

5.6 Islamic World: A Different Type of Empire

Background: Rome in the Mediterranean world, Gupta India, and Tang China were traditional empires based on governments, armies, laws, and a distinct land area. The Muslim or Islamic empire c. 1500 had a very different foundation. It was more extensive and never united. The “empire” was more of a network bound together by three interrelated factors: religion, language, and trade. Everyone in the Islamic world was not required to convert to Islam, but to be included in the network, local rulers did. Local languages predominated in each region, while Arabic was the lingua franca, or common language of exchange, for the network. Inclusion in the Islamic network brought local rulers a number of benefits. Literacy promoted more effective governance and trade brought prosperity. Membership also made their realm less likely to be invaded by Islamic armies.

Questions

1. Name ten contemporary countries that were part of the Islamic empire c. 1500.
2. How did Islamic control of this vast region of the Afro-Eurasian world stimulate the European Age of Discovery?
3. In your opinion, why was the Islamic world vulnerable to later challenges from Europe?

