MAIN IDEAS

1. Geography The geography of the Arabian peninsula encouraged a nomadic way of life.

2. Economics Trade routes opened the Arabian peninsula to goods and ideas from many parts of the world.

3. Belief Systems Mecca was an important religious center as well as a trade city.

TAKING NOTES

Reading Skill: Categorizing
As you read each part of Lesson 1, look for important information about life on the Arabian peninsula. Record this information on a cluster diagram like the one shown below.

Ancient Water Jug
Storing water was a necessity on the arid Arabian peninsula. It was kept in clay jugs, similar to the one shown above.

Skillbuilder Handbook, page R6

CALIFORNIA STANDARDS

7.2.1 Identify the physical features and describe the climate of the Arabian peninsula, its relationship to surrounding bodies of land and water, and nomadic and sedentary ways of life.

7.2.2 Trace the origins of Islam and the life and teachings of Muhammad, including Islamic teachings on the connection with Judaism and Christianity.

7.2.5 Describe the growth of cities and the establishment of trade routes among Asia, Africa, and Europe, the products and inventions that traveled along these routes (e.g., spices, textiles, paper, steel, new crops), and the role of merchants in Arab society.
Life on the Arabian Peninsula

Build on What You Know  What movies have you watched that included a scene from a desert region? The scene probably showed a hot, sandy area with a limited supply of water. Well, this is what the Arabian peninsula in southwest Asia is like. It was there that the Muslim Empire was built.

A Desert Culture

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  How did the geography of the Arabian peninsula encourage a nomadic way of life?

The deserts of the Arabian peninsula cover hundreds of thousands of square miles. One desert in the south covers nearly 250,000 square miles. (See map on page 81.) It is so enormous and so desolate that Arabs call it the Rub al-Khali, which means “the empty quarter.”

Physical Features and Climate  The Arabian peninsula is a region of Southwest Asia. It lies between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The peninsula is about 1,200 miles at its longest point from north to south and 1,300 miles at its widest point from east to west. This is about one-fourth the size of the United States. The region is very arid. It receives little rain and is covered mainly by deserts. Because of its desert climate, only a small amount of the land is useful for agriculture. Farmland is found in the southern mountains and along the northern coastline.
Nomads  For centuries, Arab herders called Bedouins (BEHD•oo•ihnz) have adapted their lives to arid land. Bedouins are nomads. Because there is little farmland, nomads move from place to place instead of settling permanently. Bedouins travel within a specific area as they seek water and grazing land for their herds. The path they follow is affected by such factors as the landscape they must cross and the amount of rainfall. Another geographic factor is the location of an oasis.

An oasis is a desert area that contains water. (See Geography feature below.) Bedouins interacted with people who settled at oases and lived a sedentary, or settled, life. Often, this interaction meant that the settled population traded food that they grew to the nomads for animals and animal products.

Family Life  Bedouins organized themselves into groups called clans. Clans were families of people related by blood or marriage. Each clan was its own unit of government. Clans also provided security and support in the extreme conditions of the desert.

Bedouins took pride in their ability to adapt to life in the desert. They were also proud of their fighting skills. Clans had to defend themselves against raids by other clans who wanted water, livestock, or food supplies. Because of their fighting ability, Bedouins became the core of armies that would help create the Muslim Empire.

How did people of Arabia adapt to its landforms and climate?

Oasis

An oasis is a fertile or green spot in the midst of a desert.

• Oases occur where water in underlying rock rises to the surface to provide a source for wells and springs. The water usually seeps upward when it hits a fault, or fracture, in the rock.
• Some large oases can support an entire city. Others might simply be a small spring.

Human-Environment Interaction

Why might oases be important to people who live on the Arabian peninsula?
Crossroads of Three Continents

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What made the Arabian peninsula important for trade?

The Arabian peninsula is well situated for trade. It is a crossroads of three continents—Asia, Africa, and Europe. Also, it is surrounded by bodies of water. These include the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf. (See map above.)

**Growth of Trade Cities** By the early 600s, growing numbers of Arabs had moved to market towns or oases. Market towns grew into cities because of trade. Larger settlements near the western coast of Arabia became centers for local, regional, and long-distance trade.

In these cities, Arabs could meet travelers from near and distant lands and trade a variety of goods, including spices from India and ivory from Africa. (See feature “Life Along a Trade Route” on pages 90–91.) Some seaports, such as Aden on the southwestern coast, were important trading centers long before the 600s.

Other areas, such as larger oases, prospered because they had good soil and enough water to support farming. These oases, too, were important for trade. They became stops along the many trade routes that crossed the peninsula. Mecca and Medina were such oasis cities.
Trade Routes and Trade Goods  Sea and land routes connected Arabia to major trade centers. These trade routes ran from the southern tip of the peninsula to the Byzantine and Persian empires to the north. Products and inventions from three continents moved along these routes by camel caravans. Merchants traded animals, textiles, metals, crops, and spices such as pepper and saffron.

Trade was also important in cultural exchange. Merchants carried information as well as products. For example, they would gain knowledge of different religions practiced in the cities they visited. Judaism and Christianity were spread this way.

Why did so many trade routes develop on the Arabian peninsula?

The Holy City of Mecca

Why was Mecca important as a religious center?

Mecca was an important religious center as well as a trading center. It was located along the trade routes in western Arabia. Caravans stopped in Mecca during certain holy months. They brought people who came to worship at an ancient religious shrine called the Ka’aba, which was located in the middle of the city. The shrine was a cube-shaped stone building.

Abraham in Mecca  Arabs associated the Ka’aba with Abraham. Abraham was an important early figure in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions. Many Arabs thought themselves descendants of Abraham. They believed that Abraham and his son Ishmael built the Ka’aba as a temple to God (called Allah in Arabic). The belief in one God is called monotheism.

Connect to Today  The Holy City of Mecca

Each year, Muslim pilgrims from around the world come to Mecca to worship at the Ka’aba.
Many Religions  Other Arabs, especially those in the desert, believed in many gods. This belief is called polytheism. Over the years, these Arabs began to worship at the Ka’aba. Each year, people flocked to Mecca from all over the peninsula. The journey to a sacred place is called a pilgrimage.

Many Jews and Christians lived in Arab lands, so the belief in one God continued on the Arabian peninsula. Also, some Arabs blended Christian and Jewish beliefs and rituals with their own traditions. It was into this religious environment that Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was born in Mecca around A.D. 570.

REVIEW  What factors made Mecca a center of religious activity?

Lesson Summary  
- The harsh physical features of the Arabian peninsula and its arid climate caused many people to be nomads.  
- The peninsula’s location at the crossroads of three continents encouraged trade and cultural exchange.  
- Mecca was a trade center and a religious center.

Why It Matters Now . . .
Muslims from every corner of the globe try to make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lives.

Terms & Names  
1. Explain the importance of  
   nomad clan monotheism  
   oasis Allah pilgrimage

Using Your Notes  
Categorizing  Use your completed diagram to answer the following question:  
2. What two important geographic features determined life on the Arabian peninsula? (7.2.1)

Main Ideas  
3. Why did people live a nomadic life on the Arabian peninsula? (7.2.1)
4. Why did trade often lead to cultural exchange? (7.2.5)
5. Why was the Ka’aba significant for Mecca? (7.2.2)

Critical Thinking  
6. Making Inferences  What aspect of the life of Bedouins prepared them for their role as warriors in the spread of the Muslim Empire? (7.2.1)
7. Summarizing  What were the religious beliefs on the Arabian peninsula before Muhammad? (7.2.2)

Activity  
Internet Activity  Use the Internet to research the Ka’aba. Then write a paragraph summarizing your findings in your own words. (7.2.2)
INTERNET KEYWORD: Ka’aba