

Record: 1

Title: The Spread of Islam.

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Source: Junior Scholastic; 11/24/2003, Vol. 106 Issue 8, p18, 3p, 1 map, 3 color

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: ISLAM
MUHAMMAD, Prophet, d. 632
GOD (Islam)

Geographic Terms: JERUSALEM

Abstract: The article focuses on Islam. No religion in history spread farther faster than Islam. Its prophet, Muhammad was a merchant from the Arabian city of Makkah (Mecca). In 610 A.D., according to Islamic teaching, Muhammad began to receive revelations from Allah (God in Arabic) through the angel Gabriel. Within a century after Muhammad's death in 632 A.D., Islam would become an empire that stretched 4,000 miles from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, over half the known world. Islamic thinking drew on the scholarship and traditions of Greece, Persia, and other great civilizations to create a thriving culture. The crusaders took Jerusalem in 1099 and held it until 1187, when Saladin, the sultan (ruler) of Egypt and the most famous of Muslim military heroes, recaptured it.

Lexile: 950

Full Text Word Count: 1165

ISSN: 00226688

Accession Number: 11430425

Database: Middle Search Plus

Section: WORLD HISTORY

The Spread of Islam

For centuries, the followers of Muhammad ruled one of the largest empires the world has ever seen.

No religion in history spread farther faster than Islam. Its prophet, Muhammad (moo-HAM-uhd), was a merchant from the Arabian city of Makkah (Mecca). In 610 A.D., according to Islamic teaching, Muhammad began to receive revelations from Allah (God in Arabic) through the angel Gabriel. The faith based on these revelations came to be called Islam, or surrender (to God's word), and its followers were called Muslims (those who surrender or submit).

At that time, most Arabs worshiped many gods and spirits. Muhammad persuaded Arab people to convert and worship only Allah. But many nonbelievers opposed and persecuted members of this new religion.

Muhammad and his followers were determined to defend themselves and to spread their faith. Within a century after Muhammad's death in 632 A.D., Islam would become an empire that stretched 4,000 miles — from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, over half the known world.

[Who Should Lead?](#)

After Muhammad's death, control passed to leaders called caliphs (KAY-luhfs), or captains. The first caliphs were men Muhammad had known or members of his family. Under their leadership, Muslim armies began to push into the old empires of Byzantium and Persia (see map).

These Arab warriors were fierce fighters — superb horsemen who stormed across the desert sands. In just 30 years, they conquered all of Arabia, Persia, Syria, and Egypt.

But the followers of Islam became bitterly divided over the question of Muhammad's rightful successor. Should it be a member of his family, such as his son-in-law, Ali? Or should it be an elected leader?

Civil war broke out when Ali became caliph. Soon afterward, he was assassinated. His death resulted in a division among Muslims — into the Shiah (SHEE-ah), or followers of Ali and his descendants, and the Sunni (SOON-ee), who continue to make up the majority of Muslims today.

The Golden Age

For six centuries, two dynasties (ruling families) dominated the empire of Islam, the Umayyads (oo-MY-adz) and Abbasids (uh-BAS-ihdz). These dynasties pushed the empire east into the Indus Valley of India, south through North Africa, and west to include most of Spain.

Muslim armies also crossed the Pyrenees mountains into France. But they were stopped in 732 A.D. in the Battle of Tours, in the western plains of present-day France, by the armies of the French prince Charles Martel.

When the Abbasid dynasty took power in 750, Europe was stuck in a period scholars once called the Dark Ages, making few advances in knowledge. In contrast, Islamic civilization reached a peak of sophistication and influence throughout the world.

In 762, the ancient city of Baghdad became the capital of the empire. Soon, the city was a trading crossroads and the destination for ships from the Far East and Africa.

Considered the richest city in the world, Baghdad also became a center of learning and the arts. Islamic thinking drew on the scholarship and traditions of Greece, Persia, and other great civilizations to create a thriving culture. One of the first medical schools opened in Baghdad. Students, poets, artists, and philosophers flocked to the city, which became a magical setting for some of the tales of A Thousand and One Nights.

Muslim scholars made enormous strides in astronomy, geography, mathematics, chemistry, and medicine. Muslim physicians produced the first great medical encyclopedia and helped to develop the practice of surgery. Algebra and the numerical system are among the many Arabic innovations we use today.

The Crusades

Through the centuries, trading was as important as conquest in expanding Islam's reach. Traders spread the faith to the islands of Indonesia, which today has the world's largest Muslim population.

But relations between the Muslim world and the Christian kingdoms of Europe were always troubled. In particular, Christians resented the Muslim capture of the holy city of Jerusalem in 638. In 1095, Pope Urban II called for a holy war against the Muslims. This

led to the Crusades, a series of wars that lasted two centuries and ended in defeat for the Europeans.

The crusaders took Jerusalem in 1099 and held it until 1187, when Saladin, the sultan (ruler) of Egypt and the most famous of Muslim military heroes, recaptured it. Saladin was a brilliant, charismatic, and pious leader. He matched the Christians' zeal for holy war by embracing the Muslim religious duty of jihad (struggle). So successful was Saladin that his name became legendary even among his enemies.

In the end, the Europeans went home empty-handed. But they returned with a taste for such Middle Eastern goods as rice, lemons, and cotton. Ironically, the Crusades opened Europe to Middle Eastern trade and Islamic culture. Some historians say that the adventure-filled legends of King Arthur and his knights were adapted from similar traditions of Muslim warriors.

The Ottomans

Starting in the 10th century, the Abbasid dynasty experienced years of steady decline. It finally crumbled for good in 1258, when Baghdad fell to the Mongols of Central Asia, the heirs of Genghis Khan.

The last great Islamic empire was the Ottoman Empire, a Turkish dynasty started in 1301 in Asia Minor (part of modern-day Turkey). That empire lasted more than six centuries. At its peak, it included most of southeastern Europe, Palestine, Arabia, and North Africa.

But the Ottomans began to lose territory, and were defeated in World War I (1914-1918). What was left of the empire collapsed after the war. Many modern-day Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq, emerged from the remains of the Ottoman Empire.

In the new country of Turkey, a military hero named Kemal Ataturk became President. He formed a secular (not religion-based) government that rejected the idea of an Islamic state.

Islam Today

Even though Islam is no longer an empire, it is still a major political force in many countries. Fundamentalist Muslims sparked a revolution that forced the secular government of Iran from power in 1979. Since then, secular and religious forces have continued to struggle for political control throughout the Middle East.

With more than 1.2 billion followers worldwide, Islam remains the fastest-growing religion. Only Christianity has more followers. The story of the rise and spread of Islam has been one of the most remarkable the world has ever seen.

Words to Know

- **Islam:** The religion revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the 600s A.D.
- **Muslim:** A person who practices the religion of Islam.

Your Turn WORD MATCH

- | | |
|------------|-----------------------|
| 1. nomadic | A. not religion-based |
| 2. dynasty | B. struggle |
| 3. caliph | C. ruling family |
| 4. jihad | D. captain |
| 5. secular | E. roaming |

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What set Muhammad's beliefs apart from those of earlier Arabs?
2. Why is it important to understand the beliefs and practices of different religions?

MAP

PHOTO (COLOR): Ottoman armies battle at the gates of Vienna, Austria, in 1683.

PHOTO (COLOR): Saladin, the sultan of Egypt, raises his arms in victory during a battle of the Crusades.

PHOTO (COLOR): Muslims pray in a mosque that opened last summer in Granada, Spain.

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By Bryan Brown

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