

Name _____ Date _____

Islamic Empires

“The Empires of Islam”

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Through the Middle Ages, in parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East, various Islamic peoples were building impressive societies. There were the Turks, whose massive Ottoman Empire rose to power in 1299; the Mughals, who ruled India; and the Safavids in present-day Iran. These groups all shared the Muslim faith and, taken together, comprised the Muslim empires (or empires of Islam). These new imperial powers were marked by a close relationship between government and religion. They prospered throughout the Middle Ages, but by the end of the 19th century, all three had declined significantly. By the early 20th century, the last Islamic empire collapsed with the defeat of the Ottomans in World War I.

Notes

2. According to the Muslim faith, in about the year 610, the angel Gabriel visited Muhammad. He told Muhammad that he was a prophet of God, or “Allah” in Arabic. Muhammad told people in his hometown, Mecca (present-day Saudi Arabia), about this experience. Mecca’s rulers didn’t like what he was saying, so they kicked him out. Muhammad moved to Medina, and he and his followers began spreading their faith to nomadic tribes and ambushing caravans from Mecca. Finally, he rode back into Mecca and faced little resistance. He had become a religious prophet and political leader. Islam spread very quickly under the leadership of Muhammad. He combined military conquest with strategies that made it desirable in society to join the faith.

Notes

3. The idea of the separation of church and politics was not a key principle for Muslims. Their religious leaders were (and often still are) their political leaders as well. This dates all the way back to the founding of the faith under Muhammad, who was both the spiritual and political leader of the Muslims. When he died in 632, the next leader was called a caliph, which means successor or representative. Caliphs were both the head of government and the head of the Islamic faith. One of the most famous caliphs was Harun al-Rashid (763-809). Rashid's reign was characterized by a great artistic and intellectual growth. Some say he is the hero in many of the stories in *The Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Middle Eastern and Indian stories.

Notes

4. There are two major sects of Islam, or groups with different beliefs: the Sunnis and the Shias, or Shiites. The split between Sunni and Shia Muslims goes back to 661, when the fourth caliph after Muhammad, a man named Ali, was killed. A big disagreement ensued about who should be the next caliph. Sunnis believed that the first four caliphs, or heirs to Muhammad, were his rightful successors. Their descendants ruled the Arab world until after World War I. The Shias were (and still are) a smaller group. They thought that only one of those first four caliphs was legitimate—the one named Ali—and only his heirs should rule. It might seem like a small difference, but it meant that these people were telling their rulers, "You don't have the right to rule us." There is still a lot of tension between these two sects today.

Notes

5. The Seljuks were a Muslim dynasty of Oghuz Turkic descent that invaded southwestern Asia in the 11th century. They were nomads who decided to settle down in Persia (now Iran). They conquered what is now Iraq, and by 1070, they had moved to take what is today Syria and parts of the Byzantine Empire. The Seljuks fought challenges from the Mongols and other peoples before finally falling around 1200. Out of the ashes of the Seljuk kingdom rose the Ottoman Empire, founded by one of the last Seljuk kings, Osman. Around 1299, he began expanding his empire toward Europe. The Ottomans conquered Greece in 1352. In 1453, they took the seat of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, which they renamed Istanbul. By 1517, they assumed control of Egypt on the African continent. Ottoman sultans maintained a forceful presence on the edge of Europe through the 1920s.

Notes

6. The Islamic empires also spread through North Africa and later conquered Spain. The meeting of Arab and African peoples resulted in Swahili, which is both a language and a culture. The language itself is based in African Bantu, but it incorporates a lot of Arabic terms, probably because the Swahili people were Muslims and read the Qur'an. In Spain and other parts of Europe, Muslims were called Moors. The Muslims in Spain ruled a strong state that, some say, far exceeded the rest of Europe when it came to education, technological advances and philosophies. Christians and Jews were free to practice their respective religions, as long as they paid a special tax called Jizya. The Moors were centered in southern Spain in Andalusia. Their rule came to an end in 1492 when Christian leaders took control of Granada.

Notes

7. Mosques are the places of worship of Islam. Ancient Mosques can be found throughout the world wherever Muslim people gathered. One very famous mosque is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Muslims believe that it was the place where Muhammad ascended into Paradise. The most distinctive features of mosques are their domes and minarets, the tall towers from which religious officials call Muslims to prayer. Muslims were required to pray toward Mecca, so they had to have a good sense of direction. Luckily, there was a tool that helped them orient themselves in the world. They borrowed the Greek astrolabe, a device used to determine the position of celestial objects like the sun, figure out prayer times and orient mosques and people toward Mecca. This device soon changed the world because it allowed sailors to navigate using the stars, which led to the great age of sea exploration.

Notes

8. Despite some instances of hatred, misunderstanding and ignorance that exist today between Jews, Christians and Muslim, all three groups are closely related. The three religions are monotheistic, meaning they worship only one god. Additionally, Jesus and Moses are both prophets in the Qur'an.

Notes