The Spread of Islam

Summary. About 100 years after Muhammad’s death, Muslims conquered territory stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to China. The kingdoms of the Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, Safavids, Mughals, and Ottomans were among the most influential and powerful in world history. Muslim rulers started the first university, made advances in science and math, and continued the learning of Greek and Roman societies while Europe was in the “Dark Ages.” Islamic civilization produced important scientists, astronomers, mathematicians, doctors, and philosophers during the Golden Age of Islam. New technology was developed that helped the entire world advance. The importance of reading the Qur'an produced a high level of literacy (ability to read and write) compared to other parts of the world.

The Islamic empire began in Southwest Asia (Middle East) and quickly expanded into Africa and then deeper into Asia. The territory was under Islamic control, but most of the people did not convert to Islam immediately. Islamic rulers allowed people to worship their religion, but often they had to pay a protection tax.

Trade was the main part of Islamic economy. Islamic merchants (people who buy and sell) helped to develop world trade routes over land and sea. Merchants traded goods from Africa to China, crossing deserts and mountains. What started as small trade centers, eventually developed into large cities and important cultural meeting places.

During the 1200’s, CE Mongolian invasions from the East, and the loss of population from the Black Death, greatly weakened the center of the Islamic world (between Persia and Egypt). The Ottoman Empire was able to re-conquer most Arabic-speaking areas, creating an Islamic empire that lasted until the Modern Age.

The Spread of Islamic Religion. People often assume that this huge region instantly “became Islamic” with the arrival of Muslim armies and kings. This idea led to the belief that people were forced to become Muslims. In fact, the spread of Islam in these lands took many centuries. Although Muslims were the ruling group, they were a small part of the population (minority). In other words, the expansion of territory under Muslim rule happened very rapidly, but the spread of the Islamic religion in those lands was a much slower process.
The Qur’an (Islam’s holy book)⁴ says, “Let there be no compulsion in religion”. This verse tells Muslims never to force people to convert to Islam. Anyone who accepts Islam under pressure might not be sincere. Prophet Muhammad set the example, as the leader of the town of Medina. Under his leadership, Muslims practiced tolerance toward people with other religious beliefs. They discussed religious ideas with Jews, Christians and polytheists (believers in many gods). The Qur’an and Muhammad’s example required Muslim leaders to be tolerant of the “People of the Book⁵”, or Jews and Christians, and to allow them freedom of worship. With a few exceptions, Muslim leaders have followed these policies over time.

To accept Islam, a person only has to declare their faith in front of two or more witnesses. After that, it may take a long time to learn and apply Islamic practices. As Islam spread, this process was multiplied across large populations. As people in Muslim lands learned about Islam and traveled to Muslim cities, some began to accept Islam by choice. When they returned home, they shared their religious knowledge with family and friends, thus further spreading the religion.

Islam began with the Arabic people, but spread to many ethnic groups⁶. The rulers of the Arab Umayyad Caliph (661-750 CE) were Muslims, but most of the people in their empire were not Muslims. Eventually, the North African Berbers became the first major non-Arab ethnic group to accept Islam. This would continue as Turkish, Persian, and other ethnic groups accepted Islam.

About 50 percent of the Islamic empire converted to Islam by the 900s, three hundred years after its arrival. From then on, conversion rates slowly increased in the region. Islam also spread to Spain and Portugal between 711 and 1250. Islam spread in other places, such as modern Turkey after 1071. When the Turkish Ottoman Empire conquered part of Europe in the mid 1300s Islam spread to southeastern Europe (see picture on bottom right).

### Islam Spreads in Asia
Islam was born in Asia (Southwest). Islamic groups maintained control of most of this land since the time of Mohammad until today. Between 1095 and 1291, Christian kingdoms of Europe launch several attacks on the Muslim-controlled city of Jerusalem in a series of wars called the Crusades⁷. The Christians had a few victories, but in the Islamic kingdoms retained control of the holy land for the next 600 years.
Arab Muslims spread Islam into Turkish and Persian kingdoms, who then expanded into Central Asia. In Central Asia, Islam gradually spread as cultures and ethnic groups mixed. Today, most Central Asian nations are Islamic. Beginning in 1192, Muslims conquered parts of South Asia from India to Bangladesh. They began a kingdom called the Delhi Sultanate. Although the number of Muslims in South Asia gradually increased, Hinduism remained the religion of most people in India. Muslim rulers usually treated Hindus and Buddhists just as it treated Jews and Christians. They were offered protection and freedom of religion if they paid a tax. Muslim citizens paid different taxes.

In 1526, another Islamic kingdom took over India. The Mughal Empire came from Central Asia, they descended from the Mongolians. Babur was the first king. Later Akbar the Great expanded the territory. Akbar’s grandson, Shah Jahan, ordered the Taj Mahal to be built for his dead wife. The Taj Mahal is a mausoleum (burial building) and a classic example of Islamic architecture. Today, most Muslims in South Asia live in Pakistan and Bangladesh. India remains mainly Hindu.

In southern India and Sri Lanka, traders and Sufis [soo-fees], or mystical followers of Islam, spread Islam and carried it to Southeast Asia by 1200’s CE. Sufis rode on merchant boats and inspired people with their extreme devotion. Most of Indonesia had converted within 400 years. Today, Indonesia has the highest Muslim population of any nation in the world.

Islam spread into western China by 620 CE. The Chinese Emperor tolerated it—today Muslims sometimes fight with the Chinese government. Islam didn’t spread quickly in China—only about 2% of China is Islamic today.

One of the most famous Chinese Muslims was Zheng He, the famous explorer. He traveled throughout the entire Indian Ocean and possibly farther.

Islam Spreads in Africa. Islam entered Africa from several places. First, Arab traders came from Asia into North Africa. They moved across the Sahara into West Africa. Later on, other merchant traders came by boat to the east coast. Islam spread as ivory, salt, slaves, gold, and many other items were traded and sold. The first African converts to Islam were merchants in Sudan, followed by some kings
and their royal courts. The peasants, however, often kept their local religion. Slowly more peasants embraced Islam.

The first town south of the Sahara that became majority Muslim was Gao on the Niger River. In Gao, the King of Ghana converted to Islam around 1076. Islam spread all along the Niger River after that. Muslims established the kingdom of Mali in the 13th to 15th centuries. The Mali king Mansa Musa built the capital city called Timbuktu. In Timbuktu, African Muslim scholars taught and wrote Islamic law in this advanced city. Timbuktu was also a major trade city where merchants exchanged salt for gold. Timbuktu was later taken over by the Songhai Kingdom from 1465 to 1591.

In East Africa, Arab traders had spread Islam down the Indian Ocean coast by the 900’s. Traders also sailed from India westward to Africa using “trade winds” that reversed directions later in the season, helping the merchants return home.

Cities developed in the places where African traders met Arab traders. Arab traders and travelers stimulated the development of cities as centers of buying, selling, and learning. As a town began to grow Muslims would build a mosque, which helped the city take shape. Wealthy city-states such as Kilwa and Zanzibar were powerful.

The spread of Islam throughout the African continent was neither simultaneous nor organized. The written records come from Arab sources, such as the great Arab traveler Ibn Battuta. He travelled from far western Africa all the way to far eastern China, over 75,000 miles through his life. This is much farther than Marco Polo or any other explorer of this time period.

**Advancing Culture.** Islamic culture developed in an important place. The Arabian Peninsula is in the center of much of the Ancient world; ancient knowledge was transferred to Islamic civilizations when they conquered these lands. Science and literature from the Greeks and Romans, architecture and engineering from Egypt, paper from China, the number system we still use (left) from India—all continued and advanced in Islamic civilizations.
Islamic merchants were between two major areas of trade—Europe to the west and China to the east. Islamic merchants became the “middle-man” traders who transported goods and ideas between cultures. Controlling this trade brought great wealth to Islamic civilizations, which helped civilizations advance. From the Trans-Saharan to the Silk Road, Islamic traders dominated most trade routes.

After the fall of Rome, Europe began a time where new learning slowed and much of the learning from the past was lost. Historians call this the Dark Ages. Islamic civilizations were in a Golden Age when Europe was in the “dark”. Islamic rulers embraced teachers, academics, and doctors in the lands they conquered. They learned from Greeks, Egyptians, Indians, and many other people within their empire. Islamic scientists, mathematicians, and doctors took ancient learning and made major advancements that have made our modern world possible.

Islamic doctors invented surgery methods and tools that are still used today. Mathematicians invented algebra and algorithms—the math used to make computers. The astrolabe (left) helped sailors find their position on the Earth. The first university (college) developed in Muslim kingdoms. Another invention was the first public hospital. Coffee, toothbrush, soap, types of make-up, chess, an early form of the camera, the first flying machine, and countless other inventions came from Islamic civilizations.

**Islamic Art and Architecture.**

The spread of Islam can be seen in the art and architecture in the lands controlled by Muslim kingdoms. Like nearly all parts of Islamic civilization, religion is the main motivation of life; the same is true in art and architecture. Islamic art and architecture also reflected the other cultures Muslims mixed with such as Greek, Persian, African, Turkish, and Indian.

There are a few common designs in Islamic art. Muslim art rarely shows human or animal figures—they often consider this “idol worship” (worshiping/praising something besides God). Twisting patterns of plant-like design is common—similar to vines. Calligraphy or artistic handwriting is also found on pieces of art and architecture.
Islamic architects created amazing buildings across the world. The Taj Mahal\(^2\) (pg. 3) and The Dome of the Rock (left) are some of the most famous. Most Islamic buildings are mosques (Islamic churches), but there are many forts, palaces, and tombs. Islamic architecture\(^2\) is often symmetrical. Many Muslim buildings include domes or minarets. A minaret is a tall tower, often found in the four corners of a mosque. The minaret was used to call Muslims to prayer five times each day.

**Islamic Nations Today**

![Map of Muslim Population by Percentage (%)](image)

**Review Questions:**

1. How was the growth of territory ruled by Muslims different from the spread of Islam among the people who lived in those lands?
2. How did Arab/Muslim traders help to develop urban areas (cities)?
3. How was the spread of Islam different in Asia compared to Africa? How do you explain these differences?
4. What contributions did Islamic civilizations make toward the development of our modern world?
5. What characteristics are common in Islamic art and architecture? Provide Examples.
Endnotes (numbered, out of order)

10. Click here to see a list of the number and percentage of Muslims in every nation in the world.
17. Click this link to learn more about the famous explorer Ibn Battuta.
1. Click here to learn more about the Medieval Islamic Economy.
2. Watch this video about a brief history of the mighty Mongolians
3. Click this link to learn more about the Black Death or Black Plague
4. This link will give some basics about the Holy Quran (also spelled Koran)
5. This link will shows a chart that compares Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, which are very similar.
6. Ethnic group is a group of people who share an identity, history, language, ancestors, or a homeland. Click here for a list of the main ethnic groups in the world.
7. Click here to learn more about the Crusades, especially the “Children's Crusade”
8. The Delhi Sultanate was an Islamic Kingdom in India, check it out here.
9. This link will lead to a virtual tour of the Taj Mahal grounds. Click on the red dots to move and use the controls at the bottom to look around.
11. This article talks about how the Muslim Uighurs (wee-gars) fight with the Chinese government today.
12. Learn more about China’s greatest explorer, with the biggest fleet of boat that ever sailed the Indian Ocean, including his massive “treasure ships”.
13. Click here to learn more about the major city of Gao--its history, climate, and culture today.
14. This link will tell about the famous city Timbuktu--huge gold supply and ‘salt for gold’ trade.
15. Click this link to see a photo gallery of trade city Kilwa... what is left of it.
16. This link will lead to a photo gallery of the modern city of Zanzibar, but you can see the history.
18. Click here to learn about the Trans-Saharan trade--mainly trading salt for gold. Seriously.
19. Here is a great webpage about the Silk Road, the things traded, and how it all worked.
20. This link will explain how an Islamic doctor/inventor became known as the “Father of Modern Surgery”.
21. See a picture of the first known flying machine by clicking here.
23. The Wikipedia page on the Taj Mahal is full of pictures and great information--click here to see.
22. This is an excellent gallery of Islamic Art that you can search by region, so you can compare art from Islamic Spain to art from Islamic India.
24. Similar to the above link, this is a gallery of Islamic architecture. Scroll through the pages and click on a building for more detailed pictures.

Sources

The Islam Project The Spread of Islam in History--http://www.islamproject.org/home.htm (Main source of text. some direct quotes are not in quotations.)