

Islam: a New Threat to Europe

To Europeans, it must have seemed that every disaster that could happen had already happened: Goths, Huns, Lombards, Franks, and other travelers had dropped by, taken what they wanted, and destroyed everything else. Then came the pressure of a new religion that was spreading rapidly: Islam.

Its founder was Mohammed, a camel driver and traveling merchant who had been born in the Arabian town of Mecca. There were 300 gods honored by the people in this town. As Mohammed talked with Jews and Christians, he was convinced there was only one God, whom he called Allah. His public attacks on the pagan gods created enemies for him since Mecca was a center for pagan worship, and in 622 A.D. he escaped the city with his family. This event was "Year One" for the Moslem (Islamic) faithful, and his escape from Mecca to live in the city of Medina was called the Hegira (flight). His teachings were written in the Koran (Qur'an). He taught that there was a special place in heaven for those who died for their faith. When the leader (caliph) called for a Holy War (Jihad), the loyal follower's duty was to respond.

Islam was like a mighty sword, cutting its way across the Middle East. By 639, the region from Iraq across Egypt was Moslem. Then it continued across North Africa: The Byzantines tried to stop the Moslems from taking any more of their land in Africa and were defeated in 640 at Heliopolis. In 711, the Moslems crossed from Africa into Spain; the Pillars of Hercules were renamed the Straits of Gibraltar in honor of a Moslem general. On the other side of the Mediterranean, the Moslems besieged Constantinople; the Eastern Empire was in danger of extinction. The siege failed, but in Spain, the Moors (as the Spanish Moslems were called) wiped out the old kingdom of the Visigoths and crossed the Pyrenees Mountains into France. They conquered southern France and were advancing on Paris. If they succeeded in destroying France, then conquering Europe was certainly a real possibility.

Charles Martel (The Hammer) rose to the occasion and defeated the Moslems at the Battle of Tours in 732. The Moslems were pushed back across the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain. The Moors built a kingdom in Spain that lasted until 1492, the year Columbus sailed.

At first, the Europeans looked upon the Moslems as more barbarians, but in truth, the Moors were to play a valuable role in the future of Europe. While others ignored the literature of the Greeks, the Moors preserved it. The Moors had high regard for Aristotle and referred to him simply as "the Philosopher." As practical people, the Moslems valued the insights of those with whom they came in contact. They expanded on the mathematical work of Ptolemy and Euclid. Their medical schools taught the importance of cleanliness, diagnosis, and the uses and effects of drugs. Our language still uses many of their terms: alcohol, algebra, zero, etc. Their navigational instruments would be important to sailors who traveled beyond sight of land in later years.



The Islamic religion spread from Arabia, across North Africa, and into Spain.

Name _____

Class _____

CHALLENGES

1. What was Mohammed's occupation?

2. Who convinced him there was only one God?

3. Why was he forced to flee from Mecca?

4. Where does the "Year One" begin in the Moslem calendar?

5. What was a Jihad?

6. By what name are the ancient "Pillars of Hercules" known today?

7. Who stopped the Moslem advance into France?

8. What happened to the Moors after that?

9. What Greek philosopher was especially admired by the Moors?

10. What did the Moors learn about medicine that we still think is important?

Name _____

Class _____

POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. After reading about Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in an encyclopedia, what teachings are similar to all of them?

2. What was there in Islamic teachings that made Moslems especially hard to defeat on the battlefield?

3. How much easier did the Moors make it for Christian Europe to become more skilled in medicine and exploration?
