

CHAPTER 7
THE FIRST GLOBAL CIVILIZATION: THE RISE AND SPREAD OF ISLAM

I. Introduction

The followers of Islam created the first global civilization. Islam eventually spread from its point of origin in Arabia to Europe, Asia, and Africa. The great Islamic empire provided commercial and cultural links to all of the civilized centers of the Eastern Hemisphere. Islamic civilization provided key links for exchange among the centers of classical civilization in the Eastern Hemisphere as innovations in Arabic and Islamic civilization became central to developments in Afro-Eurasia.

II. Desert and Town: The Arabian World and the Birth of Islam

A. Introduction

Islam appeared first on the Arabian peninsula, an area occupied by pastoral nomads, and on the periphery of the civilized zones. Much of the peninsula is desert, which supported both goat and camel nomadism among peoples called *Bedouin*. Sedentary agricultural communities were limited to the far south of the peninsula, and trading towns developed along the coasts. The tribal culture of the Bedouin provided a critical backdrop for the emergence of Islam.

B. Clan Identity, Clan Rivalries, and the Cycle of Vengeance

The basic social unit of the Bedouin was the kin-related clan. Although clans were also linked together into tribes, tribal units seldom met together. Clan councils determined the distribution and use of water resources, critical to nomadic life. Family leaders, or *shaykhs*, dominated clan councils. Such men were distinguished from other clan members by wealth in animals, wives, and retainers. Households of free warriors and slaves made up the rest of the clan membership. Clashes between clans over water rights, animals, or even perceived slights to clan members' honor often led to violence. Interclan disputes initiated feuds in which honor could only be maintained by exacting revenge from the clan's enemies. Constant feuding weakened Bedouin society and made it difficult to put together large, cooperative ventures.

C. Towns and Long-Distance Trade

Some cities existed along the western coast of the Arabian peninsula, where they served as entrepôts for transcontinental trade between Europe and Asia. Mecca, founded by the Umayyad clan of the Quraysh tribe, was the most important of these Arabian cities. The city was also regarded as a religious center and housed the Ka'ba, a shrine venerated by many Bedouin. Because of the Ka'ba, Mecca decreed a cessation of all tribal feuds during portions of the year.

The truce encouraged many Bedouin groups to come to Mecca and trade. The town of Yathrib, or Medina, lay north of Mecca. Periodic disputes among the two Bedouin and three Jewish tribes that dominated the city stunted Medina's economic growth.

D. Marriage and Family in Pre-Islamic Arabia

Women in Bedouin society may have had higher status than those of neighboring civilizations. Women made significant economic contributions to clan life, and inheritance in some tribes was matrilineal. Multiple marriages were permitted to both men and women. Arabian women were not secluded. Their advice was sought in clan councils, and they were often authors of Bedouin poetry. Because women could not serve as warriors, they were not the equal of men. Treatment and status were not guaranteed to women, and customs varied from one tribe to another. In the urban environment of Mecca and other coastal cities, Arabic women appear to have enjoyed less status than among the Bedouin.

E. Poets and Neglected Gods

Arab material culture was less highly developed than that of neighboring civilizations. The most creative activity of Bedouin society was poetry. Bedouin religion featured a blend of animism and polytheism. Spirits and gods tended to be associated with the night and were often located in sacred caves, springs, and groves of trees. Allah was but one of the Bedouin deities. Clan custom had more of an impact on ethical standards and morality than did religion.

III. The Life of Muhammad and the Genesis of Islam

A. Introduction

In the 7th century C.E., the revelations of the prophet Muhammad would provide the basis for the foundation of Islam. By the 6th century C.E., the Arabian peninsula was dominated by the nomadic Bedouin. Both the Byzantine and Sassanian empires were attempting to extend their political influence into their world. Monotheism, in the guise of Judaism and Christianity, began to influence the culture of Arabia. The prophet Muhammad responded to the increased emphasis on a single, all-powerful god. Born into a clan of the ruling Quraysh, Muhammad was raised by leading members of his father's clan. He received an early education as a merchant, and during caravan journeys, was exposed to both Christianity and Judaism. Muhammad married Khadijah, the widow of a wealthy merchant, and continued to trade both in Mecca and on the caravan routes outside of Arabia. He became increasingly concerned with tribal feuding and economic inequities among clan groups. Despite earning great wealth as a merchant, Muhammad began to devote himself to meditation. In 610 C.E., he began to receive the revelations that were later collected as the Quran.

B. Persecution, Flight, and Victory

Muhammad's first converts were drawn from his own household and close clan relatives. As the number of converts grew, the new religion began to threaten the traditional deities associated with the Ka'ba and the authority of the rulers of the Umayyads. To escape plots to murder him, Muhammad fled in 622 C.E. with his closest followers to Medina, where the prophet was invited to arbitrate clan disputes. Muhammad was soon able to win new converts from among the Bedouin clans of Medina. Still threatened by Muhammad's success in Medina, the Quraysh of Mecca initiated a series of attacks on the neighboring city. The victories of Muhammad's forces over the Quraysh led to a truce in 628 C.E., which included a provision allowing the prophet and

his followers to visit the Ka'ba. Muhammad's victorious return to Mecca in 629 C.E. demonstrated both the prophet's success in converting bedouin tribesmen and the power of his one God, Allah. Most of the citizens of Mecca soon joined the new religion.

C. Arabs and Islam

Islam offered a means by which Arabs could be united in a single movement that transcended clan and class divisions. The new religion was fiercely monotheistic. It offered Arabs a religion that was distinctly their own, free of the influences of outside civilizations. The *umma*—the undivided community of believers—made political unity possible, provided a single source of authority, and directed the military culture of the Bedouin outward against unbelievers. Islam also helped to close the rift between the wealthy and poor Arabic clans. The well-to-do were enjoined to take responsibility for the weak and the poor. The *zakat*—a tax to support the poor—was a responsibility of the faithful. Islamic law, drawn from the Quran and the life of the prophet, regulated all aspects of Islamic society.

D. Universal Elements in Islam

The beliefs and practices of Islam gave it strong appeal to cultures outside of Arabia. Muhammad's acceptance of other religious revelations helped to spread Islamic beliefs among both Christian and Judaic Semitic peoples. The five pillars of Islam provided a foundation for religious unity. All Muslims were required to confess their belief in Allah and Muhammad as his Prophet, to pray facing Mecca five times a day, to fast during the holy month of Ramadan, to pay a tithe to be used as charity for the poor, and to make a pilgrimage to Mecca to worship Allah at the Ka'ba. All Muslims, regardless of their nationality or ethnic origins, shared the same responsibilities.

IV. The Arab Empire of the Umayyads

A. Introduction

Although some Bedouin tribes renounced their allegiance to Islam following Muhammad's death in 632 C.E., the Prophet's followers were able to conduct military campaigns restoring the unity of the Islamic community. Once the rebellious tribesmen were brought back into the *umma*, Muslim armies began to launch attacks on neighboring civilizations outside of Arabia. Within a short period of time, Arab armies captured Mesopotamia, northern Africa, and Persia. A new dynasty, the Umayyads, ruled this Arabic empire.

B. Consolidation and Division in the Islamic Community

Muhammad died in 632 without designating a successor as leader of the *umma*. After consultation among the clans, one of Muhammad's first converts, Abu Bakr, was selected to lead the Islamic community as caliph. Abu Bakr's control over the *umma* was weak. He had no income, and his command over the Muslim armies was limited. Despite the fundamental weakness of the caliphate, Abu Bakr's armies defeated other Bedouin clans and forced most of the tribes to return to the *umma*. With the completion of the Ridda Wars and unification of Arabia, the Muslim armies began to raid the borders of Persia and Byzantium. When initial forays demonstrated the frailty of the older empires, the way was prepared for conquest.

C. Motives for Arab Conquests

Arab unity made it possible for the Muslims to challenge the neighboring empires. Early Islamic caliphs saw conquest as a useful means of deflecting martial energies outward from Arabia. Muslim warriors viewed campaigns as a means of taking booty. All of these were powerful motives for Islamic expansion, but the opportunity to win new converts to Islam was not. The economic incentives for conquest were powerful, and the promise of booty was threatened by the specter of increases in the numbers of the faithful who could share the spoils.

D. Weaknesses of the Adversary Empires

Both the Sasanian Empire of Persia and the Byzantine Empire were vulnerable to attack, but the Persian empire was the weaker of the two. A powerful landed aristocracy controlled the Sasanian emperors and oppressed the peasantry. The imperial religion, Zoroastrianism, failed to generate popular enthusiasm, and the government ruthlessly suppressed more popular religions. When the Arab attack occurred, the Sasanian Empire made only a token resistance. By 651 C.E., the last of the Persian emperors had been assassinated. Portions of the Byzantine Empire, notably Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, fell rapidly to the Muslim armies. These regions had a Christian tradition that differed from the orthodoxy enforced in Constantinople. When it appeared likely that the Islamic invaders might be more tolerant than the Byzantine government, the Christian populations of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria welcomed the Muslims. Loss of the southern provinces by 640 C.E. weakened the Byzantines, and they were equally unprepared for the challenge to their control of the Mediterranean. The Arabs' ability to achieve naval supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean sealed their victories in the former Byzantine provinces and northern Africa. Byzantine emperors were able to prevent the final collapse of their empire in the 7th century, but the Byzantine Empire survived only in Asia Minor and the Balkans.

E. The Problem of Succession and the Sunni-Shi'i Split

The successful conquests temporarily masked continuing tribal divisions within early Islam. In 656 C.E., tribal and clan disagreements of leadership and shares in the spoils of conquest spilled over into violence. Uthman, the third caliph and a member of the Umayyad clan of Mecca, was assassinated by disgruntled soldiers seeking a greater share of the booty. Supporters of Ali, a member of the Prophet's family, proclaimed him caliph. The Umayyads refused to recognize his election. Conflict between the supporters of Ali and the Umayyads led to the battle of Siffin in 657 C.E. Rather than press his attack, Ali accepted a plea for mediation of the dispute. Ali's most fervent supporters then deserted his cause and split the forces opposing the Umayyads. In 660 C.E. the Umayyad leader Mu'awiya was proclaimed caliph. His claim proved successful when Ali was assassinated in 661 C.E. Ali's son, Hasan, renounced his claims to the caliphate. The Umayyad succession did not heal deep divisions among the Muslims. Supporters of Ali—called Shi'is—continued to regard the Umayyads as usurpers. Ali's second son Husayn attempted to restore the Shi'ite claim to the caliphate, but the Umayyads killed his small party at Karbala in 680 C.E. Other Shi'ite claimants continued to mount a resistance to the Umayyad caliphate.

F. The Umayyad Imperium

With the settlement of internal divisions, Islamic expansion was renewed in the middle of the 7th century C.E. Arab armies crossed northern Africa to the straits of Gibraltar. In Asia, the Muslims penetrated to northern India. Muslim ships patrolled most of the Mediterranean. In size and extent, the Umayyad Empire exceeded that of the Romans. Although Mecca remained the religious center of Islam, the political capital of the Umayyads was located in Damascus. Unlike

the earlier caliphate, the Umayyad rulers constructed a bureaucracy to manage their far-flung empire. The Umayyad state was run by and for the benefit of Arab Muslims. Muslims comprised the bureaucracy and the army. In order to sustain Arabs outside of Arabia and to keep them separate from the indigenous populations, the Muslim armies were housed in garrison cities.

G. Converts and *People of the Book*

Despite attempts to keep garrisons apart from indigenous populations, cultural interaction and intermarriage did occur. In addition, large numbers of people voluntarily converted to Islam. Non-Arabs who converted—the *mawali*—continued to pay the tax required of nonbelievers and were excluded from government and the military. The greatest number of people within the Umayyad Empire were *dhimmi*—a term initially applied to Christians and Jews who, like the Muslims, considered the Bible a sacred text. The term was later extended to Hindus, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians. Dhimmi peoples were tolerated so long as they paid the tax on nonbelievers. They were permitted to keep land and legal systems without interference from their Muslim overlords.

H. Family and Gender Roles in the Umayyad Age

As the Islamic empire grew, the status of women changed. In the first generations after Muhammad, Islamic women strengthened their positions within their households and avoided seclusion and extreme patriarchy typical of other Middle Eastern civilizations. Islam declared the spiritual equality of men and women before Allah, and women participated in the early wars of expansion. The women of Muhammad's family were role models for Islamic women in general. Women of the early Islamic umma entered many occupations, including commerce and law.

I. Umayyad Decline and Fall

By the 8th century C.E., the Umayyad caliphs had retreated into luxurious palaces and adopted sybaritic lifestyles. Dissenters, who already opposed the Umayyads on the basis of the seizure of power after Ali's death, now accused the caliphs of violating the dictates of the Quran and the examples set by the Prophet and his family. The rebellion that toppled the Umayyads began in the frontier garrison town of Merv. Disgruntled soldiers accepted the claims of the Abbasid family to be rightful rulers of Islam. By taking advantage of military discontent and allying with Shi'ite factions, Abu al-Abbas advanced from Persia toward Damascus. In 750 the Abbasid army defeated the Umayyad caliph and captured Syria and the Umayyad capital. Abu al-Abbas attempted to eliminate all remaining members of the Umayyad clan, but one leading member of the family escaped to Spain, where he established a separate government.

V. From Arab to Islamic Empire: The Early Abbasid Era

A. Introduction

The total victory of the Abbasids allowed them to establish a centralized government, but one which admitted all converts to Islam into the regime as equal partners in the empire. Gradually the Abbasids shifted away from their alliance with Shi'ite groups and began to suppress varieties of Shi'ism as heresy. The Abbasids built a new capital in Iraq at Baghdad, where they established an opulent court. The growth of the bureaucracy was symbolized by the growing authority granted to the office of *wazir*, who served as prime minister to the caliphs. The burgeoning bureaucracy enabled the collection of vast sums of taxation for the Abbasid coffers.

Abbasid rulers adopted a status that placed them above other believers, although they did not proclaim their own divinity.

B. Islamic Conversion and Mawali Acceptance

Under the Abbasids, mass conversion was encouraged, and new converts were admitted to full equality within the umma. Converts were attracted to Islam by the Prophet's revealed message and by social and economic advantages that accrued to believers within the empire. The Persians, who converted readily to Islam, actually came to dominate the Abbasid bureaucracy.

C. Town and Country: Commercial Boom and Urban Growth

The revival of the Afro-Eurasian trade network during the Abbasid period restored commercial prosperity and spurred urban growth. Ideally placed between the other civilized cores, the Islamic world took advantage of their strategic location to engage in long-distance trade of luxury goods. Wealth supported luxurious lifestyles, went to charitable ventures within the Islamic community, and made possible the construction of schools, baths, and hospitals. As cities grew, handicraft production also expanded. Skilled artisans formed labor organizations to negotiate wages and working conditions. Slaves performed most unskilled labor. Some slaves worked in the caliphal court, where diligence could result in social advance and eventual freedom. Less fortunate were slaves bought as agricultural laborers on rural estates, where conditions were brutal. Many of the slaves were non-Muslims captured in war or on slaving raids. From the middle of the 9th century C.E., the most desperate of the slave groups formed a source of social unrest. In the countryside, a wealthy elite—the *ayan*—dominated the landscape. Peasants were reduced from landowners to dependent agricultural laborers.

D. The First Flowering of Islamic Learning

Although the Arab Bedouin who conquered the neighboring civilizations were initially illiterate, they rapidly absorbed the culture of Persia, Rome, Hellenistic Greece, and Mesopotamia. Under the Abbasids, Islamic scholars and artists flourished. In particular, Muslim philosophers preserved the writings of the Greeks and transmitted these critical concepts through an Islamic filter to the West.

VI. Global Connections: Early Islam and the World

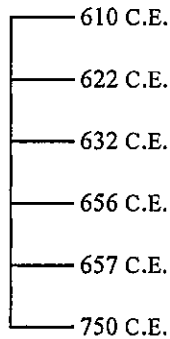
The rise of Islamic civilization was without precedent. A largely nomadic people had built the first global civilization and had nurtured Islam, one of the great universal religions. Trade was crucial to developing widespread connections. Building on the achievements of Greece and Mesopotamia, Islamic civilization developed innovations in numerous pursuits and spread those innovations across the Eastern Hemisphere.

TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

Ridda Wars begin
Muhammad escapes from Mecca to Medina
battle of Siffin

end of Umayyad dynasty
assassination of Uthman
Muhammad receives first revelations



TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

Islam
shaykhs
Quraysh
Allah
hijra
five pillars
Abu Bakr
Uthman
Sunnis
Damascus
Abbasid
wazir

Muslims
Mecca
Umayyad
Muhammad
umma
hajj
Ridda Wars
battle of Siffin
Shi'as
mawali
Abu al-Abbas
ayan

bedouin
Medina
Ka'ba
Quran
zakat
Ali
jihad
Mu'awiya
Karbala
dhimmis
Baghdad

MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What was the nature of Bedouin society prior to Muhammad's revelations?
2. How did Islam address fundamental problems in Arabic society?
3. How was the dispute over the succession to the office of caliph settled by 661 C.E.?
4. What was the nature and extent of the Umayyad Empire?
5. What event led to the fall of the Umayyads?
6. What was the achievement of the Arabic phase of Islam to 750 C.E.?
7. How was the Abbasid Empire different from the Umayyad Empire?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

8. What was there about Islam that allowed a pastoral nomadic society to achieve a global civilization? In what sense did Islam achieve global status by 850?
9. What was the nature of the succession dispute within Islam? How did it divide Muslims? How did the succession dispute make any dynasty vulnerable?