The Birth of Islamic Civilization

Islamic civilization exploded onto the world scene in the seventh century AD. From the often-ignored desert margins of Arabia, this new civilization overwhelmed all others around it. It soon built an empire larger than any before it, including the Roman Empire. Under its early leaders, the Islamic Empire grew with tremendous, even dizzying speed, and its legacy endured for centuries to come. This civilization was unique also in that it brought with it from the beginning a religion—Islam—as its central feature and unifying ideology.

The Background to Islam

At the start of the seventh century, the Mediterranean world was ruled by the remnants of the Roman Empire. Rome had been sacked and the last emperor of the west deposed in 476 AD, but in the east the empire lived on, with its capital at Constantinople. This Eastern Roman Empire, sometimes called the Byzantine Empire, maintained a balance of power with the Persian Empire in the east. The Persians were ruled by the Sassanian Dynasty.

The Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire was thoroughly Christianized and spoke primarily Greek. At the top of society was the emperor. Just as there was one God in heaven, so it was believed there should be one emperor on earth. The emperor was considered the representative of Christianity, and his will reflected the will of God. He was sometimes opposed by bishops and clergy of the church, and heresy—beliefs that were opposed to the official doctrines of Christianity promulgated by the emperor and his bishops in Constantinople—was a major problem, especially in areas far away from the capital city, such as Egypt and Syria.

In Persia, by contrast, the rulers represented the Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrianism was nowhere near the totalizing force in Persian society that Christianity was in Byzantine society. While Zoroastrianism was the majority religion in some areas, in the Persian Empire’s western lands, such as modern-day Iraq (where the imperial capital of Ctesiphon was located), Christianity and Judaism were perhaps more influential. Indeed, many Christian heretics banished from the Byzantine Empire made their homes in the Persian Empire.

While the Byzantine and Persian Empires maintained a balance of power in the late ancient world, this was sometimes punctuated by warfare. In 602 AD, the most ferocious war between the two powers broke out. Completely unprepared, the Byzantine Empire was overrun. Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Asia Minor were captured by the Persians. Slowly, the Byzantines recovered their strength, struck back, reconquered their lands, and defeated the Persians by 628.

Arabia was largely overlooked by these two battling superpowers. Both the Persian and Byzantine Empires had allied themselves with various Arab tribes, and for centuries these tribes fought each other in proxy wars. Still, Arabia was not seen as strategically important to the major powers, and was regarded as mostly a desert wasteland, though a place where some trade could happen.
The Arabs in this period were not united. They were made up of many tribes, most of which were Bedouins—people who lived nomadic, migratory existences, moving with their herds from oasis to oasis, eking out a living in the harsh climate of Arabia. Others had settled down in cities, especially on the coast. Two such cities were Yathrib and Mecca. Among the Arabs, in cities or the desert, kin-based clan groups were the basic social unit. Close family units, or clans, offered protection and assistance to their members. Every Arab tribe was made up of several clans.

Muhammad and the Birth of Islam

The Prophet Muhammad was born and lived most of his life in Mecca, one of the important trade cities of Arabia. Mecca was the home of the Kaaba, an important shrine to the Arabian gods. There was also a large population of Jews living in Arabia, and perhaps a few Christians, but most Arabs were polytheists. Most Arabs worshipped Allah as the creator god, but also held that he had daughter gods, some of which were al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat. They worshipped these gods at the Kaaba, and fighting was prohibited around the sacred place. Because the ban on fighting made Mecca a safe place to meet, it became a major trading city, with many markets and fairs. Muhammad was born of the Quraysh tribe, which controlled Mecca’s trade industry. Many of the Quraysh led trade caravans, especially trading in the Byzantine Empire. Muhammad was born into the poorest clan of the Quraysh, however, called the Hashim. The richest and most powerful clan, which ran Mecca, was the Umayyad clan. Muhammad was orphaned at a young age, and brought up by his uncle. He struggled as a caravan trader, but eventually he was offered marriage to Khadijah, an older, financially stable widow. He made several trips to Byzantine Syria to trade, and tradition holds that he came into contact with a Christian monk there.

Muhammad is said to have taken brief visits to the desert for meditation, and in 610 AD, around the age of forty, Islamic tradition holds that he had his first revelation while in the desert. It is said that he was visited by the angel Gabriel on Mount Hira. He continued to receive these relations for the rest of his life. They instructed him that there was only one God—Allah—and that all people should practice monotheism instead of worshipping other gods. Muhammad was told that one should submit to Allah, and it is from the Arabic word for submission that the word Islam derives. The revelations stated that Allah created all things and that soon he would bring about the Last Judgment, when the world would be destroyed and made anew, and all would be resurrected and undergo judgment by Allah. Following a set code of ethics and believing that there was no God but Allah would bring salvation, but failure to do so would bring damnation.

Muhammad returned to Mecca with his revelations. While he was initially afraid, his wife Khadijah encouraged him to remain receptive to the revelations and to tell them to others. Three years after his first revelation, Muhammad began to preach openly to the people of Mecca, telling them what he had heard. He said that Allah had chosen him as a prophet. Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, and many others had been prophets too. Thus, Christians and Jews were also followers of the One God, called People of the Book. But Muhammad said that the teachings given to them by their prophets had
been corrupted by greedy priests and those who feared the truth. Allah had chosen Muhammad to recite the teachings anew, as the last prophet. The revelations given to him by God through Gabriel resulted in the Qur’an. Muhammad claimed that all who followed him were part of the Islamic community, the *umma*, which transcended clan and kinship boundaries. All Muslims, followers of Islam, were part of the Islamic family.

While he attracted many followers, the elites of the Quraysh were hostile to Muhammad’s teachings. First of all, if Muhammad was right, their ancestors were in hell for worshipping the pagan gods of the Arabs. Such a thought was unacceptable to Arab elites, for whom the prestige of their ancestors was of central importance. Secondly, Muhammad’s teachings undermined the importance of the gods, which not only seemed impious, but challenged Mecca’s place as a sanctuary of the gods. If the Kaaba lost its meaning, Mecca would cease to be an important trade center. Finally, Muhammad emphasized the ethics of the individual believer, and unity of all within the Islamic community, instead of loyalty to family and clan. But it was clan loyalty upon which the Meccan social order was based. Because Muhammad’s teachings opposed the practices and values of the upper classes, the Quraysh leaders shunned Muhammad and all who followed him. As time went on, their hostility became harsher and harsher.

**The Hijra and Muhammad in Medina**

While some of Muhammad’s followers fled Mecca early on and found safe haven in the Axumite Kingdom of Ethiopia, Muhammad remained in Mecca and continued to spread his teachings. Muhammad, however, received an invitation from the people of Yathrib to come act as mediator in disputes within the city between the several Jewish and Bedouin clans who lived there. In 622 AD, after Muhammad was warned of a plot to assassinate him, he and his followers fled Mecca in the middle of the night and journeyed north to Yathrib.

This event, the Hijra, represents the beginning of the Islamic era, and so 622 AD marks the first year of the Islamic calendar, 1 AH (“after Hijra”). Soon, Yathrib became known as *Madinat un-Nabi*, the “City of the Prophet,” or Medina for short. Muhammad gained new followers and was made the leader of Medina, and set about ruling the city in accordance with the divine revelations he received.

However, Muhammad and his followers from Mecca had little to live on, and faced some opposition within Medina. In addition, the Quraysh leaders of Mecca still considered Muhammad a threat, and were not happy that he was governing a nearby city. Thus, to both gain income and weaken the Quraysh, Muhammad and his followers began raiding the Quraysh trading caravans leaving Mecca. The Quraysh began sending armed escorts, and soon these raids turned into pitched battles. In the first major battle (Battle of Badr) Muhammad and his followers were victorious and killed several Quraysh leaders. However, under a new ruler, Abu Sufyan, the Quraysh defeated Muhammad’s forces at the Battle of Uhud and soon set about trying to capture Medina and depose Muhammad. They besieged the city in the Battle of the Trench, but failed to breach its defenses.
In the aftermath of the Battle of the Trench, Muhammad learned that a number of the Jewish tribes of Medina had secretly helped the Quraysh. He exiled some of the Jews, and had a large number executed. This is usually seen as the end of Muslim attempts at integrating Judaism into the Islamic community.

With neither Muhammad nor the Quraysh victorious in their struggle, there began a period of negotiation. Muhammad and his followers left Medina to go on pilgrimage to Mecca, but were stopped by the soldiers of the Quraysh at a place called Hudaybiyyah, where a peace was negotiated. Muhammad and his followers agreed to wait one year before going to Mecca on pilgrimage and gave in to harsh demands from the Quraysh. In return, a ten-year peace was agreed upon, and Muhammad was given freedom to preach his message without opposition. In the next year, Muhammad built allegiances with the Bedouin tribes, and returned to Mecca the following year for pilgrimage, as promised. Within another year, Muhammad had built up a large enough base of support to march on Mecca. Abu Sufyan surrendered the city without a fight, and Muhammad went with his followers to the Kaaba, destroyed the pagan idols around it, and dedicated it to the one God. With the rise of Islam, the Kaaba and Mecca would not lose their status as the Quraysh leaders had feared. Instead, Muhammad’s example of pilgrimage to Mecca became a standard part of the religion, and Muslims pray, to this day, in the direction of the Kaaba, which is considered the holiest site in Islam.

Muhammad reported that it was built by the prophet Abraham in ancient times and was only later polluted with pagan associations.

With his victory over the Quraysh leadership, Muhammad united Mecca and Medina under his leadership. Their unified power made them a major force in Arabia. His Quraysh opponents quickly converted to Islam. Instead of treating the Quraysh leaders harshly, Muhammad accepted their conversion and welcomed them into the Islamic community. He gave many of the important Quraysh leaders who had opposed him, such as Abu Sufyan, important positions in his new government.

The Death of Muhammad and the Ridda Wars

Muhammad died in Medina in 632 AD, and his death came as something of a surprise to the Islamic community. The question immediately arose of who should succeed him. A group of Muhammad’s supporters gathered together and chose Abu Bakr, Muhammad’s father-in-law and close companion, as his successor. He was given the title of caliph, or “successor,” and granted authority to rule the Islamic community. The Islamic Empire, from this period on, is also called the caliphate, as it was ruled by a caliph. Caliphs, however, were political leaders and not considered prophets.

Under Abu Bakr the major threat to the Islamic community was abandonment of Islam by various tribes that had converted under Muhammad. Some of these tribes went back to their old pagan ways. Some continued to believe in Muhammad’s revelations, but wanted to be politically independent of Mecca and Medina. Others claimed that they had their own prophets, who emulated Muhammad and claimed new revelations.

In the course of a yearlong struggle, called the Ridda Wars, the armies of Mecca and Medina defeated these opponents. The rival prophets were suppressed and
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rebellious tribes defeated. In doing so, Mecca and Medina guaranteed that a unified concept of Islam would be recognized throughout Arabia, and they also ensured their own political domination over the rest of the peninsula. All other tribes had to pay tribute to Mecca and Medina, and send troops to fight for them. Suddenly, Mecca and Medina were quite powerful, dominating Arabia, and poised to compete on the world stage. Many of Muhammad’s companions had emerged from the conflicts with a great deal of military experience. In addition, the Bedouin lifestyle was based on raiding, but according to Islam, Muslims could not fight other Muslims. With newfound political and military power, and an army hungry for conquest, the newly formed Islamic state began looking outside Arabia for military expansion.

The Reign of Umar and Islamic Conquests

After Mecca and Medina’s victory over their enemies in the Ridda Wars, Abu Bakr sent Muslim armies to raid the Persian Empire and Byzantine Syria. Abu Bakr died in 634 AD, but his successor, Umar, directed the Muslim armies to continue their attacks against the Byzantines and Persians. These two powers, the superpowers of their day, had been fatally weakened by their war against each other. The exact timeline of the Islamic conquests is hazy because of conflicting accounts, but by 636 AD, the Arabs defeated the Byzantine army in Syria at the Battle of Yarmouk. As a result, the Byzantines had to abandon Syria, which was occupied by the Muslims. In the same year, a separate Muslim army defeated the Persian military at the Battle of Qadisiyyah. The Persian king fled his capital at Ctesiphon, which the Arabs besieged and conquered. Soon the Persian Sassanid Empire was completely conquered by the Muslims. The Persian king was robbed and murdered while fleeing in the northern part of his empire, and the Persian royal family went to China.

The Byzantine Empire was more resilient than the Persians and survived the onslaught, but lost most of its lands. Syria and Palestine were overrun. The caliph Umar himself journeyed to Jerusalem to take possession of the city for the Islamic caliphate. Soon after, he sent one of his generals, Amr ibn al-As, to attack Byzantine Egypt. Ibn al-As had been a merchant who traded in Egypt, and the country was familiar to him. He quickly conquered it with a relatively small force.

The speed of the Islamic conquests, especially during the reign of Umar, is shocking. Within a short time, the two world superpowers were humbled. There are a number of reasons that the Muslims may have been able to conquer these lands so quickly. For one, both the Byzantines and Persians were militarily exhausted from their war against one another, and had little strength to resist. Another reason for the rapid success of the Muslims is that many of the Christians in the Byzantine lands conquered by the Muslims were considered heretics by the emperor and were persecuted by the Byzantine state. These people would not have been willing to risk their lives to protect Byzantine authority, and many seem to have even gone over to help the Muslims. Finally, the Muslims offered mild terms of surrender to individual cities. If a city surrendered without resistance, it would be left alone in exchange for accepting the authority of Mecca and Medina and paying a tax to the Islamic state.
As People of the Books, Christians and Jews who surrendered to the Muslims were allowed to practice their religion unharmed. For heretics, this was a better situation than they had under the Byzantine Empire, who persecuted anyone who did not follow the religion of the emperor. Conquered non-Muslims, however, did have to pay the *Jaziya*, a special tax to the Islamic state. In exchange for the tax, non-Muslims were protected by the state and exempted from military duty.

While the conquered people were mostly left alone, in the lands that they conquered the Muslims set up garrison towns where Muslims could come to live in a community with each other, away from the non-Muslim populace. They also housed the new Muslim governments of the regions. Such towns soon turned into cities, and replaced the old cities in importance. For example, Alexandria in Egypt was soon overshadowed by the Muslim garrison city of Fustat, which eventually became known as Cairo.

Besides the rapid conquests, Umar’s reign is known for an emphasis on piety. He banned drinking among Muslims, and expected strict moral uprightness. He embodied these values himself. Though over the course of his reign the Islamic Empire became perhaps the most powerful empire in the world, he continued to live as he had as a commoner in Arabia. Supposedly, when he entered Jerusalem in triumph, he was dressed in worn-out clothes that shocked the people of the city. Umar was assassinated in 644 AD by an angry captive who had been taken as a slave by the Muslim armies.

*The Caliph Uthman*

With the death of Umar, the leaders of the Islamic community once again came together to choose a successor. They picked Uthman, a member of the Umayyad branch of the Quraysh from Mecca. Uthman had supported Muhammad from early on (one of Muhammad’s few followers from the Meccan elite), but he was brother to Abu Sufyán, who had been Muhammad’s harshest opponent before his late conversion. Indeed, Uthman came from the wealthy merchant class that had long represented the opposition to Muhammad.

Still, Uthman’s great wealth and trading experience made him an able administrator. Muslim tradition also holds that it was under Uthman’s reign that the Qur’an was compiled in a single book. Muslims had memorized or written down the revelations recited by Muhammad, but over time people began debating the exact wording of certain revelations, and some of the written forms differed from one another. Uthman set up a committee that gathered the complete revelations and compiled them together as a single Qur’an. All other written versions were burned, making the Uthman text the standard version of the Qur’an.

Despite these efforts, as time went on Uthman proved unpopular among a number of Muslims. He appointed members of his own clan, the Umayyads, to important positions. This nepotism seemed especially wrong because many of the family members he appointed had been long-time enemies of Muhammad. A number of Muhammad’s closest supporters who were not from Uthman’s family were left without
powerful positions. It seemed like the Quraysh elites, who fought Muhammad and then surrendered, had in the end triumphed by taking control of the Muslim state.

The Muslims in Egypt rebelled against Uthman. One thousand of them journeyed to Medina, where they besieged Uthman in his house. They were angry at Uthman’s policies of nepotism and apparently wanted Uthman replaced by Ali, who was from the family of Muhammad and an important representative of the less wealthy early supporters of Muhammad. Still, Uthman had supporters in Medina, and soon the city was embattled in street fighting between allies and opponents of Uthman. At some point, partisans broke into Uthman’s house and killed him, though the identity of the killers is not known.

The Islamic Community Divided

With the assassination of Uthman, he was replaced at Medina by Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. Muawiya, Uthman’s nephew and the Umayyad governor of Syria, however, demanded that Ali turn over the killers of Uthman. When Ali did not do this, Muawiya refused to recognize Ali as caliph and rebelled against his authority. Ali was also opposed by Aisha, one of the wives of Muhammad.

The tension over who would rule the caliphate tore apart the Islamic community. A civil war, called a Fitna, from the Arabic word for “chaos” or “upheaval,” broke out. In the end, Ali died and was replaced as caliph by Muawiya, who created the Umayyad Dynasty, which was descended from the family of Muhammad’s Quraysh enemies and ruled the caliphate for nearly a century. Those who opposed Muawiya and his family, and instead believed that the descendants of Ali should rule, became known as Shiites. The conflict created by the power struggle between Muawiya and Ali continues to this day as a fundamental division within the Islamic community, the Sunni-Shiite controversy.

Summary:

- Arabia was long ignored by the two main powers of the time, the Byzantine and Persian Empires.
- The people of Arabia were mostly polytheists. They lived as nomadic Bedouins or in small trading cities, and family and clan relations were of the utmost social importance.
- Muhammad had his first revelation in 610 AD, at the age of forty. Within three years he began preaching his revelations to the people of Mecca, his home city. The revelations that Muslims believe were given to Muhammad by God through the angel Gabriel are called the Qur’an.
- Muhammad’s message threatened the elite of Mecca, as it threatened the clan loyalty upon which the social order was based, and opposed the practices and values of the upper classes.
- Muhammad and his followers were forced to flee Mecca in 622 AD and journeyed to Yathrib, or Medina, where Muhammad took over as leader of the city.
• Muhammad and his followers clashed with the rulers of Mecca in a series of battles. In the end, they reached a stalemate, in which Muhammad was allowed to continue his preaching. He gained enough followers that he was able to take Mecca without a fight.
• With Muhammad’s victory, the Meccan elite converted to Islam, Muhammad cleansed the city of pagan worship, and Mecca and Medina became united as a single, powerful political entity.
• After Muhammad died, he was succeeded by Abu Bakr, who ruled as caliph or “successor.” Abu Bakr defeated the Arabian enemies of Mecca and Medina in the Ridda Wars.
• In 634, the Islamic conquest of the Byzantine and Persian Empires began. Both empires fell quickly. Persia was completely conquered, while the Byzantine Empire survived, but lost control of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt.
• Some reasons for the success of the early Islamic conquests were the weakness of the Byzantine and Persian Empires after a long war against each other, Islamic tolerance of all People of the Book, light terms of surrender, and the comparatively better treatment heretics and Jews would enjoy under the Muslims.
• According to Islamic tradition, the caliph Uthman compiled the official copy of the Qur’an. He was disliked, however, for his nepotism and support for members of his own Umayyad clan of Meccan elites.
• After being assassinated, Uthman was succeeded by Ali. The division in the Islamic community caused by this event would lead to the first Islamic civil war, the development of the Sunni-Shiite split, and the rise of the Umayyad Dynasty.