

Information on Government in Constantinople

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare to create a monument and accompanying plaque commemorating government in Constantinople. To prepare to create these, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Constantinople was ruled by an emperor who had absolute power and control over the city. During the first several centuries of the Byzantine empire, the belief was widespread that emperors ruled by divine right, which meant that the emperor was chosen and given power by God. According to this idea, the people had no right to interfere with the emperor's decisions or question his judgment. The emperor was held in such high respect that it was believed that after his death he would be a ruler in heaven alongside Christ.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- What power did the emperor have over Constantinople?
- What is divine right?
- According to the idea of divine right, why would the people not interfere with the decisions or judgments of the emperor?

The emperor and his wife, the empress, were given tremendous respect. They lived in the magnificent Imperial Palace, a huge building covering over 10,000 square meters and including walls, gates, harbors, ritual baths, libraries, sanctuaries, art galleries, and a church built in the form of a cross. Beautiful mosaics (pictures made from small pieces of painted tile) covered many of the palace walls and floors. Purple was considered to be the color of royalty, and only the emperor and his family were allowed to wear clothing colored with a purple dye. Only the imperial family could wear silk or use purple ink. During holidays, the emperor and his family would lead a royal parade. Involving huge displays of wealth and power, these festivals featured the emperor riding on a chariot pulled by four white horses or mules. The emperor's route through the city was decorated with ivy, flowers, incense, and magnificent carpets. The crowd of people watching were required to remain silent. The only sounds from outside the procession came from special choruses from the Blue and Green demes (political groups representing different sections of the city) who sang official songs in praise of the emperor.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Describe the Imperial Palace.
- What happened during holidays?
- Who was allowed to sing during the emperor's parade?

According to law, the emperor was supposed to be selected by the senate and the army with the approval of the people. However, because an emperor had the right to choose his successor, the senate, army, and people had very little control over the decision. The only political groups besides the emperor that did have some power were the demes. The word "deme" comes from the root "demos," meaning "people." The leaders of the demes were called demarchs, people who obtained power due to their popularity with the people in their

section of the city. Each deme had its own militia, a much smaller version of the army that could be used to help defend the city against foreign attack. The militias also had the effect of preventing the emperor and his army from having total control over the military. When a new emperor was going to be crowned, the demes went to the hippodrome to proclaim their support for the new ruler. The action was mainly symbolic—it made people think that the emperor had power because the people believed in him. In reality, the people and the demes usually had very little control over who became the emperor.

Stop here
and discuss



- How were emperors supposed to be chosen and how were they actually chosen?
- What were demes and demarchs? Whom did they represent?
- What kind of power did the demes have? Explain.

Members of the two most powerful demes, the Blues and Greens, frequently captured traveling caravans and robbed travelers. When Emperor Justinian began to order harsh punishment for the robbers, the demes became angry. More importantly, the senate and the citizens became upset when Justinian forced them to pay high taxes to support his armies, which were fighting in foreign lands. The Blues and the Greens fought one another frequently, especially at the hippodrome. During one fight, Justinian sent his army to arrest and punish all the participants. The Blues, the Greens, and many other citizens joined together to demand that Justinian be overthrown. Justinian became very nervous and quickly announced at the hippodrome that he would forgive his opponents and lower taxes. But the crowd, shouting “nika! nika!” (“conquer! conquer!”), was already too angry. The rebels wanted to crown another man, Hyptatius, emperor. Justinian wanted to give up, but his wife, Theodora, insisted that he fight back. The emperor and his army surrounded the hippodrome and killed 30,000 of the rebels. The rebellion became known as the Nika Rebellion. Afterwards, Theodora took all power away from the demes. However, in future years the demes would return, gaining enough strength to force Emperor Maurice to leave the throne in the year 602.

Stop here
and discuss



- Why were the Blues and the Greens upset with Justinian?
- What happened after the fight broke out at the hippodrome?
- Why did Theodora take all the power away from the demes?