

Information on the Treatment of Foreigners, Slaves, and Heretics in Constantinople

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare to create a monument and accompanying plaque commemorating the treatment of foreigners, slaves, and heretics 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 the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople was a thriving, successful, and diverse city. Craftsmen, artisans, Christians, and curious travelers from all over the world were attracted to the city. While Constantinople was generous in its attempt to care for the poor and elderly, the reality remained that not all people were treated equally. Many people were treated poorly, especially foreigners, slaves, and heretics (people who held religious opinions that conflicted with those held by the Orthodox Christian Church).

Foreigners were recognized by their different clothing, which included furs, hats, and brightly colored robes. On any given day, many foreign languages could be heard on the wide city streets. Popular and successful marketplaces attracted merchants and craftsmen who wanted a busy market for their goods. By the sixth century, the time of Emperor Justinian, the city's population had grown to over 600,000, close to the size of a large city today. The government tried to limit the number of people coming into Constantinople by refusing to allow newcomers inside the city walls unless they could prove that they had legitimate business there. At the same time, the government recognized the need to accommodate some tourists and built hostels (supervised, inexpensive, temporary lodging) inside the city gates for travelers. Other foreigners who were poor or unlucky were kidnapped and sold as slaves.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- How could foreigners be recognized in Constantinople?
- Why did they come to Constantinople?
- How did the city government feel and act towards them?

Slavery was common and viewed as permissible during the Byzantine period. Many foreigners and poor citizens of crowded Constantinople were enslaved by slave traders. Slaves, like the poor, wore a wool, short-sleeved, loose-fitting garment called a tunic, which came to the knees; a girdle around the waist; and a hood in cold weather. In contrast to the bright colors often worn by the privileged classes, the tunic worn by slaves had no dye and remained the natural color of sheep wool. Usually, the slaves had no shoes.

Slavery was accepted by the church. However, the church made up strict guidelines concerning the treatment of slaves by masters. Often slaves had a higher standard of living than the city's poor. A slave who was abused by his master could run away to the church for protection. However, this happened very rarely because masters had much more power than slaves and escaping was very difficult. Since many slaves were foreigners who were either kidnapped by slave sellers or captured in war, many were educated and skilled in some craft.

Often, these slaves were allowed to work for money in their spare time. Some were able to earn enough money to buy their freedom.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- How did slaves dress?
- What was the church's position on slavery?
- How were slaves able to escape from slavery?

Another group of people who suffered much persecution in Constantinople were the heretics. In Constantinople, heretics usually included astrologers, Jews, Muslims, Armenian Christians, and Monophysites. People convicted of practicing astrology were beaten and forced onto the back of a camel. Citizens with whips chased the camel with the astrologer out of the city gates. Jews were also discriminated against, although they were generally not tortured or driven out of the city on the basis of their religion. Jews were often forced by emperors to convert to Christianity and be baptized. They were also forbidden from promoting their religion or discussing it in public with Christians.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Which people were considered heretics?
- How were astrologers treated?
- How were Jews treated?

Probably the most controversial people considered to be heretical were the Monophysites. During the early period in Constantinople's history, there was a serious religious argument over how Christ could be both man and God. In A.D. 451, an official church council decided that Christ was perfect as both man and God. Christians from Syria and Egypt refused to accept this; instead, they believed in what was known as Monophysite Christianity. This form of Christianity insisted that Christ was only God, since to make Christ a man would mean that he was less perfect. Many Monophysites were forced to flee Constantinople. Emperor Justinian allowed several Monophysites who had run away from the city to return and try to discuss their problems with the Christian Orthodox priests in the city. The two groups could not reach an agreement. Emperor Justinian then imprisoned, tortured, and killed several of the Monophysite priests.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Who were the Monophysites?
- What did they and the Orthodox Christian Church in Constantinople disagree about?
- How were the Monophysites treated? Why do you think they were treated this way?