

## Information on Recreation in Constantinople

**Directions:** The following information will help your group prepare to create a monument and accompanying plaque commemorating recreation 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 a large, cosmopolitan (having characteristics from many different parts of the world) city with many opportunities for public entertainment. Within the city walls, there were 14 palaces, 4,388 houses, 322 streets, and 14 churches. For entertainment there existed 8 public and 153 private baths, 4 fora (a forum was a public square or marketplace), 2 theatres, and a hippodrome, an open-air stadium with an oval course for horse and chariot races. Socializing on the streets and in open-air marketplaces was extremely popular. Friends met one another in courtyards outside churches; they frequently took walks along the rural paths that ran outside the city walls and in the gardens along the beaches. Rowboats and sailboats were also popular. Restaurants, cafés, and public baths served as social meeting places where people sat and played board games similar to dominoes and checkers. During the summer, tables were set up in the street for game playing.

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- What kind of city was Constantinople?
- What is a hippodrome?
- Where did people go to socialize? What did they do?

Public baths, taverns, and marketplaces provided opportunities for more social interaction. For the citizens of Constantinople, bathing was more a ritual than a chore; a bath could take more than one or two hours and was usually done during the day. For entertainment many citizens went to the theatres to watch pantomimes, jugglers, ballet dancers, actors, and burlesque dances based on classical myths. Performances often began at noon and continued until nightfall. Because performers sometimes appeared not fully clothed and subject matter was often controversial, the church strongly opposed the theatre and discouraged Christians from attending performances. According to the church, the city's theatres were the creation of the devil.

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- What places provided opportunities for social interaction?
- Who disliked the theatre?
- Why were Christians told not to see theatrical performances?

By far the most widely attended form of recreation was the circus at the hippodrome. Trained animals, wild beasts, jugglers, acrobats, and musicians performed in the stadium, as well as in the streets. Each year on January 1st a full week of entertainment was provided by politicians for the people. This was held mostly in the hippodrome and included wild animals, dance, theatre, and chariot races. For the people living in Constantinople, the most exciting events in the hippodrome were the famous chariot races. The emperor and his court, together with approximately 60,000 citizens, attended these

chariot races. White, Red, Blue, and Green chariots (horse-drawn, two-wheeled vehicles) raced one another around the track. Each chariot represented a deme, a section of the city with citizen representation. People cheered for the chariot from their own deme much like people today cheer for a sports team from their own school or city.

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- What happened every year on January 1st?
- What was the most exciting event in the hippodrome?
- What happened at the hippodrome races?

By the sixth century, the Red and White demes had become less powerful, although they still competed in the races. A bitter rivalry emerged between the two most powerful teams: the Blue and the Green. Chariot racers were sometimes killed in racing accidents when competition became too intense. Each team disagreed with the other on most important issues. Members of the Green and Blue teams began to dress in bright, loud colors so that they stood out from the rest of the citizens. The men on these teams grew their hair long and wore beards and moustaches, unlike most other men. It was not uncommon for men from the Blues and the Greens to rob travelers. Fights and riots between supporters of the Green team and supporters of the Blue team broke out in the hippodrome and on the streets.

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- Which two chariot teams became the most powerful?
- What kind of relationship did the two teams have?
- How did the conflict start? Why do you think the races began to lead to violence?