

# Islamic Economy and Society

## *The Spread of New Crops and Agricultural Experimentation:*

Diplomats, merchants, and other persons of importance often encountered plants, animals and agricultural techniques unique to particular areas as they traveled through the region called ***dar-al-Islam***\*; and if they found these crops or animals useful, attempted to introduce them into new areas. Among the items which they introduced are/were sugarcane, rice, spinach, artichokes, eggplant, oranges, lemons, limes, bananas, coconuts, watermelons, mangos, cotton, indigo, and henna. New foods created a richer and more varied diet for people throughout the Islamic world. Cultivators were able to extend their growing season and produce increased quantities of food. Cotton became an important industrial crop and the basis for a substantial textile industry. In addition to cotton, the textile industry was augmented by the production of indigo and henna for dye.

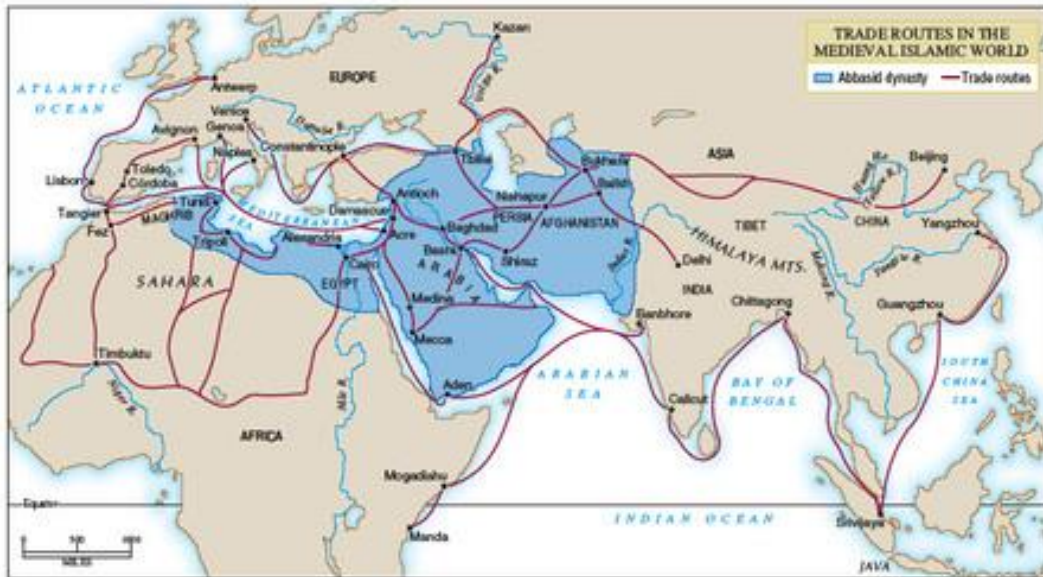
Much of the Islamic world has summers that are hot and dry, leaving many areas unarable; as a result, many farmers left their fields fallow during the summer months. With the introduction of heat loving crops, farmers were able to plant and grow crops year round.

Those who traveled throughout the Islamic world also paid attention to methods of crop rotation, irrigation, and fertilization, etc. They outlined their findings in agricultural manuals and used these to encourage experimentation with agricultural methods. The combined effect of new improved agricultural techniques and new crops was a substantially productive agricultural economy. The strong agricultural basis fueled economic growth throughout the Islamic world.

In turn, large cities grew and flourished from India to Spain. Among those cities with populations over 100,000 were Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus, Alexandria, Tangier, Samarkand, Delhi, and Toledo. All had flourishing markets with an abundance craftsmen, merchants, and artisans. Cities were important manufacturing centers where textiles, glass, leather, iron and steel were produced.

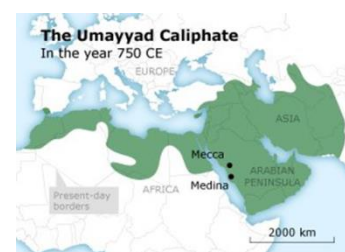
Paper was an important industry in Islamic cities. The technique of making paper had been discovered by the Chinese since the first century, C.E. At the Battle of Talas River in 751 C.E., Islamic soldiers captured prisoners who were skilled in paper making. Paper was easier to use and cheaper than calfskin (vellum) and soon lent itself to keeping administrative and commercial records. It also made possible the production of books and treatises in larger quantities than ever before. Paper was produced in mills in Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Spain, and Arabia as early as the tenth century, C.E. It later spread into Western Europe.

\****dar-al-Islam*** is a term used by Muslim scholars to those countries where Muslims can practice their religion and where other monotheistic religions were tolerated.



Commerce (trade) had been an important part of Islamic society from the beginning. Muhammad himself had been a merchant, and commented that honest merchants would stand with martyrs to the faith on the Day of Judgment. Elaborate trade networks linked the Islamic world by the time of the Abbasid Caliphate and formed a truly hemispheric economy.

After overrunning Sassanid Empire, Islamic merchants traded over the revived Silk Roads, trading from China to the Mediterranean. The Umayyad and Abbasid rulers made use of existing road networks which provided routes for military forces and administrative officials traveling throughout the Islamic world. The roads were also useful for merchants, missionaries, and pilgrims. The roads were so efficient that by the eleventh century, Muslim rulers in Egypt regularly imported ice from Syria to Cairo. Five camel loads of ice were delivered weekly to cool their food and drink.



The primary means of transportation was the **camel**, which could handle desert heat and carry relatively large loads. Along with camel transport, caravanserais, inns for caravan merchants and areas for animals to be rested, fed and watered, developed along the roads.

Improved navigation learned from conquered areas enabled Arab and Persian mariners to build a substantial maritime trading enterprise. From the Chinese, they learned the use of the **compass**; from Asian and Indian merchants, they learned the use of **lateen** (triangular) sails on the **dhow** sailing ships, which increase maneuverability. From the Mediterranean, they learned the use of the **astrolabe**, which enabled them to calculate latitude. Islamic merchants grew incredibly wealthy from maritime trading ventures.



Dhow with lateen sails

One such merchant, Ramisht of Siraf, a city on the Persian Gulf, collected a huge fortune, and became one of the world's wealthiest men. Much of his fortune was spent on pious and humanitarian causes. He founded a hospital and religious sanctuary in Mecca, and outfitted the Kaaba with a Chinese silk cover that reportedly cost eighteen thousand gold dinars.



Kaaba known as Al Kaaba Al Musharrafah Holy Kaaba is a building in the Center of Islam's Holiest Mosque (Is Al Masjid Al Haram) in Makkah Al Hejaz, near Mecca, in Saudi Arabia

**Banking** also flourished in the Islamic commercial world. Islamic banks conducted business on a large scale; they lent money to entrepreneurs, served as investment brokers, and operated currency exchanges. They also established multiple branches which honored letters of credit drawn on the parent bank. Such letters of credit were known as sakk, the root of the modern word, "check." This allowed merchants to draw letters of credit in one city and cash them in another, thus enabling them to settle accounts in distant areas without transporting large amounts of cash.

The increased volume of trade allowed entrepreneurs to refine their methods of organization. Islamic law, in fact, provided security for entrepreneurs by explicitly recognizing certain forms of business organization. Businessmen preferred not to engage in solo ventures, as loss of cargo to pirates or in a storm at sea would result in financial ruin. Instead, they pooled their resources in group investments; several cargoes were shipped by several individuals as a pool. As a result, risk was shared and more easily absorbed. Risk was further reduced by shipping in several different ships.

All of the advances in transportation, banking and business organization caused **long distance trade** to surge. Merchants dealt in silk and ceramics from China spices from India, jewelry and textiles from Byzantium, etc. They crossed the Sahara to obtain salt, steel, copper, glass and slaves from West Africa and visited east Africa where they traded for slaves, and animal skins. They also traded in Russia where they obtained animal skins, honey, amber and slaves, and also timber and livestock.



Much of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal marked Iberia on the map above) had been conquered by Muslim **Berbers** from North Africa during the early eighth century. Islamic Spain was known as al-Andalus. The governors of al-Andalus were allied with the Umayyads, and refused to recognize the authority of the Abbasid dynasty; rather they declared themselves Caliphs in their own right. Despite political tension, they still engaged in trade throughout the Islamic world. Imported crops improved the Andalusian diet, while merchants conducted business in Cordoba, Toledo, and Seville, all leading cities in Spain. By the tenth century, Cordoba had ten miles of publicly lighted roads, free Islamic schools, a tremendous mosque, and a library with over four hundred thousand volumes.



## *The Status of Women in the Islamic World:*

Pre-Islamic Arabia had been primarily patriarchal; although women enjoyed some rights not afforded them in other areas. They could inherit property, divorce their husbands on their own initiative, and engage in business. In fact, Khadija, the first of Muhammad's four wives, was a successful business woman. Women's position and security was enhanced somewhat by the Quran, as it forbade female infanticide and provided for dowries to be paid directly to brides rather than their husbands. Women were honorable individuals, equal to men before Allah, not the property of their husbands or male guardians.

Even so, male dominance was reinforced by the Quran and the *sharia* (religious laws). Inheritance was patrilineal, with substantial emphasis on genealogical purity. Women's social and sexual lives were strictly controlled by male guardians, fathers, brothers, or husbands. Men could take up to four wives, but women could have only one husband. The society established by the Quran and *sharia* were essentially patriarchal.

The veiling of women was a practice adopted after Islam expanded into the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, which also had strong patriarchal traditions. Upper class urban women had veiled themselves in Mesopotamia for over two thousand years; and Persians practiced it long before Muslims did. The practice was a sign of modesty; as was the practice of seldom venturing outside one's home unless accompanied by servants or chaperones whose purpose was to discourage the attention of men from other families.



Although the Quran expressly provided specific legal rights for Muslim women, Islamic scholars interpreted the Quran in such a way the rights of women were progressively limited. They were increasingly placed under the control of male guardians. This increased emphasis on male authority was the result of the influence of the patriarchal societies of Mesopotamia, Persia, etc.

### Islamic Values and Cultural Exchanges:

The **Quran** was and is the cornerstone of Islamic society. Muslims have also considered the Arabic text of the Quran as the only definitive and reliable scripture; translations lose part of the meaning. Theologians examined the Quran, stories of Muhammad's life and other sources of doctrine to formulate appropriate moral guidelines. This body of civil and criminal law was incorporated into the **sharia**, and established a degree of cultural unity between the various cultures/civilizations encompassed in the Islamic world.

Cultural and religious unity was also established by the **Ulama** (Muslim scholars) and **qadis** (judges), who held positions in all Islamic courts. They resolved disputes according to Islamic law, and ordered public observance of Islamic social and moral standards. As a result, the values of the Quran and *sharia* became established far from Arabia. Mosques maintained schools that provided elementary and religious education. Wealthy Muslims sometimes endowed schools. A number of institutions of higher education known as **madrasas** were established in larger cities which rulers often supported.

Among the more effective missionaries of Islam were the **Sufis**, named for the patched woolen garments which they wore. They were mystics who had advanced education in Islamic law and theology, although they did not find formal religious teachings especially meaningful. They rather concerned themselves with deepening spiritual awareness, and led pious and ascetic lives (self-discipline and abstention). Many devoted themselves to helping the poor, and others gave away all their possessions and lived as mendicant beggars. Many sought a mystical union with Allah, and relied on rousing sermons, passionate singing, and dancing, all of which raised them to a state of high emotion. Many Muslim theologians mistrusted the Sufis as they feared their lack of concern would lead them into error. However, they became increasingly popular after the ninth century because of their piety and eagerness to help others.



The most influential of the Sufis was a Persian theologian, *al Ghazali* (1058 – 1111) who taught human reason was too frail to understand the nature of Allah, and therefore could not understand or explain the world's mysteries. One could only appreciate the uniqueness and power of Allah by devotion and guidance from the Quran. Philosophy and reasoning were all vain pursuits that would only lead to confusion.

Their devotion to Allah rather than to mastery of doctrine made the Sufis effective missionaries. They tolerated the observance of pre-Islamic customs, and the association of Allah with deities observed by other faiths. They often encouraged individuals to revere Allah in their own ways, even if there was no basis for their belief in the Quran. They attracted numerous converts through their kindness, holiness and tolerance, and won converts from other long established religions such as Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism.

The Abbasid caliphs encouraged observance of the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca and to the Kaaba. Inns were built along the main roads to Mecca, and lavish gifts were made to shrines and sites of pilgrimages. People from distant areas visited Mecca and learned about Islam firsthand. Over time, they spread Islamic beliefs and values throughout the Islamic world. Through the work of the Sufis, the *ulama* and *qadis*, and the influence of pilgrimages, the term *dar al-Islam* became a reality.

Over time, Muslims became acquainted with the traditions of those who chose not to convert; yet these traditions interested the Muslims, who adopted them. From the Persians, they learned administrative techniques. The Persian idea of kingship was also attractive to them. From this idea, Muslim Caliphs considered themselves wise and benevolent, but absolute rulers.

Persian tradition also influenced Muslim literary work. Arabic had been the language of religion, theology and philosophy; whereas Persian was the language of literature, poetry, history and political reflection. Among the most widely known are the works of Omar Khayyam in the *Rubaiyat* ("quatrains.") Others include *Arabian Nights*, or *One Thousand and One Nights*. They told stories of adventure and romance in the Abbasid Empire.

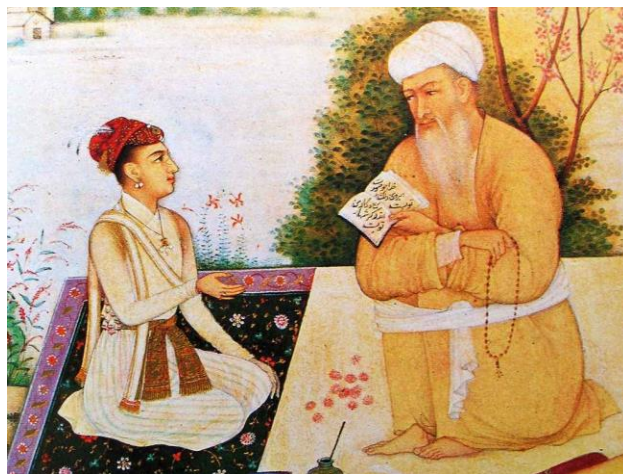
Islamic scholars were also intrigued by Indian mathematics, and readily adopted "Hindu numerals" which Europeans now known as "Arabic numerals." They also learned from them the concept of zero and thereby made complicated mathematical computations much simpler. The principle is illustrated by the fact that it is much easier to divide 94 by 13 than to divide XCIV by XIII. A Muslim mathematician, al-Khwarizmi, wrote a mathematical treatise he entitled *al-jabr*. ("Algebra.") He was known in Europe by his Latinized name, Algorithmus; hence, Algorithms. They also developed the use of geometry and trigonometry. Indian (Arabic) numerals extensively simplified bookkeeping for Muslim merchants.

Brahmi	↓		—	=	≡	+	∞	ℓ	7	5	7
Hindu	↓	०	१	२	३	४	५	६	७	८	९
Arabic	↓	•	١	٢	٣	٤	٥	٦	٧	٨	٩
Medieval	↓	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Modern		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

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Muslims were also impressed by the philosophical, scientific, and medical writings of Classical Greece, particularly the works of Aristotle and Plato. Much of their works were translated and interpreted. Many Muslim philosophers attempted to harmonize the teaching of the Greek philosophers with Islam. They did encounter some resistance. Sufi al-Ghazali considered Greek philosophy a completely unreliable guide to ultimate truth, since it relied on human reason rather than the revelations of the Quran.

As a result of Al Ghazali's objections, Muslim philosophers turned their attention more to Aristotle than to Plato. A prominent figure in this development was Ibn Rushd (1126 – 1198) who was the *qadi* of Seville, Spain. He followed Aristotle's works to find a rational way to understand the world. His reliance on reason was too much for many Muslims who felt that the revelations of the Qur'an were more important than human understanding. Later Muslim philosophers and theologians relied more on Islamic sources than on Greek philosophy. Even so, the influence of Aristotle and Plato did not disappear, even though they were not favored by official seats of learning; rather teachings from the Qur'an and Sufi mystics dominated teaching. Greek philosophy was thus used by Muslim thinkers much as they had used Persian and Indian political and cultural traditions. They simply absorbed it and used it to advance their own ideas.



Ironically, Ibn Rashd's influence extended to medieval universities in Western Europe. Western scholars learned of his work with the capture of Toledo by Christian knights from Europe. He was known there by Christian scholars as Averroes. His work on Aristotle was used by Western scholars to develop the discipline of Scholasticism, the belief that the teachings of Aristotle and those of the Bible were in harmony with each other. As a result, the Bible and Aristotle were the only accepted authorities in Medieval Western Europe.

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## Key Questions for Islamic Economy and Society

The following questions are in the order of the article and will test your reading comprehension, analysis and understanding of the subject material.

1. What does the term *dar-al-Islam* mean?
2. How did heat-loving crops aid Muslim agricultural production?
3. What agricultural information was brought back to the Muslim world and how did they use this information to increase crop production?
4. What was a result of the growth of Muslim cities that stretched from India to Spain?
5. Why was paper an important product within the Muslim empire?
6. Identify three (3) items and their origins that assisted Muslim navigation
7. How did banks operate within the Muslim world?
8. Fill in the box on the right

Long Distance Trade items brought back to the Muslim world	
From/Origin	Goods brought back to the empire
China	
India	
Byzantium	
West Africa	
East Africa	
Russia	

9. Identify three (3) *positive* rights granted to pre-Islamic women
10. Identify three (3) *negative* rights towards Islamic women
11. Who were the *Sufis* and what did they practice?
12. How did Persian tradition influence Muslim literature?
13. What was the relationship between Hindu numerals and Arabic numerals?
14. What ideas from Ancient Greece did Muslim scholars use and how were they received within Muslim society?