

Teacher's Guide



1.2A: Arabia Before Muhammad

What do you see here? Describe the landscape and the buildings. Describe how the people are dressed. What are the two men in the center of the picture doing? Why do so many of the men have weapons? What skills would a person need to survive and prosper in this environment?

- **In this transparency** we see an illustration of a traders' caravan outside Makkah. To the left is a Bedouin camel driver tying a water skin and the ivory tusks of an elephant on the back of his camel. At center, we see a trader bargaining with the Quraysh leader of the caravan, asking him to accept merchandise carried by the traders' donkeys.
- Before the birth of Muhammad, the majority of Arabs were Bedouins. Some linguistics link the word "Arab" to the Hebrew root "Abhar," which means to move or to pass. As herders, they roamed the desert in search of grass and water for their camels, goats, and sheep. They lived in tents woven from camel or goat hair. Bedouin warriors raided other peoples and fought one another over pastures and springs. They valued their camels and swords above else. They enjoyed poetry and music. Like other early peoples, they believed in many gods. There was no single religion. The people were scattered in tribes throughout the desert country. Each tribe had its own religion. Best described as an animistic polytheists, many tribes worshipped beastly sprites called jinn or demons, who were believed to reside in trees, streams, and stones. Despite the personifications given to these gods, they offered people no guidance for proper moral conduct.
- Biblical tradition has it that Arabs are descendents of Noah's son, Shem. This is where the word Semite comes from; a Semite, literally, is a descendant of Shem. The descendants of Shem can also be traced to the prophet Abraham. Indeed, it was the submission of Abraham in the supreme test, the attempted sacrifice of his son, described in the Qur'an (Koran) by the verb *aslama*, that appears to have provided Islam with its name. Abraham, who was married to Sarah, had no son, yet wanted to continue his line. Consequently, he took Hajra for his wife, who bore him a son named Ishmael; whereupon Sarah also had a son named Isaac. Sarah then demanded that Abraham banish Ishmael and Hajra from the tribe. According to the Qur'an, Ishmael went to Makkah (Mecca), and his descendants grew to be Arabs, whereas the descendants of Isaac remained in Palestine and became Jews and early Christians.
- Makkah was located in a narrow, sterile valley surrounded by bare mountains; its food supply was drawn from the gardens of Ta'if, some 75 miles to the southeast, and its livelihood depended entirely on the profits of trade. Traders stopped there for food and water on their way north to Constantinople. In the fifth century, the Quraysh, a powerful

local tribe of Arabs, decided to try to bring more trade and business to Makkah. The Quraysh negotiated treaties with people in neighboring areas that attempted to guarantee that the trade caravans traveling through the robber-infested desert would be safe. The Quraysh were largely successful; by the late sixth century, Makkah had become the most prosperous trading center in all of Arabia.

- Makkah was also an important religious center. Hundreds of years before the Quraysh settled in Makkah, local tribes came to Makkah to worship. For safekeeping, some of these tribes enclosed idols of their gods in a low, cube-shaped shrine called the Kaaba, which means “cube” in Arabic. According to legend, the original Kaaba had stood in heaven. When Adam was forced to leave the Garden of Eden, he built a structure on earth exactly like the one in heaven. The Kaaba, it was also believed, had a black stone embedded in its corner which had been a gift from the angel Gabriel to the prophet Abraham. Inside the Kaaba were stones, statues, and even some Christian pictures, for Christians and Jews also visited Makkah. The Quraysh encouraged tribes to deposit their idols in the Kaaba and promised to protect them for a fee. Originally a place dedicated to the worship of one God, by A.D. 500, more than 360 idols of the gods of various tribes were housed within the Kaaba.
- Makkah’s heterogeneous urban population included Arab tribes, Syrians who worked as caravan leaders, merchants, traveling monks, Christians, and Jews. Largely because Makkah’s population was so diverse, there was little social unity in the city. The Quraysh contributed to this when, in an effort to generate more wealth, they began to break the tradition of favoring their own kinsmen. By forming business partnerships with members of other families and tribes they caused hostility which led to feuds between different families.