



Columns and Obelisks in Byzantine Constantinople

Summary :

Continuing Roman practices, Constantinople was decorated with a series of honorific columns and obelisks in the early period. Constantinople's two obelisks, located in the hippodrome area and originally decorating the *spina*, date to the 4th century. Several commemorative columns survive, in various states of preservation. The practice was abandoned in the 6th century, only to be revived briefly in the 13th.

Date

4th - 6th century

Geographical Location

Constantinople, Istanbul

1. Introduction

The Byzantines inherited the practice of erecting freestanding, non-structural honorific columns from the Romans. The primary purpose of these columns was to commemorate a person (usually an emperor) or an event (usually a victory over enemies). Several such columns, or parts thereof, survive from [Constantinople](#). They can be roughly divided into two categories: a) monolithic columns with a base and a capital, supporting a statue of the commemorated person (such as the column of Marcian); b) historiated columns, inspired by the column of Trajan in Rome, comprised of drums resting on a base and supporting a capital with again a statue on top (columns of Theodosios I and Arkadios). The practice was abandoned after the 6th century. It was revived in the 13th century by emperor [Michael VIII](#), who placed a column with a statue of archangel Michael near the church of the [Holy Apostles](#).¹ The erection of obelisks, usually brought from Egypt, was likewise a continuation of Roman practice. One such obelisk, named after emperor [Theodosios I](#), decorated the hippodrome of Constantinople. Another obelisk, known as the Built Obelisk, was built of cut stone nearby.

2. Columns

2.1. The Porphyry column in the Forum of Constantine

The [Forum Constantini](#) was located on the Mese just outside the ancient walls of Byzantium.² At the center was a column, which still survives today under the name of Çemberlitaş (lit. "hooped column," because of the metal hoops that hold together the columns drums). The shaft consists of seven drums of porphyry. Originally the column was surmounted by a Corinthian capital on top of which stood a colossal statue of [Constantine I](#) as Apollo/Helios wearing a radiating crown.³ In 1106 this statue fell. A cross was put in its place during the reign of [Manuel I Komnenos](#) (1143-1180) and at that time the Corinthian capital was replaced with the current masonry one, which bears an inscription commemorating Manuel's restoration.⁴ A later masonry base now conceals the lower part of the column. A chapel dedicated to St. Constantine was located on the foot of the column.⁵

2.2. The column of Marcian

This column, commemorating the reign of emperor Marcian (r. 450-457), is located on the fourth hill of the city, on what it would have been the northwest branch of the [Mese](#).⁶ It survives in fairly good condition. The Latin inscription on the column's pedestal indicates that it was erected by Tatianus, who served as the **prefect of the city** from 450 to 452.⁷ The column itself, approximately 10 m. high, is of granite and it is surmounted by a mutilated Corinthian capital which bears an impost block with eagles in the four corners. The column originally supported a statue of Marcian. The pedestal is decorated on the east and west sides with a Christogram inscribed in a wreath and the south side with a cross within a wreath. The north side bears the dedicatory inscription along with two Nikai bearing a shield. This accounts for the Turkish name of the column, Kıztaşı (lit. "the stone or column of the



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maiden").

2.3. The column of Eudoxia

Eudoxia (d. 404) was the wife of emperor Arkadios, mostly known for her altercation with [John Chrysostom](#), which eventually led to the latter's exile. A column in her honor was erected by [consul](#) Simplicius in 403 in the northeast side of the [Augustaion](#).⁸ The shaft was made of porphyry and surmounted by a massive silver statue of the empress. The base of this column was discovered in 1848. It bears two inscriptions, a four-verse one in Greek and a shorter in Latin.⁹

2.4. The column of the Goths

This monument is located in the outer garden of the Topkapı palace.¹⁰ The 15 m monolithic marble column sits on a tall pedestal and is topped by a Corinthian capital. The Latin inscription indicates that it was erected to commemorate a successful campaign against the [Goths](#), thus its modern name.¹¹ The other side of the bears a cross with the inscription IC XC NIKA. The date of this column is uncertain. It has been attributed to Claudius II Gothicus (r. 268-270), Constantine I (r. 306-337), or Theodosios I (r. 378-395).

2.5. The column in the Forum Tauri

This column was erected in the Forum Tauri (also known as the Forum Theodosii) in the late fourth century.¹² In imitation of the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius in Rome, the shaft was decorated with a spiral freeze in low relief depicting the triumphs of Theodosios against barbarians. According to some sources the column was equipped with an internal staircase that gave access to its summit. The column was surmounted by a silver statue of Theodosios I, which fell in 480 due to an earthquake. In the late fifteenth century the column was demolished by the sultan Beyazit II. Fragments of the column, showing primarily marching Roman soldiers, have been transferred to the Istanbul Archaeological Museum or are embedded in the masonry of the Beyazit. The remains of the Forum Tauri, to which the column belonged, have been unearthed in the present area of Beyazit.

2.6. Column of Arkadios

The Forum of Arkadios, situated on the seventh hill (Xerolophos) contained a monumental historiated column that the emperor erected in 402 in honor of his father Theodosios I.¹³ The spiral low-relief decoration in the shaft, illustrating the imperial triumphs on barbarians, was comparable to the column of Theodosios and was ultimately inspired by Roman models, such as the column of [Trajan](#). It also had an internal staircase leading to the summit. In total the monument would have been 50 m high. The base (9 m high and 6 m wide) was decorated with sculptures on three sides, depicting the emperors Arkadios and Honorios participating in scenes of imperial majesty:¹⁴ on the east side the emperors are acclaimed by the Senates of Rome and [Constantinople](#); on the western side barbarian soldiers are humiliated in front of a Roman trophy; and on the southern side, foreign ambassadors are bringing gifts. In 421 Theodosios II placed on top of the column a statue of Arkadios, which survived until the [earthquake](#) of 740. The shaft of the column was pulled down in 1719 after it was damaged in an earthquake. Today only the base of the column survives in situ, severely disfigured by fires. Fragments of drums are preserved in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum.

3. Obelisks

3.1. The Hippodrome

Two obelisks decorated the *spina* (the barrier that divided the arena into two tracks) in the [hippodrome](#) of Constantinople, one named after Theodosios I and the so-called Built Obelisk, also known as the Obelisk of Porphyrogenetos.

The Obelisk of Theodosios is composed of the Egyptian obelisk of Tuthmosis III (1490-1436 BC) and its sculpted base dated to 390. The former was brought to Constantinople probably at the time of Constantine I and it was erected in the hippodrome during



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the reign of Theodosios I. The [sculpted base](#) is one of the most important secular monuments surviving in the city.¹⁵ Although the reliefs are today badly eroded, they provide important visual information about the games, imperial participation, and entertainment in the hippodrome in the early Byzantine period. Its lower part has a depiction of the erection of the obelisk, which was evidently considered as an important achievement,¹⁶ and scenes from the games, with charioteers running around the track. According to the Greek and Latin inscriptions on the base the obelisk was erected in 32 days, when Proklos was eparch. Reliefs on four sides depicting the emperor, his family, officials, military men, the people of the city, and others, such as barbarians bearing offerings, cover the largest part of the base.

The Built Obelisk, as its name implies, is not an original monolith but rather an imitation built of ashlar, approximately 32 m. in height.¹⁷ Very little is known about it: it was erected either by Constantine I or Theodosios I, probably as a pair to the Obelisk of Theodosios. In the 10th century, [Constantine VII](#) covered it with gild bronze plaques (now lost), an event commemorated in an inscription at the base of the obelisk. The monument was restored in 1895-6.

1. For this statue see Talbot, A.M., "The Restoration of Constantinople under Michael VIII," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* (1993), pp. 258-260. This entry treats only surviving columns and obelisks. On the non-extant columns of Constantinople, as well as on the sources for each column in particular, see Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, 2 ed. (Paris: 1964), pp. 73-86.
2. Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, 2 ed. (Paris: 1964), pp. 77-80; Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls: Byzantion, Konstantinupolis, Istanbul bis zum Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: 1977), pp. 255-257; Berger, A., *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos* (Bonn: 1988), pp. 288-301.
3. Such interpretation of the statue on the Porphyry column was common in the Byzantine sources, especially after the 8th century. However, G. Fowden, 'Constantine's Porphyry column: The earliest literary allusion', *Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1991), pp. 125-131, offers detailed analyses of the sources on the statue and suggests that it was not necessarily meant to represent the emperor in the image of the sun, but that this was rather a legend that emerged at some point between the 8th and the 10th centuries.
4. Mango, C., "The Byzantine Inscriptions of Constantinople: A Bibliographical Survey," *American Journal of Archaeology* 55 (1951), p. 62.
5. Janin, R., *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzantin, I: Le siège Constantinople et le patriarcat oecuménique, 3: Les églises et les monastères*, 2 ed. (Paris: 1969), p. 296.
6. Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, 2 ed. (Paris: 1964), pp.84-85; Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls: Byzantion, Konstantinupolis, Istanbul bis zum Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: 1977), pp. 54-55.
7. On the inscription see Mango, C., "The Byzantine Inscriptions of Constantinople: A Bibliographical Survey," *American Journal of Archaeology* 55 (1951), p. 62.
8. Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, 2 ed. (Paris: 1964), pp.76-77; Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls: Byzantion, Konstantinupolis, Istanbul bis zum Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: 1977), pp. 52-53.
9. Mango, C., "The Byzantine Inscriptions of Constantinople: A Bibliographical Survey," *American Journal of Archaeology* 55 (1951), p. 63.
10. Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, 2 ed. (Paris: 1964), pp.85-86; Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls: Byzantion, Konstantinupolis, Istanbul bis zum Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: 1977), p. 53.
11. Mango, C., "The Byzantine Inscriptions of Constantinople: A Bibliographical Survey," *American Journal of Archaeology* 55 (1951), p. 62.
12. Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, 2 ed. (Paris: 1964), pp.81-82; Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls: Byzantion, Konstantinupolis, Istanbul bis zum Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: 1977), pp. 258-265.
13. Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, 2 ed. (Paris: 1964), pp. 82-84; Müller-Wiener, W.,



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Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls: Byzantion, Konstantinupolis, Istanbul bis zum Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts (Tübingen: 1977), pp. 250-253.

14. Grigg, R., "'Symphōnian Aeidō tēs Basileias': An Image of Imperial Harmony on the Base of the Column of Arcadius." *Art Bulletin* 59:4 (1977), pp. 469-82.

15. Bruns, G., *Der Obelisk und seine Basis auf dem Hippodrom zu Konstantinopel* (Istanbul: 1935); Grabar, A., *Sculptures byzantines de Constantinople (IVe-Xe siècle)* (Paris: 1963), pp. 25-28. Safran, L., "Points of View: The Theodosian Obelisk Base in Context." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 34.4 (Winter 1993 [1995]), pp. 409–35; B. Kiilerich, *The Obelisk Base in Constantinople: Court Art and Imperial Ideology* (Rome 1988).

16. Wrede, H., "Zur Errichtung des Theodosiusobelisken in Istanbul," *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 16 (1966), pp. 178-198.

17. Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls: Byzantion, Konstantinupolis, Istanbul bis zum Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: 1977), pp. 65, 71; Bassett Guberti, S., "The Antiquities in the Hippodrome of Constantinople," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991), pp. 87-96; Mango, C. "The Palace of Boukoleon," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 45 (1997), pp. 41-50.

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Glossary :

	consul, -lis
	An official of the Roman state. In the period of the Republic, it was the highest military and political office: two consuls were elected each year. The consular office survived into the Imperial period (and further into the early Byzantine period), becoming a honorary post.
	praefectus urbi (prefect of the city)
	(later referred to as the <i>eparch</i> of the city) Administrator and virtual governor of Constantinople in the Early/Middle Byzantine Era. He was responsible for the surveillance and the harmonious life of the Capital. One of his responsibilities was to control the commercial and manufacturing activities of Constantinople. After 1204, however, the office began to diminish, while from the 14th century, his responsibilities were assumed by two officers, the so-called <i>kephalatikeontai of the capital</i> .

Sources

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Quotations

The bilingual inscription on the column of Eudoxia

Κίλινα πορφυρέην καὶ ἀργυρέην βασιλείαν
Δεοκέο ἔνθα πόλη θεμιστεύουσιν ἀνακτες
Τ]οῦνομαδ' εἰ ποθέεις, Εὐδοξία. Τίς ἀνέθηκεν;
Σιμπλίκιος μεγάλων ὑπάτων γόνος ἐσθλὸς ὑπαρχος.

Dominae Aeliae Eudoxiae semper Augustae
uc. Simplicius praefectus urbis dedicavit.

Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, 2 ed. (Paris: 1964), p. 77.

The column with the statue of Theodosios I in the Forum Tauri

ἽΟτι ἐν τῷ Ταύρῳ στήλη τοῦ μεγάλου Θεοδοσίου ἴσταται· ἦν δὲ πρῶν ἀργυρᾶ... Ἐπάνω δὲ τοῦ μεγάλου κίονος ἐστήλωται Θεοδόσιος... Ὅμοίως καὶ ὁ κοῦφος κίων ὁ μεγαλιαῖος ὁ ἐκέισε καὶ ὁ Ξηρόλοφος τὰς ἐσχάτας ἱστορίας τῆς πόλεως καὶ τὰς ἀλώσεις ἔχουσιν ἐνίστορας ἐγγεγλυμμένας.



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Pseudo-Kodinos, *Patria Constantinopleos*, ed. T. Preger, *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum* II (Leipzig 1907; repr. 1975), pp. 175-7.

The porphyry column and the statue of Constantine in the forum of Constantine

καὶ ἔστησεν ἐν μέσῳ κίονα πορφυροῦν μέγαν λίθου Θηβαίου ἀξιοθαύμαστον, καὶ ὑπεράνω τοῦ αὐτοῦ κίονος ἔστησεν ἑαυτοῦ ἀνδριάντα μέγαν, ἔχοντα ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ αὐτοῦ ἀκτίνας, ὅπερ χαλκούργημα ἤγαγεν ἀπὸ τῆς Φρυγίας.

Chronicon Paschale I, ed. L. Dindorf (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1832), p. 528.

Auxiliary Catalogues

List of the non-extant columns of Constantinople (after Janin):

Column of Helena in the Augustaion

Column of Constantine in the Augustaion

Column of Theodosios I and Justinian in the Augustaion

Column of Leo I, in front of the Senat