Some summer day in the year 391, the obelisk was raised. The forest of scaffolding around it was checked and braced; the hundreds of ropes attached to its wooden cradle were pulled taut; and at last, when all was ready, thousands of laborers began turning the capstans set up in the sandy arena. Hour by hour, as ropes popped and stone grated, the obelisk rose slowly skyward, sunlight flashing on its gilded crown. A crowd gathered to watch as it approached the vertical, and cheered when the base finally thundered into position, and the granite monument from Hundred-Gated Thebes stood at last atop the spina.

By the time it was re-erected in the Hippodrome of Constantinople, the obelisk was already almost two thousand years old. Carved to commemorate the victories of the warrior-pharaoh Thutmose III, it stood for centuries beside the great Temple of Amun at Karnak. Constantine had it ferried down the Nile; but perhaps because the base broke during transit, the obelisk lingered for decades in the harbor of Alexandria, before another emperor brought it across the Mediterranean to embellish his capital.

That emperor was Theodosius I. By the time he ordered the obelisk set up in the Hippodrome, Theodosius was approaching the end of an extremely eventful reign. Spanish by origin, he had been called to the throne in the wake of the disastrous Battle of Adrianople, where his predecessor Valens and the cream of the Roman army had been killed by the Goths. He spent the first years of his reign campaigning, with limited success, against the rampaging Goths, and finally ended their raids by allowed them to settle permanently in the Empire as Federates – allies responsible for contributing units to the field armies.

Theodosius is best remembered, however, for his religious policies. Although every emperor since Constantine had, with one short-lived exception, been Christian, it was Theodosius who effectively made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The last stage of this process, marked by a series of laws closing temples, ending ancient festivals, and outlawing all pagan religious practice, was well underway by the time the obelisk was set up in the Hippodrome.

Equally importantly for later European history, Theodosius was the first Roman emperor to submit to the authority of a bishop. The year before the obelisk was raised, rioters in Thessalonica killed one of Theodosius’ generals. In a fit of rage, Theodosius ordered the Gothic garrison to make an example of the mob. The Goths waited until the next chariot race in Thessalonica’s Hippodrome. Once the races had begun, they sealed the entrances, and then stormed into the stands, where they systematically massacred 7,000 spectators. When he heard the news, Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan and a friend of Theodosius, publicly condemned the emperor’s actions, and refused to give him communion until he repented for ordering the massacre. This, after some months, Theodosius did – an act that would be interpreted in the middle ages as a demonstration of the supremacy of ecclesiastical authority.

Although he traveled around the Empire as needed, Theodosius spent most of his reign in Constantinople. In the fifty years since Constantine had chosen the city as his capital, Constantinople had grown from a sleepy backwater into a bustling metropolis with several
hundred thousand inhabitants and a spectacular monumental center. From the circular Forum of
Constantine, where a gilded statue of Constantine shone atop a porphyry column, the broad street
known as the Mese led to the Augusteum, a monumental plaza adjacent to the original Church of
Haghia Sophia, the sprawling Great Palace, and the Hippodrome.

The Hippodrome was a stadium for chariot racing. Like most structures of its type, it was long
and narrow, with two tiers of seating overlooking an oval track. About 1600 feet long and 400
feet wide, the Hippodrome had room for more than 60,000 spectators, and was lavishly
decorated. The outer wall was crowned by an elegant arcade, and the spina – the tall stone barrier
that divided the track – featured a rich array of sculpture.

By the time Theodosius raised his obelisk on the spina, chariots raced in the Hippodrome 66
times each year. On each of these days, as many as 24 races were held, separated from one
another by short intermissions of juggling, buffoonery, and performances by trained animals.
Every race followed a similar pattern. Drivers in light four-horse chariots lined up in the stone
starting pens known as carceres. Although there were 12 starting pens, only four chariots raced
in most heats. The emperor dropped a napkin to signal the race’s beginning, a hidden mechanism
opened all the gates simultaneously, and the teams rushed forward.

The chariots circled seven times counter-clockwise around the track, for a total distance of about
a mile and a half. The race was wildly dangerous. Racing chariots, built for speed, were light and
flimsy vehicles. Particularly at turns, where drivers hugged the barrier, crashes were frequent,
and often fatal. To free their whip hands, drivers customarily wrapped the reins around their
wrists or waist. This meant that, in the event of a crash, they would be dragged to death behind
their horses if they didn’t manage to quickly cut themselves free with the sickle-shaped knives
they carried in their belts.

Wealth and glory, however, awaited the victorious driver. Virtually all charioteers came from
humble backgrounds. If they routinely won races, however, they could become rich, and even
attain celebrity status. The greatest charioteers were commemorated with portraits and statues in
the Hippodrome. Porphyrius, the most successful driver of the late fifth and early sixth centuries,
was honored with no fewer than seven life-size bronze likenesses on the spina.

Every driver was associated with one of the factions, the large associations that worked closely
with the emperors to provide chariots, horses, and charioteers for the games. There were four
factions: Blue, Green, White, and Red. Over the course of the fifth century, however, the Whites
formed a permanent alliance with the Blues, and the Reds with the Greens. In combination with
the growing popularity of racing, the emergence of the Blues and Greens as the only factions had
important consequences. In Constantinople and other large Roman cities, fans of the Blues and
Greens became increasingly well-organized. Allegiance to one or the other faction seems to have
been determined both by neighborhood and – to some extent – by class. Young men advertised
their loyalties by wearing blue or green clothes, and adopting exotic fashions like Hunnic
hairstyles or Persian beards. At the Hippodrome, each faction had a designated seating section,
its own chants, and a unique set of acclamations for the emperor. The emperor, for his part,
publicly allied himself with one of the factions as a means of engaging with the people.
This gesture reflected the Hippodrome’s status as the only place where emperors came into direct contact with their subjects. It was in the Hippodrome, from the fifth century onward, that emperors were crowned with the military torque and raised on a shield by the soldiers of their guard. It was in the Hippodrome that victorious emperors staged their triumphs, parading lines of captives and wagons of captured loot before the cheering populace. And it was in the Hippodrome, before every chariot race, that the tens of thousands of spectators chanted their acclamations of the emperor and the glories of his rule.

The two-story imperial box, connected to the Great Palace by a narrow passage, was an emperor’s window on the world, and his one sure way of gauging, and influencing, popular opinion. Sometimes, emperors actually spoke with representatives of the crowd through a herald. On most occasions, however, the races themselves, paid for by the emperors, were the message: a grand statement of imperial generosity, in which the victorious charioteer functioned as the alter ego of the ever-victorious emperor.

Thanks to the critical role it played in relations between emperors and their subjects, the Hippodrome of Constantinople was an ideal setting for monuments expressing imperial power. Theodosius could not have chosen a more visible place for his obelisk. Its placement in the center of the Hippodrome’s spina looked back to the past: Augustus had set up an obelisk in a similar position in Rome’s Circus Maximus. The sculpted base of Theodosius’ obelisk, however, was firmly situated in the present.

When the obelisk was raised in 391, Theodosius had just defeated the usurper Magnus Maximus. This victory, commemorated with a bronze trophy set atop the obelisk, set the tone for the reliefs carved into all four sides of its massive marble base. Every relief is divided into two parts by a schematic railing. The upper part of each relief shows the imperial box, where Theodosius – alone or with his two young sons – stands in the center, flanked by lines of court officials and Germanic guardsmen. The lower part represents the stands and arena of the Hippodrome, where spectators cheer, musicians play, and barbarians bow before the emperor.

The reliefs of the Obelisk’s base present the emperor (shown larger than any other figure) as the literal apex of a hierarchal and orderly society. So, we might imagine, Theodosius would have actually appeared in the imperial box: a tall man with graying blond hair, ringed by the graded ranks of his officials, high above the tens of thousands in the stands below.

The illusion of order proved short-lived. Little more than a year after the obelisk’s erection, a serious revolt broke out in the western provinces. The instigator was Arbogast, the Frankish general Theodosius had appointed as guardian of the western emperor Valentinian II. In the spring of 392, after young Valentinian began to show signs of independence, Arbogast had him killed, and offered the throne to Flavius Eugenius, a cultivated court official. Theodosius, however, refused to accept Eugenius as a legitimate emperor; and after Eugenius and his pagan Praetorian Prefect began to reopen closed temples and resume the ancient sacrifices, he declared war.

In the fall of 394, Theodosius led an army of about 50,000 into Italy. Nearly half his troops were federate Goths, whose leaders included an ambitious young chieftain named Alaric, the future
sacker of Rome. Alongside the Goths marched the regular field army, commanded in part by Stilicho, Alaric’s future nemesis.

Theodosius encountered Eugenius’ army, which was at least as large as his own, in the narrow mountain valley of the River Frigidus. The ensuing battle lasted two days. On the first, Theodosius’ Goths were decimated, and the eastern army withdrew in disorder. On the morning of the second day, however, in a turn of events described by Christian writers as miraculous, a howling mountain wind arose behind Theodosius’ troops, whipping dust into the faces of the western soldiers. Theodosius charged, and the western army was routed. Eugenius was promptly beheaded, and Theodosius became the last ruler of a unified Roman Empire.

He died only four months later, leaving his two young sons as joint emperors. Their reigns would mark the beginning of a new and turbulent period, in which the Western Empire would fall and the Eastern Empire would be shaken to its core. For the next thousand years, however, as the Byzantine Empire and finally the Hippodrome collapsed around it, the Obelisk of Theodosius continued to assure the people of New Rome that order and stability were the greatest gifts of imperial rule.