**Medieval Muslim societies**

**Overview**

* People living in medieval Muslim society had different levels of power, depending on their religious beliefs, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.
* Non-Muslim groups comprised a protected class called ***dhimmis*** who had to pay a special tax for protection called the ***jizya***.
* During the first century of Muslim rule, Arab Muslims were favored over non-Arab Muslims, who were called ***mawali***.
* Women’s lives varied greatly, depending largely on socioeconomic status and political context.
* Political and economic organization was different in urban areas and villages, where tribal states were more common.

**Complex hierarchies**

Muslim-majority and Muslim-ruled societies underwent massive transformations during the medieval period. They went from being united under centralized, Arab-dominated caliphates like the [Umayyads and Abbasids](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/medieval-times/social-institutions-in-the-islamic-world/a/LINK" \t "_blank) to being ruled by smaller, decentralized regional powers. Many of these regional powers were non-Arab or and had different religious traditions. As a result, Muslim societies featured very different kinds of social organization.

Within each society, complex social relations governed the lives of residents. People’s lives were defined by their religion, ethnicity, social class, gender, and legal status. Because so many factors were involved, it’s difficult to generalize about life in the Muslim world during this time. To better understand it, it’s helpful to explore the different social institutions and hierarchies that determined people’s experiences.

**Religious differences**

Religious identity was an important aspect of life. Non-Muslims and Muslims following different traditions had different experiences, and there is a lot of scholarly debate about whether non-Muslims were persecuted or treated comparatively well in Muslim societies. There is no simple answer; the treatment of non-Muslims varied considerably depending on the context.

Generally, non-Muslims were able to practice their religions and exerted some degree of autonomy in governing their own internal affairs and commercial activity. As a protected class, called ***dhimmi***, they were accorded these freedoms provided they paid a special tax called a ***jizya*** and accepted Muslim rule.

Non-Muslims did not always enjoy the same legal and social privileges as Muslims, though. Sometimes they had restrictions on their dress, public religious display, professions, and places of worship. They also paid higher taxes and tariffs. Additionally, non-Muslim men could not marry Muslim women. However, these restrictions were enforced inconsistently. Harassment and exploitation of non-Muslims was often heightened during times of political and economic turmoil.

Still, Christians and Jews were often integrated into societies and played roles in administrative, cultural, and scientific institutions. Over time, non-Muslims developed relationships with the caliphate. They were able to negotiate favorable policies which ensured that they had freedom over their religious practice. This relationship also facilitated the construction and repair of churches and monasteries.

In some ways, the defeat of the Byzantine Empire allowed Christianity to flourish in the Muslim world, though in different forms than under the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine Empire’s official religion was Orthodox Christianity, and it was officially against other Christian interpretations. For this reason, while Greek Orthodox Christians resisted Muslim rule, other Christians like the Nestorians were ambivalent. Under Muslim rule, Christianity also grew in the Caspian region and central Asia.

Similarly, in the absence of Zoroastrian institutions supported by the Persian Empire, many new sects and cults appeared in the former territories of the Persian Empire.

Many people eventually converted to Islam, for a multitude of reasons. Some converted out of sincere belief, and others converted in order to avoid higher taxes or discrimination. Some converted to attain higher status in government. Populations converted slowly, and by the eleventh century, Muslims were likely a slight majority in the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.

Within Islam, religious differences were important as well. As different schools of thought crystallized and clear religious identities formed, specific groups were favored in different contexts. For example, Shias were favored under the Shia Fatimid dynasty, while Shias suffered some persecution under the Sunni Abbasids. Shifting power balances meant that persecution of certain groups shifted frequently as well.

Even within Sunni groups, specific interpretations or approaches to religion were given precedence, often at the whims of the current ruler. For instance, under the seventh Abbasid caliph, Al-Ma'mun, religious scholars were subjected to religious tests, which were focused on seemingly minor doctrinal differences. Upon failing these tests, scholars were subject to serious punishments.

**Ethnic differences**

Islam began in the Arabian peninsula, and the first Islamic empires and had a distinctly Arab character. The Umayyad Caliphate in particular gave preference to Arabs and used Arabic as its administrative language. Non-Arab Muslims, called ***mawali***, Arabic for clients, were accorded lower status and paid higher taxes, though they often played important clerical roles. This created a lot of resentment against the Umayyads among the caliphate’s non-Arab subjects.

Ultimately, non-Arab Muslims, namely Persians, were incorporated into the Abbasid state, where they exerted considerable cultural influence. The Arab dominance of the Rashidun and Umayyad courts waned in the Abbasid Caliphate, and as Abbasid power declined, Persian, Turkic, and Berber powers rose in its place..

During the late Abbasid and post-Abbasid period, there were ethnic divisions within the military. Enslaved Turkic soldiers, called ***ghilman*** or ***mamluks***, comprised a professional military class that was separate from the civilian population. This division of the military contributed to the rising power of the Turkic **Mamluk dynasty**. The most successful non-Arab regime was that of the Mamluks in Egypt, but many other Islamic states were governed by non-Arabs.

**Women, gender, and family**

We have little information about the lives of women in the early Islamic era. Before the eleventh century, most historical accounts are limited to elite women, and legal sources do not shed much light on the lived experiences of non-elite women. While still limited, there is more information about women living in medieval Islamic societies.

Reconstructing women’s lives using these limited resources is tricky. It’s even more difficult because of the many different experiences of women, which make it impossible to generalize. Women’s lives were affected by religion, but they were also influenced by their socioeconomic status and the political environment around them.

Many historical accounts were authored by elite male scholars and were moralistic in nature, which means they were designed to instruct and give moral prescriptions. This makes them poor sources for understanding the reality of women’s lives. They can offer some indirect insights, however. For example, traditional jurists complaining about women’s independence, freedom, and role in public life suggest that at least some women ordinarily acted in such ways. Except for elite women, women frequented markets and mosques and acted in a number of spheres, including agriculture, craft-making, food preparation, medicine, and midwifery.

The ordinary behaviors of women hinged on much more than religion. Socioeconomic status arguably had a much more important role. The practices of veiling, seclusion, and polygyny—marrying more than one wife—were more common in the elite sphere. Jewish and Christian elite women were much more likely to wear a veil or remain secluded than Muslim women of the lower classes, suggesting that these practices had little to do with religion. In fact, the elite practice of having separate female spaces, sometimes called **harems**, might have been adapted from the Byzantine gynaikonitis, a zone of the home that was reserved for women only.

Practices of seclusion seem to have evolved over time, as there is little evidence of women’s seclusion during the life of the Prophet Muhammad. There is evidence that women in Muhammad’s time freely interacted with the Prophet and their male counterparts in mosques and other public arenas.

By contrast, the elite women of later periods were more limited in the public sphere. Medieval Islamic society was more patriarchal than early Islamic societies. Some of that influence came from Sasanian and Byzantine culture, through their ruling-class customs and other religious ideas. As Muslim societies integrated ideas from conquered regions, the cultures of these regions affected the interpretation of Islamic scripture as it related to gender.

It would be hasty to conclude that women constituted an oppressed class, however. While elite women did not visit public spaces, these spaces were not the center of society as they are in the modern world. Also, elite women still enjoyed considerable power and were able to use their wealth to cement political alliances, hire their own administrative staff, and fund charitable trusts. They regularly financed mosques, schools, and other institutions, and they were often the effective heads of their families. Royal women exerted significant influence at court and were often influential regents.

Elite women were also often educated. While they did not participate in official Islamic legal bodies, they had their own educational institutions where they studied and taught religion and other subjects to other women. There were also Sufi convents, where women were able to live and worship. One notable Sufi mystic was Rabia of Basra, who lived in the eighth century and was known for her extreme piety.

Women of all socioeconomic classes enjoyed a degree of legal and financial independence which was uncommon in other cultures at the time. Women were able to manage independent wealth, make investments, engage in trade, initiate divorce, and inherit assets. However, women inherited less than their male counterparts and required male guardians to initiate marriage according to some schools of thought. In legal matters, women did not act as judges, and their testimonies were not as valuable as those of their male counterparts.

While Islamic scripture and tradition set up moral principles for women and families, the way these principles were applied fluctuated in different political contexts. In early Islamic societies, pre-Islamic Arab culture was still very influential; the family was organized around a patriarchal clan with a common male ancestor. Families were led by the eldest male family member. However, centuries later, during Mamluk rule, society was organized very differently, with individuals exerting more power. Women in this context were able to move through society more independently.

Sometimes, rulers curtailed women’s freedoms, but they did not always have religious reasons for doing so. For example, the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim decreed that women should veil, avoid going out in the evenings, and avoid mingling with men. Some scholars think these restrictions were motivated by a plague crisis. When al-Hakim’s half sister, Sitt al-Mulk, came to power as regent, she removed her brother’s regulations and allowed women to move through the public sphere without restrictions.

**Political and economic organization**

After the disintegration of the Abbasid caliphate, numerous fragmented political bodies ruled the formerly massive empire. Because of this, medieval Islamic society had many different forms of political, social, and economic organization and was governed by dozens of different dynasties, caliphates, and tribal states.

This was a period of decentralization, and for most ordinary people, the government was a distant entity. In urban areas, urban elite, wealthy merchants and land-owning families had the most power over religious and economic institutions. In rural areas, landowners and tribal rulers exerted the greatest influence.

In places where the military was comprised of *mamluks* or *ghilman*, like Baghdad, the government was largely concerned with organizing and financing this foreign military class. The government either collected taxes from civilians and issued a regular salary to the troops or paid the military through land grants, called ***iqta***. This worked well at times, but unorganized or corrupt practices sometimes led to long periods of social unrest.

The holders of land grants acted like landlords over the farmers on that land, and they collected revenues from them. They used a portion of these revenues to maintain irrigation systems. It is unclear whether the farmers had to pay taxes or rent, but they were effectively tenants of the landowner.

Areas outside major cities were based on tribal structures. In these areas, the government was less formal, and rulers spent time ensuring that grazing areas were sufficient for sustaining pastoral lifestyles and filling any needs that were unmet by this system. Rather than taxation or land grants, tributes in exchange for protection were much more common in tribal states. These looser civic relationships gave individuals more social autonomy. In place of centralized, direct control, villages and towns had local officials.

As in earlier civilizations, enslaved people were an important component of the domestic and military workforce, and the slave trade was active in many Muslim-ruled regions. Slavery remained legal after the advent of Islam, but Islamic rules concerning the treatment of enslaved people were enacted. People were enslaved through trade and war, but they often ended up doing skilled labor as opposed to working in agriculture. Many enslaved people ended up working as nurses, merchants, or administrators on behalf of their masters.