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Islam From The Beginning To 1300
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Spread Into Africa

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The spread of Islam, from its heartland in the Middle East and North Africa to India and Southeast Asia, revealed the power of the religion and its commercial and sometimes military attributes. Civilizations were altered without being fully drawn into a single Islamic statement. A similar pattern developed in sub-Saharan Africa, as Islam provided new influences and contacts

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without amalgamating African culture as a whole to the Middle Eastern core. New religious, economic, and political patterns developed in relation to the Islamic surge, but great diversity remained.

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May peace and blessings of Allah be on thee

The spread of Islam across much of the northern third of Africa produced profound effects on both those who converted and those who resisted the new faith. Islamization also served to link Muslim Africa even more closely to the outside world through trade, religion, and politics. Trade and long-distance commerce, in fact, was carried out in many parts of the continent and linked regions beyond the orbit of Muslim penetration. Until about 1450, however, Islam provided the major external contact between sub-Saharan Africa and the world.

State building took place in many areas of the continent under a variety of conditions. West Africa, for example, experienced both the cultural influence of Islam and its own internal dynamic of state building and civilizational developments that produced, in some places, great artistic accomplishments. The formation of some powerful states, such as Mali and Songhay, depended more on military power and dynastic alliances than on ethnic or cultural unity. In this aspect and in the process of state formation itself, Africa paralleled the roughly contemporaneous developments of western Europe. The development of city-states, with strong merchant communities in West Africa and on the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa, bore certain similarities to the urban developments of Italy and Germany in this period. However, disparities between the technologies and ideologies of Europeans and Africans by the end of this period also created marked differences in the way in which their societies developed. The arrival of western Europeans - the Portuguese - in the 15th century set in motion a series of exchanges that would draw Africans increasingly into the world economy and create a new set of relationships that would characterize African development for centuries to come.

Several emphases thus highlight the history of Africa in the postclassical centuries. Northern Africa and the East African coast became increasingly incorporated into the Arab Muslim world, but even other parts of the continent reflected the power of Islamic thought and institutions. New centers of civilization and political power arose in several parts of sub-Saharan Africa, illustrating the geographical diffusion of civilization. African civilizations, however, built somewhat less clearly on prior precedent than was the case in other postclassical societies. Some earlier themes, such as the Bantu migration and the formation of large states in the western Sudan, persisted. Overall, sub-Saharan Africa remained a varied and distinctive setting, parts of it drawn into new contacts with the growing world network, but much of it retaining a certain isolation.

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