Life on the Desert: The Bedouins

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A Bedouin encampment in the desert. Photo from Wikimedia.

For the Bedouin people, home means the entire Sahara desert.

Traditional Bedouin are nomads, or wanderers who travel with herds of animals. They are constantly on the move, with no permanent camping place. Their most important belongings are their camels and their tents. Any type of settled life is traditionally considered beneath Bedouin dignity.

While it may seem like the Bedouin lack order, this is far from true. Tribes are the basic unit of Bedouin life, and though simple, they are highly structured. For travel, tribes break into smaller clans and family units.

Today, Bedouin tribes and lands are strongly identified with the Middle East because they are Arabs who originally came from the Arabian Peninsula. It is important to recognize that much of Bedouin history also took place in northern Africa. In fact, the Sahara was one of the first territories the Bedouin conquered.
Islam arrives in northern Africa

The first Arab invasion of North Africa was led by the Bedouin and occurred in A.D. 643. By that time, northern Africa had already been invaded many times by outsiders. The Greeks, Romans and Phoenicians had all left their cultural marks on the region, and the Arab Muslims did the same.

Followers of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, emerged from the Arabian Peninsula. They moved westward across northern Africa. Their goals were to teach Islam and establish political and religious unity under the rule of a Muslim leader, or caliph.

The invasion was intense, and by the 700s, the primary goals were accomplished. Muslims had succeeded in conquering the region, but internal conflict led to big changes.
Controversy over the new caliph

After Prophet Muhammad died in A.D. 632, his followers had a serious disagreement over who should lead Islam. A leader, called a caliph, was chosen to be in charge of Islam and rule the Islamic empire — the caliphate. But some of Muhammad's followers did not agree over who should be the caliph. There was hostile disagreement between Arab leaders over who should become the caliph. This divided Islam into two branches — Sunni and Shia. This division continues today.

A long chain of events resulted from this division. One important consequence was another invasion of North Africa by the Bedouin. The Berbers are the original people of North Africa. Around A.D. 1040, a group of Muslim Berbers from the Zirid Dynasty who had become Shia and were part of the Fatimid Caliphate launched a rebellion to convert to the Sunni branch.

The Shiite caliph of the Fatimid Caliphate was angry. He invited two tribes of Arabian Bedouin to travel west and punish the Berbers.

The Bedouin spread Arab culture

The Bedouin groups, known as the Hilalians or Banu Hilal, agreed. They came, fighting their way through Egypt and Libya — and some even continued on to the coast of Morocco. This was their chance to acquire new territory through conquest.

The Hilalian invasion was devastating to the region. The Bedouin and their herds demolished towns. Great cities were sacked and literally trampled to dust. Farmlands were destroyed. Little was left behind. Some Berbers eventually decided to join the Bedouin invaders in order to survive.

The Bedouin invasion of northern Africa was one of destruction, but it was also one of introduction. As the nomads swept through the region, they continued the process of Arabization — the teaching and spreading of Arab and Islamic culture.

The early Bedouin left behind the ideals of strength and endurance that have allowed their culture and peoples to survive today. Modern Bedouin tribes have been forced over the years to adapt to modern conditions. Gradually, many have started living in towns or roam in a much more limited area. Still, their culture is still founded on the ideals of nomadism, and the desert is still the place they call home.