

The First Global Civilization: The Rise and Spread of Islam

Desert and Town: The Pre-Islamic Arabian World

- Islam appeared first on the **Arabian Peninsula**, an area occupied by pastoral nomads and on the periphery of the civilized zones.
- Much of the peninsula is desert, which supported both goat and camel nomadism among peoples called **bedouin**. Sedentary agricultural communities were limited to the far south of the peninsula, and trading towns like **Mecca** developed along the coasts.
- The bedouin tribal culture of **clan loyalty** and rivalry provided a critical backdrop for the emergence of Islam. Women enjoyed somewhat greater freedom, art was largely nonexistent, and religion was a blend of animism and polytheism.

The Life of Muhammad and the Genesis of Islam

- In the 7th century C.E., a new religion arose in the Arabian peninsula. Built on the revelations received by the prophet **Muhammad**, a trader from Mecca, the new faith won over many camel-herding tribes of the peninsula within decades.
- Islam **united Arabs** and provided an important ethical system. Though initially an Arab religion, Islam's beliefs and practices (including the **five pillars**) eventually made it one of the great world religions.

The Arab Empire of the Umayyads

- Although some bedouin tribes renounced their allegiance to Islam following **Muhammad's death** in 632, the Prophet's followers were able to conduct military campaigns restoring the unity of the Islamic community.
- **Abu Bakr** assumed leadership of the **umma** (community of the faithful). **Ali**, Muhammad's son-in-law, was passed over, which would later cause an important rift in the Muslim community.
- Once the rebellious tribesmen were brought back into the umma, Muslim armies began to launch attacks on neighboring civilizations outside of Arabia.
- Within a short period of time, Arab armies exploited weaknesses in their enemies' forces and captured Mesopotamia, northern Africa, and Persia. A new dynasty, the **Umayyads**, ruled this Arabic empire.
- The question of **succession** soon led to the **Sunni-Shi'a** split.
- Umayyad extravagance ultimately led to the empire's overthrow.

From Arab to Islamic Empire: The Early Abassid Era

- The Abbasid rulers moved the Empire's capital to **Baghdad**, and lived a life of luxury that alienated many followers.
- The Abbasids fully integrated the **mawali**, or non-Arab Muslims, into the Islamic community.
- **Merchants and landlords** grew in wealth and status. Cities grew, the **dhow** improved sailing, and **slave labor** became increasingly important.
- **Arab learning flowered**, as scholars sought to preserve the great works of Greek and Roman civilization.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. In pre-Islamic times, the status of Mecca was enhanced by
 - (A) the presence in the city of a Christian bishop.
 - (B) the Ka'aba, a religious shrine which attracted pilgrims.
 - (C) its merchants control of trade throughout the Middle East.
 - (D) its alliance with the Sasanid Persian Empire.
 - (E) the freedoms given its slaves and women.
2. The Prophet Muhammad had knowledge of life beyond Mecca because he was
 - (A) a merchant and had traveled.
 - (B) well-read and well-educated as an Arab scholar.
 - (C) exiled to Persia before his conversion.
 - (D) a judge who frequently arbitrated disputes.
 - (E) a traveling scholar who moved between cities teaching.
3. One of the strengths of Islam which made it a successful universalizing religion similar to Christianity was its
 - (A) use of a common language, Arabic, to unite all members.
 - (B) insistence that there was only one God.
 - (C) support for merchants and commercial values.
 - (D) egalitarianism that transcended previous loyalties, ethnicities, or allegiances.
 - (E) condemnation of violence as incompatible with faith.
4. The issue that confronted Muslims following Muhammad's death, and the issue which eventually split Muslims into Shi'a and Sunni sects involved
 - (A) the toleration or persecution of Christians and Jews.
 - (B) who was Muhammad's legitimate successor.
 - (C) the conversion of non-Arabs to Islam.
 - (D) the morality of the holy war (jihad) against enemies of the faith.
 - (E) the accuracy of different translations and versions of the Quran.
5. The Pillar of Islam which helped create the first global civilization was
 - (A) a profession of faith.
 - (B) charity and alms-giving to help the Muslim community.
 - (C) the pilgrimage by the faithful to Mecca.
 - (D) fasting during Ramadan.
 - (E) the holy war (jihad) against unbelievers.
6. The reasons for the Arabs' (Muslim) successful conquest of the Middle East and north Africa was most likely due to
 - (A) the promise of booty to be won.
 - (B) overpopulation in the Arabian peninsula.
 - (C) the desire to convert others to Islam.
 - (D) the weaknesses caused by their long wars of Islam's two main adversaries, Persia and the Byzantine Empire.
 - (E) the unity provided by their faith in Islam.

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7. The decline of women's position within Islamic civilization was due to
- (A) Islamic dogma.
 - (B) contacts with older sedentary cultures and their highly stratified urban systems.
 - (C) the necessities of war and holy war.
 - (D) the high death rates of males; the increased number of women in Islamic society "decreased the value" of women.
 - (E) bedouin traditions.
8. As the Muslim empire grew and the Abbasid dynasty came to power
- (A) Muslim rulers were increasingly isolated because of advisors and harems.
 - (B) civil wars destroyed the unity of the empires as provinces broke away.
 - (C) the Shi'a doctrines were supported and spread by the caliphs.
 - (D) the caliphs increasingly brought distant provinces under central control.
 - (E) conversions to Islam declined.
9. As similarly compared to classical Rome, later Muslim society
- (A) granted women extensive rights.
 - (B) denied merchants high social status.
 - (C) discouraged toleration of foreigners and conversion to the official religion.
 - (D) relied on the military to run the government.
 - (E) used slave labor extensively and had an important landed elite.
10. The first flowering of Islamic civilization
- (A) was intolerant toward older civilizations and their learning because these cultures were pagan.
 - (B) grew largely out of indigenous Arabia and bedouin traditions.
 - (C) borrowed exclusively from the Chinese.
 - (D) borrowed heavily from classical civilizations, but made significant contributions in its own areas.
 - (E) was mostly imitative rather than creative.

Free-Response Question

Explain the reasons for the rapid rise and spread of Islam.

ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS

Multiple-Choice Questions

- **1. (B) is correct.** The Ka'aba was one of the holiest shrines in pre-Islamic Arabia, and the reason for interclan truces.
- **2. (A) is correct.** Muhammad's travels as a merchant brought him into contact with Christians and Jews, and with people who lived on and outside the Arabian peninsula.
- **3. (D) is correct.** Whereas many of the pre-Islamic religions were attached to individual tribes, Muhammad's monotheism did not belong to any one tribe. He stressed equality before God, and emphasized his faith was a refinement of the revelations contained in Judaism and Christianity.
- **4. (B) is correct.** The Shi'a branch of Islam would claim that Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, was the Prophet's true heir.
- **5. (C) is correct.** The *hajj* allowed followers from around the world to meet and find common ground.
- **6. (D) is correct.** The Sasanian Empire of Persia was weakened by loose central control, while the Byzantines lost support of Arabs in border regions and Christians who resented persecution.

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- **7. (B) is correct.** While Islam initially gave women more freedom than other faiths, the long-held views of converted peoples—accentuated by urbanization—would ultimately weaken the status of Muslim women.
 - **8. (A) is correct.** Abbasid leaders quickly developed extravagant lifestyles that kept them in the thrall of their harems and secluded from their empire. In their place, advisors took a critical role in governing.
 - **9. (E) is correct.** Slavery was an essential feature of Islamic civilization, as men and women slaves worked in numerous roles throughout society. Some even achieved great power in government.
 - **10. (D) is correct.** Islamic civilization is given credit for preserving the great works of classical Mediterranean culture; it also gained from Indian mathematics. However, Muslims also developed a rich cultural tradition of their own.

Free-Response Essay Sample Response

Explain the reasons for the rapid rise and spread of Islam.

Islam's egalitarianism appealed to a wide audience, and served to unite the many Bedouin groups on the Arabian peninsula. Its uncompromising monotheism, highly developed legal codes, and strong sense of community also made it attractive. Once the religion had a foothold, Arab leaders exploited weaknesses in the surrounding empires, carving out a wide territory for the religion to spread. Islam's tolerant stance toward so-called "peoples of the book" and recognition of the *mawali* also made it welcomed in many areas that had been persecuted by other regimes.