

# *Story of Islam*

By Suzanne Strauss Art

## SELECTED PASSAGES

In those early times, each of the Bedouin tribes worshiped its own nature gods, which were believed to dwell in certain trees, rocks, springs, and wells. These gods controlled the weather, the sun, moon, and stars, and even the destinies of the people. Reigning above the tribal deities was the all-powerful Allah (a name derived from the Arabic al-ilah, which simply means "the god"). Although revered as the creator of the heavens and the earth, Allah was considered a remote deity who took little interest in the daily lives of human beings. He had three daughters - Allat, al-Uzza, and Manat. They served as mediators between him and his worshippers.

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Muhammad's house had a spacious courtyard enclosed by a wall. Usually such a courtyard was used to fence in camels at night. In this case, however, it became a place for Muslims to gather for meetings as well as formal prayers. The trunks of two palm trees stood like pillars along the northern wall to show worshippers the direction of Jerusalem, towards which they faced during prayer. The wall indicating the direction of prayer was called the qibla. Other tree trunks supported a roof of palm branches over a section of the courtyard as protection from the hot desert sun. This simple enclosure served as the first mosque. (The word "mosque" is derived from the Arabic masjid meaning "place of prostration.")

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Sufism had its roots in the reaction of certain pious Muslims to the worldly ways of the Umayyads. The word "sufi" comes from the Arabic word suf, meaning "wool," and it refers to the coarse blue woolen garments worn by the mystics to protect the materialism they saw around them. The Sufis longed for a return to the simple ways of the first umma and sought a more inward approach to religion. They tried to reproduce within themselves the state of mind that made it possible for Muhammad to receive the revelations. By concentrating their mental powers while breathing deeply and

rhythmically, they believed they could experience the presence of God in the depths of their being. At first Sufism was a small fringe movement, but, as you will see, it would later have a great influence upon Muslim society.

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While translating Indian texts at the House of Wisdom, the scholars stumbled upon some strange-looking figures. After careful study, they realized that the figures represented a very efficient method of calculating numbers, which involved using the symbol of zero and a place-value system. This method (we use it today) allowed all numbers, no matter how large, to be expressed by means of nine figures (plus zero. This number system was a vast improvement over the cumbersome Roman numerals that were in use in Europe and western Asia at the time. Although they came from India, the numbers of known today as "Arabic numerals," because the Arabs adopted them and spread their use throughout much of the civilized world.

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The umma had changed dramatically since the time of Muhammad. No longer a small community of Arabs who knew one another quite well, Muslims were fast becoming the majority group in a vast empire. As Dar al-Islam (the abode of Islam) expanded and grew more diverse, there was a need to organize and reform the religious institutions that regulated the lives of its people. The first step was to filter through the vast collection of information then in circulation about the very origins of Islam.

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The builders [of La Mezquita] collected marble columns and capitals from nearby Roman ruins. However, most of these columns were only seven or eight feet tall, not high enough to support the ceiling of such an important building. So an ingenious architect placed rectangular piers on top of the columns and constructed two tiers of horseshoe-shaped arches on the piers. The lower tier of the arches connected the columns, while the upper tier supported the roof. The alternation of red brick and white limestone in the arches created a striking "candy-stripe" pattern, which you can see in the photograph on the opposite page. La Mezquita was modeled on the Great Mosque in Damascus, with

aisles arranged perpendicular to the qibla wall. While this worked well as a design for the prayer hall, the architect followed his model a bit too closely: the qibla of La Mezquita faced south, which was the correct orientation towards Mecca for Damascus, but not for a city in Spain!

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Al-Hakam II, the most scholarly of the caliphs, created a vast library at Cordoba with over 400,000 books, mainly about mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, which were carefully indexed in 44 catalogues. As in Baghdad, men of learning were drawn to the library from distant lands. Christians and Jews gathered there with Muslim scholars, sharing their views and perspectives in a zealous spirit of inquiry matching that of the House of Wisdom a century earlier. This open-minded co-mingling of intellectuals from different faiths came to be known as the *Convivencia*, a Spanish word meaning "living together."

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For Muslim historians, the Crusades were a minor series of skirmishes. The scholars did, however, write at length about Saladin, who was revered for bringing Egypt back into the Sunni fold and returning Jerusalem to Dar al-Islam. Saladin even won the respect of many of the Crusaders, not only for his courage and military prowess but also for his generous spirit. According to legend, when English King Richard the Lion-hearted was wounded Saladin offered the services of his own physician and ordered some of his soldiers to carry ice down from the mountains to comfort him.

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The Janissary corps now numbered nearly 20,000 men. The soldiers were assigned to regiments called *ortas*. *Orta* means "hearth," which reflects the fact that life in the barracks centered around the great copper cauldrons in the cooking hearth. This is where the men gathered to eat and socialize. Every Friday the *ortas* stationed in Istanbul marched with their cauldrons to the great palace kitchen and received the next week's rations of rice and mutton. Beyond its practical use, the regiment's cauldron had a symbolic function, much like a flag or standard. It was carried in front of an *orta* on the

march and even paraded in public ceremonies. The greatest disgrace to a regiment was to lose its cauldron. Should this happen, all officers in the unit would be expelled from the corps. In later years, if the Janissaries disapproved of something the sultan did they would turn their cauldron upside-down.

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The turban did not become common among the Ottomans until after the capture of Constantinople. Mehmed began the fashion, winding a long narrow piece of cloth around his felt cap. As in other Islamic states, this headdress was worn only by Muslims. With the Ottomans, the higher one's social status, the larger the turn. The cloth was 12 feet long - or longer. Turbans worn by the sultan were huge, and they were often decorated with gems and gold embroidery. The ulama wore gold-embroidered skullcaps wound round with white muslin, forming flat turbans.