

Information on Religious Life in Constantinople

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare to create a monument and accompanying plaque commemorating religious life 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.

St. Helen, the mother of Constantine, the founder of Constantinople, converted to Christianity late in her life. She traveled to the holy city of Jerusalem to participate in excavations (digging for artifacts) there. She discovered the True Cross and other Christian artifacts. She brought these holy Christian objects back to Constantinople, giving the city the honor of housing some of the Holy Land's most sacred possessions. Constantine also converted to Christianity, and Constantinople became known as the "God-guarded city."

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Who was St. Helen?
- Where did she travel to?
- What effect did Helen's and Constantine's conversions to Christianity have on Constantinople?

Constantine's conversion marked the beginning of Constantinople becoming the Christian capital of the world. From the city's founding in A.D. 330, religion and government were closely related to one another. In 380, Christianity was declared the official Byzantine religion. All other religions were declared to be "demented and insane." The emperor of Constantinople used the motto, "One God, one empire, one religion." Beginning in the fifth century, all Christian emperors were crowned in Constantinople. Although the city officially became Christian with Constantine's personal conversion, at that time Christians living in Constantinople were a minority. Many citizens continued to practice and believe in pagan (non-Christian) traditions, especially the belief in demons and sorcery, for many years after the emperor declared Christianity to be the official religion.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- What kind of relationship existed between the government and the church?
- What was the attitude of the government towards other religions?
- Did everyone in the city convert to Christianity when Constantine did?
Explain.

Of the many churches in Constantinople, Hagia Sophia, or Church of Holy Wisdom, became the religious center for all of the Byzantine Empire. Built by Emperor Justinian, Hagia Sophia became one of the most holy buildings in the world for Christians. It became the site of many sacred ceremonies and the destination of many pilgrimages (journeys to sacred places). The church also housed images and relics (objects of religious importance, usually objects related to saints) of Christian saints. It was believed that touching certain relics would miraculously cure illness. The church's interior was enormous and impressive. Supported by huge pillars, as was characteristic of Roman architecture, its dome rose 180

feet above the ground. The building also included intricately carved arches, elaborate ornaments, and richly patterned mosaics (pictures made from small pieces of colored tile).

*Stop here
and discuss*



- What was Hagia Sophia?
- Why was the building so important?
- Describe what the building looked like.

Religion played a central role in the lives of the people of Constantinople. Regular Christian services often lasted several hours. Parades and royal processions through the city occurred on religious holidays. On Easter, the government provided free lambs to the city's restaurants so that all citizens, rich and poor alike, could enjoy a feast on the sacred holiday. In the lives of monks, Christianity played an even bigger, all-consuming role. Monasticism refers to the lifestyle of people living in religious seclusion. Monks lived apart from the rest of society in order to feel closer to God. Monasticism in Constantinople developed during the late fourth century. By 463, the famous St. John of Studion monastery had been founded. Over 1,000 monks lived there. Prayer continued around the clock. Monks were divided into three groups of singers so that the rites of worship could be heard 24 hours a day without a break.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- How did religion play a role in people's daily lives?
- What happened on religious holidays?
- What did monks do?

Rules in monasteries were usually fairly strict. Monks were not allowed to leave the monastery and associate with other people. Many monks were prevented from trading for personal profit. One sect of monks, the St. Simeon Stylites, believed in denying themselves comfort and in preventing unnecessary movement in order to achieve greater closeness to God. These monks lived in trees or on top of columns as high as 50 feet above the ground. As monasticism in Constantinople increased in strength throughout the centuries, women were barred from entering monasteries or even from walking onto the peninsula that housed 20 of the city's monasteries.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- What kinds of rules existed for monks?
- How did the St. Simeon Stylites live? Why did they live this way?
- Why did monks set themselves apart from women and other people outside of the monastery?