

Chapter Six

The Rise of Islam

By the sixth century, unified Roman control over the Mediterranean basin had been shattered. Much of the northeastern part of the Empire would remain in the hands of the Eastern Roman Empire, which was evolving into the Byzantine Empire. To the south and east, major changes would soon take place that would have a great impact on world history.

In the seventh century, Islam arose among the nomads and city dwellers of the Arabian Desert. Led by their prophet, Muhammad, followers of Islam united most of the Arab world by the time of his death in 632. Over the course of the following century, these Islamic Arabs defeated the Persian Empire, took control of lands bordering the southern Mediterranean Sea from the Byzantine Empire, and were pushing farther east toward India and moving north into the Iberian peninsula. By the eighth century, much of the Mediterranean basin, formerly controlled by the Roman or Byzantine Empires, was under the authority of the Islamic Empire.

By the 10th and 11th centuries, this Arabic empire would lose much of its political unity and initial zeal, but

Islam would continue to expand in different ways in the following centuries—particularly farther south in Africa and farther east in Asia. Combining Arabic, Greco-Roman, Persian, and other sources, Islamic culture would become permanently established over large areas of the world.

The sources in this chapter will examine the rise and spread of Islam, particularly in the earlier period when it was so closely tied to Arabic civilization. In the process of doing this, the sources will address several fundamental questions. What was the nature of Islamic faith? What were some of the intellectual and cultural traditions that were valued in the Islamic world? In what ways was Islamic society physically recognizable? How did Islamic customs differ from customs in other societies? Was Islam oriented primarily toward the West or toward the East?

Together, the sources provide an introduction to this civilization, particularly in the areas around the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Middle East. In the following and subsequent chapters, Islam's expansion and influence farther east in Asia and farther south in Africa will be examined.



