

Islam

Introduction

Arabia is a desert region bounded in the north by the Persian Gulf, in the east by the Indian Ocean and to the south by the Red Sea. In the 7th century the Persian Empire lay to the north and the Byzantine Empire lay to the west of Arabia, around the Mediterranean sea.

The country was inhabited mainly by Bedouin nomads divided into tribes but in the south-west of the country which was a little bit wetter there were towns such as Mecca where people lived from farming and trade.

The Arabs were polytheist, that is, they had a number of gods of the desert, of the mountains, stars, winds, oases etc. They regularly went on pilgrimages to Mecca where idols, or statues, of their gods could be seen on display and worshipped in a holy place called the Kaaba. This is an immense cube, the size of a big house and is built in stone. In one corner is 'the eye of god', a curious black stone that Arabs kissed and touched. It is thought to be a meteorite.

Some Arabs, however, were attracted by the monotheism of the Jews and Christians and it is believed that Mohammed must have learnt about these two religions in his travels across Arabia, working as a merchant.



"Mecca today is in Saudi Arabia and this is the Saudi flag. Written across it is the Shahada, the Muslims' statement of faith: 'There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His Prophet'. The writing and sword are white on a green background. Green is the colour of Islam and most Muslim countries have green somewhere on their flags."
(Middle Ages Today : Mohammed & Islam)

Mohammed

Mohammed was born in about 570 at Mecca. As a young man he helped drive camel caravans across the desert for his uncle who was a merchant. After his marriage with a wealthy widow, Khadidja, Mohammed spent more and more time alone, meditating in a cave of Mount Hira near Mecca. It was here that Muslims believe he had a vision: the Angel Gabriel appeared and told him that there was only one God, Allah. Allah was the same god as the god of the Jews and Christians and Mohammed came at the end of a long line of Prophets (special messengers of god) after Abraham, Moses and Jesus Christ.

From about 613 onwards, Mohammed began preaching to the people of Mecca, telling them to abandon their worship of idols in the Kaaba. and to turn to Allah. The rich families of the city were not happy to lose the lucrative pilgrimage trade that the idols brought to Mecca and they persecuted Mohammed and those who followed him.

The Hegira

In 622, his life under threat, Mohammed escaped across the desert to the city of Medina ('the city of the Prophet' in Arabic) where he was welcomed and made the chief. This event became known as the Hegira or 'Flight' and is so important that it marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar, just as the birth of Jesus Christ marks the beginning of the Christian calendar. The Prophet became not only a religious leader but a military leader too. He led armies back across the desert to conquer Mecca in 630. Here he destroyed the idols but kept the Kaaba and its black stone as holy places which Muslims still visit today on their pilgrimages.

Mohammed was generous with his enemies and this attracted more and more Arabs to his faith. When he died in 632, most of Arabia had accepted the new religion of Islam, which means 'obedience to the will of God'. Those who were converted to the religion were called 'Muslims'

The Koran

'Koran' means literally 'recitation' and for millions of Muslim children it is a textbook from which they first learn to read and write. Muslims believe that the Koran contains information given by Allah to Mohammed to be told to all humanity. The Prophet did not write the Koran but his followers noted everything he had taught later in the 7th century.

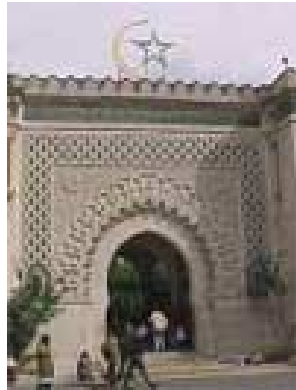
There are 114 chapters written in Arabic and it contains instructions on political organisation, family life and law as well as on prayer and worship.



This Koran can be seen in the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris

The Mosque

The mosque is the place of worship for Muslims. Here the faithful meet on Fridays, the Muslim holy day . Usually the mosque is walled off from the rest of the city and you go through the main gates as in this photo.



A tower called the minaret is used by the muezzin to call the faithful to prayer .



Inside there is a central courtyard with a washing fountain. Before entering the hall of prayer you have to take off your shoes, wash your feet, face, hands and arms. Often there are baths if you want a complete wash.



The Muslim then enters the hall of prayer and turns to face Mecca, in the south - east (if you are in Paris). There is an alcove called the mirhab in the side of the wall facing Mecca. In a kind of elevated stand called the minbar, the imam or prayer leader leads the faithful in prayer. There is no clergy in a mosque and any wise, scholarly man can have the role of imam. Similarly there is no formal instruction or admission ceremony to become a Muslim. You simply recite the Shahada (see your work on the Five Pillars) in front of another Muslim, believing in the recitation, and you become a Muslim yourself.



Women are separated from men by a special screen as in this photo so that nobody is distracted in their prayers.



There are no pictures of Allah, Mohammed or any humans in a mosque. However, there are beautiful symmetrical designs in ceramic tiles and written extracts from the Koran decorated as arabesques.

