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Time Period: The Islamic World, 600-1500 CE

The Expansion of Islam

Overview



Beginning in the seventh century CE, Muslim armies quickly carried their new faith out of Arabia, Islam's place of origin, and established powerful Muslim dynasties in nearby places such as Iran as well as more distant areas such as India and Spain. During this period of territorial expansion, Islamic culture also began to develop lasting social, legal, and political traditions.

Islam in Iran and India

When Muslim forces moved north and northeast against the Byzantines and the Sassanid Persians, they encountered empires that were already exhausted by a long conflict known as the Byzantine-Persian Wars. During the 630s, the Muslims captured much of the Near East, including the holy city of Jerusalem, and won a decisive victory over the Byzantines at the Battle of the Yarmuk River.

Turning eastward, Muslim forces invaded Persia (in present-day Iran) and in 637 at the Battle of Qadisiya took Persia's capital, Ctesiphon. Within a few more years, the Persian Empire had been conquered. Over time, Islam spread and became the dominant religion in Iran, while Persian cultural traditions influenced the Muslim conquerors. During the 11th and 12th centuries, Iran was ruled by the Muslim Seljuk Turks, and then by the Mongol Il-Khanid dynasty from 1256 to 1334.

The Il-Khanid ruler Mahmud Ghazan established Sunni Islam as Iran's major religion, and it remained so until the Shiite Safavid dynasty took control in the early 16th century. Even while

Sunni Islam was dominant, Shia groups such as the Ismailis attracted followers. The mystical Islamic tradition of Sufism also flourished in Iran, with some branches such the Qadiriyya, the Suhrawardi, and the Rifaiyya becoming prominent and spreading beyond Iran.

About 711, Umayyad general Muhammad ibn Qasim led an invasion of India, where local political instability made conquest easier. Another Muslim invasion of India occurred in the early 11th century under Ghaznavid sultan Mahmud of Ghazna. Mahmud brought northern India under Ghaznavid control. The Ghaznavids lost their power to the Turko-Afghan Ghurids, who were also Muslims, in 1173. Out of Ghurid rule emerged the Delhi sultanate, which governed India in a period of prosperity and flourishing Islamic culture. The Delhi sultanate was seriously weakened by the invasion of the Muslim Mongol Timur in 1398, and in 1526 it fell to another Muslim dynasty, the Mughals.



Islam in Spain

During the eighth century, Muslim forces crossed from North Africa into the Iberian Peninsula to conquer much of Spain and Portugal. In 711, Tangier governor Tariq ibn Ziyad led a force of Arabs and Berbers (known as the Moors) to defeat Spain's Visigothic king Roderick at the Battle of Río Barbate. In 712, the Arab North African viceroy Musa ibn Nasayr took the cities of Seville and Merida. Musa made additional conquests in Spain, and his son Abdul Aziz took Portugal and the cities of Granada and Murcia.

Under Umayyad Muslim rule, Spain was now called Andalusia (al-Andalus). In 756, Umayyad emir Abd al-Rahman founded the Caliphate of Córdoba. By the 10th century, Córdoba had become a center of Islamic culture and learning and the home of such scholars as Muslim physician Averroes and Jewish philosopher Maimonides. Córdoba also practiced considerable religious tolerance, with Jews and Christians granted social and economic rights and protections in exchange for paying a special tax, the jizya.



Muslim Spain was divided by conflicts between the Umayyad rulers and a large population of North African Berbers who were new converts to Islam. Eventually, the Berbers made attacks on some regions of Spain, including Córdoba. In the 11th century, Muslim Spain began to break up into separate, small principalities called Taifa kingdoms. During this time, the Almoravid dynasty became dominant in Andalusia until the rise of the Almohad dynasty in the 1140s.

The Muslim conquest of Spain had never been complete, and from northern Spain came a series of military campaigns aimed at the Christian Reconquest of Spain (Reconquista). The reconquest would extend over 700 years, with Castile, Aragon, and Catalonia prominent centers of the movement.

In 1212 at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, the Almohads were defeated by Christian forces from Aragon, Castile, Leon, Navarre, and Portugal. Also in the 13th century, Majorca, Córdoba, and Seville fell to the Christians. The Muslims retained possession of the kingdom of Granada until their final defeat by Christian monarchs Ferdinand V and Isabella I in 1492. Afterward, conversion to Christianity was enforced in Spain and many Jews were expelled.

Islamic Law and Leaders

Islamic law became an important cultural institution in the newly-Muslim territories. Religion and law were tightly connected, and the Islamic legal code, known as sharia, offered guidance in many areas of Muslim life.

Much of sharia is derived from Islam's sacred text, the Koran. Sharia addresses questions of relationships between Muslims—such as laws concerning civil matters, business activities, or family life—as well as their relationship with Allah (God). A judge known as a qadi used his knowledge of sharia to reach decisions in cases of both religious and non-religious matters.



Muslim communities were guided by other leaders, as well. Imams held especially powerful roles, though Sunnis and Shiites perceived their authority differently. Sunnis considered the term to apply to the caliph, who was the ruler of the Muslim community and legitimate successor of Islam's founder, Muhammad. Shiites, on the other hand, held that the imam and the caliph were separate positions and that imams were divinely selected.

Muftis were scholars of Islamic law and the Koran. Their responses to legal questions, fatwas, were generally considered to have religious and legal authority for the Muslim community.

Influential leaders were also found among the ulema, a group of learned individuals from Islam's history. Members of the ulema—such as poets, preachers, and mystics—held enduring influence on the Muslim community's religious and cultural traditions.

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Further Reading

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