

Chapter 9

GEOGRAPHY

ACTIVITY

Persia, Byzantium, and the Rise of Russia

Constantinople—Crossroads of Europe and Asia

About 650 B.C. a Greek named Byzas wanted to establish a new Greek colony. He consulted the oracle at Delphi for advice on where to locate his settlement. Byzas was told to establish a city "opposite the blind," which he took to mean "blind people." Searching for a site, Byzas reached the Bosphorus. This strait, 20 miles long and 2,000 feet wide, separates Europe from Asia and connects the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara.

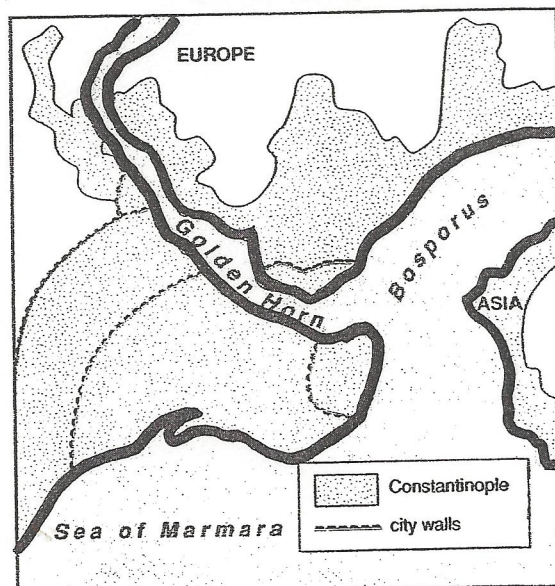
Byzas noted that a Greek colony, Chalcedon, had already been established on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. He felt, however, that the European side was far superior. There, seven hills rise above the waters of the Bosphorus, and an inlet creates a natural harbor. Byzas believed that the people of Chalcedon must have been blind not to recognize this geographic advantage. He realized then that he had found his site "opposite the blind." Byzas' city, or Byzantium, was soon established on the European shore.

Byzantium prospered immediately, thanks to its commanding geographic position. It collected tolls from those who sailed beneath the city walls through the Bosphorus. It made the most of its location and became an important trading center. As artisans opened busy shops, the city also became a major producer of goods.

It is no wonder that the Emperor Constantine chose Byzantium as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire in A.D. 330. He was attracted by its location on a peninsula that could be fortified. Also, the city's location assured its control of navigation through the Bosphorus from the Black Sea to the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. Constantine wanted to make Byzantium a capital worthy of a great empire. He ordered the building of more walls around the city to make it, according to one writer, an "impregnable fortress enclosing the sea." He also gave Byzantium a new name in his honor—Constantinople.

By the 900s, Constantinople had become one of the world's largest cities. Located at the crossroads of the world, Constantinople was subject to attack both from the east and from the west. The inhabitants therefore mounted bronze tubes on the walls of the city. When Constantinople was under attack, a substance called "Greek fire" was poured down the tubes onto the invaders. This devastating weapon was a flammable mixture of sulfur, naphtha, and quicklime. When ignited, it became liquid fire. Constantinople was able to defeat all invaders until 1204.

Constantinople



Chapter 9, Geography Activity, continued ➤

1. What geographic features made Constantinople highly defensible?

2. What is the name of the inlet that helps to form Constantinople's natural harbor?

3. Through what strait would ships have to pass after leaving Byzantium for the Mediterranean?

4. What information on the map indicates that the city expanded over time?

Critical Thinking: Movement

How did Constantinople's location make it a "crossroads of Europe and Asia"?
