

Student Handout 1 - Overview of the History of Islam in the Middle East

Read the article below. As you read, think about how the geography of the Middle East was important; how Muhammad was an important historical figure; the basic beliefs of Islam; and how the political power of Islamic kingdoms spread over time. You may want to underline important ideas as you read. After reading, complete the exercises on the last page of the handout.



Look at the map to the left. In the middle of the circle you will see the Arabian Peninsula denoted in yellow, which is the large piece of land that bridges Asia and Africa. The Arabian Peninsula, by definition has water on three sides: the Red Sea on the west side, the Persian Gulf on the east, and the Arabian Sea and connected Indian Ocean to the south. There is also water to the northwest with the Mediterranean Sea.

there from as far back as 8,000 BCE and think that at one point, the Peninsula was not as dry and was covered with grasslands.

The Arabian Peninsula is mostly desert, although there are some more fertile areas on the edges. Archaeologists have found human artifacts



The Arabian Peninsula is, in many ways, at the crossroads between Asia and Africa, and the many waterways around it make it an important area for trade and transportation.

The first people in this region lived where they could raise animals like sheep and goats in areas with enough vegetation. Later on, probably sometime after 1000 BCE, people began to move into new parts of the peninsula thanks to the domestication of the camel. The camel allowed people to travel across large areas of the desert between areas with water (oases). Camels can travel long distances without water and they can carry large loads, including enough water for people, on packs that people strap to their backs. The camel made it possible for people to travel the peninsula for trade and exploration, and opened up a new route between Africa and Asia. As civilizations developed, certain cities on and near the peninsula became important trading centers, and some of the routes of the Silk Roads passed through this region.

Turn and Talk: How was geography important in shaping the history of this region? Why and how did people move through and settle in the Arabian Peninsula?

Soldiers from this area, who had learned to use camels as cavalry animals, even fought for the Roman and Persian armies at different times. The use of camels for desert warfare allowed people from the Arabian Peninsula to gain control of some parts of the Silk Roads, giving them regional power and access to new products and ideas.

People in this region included pastoral nomads as well as farmers and people who lived in the towns. All of these groups interacted and depended on each other in some way. The nomads raised different animals and traded meat, skins, and milk from their animals, while farmers provided grains and other agricultural products. Skilled laborers in towns provided different goods and products. Towns also served as places where trade was carried out and coordinated. Nomads who used camels as their pack animals also served as guides and porters for traders who needed to carry goods across the desert areas. Most people benefitted in some way from these exchanges of goods and services.

The trade and movement of people through this area brought new products to the Arabian Peninsula, as well as new ideas. The religions of Judaism and Christianity, which began in the Middle East, were introduced to people in the

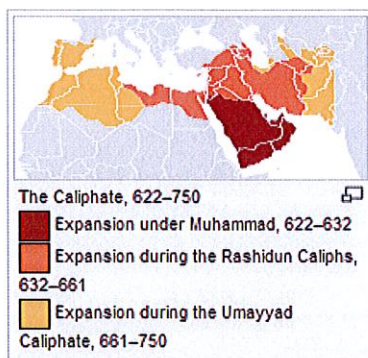
Arabian Peninsula, even though most people in the area were polytheistic until the development of Islam.

The religion of Islam was begun by a man named Muhammad who was born on the Arabian Peninsula sometime around 570 CE. Muhammad became recognized as a prophet when he began sharing religious revelations he stated were important messages from God, or Allah in Arabic, around 610 CE. Many people were drawn to him and the revelations, and he developed a large body of followers. Muhammad lived in the city of Makkah (now known as Mecca), which was a caravan stop on an important trade route. This town was also a place of worship associated with the Prophets Abraham and Ishmael, important figures in religious history for both Jews and Christians.

Muhammad spent 13 years in Makkah, during which the rulers of the area persecuted him, and then he and many of his followers went to Madinah (Medina) to escape the negative treatment, where he received more revelations. The journey to Madinah took place in 622 CE, and is used as the beginning of the Islamic calendar and is now made as a pilgrimage for Muslims. The revelations of Muhammad were memorized and written down in what became the holy book for Islam, the Qur'an, which means "the recitation," and which is seen as the word of God by Muslims.

The religion founded by Muhammad became known as Islam, and its followers are known as Muslims. There were several years of conflict between the growing Muslim community and other groups in the region at this time, including several battles. Nevertheless, the religion of Islam spread and gained many more followers throughout the region, and Muslims developed a strong sense of identity and community and established a system of beliefs and practices. Muhammad became a political leader as well and developed a government system and army. Islam and its leaders thus became a political force in the region by the time Muhammad died in 632 CE.

Turn and Talk: Besides being an important religious figure, what important historical and political role did Muhammad play?



Muhammad's political rule was continued by his successors, who were known as Caliphs, leaders of the political and religious kingdom that was known as the Caliphate. These leaders exercised political and military power, but were not seen as prophets or religious leaders on the level of Muhammad. In the 100 years after Muhammad's death, the Caliphate armies gained control of a large area that stretched between North Africa and Central Asia. The Persian Empire was conquered around 651 CE, and much land was taken from the Byzantine Empire as well. During a time called the Umayyad Dynasty, from 661 to 750 CE in which the Caliphs came from the Umayyad family, the Islamic empire even moved into Spain.

An internal conflict developed shortly after the death of Mohammad over who would be his successor as Caliph. During the course of this "Muslim Civil War," a split developed between the Sunni and Shiite factions, a divide which still exists in the

Muslim community up to the present day. Although the Islamic empires controlled lots of territories, this did not mean that everyone in these lands became a Muslim. As a result the spread of the religion of Islam actually happened at a much slower pace than the spread of the political control of the Caliphate empires. The expanding Islamic empire collided with Christian kingdoms to the west in Europe touching off a series of conflicts that would last for over a thousand years.

As a religion, Islam shares historical, cultural, and geographic origins with Judaism and Christianity. All three religions are monotheistic, share a belief in one god, and they also share belief in much of the early history of creation as described in the Old Testament of the Bible. They all believe that God gave teachings to the people of the world through different prophets, and that these teachings were written down in their holy books. All three religions believe in moral standards and treating others with kindness. They disagree, however, on some of the prophets and on more specific beliefs and practices.

Turn and Talk: Islam became a world religion that had a large impact on this region beyond just spreading a new belief system. How did the Islamic Caliphates play an important historical role in this era?

Adapted from: http://www.islamproject.org/muhammad/muhammad_04_GeographyArabianPeninsula.htm;
https://archive.org/stream/TheNewCambridgeHistoryOfIslamVolume1/The_New_Cambridge_History_of_Islam_Volume_1#page/n235/mode/1up