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Time Period: The Islamic World, 600-1500 CE

The Rise of Islam

Overview



The religion of Islam emerged in Arabia during the seventh century CE. Founded by Muhammad, who claimed to be the Prophet of the one true God (Allah), the new faith initially encountered resistance from local polytheistic tribes but soon became the region's dominant religious and cultural tradition. Islam's rapid success set the stage for its spread far beyond Arabia over the next century.

Muhammad

Muhammad was born about 570 CE to a family of Meccan traders. While much of his early life is obscure, it is known that after his parents' deaths he was raised by his uncle, Abu Talib. According to tradition, numerous signs predicted the young Muhammad's future role as a prophet. As a young man Muhammad accompanied caravans on trade expeditions and eventually became a merchant. At this time he married his first wife, Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, a wealthy widow for whom he had conducted business.

When he was about 40, Muhammad began to have religious experiences that led to the creation of Islam. He claimed that the archangel Gabriel visited him with revelations from Allah. Muhammad's recitation of these messages—which formed the foundation of Islam's sacred text, the Koran—included the declarations that Allah was the only deity that existed and that Muhammad was his prophet.



Muhammad shared his experiences with fellow Meccans and gained some followers, but many resisted the new teaching because it conflicted with traditional polytheistic beliefs. Mecca itself was the site of a major shrine in the Arabian polytheistic religion. Persecuted by the Meccans, in 622 Muhammad and his followers migrated to the Arabian city of Medina. This event is known as the hijra (flight).

Muhammad was welcomed in Medina, where he soon attracted more believers to his new faith. He and his Meccan enemies began raiding one another's caravans and camps, and hostilities reached a high point in 624 at the Battle of Badr, where Muhammad's outnumbered Medinans defeated the Meccans.

Aided by Bedouin tribes, Muhammad's forces made additional military campaigns against the Meccans and other Arab tribes. In 630, Mecca fell to Muhammad, and many Meccans converted to Islam. When Muhammad died in 632, the new Muslim community was prepared to launch a rapid territorial expansion and spread of their religion.

Teachings of Islam

Muhammad was not considered divine, but as Islam's Prophet his teachings were received as Allah's word. Muhammad memorized the revelations given him by Gabriel and passed them on to his followers, some of whom committed them to writing. The resulting text became the Koran, which provides spiritual instruction and guidelines for living according to Muslim principles. Surrender to Allah's will (Islam means "submission") as revealed in the Koran is a central Muslim tenet.

After the Koran, the most sacred Islamic texts are the hadiths, which are sayings attributed to Muhammad. Hadiths provide guidance for many areas of private and social life and use stories to provide examples of moral behavior. The Islamic code of laws, sharia, also plays an important role in ordering Muslim family life and society.

The Five Pillars of Islam are essential actions all Muslims are expected to perform as expressions of faith. The first pillar is the acknowledgment of Allah as the sole God and Muhammad as Allah's prophet. The second pillar requires believers to pray, facing toward Mecca, five times a day. Prayer often takes place in a mosque. Daytime fasting and other acts of self-restraint during the month of Ramadan fulfill the third pillar. The fourth pillar calls for paying the zakat, a tax to benefit the poor. For the fifth pillar, all Muslims who have the ability are expected to make a pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.



Hijra and Kaaba

Muhammad's flight to Medina (hijra or hegira) was such a fundamental event in the early history of Islam that 622 became the first year of the Islamic calendar. Islam's success in Medina allowed Muhammad to build up sufficient forces to return to Mecca in 630 and quickly win the city's surrender.



Muhammad took charge of the Kaaba, Mecca's most important shrine. The Kaaba is a cube-shaped structure whose eastern cornerstone is a sacred black stone (probably a meteorite). Muslim tradition holds that the biblical patriarch Ibrahim (Abraham) and his son Ismail (Ishmael) built the Kaaba and put the black stone in place according to divine instructions. There is also a tradition tracing the Kaaba's site and the presence of the black stone as far back as the biblical first man, Adam.

At the time of Muhammad's capture of Mecca, the Kaaba was used in polytheistic rites and housed numerous idols. Muhammad removed the idols and established the Kaaba as Islam's holy center. The Kaaba became the destination point of the hajj. Pilgrims to Mecca make circuits around the Kaaba and try to kiss or touch the black stone. In mosques around the world, the direction of Mecca and specifically the Kaaba is indicated by a prayer niche called a mihrab.

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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; Nicolle, David. *The Armies of Islam, 7th–11th Centuries*. London: Osprey, 1982; Nigosian, S. A. *Islam: Its History, Teaching and Practices*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004; Rodinson, Maxime. *Muhammad: Prophet of Islam*. London: Tauris Parke, 2002.

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