

World History
Objective 2.06
Lesson

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Describe the rise and achievements of the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations.

The beginnings of the Byzantine Empire can be traced to the efforts of two Roman emperors, Diocletian and Constantine. Believing that the Roman Empire had become too large for a single ruler, Diocletian divided it into four units, each with its own ruler. Constantine expanded the policies of Diocletian and began construction of a new capital city in the east, on the site of the Greek city, Byzantium. The city, eventually renamed Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey) became the center of the Eastern Roman Empire.

As the Roman Empire declined in the west and Rome was conquered by various Barbarian tribes, the Roman Empire in the east, usually referred to as the Byzantine Empire, continued for almost 1000 more years.

Under the Emperor Justinian, Roman law was codified. This code of Roman laws was the basis of imperial law in the Eastern Roman Empire for nine hundred years, and became the basis for much of the legal system of Europe. Many of the cultural developments of the Roman Empire were preserved from the Barbarian invasions by being incorporated by the Byzantine Empire.

In the Byzantine Empire, the Roman Catholic Church split into two groups, those who stayed in union with Rome and those who felt that the Patriarch of Constantinople was the leader of the church on earth. They became known as Orthodox or Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Islam developed in the Arabian peninsula in the early seventh century. The Arabian peninsula took on a new importance when political disorder made the usual trade routes through Mesopotamia and Egypt too dangerous to travel. Communities along the new trade route from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean prospered.

Muhammed was born into this world of tension. Muslims believe that Muhammed received revelations from God while meditating. These messages were given by the angel Gabriel. Out of these revelations, which were eventually written down, came the Quran, the holy book of the religion, Islam. Muslims, (those who practice the religion of Islam), believe that practicing acts of worship known as the Five Pillars of Islam, are essential for all Muslims.

After Mohammed's death, the Muslims expanded over Arabia and beyond. By the year 750, the Arab advance had extended to the southern and eastern Mediterranean parts of the old Roman Empire, Mesopotamia and Persia to the east and central Asia, to the north.

At this time a split took place in Islam. The Shia Muslims accept only the descendants of Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammed, as the true rulers of Islam; The Sunni Muslims, accepted the Umayyads as rulers or caliphs. In the 21st century, Sunnis are a majority in the world, but most of the people of Iraq and Iran consider themselves to be Shia.

Islamic zeal and territorial ambition led to vast conquests and an empire ruled first from Makkah (Mecca) and then from Baghdad. This expansion led to numerous conflicts, especially with European states who feared the rise of this new power. Some examples of these conflicts include the Crusades, in which the European Christian states tried to recover the Christian sites in the Holy Land (Palestine), Spain, which was ruled by the Muslims for almost 900 years, and the Byzantine Empire, which was taken over by the Seljuk Turks in 1453.

While Europe in the Middle Ages was still struggling through feudalism and the beginnings of the rise of cities and towns, Islamic culture had already reached a high level of sophistication in many areas. Islamic scholars wrote commentaries on the classical works of Aristotle; Muslim scholars passed on the numerical system of India, including the use of the zero. They developed the discipline of algebra, invented the astrolabe, an instrument that allowed sailors to determine their location by observing the stars and heavenly bodies. Universities existed in many cities under Muslim rule.

Lesson:

Using your textbook and any reliable outside sources, find a summary of European discoveries and inventions in the period 500 – 1500 AD. Then compare that summary with one of those that took place in Islamic societies during the same time period.

Compare and evaluate the two.