

All together, the thousands of titles and authors commented on by al-Nadim provide both a panorama of what interested book buyers in tenth-century Baghdad and a saddening picture of how profound the loss of knowledge has been since that glorious era.

THE ORIGINS OF ISLAM

The Arabian Peninsula Before Muhammad

The Arabs of 600 C.E. lived exclusively in the Arabian peninsula and on the desert fringes of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. Along their Euphrates frontier, the Sasanids (see Chapter 7) subsidized nomadic Arab chieftains to protect their empire from invasion. The Byzantines did the same with Arabs on their Jordanian frontier. Arab pastoralists farther to the south remained isolated and independent, seldom engaging the attention of the shahs and emperors. It was in these interior Arabian lands that the religion of Islam took form.

Throughout history more people living on the Arabian peninsula have subsisted as farmers than as pastoral nomads. Farming villages support the comparatively dense population of Yemen, where abundant rainfall waters the highlands during the spring monsoon. Small inlets along the southern coast favored fishing and trading communities. The enormous sea of sand known as the “Empty Quarter” isolated many southern regions from the Arabian interior. In the seventh century, most people in southern Arabia knew more about Africa, India, and the Persian Gulf than about the forbidding interior and the scattered camel- and sheep-herding nomads who lived there.

Caravan trading provided a rare link among peoples. Nomads derived income from providing camels, guides, and safe passage to merchants bringing the primary product of the south, the aromatic resins frankincense and myrrh, to northern customers. Return caravans brought manufactured products from Mesopotamia and Syria.

Nomad dominance of the caravan trade received a boost from the invention of militarily efficient camel saddles. This contributed to the rise of Arab-dominated caravan cities and to Arab pastoralists becoming the primary suppliers of animal power throughout the region. By 600 C.E., wheeled vehicles—mostly ox carts and horse-drawn chariots—had all but disappeared from the Middle East, replaced by pack camels and donkeys.

As explained in Chapter 7, Arabs who accompanied the caravans became familiar with the cultures and lifestyles of the Sasanid and Byzantine Empires, and many of those who pastured their herds on the imperial frontiers adopted one form or another of Christianity. Even in the interior deserts, Semitic polytheism, with its worship of natural forces and celestial bodies, began to encounter more sophisticated religions.

Mecca, a late-blooming caravan city, occupies a barren mountain valley halfway between Yemen and Syria and somewhat inland from the Red Sea coast (see Map 8.1). A nomadic kin group known as the Quraysh (**koo-RYYSH**) settled in Mecca in the fifth century and assumed control of trade. Mecca rapidly achieved a measure of prosperity, partly because it was too far from Byzantine Syria, Sasanid Iraq, and Ethiopian-controlled Yemen for them to attack it.

A cubical shrine with idols inside called the Ka’ba (**KAH-buh**), a holy well called Zamzam, and a sacred precinct surrounding the two wherein killing was prohibited contributed to the emergence of Mecca as a pilgrimage site. Some Meccans associated the shrine with stories known to Jews and Christians. They regarded Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic) as the builder of the Ka’ba, and they identified a site outside Mecca as the location where God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. The son was not Isaac (Ishaq in Arabic), the son of Sarah, but Ishmael (Isma’il in Arabic), the son of Hagar, cited in the Bible as the forefather of the Arabs.

Muhammad in Mecca

Born in Mecca in 570, **Muhammad** grew up an orphan in the house of his uncle. He engaged in trade and married a Quraysh widow named Khadija (**kah-DEE-juh**), whose caravan inter-

AP* Exam Tip The origin of Islam is an important topic on both the multiple choice and the essay section of the AP exam.

Caravan Trade

Mecca City in western Arabia; birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and ritual center of the Islamic religion.

Mecca, a Caravan City

Pilgrimage Center

Muhammad Arab prophet; founder of religion of Islam.

CHRONOLOGY

The Arab Lands

Iran and Central Asia

200		
	570–632 Life of the Prophet Muhammad	
600	634 Conquests of Iraq and Syria commence	
	639–42 Conquest of Egypt by Arabs	
	656–61 Ali caliph; first civil war	
	661–750 Umayyad Caliphate rules from Damascus	
700	711 Berbers and Arabs invade Spain from North Africa	711 Arabs capture Sind in India
	750 Beginning of Abbasid Caliphate	747 Abbasid revolt begins in Khurasan
	755 Umayyad state established in Spain	
	776–809 Caliphate of Harun al-Rashid	
800		835–92 Abbasid capital moved from Baghdad to Samarra
		875 Independent Samanid state founded in Bukhara
900	909 Fatimids seize North Africa, found Shi’ite Caliphate	
	929 Abd al-Rahman III declares himself caliph in Cordoba	
	945 Shi’ite Buyids take control in Baghdad	945 Buyids from northern Iran take control of Abbasid Caliphate
	969 Fatimids conquer Egypt	
1000		1036 Beginning of Turkish Seljuk rule in Khurasan
	1055 Seljuk Turks take control in Baghdad	
	1099 First Crusade captures Jerusalem	
	1171 Fall of Fatimid Egypt	
	1187 Saladin recaptures Jerusalem	
	1250 Mamluks control Egypt	
	1258 Mongols sack Baghdad and end Abbasid Caliphate	
	1260 Mamluks defeat Mongols at Ain Jalut	

ests he superintended. Their son died in childhood, but several daughters survived. Around 610 Muhammad began meditating at night in the mountainous terrain around Mecca. During one night vigil, known to later tradition as the “Night of Power and Excellence,” a being whom Muhammad later understood to be the angel Gabriel (Jibra’il in Arabic) spoke to him:

Proclaim! In the name of your Lord who created. Created man from a clot of congealed blood. Proclaim! And your Lord is the Most Bountiful. He who has taught by the pen. Taught man that which he knew not.¹

“Messenger of God”

For three years Muhammad shared this and subsequent revelations only with close friends and family members. This period culminated in his conviction that he was hearing the words of God (Allah [**AH-luh**] in Arabic). Khadija, his uncle’s son Ali, his friend Abu Bakr (**ah-boo BAK-uh**), and others close to him shared this conviction. The revelations continued until Muhammad’s death in 632.