CHAPTER 6

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.

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.

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 Abassid rulers moved the Empire’s capital to Baghdad, and lived a life of luxury that alienated many followers.
- The Abassids 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.
CHAPTER 7

Abbasid Decline and the Spread of Islamic Civilization to South and Southeast Asia

Islamic Heartlands in the Middle and Late Abbasid Eras

- The Abbasid leadership’s excess and sumptuous living (as exemplified by Harun al-Rashid) was apparent from early in the caliphate. This led to the gradual disintegration of the vast empire between the 9th and 13th centuries.
- Civil wars drained the treasury, and revolts against the ensuing taxes spread among the peasants.
- Slavery increased, and the position of women was further eroded.
- Divisions within the empire (brought by groups like the Buyids and Seljuk Turks) opened the way for Christian crusaders from western Europe to invade, and for a short time, establish warrior kingdoms in the Muslim heartlands.
- Political decline and social turmoil were offset for many by the urban affluence, inventiveness, and artistic creativity of the Abbasid Age.

An Age of Learning and Artistic Refinements

- As the Abbasid dynasty fell politically, trade links and intellectual creativity grew dramatically.
- An expansion of the professional and artisan classes demonstrated increasing urban prosperity.
- Persian gradually replaced Arabic as the court language, and many great works of literature were authored.
- Scientists and doctors also made many important advances in chemistry, astronomy, and human biology.
- Islam saw an increase in both mysticism (the Sufis) and orthodox religious scholars (the ulama).
- The Abbasid caliphate eventually fell to the Mogols, then the forces of Tamerlane.

The Coming of Islam to South Asia

- From the 7th century onward, successive waves of Muslim invaders, traders, and migrants carried the Islamic faith and elements of Islamic civilization to much of the vast south Asian subcontinent.
- The first wave of influence occurred as a result of Muhammad ibn Qasim's
incursions. The second occurred when Muhammad of Ghazni conquered much of the Indus River Valley and north central India.

Conversion to Islam was peaceful; in particular, many Indian Buddhists became Muslim. However, the once-egalitarian Islam generally succumbed to the caste system. Hindus took many measures to maintain dominance, including emphasizing devotional cults, and as a result Islam did not spread in India as it had elsewhere.

**The Spread of Islam to Southeast Asia**

- The spread of Islam to India set the stage for its further expansion. Arab traders and sailors regularly visited the “middle ground” ports of southeast Asia.
- From the 13th century, traders and Sufi mystics spread Islam to Java and the islands of modern Indonesia. As was the case in India, conversion was generally peaceful, and the new believers combined Islamic teachings and rituals with elements of local religions that had spread to the area in preceding centuries.
African Civilizations and the Spread of Islam

African Societies: Diversity and Similarities

- A wide variety of societies developed in Africa. This diversity meant political unity was difficult. Though universal states and religions did not develop in Africa, universal religions from elsewhere did impact the region.
- Many Africans lived in stateless societies, which were organized around kinship or other forms of obligation and lacking concentration of political power.
- Despite Africa's remarkable diversity, some commonalities existed, including a common linguistic base (Bantu), and a tendency toward animistic religions. Economic conditions varied by geographic region, and historians have few reliable population numbers.
- In the second half of the 7th century, Mohammad's followers swept through north Africa and brought Islamic influence. The Berbers, a people of the Sahara desert, joined the Almoravid and Almohadi Islamic reform movements, launching into jihad against Spain and the savanna kingdoms of Africa. Islam's attractive promise of egalitarianism was not always fulfilled in practice, however.
- Early Christian kingdoms developed in northeastern Africa (in particular, Nubia and Ethiopia) and resisted Muslim encroachment for many centuries. These regions practiced a unique Coptic brand of Christianity.

Kingdoms of the Grasslands

- Trans-Saharan Muslim traders brought Islam to the Sahel grasslands of Africa. Ghana, which converted to Islam by the 10th century, was the first, great west African empire.
- The effective control of subordinate societies and the legal or informal control of their sovereignty are the usual definition of empires. The Sudanic states of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay fit that definition.
- Mali, created by the Malinke people in the 13th century, was an agricultural, Islamicized state that also depended on gold reserves. Trade was facilitated by Malinke merchants, or juula. Griots, or Malian oral historians, celebrated Sundiata, the founder of Mali's empire, as did the noted Arab traveler Ibn Batuta. Mansa Musa, perhaps Mali's greatest ruler, made a famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324.
- Timbuktu became a great trading and learning center, though most people in Mali relied on subsistence farming to survive.
Songhay, founded by Sunni Ali and expanded by Muhammad the Great, was the third great Sudanic state. Songhay fell at the end of the 16th century. The Hausa kingdoms of northern Nigeria also combined pagan and Muslim traditions.

The development of unified states provided an overarching structure that allowed the various groups and communities to coexist. Sharia was not always followed (for example, women tended to have greater freedom in the Sudanic states) as pagan traditions fused with Islam. Muslim influence also meant that more Africans became slaves than ever before.

The Swahili Coast of East Africa

- A string of Islamicized trading ports along Africa’s Indian Ocean coast increased that region's contact with the Arabic, Indian, Persian, and Chinese worlds.
- Zenj (the Arabic word for the Swahili Coast) came under Muslim influence and many of its port towns were thriving by the 13th century.
- By the time the Portuguese gained control of Mozambique in the early 16th century, Swahili culture (a hybrid of Bantu and Arabic language and customs) was entrenched.

Peoples of the Forest and Plains

- Across central Africa, many preliterate agrarian societies thrived. Over time, several kingdoms developed.
- In Nigeria, the Nok culture reflected early artistic achievement; later, Yoruba culture was highly urbanized and politically organized. East of Yoruba, the Benin city-state was powerful enough to impress Portuguese visitors.
- South of the Zambezi River, beyond the influence of Islam, many central African peoples had begun their own process of state formation by about 1000, replacing the pattern of kinship-based societies with forms of political authority based on kingship.
- Along the Congo River, the state of Kongo was spread out in family-based villages and towns. There was a sharp division of labor between women and men.
- Another large Bantu confederation, with extensive trade connections, developed east of the Congo. Its headquarters were at Great Zimbabwe, an impressive set of stone structures.