

Muhammad* and Islam: the role of the individual

ON pages 156–159, you found out something about the world that Muhammad*, the great PROPHET of ISLAM, was born into. Muhammad's* life was going to lead to great changes in Arabia as the faith of Islam took root – and eventually to changes throughout the world. But as the timeline at the bottom of the page shows, it began in hardship and suffering.

The Muslim calendar

So far in this book we have been giving dates in the familiar way you will know from your study of medieval England. MUSLIMS, however, do not use this time system. Their calendar begins at what they consider to be the major turning point in the history of the world (just as the Christian calendar begins in the year that people think Jesus Christ was born).

1. Look at the events shown on the timeline. From that evidence decide when you might expect the Muslim calendar to begin. Which of the events shown might Muhammad's* followers consider the most important turning point?

The life of Muhammad*: turning points

610 Muhammad's* first vision

Muhammad* kept his messages to himself to start with.

He feared he was possessed by devils. Once he said that these messages 'strike straight to my heart like a ringing bell'. Another time he described being seized by violent shuddering as he received the messages.

Many of his messages appealed directly to Jews and Christians. He said Islam was the true religion that Abraham and Jesus had been preparing the world for.

* You may have noticed one unexplained feature in this book – the * after Muhammad's* name. When Muslims speak or write the name of Muhammad* they add 'Peace be upon him'. In this unit we have shown this by a *.



SOURCE 1 Route from Mecca to Medinah

613 Muhammad* begins to preach in public

Muhammad* was unhappy about what he saw as the injustice of the Meccans, and by the plight of the poor and the slaves in the city. Many of the early messages of the QURAN are seen as direct criticisms of the people of Mecca.

Other things made the Meccans angry as well. 'There are some among the Meccans who speak ill of you concerning the distribution of alms' (Quran, 9.57).

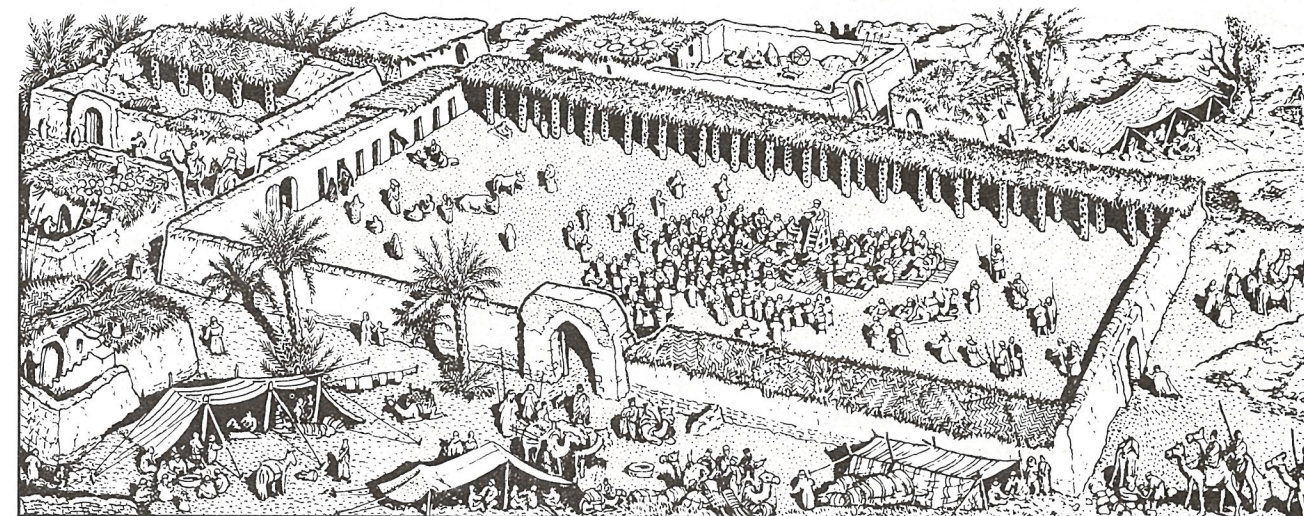
Your teacher will tell you when the Muslim calendar does in fact begin.

Historians think that the new calendar was in use only ten years after Muhammad's* death.

From now on in this book, dates will be given according to both the Christian and Muslim calendars.

To convert dates from one calendar to the other, you need to know that the Muslim year is eleven days shorter than the Christian year. A Muslim century equals 97 years in the Christian calendar. There are some easy and useful correspondences to remember: AD 1300 is the same as 700AH; 1400AH began in November 1979. (AH stands for after the HIJRA.)

SOURCE 2 Modern drawing of the prophet's home in Medinah



2. Calculate the year of your birth in AH.

622 The first Muslim community

Opposition increased so much that Muhammad* and his followers fled 200 miles across the desert to Medinah. Muhammad's* house in Medinah became the centre of the first community of MUSLIMS (see Source 2).

He specially concentrated on convincing the many Jews in Medinah that Islam was the true religion.

630 Muslims take control of Mecca

Muhammad* came to Mecca with a few lightly armed forces. In his earlier battles Muhammad's* forces had beaten much larger armies. He reached a peaceful agreement with the Meccans, who allowed him to clear the IDOLS out of the Kaabah. He dedicated the Kaabah to the faith of Islam. Many Arab tribes, as well as people in Mecca, accepted his leadership.

570 Born. A member of the powerful Meccan tribe the Quraysh. His father dies before he is born

590 Taken to work in the camel caravans by his uncle. Sees a lot of Arabia for himself, and visits Syria

610 Has a message from God

619 His wife (and financial supporter) Khadijah dies. So does Abu Talib, his uncle and head of his family. Opposition to Muhammad* increases with the head of his family out of the way

624 Muslims defeat a larger army of Meccans at Badr, then embark on a series of wars and raids on other tribes who are opposing Islam

630 Muslims take control of Mecca

576 His mother dies. Brought up by his grandfather, who is the keeper of the KAABAH in Mecca

595 Escapes from his early poverty by his marriage to a rich widow called Khadijah

613 Begins to preach in public. Powerful Meccans angry

622 The HIJRA (migration). Muhammad* moves to Medinah as leader of the first community of MUSLIMS

627 Muslims survive Meccan siege of Medinah. A truce is agreed between Muslims and Meccans

632 Muhammad* dies. By this time nearly all of Arabia has been converted to the Islamic religion

The messages of God to Muhammad* were collected together in the QURAN.

Here are some statements from the Quran that tell us things about Muhammad* – what he was like as a person and how people reacted to him.

SOURCE 3 From the Quran

“Did God not find you [Muhammad*] an orphan and give you shelter? (Sura 93.6)

It was thanks to God’s mercy that you [Muhammad*] dealt so leniently with [some deserters]. Had you been cruel they would surely have deserted you. (Sura 3.159)

[Muhammad*] frowned and turned his back when the blind man came towards him. But to the wealthy man he was all attention. This is a criticism. (Sura 80.1)

When they are blessed with good fortune they say ‘This is from God’. But when evil befalls them they say ‘It was Muhammad’s* fault’. (Sura 4.79)

Remember how the unbelievers plotted against you [Muhammad*]. They sought to take you captive or have you slain or banished. (Sura 8.30)

When [Muhammad*] rose to pray, they pressed around him in multitudes. (Sura 72.19)

The spoils taken from the town-dwellers and given by God to his apostle [Muhammad*] shall belong to God, to the apostle and his family, to orphans, to the poor and to the travellers in need; they shall not become the property of the rich among you. (Sura 59.7)

On entering the house of the Prophet [Muhammad*] . . . Do not engage in familiar talk, as this would annoy the Prophet and he would be ashamed to bid you go. (Sura 33.53)

It shall be unlawful for you [Muhammad*] to take more wives – or to change your present wives for other women. (Sura 33.52)

Your own city (Mecca) has cast you [Muhammad*] out. (Sura 47.13)

Remember when you [Muhammad*] left your people early in the morning to lead the Muslims to their battle positions? (Sura 3.122)

1. Write two paragraphs about Muhammad*, using the evidence in Source 3.

Islam

What was the new religion of Islam about? Its followers will tell you it is not a complicated religion. The word Islam means ‘submitting’, and at the heart of Muhammad’s* message were five basic rules for every Muslim – called the five Pillars of Islam.

1. Using the evidence in Source 4 – taken from the Quran – can you work out what these five rules are?

SOURCE 4 From the Quran

a) In the month of Ramadan the Quran was revealed, a book of guidance distinguishing right from wrong. Therefore whoever of you is present in that month, let him fast [go without food and drink]. (Sura 2.184)

b) The righteous man is he who: believes in God and the last day [of judgement], in the Angels and the Book and the Prophets . . .

c) Who, though he loves it dearly, gives away his wealth to relatives, to orphans, to the helpless, to the traveller in need, and to the beggars, and for the ransom of slaves . . .

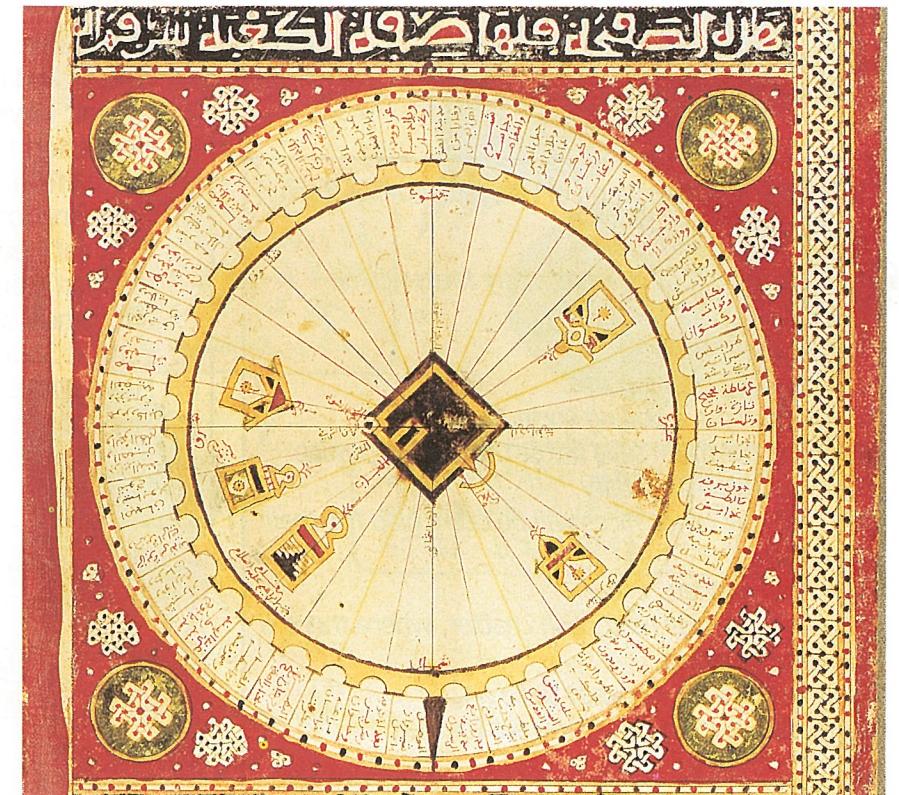
d) Who attends to his prayers and renders the alms [charity] levy. (Sura 2.177)

e) Make the pilgrimage and visit the sacred house [at Mecca] for his sake. If you cannot, send such offerings as you can afford. (Sura 2.196)

In addition, Islam teaches that it is an important duty of Muslims:

- to be willing to fight for other Muslims if they are attacked.
- to obey the many other rules laid down in the Quran and the HADITH (things the prophet is supposed to have said) concerning practical day-to-day matters such as family life, business, not drinking alcohol, and not eating pork.

► **SOURCE 5** Front page of an Islamic atlas showing the direction to Mecca from various Islamic cities. (The square in the centre is the Kaabah.) Until AD624/2AH the Muslims prayed towards Jerusalem. Ever since then they have prayed towards Mecca



▼ **SOURCE 6** The flag of modern-day Saudi Arabia, the only country to have a religious declaration on its flag. The writing says ‘I witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the prophet of God’

2. Source 6 includes what is said to be the most important part of Islamic belief. Which of the five pillars of Islam (Source 4) is this?



Activity

You are a young member of a rich Meccan MERCHANT family who have just become Muslims. Use all the evidence on pages 160–163 to describe a few of the changes that this new religion has brought about in the way you live your life.

Heaven and Hell

Like Christianity, Islam presents its followers with vivid descriptions of Heaven and Hell.

SOURCE 7 Description of Heaven and Hell from the Quran (Sura 88.2)

“On the Day of Judgement many faces will be downcast, toiling, weary, scorched by burning fire, drinking from a boiling spring. No food for them save bitter thorn-fruit, which does not feed or satisfy. On that day other faces will be calm, glad for their past effort, in a high garden, where they hear no foolish chatter, where there is a gushing spring, where there are couches to lie on, and glasses (to drink from) set to hand, and cushions piled up, and silk carpets spread out.”

1. Use Sources 7, 8 and 9 to describe what Heaven and Hell are like.
2. In what ways do these visions of Heaven and Hell reflect the best and the worst things about life in a desert environment?
3. Compare Sources 7, 8 and 9 with a Christian vision of Heaven and Hell on page 112 (the Chaldon Mural). What similarities and differences are there?
4. Look at Sources 4–9 again. How do you get to Heaven if you are a Muslim?
5. How does this differ from the way people in medieval England thought Christians got to Heaven?



SOURCES 8 and 9 A vision of Heaven and a vision of Hell from the *Miraj Namah*, a book illustrated by an Iranian Muslim in the fifteenth century AD/ninth century AH



HE'S SHOWN HOW POWERFUL HIS GOD IS BY DOING AWAY WITH ALL THE PAGAN IDOLS

I KNOW MUHAMMAD, HE'S A GOOD MAN. HE HELPS THE POOR

Muhammad is right about the Meccans. They are a bad lot. His teachings make a lot of sense to me.

These teachings are the most beautiful poetry I have ever heard. They must come from God. Only God could speak like that.

More people join him every day. I'd better join. I don't want to be on the wrong side.

I'm afraid of the Hell he talks about. I want to go to Heaven.

He's defeated the Meccans. God must be on his side

MUHAMMAD BELONGS TO MY TRIBE. I OUGHT TO STICK BY HIM.

Why did people follow Muhammad*?

Above are some of the reasons people had for deciding to follow Muhammad* and Islam.

Some of these reasons show the importance of Muhammad* as an individual – others show different factors.

Look at the reasons people had for following Muhammad*.

1. Which reasons show the importance of what Muhammad* had to say?
2. Which reasons show the importance of what Muhammad* did?
3. Why do you think many people believed that Muhammad's* message came from God?

Activity

- a) Imagine you are a Meccan slave in AD630/8AH. Explain why you have decided to become a Muslim.
- b) Imagine you are a Meccan merchant in 630/8. Explain whether or not you have decided to become a Muslim. Give your reasons.



How did Islam survive the death of Muhammad*?

IT IS 633 or 11AH – one year after Muhammad's* death. On the Arabian border, a thousand miles from Mecca, some Persian chiefs are gathered to discuss an important letter (see Source 1).

SOURCE 1 Letter to the Persian border chiefs

"In the name of God, the merciful and the compassionate. From Khalid ibn al-Walid to the border chiefs of Persia: Become Muslim and be saved. If not, accept protection from us and pay the poll tax. Otherwise, I shall come against you with men who love death as you love to drink wine."

Scenes like this were happening again and again all over the Middle East. One region after another came under the control of Islamic forces. How did the Muslims manage this, when their leader Muhammad* was dead?

Muhammad's* death was a crucial moment for Islam. During his lifetime, Muhammad* had seen all Arabia accept his leadership. His death came as a terrible shock. People asked whether this signalled the end of the Islamic faith. Or would it simply be the beginning of a new phase?

Muhammad's* followers had two particular problems to solve:

- Who should succeed Muhammad*? He had not named the next leader. Should anyone succeed him at all? Muhammad* was, after all, the last PROPHET of God. A new leader might be thought to be claiming a similar position.
- Some tribes said that they had sworn to obey Muhammad*. Now that he was dead they said they were released from their oath and were free to give up Islam. A military campaign against the tribes might bring them back under control.

Discuss with a partner how you would advise the Muslims to solve these problems.

1. Should they choose a new leader?
2. If so, who should they choose: Muhammad's* closest adviser and friend, the best soldier, the oldest Muslim, or someone else?
3. How could they convince the desert tribes that Islam was alive and well even though Muhammad* had died?

The Muslims finally elected Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad's* closest followers.

SOURCE 2 The early Muslims swear loyalty to their new leader, Abu Bakr

"You are the worthiest of those who travelled with the Prophet to Medinah, and the second of the two who were in the cave, and heard the messages from God. You are the deputy (khalifa) of the Prophet of God in prayer, and prayer is the noblest part of the religion of the Muslims. Stretch out your hand so that we may swear allegiance to you."

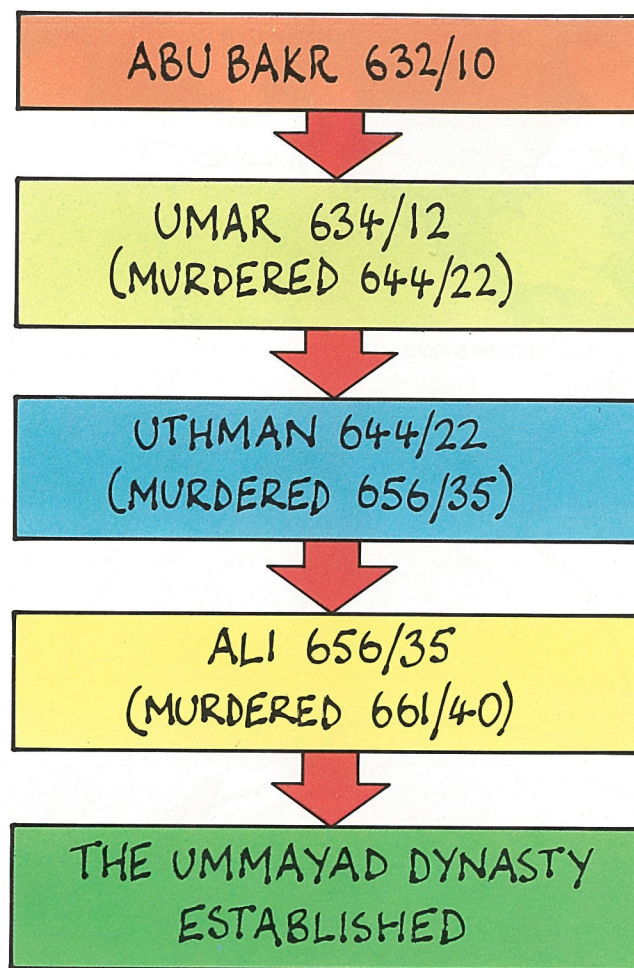
SOURCE 3 Abu Bakr probably made this speech when he became leader

"O people, I have been appointed to rule over you, though I am not the best among you. If I do well help me, and if I do ill correct me. Truth is loyalty and falsehood is treachery. . . If any people holds back from fighting the holy war for God, God strikes them down. If weakness spreads among a people, God brings disaster upon all of them. Obey me as long as I obey his Prophet. And if I disobey God and his Prophet you do not owe me obedience. Come to prayer, and may God have mercy on you."

4. Read Sources 2 and 3. Why do you think people at that time thought Abu Bakr would make a good leader?

Abu Bakr was actually called *khalifa* or Caliph – which means deputy or successor, not leader. From this time on, the leaders of Islam (see Source 4) were thought of as Muhammad's* deputies.

Abu Bakr led a very successful military campaign against some of the desert tribes who had abandoned Islam when Muhammad* died. The tribes quickly returned to Islam and recognised Abu Bakr as leader. Then the campaign spread into neighbouring countries. Islam was about to begin an expansion which would be more rapid and far reaching than even the growth of the Roman Empire.



SOURCE 4 The first caliphs of Islam

No pictures

Unlike the Romans, who made statues of their emperors, or people in medieval Britain, who painted pictures of their kings, the Muslims made very few pictures of Islamic places, people or events. Source 5 explains one reason why.

SOURCE 5 A saying (*hadith*) of Muhammad*

"Those who will be most clearly punished on the Day of Judgement are one who murders a prophet, one who has been put to death by a prophet, one who leads men astray, and the maker of images and pictures."

1. What might be wrong with making images and pictures?

Instead of pictures, Islamic writers wrote detailed accounts of the birth of Islam and descriptions of early Islamic leaders.

One of the earliest Islamic histories which have come down to us is Al Tabari's. It was written almost 300 years after the birth of Muhammad*.

Source 6 gives descriptions of Umar, one of Muhammad's* first followers and the second Caliph (see Source 4).

SOURCE 6 Written by Al Tabari

"I heard from Hannad, who heard from Waki, on the authority of Sufayan, on the authority of Asim, on the authority of Zirr, who said: 'Umar went forth on the festival day. He was ruddy, tall and ambidextrous [both right and left handed] and walked as if he were riding.'"

Al Tabari gives other descriptions, explaining how each one came to him from different people.

SOURCE 7

*"I saw Umar arrive at the festival, walking barefoot, ambidextrous, tucking up his sewn garment, standing taller than the people, as though he were mounted."
'Umar used to dye his beard yellow and dress his head with henna.'
I heard the son of Umar describe Umar, saying, 'A pale man, with a touch of redness, tall, grey and bald.'"*

2. From the four descriptions what can you say is probably true about Umar?
3. Why does Al Tabari list the people he got his information from? Does this make you trust his account more than you would if he didn't tell you how he found out?
4. Why do you think he gives several different versions? Does this make you trust him more than if he only gave one version?
5. What Umar looked like might not seem to be such an important question to us – so why do you think Al Tabari was so concerned to get it right?

What made the Arabs so successful?

SOURCE 1 shows you what happened to the ARAB Muslims in the century following Muhammad's* death.

723/113
Western Europe
Advance into France, but defeated by Charles Martel near Tours

637/15 and 718/99
Central Europe
Fail to capture Constantinople despite a long siege. No progress into Central Europe

636/14
Yarmuk
Opponents: Byzantines
Muslims attack in the middle of a sandstorm, and destroy a mixed force, including Armenians and Syrians. Byzantine emperor escapes back to Constantinople and abandons Syria to the Arabs

642/20
Egypt
Capture Alexandria and its shipyards. This allows rapid expansion along north African coast and capture of Cyprus (648/33)

Key

- The Islamic Empire in 632
- Area conquered by 634
- Area conquered by 644
- Area conquered by 656
- Area conquered by 750
- The Byzantine Empire
- The main lines of attack
- Battle

Scale 0 1000 km

SOURCE 1 Arab expansion from 636/14 to 751/133

637/15
Qadisiya in Iraq
Opponents: Persians (the unpopular rulers of Iraq)
Persian ruler escapes, leaving Iraq to the Muslims

642/20
Nevahend
Opponents: Persians
Victory opens the way for final victory over the Persians, and for attacks northwards into Azerbaijan and Armenia

751/133
China
Defeat the Chinese at the Battle of Talas, but cannot advance further

715/95
India
Conquer Sind, but no more progress

1. From 661/40 to 750/132, the capital of the Empire was Damascus. How far is the furthest point of the Empire from Damascus?
2. What would be the difficulties of controlling such a large Empire in the eighth/second century?
3. Each of the countries invaded had its own culture and its own religion. How would you expect the Arab Muslim invaders to deal with these religions?

WHAT MADE THE ARABS SO SUCCESSFUL?

What are the explanations for the success of the Arab Muslim armies?

One possible reason is that they were brave, well armed and skilful fighters.



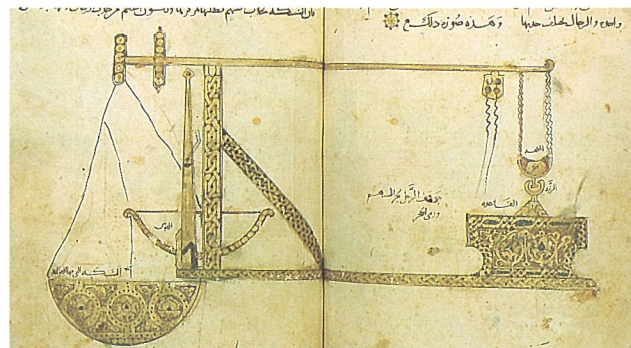
SOURCE 2 Arab soldiers in the seventh/first century, painted about 800 years later



SOURCE 3 A fragment from a tenth/fourth-century manuscript, showing Arab soldiers at that time

SOURCE 4 A modern historian describes Arab tactics

“The Arabs made good use of their experience of desert warfare. They were mounted on camels – their opponents on horses. After attack they could therefore retreat back into the safety of the desert.”



SOURCE 5 A catapult, drawn in the fourteenth/eighth century, but used by the Arabs from the eleventh/fifth century



SOURCE 6 Hand grenades – used by Muslim troops from the twelfth/sixth century

SOURCE 7 A ninth/third-century Persian writer describes Arab tactics and methods

“The Persians said to the Arabs, ‘You had only cane lances, tipped with ox-horn, and you used to ride your horses bareback in battle.’

‘The Arab lance used a solid shaft, but we know that a hollow one is lighter to carry and gives a more powerful thrust.’

‘You used to make war in separate, unorganised bands. You used not to fight at night, and you knew nothing of the ambush. Nor did you know anything of the instruments of war – the battering ram, the catapult, or throwing fire.’

1. What does Source 2 tell you about the way the early Arab soldiers were dressed and armed and the methods they used to fight?
2. Look at Sources 3, 4, 5 and 6, which are all about warfare in a later period. What changes have taken place in the Muslims’ methods of fighting?
3. Do you think all these changes are improvements?
4. Read Source 7. What is the writer’s view of the Arabs as fighters? Do you agree with his view?

Most historians agree that there were other reasons that the Arab Muslim armies were so successful. Here are some of them:

- When the Arabs were divided, they were no threat to anyone. When they were united together they suddenly became a major new power.
- The Arabs were transformed by Islam. The habit of disciplined prayer five times a day helped them to take orders and co-operate when fighting.
- They believed that if they died fighting for Islam they would go straight to Heaven.
- The neighbouring BYZANTINE and Persian Empires had been fighting each other from 603 to 629/7. By the time they had to face the Muslims they were already exhausted by war.
- Many people whose countries had been taken over by the Byzantine and Persian Empires hated their rulers and welcomed the Muslim invaders as liberators.
- The more lands the Muslims conquered, the more wealth they got to pay their armies and the more soldiers wanted to fight for them.

5. Try to link these reasons with what Sources 8–12 tell you about Arab warfare.

SOURCE 8 Two sayings of Muhammad*

- a) Swords are the key to Paradise.
- b) A day and night fighting on the frontier is better than a month of fasting and prayer.

SOURCE 9 Written by a modern historian

“In Emesa in Syria, the townspeople – Jews and Christians – closed the city gates against their own Byzantine troops and sided with the Muslims. In Spain, the Jewish communities rose up together in armed revolt against their rulers and in city after city the overstretched Muslims organised them into garrisons.”

SOURCE 10 An Arab general offers terms for surrender in the seventh/first century

“This is what we would grant the people of Damascus if we enter it: security for their lives, property and churches. So long as they pay the poll tax, nothing but good shall befall them.”

SOURCE 11 A modern Muslim writer describes the spread of Islam

“It has united all the different nations in one bond of love. This could only have been done by God.”

SOURCE 12 Some rules of war laid down by Abu Bakr in the seventh/first century

“Do not betray or steal any of the booty. Do not practise treachery or mutilation. Do not kill a young child, an old man or a woman.”

Activity

Get into groups. You are going to produce a project or a display showing why the Arabs were so successful. First of all, put the reasons for their success in order of importance. Explain why you have chosen this order. Then add any other explanations that the sources suggest to you.

1. Some historians think the Arabs would never have won so many wars or conquered so many countries if they had not become Muslims. Do you agree?