

Information on Trade and Commerce in Constantinople

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

Much of Constantinople's success as the religious and political capital of the Byzantine Empire was due to its thriving trade and economic prosperity. Currency (any form of money used for exchange), geographic location, guilds, and marketplaces all contributed to making Constantinople a strong trading city. The secure, gold-based money was originally called a solidus (in later times nomisma and hyperperos) and was known in the West as a bezant. The relatively heavy coin weighed four and half grams. Less valuable coins were made of silver and bronze. The value of these coins remained the same for many years, and therefore played a large part in ensuring Constantinople's economic stability.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- What helped Constantinople to act as the Christian and Byzantine capital?
- What factors contributed to economic stability?
- What was important about Constantinople's currency?

Constantinople had the important advantage of being located on an excellent harbor for trade. The Sea of Marmara, the Bosphorus Straits, and the Golden Horn surrounded the city with water on three sides. Hills sheltered the Golden Horn from wind, so that ships were safe there even in stormy weather. Constantinople was also able to control and monitor trade between the Black Sea and the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. Boats and horses continually arrived at the city bringing spices, jewels, clothing, and raw materials. Enormous warehouses built near the harbor held the imported goods until they could be sent to where they were needed.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Where was Constantinople located and why was this location important?
- What did the city import from foreign countries?
- What were the warehouses used for?

The extensive system of guilds (associations of merchants, craftsmen, or artisans) was created by the government, whose leaders believed that strong government control over trade helped businesses to be successful. Craftsmen usually worked alone or with an apprentice or child assistant. Guilds' rules were very strict, and changing jobs was very difficult. A young apprentice to a baker usually remained a baker for life. The son of a craftsman whose father belonged to a guild was forced to go into the same profession as his father or face harsh punishment. Government control over guilds resulted in different businesses being segregated (forcibly separated) into different areas of the city. For example, there was a section of Constantinople reserved for bakers, one for perfume merchants, one for fish merchants, and so on.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- What were guilds and who controlled them?
- How did guilds restrict people's choice of occupation?
- How did the government control the location of guilds?

Constantinople's lively trade made the city colorful and entertaining. Traveling merchants walked from door to door selling food. Donkeys, camels, and mules rode to market carrying merchants, goods, and customers. The wealthier nobles rode in brightly -decorated wooden carriages. Artists and craftsmen from all over the Byzantine Empire traveled to Constantinople to sell beautiful jewelry with precious stones and delicate gold designs, silverware, carved ivory figures and cosmetic boxes, gold locket, crosses, boxes for holy Christian relics (objects of religious importance), expensive cloth, leather, books, and bronze and copper figures, among many other items. Artists also sold purple codices (beautifully bound volumes of manuscripts), usually of the Biblical scriptures or the classical works of Homer or Aristotle. In good weather, artists and craftsmen would set up their booths in a cluster. In the tradition of the Orient, customers would come to the crowded marketplace and hear merchants shouting to them about the beauty of their merchandise. Smells from food stands with charcoal fires pervaded the air. Customers could buy foods from Egypt, Spain, and other far away areas of the world.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Who came to the marketplaces in Constantinople?
- What did the artisans and craftsmen sell there?
- Describe the scene in the marketplace.