

Webquest

The Expansion of Islam and the Culture of the Islamic Empire

This webquest is divided into two parts. The first part should only take you about 10-15 minutes. The point of this part is for you to read about how Islam expanded under the Arab conquests during the century following Muhammad's death. The main goals are:

- ✳ to reinforce what you have read in your textbook about the historical expansion of Islam
- ✳ to review some of the geography of the Middle East

Part I:

As you will recall from your textbook reading and from class discussions, Islam began to expand under the first four so-called "rightly-guided" caliphs. Abu Bakr (r. 632-634) was succeeded by Umar (r. 634-644). Both of these caliphs led their Arab military forces against the two major imperial states of the period: the Byzantine Empire, which also controlled the Nile Valley, Palestine, and Syria (see map at <http://www.israelipalestinianprocon.org/NewMaps5/330-700large.html>), and the Sassanid Empire of Persia, which not only controlled the plateau of Iran but also the ancient region of the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. Take note of the territory (called "Contested Territory" on the map key) on this second map that had been fought over for much of the 6th and 7th centuries C.E. between the two great imperial powers of the Byzantines and the Persians (see map at <http://www.fsmitha.com/h1/map20per.htm>). The success of the Arab armies was due in part to the growing weakness of these two empires from continuous warfare and the tendency of the indigenous peoples of the region to prefer the Muslim conquerors to either the Byzantines or the Persians.

Under Abu Bakr, the caliph's forces were primarily occupied with confronting and defeating challenges by other Arab tribes within the Arabian peninsula. Under his successor Umar, however, the Arab armies began to spill out of their homeland of Arabia northward into the ancient centers of the Middle East (see map at

http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/imageislam/umar634.gif for a visual representation of Islamic expansion under the second caliph). Damascus fell to Umar's forces in 635 C.E. and Jerusalem in 637 C.E. In these territories he established the *kharaj*, a tax paid by landowners and peasants based upon their wealth, and the *jizya*, another tax paid by non-Muslims, particularly Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, for the freedom to worship as they chose. Turning eastward the Muslim armies won a decisive victory against the Persians in 636 C.E. and proceeded to occupy the Sassanid capital of Ctesiphon on the Tigris river (look briefly at two photographs of some of the ruins of the ancient city of Ctesiphon at the following website http://www.allempires.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=99&PN=11).

Turning westward the Muslim armies conquered the Byzantine fortress just south of Cairo in 641 C.E., and in the following year the Patriarch of Alexandria surrendered this major seaport in the Nile Delta, giving the Arabs more direct access to the eastern Mediterranean. At the time of Umar's death in 644 (he was murdered by a Persian Christian), he controlled an empire second in size only to that of the Chinese.

Although Uthman's (r. 644-656 C.E.) conquests were not as extensive as those of his predecessor, several significant events occurred during his reign. He appointed his cousin, Mu'awiya, as governor of Syria and commissioned a navy that allowed the Muslim armies to conquer the island of Cyprus in 649 C.E. In addition, the conquest of Persia was completed by the Arab takeover of the easternmost province of Khurasan, the traditional eastern boundary of which was the Oxus River (look at the following map to find Khurasan and the Oxus River <http://fsmitha.com/h3/map13-ti.htm>). The most important achievement of Uthman's caliphate, however, was his sponsorship of a definitive text of the Qur'an which remained the standard for centuries thereafter.

You will recall the civil war that erupted during the caliphate of Ali (r. 656-661) which resulted from his rivalry with Mu'awiya and ended ultimately in Ali's assassination. This period of civil war caused a permanent rift within the Islamic community, with the Shi'ite (Shi'a) supporters of Ali opposing the Umayyads and their successors, who were to come to be known as the Sunni.

The center of the Islamic empire under the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 C.E.) was Damascus. The early years of Umayyad rule witnessed another Shi'ite uprising, this time under Ali's second son, Husain, who was killed at the Battle of Karbala in 680 C.E. In terms of territorial expansion, under the Umayyads Islam began to push westward across the continent of Africa into the region which they called the *Maghrib* (literally "the West"), that part of Africa along the coast of Mediterranean Sea from present-day Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, which constituted the Byzantine province of Africa (see the historical map at

http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/islam/caliphate/umTerritory.html). Then beginning in 711 C.E. the Berbers, the indigenous nomadic peoples of the *Maghrib*, crossed the strait of Gibraltar and conquered most of the Iberian peninsula (modern Spain and Portugal). The Muslims set up their capital in the city of Cordoba and called the territory in southern Spain over which they ruled al-Andalus, modern Andalucia (see map at

http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/imageislam/muslimSpain750Large.gif.

As a result of growing corruption among the Umayyad rulers and discontent among non-Arab Muslims called the *mawali*, the caliphate was seized by the Abbasids in 750 C.E., and the capital of the Islamic Empire was moved to Baghdad. Muslim territory was extended once again eastward into Central Asia, beyond the Oxus River and through the Hindu Kush mountains into the Indus River Valley, or modern Pakistan (see map at

http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/imageislam/centralAsia661.gif).

The Abbasid caliphate was not to be toppled until the Mongol invasion of 1258, but the centralized control of the caliph in Baghdad would be slowly eroded by Turkic-speaking peoples moving into the Empire and the growing independent authority of regional governments in Damascus (Syria), Cairo (Egypt), and Cordoba (Spain). But in spite of this growing political division, the period from 750 to 1258 C.E. was one of increasing trading contacts, and thus growing amounts of wealth, within the various parts of the Empire, and each of the major regions shared in a cultural revival that witnessed significant developments in learning, literature, architecture, and the arts.

Part II:

In the second part of this webquest, you will learn about some of the major developments in architecture and the arts in the Islamic Empire by visiting a number of different websites dedicated to some of the important monuments and artifacts from the period.

You should begin by clicking on the following link [The Expansion of Islam and the Culture of the Islamic Empire](#) and saving the document in Word. (Follow the directions at the top when you open the document). This worksheet will be handed in at the end of the period, or if you do not have time to complete the exercise in class, you should save it and/or e-mail it to yourself and complete it for homework.

Once you have saved the worksheet, you will need to keep the document open, because during the activity you will need to switch back and forth between reading the text and visiting various links on the website and answering questions on the worksheet. Be sure to save your worksheet periodically so that you do not lose your work.

In this activity you will visit a number of different websites. You will retrace your steps that you have just followed on the path of Muslim conquest through some of the major cities of the Islamic Empire. As you answer the questions associated with the various sites, take note of those stylistic elements that the Muslims in the different regions inherited from earlier cultural traditions as well as those new developments more closely associated with the spread of the Islamic faith.

Stage 1:

You will begin your tour in the Byzantine provinces of Syria and Palestine. In this region is found one of the earliest surviving Islamic buildings, **The Dome of the Rock** (go to http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/Dome_of_the_Rock.html (scroll down and click on the images) AND <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/4205/19933> (scroll down and read several of the paragraphs so that you will be able to answer the questions on the worksheet).

In this stage of your journey you will also visit the **Great Mosque of Damascus** (scroll down and click on some of the images)

http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/Great_Mosque_of_Damascus.html and

http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/islam/caliphate/umPolitics.html (scroll down to the image).

Stage 2:

Heading west from the Levant (the eastern end of the Mediterranean) through the Sinai and into the Nile Valley, you will come to the center of culture of the Fatimid dynasty (c. 900-1171 CE) in Egypt. In the tenth century a Muslim leader, Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi, claimed the caliphate through descent from Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, and his descendants established their capital at Cairo. Here you will visit the famous Ibn Tulun Mosque. Look at the following images of the exterior of the Ibn Tulun mosque

http://rubens.anu.edu.au/raider7/egypt_2005/cairo/mosques/ibn_tulun/exterior/east/

What differences do you notice between the style of this architecture and that of the Great Mosque of Damascus? Then characterize the stone tracery of the exterior windows. How would you describe the design?

http://rubens.anu.edu.au/raider7/egypt_2005/cairo/mosques/ibn_tulun/exterior/west/

What do you suppose was the purpose of the fountain in the interior of the courtyard?

http://rubens.anu.edu.au/raider7/egypt_2005/cairo/mosques/ibn_tulun/interior/fountain/

Stage 3:

The Umayyad dynasty centered in the southern region of Spain that the Muslims called al-Andalus, modern Andalusia, established a brilliant court at the capital city of **Cordoba**. Look at the image of the **Great Mosque** and read about its origins and characteristics.

<http://witcombe.sbc.edu/sacredplaces/cordoba.html>

Then look at an image of the interior great hall.

<http://www.islamicity.com/Culture/MOSQUES/Europe/TMp105b.htm>

This image illustrates particularly well how Muslim architects often built a covered space on the side of the courtyard facing Mecca. On Fridays when there was public prayer at the mosque such covered areas provided shade and shelter from the sun and the elements. Finally, look at the following image and describe the interior of the dome.

<http://www.islamicity.com/Culture/MOSQUES/Europe/cordoba.htm>

Andalusia is notable not only for its religious but also its secular architecture. Unlike many other areas of the Islamic Empire, where earlier palaces have been destroyed in part or in whole over the centuries, one of the most famous of the palaces of Muslim Spain survives virtually intact. It is the **Alhambra Palace** located in the city of Granada. Go to the following website and scroll down and click on the images.

http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/The_Alhambra.html

Stage 4:

With the rise of the Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad after 750 C.E., a cultural revival also occurred in the East as the Muslim invaders absorbed much of the culture of the ancient Persian Empire. In 637 Muslim armies captured the capital of the Persian Empire, Ctesiphon, (click on this link and look at some of the remains of the city) <http://www.nestorian.org/ctesiphon.html>

but they ultimately established their capital about 20 miles upstream on the Tigris River at the city of Baghdad. The structures built in this part of the Middle East

(primarily modern Iraq and Iran) would ultimately draw on numerous influences, from the ancient Sumerian and Babylonian cultures of Mesopotamia, as well as the Persians and the Turkic-speaking peoples who began moving into the region in the ninth century C.E.

For a period during the ninth century the Abbasid caliphs moved their capital north to the city of Samarra. Click on the following link and scroll down to the images (http://www.farhangsara.com/history_abbasid.htm) The famous minaret from the mosque built during this period is likely a familiar image to you. <http://www.islamicity.com/Culture/Mosques/Asia/TMp81a.htm>

After you have ensured that you have answered the questions on the worksheet up to this point, proceed to a later center of Persian influence. Although from a later period, the Masjid-i Shah mosque in Isfahan, a city in the northern part of modern Iran, illustrates several other common features of mosques. In the covered interior space of a mosque, the wall facing Mecca (the *qibla*) was often the only side that was ornately decorated. A recessed area in this wall called a *mihrab* indicated to the faithful the direction of the holy city of Mecca. Click on the following website to view an image of a typical *qibla* wall

<http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/4/4.615/images/13/1096.jpeg> and a *mihrab*

http://faculty.evansville.edu/rl29/art105/img/islamic_mihrab.jpg.

On this side of the wall were also found one or more pulpits or *minbars*, from which the imam or religious leader would lead the faithful in prayer.

<http://www.islamicity.com/Culture/Mosques/Asia/TMp130b.htm>

The exterior dome of this building, as well as the *mihrab* in the image above, is an excellent example of the decorative design common in the Islamic world called *arabesques*.

<http://www.islamicity.com/Culture/Mosques/Asia/TMp129a.htm>