Alcmene. On the way home after one of his many heroic deeds, Herakles is said to have passed the grave of the hero Pelops and organized games for him there. Pelops himself is the figure most often credited, along with King Oenomaus of Pisa (close to Olympia). This version is supported by a chariot-racing story. Oenomaus had a pretty daughter called Hippodamia ("the horse tamer"). It had once been foretold that Oenomaus's daughter's husband would be responsible for his death, and so to prevent his daughter from marrying, Oenomaus demanded of every prospective bridegroom that he first compete against him in the arena, in a four-horse chariot, or *quadriga*. Thirteen candidates had paid with their lives for attempts to win Hippodameia's hand, but Pelops was undeterred, even though he knew that Oenomaus's horses, given to him by Ares, the god of war, were unbeatable. They could run faster than the north wind. Oenomaus always gave his opponents a good head start, then caught up and speared them to death.

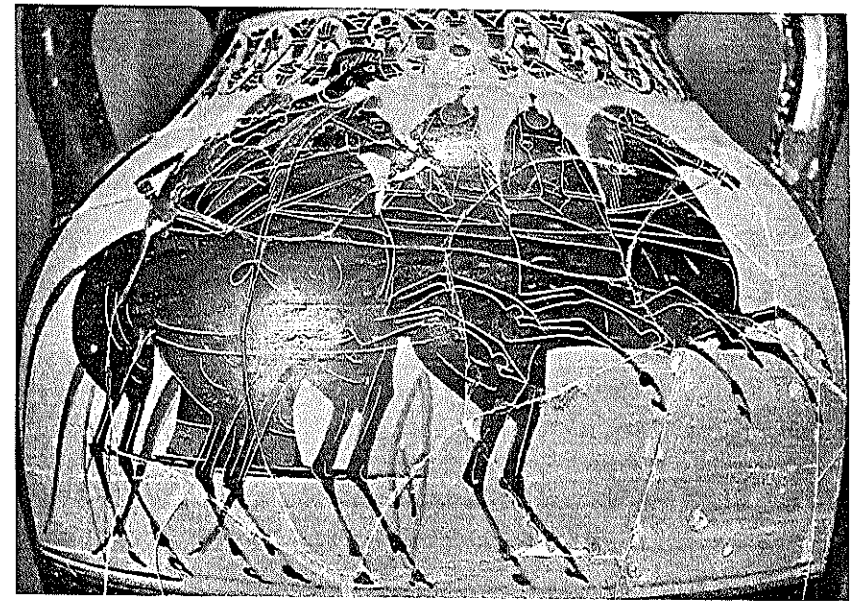
This race turned out differently. There are various accounts of how Pelops emerged victorious. According to some he was a superior charioteer and simply faster than Oenomaus, but a more colorful story is that he managed to win over Oenomaus's blacksmith and persuade him to remove the bronze linchpins from the axles of the king's chariot and replace them with pins made of wax. During the race they heated up and melted. The wheels came off, the chariot broke apart, and Oenomaus was thrown out and killed; Pelops won the race and married Hippodamia. Funeral games were held to mark Oenomaus's burial, and they are said to have given rise to the Olympic Games.

Chariot racing became an official Olympic sport in 680 BC, at least according to Pausanias, who wrote what might be described as a travel

guide to Greece in the second century AD, devoting a great deal of space to Olympia, both the visible monuments there and the history bound up with them.² It is quite possible that chariot racing had been on the program for some time already, alongside the running, fighting, and throwing events. The impetus to make chariot races a permanent feature must have come from members of the elite, who always did all they could to make a show of their status and their superiority to the common people. They saw chariot racing as an excellent means to this end. At first only four-horse chariots were used, but later two-horse chariots, or *bigae*, were introduced. Special races were occasionally held with chariots pulled by mules or foals, but a shortage of participants meant these events disappeared from the program in the course of the fifth century BC, leaving only the four-horse and two-horse teams.

Based on vase paintings, there is little we can say about Olympic racing chariots other than that they bear a striking resemblance to Egyptian war chariots as depicted in the grave of Tutankhamun, the Egyptian boy king. They were very light, with a floor of interwoven leather straps and a low guard at the front, behind which the driver stood. The two wooden wheels with broad spokes had leather-clad felloes, and they turned around hubs that were fixed to the axle block. From the axle block a long draft pole extended forward, and to it was secured, by a wooden peg, the yoke that went over the horses' necks. In the case of a four-horse chariot with the four horses adjacent, only the two inner horses were directly attached to the yoke. The two outer horses were tied to the yoke by a rein, but they pulled the chariot by means of long traces, which made it easier for them to take the sharp bends at the turns.

Olympic chariot races were not held in the stadium where other events on the program took place but on a field to the southeast. Since hardly any remains of the old Hippodrome have been found, we are reliant on the description by Pausanias. When he refers to the old Hippodrome of Olympia, it is not as a full-fledged sporting arena with tiers of seating, comparable to the racetracks of his own time, but as a large field, prepared for chariot races but without any amenities for spectators. The crowd stood or sat at the two extreme ends of the track, on a high hill to the north and an artificially created bank to the south. Only the umpires and a few high-status visitors had proper seats. The track



A *quadriga* rounding the turning post, on a pan-Athenian amphora of the late fifth century BC. (Photograph by Jastrow)

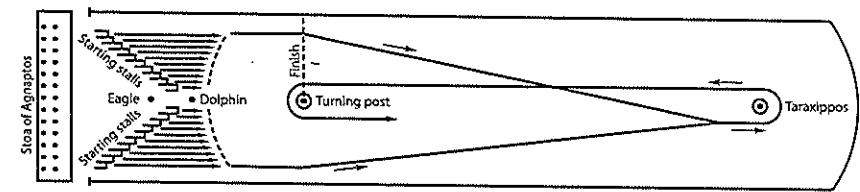
was some six hundred meters long and two hundred meters wide. The clearly visible turning posts were placed two *stadia*, almost 390 meters, apart.³

“Conquer” was the cry to which participants in the Olympia Games entered the fray. Coming in an honorable second counted for nothing, at least as far as the kings, despots, and other aristocrats who signed up to take part in the chariot races were concerned. The tyrants Myron and Cleisthenes of Sicyon, Hiero of Syracuse, and Empedocles of Acragas, ambitious rulers who had done whatever it took to seize power in their cities, felt extremely proud of being able to add their name to the lists of victors. They saw it as confirming their power, and they wasted no opportunity to parade their achievements. Miltiades, Callias, and Alcibiades, fifth-century Athenian politicians who were prominent players in the democratic system of government of their own city, had the same attitude. Since only victory counted, it quite regularly came about that leading aristocrats who owned good horses but thought themselves of insufficient caliber to win races would hire drivers from among the

common people. Although their victories were achieved by others, the credit went to the owners of the horses. This meant it was possible for women, who were not permitted to compete in person at the Olympic Games, to win first prizes as owners of victorious *quadrigae*.

It must have been an enthralling spectacle when the chariots shot out of the starting gates, especially from the sixth century onward, when as many as several dozen might take part in a race. Although no figures are given for Olympia, there is written evidence that at the Pythian Games in Delphi in 462 BC forty-one chariots lined up at the start, and so we should assume the numbers in Olympia, too, were large. Forty chariots at a time was probably the exception, but even if only half that number participated, it must have been impossible to make them set off from a straight line perpendicular to the track. The outermost chariots, those on the left in any case, would have been at a considerable disadvantage, needing to leave their lanes almost immediately to head for the ideal course in the center.

The organizers soon came up with a solution. To guarantee the races were as fair as possible and to prevent collisions in the first hundred meters, a broad row of starting gates was placed across the full width of the track, with a separate starting stall for each chariot, held shut by a rope. The result looked rather like the bow of a ship, with the chariots in the center the farthest forward, those at the sides farthest back. Immediately in front of the foremost chariots, in the middle of the track, was a bronze dolphin on top of a pole. A bronze eagle with its wings spread stood on what is described as a small altar, which housed a mechanism for raising the eagle and lowering the dolphin. This was the signal that the ropes across the starting gates could be released in pairs, the outermost ones first, those in the center last. The chariots at the edges of the track raced off while others in the middle were still waiting to start. In contrast to later Roman circuses, there was probably no dividing wall running between the two turning posts, and so the chariots on the left had several hundred meters in which to get themselves over to the right-hand side of the track. An alternative possibility is put forward by John Humphrey in his standard work *Roman Circuses*. Based on Pausanias's description of the starting procedure, he suggests that the track had a wide extension to the right at the starting end and that some of the chariots started off beside the actual track, in



Hypothetical diagram of the start and first lap at the hippodrome in Olympia.

the bow formation described above. In that case none of the chariots would need to cross to the right-hand side by passing between the two posts.⁴ They did, however, have to stay in lane until they reached the start of the central barrier.

Only when all the chariots were fully under way did a trumpeter announce with a loud blast that the race proper had begun and the contestants could break for position. Now it was a matter of speed and dexterity, for twelve laps. Each driver knew the risks ahead. He was aware that his opponents would try to drive him off the track and that the crush at the turning posts might prove his downfall. When the trumpeter made himself heard again to signal that the *quadrigae* were on the final straight, the crowd went wild and greeted the winner with thunderous applause.

We have one magnificent report of a chariot race of this kind. It dates from the fifth century BC and comes from Sophocles' tragedy *Electra*. This is not an account of a race that was actually held but a fictional story of a sprint with a tragic outcome during the Pythian Games at Delphi. The fable is told by Orestes' orderly, who tricks Orestes' sister Electra into believing her brother has been killed in a race.

Well now, Orestes, when he was in Delphi,
Had signed up to take part in the sports contests there.
And when the first event, a foot race, was loudly announced,
He stepped forward, admired by all for his fine physique.
As expected, he went on to perform accordingly,
Emerging from the contests the supreme victor.
In short, in my whole life I have never once
Witnessed such a sensational triumph.

In each event that the contest management
Had organized, he carried off the very top prizes.
He was honored as champion by the people
And everywhere his name resounded: Orestes,
From Argos, the son of Agamemnon,
Who was once the general of our proud troops.
So far so good. But what is any man's power,
Or all his abilities, if the heavens thwart him?
Dawn broke on the day that had been reserved
For chariot races. From sunrise onward
Competitors streamed in from all directions.
One was from Sparta, another from Achaea,
Two charioteers were from Libyan lands.
Orestes was named as the fifth competitor,
And he would drive a team of Thessalian horses.
The sixth charioteer was an Aetolian,
His horses brown. Next came a driver
From Magnesia; the eighth was an Aenian,
With his gray stallions, and number nine
Came from Athens, the city of the gods.
Lastly there was a chariot from Boeotia.
They were shown to their places, chosen by lot,
And all the chariots lined up at the start.
Then a loud blast of trumpets sounded,
And they were off. The drivers noisily
Egged on their steeds, their reins pulled taut.
The track was filled with a rattling sound
And the dust flew up, because no driver
Spared the whip or the goad in that tight throng
In his eagerness to overtake the wheels
And pass the snorting teams of his opponents.
Their backs foaming white, the turning wheels too,
They panted onward. Round every lap
Orestes gave rein to the trace horse on the right
While checking the horse on the inner side,
Always cutting close to the turning pillars.
So far none of the drivers had fallen,

But suddenly the Aenian's foals took flight,
Just after the last turn on the sixth lap,
And collided head on with the North African pair.
The crash caused havoc and the whole field
Was like a sea scattered with freshly wrecked driftwood.
The charioteer from Athens saw the incident
In time, and skillfully pulled aside and paused,
While a chaos of smashed chariots could be seen.
Orestes approached, bringing up the rear.
He'd been holding his horses back in the hope
Of a final spurt on the home straight,
But seeing the Athenian was now his one rival,
He gave chase with a deafening crack of the whip.
The horses drew level, neck and neck,
First this one nosing in front, then the other.
They'd completed all the laps but one.
Orestes was still standing straight, poor man, head high . . .
But before the horses came out of the turn
He slackened his left rein and the wheel on that side
Hit the pillar, breaking the axle in two.
He tumbled out of the chariot and was caught
In the tangled reins while his horses raced on
Even though he had fallen, galloping toward
The center of the track. The crowd was shocked
To see him fall and cried out in sympathy.
After such deeds to be struck by such doom!
He banged along the ground, his legs in the air
Till other charioteers managed to hold his horses
And his bloodstained body, unrecognizable
Even to his friends, could be got free.
It was cremated. A small urn of bronze
Contains the ashes of this great hero;
Perhaps a delegation of Phocaeans will come
So that he can be buried in his own native soil.
This, then, is the bad news I bring,
Painful to hear, but for an eyewitness as I am
The greatest disaster I ever experienced.⁵

There must have been many crashes like this. Charioteers regularly lost their lives on the racetrack, to the horror of the spectators. Not that anyone was deterred from watching. People kept coming in large numbers. Nevertheless, and rather surprisingly perhaps, given the spectacular nature of the races, charioteering was not the most popular event on the program. The winners on the racetrack in these years were unable to match the appeal of top boxers and star athletes. They never gained the heroic status of the later charioteers in Rome and Constantinople. This was partly because spectators sat a long way back from the scene of the action, at the short ends of the track, from where they could follow only a small stretch of each race properly. Another factor was no doubt that "ordinary" spectators, those who were not members of the elite, found it hard to identify with their charioteering lords and masters to whom they were obliged to pay so much respect in daily life. To them the environment of the track seemed remote. Chariot races in Olympia and Delphi were always an elitist affair.

Etruria

By the eighth century BC, when Homer wrote his chariot-racing story, equestrian sports were starting to become a familiar pursuit in what is now Italy. They had probably been introduced by Greek colonizers who organized horseracing and charioteering in the cities they founded in the south of the peninsula, as their ancestors had done in Greece. Since no remains of arenas have been found, it seems that here, too, the races took place on stretches of ground naturally suited to the purpose.

Whether the Etruscans, who inhabited a region corresponding roughly to modern-day Tuscany, adopted chariot racing directly from the Greeks is hard to say. They probably organized their races at a relatively late stage, long after the arrival of the Greeks in the Italian peninsula and after they had been enjoying horseracing as entertainment for some time. Depictions in wall paintings, on terracotta tablets, and on vases, which show unsaddled horses being ridden by jockeys holding whips, are convincing evidence that horseracing was popular by the seventh century BC. The earliest pictures of chariots, in frescoes found in burial chambers, date from the sixth century BC, and so the

Etruscans probably encountered chariot racing around that time and not before.

The oldest image ever found of teams of horses, a wall painting in the Tomba della Olimpiadi dating from 530–520 BC, shows a race between *bigae*. The four participants with their two-horse teams are racing toward the turning post. Three are engaged in a fierce contest; the fourth will not finish the race, since one of his horses is lying on its back and the other is rearing up, throwing him out of his chariot. In these as in other depictions there is no sign of permanent facilities. An early fifth-century relief from Chiusi further supports the assumption that races were held in natural settings. It shows a race between three chariots, in this case *trigae*, in other words pulled by teams of three horses, with trees behind them that function not just as a natural backdrop but as the dividing "wall" between the two turning points. The route had to be marked out afresh every time, and low benches were brought in to provide spectators with a modicum of comfort. In a painting from the Tomba delle Bighe that dates from the late sixth or early fifth century BC, Etruscan men and women are shown in a primitive grandstand, little more than a slightly elevated bench covered by a sun shade of some kind. It would not accommodate a large crowd. Notably, no four-horse chariots are shown in any of these pictures, which seems to indicate that the Etruscans initially held races only with *bigae* and *trigae*, rather than *quadrigae*.

The Etruscan charioteers remain anonymous with one exception: Ratumenna of Veii.⁶ His name has come down to us in connection with an extraordinary event surrounding Tarquinius Superbus, the last king of Rome, a man of Etruscan descent. Tarquinius had commissioned artists from Veii to make a terracotta *quadriga*, which was to be placed on the central ridge piece of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitol. When the terracotta chariot was baked in the oven, it swelled enormously, and this was interpreted as a sign that whoever came into possession of it would enjoy great power. As a result, the residents of Veii refused to surrender their *quadriga* to the Romans. They felt they had a right to refuse, since Tarquinius Superbus, who had commissioned the work, had meanwhile been banished from Rome. Before long it was time for chariot races to be held in Veii. Ratumenna

won, but after crossing the finishing line he did something very strange: he rode on all the way to Rome, turning around only on reaching a gate near the Capitol. The people of Veii saw this as a sign of the might of the Romans and decided to hand over the terracotta chariot to Rome after all. It was placed in the Temple of Jupiter. The gate at which Ratumenna had turned back was named after him. Nothing more is known about this charioteer, but several prominent Etruscan families bore the name Ratumenna, and so it is quite plausible that he was a member of the aristocracy and that the contestants he was up against had similar backgrounds.

Rome

According to the oldest tradition, chronicled by Livy in book 1 of his *History of Rome*, Romulus, the first king of Rome, introduced horseracing shortly after the city was founded in 753 BC. The races were held in the long valley where a little river called the Murcia flows between the Aventine and Palatine hills. Romulus is said to have organized chariot racing there before long as well. He simply had the valley closed off and personally arranged for chariots and drivers to meet there.

The first occasion on which a racetrack came to public attention to any significant degree was an event known as the Rape of the Sabines. Romulus had foreseen for some time that the Romans would inevitably start to run low on wives, and he feared for the survival of the Roman people as a result. So he thought of a trick. He organized chariot races and invited the Sabines and their daughters. While they were relaxing and watching the races, Roman soldiers suddenly appeared, grabbed the girls, and dragged them off.⁷ The fact that Romulus specifically chose the racetrack for this operation suggests that chariot racing appealed to large numbers of people from the earliest times in Rome—and not just to the Romans but to their neighbors as well.

In about 600 BC one of Romulus's successors, Tarquinius Priscus—as tradition would have it, the fifth king of Rome—took the first step toward creating a proper racetrack. He had returned rich with booty from a successful war against the Latins and felt this triumph should be celebrated annually with magnificent games in an appropriate setting. According to Livy, it was then that Tarquinius initiated the building

of what was to become the Circus Maximus.⁸ He had special seats made for the senators and knights, set four meters or so above the ground on stone bases. From there they watched a program of games that included, along with athletics and boxing matches, horseracing and charioteering. This adaptation of the valley between the Aventine and Palatine hills meant a slow but inexorable turning away from the Etruscan style of chariot racing, since from this point on the races in Rome took place at a real racetrack with seating that did not need to be set up and taken down each time.

These early chariot races were held not simply because a king, or later a republican magistrate, felt like it but in conjunction with special events—a great victory, the triumphal march of a general, or a tribute to one of the gods—and they were components of larger festivals. Romulus himself is said to have set the pattern at his own equestrian festival, called Consualia after the god Consus, a figure parallel to Neptune, the god of the sea and of horses. These events were on a small scale at first, but in time they grew to become a festival held annually on two fixed dates: 21 August and 15 December. Later a second festival was added, the Equirria, held every year on 27 February and 14 March in honor of Mars, the god of war. By the end of the royal era, in roughly 509 BC, chariot racing was the main event on the program at both festivals.

In the five centuries of the republic, chariot races increased in popularity at the expense of other equestrian events. Horseracing remained on the program in the Circus Maximus, but mainly as an accompaniment to the charioteering. Most riders performed as acrobats rather than as proper jockeys, entering the arena with two horses and jumping from one to the other during a race, or working through a series of acrobatic stunts. The growing enthusiasm for chariot racing received a significant boost in the fourth century AD with the expansion of the festival calendar to include a number of sporting events lasting several days, the *ludi*. These were held in honor of specific deities and financed by the state. The oldest were the *ludi Romani*. Livy is the first to mention them, in describing events of the year 366 BC.⁹ He says the games had been instigated by the Etruscan king, Tarquinius Superbus, in honor of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, to celebrate the anniversary of the inauguration of the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitol on 13 September.

Eventually these *ludi* grew into a festival lasting a fortnight, from 5 to 19 September, with two permanent features: plays and chariot races. More days were set aside for theatrical performances than for chariot racing simply because the latter was far more expensive to stage.

In the centuries that followed, many more fixed dates for *ludi* were added to the Roman calendar. The *ludi plebei* in honor of Jupiter were introduced at the beginning of the Second Punic War in 216 BC. They were held every year between 4 and 17 November, with the final three days reserved for chariot races. The *ludi Apollinares* in honor of Apollo were introduced eight years later, in 208 BC, and were always held between 6 and 13 July, with chariot racing on the last two days. Then from 191 BC onward there were the *ludi Megalenses*, held from 4 to 10 April in honor of Cybele, the mother goddess from Phrygia, with one day, the last, entirely devoted to chariot racing. The month of April might in fact be described as a festival month, since from 12 to 19 April the *ludi Cereales* were held, for Ceres, the goddess of fertility, again with one day for chariot racing. Finally, on 27 April the *ludi Florales* began, games for the goddess Flora, which lasted until 3 May. They too featured chariot racing on the final day.

This growth in the number of days on which chariot races were held is closely connected with the changing makeup of the population. In the fifth and fourth centuries BC, Rome grew rapidly, becoming a full-fledged metropolis that was hugely attractive to newcomers. People came to the city from all over the Italian peninsula to make it their permanent home. In the second century BC and thereafter, Rome underwent truly spectacular growth with the arrival of countless foreigners, people from conquered provinces who settled in the city either voluntarily or by order of their new masters. In 218 BC, on the eve of the Second Punic War, Rome had around 125,000 inhabitants, but by 133 BC, when Tiberius Gracchus launched his land reform program, there were already well over 300,000. Most newcomers were not well off; in fact the same was true of the vast majority of the native population, and they were keen to find cheap entertainment in the metropolis. Along with popular theater, athletics, boxing matches, and huge hunting shows with wild beasts (gladiatorial combat was not yet an established form of popular entertainment), chariot races held great

appeal, probably partly because people had been familiar with them even before they came to Rome.

The authorities capitalized on this growing enthusiasm. Tiers of seating were built all around the arena and the capacity of the circus gradually increased. Spectators were no longer distant observers; they felt they were part of things, and they could now identify with the chariot racers, who were no longer exclusively the sons of senators or knights but often had nonaristocratic backgrounds (see chapter 4). The distinction between the common people and the aristocracy was still obvious from the seating arrangements. Ordinary spectators sat high on the slopes of the Aventine and Palatine hills on the long sides of the Circus Maximus, separated from the senators and knights, who followed the races from seats close to the track.

In the last century of the republic two new *ludi* were added. Sulla and Caesar, both dictators, established sporting festivals to commemorate their own achievements. This signified an uncoupling of the traditional link between games and ancient deities. The *ludi victoriae Sullanae*, established by Sulla in 82 BC to celebrate his victory over the Italians, were associated with Victoria, the goddess of victory, who had supported Sulla, but everyone knew they were primarily intended to honor Sulla himself, who liked to be called “restorer of the Roman republic” and “protector and benefactor of the Roman people.” The games lasted for five days, between 26 October and 1 November, with one day, the last, reserved for chariot races. Caesar followed Sulla’s example and established games of the same kind, the *ludi victoriae Caesaris*, to be held annually between 20 and 30 July. On three of the ten days, chariot races were held. The decision by these two dictators to organize games in their own honor had far-reaching consequences. By taking their sporting festivals out of the traditional religious context, they made way for others to do the same. This laid the basis for the circus games of the imperial era, which were no longer necessarily associated with religious festivities.¹⁰