

Student Handout 3.1—The Impact of Islam in Afroeurasia

Excerpt from K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 35-36

The expansion and the new activities which became faintly evident in the rhythm of both caravan and trans-oceanic trade from the seventh century onwards in northern and southern China received a great deal of their impetus from the domestic aspirations and developments of the Tang and Sung empires. However, in the West it was joined by the second and most powerful of the historical forces of the time, the rise of Islam and its expansion across the fertile lands of the Near East and South Asia. Movements of people by definition involve the exchange of ideas, economic systems, social usage, political institutions, and artistic traditions. The spread of Islam subsumed all these things. It may be an exaggeration for lack of definite proof to state that the commerce of the Indian Ocean in the westward direction had entered a period of relative contraction during the later Roman empire with the weakening of a Mediterranean “world economy.” It is certainly true that the Arab conquests and rapid demographic diffusion and the political integration of Egypt, Syria, Iran, and North Africa created an enormously powerful zone of economic consumption. It was an expanding area that drew its commercial and fiscal strength from refashioning in the West the Mediterranean economy of antiquity and from harnessing the productive resources of the lands around the Indian Ocean in the East. Arab economic success in the early caliphate period was achieved with the aid of the skills possessed by the people of the ancient Near East. But the growth of great urban centers, a universal feature of Islam, and the new capital cities gave rise to an expanding demand for commodities of all kinds and for precious objects. This in turn quickened the pace of long-distance trade. The revival of the sea and caravan routes across the famous international boundary lines, known to merchants since Hellenistic times, owed much to the ability of the Islamic rulers to protect their property and persons against violence. The laws of commercial contracts and the principles of juridical rights, which evolved in the centuries following the foundation of Islam, took into account a cardinal fact of pre-modern trade. Merchants who traveled by land and sea into the realms of foreign princes were prone to take their business elsewhere without the guarantee of a certain amount of commercial freedom secured by reciprocal political rights and obligations.

K.N. Chaudhuri, “The Economy in Muslim Societies,” in F. Robinson, ed., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 124

In popular imagination, Islam was a religion of the desert which arose in the oasis towns of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt in the seventh century AD. Of course, neither Mecca nor Medina, the twin cities of the Prophet Muhammad, really belonged to the desert or the bedouin nomadic way of life. The Umayyad military victories in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Iran within a decade of Muhammad's death in 632 produced immediate and tangible results, the most notable of which was the consolidation of the two transcontinental trade routes through the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The economic foundation of the Muslim world system created by the Umayyads and the Abbasids in the first century of Islam rested on three factors: settled agriculture, urbanization, and long-distance trade. Nomadism and its economy had provided the backdrop to the early Arab expansion and they were not entirely marginalized in the development of urbanized Islam. The bedouin of Arabia did not give up their nomadic way of life; the desert and the camel continued to signify certain aspects of Islam and certainly to signify the context of its movements. Anyone who contemplates the magnificent mihrab of the Great Mosque in Cordoba built in the eighth century, with its pure Arab geometry, must be aware that the historical roots of the Islamic world were already strong by the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. But those political leaders and their Arab followers who did migrate to the old and new towns to adopt an urban life

soon revived the economic unity of the ancient world, which had been lost with the decline of Rome and Persia.”

Excerpt from Andrew Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 91-94.

The early centuries of Islam saw the creation of a medium for diffusion of great efficiency: it was peculiarly receptive to novelties and favored their transmission. . . .

The creation of this medium began with the Muslim conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries which united—or began to unite—a large part of the known world, bringing the conquered territories for a time under one rule, and more durably under one language, one religion and one legal system. Although Muhammad’s State was a very loose alliance depending on allegiance to the Prophet, and although centrifugal forces at all times worked against centralizing tendencies, the relatively strong State which emerged under the Umayyads and the early Abbasids was an umbrella under which other kinds of unification took place. Gradually, Arabic displaced indigenous tongues as the language of administration, of higher culture and—to varying degrees—of common speech. In time, more and more of the conquered peoples were converted to the religion of the Prophet, so that although non-believers were at first very numerous and religious minorities remained important throughout the period of classical Islam, the State came to be an Islamic state and the people it governed came to be predominantly Muslim. The apparatus of the State was the means for other kinds of unification: of law, of coinage and of weights and measures. It also forged, when it did not inherit them, links of communication—roads, caravan routes, ports, postal and courier services, and a far-reaching network of smoke and flame signals—which drew still more closely together the far-flung territories of the caliphates. . . .

Within the area of Arab dominion, and to some extent beyond, there was much movement of men, of goods, of technology, of information and of ideas. Ibn Khaldun wrote of the Arabs that “all their customary activities lead to travel and movement,” and so it was to become not only for those of Arabic stock but also for the conquered peoples. The very conquest and settlement of new areas often led to important displacements of peoples. When an area was overrun by Arabs and their allies, the conquering soldiers—mostly from distant places—were often encouraged to settle in the conquered lands. Another wave of migrations occurred when the Jews of formerly Byzantine, Sasanian and Visigothic territories, many of whom had collaborated with the invading armies, began to spread out through the early Islamic world. Further movements followed the conquests with the flight of some conquered peoples, their forcible displacement and the long-distance trade in captured slaves. . . .

To the movement of peoples initiated by the conquests and their aftermath were soon added other kinds of displacement. The pilgrimages that Muslims made in great numbers, and especially the pilgrimage to Mecca, brought together people from the far corners of the earth and thus were a vehicle of prime importance for cultural transmission. . . . Many pilgrims took advantage of their displacement to indulge in further travel: to carry out business, to visit relatives, to study in foreign centers of learning and just to see sights. Trade by professional merchants also led to much movement. Very soon after the rise of Islam, Muslim and Jewish merchants were penetrating to the outer limits of the caliphate. By the middle of the eighth century they had reached far beyond these bounds and established counters in India, China and East Africa. Hand in hand with trade went missionary activity, as holy men followed in the footsteps of merchants to preach to isolated Muslim communities abroad and to convert the heathen. Thus both trade and religion linked distant outposts into a network which spanned the

Handouts: Impact of Islam
Honors World History

continents. . . .

But perhaps any attempt to explain, or even to describe, the widespread movement of people across the early Islamic world is doomed to fail. All through the literary sources from the medieval Islamic world are found accounts that suggest an almost incomprehensible amount of coming and going across huge stretches of land and water. Every class of people, it seems, was prone to this restlessness; all traveled: the rich and the poor, the scholar and the illiterate, the holy and the not so holy. Poverty was no obstacle, as one could move by foot, begging along the way; relatives could be imposed upon endlessly; patrons were readily found for scholars or holy men, or those who posed as such; a place to bunk, and perhaps to eat, was available outside the main mosque in most cities. Lured on in search of money, adventure or truth, Muslims from every region and of every station left home and roamed to and fro over the continents, taking with them knowledge of the farming techniques, plant life and cookery of their homelands and seeing on their way the agricultural practices, plants and foods of new lands. In their travels the early Muslims were on the lookout for whatever could be learned or bought.

Handouts: Impact of Islam
Honors World History

Urbanization	Growth of Trade
Migration	Spread of Knowledge
Language	Law
Technology	Governance