

7.1 Introduction

Our study of Islam begins with the Arabian Peninsula, where Islam was first preached. The founder of Islam, Muhammad, was born on the peninsula in about 570 C.E. In this chapter, you'll learn about the peninsula's geography and the ways of life of its people in the sixth century.

The Arabian Peninsula is in southwest Asia, between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. It is often called Arabia. Along with North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean shore, and present day Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, it is part of the modern Middle East.

Most of the people living in Arabia in the sixth century were Arabs. Some Arabs call their home al-Jazeera, or "the Island." But it is surrounded by water on only three sides. The Persian Gulf lies to the east, the Red Sea to the west, and the Indian Ocean to the south. To the north are lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea. These lands serve as a land bridge between Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Imagine that you are flying over the Arabian Peninsula. As you look down, you see vast deserts dotted by oases. Coastal plains line the southern and western coasts. Mountain ranges divide these coastal plains from the desert.

The hot, dry Arabian Peninsula is a challenging place to live. In this chapter, you will study the geography of Arabia and its different environments. You'll see how people made adaptations in order to thrive there.

7.2 The Importance of the Arabian Peninsula and Surrounding Lands

Arabia lies at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe. In ancient times, great civilizations grew up in the lands around Arabia. To the northeast, Sumerians built their complex civilization along the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in present day Iraq. To the west, the Egyptians built their society on the banks of the Nile River in North Africa. Later, the Greeks, Romans, and Persians all had a major influence on the Middle East.



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A great deal of trade passed through this region. Traders carried silk from China and jewels, cotton, and spices from India. From Africa came ivory and gold. The Romans sent glass and gold east to China.

As early as 2000 B.C.E., the people of Arabia served as middlemen in the trade between these lands. Arab traders used camels to carry goods through the desert in caravans. Along the coasts, merchants sent ships to distant marketplaces. Serving as a link between such diverse regions exposed Arabia to new goods and ideas. Arabs also shared their own knowledge along these trade routes.

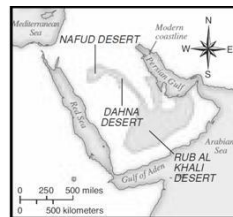
The influence of Arabia became far more powerful with the rise of Islam. From its central location in Arabia, Islam spread rapidly throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Europe. Great cities like Cordoba in Spain, Cairo in Egypt, and Baghdad in present day Iraq became important centers of the Islamic world.

Knowledge, ideas, technology, and goods flowed through Arab lands. For example, Arabs brought knowledge of paper making to Europe from China. Europe also benefited from ancient Greek learning that was preserved and enhanced by Arab scholars. And Islam itself would become one of the largest and most influential religions in the world.

What was the birthplace of Islam like? In the rest of this chapter, we'll look at Arabia's geography.

7.3 The Desert

About three quarters of the Arabian Peninsula is covered by desert. Besides vast seas of sand, the desert includes plains and plateaus.



Environment The hot, dry desert environment is very harsh. Summer temperatures often rise above 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Winter and nighttime temperatures can drop below freezing. Annual rainfall does not surpass more than 3 to 4 inches, and droughts can last for years. When the rain comes, it often falls as violent storms, sometimes causing flash floods. These infrequent waters cause clumps of grass and pockets of low shrubs to spring to life.



The harsh desert environment covers much of the Arabian Peninsula. The deserts include plains and plateaus like those seen below.

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The desert is often swept by windstorms. Powerful winds may flare up suddenly, causing blinding sandstorms. The winds transform the landscape, sometimes creating sand dunes that rise 800 feet into the sky.

Adaptations Many Arabs in the sixth century lived in towns and villages. Others, however, were nomads. Arab nomads, called Bedouins, migrated through the desert raising sheep, goats, and camels. Upon finding a place for their herds to graze and drink, they set up tents. They moved on when the animals had eaten most of the vegetation.

The camel – called the “ship of the desert” – was the Bedouins’ main method of transportation. Camels could survive for days without water, eat almost anything, and carry heavy loads for long distances.

Bedouins clothed themselves in loose-fitting long gowns and cotton headdresses to protect against dust, heat, and flies. They got almost everything they needed from their herds. They drank milk, made yogurt and cheese, and sometimes ate meat. The animals provided wool and hair for clothing, blankets, and tents, as well as leather hides. To obtain other items, like grain or weapons, Bedouins traded their animal products with merchants from the towns.

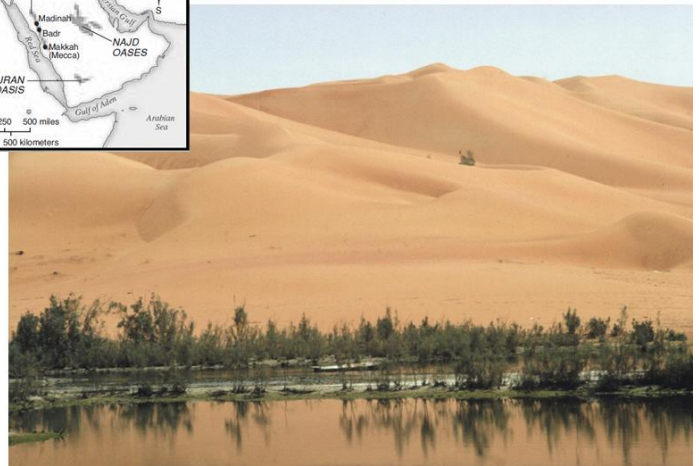
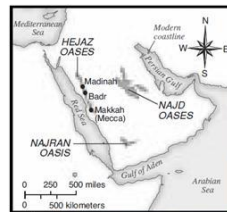
Some Bedouins controlled the valuable trade routes that linked towns and villages. Merchants operated caravans that carried goods across the desert. Sizable towns, like Makkah (Mecca) in western Arabia, developed as markets and resting places for the caravans.

7.4 The Oases

The desert is dotted with oases, areas where fresh water is available. Oases are important because they provide plant life and shade as well as water.

Environment Oases occur in areas where water has been trapped under the ground. The water seeps to the surface as a spring or waterhole. On these fertile lands, plant life sprouts up, particularly grass and shrubs. Oases vary in size, ranging from a few acres to large areas of land.

Adaptations For centuries, nomads traveled from oasis to oasis in search of water and vegetation for their herds. Realizing they could grow



Oases provide water and plant life in the desert environment. Adaptations for living in the desert revolve around oases.

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crops at the oases, some nomads gave up their wandering lifestyle to become sedentary. To obtain more water for the crops they planted, they dug wells deep into the ground.

Oasis dwellers grew fruits such as dates and peaches, and grains to make bread. The date palm tree thrived in Arabia, and it became an invaluable resource. Palm leaves offered shade, while dates were a source of food. Farmers used palm wood to build homes. They used leaves for thatch roofs, fibers for rope, hollowed-out trunks for irrigation pipes, and various parts of the tree to fuel fires. The date palm was so useful that it was called “the mother and aunt of the Arabs.”

A number of towns developed around oases, linked by tracks through the desert. Many of these towns evolved into small trading centers. Farmers bartered (traded) their crops for the goods the nomads brought, like milk, meat, and camel hair. Nomads either used these crops themselves or traded them elsewhere in the region. In time, merchants became an important part of town life.

7.5 The Coastal Plain

Arabia’s coastal plain runs along the coasts of the peninsula. The coastal plain separates inland plateaus from the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf.

Environment Arabia’s coastal plain ranges between 5 and 40 miles inland. It ends at a series of rocky cliffs. The air is damp and moist, and rain falls regularly. Several dry riverbeds cut through the coastal plain and periodically fill with water. The coastal plain also has a few natural harbors.

Adaptations Unlike the dry desert, the coastal plain is suitable for farming. For centuries, farming communities thrived in southern Arabia. People built deep wells, dams, and systems to irrigate the land. They conserved rainwater in canals and reservoirs. In what is now Yemen, the great Marib Dam brought water to fields that grew food for 300,000 people. This dam survived for about 1,000 years. In about 580 C.E., the walls broke, and waters flooded the land.

In the sixth century, most people on the coastal plain were farmers. They grew crops such as grains, fruits, and vegetables. They also collected fragrant tree sap to make myrrh and frankincense, which Europeans used as incense, perfumes, and medicine.



The coastal plain environment extends from the coast inland. Coastal plains receive plenty of rain and are suitable for farming.

There were also traders on the coastal plain. They sent their goods by caravan to towns like Makkah or to seaports. From ancient times, ships had stopped at such port cities as Aden (at the southern tip of Arabia). In this way, the people of the coastal plain traded with merchants from places like India, East Africa, and the lands along the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The combination of farming and trade led to the rise of powerful kingdoms in southern Arabia in ancient times.

7.6 The Mountains

Arabia's largest mountain ranges run along the western and southern edges of the peninsula. They divide the coastal plain from the desert

Environment Arabia's mountains rise from 1,000 to 12,000 feet high. These craggy mountain ranges have a very different climate from the rest of the peninsula. Moist winds from the Indian Ocean bring as much as 20 inches of rain each year to the mountains. The rain and elevation help keep temperatures in the mountains cool. In the winter, frost may form. Ancient dry riverbeds cut down the sides of the mountains and fill with water during rainstorms.



Mountain ranges separate the coastal plain and desert environments of the Arabian Peninsula. People have lived in these mountains for thousands of years.

Adaptations People have lived in Arabia's mountains for thousands of years. Isolated from the rest of the peninsula, they developed ways of life that endure to this day. For instance, it is likely that mountain dwellers in the sixth century lived in houses made of mud bricks. People in this region today still live in this type of dwelling.

In the sixth century, many people lived in the Asir Mountains in the southwest. These people farmed on the steep slopes by creating steplike terraces, or flat areas. They probably made the terraces by building low stone walls around narrow strips of land. The terraces enlarged the space that was usable for farming. Terrace walls also conserved water by keeping it from running off the fields.

Farming also constructed dams and irrigation systems. They stored extra rainwater in underground storage containers, leather bags, and hollowed-out trees.

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Farmers in the mountains relied on many different crops. They grew fruits, like melons and pomegranates. They also grew trees to produce frankincense and myrrh. They probably used manure and ashes from cooking fires to fertilize the soil.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, you learned about the geography of the Arabian Peninsula, the birthplace of Islam. You also found out how people on the peninsula adapted to their environments.

Arabia and nearby lands are at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe. Arabia played a key role in the exchange of goods and ideas among these regions. With the rise of Islam in the 600s C.E., Arabia would have a major influence on distant societies. Islamic culture spread from Arabia through the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Europe.

Desert stretches over much of Arabia. The desert is a place of fiery heat, bitter cold, and little water or plant life. Still, people learned how to survive and even thrive in this barren region. Nomads raised animals that could survive in the desert and moved from place to place to find vegetation for their livestock.

Some people gave up the nomadic life to settle in the desert oases. Most people on the oases were farmers, but towns also grew up and became centers of trade.

Unlike the desert, the wet coastal plain in the south and west is quite fertile. Here farmers grew crops, and traders sent items to distant lands. To water their crops, farmers built irrigation systems. Port cities became trading centers.

Arabia's mountains run between the coastal plain and the desert. In these tall peaks, people lived off the land by creating terraced fields. This adaptation allowed them to make better use of the steep slopes.

The founder of Islam, Muhammad, came from Makkah, an ancient holy place and trading center in western Arabia. In the next chapter, you will learn about Muhammad and the faith he introduced to the world.