Economy and Society of the Early Islamic World

Directions: As you read, annotate for how the economy and trade contributed to the accomplishments of the Islamic empires. You should be able to answer the following sub-questions related to this question:

- What goods and ideas were traded?
- With whom did they trade? How did they move goods from one place to another?
- What were some of the Islamic Empires accomplishments?

In the dar al-Islam (lands under Muslim rule), as in other agricultural societies, peasants tilled the land as their ancestors had done for centuries before them while manufacturers and merchants supported a thriving urban economy. As in other lands, the creation of large empires had dramatic economic implications. The Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates created a zone of trade, exchange, and communication stretching from India to Iberia. Commerce throughout this zone served as a vigorous economic stimulus for both the countryside and the cities of the early Islamic world.

New Crops, Agricultural Experimentation, and Urban Growth

As soldiers, administrators, diplomats, and merchants traveled throughout the dar al-Islam, they encountered plants, animals, and agricultural techniques peculiar to the empires various regions. They often introduced particularly useful crops to new regions. The most important of the transplants traveled west from India to Persia, southwest Asia, Arabia, Egypt, north Africa, Spain, and the Mediterranean islands of Cyprus, Crete, Sicily, and Sardinia. They included staple crops such as sugarcane, rice, and new varieties of sorghum and wheat; vegetables, fruit; and industrial crops such as cotton, indigo, and henna.

The introduction of these crops into the western regions of the Islamic world had wide-ranging effects. New food crops led to a richer and more varied diet. They also increased quantities of food available because they enabled cultivators to extend the growing season. The result was a dramatic increase in food supplies.

Some new crops had industrial uses. The most important of these was cotton, which became the basis for a thriving textile industry throughout much of the Islamic world. Indigo and henna yielded dyes that textile manufacturers used in large quantities.

Travel and communication in the dar al-Islam also encouraged experimentation with agricultural methods. Cultivators paid close attention to methods of irrigation,
fertilization, and crop rotation, and they outlined their findings in hundreds of agricultural manuals. Copies of these works survive in numerous manuscripts that circulated widely throughout the Islamic world. The combined effect of new crops and improved techniques was a far more productive agricultural economy, which in turn supported vigorous economic growth throughout the dar al-Islam.

Increased agricultural production contributed to the rapid growth of cities in all parts of the Islamic world from India to Spain. All these cities had flourishing markets supporting thousands of artisans, craftsmen, and merchants. Most of them were also important centers of industrial production, particularly of textiles, pottery, glassware, leather, iron, and steel.

One new industry appeared in Islamic cities during the Abbasid era: paper manufacturing. Chinese craftsmen had made paper since the first century C.E., but their technology did not spread far beyond China until Arab forces defeated a Chinese army in 751 and took prisoners skilled in paper production. Paper was cheaper and easier to use than previous writing materials and soon became popular throughout the Islamic world. Paper facilitated the keeping of administrative and commercial records, and it made possible the dissemination of books and treatises in larger quantities than ever before. By the tenth century mills produced paper in Persia, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Egypt, and Spain, and the industry soon spread further to western Europe.

The Formation of a Hemispheric Trading Zone

From its earliest days Islamic society drew much of its prosperity from commerce. Muhammad himself was a merchant, and he held merchants in high esteem. According to early accounts of his life, Muhammad once said that honest merchants would stand alongside martyrs to the faith on the day of judgment. By the time of the Abbasid caliphate, elaborate trade networks linked all the regions of the Islamic world and joined it to a larger hemispheric economy.

Overland trade traveled mostly by camel caravan. Although they are unpleasant and often uncooperative beasts, camels endure the rigors of desert travel much better than horses or donkeys. Moreover, when fitted with a well-designed saddle, camels can carry heavy loads. As camel transport became more common, the major cities of the Islamic world and central Asia built and maintained caravanserais inns offering lodging for caravan merchants, as well as food, water, and care for their animals.

Meanwhile, innovations in nautical technology contributed to a steadily increasing volume of maritime trade in the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean. Arab and Persian mariners borrowed the compass from its Chinese inventors and used it to guide them on the high seas. From southeast Asian and Indian mariners, they borrowed the lateen sail, a triangular sail that increased a ship's maneuverability. From the Hellenistic Mediterranean they borrowed the astrolabe, an instrument that enabled them to calculate latitude.

Banking also stimulated the commercial economy of the Islamic world. Banks had operated since classical antiquity, but Islamic banks of the Abbasid period conducted business on a much larger scale and provided a more extensive range of services than their predecessors. They not only lent money to entrepreneurs, but also served as brokers for investments and exchanged...
different currencies. They established multiple branches that honored letters of credit known as sakk—the root of the modern word for check—drawn on the parent bank. Thus merchants could draw letters of credit in one city and cash them in another, and they could settle accounts with distant business partners without having to deal in cash.

Trade benefited also from techniques of business organization. Islamic law provided security for entrepreneurs by explicitly recognizing certain forms of business organization. Usually Islamic businessmen preferred not to embark on solo ventures, since an individual could face financial ruin if an entire cargo of commodities fell prey to pirates or went down with a ship that sank in a storm. Instead, Abbasid entrepreneurs often pooled their resources in group investments. If several individuals invested in several cargos, they could distribute their risks and more easily absorb losses.

As a result of improved transportation, expanded banking services, and refined techniques of business organization, long-distance trade surged in the early Islamic world. Merchants ventured beyond settled societies in China, India, and the Mediterranean basin to distant lands that previously had not engaged systematically in long-distance trade. They crossed the Sahara desert by camel caravan to trade salt, steel, copper, and glass for gold and slaves from the kingdoms of west Africa. They visited the coastal regions of east Africa, where they obtained slaves and exotic local commodities such as animal skins. They engaged in trade with Russia and Scandinavia and obtained high-value commodities such as animal skins, furs, honey, amber, and slaves, as well as bulk goods such as timber and livestock. The vigorous economy of the Abbasid empire thus helped to establish networks of communication and exchange throughout much of the eastern hemisphere.

The prosperity of Islamic Spain, known as al-Andalus, illustrates the far-reaching effects of long-distance trade during the Abbasid era. Most of the Iberian peninsula had fallen into the hands of Muslim Berber conquerors from north Africa during the early eighth century. As allies of the Umayyads, the governors of al-Andalus refused to recognize the Abbasid dynasty. Despite political and diplomatic tensions, al-Andalus participated actively in the commercial life of the larger Islamic world.

Imported crops increased the supply of food and enriched the diet of al-Andalus, enabling merchants and manufacturers to conduct thriving businesses in cities like Córdoba, Toledo, and Seville. Ceramics, painted tiles, lead crystal, and gold jewelry from al-Andalus enjoyed a reputation for excellence and helped pay for imported goods and the building of a magnificent capital city at Córdoba. During the tenth century Córdoba had more than sixteen kilometers (ten miles) of publicly lighted roads, as well as free Islamic schools, a gargantuan mosque, and a splendid library with four hundred thousand volumes.