Overview: The Seljuk Turks were nomadic horsemen who converted to Islam and recognized the Abbasid Caliph. They usurped power from the Abbasids and then embraced their culture and conquered much of Central Asia and the Middle East. They were named after one of their early leaders and converted as a group to Islam through the efforts of Arab missionaries.

The Seljuk Turks created a huge empire that stretched from western China to the Mediterranean and included modern-day Turkmenistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and parts of Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia and Palestine. At their height, the Seljuk sultan had himself invested as emperor by the caliph of Baghdad. Their success was largely accidental.

The Seljuks emerged at a time when the Abbasid Caliphate was weak and the Muslim world was in chaos and was made a number of shifting independent states that fought among themselves with none being able to establish dominance until the Seljuks came along. The Seljuks ruled for about a century before they were weakened by fights for succession that thrust Central Asia into another period marked by chaos and conflicts between feuding states.

Ken Johnson wrote in the New York Times, “The Great Seljuq Empire, which occupied most of western Asia and the Middle East from around 1040 to 1157, was among the more short-lived” empires, “and it left a comparatively modest material inheritance. But if the Seljuq dynasty produced nothing as grand as the pyramids, the Parthenon or the Taj Mahal, it nevertheless presided over a cosmopolitan multicultural age of terrific artistic and intellectual vitality and innovation. In the long run, the Seljuq Empire was not cohesive enough to withstand divisions within its own family dynasty and rebellions by competing tribes. The empire collapsed in the mid-12th century, but its successor states persisted independently in places like Anatolia, Syria and northern Mesopotamia into the early 14th century.

Beginning:
Seljuks and Early Turkish States
In the 11th Turkish tribes began invading western Asia from their homelands in Central Asia. They established a large empire that stretched from western China to the Mediterranean. The Karakhanids and Ghaznavids fought one another off and on until they were both out maneuvered diplomatically and militarily by the Seljuk Turks, who created a huge empire that stretched

Founding of the Seljuk Turks
J.J. Saunders wrote in “A History of Medieval Islam”: “The pasture-lands to the north of the Caspian and Aral Seas had long been the home of a group of Turkish tribes known as the Ghuzz or Turkomans. About 950 a number of clans withdrew from the Ghuzz confederacy, and settled under a chief named Seljuk. A few years later they abandoned their ancestral shamanism for Islam, a change of faith that was momentous for the future of Asia. Seljuk is a semi-legendary figure who is said to have lived to the patriarchal age of 107, but he seems to have been an able leader, who welded his people into a first-class fighting force and by adroit diplomacy played off one neighboring prince against another

Middle:
Seljuks Take Baghdad
The Abbasids—the Arab-Muslim rulers of Baghdad—were displaced by Turkic-speaking warriors who had been in Central Asia for more than a millennium. The Abbasid caliphs began enlisting these people as slave warriors as
early as the ninth century. They came to a special relationship with the Muslim caliph, who at the time was very weak and needed military support. In return for propping up the caliph, the Seljuks---still close to their nomadic horseman roots---were able to conquer in the name of Islam and keep the spoils of their conquests. Shortly thereafter the real power of the Abbasid caliphs began to wane; eventually they became religious figureheads while the warrior slaves ruled.

The Seljuks usurped power from the Abbasids and then embraced their culture, claiming Sunni Orthodoxy, declared themselves sultans "holder of power." The Seljuks proceeded to unify the Muslim world again by conquering Iraq and eastern Asia Minor. The y helped make the Muslim world stringer by allowing the regions to serve a Muslim hierarchy but maintain a degree of autonomy that stretched beyond Seljuk territory. Although places like Cairo, Samarkand and Cordova were not under Seljuk rule they were able to prosper due to stability in the Muslim world and independence at home.

The Seljuks reached their peak under the brilliant Persian Vizier Nizamulmulk (ruled 1063 to 1092), who wanted to use the Turks to unify Muslims and rebuild the old Abbasid bureaucracy. He augmented the Seljuk cavalry with a new slave corp that was able to expand the Seljuk Empire as far Yemen in the south, Afghanistan in the west and Syria in the west. Under Nizamulmulk, the Seljuk Turks captured Jerusalem and the Holy land in 1071 and held it during the time of the First Crusade.

**Seljuk Turks Versus the Byzantines**

To the west of the Seljuks were the Byzantines. The Byzantine Empire was essentially the continuation of the Roman Empire in Eastern Europe. Following the fall of the Roman Empire, The Byzantine Empire had prospered, even expanding into modern Syria and Armenia. But conquests such as these caused the Byzantine to spend a lot of money, making the empire very weak.

"The Turks drove towards the Byzantine frontiers, partly by design, partly by accident. Their coming had produced something of a social crisis in the Persian and Arab lands. The Seljuk Turks won several battles against the Byzantine Empire.

By 1091, the Byzantine Emperor asked Pope Urban II for help battling the Seljuks. In 1095, the Crusaders came to the aid of the Byzantines and helped drive the Seljuks from western Anatolia. The Byzantines had struck a deal, allowing the Crusaders to pass through Constantinople on their way to the Holy Land in return for handing over any territory they took from the Seljuks.

With the help of the Crusaders of the First Crusade, Byzantine was able to win back much of the territory lost to the Seljuks. In 1097, the Seljuks were kicked out of Nicaea and driven eastward into Anatolia. The Seljuks then established a provincial capital in Konya. Later the Seljuks were able to win back much of the land taken by the Crusaders and managed to hold on to Anatolia through all Seventh Crusade. Konya reached its peak under the leadership of Sultan Alaeddin Keykubat in the 13th century but the Seljuk Empire as a whole was never as strong as it was.

**Aftermath of the First Crusade**

The Crusades gave trade during the Middle Ages a big push. The crusades opened up trade with the Muslim world, which was also a conduit for products from the Orient. Crusaders returned to Europe with spices and perfumes, knowledge of a world outside their own and a taste for the exotic. States like Venice grew rich selling silks, perfumes and spices and bankers in Italy grew rich financing the purchase of these items for clerics, popes, kings and nobles.

**End:**

**Decline of the Seljuk Empire**

Suzan Yalman of the Metropolitan Museum of Art wrote: “By the close of the eleventh century, as the Seljuk realm in Iran became troubled due to internal conflicts and the division of the realm among heirs, the empire dissolved into separate territories governed by different branches of the dynasty. The main branch of the Seljuk house, the so-called Great Seljuks, maintained control over Iran.

A serious internal threat to the Seljuks, came from the Ismailis, a secret sect with headquarters at Alumut between Rasht and Tehran. They controlled the immediate area for more than 150 years and sporadically sent out adherents to strengthen their rule by murdering important officials. The word assassins, which was applied to these murderers,
developed from a European corruption of the name applied to them in Syria, hashishiyya, because folklore had it that they smoked hashish before their missions.

J.J. Saunders wrote in “A History of Medieval Islam”: “The Seljuks rendered notable service to Islam, but their successes were balanced by many failures. They brought a new vigor and unity into Western Asia. They dealt a staggering blow to Byzantine power by winning Asia Minor for Islam, a feat the Arabs had never been able to achieve, thereby breaking down the last defenses of Christendom on the Asiatic continent, and opening up this ancient land to Turkish colonial settlement. Under Seluk protection the champions of Sunnite Islam launched a strong propaganda drive against heretics and deviators from the true faith: madrasas or 'college-mosques' were founded in the principal cities for the instruction of students.

“On the other hand, the Seljuks proved unable to create a strong, durable and centralized Empire or to destroy the Fatimid Anti-Caliphate in Egypt. Their conceptions of government were primitive, and they treated their realm as family property to be divided up among sons and nephews. Tracts of land were even given to minor children. By 1100 the best days of the Seljuks were over, and it was precisely at this Juncture that the Franks chose to launch against Islam the strange Christian counter-offensive which we know as The Crusades.”

**End of the Seljuk Turks**

The Seljuk Empire was divided into states in the 12th century: one was ruled by Seljuks and the other by Mamluks (a military caste of former Turk, Kurd and Circassian slaves). The Mamluks occupied Egypt and the Holy Land until the Ottomans took over."

The Seljuk dynasty ended with the invasion of the Mongols in 1243. The Mongols destroyed Baghdad and a number of other great Muslim cities. The Seljuks in Konya surrendered and submitted to the Mongols and after that lost their hold in Anatolia and disappeared from history.