## The World of Muhammad

The Arabian peninsula into which Muhammad was born in 570 was a hub of ancient caravan routes. Although the coastal regions of the peninsula were inhabited by settled peoples, the interior region provided a homeland for nomadic tribes called Bedouins. Located in the interior of the peninsula was the city of Mecca, which served both as a commercial center and as the location of a religious shrine for the polytheistic worship common to the nomadic peoples of the peninsula. Pilgrims were in the habit of visiting Mecca and its revered shrine, the **Ka'aba**, a cubic structure that housed a meteorite. The merchants of Mecca enjoyed a substantial profit from these pilgrims.

Muhammad, an orphan from the merchant class of Mecca, was raised by his grandfather and uncle. He married a wealthy local widow and businesswoman named Khadija. About 610, Muhammad experienced the first of a number of revelations that he believed came from the archangel Gabriel. In these revelations he was told that there is only one God, called "**Allah**" in Arabic. (Allah was one of the gods in the Arabic pantheon.) Although the peoples of the Arabian peninsula had already been exposed to monotheism through Jewish traders and Arabic converts to Christianity, Muhammad's fervent proclamation of the existence of only one god angered the merchants of Mecca, who anticipated decreased profits from pilgrimages if the revelations of Muhammad were widely accepted. In 622, realizing that his life was in danger, Muhammad and his followers fled to the city of Yathrib (later called Medina), about 200 miles northwest of Mecca. Here Muhammad was allowed to freely exercise his role as prophet of the new faith, and the numbers of believers in the new religion grew. The flight of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, called the ***hijrah***, became the first year in the Muslim calendar.

In Medina, Muhammad oversaw the daily lives of his followers, organizing them into a community of believers known as the ***umma***. The well-being of the *umma* included programs concerning all aspects of life, from relief for widows and orphans to campaigns of military defense.

In 629, Muhammad and his followers journeyed to Mecca to make a pilgrimage to the Ka'aba, now incorporated as a shrine in the Islamic faith. The following year they returned as successful conquerors of the city, and in 632, they again participated in the ***hajj***. In 632, Muhammad died without appointing a successor, an omission that would have a profound effect on the future of Islam.

## The Teachings of Islam

The term Islam means "submission," while the name **Muslim**, applied to the followers of Islam, means "one who submits." Muhammad viewed his revelations as a completion of those of Judaism and Christianity and perceived himself not as a deity but as the last in a series of prophets of the one god, Allah. He considered Abraham, Moses, and Jesus also among the prophets of Allah. According to the teachings of Islam, the faithful must follow a set of regulations known as the **Five Pillars**. They include:

- *Faith.* In order to be considered a follower of Islam, a person must proclaim in the presence of a Muslim the following statement: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet."
- *Prayer.* The Muslim must pray at five prescribed times daily, each time facing the holy city of Mecca.

- *Fasting.* The faithful must fast from dawn to dusk during the days of the holy month of Ramadan, a commemoration of the first revelation to Muhammad.
- *Alms-giving.* The Muslim is to pay the ***zakat,*** or tithe for the needy.
- *The* hajj. At least once, the follower of Islam is required to make a pilgrimage to the Ka'aba in the holy city of Mecca. The faithful are released from this requirement if they are too ill or too poor to make the journey.

The revelations and teachings of Muhammad were not compiled into a single written document until after his death. The resulting ***Quran***, or holy book of the Muslims, was completed in 650. In addition, the sayings of Muhammad were compiled into the books of the ***Hadith***. After the death of Muhammad the ***shariah***, or moral law, was compiled. In addition to addressing issues of everyday life, the *shariah* established political order and provided for criminal justice.

## The Split Between the Sunni and the Shia

After the death of Muhammad in 632, the *umma* chose Abu-Bakr, one of the original followers of Muhammad, as the first **caliph**, or successor to the prophet. The office of caliph united both secular and religious authority in the person of one leader. When the third caliph, Uthman of the Umayyad family, was assassinated, Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, was appointed caliph. Soon controversy arose over his appointment. As time progressed, the disagreement became more pronounced, resulting in a split in the Muslim world that exists to the present. After the assassination of Ali in 661, the **Shia** sect, believing that only a member of the family of Muhammad should serve as caliph, arose to support the descendants of Ali. The **Sunni**, who eventually became the largest segment of Islam, believed that the successor to the caliphate should be chosen from among the *umma,* or Muslim community, and accepted the earliest caliphs as the legitimate rulers of Islam.

## The Early Expansion of Islam

Shortly after the death of Muhammad, the new religion of Islam embarked upon a rapid drive for expansion. Unlike the Buddhist and Christian religions, which expanded by means of missionary endeavor and commercial activity, Islam at first extended its influence by military conquest. Islam spread swiftly throughout portions of Eurasia and Africa:

- Within a year after the death of Muhammad, most of the Arabian Peninsula was united under the banner of Islam.
- Persia was conquered in 651 with the overthrow of the Sasanid dynasty.
- By the latter years of the seventh century, the new faith had reached Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Egypt.
- At the same time, Islam extended into Central Asia east of the Caspian Sea, where it competed with Buddhism.
- During the eighth century, Muslim armies reached present-day Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco; Hindu-dominated northwest India; and the Iberian peninsula (present-day Spain and Portugal).

The earliest Muslim conquerors were not as concerned with the spread of religious belief as they were with the extension of power for the Muslim leaders and people.

## The Umayyad Caliphate

After the assassination of Ali in 661, the Umayyad family came to power in the Islamic world. Establishing their capital at Damascus in Syria, the Umayyad were noted for the following:

- An empire that emphasized Arabic ethnicity over adherence to Islam.
- Inferior status assigned to converts to Islam.
- Respect for Jews and Christians as "**People of the Book**." Although required to pay taxes for charity and on property, Jews and Christians were allowed freedom of worship and self-rule within their communities.
- Luxurious living for the ruling families, which prompted riots among the general population.

These riots among the general population led to the overthrow of the Umayyad by the Abbasid dynasty in 750. Although most of the Umayyad were killed in the takeover, one member of the family escaped to Spain, where he established the Caliphate of Cordoba.

## The Abbasid Caliphate

The Abbasids, originally supported by the **Shi'ites (Shia)**, became increasingly receptive to the Sunni also. Establishing their capital at Baghdad in present-day Iraq, the Abbasids differed from the Umayyad in granting equal status to converts to Islam. Under the Abbasids:

- Converts experienced new opportunities for advanced education and career advancement.
- Trade was heightened from the western Mediterranean world to China.
- The learning of the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Persians was preserved. Greek logic, particularly that of Aristotle, penetrated Muslim thought.
- The Indian system of numbers, which included the use of zero as a place holder, was carried by caravan from India to the Middle East and subsequently to Western Europe, where the numbers were labeled "Arabic" numerals.
- In mathematics, the fields of algebra, geometry, and trigonometry were further refined.
- The **astrolabe**, which measured the position of stars, was improved.
- The study of astronomy produced maps of the stars.
- Optic surgery became a specialty, and human anatomy was studied in detail.
- Muslim cartographers produced some of the most detailed maps in the world.
- The number and size of urban centers such as Baghdad, Cairo, and Córdoba increased.
- Institutions of higher learning in Cairo, Baghdad, and Córdoba arose by the twelfth century.
- In the arts, calligraphy and designs called **arabesques** adorned writing and pottery.
- New architectural styles arose. Buildings were commonly centered around a patio area. **Minarets**, towers from which the faithful received the call to prayer, topped **mosques**, or Muslim places of worship.
- Great literature, such as poetic works and *The Arabian Nights,* enriched Muslim culture. Persian language and literary style was blended with that of Arabic.
- Mystics called **Sufis**, focusing on an emotional union with Allah, began missionary work to spread Islam.

Although responsible for much of the advancement of Islamic culture, the Abbasids found their vast empire increasingly difficult to govern. The dynasty failed to address the problem of succession within the Islamic world, and high taxes made the leaders less and less popular.

Independent kingdoms began to arise within the Abbasid Empire, one of them in Persia, where local leaders, calling themselves "**sultan**," took control of Baghdad in 945. The Persians were challenged by the Seljuk Turks from central Asia, who also chipped away at the Byzantine Empire. The weakening Persian sultanate allied with the Seljuks, whose contacts with the Abbasids had led them to begin converting to Sunni Islam in the middle of the tenth century. By the middle of the eleventh century, the Seljuks controlled Baghdad. In the thirteenth century, the Abbasid dynasty ended when Mongol invaders executed the Abbasid caliph.

It was the Seljuk takeover of Jerusalem that prompted the beginnings of the Crusades in 1095 (see Chapter 13). Divisions within the Muslim world allowed Christians from Western Europe to capture Jerusalem during the First Crusade. Under Saladin, however, Muslim armies reconquered most of the lost territory during the twelfth century.

## Al-Andalus

The flowering of Islamic culture became particularly pronounced in *al-Andalus,* or Islamic Spain. In 711, Berbers from North Africa conquered the Iberian peninsula, penetrating the European continent until their advance was stopped about 200 miles south of Paris at the **Battle of Tours** in 732. Allies of the Umayyad dynasty, the caliphs of *al-Andalus* served to preserve Greco-Roman culture, enhancing it with the scientific and mathematical developments of the Muslim world. The Caliphate of Córdoba boasted a magnificent library and free education in Muslim schools. Interregional commerce thrived, while Arabic words such as *alcohol, álgebra,* and *sofá* were added to the Spanish vocabulary, and Muslim styles such as minarets, rounded arches, and arabesques were used in Spanish art and architecture.

## Islam in India and Southeast Asia

Between the seventh and twelfth centuries, Muslims expanded their influence from northwest India to the Indus Valley and a large portion of northern India. Centering their government at Delhi, the rulers of the Delhi Sultanate extended their power by military conquest, controlling northern India from 1206 to 1526. Unsuccessful at achieving popularity among the Indians as a whole because of their monotheistic beliefs, the Muslim conquerors found acceptance among some Buddhists. Members of lower Hindu castes and untouchables also found Islam appealing because of its accepting and egalitarian nature. Although militarily powerful, the Delhi Sultanate failed to establish a strong administration. It did, however, introduce Islam to the culture of India.

In Southeast Asia, Islam spread more from commercial contacts and conversion than from military victories. By the eighth century, Muslim traders reached Southeast Asia, with migrants from Persia and southern Arabia arriving during the tenth century. Although the new faith did not gain widespread popularity among Buddhist areas of mainland Southeast Asia, the inhabitants of some of the islands of the Indian Ocean, familiar with Islam from trading contacts, were receptive to the new faith. Hinduism and Buddhism remained popular with many of the island peoples of the Indian Ocean. At the same time, however, Islam also found a stronghold on the islands of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines.

## Islam in Africa

The spirit of ***jihad***, or Islamic holy war, brought Islam into Africa in the eighth century. Wave after wave of traders and travelers carried the message of Muhammad across the sands of the Sahara along caravan routes. In the tenth century, Egypt was added to the Muslim territories. The authoritarian rulers of African states in the savannas south of the Sahara Desert adapted well to the Muslim concept of the unification of secular and spiritual powers in the person of the caliph. By the tenth century, the rulers of the kingdom of Ghana in West Africa converted to Islam, followed in the thirteenth century by the conversion of the rulers of the empire of Mali to the east of Ghana. Although widely accepted by the rulers of these regions, the common people preferred to remain loyal to their traditional polytheistic beliefs. When they did convert to Islam, they tended to blend some of their traditional beliefs and practices with those of Islam. Some Sudanic societies were resistant to Islam because their matrilineal structure offered women more freedom than did the practice of Islam.

Along the east coast of Africa, Indian Ocean trade was the focal point that brought Islam to the inhabitants of the coastal areas and islands. East African cities such as Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Kilwa became vibrant centers of Islam that caught the attention of Ibn Battuta, an Arab traveler who journeyed throughout the world of Islam in the fourteenth century. Islam did not experience much success in finding converts in the interior of Africa. In East Africa, as in the western portion of the continent, rulers were the first to convert to Islam, followed much later, if at all, by the masses. Women in eastern Africa already experienced more freedoms than did their Muslim counterparts, a fact that made them resistant to the new faith.

## The Mamluk Dynasties

With the destruction of Islamic power in Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols (see Chapter 14), the **Mamluk** dynasties provided the force that made Egypt a center for Muslim culture and learning. The Mamluks were converts to Islam who maintained their position among the caliphs by adhering to a strict observance of Islam. By encouraging the safety of trade routes within their domain, the Mamluks contributed to the prosperity of Egypt during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries until internal disorder led to their takeover in the sixteenth century by the Ottoman Turks (see Chapter 16).

## The Role of Women in Islamic Society

The role of women in Islam underwent considerable change from the time of Muhammad to the fifteenth century. In the early days of Islam, women were not required to veil and were not secluded from the public; these customs were adopted by Islam after later contact with Middle Eastern women. The seclusion of the **harem** originated with the Abbasid court. From the time of Muhammad onward, Muslim men, following the example of Muhammad, could have up to four wives, provided that they could afford to treat them equally. Women, by contrast, were allowed only one husband.

In many respects, however, Islamic women enjoyed greater privileges than women in other societies at the same time. Both men and women were equal before Allah, and female infanticide was forbidden. Women could own property both before and after marriage. In some circumstances, Islamic women could initiate divorce proceedings and were allowed to remarry if