



chapter four

The Arab Monopoly

The Empire of Islam



▲ *An illustration of Arab merchants on a trading mission. The Arabs were skilled sailors, their navigational skills perfected over many centuries of Spice Route trade.*

▼ *The blue area on this map shows the extent of Muslim power in 814.*



Early in the Seventh Century CE, the Prophet Muhammad preached the new religion of Islam to the Arabs of central and southern Arabia. On his death in 632 CE, he left an organized community of Muslims who were determined to carry his message to the world. The Muslim Arab armies swept through the Middle East. They captured the

Egyptian port of Alexandria in 641 and by 710 their empire stretched from Spain to the Pamir mountains of Central Asia. Many of the peoples they conquered converted to Islam and from this religious unity developed an empire of great variety and dazzling grace. It was ruled by successive dynasties: the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the Fatimids and the Turkish 'slave' dynasty of the Mamelukes.

Even before the rise of Islam, the Arabs had been active traders. Their share of the Red Sea trade had greatly increased with the decline of Roman power there in the Fourth Century CE and now the Spice Routes of the Persian Gulf came under their control as well. These had previously been in the hands of the Sasanians (224-651 CE), the successors to Parthian rule in Iran. Sasanian ships had sailed regularly to Sri Lanka and were already trading at Spice Route ports as far east as southern China. The Arabs now added their considerable sailing skills to these activities and Muslims came to dominate the Spice Route trade right across Asia and down the east coast of Africa. Much of the trade was direct to the source of supply so cutting out the expense of a middleman. Where they travelled and traded, the Muslims also

converted, further consolidating their hold on the trade network from the East.

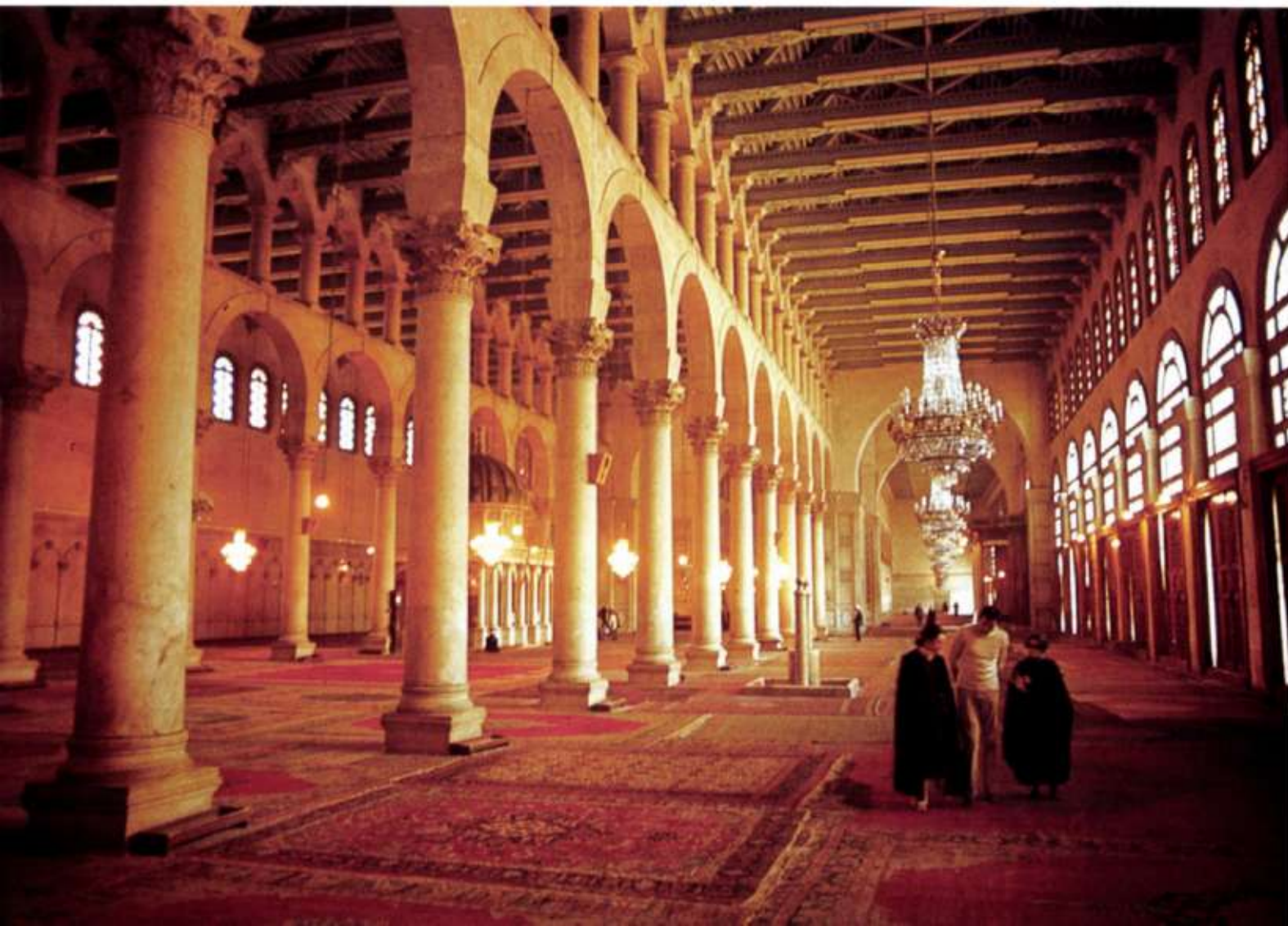
The monopoly of trade brought wealth and prosperity to the Middle East. There was a blossoming of literature and learning, founded on Arab intellectual and scientific traditions and those the Muslims inherited from the Sasanians and classical Europe. It was fed by the information brought back by Spice Route merchants. New knowledge of spices is reflected in the works of the Iranian doctor Ibn Sina (980-1037). His *Canon of Medicine*, which was to dominate medical teaching in Europe until the Seventeenth Century, includes details of the preparation of drugs from spices and herbs.

The skills of Muslim artisans were also enhanced by techniques learnt from abroad. Chinese weavers were brought to Iran, contributing to the growth of the silk industry there. The production of ceramics increased with the Muslims adopting many of the techniques used by the Tang Chinese and copying their decorative styles long after the Tang Dynasty had ended.



▲ An illustration from a 12th Century Persian botanical treatise. It shows the tapping of balsam trees for their sap.

▼ A view of the interior of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria.





European Middlemen



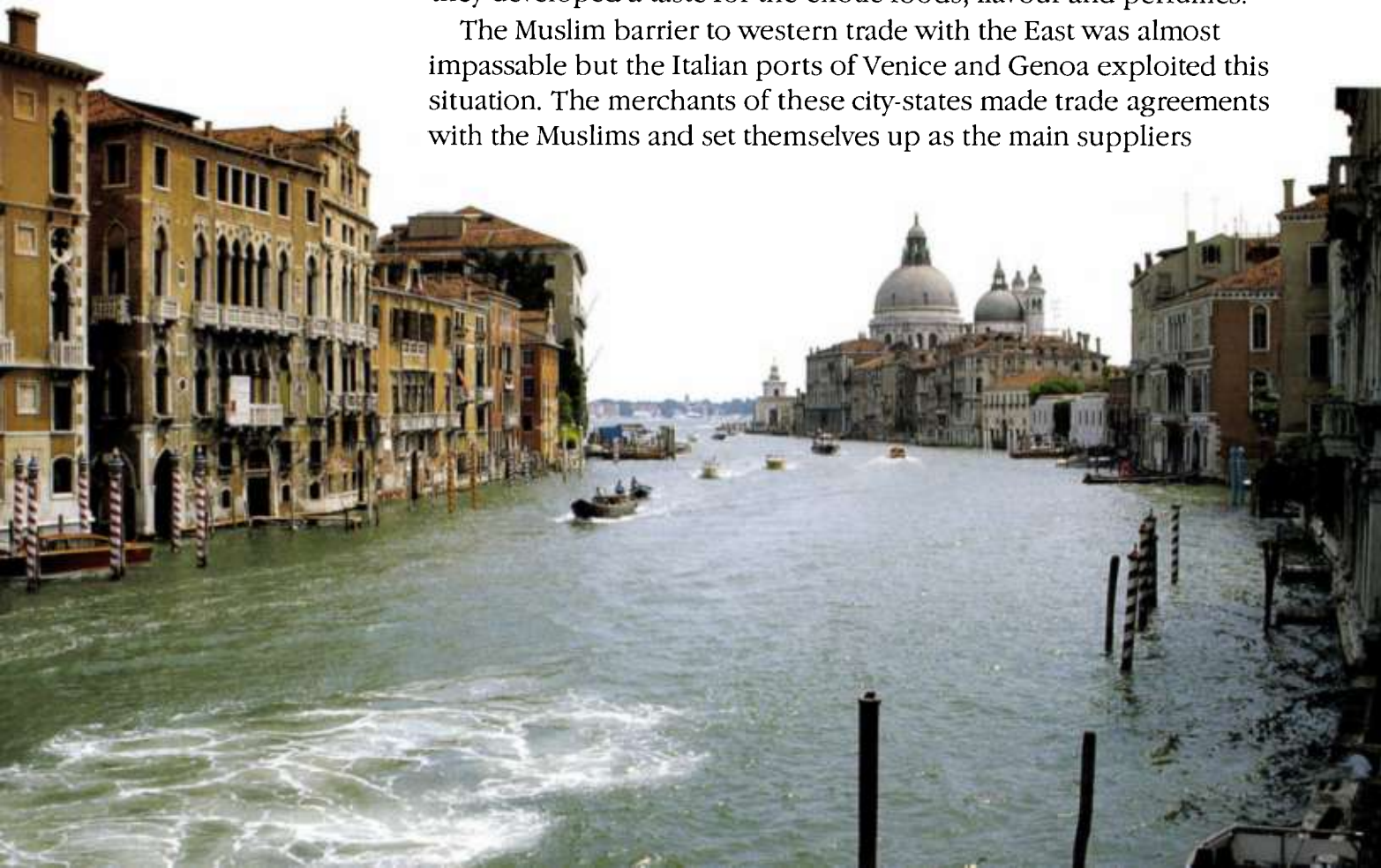
▲ *The lion of St. Mark, patron saint of Venice.*

▼ *The Grand Canal in Venice. The city grew fabulously wealthy in her position as broker between Arabs and Europeans and beautiful palaces and churches were built beside the canals.*

Whilst Muslim commerce and culture flourished in the Middle East through the Seventh to Twelfth Centuries, the situation was very different in Christian Europe. The Roman Empire had slowly crumbled from the start of the Fourth Century and by 610 CE had lost all power in western Europe. Its remnants, the Byzantine Empire, was now focused on the City of Constantinople (today's Istanbul in Turkey). Constantinople continued many of the old traditions of Rome, while the taste for luxuries if anything increased. New trade routes sprang up around the city and, despite decreases in territory, the Empire's economy boomed.

Western Europe, however, sank into turmoil and the flow of goods reaching it from the East was reduced to a trickle. Trade on a large scale was not to revive until the Christian Crusades (1095-1291), which were launched to capture the holy city of Jerusalem from the Muslims. The crusaders saw what riches poured into the Muslim world from the East – spices and silks, porcelain and precious stones – and they developed a taste for the exotic foods, flavour and perfumes.

The Muslim barrier to western trade with the East was almost impassable but the Italian ports of Venice and Genoa exploited this situation. The merchants of these city-states made trade agreements with the Muslims and set themselves up as the main suppliers





◀ A 15th Century French illustration of crusaders disembarking at the port of Damietta in Egypt, on their way to Jerusalem. They are being blessed by bishops as they leave the boat. The Crusades brought the riches of the East to the attention of Europe once again.

▼ The port and city of Genoa today.



to the crusaders. Once they had reached the Mediterranean ports, the Oriental goods were sold by the Muslim traders to Venetian and Genoese merchants, who then resold them in Europe at exorbitant prices. The further these goods made their way into Europe, the more transactions had to be negotiated, with each transaction adding to the sale price. For example, a hundredweight of pepper cost only three ducats in the Indian port of Calicut, but the Venetians could sell it in Europe for eighty.

The two Italian cities grew enormously rich from their trading links with the Muslims. But a bitter rivalry grew up between them and also Constantinople. In 1204 the Venetians were chosen to lead the Fourth Crusade against Alexandria but instead attacked Constantinople. Venice grabbed the most profitable areas of the Byzantine Empire for itself along with its lucrative trade in pepper with Alexandria.

Still later, the rivalry between Venice and Genoa came to a head with the Chioggia War (1378-81) from which Venice emerged victorious. Now Venice reigned supreme: ships filled its harbours and merchants bargained for the spices, perfumes and silks of the East. Its arsenal was the most impressive in the Mediterranean and the palaces and squares lining its canals were some of the most splendid in Europe.



The Travels of Ibn Battuta



▲ A Byzantine mosaic of Mary and the Infant Jesus, from a church in Istanbul. Ibn Battuta visited Constantinople, as it then was, and marvelled at its buildings.

► Map showing the complicated routes taken by Ibn Battuta on his travels.

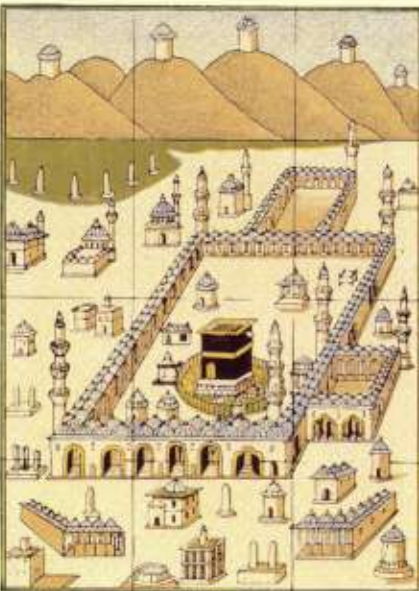
▼ A view of Mecca, with the sacred Kaaba in the centre. Mecca was Ibn Battuta's original destination, but he continued his journeys for another 23 years.



In 1325, a twenty-one year old Muslim called Ibn Battuta left his home in Tangier, Morocco to make the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca. It was the start of one of the greatest journeys of exploration made during the Medieval era.

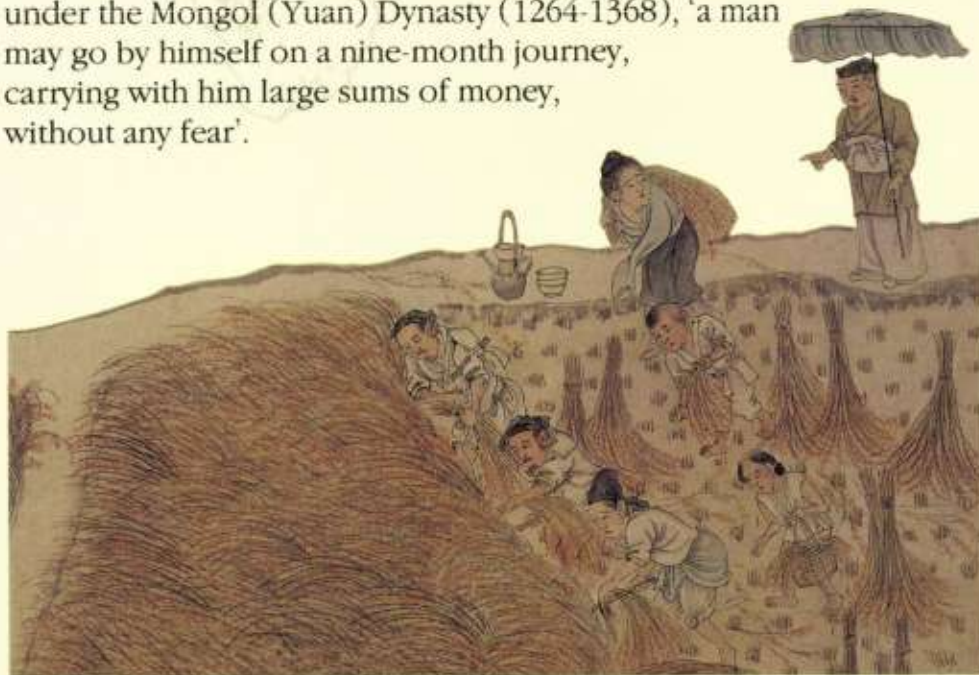
It seems that on the way to Mecca, Ibn Battuta had gained a taste for travel for, rather than returning home, he went north to Baghdad. Over the next 23 years, he was to visit cities as far flung as Constantinople and Kilwa (on Africa's east coast); Calicut on the Malabar Coast of India and Canton in China. Still later, having returned briefly to Morocco, he visited Spain and even journeyed to Timbuktu in west Africa. He finally settled near Fez and, on the instructions of the Sultan of Morocco, wrote down the account of all his travels. He died in 1369.

Ibn Battuta travelled slowly, following no set plan and often staying in one place for years at a time. As a result, his account provides a vivid evocation of the world at this time and the network of trade routes that he followed. He describes many of the Spice Route ports and cities: Cairo was 'peerless in beauty and splendour' whilst Zaila in Somalia was 'the dirtiest town in the world'. The port of Calicut was 'visited by



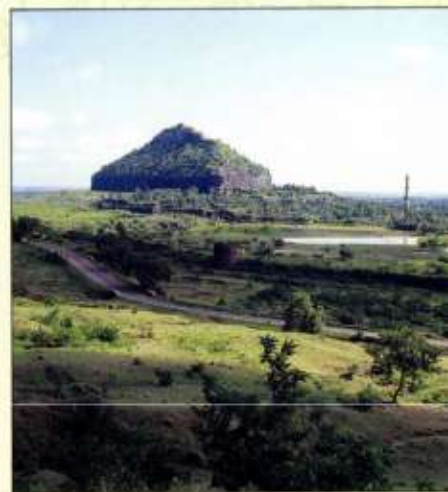
merchants from China, Sumatra, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Yemen and Fars [Iran]' and the port of Zaitun (modern Quanzhou) in China was remarkable for its harbour. 'The harbour. . . is one of the greatest in the world – I am wrong: it is the *greatest!*' enthused Ibn Battuta.

The days of a unified empire of Islam were long since over and, by Ibn Battuta's time, much of Asia lay in the hands of the Mongols. A fierce warrior tribe from the north-east Steppes, the Mongols had swept through Asia, including most of China and Iran, crushing any opposition with immense brutality. Ibn Battuta describes how shocked he was to find Baghdad, once the great capital of the Abassid Dynasty (750-1258), in ruins, destroyed in 1258 by the Mongol onslaught. But now Mongol rule meant there was peace through Asia and travel was relatively safe. Ibn Battuta commented that in China, under the Mongol (Yuan) Dynasty (1264-1368), 'a man may go by himself on a nine-month journey, carrying with him large sums of money, without any fear'.



But although Muslim power had fragmented, the religion itself prospered, particularly along the Spice Routes. Ibn Battuta found practising Muslims as far east as Sumatra and through much of India. He describes several of the Muslim rulers he met: the Sultan of Sumatra was 'a humble-hearted man who walks on foot to Friday prayer', whereas the Sultan of Delhi was 'fondest of making gifts and shedding of blood'!

Ibn Battuta visited the lands of every Muslim ruler of the time – the only medieval traveller known to do this – as well as such 'infidel' countries as Byzantium, Sri Lanka and China. He set out only one year after the death of Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant whose journey to China is so famous. According to one calculation, Ibn Battuta's journeys covered a total distance of 120,700 kilometres – three times that travelled by Marco Polo.



▲ The ruins of Daulatabad (City of Fortune), the capital city of the Sultan of Delhi. Ibn Battuta worked there as a judge for 8 years.

◀ A Yuan Dynasty drawing of the rice harvest. Ibn Battuta was impressed by the order and security of Yuan ruled China.



▲ A souk (market) in Fez, Morocco. Many of these markets look much as they did in Ibn Battuta's day.