
The Base of the Obelisk of Theodosius

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THE BASE OF THE OBELISK OF THEODOSIUS.

DURING a visit to Constantinople in July 1905 I spent some little time in studying the base of the obelisk of Theodosius in the Hippodrome (Fig. 1).



FIG. 1.—THE OBELISK OF THEODOSIUS.

An examination of the construction of the base and its sculpture led to the view that it was composed of material older than the reign of Theodosius. I subsequently read a paper on the subject at an open meeting of the British School at Rome.¹ In the summer of 1906, Mr. Traquair, architectural student of the British School at Athens, made a detailed study of the construction of the base. His conclusions confirm the view which I had previously expressed. The present paper, which merely claims to put forward the reasons for assigning an earlier date to the base as briefly and clearly as possible, consists of two parts, Mr. Traquair's architectural report, and my own archaeological discussion of the questions raised. Both Mr. Traquair and myself owe much to the kind assistance of Dr. Van Millingen, for but for his aid this paper would never have been written.

1.—*The Structure of the Base.*

The base of the obelisk is in three parts, which may be described from the ground upwards.

The foundation² (Fig. 2) is in two steps built of squared ashlar in courses from 18 to 22 metres high, laid as far as can be seen without mortar. The topmost course projects slightly beyond the rest

¹ *Athenæum*, 1906, p. 402.

² Cf. the description of Gyllius given in Banduri, *Antiq. Constant.* i. pp. 297 ff. (ed. Paris, p. 375.)

forming a 'nosing' to the step. The work is finely dressed, but not polished. This platform is nearly square, and measures 6.44×6.50 metres on the upper step. Upon the platform is placed a large block of white marble bearing the inscription, and the reliefs describing the transport of the obelisk. Above the inscription, but forming part of the same block, was a square fluted plinth. The angles of this and the top of the block bearing the inscription have been cut away and four granite blocks inserted, one at each angle. These are bedded at top and bottom with lead, and wedged up at the sides with small stones. They measure about $.45 \times .62$ metres with slight variations, and are placed with their short ends facing east and west. At the north-west corner on the top is a roughly cut inscription KOETT . On the north side, also on top, are two holes and a hollow. These holes are not the usual perpendicular dowel holes, but are oval in shape. Round the top are a number of similar holes irregularly placed. Near the top are small holes drilled through the angles. That at the south-east corner has broken through. They may have been used to lift the stone, but would be not only unsightly afterwards, but weak for the purpose. They are probably late and intended for the attachment of some objects. The white marble block measures along the sides at the inscription level 3.74, 3.73, 3.72, and 3.63 metres, the north side being slightly shorter than the others. The plinth has been a square of about 2.75 metres, but, as the granite blocks are longer from east to west, now measures across them about 3.11 by 2.85 metres. Both plinth and inscription are broken through from top to bottom.

Upon the plinth with its granite angles rests a sculptured pedestal crowned at the top with a small, splayed cornice. At the bottom are four small square holes, two on the east, and two on the north side. At the top on the north side is a short channel terminating in a drain cut right down through the sculpture. The cornice has been broken away at the south-east angle and rather clumsily replaced. Upon the top of the pedestal are set the four bronze legs which support the obelisk. They are bedded at the top and bottom on lead, and have small square projections at the inside angle which fit into holes on the top of the pedestal to keep them from slipping. Their position on the top of the pedestal has been fixed by lines scratched in the marble, and still partly visible. They measure about .47 metres square by .49 metres high.

The granite obelisk was originally longer, and has been cut before being erected. The bottom angle, which is square above the bronze legs, is slightly rounded between them. When first erected it was evidently not quite plumb, for bronze wedges have been driven in on top of the north-east leg, so as to raise the obelisk slightly at that angle. On plan the obelisk measures as follows:—E. 2.25 m., S. 2.50 m., W. 2.18 m., N. 2.38 m. The east and south sides are flat, while the north and west are convex on plan. The west side particularly has a strong curve. As the obelisk is very highly finished, this peculiar form must be intentional.

The first point of interest to be considered is the shape of the granite blocks. Had these been intended merely to strengthen the plinth, they

would have been made square. As at present placed they increase the length of the plinth from east to west, but not its breadth. Now whilst the top of the original plinth is square, and the bottom of the obelisk practically so, the pedestal which comes between them is oblong and fits the granite legs, but projects over the plinth to the east and west. This suggests the following explanation of the manner in which the monument was erected. The foundation steps, and the inscription block with its plinth were first intended to support the obelisk—perhaps with an additional square pedestal—. It was then determined to use the present sculptured pedestal. As, however, it did not fit the top of the plinth, the granite blocks were inserted at the angles to support its projecting ends. The obelisk was cut short, either to make it easier to erect, or because it had got broken at the end. It was placed on the bronze legs because, owing to the smoothness of its sides and its tapering form, it was necessary to support it from the bottom, while it was being lifted. Had the pedestal been placed in position by some device of grasping it under the angles, the granite blocks would have been wedged up. That they are bedded in lead shows that the pedestal was placed on them. They were probably covered by some form of plinth moulding now gone.

The obelisk does not bear in the slightest on the patched piece of the cornice of the pedestal, which has been carefully cut to avoid the bronze leg.

RAMSAY TRAQUAIR.

2.—*The Date of the Base.*

It will be seen from Mr. Traquair's report that the base of the obelisk consists of three parts, the foundation, the inscription block, and the sculptured pedestal. He also shows that the first two belong together and were originally meant to carry the obelisk. The sculptured pedestal is a later addition, inserted at the time of the setting up of the obelisk. We thus can distinguish two periods, one the intended, and the other the actual erection of the obelisk. This view is confirmed by the Greek and Latin verses³ on the inscription block, which run thus:—

κίονα τετράπλευρον, ἀεὶ χθονὶ κείμενον ἄχθος,
 μόνος ἀναστήσαι Θεοδοσίος βασιλεὺς
 τολμήσας Πρόκλῳ ἐπεκέκλετο· καὶ τόσος ἔσται
 κίων ἡελίοις ἐν τριάκοντα δύο.

Difficilis quondam dominis parere serenis
 iussus et extinctis palmam portare tyrannis
 —omnia Theodosio cedunt subolique perenni—,
 ter denis sic victus ego domitusque diebus
 iudice sub Proclo superas elatus ad auras.

³ C. I. G. 8612.

From these it is clear that an unsuccessful attempt to erect the obelisk had been made during the reign of *domini sereni*, and that it, in consequence, had long lain $\chi\theta\omicron\nu\iota \acute{\alpha}\chi\theta\omicron\varsigma$. Theodosius *extinctis tyrannis* ordered it to be set up as a monument of his victory. The work was entrusted to Proclus and accomplished in thirty-two days. This implies that Proclus found the base ready, and that the block (afterwards to be inscribed) with its reliefs showing the transport of the obelisk and its position in the Hippodrome was in place. Then to make the base more ornamental—or perhaps for mechanical reasons—

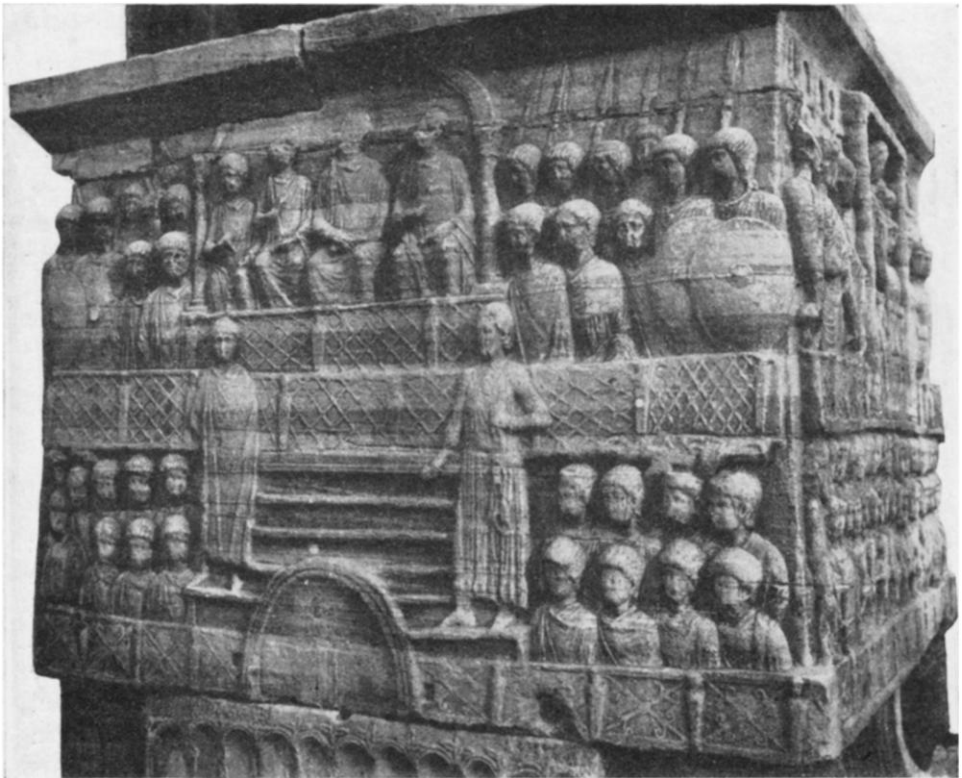


FIG. 3.—SOUTH SIDE OF THE PEDESTAL.

the sculptured pedestal was added. This also was probably found ready carved. At its south-west angle part of the cornice has been broken away and replaced in antiquity (Figs. 3, 5). The patch, as Mr. Traquair says, has been carefully fitted to avoid the bronze block that supports the obelisk, and has been carved to match the rest of the pedestal. But, while the arch over the imperial *pulvinar* is continued in it, the spears of the guards are not. It is perhaps reasonable to suppose that during the transport of the block to its present position one angle was broken off, and somewhat hastily replaced. Further proof that the pedestal was carved before being put in position is

given by the drain on its north side. This is roughly cut through the side of the block without any regard for the reliefs. The drain is therefore later than the carving of the pedestal. It seems to be contemporary with the erection of the obelisk, for its object is to let the rain water run off the top of the pedestal and prevent any damage to the bronze blocks that support the obelisk.

Thus while there is no doubt that the obelisk was erected during the reign of Theodosius, it seems certain that both the inscription block and the

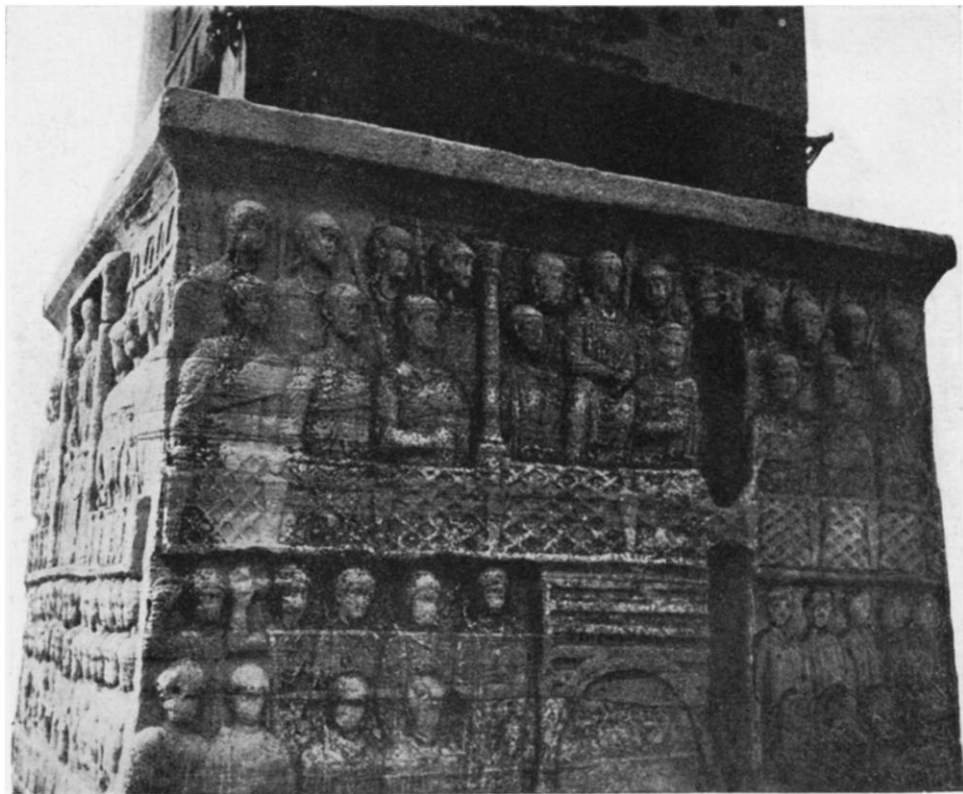


FIG. 4.—NORTH SIDE OF THE PEDESTAL.

sculptured pedestal are earlier. The date of the erection is given by Marcellinus⁴ as 390 A.D., when Valentinian.II. and Nectarius were consuls. The *extincti tyranni*⁵ are usually and probably rightly considered to be Maximus and his son Victor, who were defeated and killed by Theodosius in 388 A.D. The holes bored through the corners of the inscription block,

⁴ v. *C.I.G. loc. cit.*; Banduri (*Antiq. Constant.* ii. p. 469) rightly rejects the view that the obelisk was brought from Athens and erected under Theodosius II.

⁵ The editors of the *C.I.G., loc. cit.*, compare an epigram in which Valentinian is called *extinctor tyrannorum*.

which Mr. Traquair believes to have been used for the attachment of some objects, were perhaps used to hang wreaths of gilded bronze in commemoration of the defeat of Maximus. This would explain the phrase *palmam portare* of the Latin inscription. Proclus was prefect of the city, and it seems that a statue was afterwards set up in his honour,⁶ but he never rose to the consulship.

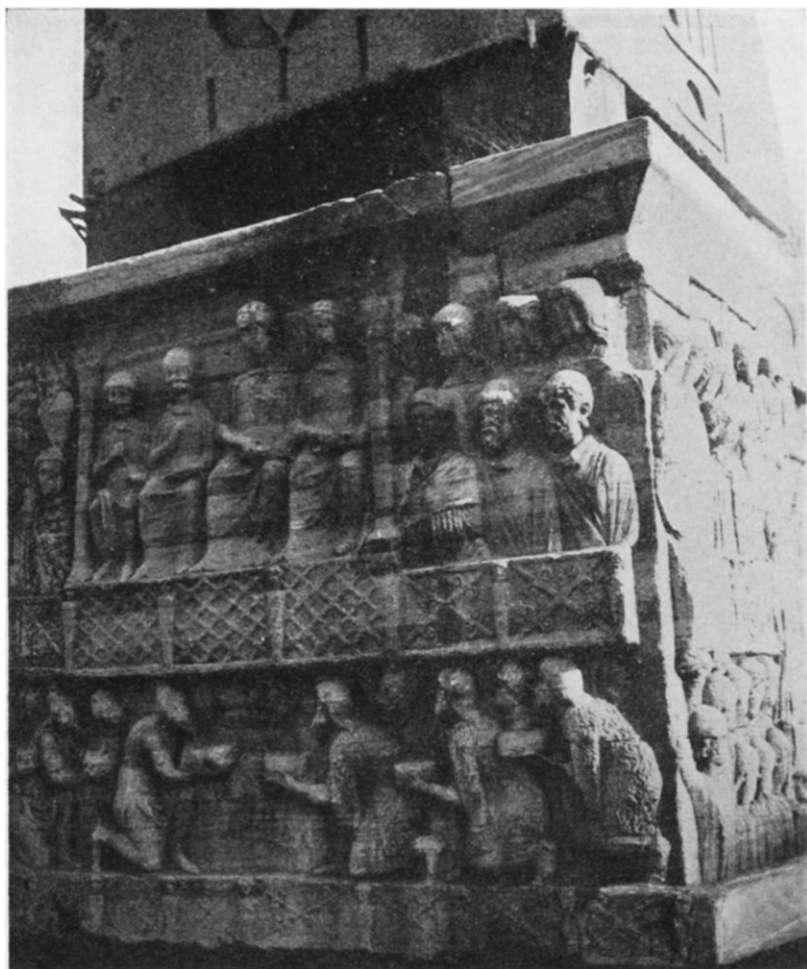


FIG. 5.—WEST SIDE OF THE PEDESTAL.

We now have to consider the date of the pedestal and the inscription block. The four scenes on the former represent incidents taking place in the Hippodrome. On the south (Fig. 3), the emperor attended by three members of his family is seated in the *pulvinar* or imperial box. On both sides stand

⁶Cf. the epigram given by Banduri, *op. cit.* i. p. 117, lib. vii.

detachments of guards, and on the steps leading to the box are two officials. At the side of the steps are other officials, four of whom hold napkins in their raised right hands ready to give the signal for the start of the chariot races.⁷ The scene on the north (Fig. 4), is similar, except that the emperor has apparently guards or officials with him in the *pulvinar*, or two sons who stand by his side, while guards are seen behind them. On the west (Fig. 5), the emperor and the three members of his family seated in the box and attended by guards receive the homage of barbarians. On the east (Fig. 6), the scene shows

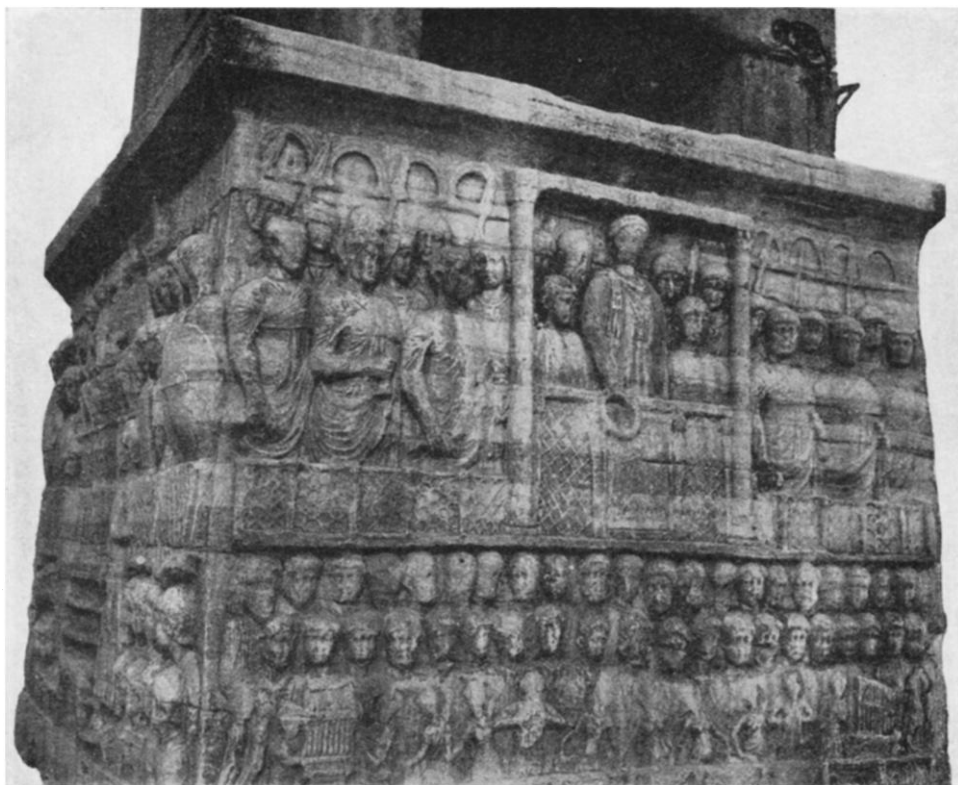


FIG. 6.—EAST SIDE OF THE PEDESTAL.

the emperor with his family, or officials, standing in the *pulvinar*. His right hand holds the wreath for the victorious charioteer. On either side are spectators and guards. In the lower seats are two rows of spectators, and before them a line of musicians and dancing girls.

The emperor and the three members of his family seated in the *pulvinar* have always been thought to be Theodosius, his wife Flaccilla or

⁷ Cf. the statues in the Palazzo dei Conservatori at Rome, Helbig², 583, 584; *Bull. Com.* 1883, p. 17, Pls. II., IV.; Reinach, *Répert.* ii.

p. 537, 7, 8; Strong, *Roman Sculpture*, Plate CXXIX.

Galla, and his sons Arcadius and Honorius. Since, as pointed out before, the pedestal is earlier than the time of Theodosius, he cannot be represented on it. Further the supposed Flaccilla is dressed exactly like the other three persons, and the figure does not seem to be female. Therefore if the other three are male, the Flaccilla must also be male. We may then assume that there are here shown an emperor and his three sons. The only emperor of Constantinople before Theodosius who had three sons was Constantine the Great. His three sons were, Constantinus proclaimed Caesar in 317 A.D.,



FIG. 7.—CONSTANTINIAN PORTRAIT IN ROME.

Constantius Caesar in 323 or 324 A.D., and Constans Caesar in 333 A.D.⁸ If we may assume that at the time the pedestal was carved all three sons were Caesars, it is possible that the pedestal, since barbarians doing homage appear in one scene, was the base of a monument to commemorate the Gothic War of 332 A.D. It might also have been erected in honour of the thirtieth anniversary of Constantine's reign, which was celebrated in 336 A.D.

⁸ For these dates see Pauly-Wissowa, *s.nn.*

In 333-Constantinus would have been twenty-six, Constantius seven months younger, and Constans ten years old. Thus as regards age they would agree well with the appearance of the figures on the relief.

In style the reliefs show great likeness to other sculptures of the same period. The most important parallels are the Diocletianic and Constantinian reliefs on the arch of Constantine at Rome,⁹ and the arch of Galerius at Salonica.¹⁰ The frontality and the high relief of the figures make them seem to be standing in an open space. This is, as shown by Riegl,¹¹ a marked characteristic in the other sculptures referred to. Even more striking is the likeness shown by individual heads on the pedestal to Constantinian portraits. When they are compared with the portrait here reproduced (Fig. 7), a head in the Magazzino Archeologico at Rome, there is no doubt that they are works of the same period.

As regards the inscription block it is clear that the Greek and Latin verses belong to the time of the erection of the obelisk, the reign of Theodosius. But, since the block was originally intended for the obelisk at the time of the failure to erect it, it seems likely that the scenes showing its transport and its position in the Hippodrome date from that period. It does not seem very possible that the reliefs are Theodosian, although their style is not good. But as we have no sculptured monuments of that date except a much battered relief probably from the column of Arcadius,¹² there is no possibility of coming to a definite conclusion. It is, however, interesting to observe that Theodosius apparently used earlier reliefs for the decoration of the Golden Gate.¹³

It is not known for what purpose the erection of the obelisk was originally planned. As a mere conjecture it is possible that it was brought to Constantinople by Constantine and from the first intended for the Hippodrome. Probably he wished to erect it there, as Augustus had set up a similar obelisk in the *Circus Maximus* at Rome,¹⁴ so that his new Rome in the east should not be inferior in this respect to the western capital. Finally if Proclus erected the obelisk in thirty-two days, there seems no reason why Constantine should have failed to set it up.

A. J. B. WACE.

⁹ *Papers B.S.R.* iv. Pls. XXXV.-XXXVII.

¹⁰ Kinch, *L'Arc de Triomphe de Salonique*, Paris, Libraire Nilsson, 1890.

¹¹ *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, chap. ii.; *Strena Helbigiana*, pp. 250 ff.; cf. Petersen, *Atti dell' Accad. Pontificia*, ser. ii. vol. vii.

pp. 159 ff.

¹² Strzygowski, *Jahrbuch*, 1893, p. 249, Fig. 10.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 31 ff.

¹⁴ Richter, *Topogr. d. Stadt Rom*², p. 176; Hülsen-Jordan, *Topographie*, i. 3, p. 140.