Chapter Summary

Islam and the Arab Empire

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

How can religion influence the development of an empire?

How might religious beliefs affect society, culture, and politics?

The First Muslims

- The domestication of the camel and political disorder in Mesopotamia and Egypt helped expand caravan trade on the Arabian Peninsula as towns developed along trade routes between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.

- The revelations of Muhammad, which Muslims believe were given to him by the angel Gabriel, led to the creation of the Islamic religion.

- Islam is a monotheistic religion and way of life that stresses the need to obey the will of Allah by practicing the Five Pillars of Islam—belief, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage—and by following the shari’ah, a set of practical laws to regulate the daily lives of Muslims.

The Arab Empire and the Caliphates

- The death of Muhammad left his followers without an heir or a chosen successor.

- The leadership of Abū Bakr, Muhammad’s father-in-law, expanded the Islamic Empire and unified the Arabs.

- The Islamic Empire made many conquests under the rule of the Umayyad dynasty, including the Byzantine province of Syria, Egypt, the Persian Empire, and most of Spain.

- Internal struggles within the empire resulted in a split in Islam into two groups: the Shia Muslims, who accept only the descendants of Ali as the true rulers of Islam, and the Sunni Muslims, who accept the Umayyads as rulers, or caliphs.

- Under the Abbasids, a new capital city was built at Baghdad, on the Tigris River; Islam experienced prosperity and a new cultural outlook as Islamic culture was opened to the influence of the civilizations they had conquered.

Islamic Civilization

- Trade resulted in the growth of cities—Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus—and helped expand the reach of Islam into China, the Byzantine Empire, India, and Southeast Asia.

- Although Islamic teaching states that all groups are equal in the eyes of Allah, all social groups were not equal in the Arab Empire. A fairly well-defined upper class existed that consisted of ruling families, senior officials, nomadic elites, and the wealthiest merchants.

- Islamic advancements in philosophy, science, and history contributed to the world’s knowledge; Arabs translated the works of Plato and Aristotle into Arabic and an Arab mathematician developed the mathematical discipline of algebra, still taught in schools today.

- Islam brought major changes to the culture of Southwest Asia in its literature, art, and architecture; guided by the Quran, the representation of living beings is prohibited in Islamic art and architecture.