

Information on Military Protection in Constantinople

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare to create a monument and accompanying plaque commemorating military protection 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's strategic location—it was surrounded on three sides by water—helped safeguard the city until 1453, when it was captured by the Turks. For many centuries after its founding, military techniques in Constantinople were fairly advanced compared to the those of other societies at this time. A large army, huge walls and towers, and powerful military technology contributed to the city's security. In addition, the city's soldiers fought with great spirit. They believed that they were fighting under the name and will of the Christian God.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- How did Constantinople's location help protect it?
- What contributed to the city's security?
- Why did the city's soldiers fight with great spirit?

Water surrounded Constantinople on three sides and served as natural protection against enemy attack. On the fourth side, Constantine and his successors built three parallel walls in increasing heights. In front of the outer wall was a huge moat 30 feet in depth (three times as deep as the deepest part of a normal swimming pool today). The inner wall was the highest, stretching 40 to 70 feet high and 12 to 40 feet thick. Watchtowers built onto the middle wall helped the army receive early warning if enemies were approaching. Fire beacons (a signal from a hill or tower) and flag towers were used to provide early warnings of invasions. A heavy chain extended across the Golden Horn inlet made it difficult for enemy ships to reach the city's harbors. Distant ports, naval patrols, merchants, and spies were often willing to provide information about enemies to the army. A Bureau of Barbarians functioned like the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) today. The Bureau of Barbarians spied on people from other countries and analyzed whether their leaders might threaten Constantinople.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Other than water, what protected Constantinople?
- Describe the city's walls.
- In what ways did Constantinople protect against invasions?

Emperor Justinian made frequent use of his army. The heavy taxes necessary to support these military adventures, however, angered many citizens. During Justinian's reign, Constantinople's military dominated the Vandals in North Africa, the Ostrogoths in Italy, and the Visigoths in Southern Spain. Persia presented the greatest threat, and Justinian tried to control but not crush other nations in the East so that they could be used to help defend Constantinople against Persia. When Constantinople's own population did not provide enough soldiers, the emperor would hire mercenary soldiers (foreign men who were hired to fight). These men, many of whom were Germans, comprised a large part of Constantinople's

army. Soldiers were divided into three types: heavy cavalrymen who carried a sword, dagger, and bow and arrows; light horsemen who carried a bow and arrows and a shield; and heavy footsoldiers who carried a sword and a special kind of axe with a blade on one side and a spike on the other. The army practiced techniques of fake retreats, attacks in the dark, ambushes (surprise attacks from a hidden position), and parleys, which were conferences with the enemy.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Describe Justinian's use of his army.
- What were mercenary soldiers?
- Describe the different types of soldiers in Constantinople. What military techniques did the soldiers practice?

By far the most dangerous weapon used by the city's army was Greek fire. This explosive, whose recipe was a secret known only to the Greeks, was made of petroleum and other chemicals. By using a copper siphon, Greek fire could be thrown a short distance at an enemy. When thrown, the chemical compound exploded and emitted huge clouds of smoke and a horrible smell. The effect was extremely frightening. Even water could not put out the chemical fire. Most often the weapon was transported in light-weight boats called karabos and was used by the navy. In the late seventh century, when the Arabs attempted to capture Constantinople, Greek fire saved the city.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- What was Constantinople's army's most dangerous weapon?
- Describe Greek fire's use and effect.
- How did Greek fire help Constantinople in the seventh century?