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Time Period: The Islamic World, 600-1500 CE

Islamic Empire

Overview



Shortly after its founding by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE, Islam was introduced into regions outside Arabia by Muslim armies seeking new territory. Islam's successful spread was due to the zeal of its followers as well as favorable social and political circumstances in invaded areas. Islam soon extended throughout the Near and Middle Eastern regions and into Spain and India. Out of these conquests grew an Islamic empire and an institution of rulership known as the caliphate. At the same time, rivalries within the Muslim community and differences of religious interpretation resulted in Islam's split into two major branches, Sunni and Shia.

Age of Conquests

While Islam's swift expansion occurred partly through voluntary conversion, Muslim armies' conquests of new lands played a substantial role. The Arab tradition of *ghazw*—the practice of raiding the caravans and settlements of other tribes—provided a precedent for the Muslim conquests. Instead of fighting one other, however, Arab tribes now joined forces under the Islamic faith to fight non-Muslims.



At the Battle of Badr in 624, with Muhammad's defeat of the Meccans who had resisted Islam, the era of Muslim conquest began. Soon after Muhammad's death in 632, Muslim armies were winning widespread victories. With much of Palestine and Syria captured by 635, Muslim armies turned their attention to the Byzantine and Sassanid Persian

empires, which were already weakened by ongoing warfare with each other. The Muslims defeated the Byzantines at the Battle of the Yarmuk River in 636 and the Sassanids at the Battle of Qadisiya in 637. They also took the cities of Damascus in 635 and Jerusalem (sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims) in 638.

Muslim forces moved into North Africa, where they took the Libyan city of Tripoli in 643 and soon afterward captured Egypt from the Byzantines. Also about this time, Muslim armies invaded Armenia, Rhodes, Crete, and Cyprus. In 698, the Byzantines lost their North African holdings when the Muslims captured the city of Carthage in Tunisia.

The Muslim conquerors next extended their reach into Europe. Commander Tariq ibn Ziyad led an invasion of Spain, and his 711 victory at the Battle of Rio Barbate brought most of Spain under Muslim control. Far to the east, also about 711, general Muhammad ibn Qasim began a Muslim invasion of India.

The Caliphates

The caliphs (from khalifa, "successor") were the leaders of the Islamic community after Muhammad's death. Muhammad's first four successors (known to Sunni Muslims as Rashidun, the "rightly guided caliphs") were Abu Bakr, Muhammad's father-in-law; Umar I; Uthman ibn Affan; and Ali ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad's son-in-law. They acted as religious, political, and military leaders. Abu Bakr further united the Arab tribes and reinforced the Muslim faith among them. He also sent the first Muslim invasions beyond Arabia.



Umar I organized the caliphate's military and taxation systems and established garrisons in new Muslim territory. However, Uthman and Ali were both murdered as disputes began to divide the Muslim community over the appointment and authority of the caliphs.

Though the umma (Muslim community) had selected the early caliphs, after Ali's death in 661 the Umayyad dynasty under the leadership of Muawiyah took over the caliphate. The Umayyads, based in Damascus, Syria, established a dynastic form of succession and made important contributions to Islamic art, architecture, and government. In 750, the Umayyads lost the caliphate to the Abbasid dynasty.

The fifth Abbasid caliph, the famous Harun al-Rashid, ruled in Baghdad from 786–809 during a high point of Islamic culture, art, and economic prosperity. Soon afterward, however, the Muslim Civil War of 861–870 undermined the authority of the caliphate as a unifying institution of Muslim government and law. While the Abbasid caliphate continued until the mid-13th century, rival caliphs emerged in different parts of the Muslim world, such as the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt as well as caliphates in Spain, Algeria, and Tunisia.

Sunni and Shia

When Muhammad died without a male heir, the new Muslim community faced the challenge of finding his successor. Soon two major factions formed: the Shia and the Sunni. While some Muslims believed that Ali (as Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) should succeed him, Abu Bakr,

Umar, and Uthman were selected ahead of him.



On Uthman's death and Ali's appointment as caliph in 656, the Muslim Civil War of 656–661 broke out between Muslim factions. One of Muhammad's wives, Aisha, led an army against Ali (and was defeated) in the Battle of the Camel. In 657, Ali's forces met those of Umayyad commander Muawiyah at the Battle of Siffin, which ended in a settlement that weakened Ali's position as caliph. About 661, a faction opposing both Ali and Muawiyah called the Kharijites assassinated Ali. This ended the civil war, but divisions between Muslims continued.

The members of the Shia community (Shiites), including Egypt's Fatimid dynasty, believed that only the descendants of Ali and his wife Fatima bint Muhammad (Muhammad's daughter) should provide the line of succession for Islamic rulers. Ali's son Husayn ibn Ali was killed at Karbala, Iraq, by forces sent by Muawiyah's son Yazid. Husayn became a martyr for Shiites and the location of his death a pilgrimage site.

The Sunnis made up the majority of Muslims, including the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. They held that each of the first four caliphs—Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali—were the rightful heirs of Muhammad. In addition to political disagreements, Sunnis also differed from Shiites on certain interpretations of the Koran, the hadiths, and Islamic law.

Jennifer Hutchinson

Further Reading

Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. New York: Random House, 2002; Donner, Fred. *The Early Islamic Conquests*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980; Hawting, G. R. *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate, A.D. 661-750*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1987; Nicolle, David. *Armies of the Caliphates, 862–1098*. Oxford: Osprey, 1998; Nigosian, S. A. *Islam: Its History, Teaching and Practices*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.

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Aisha bint Abu Bakr at the Battle of the Camel: Yale University Gallery of Art

Muhammad's name in Arabic calligraphy: Hattat Aziz Efendi

Battle of Badr: Bilkent University

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