



THE RISE & EXPANSION OF ISLAM

THE CULTURAL & HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ARABIA BEFORE MUHAMMAD

Beginning with the Sumerians and continuing with the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the brief conquests of Alexander the Great, Western Asia has given birth to some of the most powerful civilizations in history. In the seventh century, another force—the Arabs—arose in the Arabian Peninsula and spread their influence throughout Western Asia and beyond.

Like the Hebrews and the Assyrians, the Arabs were a Semitic-speaking people who lived in the Arabian Peninsula, a desert land sorely lacking in rivers and lakes. The Arabs were nomads who, because of their hostile surroundings, moved constantly to find water and food for their animals. Survival in such a harsh environment was not easy, and the Arabs organized into tribes to help one another. Each tribe was ruled by a sheikh (SHAYK) who was chosen from one of the leading families by a council of elders. Although each tribe was independent, all the tribes were loosely connected to one another.

The Arabs lived as farmers and shepherders on the oases and rain-fed areas of the Arabian Peninsula. After the camel was domesticated in the first millennium B.C., the Arabs populated more of the desert. They also expanded the caravan trade into these regions. Towns developed along the routes as the Arabs became major carriers of goods between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, where the Silk Road ended.

Most early Arabs were polytheistic—they believed in many gods. The Arabs recognized a supreme god named Allah (Allah is Arabic for “God”), but they also believed in other tribal gods. The Arabs trace their ancestors to Abraham and his son Ishmael, who were believed to have built a house of worship called the Kaaba at Makkah (Mecca). A sacred stone, called the Black Stone, is the cornerstone of the Kaaba. The Arabs revered the Kaaba (KAH- buh) for its association with Abraham.

The Arabian Peninsula took on a new importance when political disorder in Mesopotamia and Egypt made the usual trade routes in Southwest Asia too dangerous to travel. A safer route through Makkah to present-day Yemen and then by ship across the Indian Ocean became popular. Camel caravans transported highly prized frankincense and myrrh along this route. The journey was long and camels had to stop over 60 times. Communities along this route prospered from the increased trade. Tensions arose, however, as increasingly wealthy merchants showed little concern for the welfare of poorer clans people and slaves.

THE LIFE OF MUHAMMAD

Into this world of tension stepped a man named Muhammad. Born in Makkah to a merchant family, he was orphaned at five. He grew up to become a caravan manager and married a rich widow named Khadija. Over time, Muhammad became troubled by the growing gap between the generosity of most Makkans and the greediness of

the wealthy elite. Deeply worried, he began to visit the hills to meditate. During one of these visits, Muslims believe, Muhammad received revelations from God. According to Islamic teachings, the messages were given by the angel Gabriel.

Gabriel told Muhammad to recite what he heard. Muhammad came to believe that Allah had already revealed himself through Moses and Jesus—and thus through the Hebrew and Christian traditions. He believed, however, that the final revelations of Allah were now being given to

him. Out of these revelations, which were eventually written down, came the Quran, the holy book of the religion of Islam. The word Islam means “peace through submission to the will of Allah.” The Quran contains the ethical guidelines and laws by which the followers of Allah are to live. Those who practice the religion of Islam are called Muslims. Islam has only one God, Allah, and Muhammad is God’s prophet.

Muhammad returned home after receiving the revelations and reflected on his experience. His wife, Khadija, urged him to follow Gabriel’s message, and she became the first convert to Islam. Muhammad then set out to convince the people of Makkah of the truth of the revelations. Many were surprised at Muhammad’s claims to be a prophet. The wealthy feared that his attacks on corrupt society would upset the established social and political order. After three years of preaching, he had only 30 followers. Muhammad was discouraged by the persecution of his followers, as well as by the Makkans’ failure to accept his message.

In 622, the year 1 of the Islamic calendar, he and his supporters left Makkah and moved north to Yathrib, later renamed Madinah (Medina; “city of the prophet”). The journey to Madinah is known as the Hijrah (HIH- jruh). Muhammad began to win support from people in Madinah, as well as from Arabs in the desert, known as Bedouin. These groups formed the first community of practicing Muslims.

Submission to the will of Allah meant submission to his prophet, Muhammad. For this reason, Muhammad soon became both a religious and a political leader. His political and military skills enabled him to put together a reliable military force to defend himself and his followers. In 630, Muhammad returned to Makkah with 10,000 men. After the city surrendered, and most of the people converted to Islam, Muhammad declared the Kaaba a sacred shrine of Islam. Two years after his triumphal return to Makkah, just as Islam was spreading through the Arabian Peninsula, Muhammad died. All Muslims are encouraged to make a pilgrimage to Makkah, known as the hajj (HAJ), if possible.

EARLY SUCCESSION & CONQUESTS

Muhammad had been accepted as both the political and religious leader of the Islamic community. The death of Muhammad left his followers with a problem: Muhammad had never named a successor. Although he had several daughters, he had left no son. In a male-oriented society, who would lead the community of the faithful?

Shortly after Muhammad’s death, some of his closest followers chose Abu Bakr (uh- BOO BA- kuh), a wealthy merchant and Muhammad’s father-in-law, to be their leader. Abu Bakr had been Muhammad’s companion on the journey to Madinah in 622. There Abu Bakr had functioned as Muhammad’s chief adviser and also led the public prayers during Muhammad’s final illness. In 632 Abu Bakr was named caliph (KAY- luhf), or successor to Muhammad.

Under Abu Bakr’s leadership, the Islamic movement began to grow. He was able to suppress tribal political and religious uprisings, thereby uniting the Muslim world. As the Romans had slowly conquered Italy, so also the Muslims expanded over Arabia, and beyond.

Muhammad had overcome military efforts by the early Makkans to defeat his movement. The Quran permitted warfare as jihad (jih- HAHD), or “struggle in the way of God” OR “holy war.” Muhammad’s successors expanded their territory.

Unified under Abu Bakr, the Arabs began to turn the energy they had once directed toward each other against neighboring peoples. At Yarmuk in 636, the Arab army defeated the Byzantine army in the midst of a dust storm that enabled the Arabs to take their enemy by surprise. Four years later, they took control of the Byzantine province of Syria. By 642, Egypt and other areas of northern Africa had been added to the new Islamic Empire. To the east, the Arabs had conquered the entire Persian Empire by 650.

The Muslims, led by a series of brilliant generals, had put together a large, dedicated army. The courage of the Muslim soldiers was enhanced by the belief that Muslim warriors were assured a place in paradise if they died in battle.

Early caliphs ruled their far-flung empire from Madinah. After Abu Bakr died, problems arose over who should become the next caliph. There were no clear successors to Abu Bakr, and the first two caliphs to rule after his death were assassinated. In 656, Ali, Muhammad’s son-in-law and one of the first converts to Islam, was chosen to be caliph, but he too was assassinated after ruling for five years.

THE Umayyad DYNASTY

In 661, the general Mu'awiyah (moo- UH- wee- uh), the governor of Syria and one of Ali's chief rivals, became caliph. He was known for one outstanding virtue: he used force only when absolutely necessary. As he said, "I never use my sword when my whip will do, nor my whip when my tongue will do."

Mu'awiyah moved quickly to make the office of caliph, called the caliphate, hereditary in his own family. In doing this, he established the Umayyad (oo- MY- uhd) dynasty. He then moved the capital of the Arab Empire from Madinah to Damascus, in Syria.

At the beginning of the eighth century, the Arabs carried out new attacks at both the eastern and western ends of the Mediterranean world. Arab armies moved across North Africa and conquered and converted the Berbers, a pastoral people living along the Mediterranean coast.

Around 710, combined Berber and Arab forces crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and occupied southern Spain. By 725, most of Spain had become a Muslim state with its center at Córdoba. In 732, however, Arab forces were defeated at the Battle of Tours in Gaul (now France). Arab expansion in Europe came to a halt.

In 717, another Muslim force had launched an attack on Constantinople with the hope of defeating the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantines survived, however, by destroying the Muslim fleet. This created an uneasy frontier in southern Asia Minor between the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world.

By 750, the Arab advance had finally come to an end, but not before the southern and eastern Mediterranean parts of the old Roman Empire had been conquered. Arab power also extended to the east in Mesopotamia and Persia and northward into central Asia.

The Umayyad dynasty at Damascus now ruled an enormous empire. Expansion had brought not only great wealth and new ethnic groups into the fold of Islam, but also contact with other civilizations. As a result, the new Arab Empire would be influenced by Byzantine culture, as well as that of the Persians.

In spite of Umayyad successes, internal struggles threatened the empire's stability. Many Muslims of non-Arab background, such as Persians and Byzantines, did not like the way local administrators favored the Arabs. Financial troubles further weakened the Umayyad dynasty. Also, since the empire was so vast, it was difficult to rule from a capital so far from the frontiers. These distant regions began to develop their own power, hostile to the caliphate.

An especially important revolt took place in present-day Iraq early in the Umayyad period. It was led by Hussein (hoo- SAYN), second son of Ali—the son-in-law of Muhammad.

Hussein encouraged his followers to rise up against Umayyad rule in 680. He set off to do battle, but his soldiers defected, leaving him with an army of 72 warriors against 10,000 Umayyad soldiers. Hussein's tiny force fought courageously, but all died.

This struggle led to a split of Islam into two groups. The Shia (SHEE- AH) Muslims accept only the descendants of Ali as the true rulers of Islam. The Sunni (SU- NEE) Muslims did not all agree with Umayyad rule but accepted the Umayyad's as rulers, or caliphs. This political split led to the development of two branches of Muslims that persist to the present. The Sunnis are a majority in the Muslim world, but most of the people in Iraq and neighboring Iran consider themselves to be Shia.

THE ABBASID DYNASTY

Resentment against Umayyad rule grew among non-Arab Muslims who resented the favoritism shown to Arabs. The Umayyad's also helped to bring about their end by corrupt behavior. Abū al-ʿAbbās, a descendant of Muhammad's uncle, overthrew the Umayyad dynasty in 750 and set up the Abbasid (uh- BA- suhd) dynasty, which lasted until 1258.

In 762, the Abbasids built a new capital city at Baghdad, on the Tigris River, far to the east of the Umayyad capital at Damascus. Baghdad's location took advantage of river traffic in the Persian Gulf and the caravan route from the Mediterranean to central Asia.

The move eastward increased Persian influence and encouraged a new cultural outlook. Under the Umayyad's, warriors had been seen as the ideal citizens. Under the Abbasids, judges, merchants, and government officials were the new heroes. The Abbasid rulers tried to break down the distinctions between Arab and non-Arab Muslims. This change opened Islamic culture to the influence of the civilizations they had conquered. All Muslims, regardless of ethnic background, could now hold both civil and military offices. Many Arabs began to intermarry with conquered peoples.

The best known of the caliphs of the time was Hārūn al-Rashīd (ha- ROON ahr- rah- SHEED), whose reign is often described as the golden age of the Abbasid caliphate. Hārūn al-Rashīd was known for his charity, and he also lavished support on artists and writers. His son Abu al-Ma'mūn (ahl- mah- MOON) was a great patron of learning. He supported the study of astronomy and created a foundation for translating classical Greek works.

The Arabs had conquered many of the richest provinces of the Roman Empire, and they now controlled the trade routes to the East. Baghdad became the center of an enormous trade empire that extended into Asia, Africa, and Europe, adding to the riches of the Islamic world.

Under the Abbasids, the caliph began to act more regally. The bureaucracy assisting the caliph in administering the empire grew more complex. A council headed by a prime minister, known as a vizier, advised the caliph. During council meetings, the caliph sat behind a screen listening to the council's discussions and then whispered his orders to the vizier.

Despite its prosperity, all was not well in the empire of the Abbasids. There was much fighting over the succession to the caliphate. When Hārūn al-Rashīd died, his two sons fought to succeed him, almost destroying the city of Baghdad.

Vast wealth gave rise to financial corruption. Members of Hārūn al-Rashīd's clan were given large sums of money from the state treasury. His wife was reported to have spent vast amounts on a pilgrimage to Makkah.

The shortage of qualified Arabs for key positions in the army and the civil service also contributed to the decline of the Abbasids. Caliphs began to recruit officials from among the non-Arab peoples within the empire, such as Persians and Turks. These people were trained to serve the caliphs, but gradually they began to dominate the army and the bureaucracy.

Eventually, rulers of the provinces of the Abbasid Empire began to break away from the central authority and establish independent dynasties. Spain had established its own caliphate when a prince of the Umayyad dynasty fled there in 750. Morocco became independent, and a new dynasty under the Fatimid's was established in Egypt, with its capital at Cairo, in 973. The Muslim Empire was now politically divided.

THE SELJUK TURKS & CRUSADES

The Fatimid dynasty in Egypt soon became the dynamic center of Islamic civilization. From their position in the heart of the Nile delta, the Fatimids played a major role in trade from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. They created a strong army by hiring nonnative soldiers. One such group was the Seljuk (SEHL- JOOK) Turks.

The Seljuk Turks were a nomadic people from central Asia. They had converted to Islam and prospered as soldiers for the Abbasid caliphate. As the Abbasids grew weaker, the Seljuk Turks grew stronger, moving gradually into Iran and Armenia. By the eleventh century, they had taken over the eastern provinces of the Abbasid Empire.

In 1055, a Turkish leader captured Baghdad and took command of the empire. His title was sultan—or “holder of power.” The Abbasid caliph was still the chief religious authority, but, after they captured Baghdad, the Seljuk Turks held the real military and political power of the state.

By the second half of the eleventh century, the Seljuks were putting military pressure on the Byzantine Empire. In 1071, the Byzantines foolishly challenged the Turks, and the Byzantine army was routed at Manzikert in modern-day eastern Turkey. The Turks now took over most of the Anatolian Peninsula. In desperation, the Byzantine Empire turned to the West for help.

The Byzantine emperor Alexius I asked the Christian states of Europe for help against the Turks. Because the Christian states and the Islamic world feared and disliked each other, many Europeans agreed, beginning a series of crusades in 1096.

At first, Muslim rulers lost to the invading crusaders, who conquered areas and established crusader states. In 1169, however, Saladin, a new Muslim ruler, took control of Egypt and made himself sultan, thus ending the Fatimid dynasty. He also established control over Syria and took the offensive against the Christian states in the area.

In 1187, Saladin’s army invaded the kingdom of Jerusalem and destroyed the Christian forces there. The Christians were left with only a handful of fortresses along the coast of Palestine. Saladin did not allow a massacre of the population. He even allowed Christian religious services to continue.

The Crusades had little lasting impact on Southwest Asia, except to breed centuries of mistrust between Muslims and Christians. Far more important was the threat posed by new invaders—the Mongols.

THE MONGOLS

The Mongols were a pastoral, horse-riding people who swept out of the Gobi in the early thirteenth century to seize control over much of the known world (see Chapter 8). Unlike the Seljuk Turks, the Mongols were not Muslims. As nomadic peoples, they often found it difficult to adapt to the settled conditions they found in major cities in the region. These invaders were destructive in their conquests. They burned cities to the ground, destroyed dams, and reduced farming villages to the point of mass starvation. Their goal was to create such terror that people would not fight back.

Beginning with the advances led by Genghis Khan in North China, Mongol armies spread across central Asia. By the time of Genghis Khan’s death in 1227, the Mongol Empire covered land from the Caspian Sea to the Sea of Japan. In 1258, under the leadership of Hülegü (hoo-LAY-GOO), brother of the more famous Kublai Khan (KOO-BLUH-KAHN), the Mongols seized Persia and Mesopotamia. The Abbasid caliphate at Baghdad was brought to an end. Hülegü had a strong hatred of Islam. After his forces captured Baghdad in 1258, he decided to destroy the city. Schools, libraries, mosques (Muslim houses of worship), and palaces were burned to the ground. Possibly a million Muslims were killed, along with members of the Abbasid dynasty.

The Mongols advanced as far as the Red Sea. Their attempt to seize Egypt failed, however, in part because of resistance from the Mamluks. The Mamluks were enslaved Turkish soldiers who had overthrown the administration set up by Saladin and seized power for themselves.

Like the Arabs, Berbers, and Turks, the Mongols became involved in city life through the caravan trade. Over time, the Mongol rulers converted to Islam and began to intermarry with local peoples. Where once they had aggressively destroyed the cities, they now began to rebuild them. By the fourteenth century, the Mongol Empire had begun to split into separate kingdoms. The old Islamic Empire established by the Arabs in the seventh and eighth centuries had come to an end. As a result of the Mongol destruction of Baghdad, the new center of Islamic civilization became Cairo, in Egypt.