

The Beginning of Islam

As early as 3000 B.C., the people known as the Arabs inhabited a large peninsula between Asia and Africa. This peninsula would come to be known as the Arabian Peninsula after the people who lived there.

Because of the remoteness of their villages and the brutal deserts that surrounded them, the Arabians were left alone for centuries. Free from attack by outside forces and isolated from the rest of the world, the Arabian culture evolved in a unique direction, completely separate from the cultures of other civilizations around them.

In order to survive the harsh conditions of their homeland, the Arabians drew close to their families. Several related families often came together to form a tribe. These tribes were ruled by one chief called the sheikh. The sheikh ruled so long as the heads of each family supported him.

These tribes often raided one another in search of camels, goats, and other necessary supplies for their survival. The men engaged in games that helped to prepare them to be warriors.

These early Arabians traveled from oases to oases in search of water and food. Their diet consisted mainly of dates (a small fruit) and milk from their herds. On special occasions, they would kill and feast on a fatted lamb.

Towns Emerge

By 500 A.D., life began to change for the Arabians. Instead of migrating in search of food, they began to settle in oases or fertile valleys. This allowed them to build villages, towns and cities.

Many of the Arabians became skilled farmers, while others learned crafts such as blacksmithing. Others still became merchants and traders. As the centuries wore on, some of these cities became very large and wealthy.



The City of Makkah

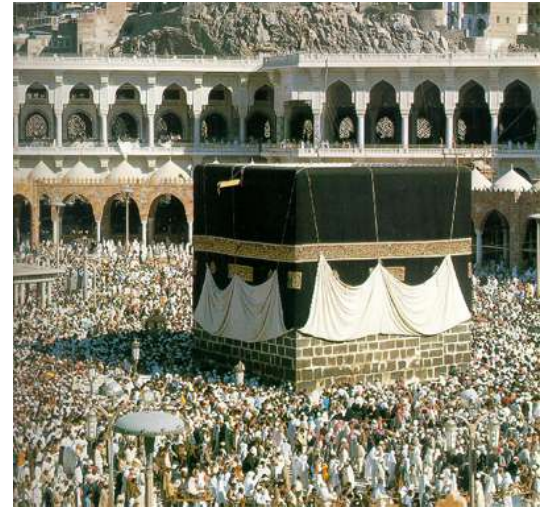
One of the most important cities in the region was Makkah. Makkah was located about 55 miles from the borders of the Red Sea. Its location along the Red Sea and also along important trade routes made it a good location for controlling trade in the region.

Makkah also was home to the region's most sacred religious shrine. This shrine, known as the Kaaba, contained engraved images of all the Arabian gods.

Arabians would travel hundreds of miles in great pilgrimages to visit the Kaaba in the city of Makkah so that they could faithfully worship their gods. This brought additional wealth and prosperity to the city, and became an important part of their economy.

The Need For Government

As the Arabian cities prospered, the old tribal governments were no longer sufficient. Arabia was ruled by hundreds of sheiks, instead of one central government. They all shared the same language, culture and religious beliefs, but because they did not share the same government and were not united, it was difficult for them to defend themselves.



The Persian Empire and the Byzantine Empire were both growing in strength and influence. Both of these Empires looked at Arab lands and threatened to conquer them.

Religious Movement

Arabia lies between several cultures who had rejected the idol worship of their ancestors. The Jews and Christians both worshipped a single God. Many of the nations surrounding Arabia practiced one of these two faiths.

Arab teachers called hanifs began searching for a new monotheistic faith. Monotheistic means that they worship only one god, instead of many idols. These hanifs rejected both Judaism as well as Christianity, and instead formed their own monotheistic faith which they called Islam. Islam means 'submission to the will of Allah.' Allah is the name of the god that followers of Islam worship.

Muhammad

In the year 570 A.D., a man who would greatly influence the religious beliefs of Islam was born in the city of Makkah. This man's name was Muhammad.

Muhammad was orphaned when his parents were killed, and was left to be raised by an uncle. In order to survive, Muhammad went to work as a caravan leader when he was only a teenager. He was very good at his job and brought his employer, a 40-year-old widow, tremendous wealth.

When Muhammad reached the age of 25, this widow proposed marriage to him. After marrying this wealthy woman, Muhammad was now free to contemplate life. His new found wealth allowed him more free time than before his marriage.

As Muhammad contemplated his faith, he became concerned about the greed and wickedness of his people. He saw a great disparity between the wealthy and the poor. He was also concerned about the worship of idols instead of worshipping Allah, or God.

In 610 A.D., after years of prayer and anguish over the sins of his people, Islamic tradition states that Muhammad received a revelation from Allah telling him to preach to the people. Muhammad later received other revelations giving him further instructions about what to share with his people.

Muhammad Shares His Message



By 613 A.D., Muhammad began sharing the message that Allah had given him with others, beginning with his family and close friends. As word spread that Muhammad had seen a vision from Allah, many in Makkah began to persecute him and his followers. One of the most important elements of the economy in Makkah were the pilgrims who traveled to the city to worship their idols. The wealthy merchants feared that this new religion, which forbade the worship of idols, would hurt their economy.

Muhammad did have some early success, however, mainly with the poorer classes of people who lived in and around Makkah. They were drawn to his message because he taught that the poor and wealthy were equal, and that the wealthy should share their means with those who did not have enough.

The Hijrah

In the year 622 A.D., persecution against Muhammad and his followers became especially brutal. Muhammad had received a number of threats against his life, including attempted assassinations. In order to protect both himself and his people, Muhammad sent his followers, which consisted of about 60 separate families, to the town of Yathrib. Muhammad himself traveled to Yathrib secretly shortly thereafter.

Followers of Islam, known as Muslims, call this the Hijrah. Hijrah means 'great emigration.' The year that the Hijrah took



place marks the first year of the Islamic calendar, and is the year that most historians consider the beginning of the Islamic era.

City of Yathrib

In Yathrib Islam began to flourish. The people accepted Muhammad as their leader and king. Muhammad established all laws, and settled all disputes. He taught the people that they owed their loyalty first to Islam, second to their families, and only thirdly to their own tribes. These teachings united his people under his rule and authority.

The teachings and laws revealed by Muhammad were written in books which became known as the Quran. The Quran today is considered to be holy scripture by those who practice Islam.

Gradually the city of Yathrib became known as Madinah, which means 'The City of the Prophet.'

An Islamic State

In 630 A.D., the people who lived in Makkah attacked Muhammad and his people in an attempt to destroy them. The Muslims were not only able to defend themselves against attack, but in the same year were able to overthrow and conquer Makkah.

Many tribes throughout the Arabian Peninsula saw this as a sign of Allah's power. By 631 A.D., Muhammad was recognized throughout the region as the prophet of God. As Allah's prophet, Muhammad was then easily able to conquer the entire Arabian Peninsula with little opposition.



Muhammad set up a strong central government, whose capital was in Madinah. He destroyed all the idols that were in Kaaba, and instead established Kaaba as the center of Muslim worship. Thus, Makkah became the religious capital of this Islamic nation.

Muhammad Dies

In the year 632 A.D., after battling a fast moving infection, Muhammad died. However, he left behind a legacy that is almost unparalleled in world history. During his short reign, Muhammad founded a new world religion, and united all of the Arabian tribes behind one central government, giving it new strength that would help it survive the coming centuries.