



# A day at the races in Byzantine Oxyrhynchus

In 2012, and particularly in London, much attention has been focused on the ancient Olympics. **Margaret Mountford** reviews the evidence for the sports held at Oxyrhynchus and the events which were included in the programme there.

The Olympic Games, according to tradition, first took place in 776 BC at Olympia, near Elis in the north-west of the Peloponnese. Our knowledge of those Games has been pieced together from a variety of sources including the epinician poetry of Pindar, the travel writings of Pausanias, inscriptions found both at the site and in the home towns of the victors, and documentary evidence on papyri. The only event in the early Olympics was the 200 metre foot-race, but chariot-racing was included from the early seventh century BC. This Greek-style chariot racing was very much a sport for the wealthy, who could afford to own horses and the slaves who drove the chariots. The Olympic programme eventually included combat sports (boxing, wrestling and the pankration) and other athletic events (longer foot-races and the pentathlon) but chariot-racing remained popular throughout the history of the Games. At Delphi, Nemea and the Isthmus of Corinth, the other venues where 'Crown Games' (in which the prize was not money but a wreath) were held, the festivals included contests in the performing arts, but at Olympia music, dance and dramatic performances were not competitive events, being rather like our 'cultural Olympiad' today.

Among the papyri which I have been studying, and which will be published in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 79, are three so-called 'circus programmes'. These are lists of events which took place in the fifth or sixth centuries AD at Oxyrhynchus, the town about 100 miles south of Cairo where the Oxford scholars Grenfell and Hunt (funded by the EES) extracted thousands of papyri from ancient rubbish mounds. These are very different from an Olympic programme, but the events listed in them, a combination of races and other 'acts', have their origins in the Panhellenic festivals of classical and Hellenistic Greece, like the Olympic Games, as well as the chariot-races and gladiatorial and wild beast shows of imperial Rome. Gladiatorial contests and the practice of throwing victims to the lions were prohibited by the end of the fifth century



*The Delphi Charioteer (474 BC). Photograph © Peter Clayton*

AD and although wild beast hunts and shows continued these too were becoming rarer, due to a combination of pressure from the Christian church, increasing costs and the difficulty in obtaining wild animals.

By the sixth century Roman-style chariot-racing had replaced the earlier Greek style and had become the main competitive 'sport' for mass entertainment; horses and riders were organised in four teams or 'Colours' (the Blues and Greens were the predominant ones, but there were also Reds and Whites) which competed all over the Roman Empire. In Oxyrhynchus the Colours were first attested in AD 552 and the only Roman remains left standing above ground at the site, part of a column, marks the 'place belonging to the Blues'. The programmes also include other entertainments such as mimes, acrobats and singers, continuing the tradition of musical displays and contests which took place alongside the track and field events in the ancient Games. Such entertainments were sometimes included to distract the crowd while the track was cleared and prepared between races, but in other cases may have formed a separate section of the programme after the racing had concluded. By the time of these programmes the gymnasium had ceased to play a major part in the education of the upper classes and athletics had also become a spectator sport, with professional athletes forming part of the bill. The performers (charioteers, horses and equipment, and the other entertainers) may have had to remain in the town where they were based.

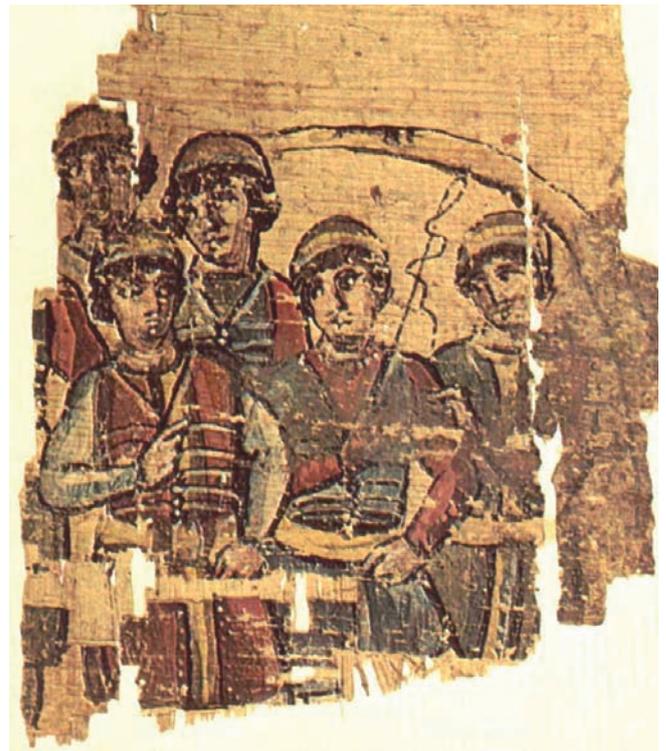


*A charioteer for the 'Blues' team (third century AD). Mosaic in the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome. Photograph © Peter Clayton*

One wonders whether, in a town like Oxyrhynchus, there would have been sufficient variety of entertainers to keep the people amused; perhaps the horses and riders remained in the same stables or racing yards but the other artists continued to travel around from one games to another, as they had centuries before.

Three circus programmes have been published so far; the only complete one is also from Oxyrhynchus (P. Oxy. XXXIV 2707). It lists six races, with items such as singing stilt-walkers, athletes and mimes (the most common and so, presumably, the most popular or the least expensive entertainment) in between. Other known types of entertainers included mimics, gymnasts, tight- and slack-rope walkers and performers with hoops. All the programmes which are preserved intact start with an invocation to good fortune (a throw-back to pagan times when Tyche, the goddess of the fortune of the city, was invoked) and some form of display of victory or victories, probably statues or panels symbolising the Emperor. A procession of all the performers also regularly took place, possibly including imperial representatives and local dignitaries.

The entertainments were provided free for the crowds, but it is not entirely clear how they were funded by the time of these papyri; possibly there was no single source of finance. The emperor paid for entertainments in Constantinople and it would seem logical, if the same political purpose was to be achieved, that the imperial role

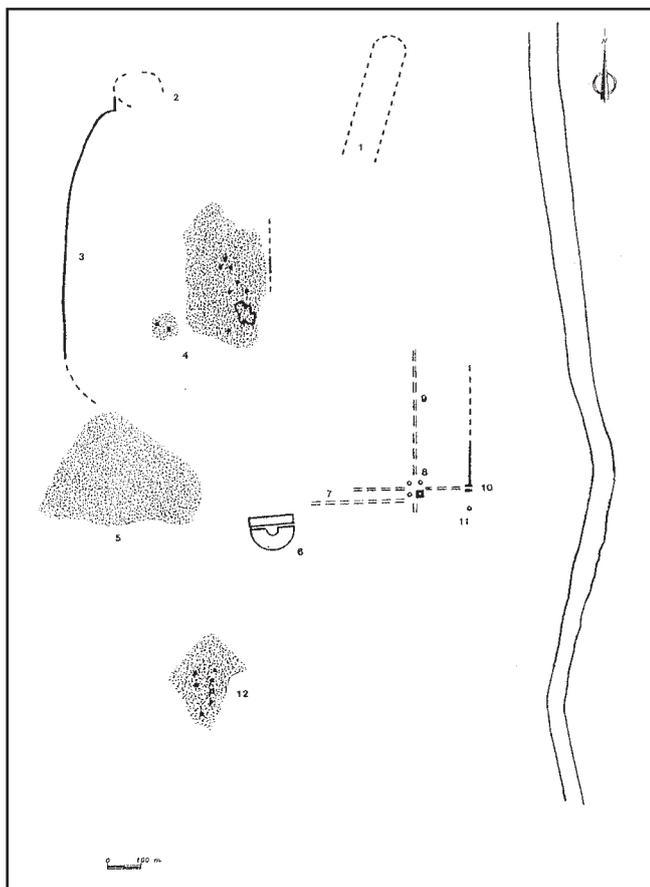


*Charioteers (fifth century AD) depicted on a papyrus found by the EES in 1914 at Antinoe (Antinoopolis)*

would have been performed by the governors, or others perceived to represent him, in the provinces.

The papyri do not show the venue for the events. Oxyrhynchus had a hippodrome (or Roman circus), probably just outside the city to the north of the ancient site, and there was a theatre in the south-west quarter of the city, where shows which did not include chariot-racing may have taken place. In Aphrodisias in Turkey, for example, where there was no hippodrome, there is evidence in the theatre for a range of entertainers, including mimes and a tight-rope walker.

What were these documents used for? Two of them (2707 and new papyrus 1) end with the words 'Farewell', added by a second writer, suggesting that they may have been copies of a public notice which was seen and approved by a second person, possibly passed from one municipal official to another. We cannot tell if any of the others had such a subscription; all may have had. All are written in large letters with wide spaces between the lines and, so far as one can see, wide margins which suggest that they may have been created to be handed round or pinned up; whatever the general level of literacy, there would have been enough people able to read to justify this. Alternatively they may have been used by the master of ceremonies or impresario in charge of ensuring that the various acts came on at their appointed times.



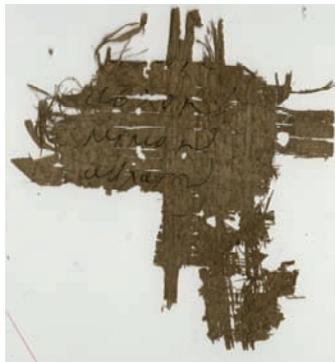
*Hypothetical reconstruction of ancient Oxyrhynchus. From Oxyrhynchus: A City and its Texts (EES 2007)*

Key:	
1. Hippodrome (?)	7. Colonnade photographed by Petrie
2. North-west gate (?)	8. Base of honorific column
3. West rampart	9. Wells and column (temple?)
4. Upper necropolis	10. Eastern gate
5. Graeco Roman necropolis	11. Corner of Doric peristyle (gymnasium?)
6. Theatre	12. New Kingdom necropolis (?)



- For good fortune
- Victory
- [ ]
- [ ]
- Mime
- [ ]
- Gymnast
- Mime
- Vocalists
- [ ]
- (2<sup>nd</sup> hand) Farewell

New papyrus 1



- Mime
- Race
- Mime
- ??????
- Race [or mime]

New papyrus 2



- Mime
- Vocalists
- Hoop artist
- Mimics

New papyrus 3

The number of races held on a single day varied widely from time to time and from place to place, with 24 a day being normal in the capital during the Imperial Period. There were only six races in P. Oxy. 2707, and three of the six known papyrus programmes do not appear to list any races at all, even though one of those definitely contains the opening elements (the invocation to good fortune, the display of victories and the procession) which were typical elements of *ludi circenses*, and the others may do so. It must have been cheaper to put on such a show rather than a full programme including racing, but the absence of racing may indicate that these three papyri are later than the others and from a time when the venues no longer had racing stables. They show that a day at the races had, by the Byzantine Period, actually become what we would call a day at the circus.

□ Margaret Mountford has recently been awarded a PhD at University College London for her research into documentary papyri from Oxyrhynchus, including circus programmes. She has been a Trustee of the Egypt Exploration Society since December 2010. Photographs, unless otherwise indicated, © The Egypt Exploration Society and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri Imaging Project.

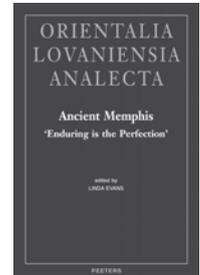
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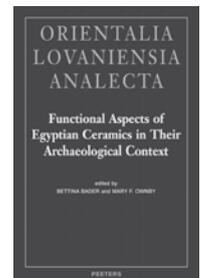


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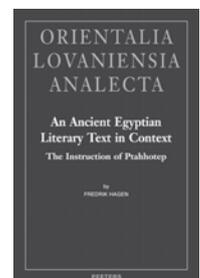


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