

## **PART III**

### **THE POSTCLASSICAL ERA, 500-1450: NEW FAITH AND NEW COMMERCE**

**Summary.** The big changes in the period from 500 to 1450 did not involve political boundaries but the spread of major world religions across political and cultural borders and the development of a new, more regular system of trade that connected much of Asia, Africa, and Europe. The spread of trade helped disseminate religion, and confidence in a divine order helped merchants to take risks. A trigger for this change was the economic decline and disorder associated with the decline of the classical empires. Religion and commerce were the engines of change in the postclassical period. Both facilitated the spread of technologies, ideas, and disease. Even though the classical empires collapsed, the successes of classical civilization encouraged many people to maintain or revive classical forms. The impact of this time period on the daily life of women was noticeable. The postclassical period saw an intriguing tension on the roles of women as religions insisted on equality but societies clung onto the patriarchal culture.

## CHAPTER 6

### *The First Global Civilization: The Rise and Spread of Islam*

#### CHAPTER SUMMARY

In the 7th century C.E., the Arab followers of Muhammad surged from the Arabian Peninsula to create the first global civilization. They quickly conquered an empire incorporating elements of the classical civilizations of Greece, Egypt, and Persia. Islamic merchants, mystics, and warriors continued its expansion in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The process provided links for exchange among civilized centers and forged a truly global civilization. Although united in belief of Muhammad's message, the Islamic world was divided by cultural and political rivalries. The disputes did not undermine the strength of Muslim civilization until the 14th century.

**Desert and Town: The Pre-Islamic Arabian World.** The inhospitable Arabian Peninsula was inhabited by bedouin societies. Some desert-dwellers herded camels and goats. Others practiced agriculture in oasis towns. Important agricultural and commercial centers flourished in southern coastal regions. The towns were extensions of bedouin society, sharing its culture and ruled by its clans.

**Clan Identity, Clan Rivalries, and the Cycle of Vengeance.** Mobile kin-related clans were the basis of social organization. The clans clustered into larger tribal units that functioned only during crises. In the harsh environment, individual survival depended upon clan loyalty. Wealth and status varied within clans. Leaders, or shaykhs, although elected by councils, usually were wealthy men. Free warriors enforced their decisions. Slave families served the leaders or the clan as a whole. Clan cohesion was reinforced by interclan rivalry and by conflicts over water and pasturage. The resulting enmity might inaugurate feuds enduring for centuries. The strife weakened bedouin society against its rivals.

**Towns and Long-Distance Trade.** Cities had developed as entrepôts in the trading system linking the Mediterranean to east Asia. The most important, Mecca, in western Arabia, had been founded by the Umayyad clan of the Quraysh tribe. The city was the site of the Ka'ba, an important religious shrine that, during an obligatory annual truce in interclan feuds, attracted pilgrims and visitors. A second important town, Medina, an agricultural oasis and commercial center, lay to the northeast. Quarrels among Medina's two bedouin and three Jewish clans hampered its development and later opened a place for Muhammad.

**Marriage and the Family in Pre-Islamic Arabia.** Women might have enjoyed more freedom than in the Byzantine and Sassanid empires. They had key economic roles in clan life. Descent was traced through the female line, and men paid a bride-price to the wife's family. Women did not wear veils and were not secluded. Both sexes had multiple marriage partners. Still, men, who carried on the honored warrior tradition, remained superior. Traditional practices of property control, inheritance, and divorce favored men. Women did drudge labor. Female status was even more restricted in urban centers.

**Poets and Neglected Gods.** Arab material culture, because of isolation and the environment, was not highly developed. The main focus of creativity was in orally transmitted poetry.

Bedouin religion was a blend of animism and polytheism. Some tribes recognized a supreme deity, Allah, but paid him little attention. They instead focused on spirits associated with nature. Religion and ethics were not connected. In all, the bedouin did not take their religion seriously.

**The Life of Muhammad and the Genesis of Islam.** In the 6th century C.E., camel nomads dominated Arabia. Cities were dependent upon alliances with surrounding tribes. Pressures for change came from the Byzantine and Sassanid empires and from the presence of Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad, a member of the Banu Hasim clan of the Quraysh, was born about 570. Left an orphan, he was raised by his father's family and became a merchant. Muhammad resided in Mecca, where he married a wealthy widow, Khadijah. Merchant travels allowed Muhammad to observe the forces undermining clan unity and to encounter the spread of monotheistic ideas. Muhammad became dissatisfied with a life focused on material gain and went to meditate in the hills. In 610, he began receiving revelations transmitted from God via the angel Gabriel. Later, written in Arabic and collected in the Qur'an, they formed the basis for Islam.

**Persecution, Flight, and Victory.** As Muhammad's initially very small following grew, he was seen as a threat by Mecca's rulers. The new faith endangered the gods of the Ka'ba. With his life in danger, Muhammad was invited to come to Medina to mediate its clan quarrels. In 622, Muhammad left Mecca for Medina where his skilled leadership brought new followers. The Quraysh attacked Medina, but Muhammad's forces ultimately triumphed. A treaty in 628 allowed his followers permission to visit the Ka'ba. He returned to Mecca in 629 and converted most of its inhabitants to Islam.

**Arabs and Islam.** The new religion initially was adopted by town dwellers and bedouins in the region where Muhammad lived. But Islam offered opportunities for uniting Arabs by providing a distinct indigenous monotheism supplanting clan divisions and allowing an end to clan feuding. The "umma," the community of the faithful, transcended old tribal boundaries. Islam also offered an ethical system capable of healing social rifts within Arab society. All believers were equal before Allah; the strong and wealthy were responsible for the care of the weak and poor. The Prophet's teachings and the Qur'an became the basis for laws regulating the Muslim faithful. All faced a last judgment by a stern but compassionate God.

**Universal Elements in Islam.** Islam, by nature, contained beliefs appealing to individuals in many differing world cultures. They included its monotheism, legal codes, egalitarianism, and strong sense of community. Islam, while regarding Muhammad's message as the culmination of divine revelation, accepted the validity of similar components previously incorporated in Judaism and Christianity. Islam's five pillars provide a basis for underlying unity: (1) acceptance of Islam; (2) prayer five times daily; (3) the fast month of Ramadan; (4) payment of a tithe (zakat) for charity; and (5) the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca.

**The Arab Empire of the Umayyads.** Muhammad's defeat of Mecca had won the allegiance of many bedouin tribes, but the unity was threatened when he died in 632. Tribes broke away and his followers quarreled about the succession. The community managed to select new leaders who reunited Islam by 633 and then began campaigns beyond Arabia. Arab religious zeal and the weaknesses of opponents resulted in victories in Mesopotamia, north Africa, and Persia. The new empire was governed by a warrior elite under the Umayyad clan that had little interest in conversion.

**Consolidation and Division in the Islamic Community.** Muhammad, the last of the prophets, could not have a successor possessing his attributes. He had not established a procedure for selecting a new leader. After a troubled process, Abu Bakr was chosen as caliph, the leader of the Islamic community. Breakaway tribes and rival prophets were defeated during the Ridda wars to restore Islamic unity. Arab armies invaded the weak Byzantine and Sassanid empires where they were joined by bedouins who had migrated earlier.

**Motives for Arab Conquest.** Islam provided the Arabs with a sense of common cause and a way of releasing martial energies against neighboring opponents. The rich booty and tribute gained often were more of a motivation than spreading Islam, since converts were exempted from taxes and shared the spoils of victory.

**Weaknesses of the Adversary Empires.** The weak Sassanian Empire was ruled by an emperor manipulated by a landed, aristocratic class that exploited the agricultural masses. Official Zoroastrianism lacked popular roots and the more popular creed of Mazdak had been brutally suppressed. The Arabs defeated the poorly prepared Sassanid military and ended the dynasty in 651. The Byzantines were more resilient adversaries. The empire had been weakened by the defection of frontier Arabs and persecuted Christian sects and by long wars with the Sassanids. The Arabs quickly seized western Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. From the 640s, the Arabs had gained naval supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean and extended conquests westward into north Africa and southern Europe. The weakened Byzantines held off attacks in their core Asia Minor and Balkan territories.

**The Problem of Succession and the Sunni-Shi'a Split.** Arab victories for a time covered old tribal internal divisions. The murder of Uthman, the third caliph, caused a succession struggle. Muhammad's earliest followers supported Ali, but he was rejected by the Umayyads. In the ensuing hostilities, Ali won the advantage until he accepted a plea for mediation at Siffin in 657. Ali lost the support of his most radical adherents, and the Umayyads won the renewed hostilities. The Umayyad leader, Mu'awiya, was proclaimed caliph in 660. Ali was assassinated in 661; his son, Husayn, was killed at Karbala in 680. The dispute left a permanent division within Islam. The Shi'a, eventually dividing into many sects, continued to uphold the rights of Ali's descendants to be caliphs.

**The Umayyad Imperium.** With internal disputes resolved, the Muslims during the 7th and 8th centuries pushed forward into central Asia, northwest India, and southwestern Europe. The Franks checked the advance at Poitiers in 732, but Muslims ruled much of Iberia for centuries. By the 9th century, they dominated the Mediterranean. The Umayyad political capital was at Damascus. The caliphs built an imperial administration with both bureaucracy and military dominated by a Muslim Arab elite. The warriors remained concentrated in garrison towns to prevent assimilation by the conquered.

**Converts and "People of the Book."** Umayyad policy did not prevent interaction, intermarriage, and conversion between Arabs and their subjects. Muslim converts still paid taxes and did not receive a share of booty; they were blocked from important positions in the army or bureaucracy. Most of the conquered peoples were Dhimmis, or people of the book. The first were Jews and Christians; later the term also included Zoroastrians and Hindus. The Dhimmis had to pay taxes but were allowed to retain their own religious and social organization.

**Family and Gender Roles in the Umayyad Age.** Gender relationships altered as the Muslim community expanded. Initially, the more favorable status of women among the Arabs prevailed over the seclusion and male domination common in the Middle East. Muhammad and the Quran stressed the moral and ethical dimensions of marriage. The adultery of both partners was denounced; female infanticide was forbidden. Although women could have only one husband, men were allowed four wives, but all had to be treated equally. Muhammad strengthened women's legal rights in inheritance and divorce. Both sexes were equal before Allah.

**In Depth: Civilization and Gender Relationships.** The strong position gained by women through Muhammad's teachings did not endure. Long-established Middle Eastern and Mediterranean male-dominated traditions of the conquered societies eventually prevailed. The historical record in China, India, Greece, and the Middle East appears to make a connection among political centralization, urbanization, and decline in the position of women. But in the Islamic world, religion and law left women of all classes in better conditions than in other civilized cultures. In cultural areas with decentralized authority and unstratified social organization, women retained a stronger position.

**Umayyad Decline and Fall.** The spoils of victory brought luxury and decline of military talents to the Umayyads. Many Muslims considered such conduct a retreat from Islamic virtues, and revolts occurred throughout the empire. The most important occurred among frontier warriors settled near the Iranian borderland town of Merv. Many men had married locally and developed regional loyalties. Angry at not receiving adequate shares of booty, they revolted when new troops were introduced. The rebels were led by the Abbasid clan. Allied with Shi'a and Malawi, Abu al-Abbas defeated the Umayyads in 750, later assassinating most of their clan leaders.

**From Arab to Islamic Empire: The Early Abbasid Era.** The triumph of a new dynasty reflected a series of fundamental changes within the Islamic world. The increased size of Muslim civilization brought growing regional identities and made it difficult to hold the empire together. The Abbasid victory led to increased bureaucratic expansion, absolutism, and luxurious living. The Abbasids championed conversion and transformed the character of the previously Arab-dominated Islamic community. Once in power, the Abbasids turned against the Shi'a and other allies to support a less tolerant Sunni Islam. At their new capital, Baghdad, the rulers accepted Persian ruling concepts, elevating themselves to a different status than the earlier Muslim leaders. A growing bureaucracy worked under the direction of the wazir, or chief administrator. The great extent of the empire hindered efficiency, but the regime worked well for more than a century. The constant presence of the royal executioner symbolized the absolute power of the rulers over their subjects.

**Islamic Conversion and Malawi Acceptance.** Under the Abbasids, new converts, both Arabs and others, were fully integrated into the Muslim community. The old distinction between Malawi and older believers disappeared. Most conversions occurred peacefully. Many individuals sincerely accepted appealing ethical Islamic beliefs. Others perhaps reacted to the advantages of avoiding special taxes and to the opportunities for advancement open to believers through education, administration, and commerce. Persians, for example, soon became the real source of power in the imperial system.

**Town and Country: Commercial Boom and Agrarian Expansion.** The rise of the Malawi was accompanied by the growth in wealth and status of merchant and landlord classes. Urban

expansion was likened to a revival of the Afro-Eurasian trading network declining with the fall of the Han and Roman empires. Muslim merchants moved goods from the western Mediterranean to the South China Sea. Urban prosperity led to increased artisan handicraft production in both government and private workshops. The most skilled artisans formed guild-like organizations to negotiate wages and working conditions and to provide support services. Slaves performed unskilled labor and served caliphs and high officials. Some slaves held powerful positions and gained freedom. Most unskilled slaves, many of them Africans, worked under terrible conditions. A rural, landed elite, the *ayan*, emerged. The majority of peasants occupied land as tenants and had to give most of their harvest to the owners.

**The First Flowering of Islamic Learning.** The Arabs before Islam were without writing and knew little of the outside world. They were very receptive to the accomplishments of the many civilizations falling to Muslim armies. Under the Abbasids, Islamic artistic contribution first lay in mosque and palace construction. Islamic learning flourished in religious, legal, and philosophical discourse, with special focus on the sciences and mathematics. Scholars recovered and preserved the works of earlier civilizations. Greek writings were saved and later passed on to the Christian world. Muslims also introduced Indian (“Arabic”) numbers into the Mediterranean world.

**Global Connections: Early Islam and the World.** The rise of Islamic civilization was without precedent in history. By the 9th century, Abbasid power had waned before the rise of regional states and the incursions of non-Muslim peoples. The Turks converted to Islam and became a major component of the Muslim world. The Arabs had created a basis for the first global civilization, incorporating many linguistic and ethnic groups into one culture. They created Islam, one of the great universal religions. Religion and politics initially had been joined, but the Umayyads and Abbasids used religious legitimacy to govern their vast empires. In both religion and politics, they absorbed precedents from earlier civilizations. Muslims did the same in the arts and sciences, later fashioning their own innovative thinking that influenced other societies in Europe, Africa, and Asia.

## KEY TERMS

**Bedouin:** Nomads of the Arabian Peninsula with a culture based on herding camels and goats.

**Shaykhs:** Leaders of tribes and clans within bedouin society; usually possessed large herds, several wives, and many children.

**Mecca:** Arabian commercial center; dominated by the Quraysh; the home of Muhammad and the future center of Islam.

**Medina:** Town northeast of Mecca; asked Muhammad to resolve its intergroup differences. Muhammad’s flight to Medina, the Hijra, in 622 began the Muslim calendar.

**Umayyad:** Clan of the Quraysh that dominated Mecca; later an Islamic dynasty.

**Ka’ba:** Revered pre-Islamic shrine in Mecca; incorporated into Muslim worship.

**Qur’an:** The word of God as revealed through Muhammad; made into the holy book of Islam.

**Umma:** Community of the faithful within Islam.

**Zakat:** Tax for charity obligatory for all Muslims.

**Five pillars:** The obligatory religious duties for all Muslims: profession of faith, prayer, fasting during Ramadan, zakat, and hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca).

**Caliph:** The successor to Muhammad as head of the Islamic community.

**Ali:** Cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad; one of the orthodox caliphs; focus for the development of Shi'ism.

**Abu Bakr:** Succeeded Muhammad as the first caliph.

**Ridda Wars:** Wars following Muhammad's death; the defeat of rival prophets and opponents restored the unity of Islam.

**Jihad:** Islamic holy war.

**Uthman:** Third caliph; his assassination set off a civil war within Islam between the Umayyads and Ali.

**Battle of Siffin:** Battle fought in 657 between Ali and the Umayyads; led to negotiations that fragmented Ali's party.

**Mu'awiya:** First Umayyad caliph; his capital was Damascus.

**Sunni:** Followers of the majority interpretation within Islam; included the Umayyads.

**Shi'a:** Followers of Ali's interpretation of Islam.

**Karbala:** Site of the defeat and death of Husayn, the son of Ali.

**Mawali:** Non-Arab converts to Islam.

**Jizya:** Head tax paid by all non-Muslims in Islamic lands.

**Dhimmi:** "The people of the book," Jews, Christians; later extended to Zoroastrians and Hindus.

**Abbasids:** Dynasty that succeeded the Umayyads in 750; their capital was Baghdad.

**Wazir:** Chief administrative official under the Abbasids.

**Ayan:** The wealthy landed elite that emerged under the Abbasids.

**Quraysh Bedouin tribe:** The Umayyad clan of this bedouin tribe founded the city of Mecca.

**Allah:** Islamic term for God.

**Khadijah:** First wife of Muhammad who was the widow of a wealthy merchant.

**Hijra:** Term used to describe Muhammad's flight to Medina; marks the first year of the Islamic calendar.

**Ramadam:** The ninth month of the Islamic year that requires daily fasting from sunrise to sunset.

**Hajj:** Pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca; one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

**Damascus:** Ancient Islamic cultural center; capital of present-day Syria.

**Hadiths:** Traditions of the prophet Muhammad.

**Battle of River Zab:** Battle in 750 C.E. in which Abbasid forces met and defeated an army led by the Umayyad caliph near the Tigris River; the Abbasid victory opened the way for the conquest of Syria and capture of the Umayyad capital

**Baghdad:** Ancient Islamic cultural center on Tigris River; capital of present-day Iraq.

**Dhows:** Ship with lateen sails and raised deck at the stern; used along the coasts of east Africa and the Middle East.

**Mosque:** Islamic temple and place of worship.

## LESSON SUGGESTIONS

<b>Leader Analysis</b>	Muhammad
<b>Peoples Analysis</b>	Islamic societies
<b>Conflict Analysis</b>	Sunni-Shi'a split
<b>Change Analysis</b>	Arabian society before and after Muhammad
<b>Societal Comparison</b>	Umayyad and Han or Roman empires
<b>Document Analysis</b>	<i>The Thousand and One Nights</i>
<b>Dialectical Journal</b>	The postclassical period as a period of world history
<b>Inner/Outer Circle</b>	In Depth: Civilization and Gender Relationships