

Geography and History Activity *Cont.*

The Byzantine Empire and the Spread of Christianity

Trade and Culture

Constantinople became an important center for trade. The main land routes between Europe and Asia passed through the city. Most traders wanted to acquire silk from China, but other goods were desired as well. Items that were traded by merchants in the city included cloth, jewelry, spices, wine, furs, leather, and even enslaved people.

As merchants from Europe and Asia came into contact with each other, they shared their cultures with one another. Constantinople became a center for **cultural diffusion**, or a place where elements of a culture spread from one group of people to others. Cultural diffusion was noticeable throughout the city. Several religions were practiced and many languages were spoken. Even the variety of architecture reflected the different cultures living within the city.

Architecture

The city's most famous church, the Hagia Sophia, reflected the city's cultural diffusion. When it was built, the church displayed the architectural styles of the Western Roman Empire. Massive blocks of marble, imported from Egypt and Italy, covered the walls. The overhead dome curved 105 feet (32 m) from east to west. It took five years to build the church and was completed in 537 C.E.

By the ninth century, the church showed the Greek influences of the Eastern Roman Empire. It was transformed into an Eastern Orthodox church with multicolored **mosaics** (moh-ZAY-inks), pictures or patterns made from small bits of colored glass or stone. The Hagia Sophia's mosaics included images of angels and saints, as well as emperors and empresses.

In 1453 C.E. Turkish armies invaded Constantinople. The church became an Islamic mosque, which is a Muslim house of worship. Christian objects, like the altar, were removed and the mosaics were covered with plaster. Islamic features were then added to Hagia Sophia. Four minarets, or tall slender towers with balconies, were added to the structure. The conquerors admired the Hagia Sophia so much, however, that they did not change its name. They adapted it to the Turkish spelling of "Ayasofya." In 1935 Turkey's first president, Kemal Atatürk, ordered that the Hagia Sophia become a museum.

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Lesson 2 *The Byzantine Empire*

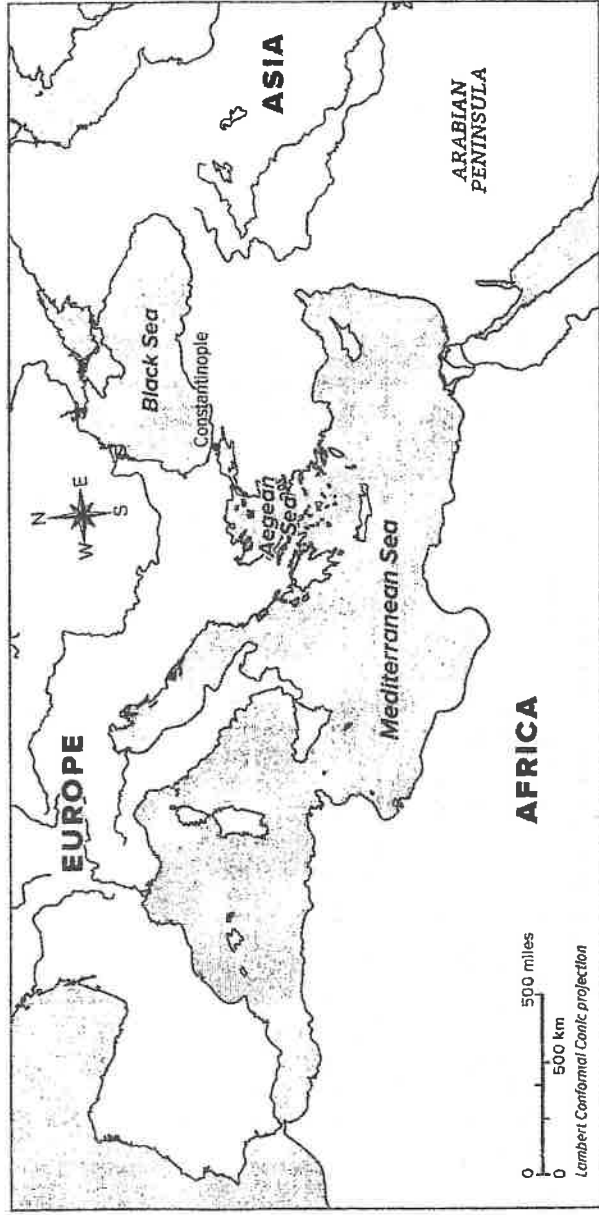
Understanding Location: Constantinople

Constantinople's success had much to do with the city's location. It was situated where two continents—Europe and Asia—came together. Today Constantinople is called Istanbul and is part of the present-day country of Turkey.

Geography

Constantinople sat at the end of a peninsula. Three sides of the city were along bodies of water. These waterways acted as natural barriers that protected the city from invasions. They also provided access from the Mediterranean region to Asia and Africa. Because of its location, Constantinople was attacked numerous times by groups who wanted to control it. To fend off these invaders, walls were built around the city.

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