

Module 7: The Islamic Civilization

Topic 3 Content: Cultural Contributions of Early Islamic Civilization


Introduction

Cultural Contributions of Early Islamic Civilization

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Click on each of the bars to explore some of the cultural contributions of early Islamic civilization.

Image: An artist's depiction of Salāh ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb from the 12th century



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Architecture: Mosques

Cultural Contributions of Early Islamic Civilization

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In the world of architecture, Muslims made contributions through their places of worship, called mosques. First appearing on the Arabian Peninsula with the advent of Islam, these mosques soon appeared in other parts of the world as Islam spread. Many mosques included a set of standard architectural and artistic features, while also including characteristics of their native lands.

Image: A mosque in Malataya, Turkey



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Image: A mosque in Malataya, Turkey

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Architecture: Domes and Minarets

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Domes and minarets constitute two features often used in mosque design. Most mosques incorporate a dome over the main prayer hall of the building. Throughout time, as mosques were built, the size of the dome and its place in the design of the mosque grew larger. Many mosques have more than one dome. Minarets are tall, thin towers that include a base at the bottom and a circular or tear-drop shaped top. The design and size of a mosque's minaret are usually determined by its regional location and the time period in which it was built. These structures are important features to the mosque because they are used to call worshippers to prayer.

Image: The minaret of a mosque in Khiva, Uzbekistan



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Image: The minaret of a mosque in Khiva, Uzbekistan

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Architecture: The Dome of the Rock

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Architecture: The Dome of the Rock

Completed in 691 A.D. (C.E.) in Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock is a famous holy site for Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Muslims believe this is the spot where Mohammed prayed with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, and then left for heaven with the Angel Gabriel. At the heart of the site lies the Foundation Stone, the holiest site in Judaism. Jews believe that the stone is located where Abraham was going to sacrifice his son Isaac. The Dome of the Rock features a large golden dome on the outside of the building, and is decorated by mosaics and marble features on the inside.

Image: The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem



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Image: The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem

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Arabic Alphabet and Language

Cultural Contributions of Early Islamic Civilization

Architecture: The Dome of the Rock

Arabic Alphabet and Language

While Arabic can be traced back as far as the eighth century B.C. (B.C.E.), the use of this language extends into modern times. Beginning on the Arabian Peninsula, Arabic spread throughout the Middle East due to the spread of Islam. The language of Arabic is important to the Islamic faith because the Qu'ran is written in it. While most modern-day Muslims speak the language local to their region, many of them can understand Arabic from the Qu'ran.




Image: Arabic writing seen on a sign in Bethlehem

Art: Mosaics

Art: Calligraphy

Education: Universities and Libraries

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Art: Mosaics

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Architecture: The Dome of the Rock

Arabic Alphabet and Language

Art: Mosaics

Art was, and remains, a large part of Islamic culture. Derived from Roman and Byzantine influences, early Muslims used mosaics to decorate religious and civic buildings. During the Islamic period, many mosaics depicted landscapes, plants, or geometric themes. Typically, Muslims did not use humans or animals in their mosaic designs, to avoid them being seen as false idols. Because they were not controversial, geometric patterns were often used in Islamic mosaics and other Islamic art. Combinations of circles, squares, and triangles can be seen on many early Islamic artifacts.




Image: Tiled exterior of the Friday Mosque of Herat, Afghanistan

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Developed from the Arabic script, Arabic calligraphy depicts words designed as art. Because religious art could not use human and animal subjects, calligraphy was used to create many of these ideas. Geometric designs were also used in Arabic calligraphy. Many Arabic calligraphers use proverbs or passages from the Qu'ran in their work.

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Education: Universities and Libraries

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Located throughout the Islamic Empire, Muslims during this time period set up some of the first degree-granting universities and invested heavily in libraries. During the Islamic period, Córdoba, Spain was a major political, cultural, and intellectual center of the world. It had the largest library in the world, which housed from 400,000 to 1,000,000 works. The House of Knowledge in Baghdad was a major library and translation institute that was responsible for translating ancient Greek and Roman texts into Arabic. Once these works were translated, the institute maintained copies and became a learning center. Many of these translations allowed Muslims to build upon the work of the Greek and Roman intellectuals who came before them, while obtaining new information from Persia and India as those areas came under the empire. Because the empire was so large, it was connected through a series of trade and travel routes. Along with material goods, important ideas and new discoveries were transported through the empire. As the empire grew, other important universities were built in Timbuktu and Mali, and



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Image: Al-Azhar University in Egypt was founded in 970 A.D. (C.E.), and is still in operation today

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Literature: Poetry and Folktales

Cultural Contributions of Early Islamic Civilization

Education: Universities and Libraries

Literature: Poetry and Folktales

While people during this Islamic age were intent on preserving the works of great classical writers, several original works important to the Islamic world were created. Later recorded by friends or contemporaries, the poetic works of Omar Khayyam in *The Rubaiyat* from the 11th and 12th centuries explored important issues during this time period, as well as larger questions on the meaning of life. In addition, *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, a collection of folktales and fables, was compiled by an anonymous author or authors. Most of these stories were generations old, but were written down for the first time in this collection. Many stories from this region, like Aladdin, are based on this work.




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