

Information on Public Works and Charity in Constantinople

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare to create a monument and accompanying plaque commemorating public works and charity 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.

As in large urban cities today, people of many different social and economic classes lived in Constantinople. A rigid class system existed that made it very difficult for the poor ever to earn enough money to improve their lifestyle. Separate laws existed for the rich and the poor. For instance, people from wealthy families could not be punished with hard work in the mines or put to death as punishment without the personal approval of the emperor. On the other hand, the poor could be punished more harshly and more easily.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- What kinds of people lived in Constantinople?
- How did laws for the rich differ from laws for the poor?
- Give an example of laws that favored the rich.

Despite the fact that the poor could be discriminated against (treated worse than the wealthy), both city officials and the church felt a strong sense of responsibility to take care of all of Constantinople's citizens. The church received large donations of money from the rich. The church was not required to pay taxes but had to help the government take care of the city's charitable functions (the giving of money or other help to the poor and needy). Building and maintaining hospitals, orphanages, and homes for the poor and elderly were among the church's obligations. Daily meals were offered for free in many churches throughout the city. The church also helped to employ the poor in janitorial jobs within the church buildings.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- How did the city and church feel about charity?
- How did the church acquire and keep money?
- In what ways did the church help the poor and elderly?

The government also helped to care for the poor. Public baths, in addition to being popular places for socializing, helped to ensure that even the poor were clean and in fairly good health. The diseases of dysentery and the bubonic plague were widespread during different times in Constantinople's early history. During the middle of the sixth century, as many as 5,000 people died in one day of the bubonic plague. The government tried to help by working with the church to operate free hospitals and by using government money to pay public doctors to care for those who were poor and sick. The government also helped in other ways. Many people who were poor and unemployed were put to work in public construction projects. In fact, lower-class men who were unemployed could be forced by the government to work in building projects.

Stop here
and discuss



- Who helped the church to care for the poor?
- What functions did public baths serve?
- How did the government help care for the poor and sick?

Grain was the principle item in the diets of most people at the time. As a result, the most important charitable function of the government was to provide bread to its citizens. During good times, bread was distributed to all citizens, and during more difficult times it was distributed at least to the poor. Grain usually needed to be imported from Egypt or other foreign countries. As a result, keeping enough grain delivered to the bakeries became the central problem of Constantinople's government. When the emperor temporarily failed to deliver bread, riots would break out in the city. For this reason, it was important to the government that the bakers' guild be strictly controlled.

Stop here
and discuss



- What was the most important charitable function of the government?
- Who received bread from the government?
- What sometimes happened when the emperor failed to deliver bread to the citizens?

Efforts made by the church and government to care for the poor resulted in a large public works system and many effective charitable institutions. Still, the acts of charity did little to cure the problem of poverty or to educate the poor to be skilled workers. One of the best and most effective programs to help the unfortunate was initiated by the Empress Theodora. Before she married Emperor Justinian, Theodora was an actress. During this time, the sixth century, actors and actresses were looked down upon by most people. Her father had a low position in the hippodrome, and her mother was apparently missing. At the age of twenty, Theodora ran away from Constantinople. After becoming a Christian and then the empress, Theodora wanted to help young girls in similarly difficult positions. She began a program that provided housing, money, food, and even attractive clothing to young women and girls with no other support system.

Stop here
and discuss



- Did the church's and government's charitable work eliminate poverty?
- Why do you think Theodora cared about young girls in difficult positions?
- What did Theodora do to help young girls?