sports in the Byzantine Empire

Constantinople's most important sporting venue was the hippodrome, which became the center and focal point of many Byzantines' lives. All citizens, regardless of occupation or social status, were eligible to receive a token to see the games free of charge. This stadium, built along the lines of a Roman circus, had not only social implications, but also political and religious significance, for it was located close to the royal palace and cathedral of Hagia Sophia. This arena for chariot racing had close links with the administration of the city, witnessing state ceremonies, political assemblies, and processions. On the day of the races, the emperor entered the stadium dressed in imperial robes, carrying the lighted candle that he had used in prayers in his private chapel. He alone granted permission to hold the games and dropped the white napkin as a signal for the events to begin. Traditionally, the emperors' wives were unable to watch the races until the 11th century, and even then not from the royal box but from the rooftops of the palace. In general, the Byzantines discouraged women from attending the games.

As in Rome, the racing colors and fans (the factions) played a leading role in chariot racing, with the Reds and Whites still assisting the Blues and Greens. The Byzantine factions seem to have been more associated with politics and religion than Roman fans and to have had some social and ideological characteristics, although unlike their Roman counterparts, they organized themselves into gangs with their colors emblazoned on their shoulders. The stadium contained separate Blue and Green stands where the factions wore their team jackets. Both factions carried weapons concealed in their clothing.

For most of the sixth century and beyond, chariot racing remained the only major entertainment in Constantinople. Yet another pastime and form of military training for the nobility was hunting, which became a common motif in Byzantine art; the lower classes, too, participated in hunting (and fishing), but perhaps more for survival and protection against wild animals than for sport. The emperors used horses, dogs, and exotic creatures such as cheetahs for hunting bear, boar, or deer. They also used spears—even against lions according to paintings—bows and arrows, and hunting horns. Falconry became a popular sport that inspired the writing of practical manuals. The courtiers practiced archery and perhaps an early form of tennis. They enjoyed dice and board games such as chess (with pieces made from wood, bone, and precious metals) and backgammon that they introduced from the East in the sixth century. The Byzantines in general watched boxing, wrestling, acrobatics, and dancing, especially in the hippodrome in Constantinople, which became renowned among both citizens and foreigners for the entertainments that took place during the intermissions between chariot races.
**Byzantine agriculture**

The largest part of Byzantine agricultural production came from gardens, fields, and orchards. Most families farmed on a small scale and continued with little change centuries-old traditions.

Cereals had long formed the basis of the Mediterranean diet and were grown across the Byzantine countryside. Wheat (*sitos*) was the most highly regarded grain.

Grape vines have long flourished across the Mediterranean, especially in hillside areas near the coast.

A well-situated and skillfully pruned olive tree was an excellent long-term investment that could bear fruit for generations. Olive oil (*elaion*) was an indispensable part of Byzantine life. It was widely used for cooking and was an essential nutritional source for most people. Recent estimates of medieval consumption have ranged from 5 to 13 gallons (20 to 50 liters) per year. By this reckoning a village of 1,000 may have needed between 5,000 and 15,000 gallons (20,000 to 60,000 liters) each year for food. Oil was burned as fuel in candles and lamps.

Each rural family kept its own kitchen garden.

A typical garden was planted with vegetables, herbs, and some trellised vines, with a tree or two for shade. The most common crops were broad beans, lentils, chickpeas, and vetches. Nearly a hundred different vegetable species were known in Byzantine territories, including dill, carrot, cucumber, white cabbage, kohlrabi, cress, leeks, mangold, radish, beetroot, turnip, onion, Swedish turnip, mangold root, rape, orach, pars-nip, hedge mustard, common rue, savory, Jewish mallow, eggplant, and artichokes. Gourds, pumpkins, and melons were widely grown but not highly valued. Not all of these vegetables would be immediately recognized by a modern shopper. Carrots, for example, were yellow in antiquity and only gained their distinctive reddish color through medieval experiments with central Asian varieties. Most produce did not travel well and was consumed within the home, often after drying or pickling for winter storage.

Herbs were raised for seasoning as well as medical applications. The *Geoponika* lists basil, marjoram, rosemary, savory, coriander, saffron, dill, rue, fenugreek, cress, mallow, fennel, mint, borage, costmary, squill, and mustard as common household herbs. Cumin, parsley, and tarragon are known from other sources. One would expect to find a few flowers in even the smallest garden.

Almost all rural families raised at least one or two fruit trees, and many tended small orchards that included several species. Apples, cherries, figs, pears, and pomegranates were widely grown.
Hagia Sophia, built under Byzantine emperor Justinian I and dedicated in 537 CE, was for centuries the most important church in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Located in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey), Hagia Sophia was a symbol of the greatness of the Byzantine Empire. It was later adapted for use as an Islamic mosque and today houses a museum.
Justinian I

One of the greatest emperors in the history of the Byzantine Empire, Justinian I made a profound and lasting imprint on the course of the empire's subsequent development. Justinian's codification of the law, involvement in religious disputes, and rebuilding of Constantinople provided the foundation for later intellectual, legal, and cultural development. His most ambitious effort, however, was the reconquest of the west and the reunification of the empire under his authority. Justinian's wars in Italy led to the successful restoration of Byzantine power in Italy and the destruction of the kingdom of the Ostrogoths, but his success was short-lived.

As emperor, Justinian—like many emperors before and after him—felt that he should rule not only in political life but in religious life as well. He passed legislation dealing with religious issues and persecuted those who were not Christians or who did not follow the standard Catholic beliefs. Among other reforms, he closed the schools of higher learning in Athens, which had been a center of influence for non-Christians.

Byzantine map of Jerusalem

Ancient mosaic map of Jerusalem in present-day Medeba, Jordan. The map depicts the city walls, the Damascus Gate, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of Holy Zion, as well as column-lined streets. The map was part of the floor of a Byzantine church, built in the sixth century CE, and is the oldest surviving map of the Christian Holy Land.
The Byzantine Influence: Religion, Culture, and Alphabet
(Overview)

When the nations of Serbia, Montenegro, and the Russian Federation emerged from Soviet rule in the 1990s, they all chose for their coat of arms an eagle with two heads facing to the right and left. While the citizens of those Slavic nations probably knew that the image was the ancient symbol of the Russian czars, many of them might not have realized that the czars took the symbol from an older tradition: the emperors of the Byzantine Empire. From late antiquity until the early modern period, the two-headed eagle was often used to represent the city of Constantinople (modern Istanbul), which was ideally located to look west to Europe and east to Asia. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in the mid-15th century, Russian grand prince Ivan III adopted that image to show that Russia was the inheritor of Byzantium’s traditional role as the dominant cultural, religious, and political force between the east and the west. Russia’s cultural debt to the Byzantines goes much further than just the coat of arms—the Eastern Orthodox religion, the Cyrillic alphabet, and Russian culture and architecture were all borrowed from or heavily influenced by the Byzantines. Even the title “czar” is derived from the old Roman and Byzantine title “Caesar.”

Saint Sophia cathedral in Kiev

[http://www.travel-images.com]

Yaroslav the Wise commissioned the construction of the cathedral of Saint Sophia in Kiev, to be modeled after Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Vladimir I, Yaroslav’s father, is credited with bringing Christianity to Kiev.
Byzantine Christendom and Islam: Tension and Conflict

636 - 638
Muslim armies conquer territories in the southern Byzantine Empire, including the holy city of Jerusalem.

717 - 718
Muslim armies attempt a siege of Constantinople but are unsuccessful.

867 - 1025
Byzantine armies recapture most of Syria and parts of Palestine. The Byzantine Empire is once again the most powerful political entity in the Mediterranean, although Turkish tribes begin moving in from the east.

800 YEARS OF TENSION AND CONFLICT

1071
Seljuk Turks defeat the Byzantine Army led by Romanus IV Diogenes at the Battle of Manzikert.

1095 - 1444
The Crusades increase tensions between Byzantine Christendom and Islamic powers.

1453
Ottoman Turks succeed in their siege of Constantinople, putting an end to the Byzantine Empire.