CHAPTER 8: The Rise of Islam, 600-1200

I. The Origins of Islam

A. The Arabian Peninsula Before Muhammad

1. Most Arabs were settled people. Nomads were a minority, but they were important in the caravan trade that linked Yemen to Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. This caravan trade gave rise to and supported the merchants of caravan cities such as Petra and Palmyra. It also brought Arabs into contact with Byzantine and Sasanid civilizations.

2. The nomads were polytheists who worshiped natural forces and celestial bodies, but they were also familiar with other religions, including Christianity.

3. Mecca was a caravan city between Yemen and Syria. Mecca was also a cult center that attracted nomads to worship the idols enshrined in a small cubical shrine called the Ka’ba.

B. Muhammad in Mecca

1. Muhammad was born in Mecca, grew up as an orphan, and then got involved in the caravan trade. In 610, he began receiving revelations that he concluded were the words of the one god, Allah. Others in his community believed that he might be possessed by a spirit.

2. The message of Muhammad’s revelations was that there is one god, Allah, and that all people should submit to him. At the final judgement, those who had submitted to Allah would go to paradise; those who had not, to hell. Muhammad’s revelations were considered to be the final revelations, following and superceding the earlier revelations of God to Noah, Moses, and Jesus.
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C. The Formation of the Umma

1. Muhammad and his followers fled from Mecca to Medina in 622. In Medina, Muhammad’s Meccan followers and converts from Medina formed a single community of believers, the umma.

2. During the last decade of Muhammad’s life, the umma in Medina developed in the core of the Islamic state that would later expand to include all of Arabia and lands beyond in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

3. Muhammad’s father-in-law Abu Bakr took over leadership of the umma as the successor (caliph) of Muhammad. Abu Bakr faced two main tasks: standardization of the Islamic religion and consolidation of the Islamic state. Abu Bakr successfully re-established Muslim authority over the Arabs and oversaw the compilation and organization of the Quran in book form.

4. Disagreements over the question of succession to the caliphate emerged following the assassination of the third caliph, Uthman. A civil war was fought between those who supported keeping the caliphate in Uthman’s clan (the Ummaya) and those who supported the claim of Muhammad’s first cousin and son-in-law, Ali. The Umayya forces won and established the Umayyad Caliphate in 661.

5. These disagreements led to the development of three rival sects in the Muslim community. The Shi’ites supported Ali’s claim to the caliphate and believed that the position of caliph rightly belonged to the descendants of Ali. Those known as the Sunnis believed that the first three caliphs had been correctly chosen and supported by the Umayyad Caliphate. The most militant followers of Ali
formed the Kharijite (rebel) sects. Most of the 800 million Muslims of today are either Sunnis or Shi’ites.

II. The Rise and Fall of the Caliphate, 632-1258

A. The Islamic Conquests, 634-711

1. The Islamic conquests of areas outside Arabia began in the 7th century. In the first wave of conquest, the Arabs took Syria, Egypt, and the Sasanid Empire. In the late 7th and early 8th centuries, Islamic forces took Tunisia, Spain, Algeria, Morocco, and Sind.

2. Common explanations for the rapidity of the Muslim advance include lust for booty, religious fanaticism, and the weakness of the foes of Islam. None of these explanations has a strong basis in fact. The most convincing explanation finds the causes of Muslim expansion in the talent of the Muslim leaders and the structure of Arab society.

3. During the period of expansion, the Arab forces were organized into regular, paid armies and kept in military camps and garrison towns so they did not overrun the countryside. The Arab Muslims became minority rulers, thinly spread over non-Muslim societies that they dominated and taxed, but did not try to convert.

B. The Umayyad and Early Abbasid Caliphates, 661-850

1. The Umayyads ruled an Arab empire, not a Muslim empire. They administered their territory through the established Sasanid and Byzantine apparatus, gradually bringing in Muslim bureaucrats and the Arabic language. Rebellions
overthrew the Umayyads in 750; one branch of the family, however, remained in power in Spain.

2. Upon the fall of the Umayyads, the family of Abbas - an uncle of Muhammad - took over and established the Abbasid Caliphate. The Abbasids, who held the caliphate until 1258, provided renewed religious leadership, which they combined with a styles of rulership and royal ceremony derived from the Sasanids.

3. Literature and learning, including the translation of Greek texts and secular Arab poetry, thrived under the Abbasids. Baghdad was a center of Abbasid culture; other areas shared in this culture to varying extents. The Abbasid period also saw an acceleration of the rate of conversion of non-Muslim subjects to Islam in the 9th century.

C. Political Fragmentation, 850-1050

1. Abbasid power began to decline in the second half of the 9th century because the caliphs found it impossible to maintain control over their vast territory. One factor in the decline of Abbasid power was the difficulty of transportation and communications. Another factor was the dissatisfaction of the non-Muslim provincial populations with a political and economic system that was centered on Baghdad. In the 9th century, local revolts carved the Abbasid realm into smaller Muslim states that did not pay taxes or homage to the caliphs in Baghdad.
2. In Baghdad, the caliphs had come to rely on Turkish slave troops known as Mamluks. In the late 9th century, when they were not paid properly, the mamluks took control of the caliphate, choosing whomever they wanted to be caliph and dominating the government. Then in 945, the caliphate fell under the control of the Iranian Shi'ite Buyids. As the Abbasid Caliphate declined, various provincial regimes rose to power. These included the Samanids in the Bukhara and the Fatimids in Egypt.

3. In Spain, the Umayyads help power over a society in which Islamic, Roman, German, and Jewish cultures combined to form a unique Iberian variant of Islamic civilization. Muslim Spain saw substantial urbanization; the introduction of citrus crops; a diverse, irrigated, agricultural sector; and a florescence of Muslim and Jewish intellectual activity.

4. Underlying the political diversity of the fragmented Muslim world was a strong sense of religious identity preserved by the religious scholars - the ulama.

D. Assault from Within and Without, 1050-1258

1. In Central Asia and the Middle East, another nomad group, the Seljuk Turks, took advantage of the decline of the Abbasids to establish the Suljuk Sultanate. The Seljuks ruled a territory stretching from Afghanistan to Baghdad and took Anatolia from the Byzantines in 1071.

2. Turkish depredations, the deteriorations of the Tigris-Euphrates irrigation system, insufficient revenue, and insufficient food resources led to the collapse of the city of Baghdad.
3. The Crusades also put some pressure on the Islamic lands, but the Muslims were able to unite under Saladin and his descendants to drive the Christians out. However Saladin’s descendants were not able to restore unity and order to the Islamic world, which was hit by another Turkish invasion in 1250 and by the Mongol invasions of the 13th century.

III. Islamic Civilization

A. Law and Dogma

1. Islamic law - Shari’a - evolved over time in response to the Muslim community’s need for a legal system. The most important source of law was the traditions of the Prophet (sunna) as revealed in reports (hadith) about his words or deeds.

2. Specialists on Islamic law collected and edited tens of thousands of hadiths, discarding those that seemed to be spurious and publishing the others. The Sahri’a, developed over centuries, held that all Muslims are brothers and sisters and shared the same moral values.

B. Converts and Cities

1. Conversion and urbanization were related. During the early period of Islamic expansion, converts to Islam needed to learn about their new religion and found that the best way to do so was to move to the wealthy, expanding urban areas where the Muslim population was concentrated. Discrimination in their native, rural, non-Muslim villages also spurred new converts to move to the cities.

2. Urban social life and the practice of Islam itself were varied because the Muslims had no central authority to prescribe religious dogma. The growing
cities provided an expanding market for agricultural and manufactured products and contributed to an increase in trade.

3. In medicine and astronomy, Muslim scholars built on and surpassed the work of the Greek and Hellenistic civilizations and developed skills and theories far more sophisticated that those of Christian Europe.

C. Islam, Women, and Slaves

1. Muslim women were veiled and secluded as they had been previously in the Byzantine and Sasanid empires. Women could be influential in the family, but only slave women could have a public role or appear in public before men.

2. Muslim women did have rights under Islamic law. These rights included the right to inherit and own property and to retain it in marriage, the right to divorce, to remarry, to testify in court, and to go on pilgrimage.

3. Stories about Muhammad’s young wife A’isha illustrate what Muslims feared most about women: sexual infidelity and meddling in politics. Muhammad’s faithful first Khadija and his daughter Fatima are held up as models of female propriety.

4. Islam did not permit homosexuality, but notable Muslims including rulers and poets advocated the practice of male homosexuality.

5. Muslims were not permitted to enslave their fellow Muslims, Jews, Christians, or Zoroastrians except when taken as prisoners of war. Muslims could and did hold non-Muslim slaves, but the status of slave was not hereditary.
D. The Re-centering of Islam

1. The decline of the caliphate and factionalism within the ulama deprived Islam of a religious center. During the 12th and 13th centuries, two new sources of religious authority developed: the madrasas (religious colleges) and the Sufi brotherhoods.

2. Sufi brotherhoods were mystic fraternities whose members sought union with God through rituals and training. The early Sufis were mystics who went into ecstasies and expressed their ideas in poetry; Sufi brotherhoods developed into more prosaic organizations of Muslim men.

3. Sufi brotherhoods provided their members with spiritual guidance and rules for everyday life. The brotherhoods originated in the urban areas and then spread to the countryside.

IV. Comparative Perspectives

A. Similarities Between the Sasanid and Roman Empires

1. Both empires from the third to the seventh centuries forged strong relations between the ruler and the dominant religion.

2. As priestly hierarchies came to resemble governmental structures, citizens began to identify themselves with religion than ruler. Consequently, founders of new religions, such as Muhammad, began commanding both political and religious loyalty.

B. Comparing Local and Universal Islam

1. The concept of the umma united all Muslims in a universal community, even though the religion spread out over diverse cultures and traditions.
2. New religious institutions such as the madrasas and Sufi brotherhoods also provided a sense of community for Muslims as they carried Islam into new regions.