
Why Did Islam Spread So Quickly?

EV



A medieval caravan of Muslim pilgrims traveling to Mecca

Overview: According to the holy texts of the Muslims, in 610 CE a local merchant named Muhammad retreated to a cave outside the city of Mecca in Arabia to meditate. There, the archangel Gabriel appeared and gave Muhammad words to recite. These words were to give birth to a religion called Islam. Within 140 years, followers of Islam had created an empire that ruled the Middle East and stretched across North Africa into Europe. This Mini-Q explores why this new religion was able to spread so quickly.

The Documents:

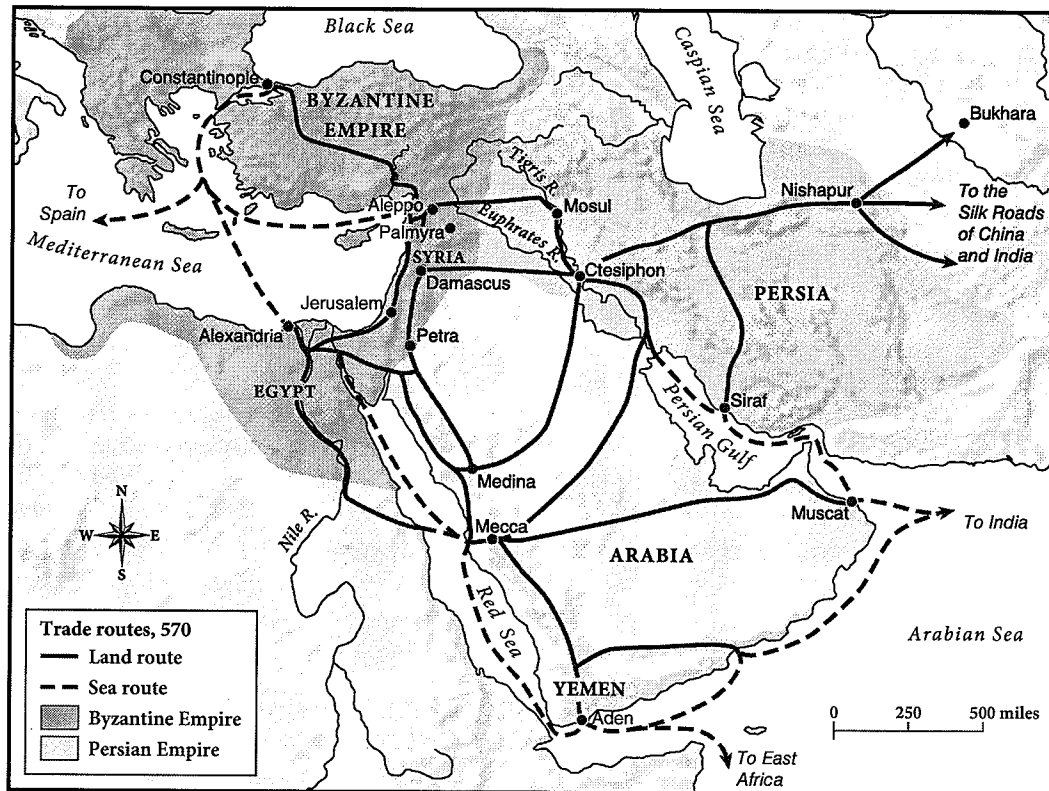
- Document A: Arabian Peninsula Trade Routes (map)
- Document B: Verses from the Qur'an
- Document C: The Spread of Islam (map)
- Document D: The Ghazu
- Document E: The Duties of the Caliph
- Document F: The People of Hims

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Document A

Sources: Desmond Stewart and the Editors of Time-Life Books, *Great Ages of Man: Early Islam*, Time-Life Books, 1967. Map created from various sources.

By the middle of the sixth century ... Mecca was ... prosperous and important. First, it was at the crossroads of the lucrative caravan trade. Vast camel trains, bearing spices, perfumes, precious metals, ivory and silk, filed through the town, headed north on the way from Yemen ... to the markets of Syria, and headed east from the Red Sea across the desert to Iraq. Adding to the profits from caravans was a brisk pilgrimage trade, for Mecca was the site of Arabia's holiest pagan shrine [the Ka'ba].



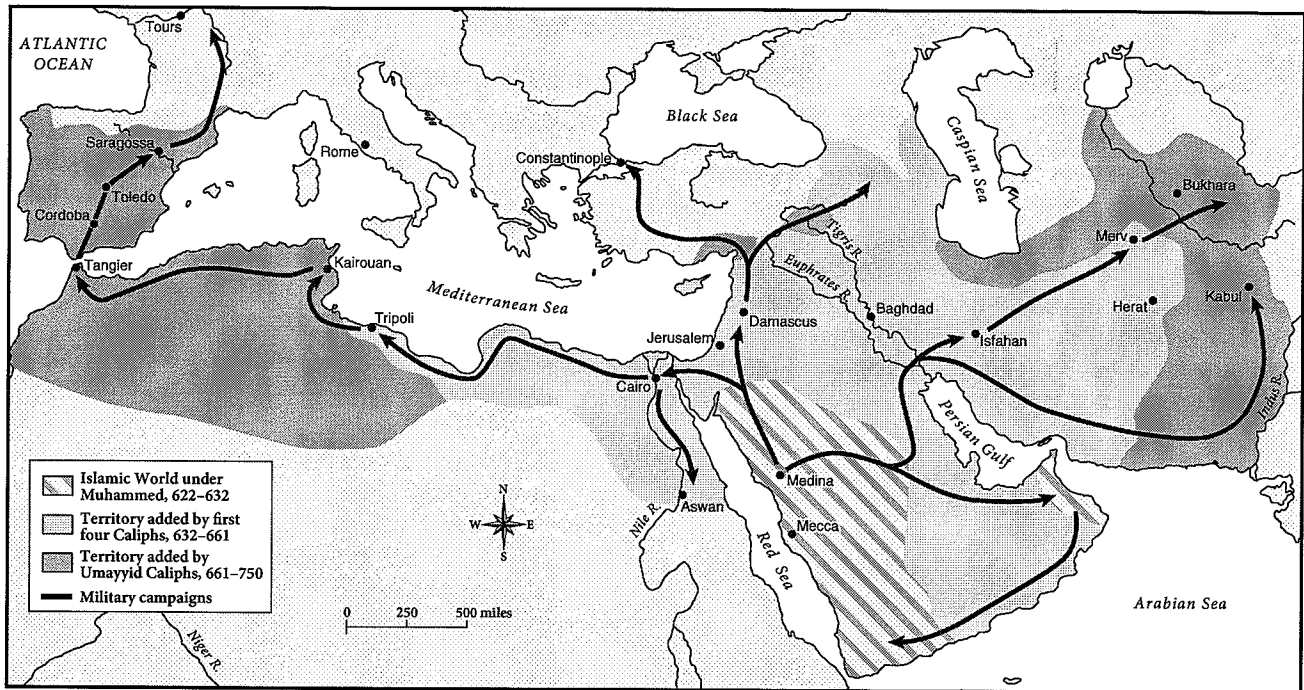
Document Analysis

1. What year is shown on this map? How does this relate to the history of Islam?
2. Name three cities that are easy to reach by trade routes from Mecca.
3. What two empires are shown on this map, and where are they in relation to Arabia?
4. Name four areas these trade routes went to that are outside the boundaries of this map.
5. Judging from both the map and the quotation on this page, why was Mecca a trade center for the Arabian Peninsula?
6. How does this document explain why Islam might have spread so quickly?

Document C

Source: Map created from various sources.

The Spread of Islam



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Document Analysis

1. By what year had each of the following come under Muslim control?

Mecca

Jerusalem

Cairo

Baghdad

Saragossa

2. How far north did Islam spread in the 600s? How far east?

3. What does this map tell you about Muhammad's followers?

4. How does this document explain how Islam spread so quickly?

Document D

Source: Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, Random House, 2000.

For centuries... Arabs had [added to] their inadequate resources by means of the ghazu [raids against other tribes], but Islam had put a stop to this because the ummah [Muslim community] was not permitted to attack one another. What would replace the ghazu, which had enabled Muslims to scratch out a meager livelihood?... The obvious answer was a series of ghazu raids against the non-Muslim communities in the neighboring countries. The unity of the ummah would be preserved by an outwardly directed offensive [attack].

There was nothing religious about these campaigns.... The objective ... was plunder and a common activity that would preserve the unity of the ummah. For centuries the Arabs had tried to raid the richer settled lands beyond the [Arabian] peninsula: the difference was that this time they encountered a power vacuum. Persia and Byzantium had both been engaged for decades in a long ... series of wars with one another. Both were exhausted.

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Document Analysis

1. What was the ghazu? What was the ummah?
2. What was the purpose of the ghazu in the years before Islam?
3. How did Islam change the way the ghazu worked?
4. Why were the Arabs able to conquer much of Persia and parts of Byzantium?
5. How does this document explain how Islam spread so quickly?

Document F

Source: Ahmad ibn-Jabir al-Baladhuri, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, circa 850 CE.

Note: In the year 636, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (“hair-uh-kli-us”) gathered an army at the Yarmuk River in Syria to resist the expansion of Islam. The people of Hims are the Syrians, non-Muslims who had been under Byzantine rule. This account was written by the Arabic Muslim historian al-Baladhuri about 200 years after the battle.

Heraclius gathered [a] large Byzantine army ... numbering about 200,000. This army he put under the command of one of his choice men.... The Moslems gathered together and the [Byzantine] army marched against them. The battle they fought at al-Yarmuk was of the fiercest and bloodiest kind.... In this battle 24,000 Moslems took part. The [Byzantines] and their followers in the battle tied themselves to each other by chains, so that no one might set his hope on flight. By Allah’s help, some 70,000 of them were put to death....

When Heraclius massed his troops against the Moslems and the Moslems heard that they were coming to meet them at al-Yarmuk, the Moslems re-

funded to the inhabitants of Hims the [land tax] they had taken from them saying, “We are too busy to support and protect you. Take care of yourselves.” But the people of Hims replied, “We like your rule and justice far better than the state of oppression and tyranny in which we were. The army of Heraclius we shall indeed . . . repulse from the city.” . . . Saying this, they closed the gates of the city and guarded them... When by Allah’s help the “unbelievers” were defeated and the Moslems won, they opened the gates of their cities, went out with the singers and music players who began to play, and paid the [land tax].

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Document Analysis

1. Who was the Muslim army fighting in this account?
2. To whom did the Muslims attribute their victory?
3. Whose version of the battle is this? Why is this important to note?
4. How did the people of Hims (the Syrians) feel about the Muslims?
5. How does this document help explain why Islam spread quickly?