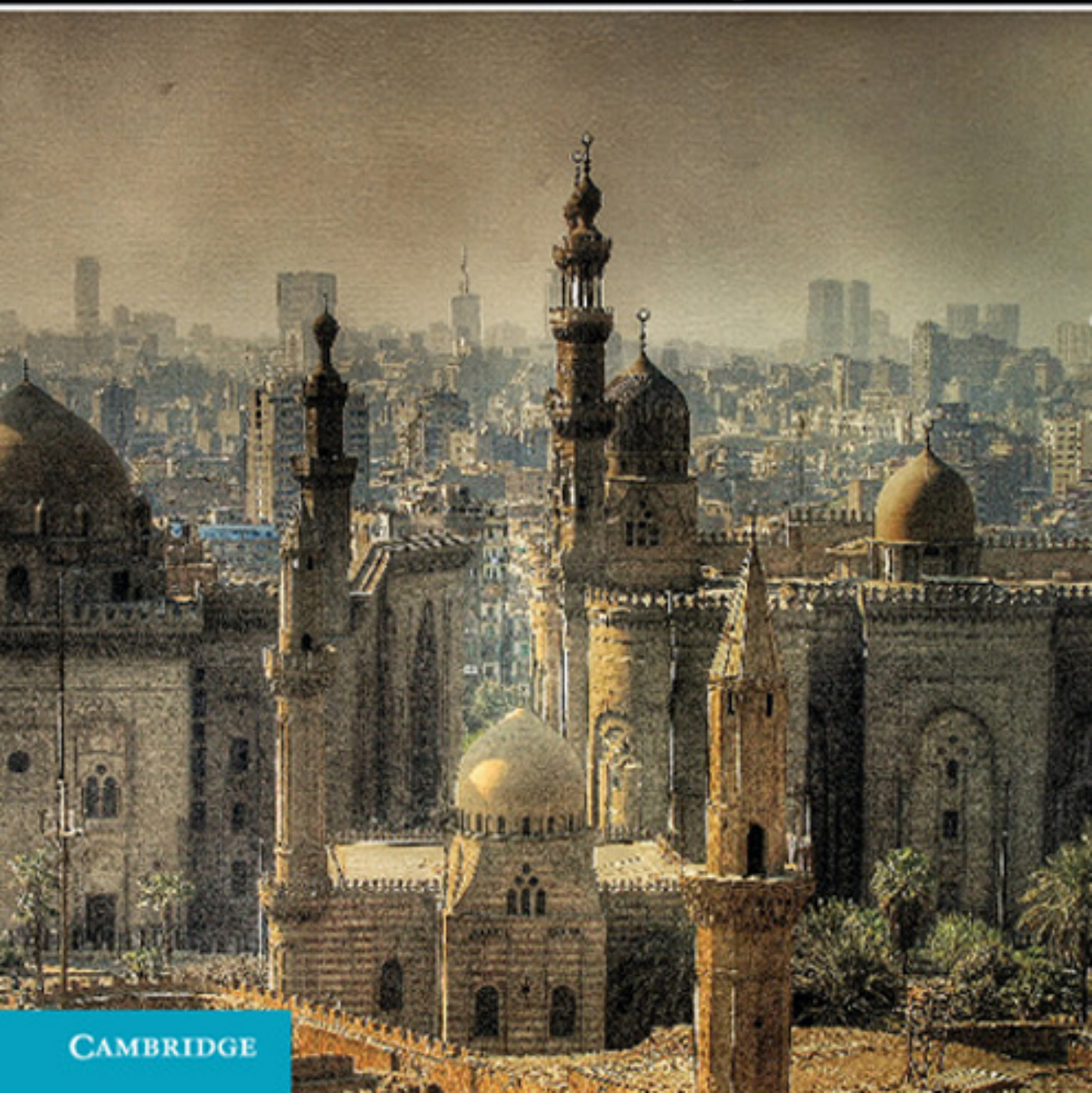


A History of Islamic Societies

Third Edition

Ira M. Lapidus



CAMBRIDGE

A HISTORY OF ISLAMIC SOCIETIES, THIRD EDITION

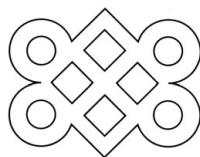
This third edition of Ira M. Lapidus's classic *A History of Islamic Societies* has been substantially revised to incorporate the new scholarship and insights of the last twenty-five years. Lapidus's history explores the beginnings and transformations of Islamic civilizations in the Middle East and details Islam's worldwide diffusion to Africa; Spain; Turkey and the Balkans; Central, South, and Southeast Asia; and North America. The book has been updated to include historical developments in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The narrative is unified by its focus on the organization of primary communities, religious groups and states, and the institutions and cultures that define them.

The history is divided into four parts. The first part is a comprehensive account of pre-Islamic late antiquity; the beginnings of Islam; the early Islamic empires; and Islamic religious, artistic, legal, and intellectual cultures. Part II deals with the construction in the Middle East of Islamic religious communities and states to the fifteenth century. Part III includes the history to the nineteenth century of Islamic North Africa and Spain; the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires; and other Islamic societies in Asia and Africa, situating them within their global, political, and economic contexts. Part IV accounts for the impact of European commercial and imperial domination on Islamic societies and traces the development of the modern national state system and the simultaneous Islamic revival from the early nineteenth century to the present. Organized in narrative sections for the history of each major region, with innovative, analytic summary introductions and conclusions, this book is a unique endeavor. The informative and substantial update, balanced judgment, and clarity of presentation – which readers have come to expect of this work – ensure that it will remain a classic in the field.

Ira M. Lapidus is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, Berkeley. Throughout his long and illustrious career he has published extensively. His abiding interest has been the relationships among families, tribes, religious communities, cities, and states. This is exemplified in his current work and previous publications, including *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (1967, 1984); *Middle Eastern Cities* (edited, 1969); *Contemporary Islamic Movements in Historical Perspective* (1983); *Islam, Politics and Social Movements* (co-edited with Edmund Burke, 1988); the two previous editions of *A History of Islamic Societies* (1988, 2002); and *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century: A Global History* (2012).

*A HISTORY OF
ISLAMIC SOCIETIES*

THIRD EDITION



IRA M. LAPIDUS

University of California, Berkeley



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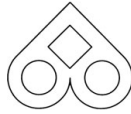
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PREFACE



Islam is the religion of peoples who inhabit the “middle” regions of the planet from the Atlantic shores of Africa to the South Pacific and from the steppes of Siberia to the remote islands of South Asia: Berbers, West Africans, Sudanese, Swahili-speaking East Africans, Middle Eastern Arabs, Turks, Iranians, Turkish and Persian peoples of Central Asia, Afghans, Pakistanis, many millions of Indians and Chinese, most of the peoples of Malaysia and Indonesia, and minorities in the Philippines – some 1.5 billion people adhere to Islam. In ethnic background, language, customs, social and political organization, and forms of culture and technology, they represent innumerable variations of human experience. Yet Islam unites them. Although Islam is not often the totality of their lives, it permeates their self-conception, regulates their daily existence, provides the bonds of society, and fulfills the yearning for salvation. For all its diversity, Islam forges one of the great spiritual families of mankind.

This book is the history of how these multitudes have become Muslims and what Islam means to them. In this book we ask the following questions: What is Islam? What are its values? How did so many peoples, so different and dispersed, become Muslims? What does Islam contribute to their character, to their way of living, to the ordering of their communities, and to their aspirations and identity? What are the historical conditions that have given rise to Islamic religious and cultural values? What are the manifold ways in which it is understood and practiced? To answer these questions, we shall see how religious concepts about the nature of reality and the meaning of human experience, embedded at once in holy scripture and works of commentary and as thoughts and feelings in the minds and hearts of Muslim believers, have given shape to the lifestyles and institutions of Muslim peoples, and how reciprocally the political and social experiences of Muslim peoples have been given expression in the values and symbols of Islam. Our history of Islam is the history of a dialogue between religious symbols and everyday reality.

This book covers the history of the Islamic world from its beginnings in the seventh century to the present day. It is based upon the original *A History of Islamic Societies*, first published in 1988. A second edition, revising and bringing contemporary history up to date, was published in 2002.

Reviewing this work only a few years later, it is striking not only that recent events call for a still further updating but that as a result of scholarly research the past is changing too. The changes are generated in some instances by the discovery of new sources, but more commonly by new historical methods and theories that lead to both controversy and fresh insights.

To take account of these changes, the editors of Cambridge University Press and I have decided to modify the format of this work. This new edition will be published as three books. The first, already published, contains a very substantially revised history of Islamic societies from their beginnings in early seventh-century Arabia to the eve of the modern era. This is the second book, and it contains

the entire work, recounting the history of Islamic societies from their beginnings to the present. The part devoted to modern history is updated on crucial issues, such as contemporary Islamic movements, the recent uprisings in the Arab world, the place of women in Muslim societies, and Islam in Europe and North America. The first book, *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century: A Global History*, will serve the needs of students and others interested in the early foundation and worldwide diffusion of Islam. This book, *A History of Islamic Societies*, is directed to readers who would like the entire history in one volume. The third volume, tentatively titled "Islamic Societies in the Modern Era," will appear in the near future.

These books share two goals. One is to tell the history of each particular population, country, or region of the Islamic world. The second is to identify the themes that give cohesion to the concept of Islamic societies. In this book, history is understood not as a sequence of stories but as an integral process in which state, religion, community, and cultures are related in many variable but definable ways. In all periods, Islam has to be understood in the context of previous and contemporary cultures. Islamic cultures are shaped by their connections to the ancient world before it; to other contemporary Islamic societies; to non-Islamic cultures; and to economic, technological, and political conditions that are not connected to religion and culture. In the present era, it has become debatable as to whether Islamic societies will continue to develop in their historic forms.

Although there are many controversies among Muslims and others over the correct version of Islam, this book attempts to recognize, depict, and respect its enormous richness and diversity.

THE BEGINNINGS OF ISLAM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The first part of this book deals with the beginnings and early development of Middle Eastern Islamic societies. The new edition emphasizes how early Islam was a part of and a continuation of the civilizations that preceded it. We review the basic structures of ancient empires, including a new section on women and family, tracing the precedents set by ancient norms for Islamic laws and values. The controversial historiography of the last thirty years dealing with the "origins" of Islam, the validity of the early sources, and the authenticity of the Quran is reevaluated, and new perspectives are incorporated into the text. There are important changes in the study of architecture as a display of imperial legitimacy. A revised history of early Islamic law and the veneration of the prophet give new perspectives on early Islamic religiosity. A new chapter situates the non-Muslim minorities under Muslim rule.

These new themes are integrated into an overall perspective on the interconnections of ancient, Mediterranean, and early Islamic cultures. Although bedouin elements made pre-Islamic Arabia different from many of the settled regions of the Middle East, in politics, trade, material development, and religious cultures, Arabia was already closely connected to the larger Middle Eastern region. Pre-Islamic Arabian religious and literary culture not only stemmed from bedouin practices but was modeled on the general system of culture found in the cities of the Middle East since the third century.

Cultural interactions continued and were intensified after the Arab-Islamic conquests. Arab-Muslim participation in the antique heritage continued approximately to the eleventh century. Islamic civilization developed out of a cultural matrix that included Arabian tribal culture and religious practices; Jewish beliefs, religious practices, and community institutions; Christian theology and eschatology; and Roman and Sasanian arts, literatures, legal systems, and political institutions. Pre-Islamic cultures were adapted through specific texts and translations, oral recitations, and ordinary social and business contacts among peoples with different backgrounds. Arab-Muslims shaped the linguistic and religious cultures of the region, while the emerging Islamic civilization was itself shaped by the earlier Middle Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations. I call this phase the Arab-Islamic renaissance,

a period of assimilation, adaptation, and creative transformation of previous, late antique Middle Eastern cultures into an Arabic-Islamic form.

Similarly, political, economic, and social institutions were carried over from the ancient into the Islamic epoch. The modes of production in agriculture, trade, services, and taxation remained the same – indeed they were ratified in Islamic law for commerce and property. The caliphate understood imperial rule as it was understood and proclaimed by the Roman-Byzantine and Sasanian emperors and similarly defined and legitimated its rule through architecture, art, and the patronage of literary and religious activities. Family life and the position of women in society carried on the concepts and practices of late antique societies.

The religion of Islam itself, although newly revealed, shared the theology of its predecessors and provided similar codes for ritual and social behavior and communal loyalties. The Quran presents Islam as a correction and the true version of corrupted older religions. Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Muslims all believed in God, the angels and the prophets, the last judgment, and the purpose of human existence as being the fulfillment of God's commands and faith in his truth. Early Islam also shared folk traditions and popular spirituality with non-Muslims. Eastern Syriac Christians who believed in the human nature of Jesus had common ground with Muslims. Jews were, like Muslims, committed monotheists. Sufism drew inspiration from the Quran and from neo-Platonism and Hindu mysticism. To all Middle Eastern peoples, similar beliefs implied a community, and all believed that religious communities had a founding prophet. Gnosticism, messianism, magic, mysticism, science, and philosophy were also found in all the Middle Eastern religions.

The distinctive cultural achievements of the early Arab-Islamic era linked Islamic civilization to its predecessors. Philosophy was translated from Greek and Syriac into Arabic, and Muslim theology (*kalam*) was built on the same dialectics and concepts as Christian theology. Islamic law (*fiqh*) was a continuation of Roman provincial law, canon law, Talmudic law, and Persian law, progressively integrated with the teachings of the Quran and hadith to form what we now know as Islamic law. The Arabian poetic forms (*qasida*) became the basis of classical Arabic poetry. Persian literature (*adab*) was translated into Arabic. Poetry and *adab* became the basis of the literary "formation" of the cultivated gentleman. In architecture, the basics of the design and decoration of mosques and even their placement in the urban environment created a distinctive Arab-Muslim presence, although based on an older visual vocabulary. A substantially new chapter deals with the interactions of Muslims, Jews, and Christians in Spain.

In all these respects, a new civilization had come into being, one that was creative and distinctive and yet a continuation of the basic institutional structures and cultural forms of previous Middle Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations – an innovative expression of the historic Middle Eastern cultures. Over centuries, however, the process of assimilating, Arabizing, and Islamizing historic cultures led to the consolidation of a distinctively new civilization whose ancient sources were forgotten, concealed, and perhaps obliterated, and whose roots can now only be uncovered by scholarly investigation.

Thus, Islam is part of a common Eurasian civilization. It continues directly from Roman, Byzantine, and Persian late antiquity. Islam integrated the existing political forms, modes of economic production, religious values, and family structures. It shares the conceptual world of Judaism and Christianity, although there are major differences due to the accidents of language and vocabulary and of historical and cultural references. Islam did not change the fundamental institutions of civilization so much as it changed languages, ideologies, and identities.

In Part II we see how this distinctively Middle Eastern Islamic civilization achieved dominance in the period from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. In the midst of repeated nomadic invasions from the east and Crusades from the west, a new quasi-imperial, quasi-feudal system of political

institutions was consolidated. Nomadic forces and military slavery supported by the assignment of benefices and fiefs became the regional norm. Muslim communities were organized into Sunni schools of law, Sufi fraternities or brotherhoods, and Shi'i sects. This was the era of the cultural consolidation of "normative Islam" based on the integration of law and Sufism and of alternative forms of Muslim belief based on philosophy, theosophy, and the popular veneration of saints. In this era, a political ethic was defined. Most important, there grew up alongside Arabic literatures a new Persian literary and poetic culture that became the dominant language and culture for the eastern regions of the Muslim world. Henceforth, Islamic culture would be expressed in both Arabic and Persian media (and later in Turkish media and that of other languages). This new edition contains newly written or extensively reworked chapters on the Timurid Empire and its political and cultural importance, the development of Persianate Islam, the social structure of Middle Eastern communities, and women and family.

THE GLOBAL DIFFUSION OF ISLAM TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The third part of the book describes how Arab–Middle Eastern Islam was the paradigm for the recreation of Islamic societies in other languages, cultures, and regions of the world. Everywhere Islam took shape as a hybrid of local cultures and Middle Eastern Islam. From the seventh to the tenth centuries, Arab conquerors brought Islam and the Arabic language and culture to North Africa and Spain, Iran and Transoxania. Persians, Turks, and Soghdians in the east and Berbers and Goths in the west were incorporated into the Arab-Muslim empire. Merchants and missionaries, often Sufis, brought Islam to the steppes of Inner Asia. From Egypt, the Sudan, and North Africa, Islam and Arab culture reached Saharan and Sudanic Africa.

After these direct contacts, Islam was carried further by newly Islamized Persian, Turkish, and African peoples. Arab-Islamic culture followed later conquests, colonization, missionary proselytization, and commerce. On the mainland of Eurasia, migrating, conquering, and empire-building Turkish peoples brought Islam westward into Anatolia, the Balkans, and southeastern Europe, eastward into Inner Asia and China, and southward into Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent. Here, they established the Mongol, Timurid, Shaybanid, Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman empires. The new empires patronized Muslim schools, courts, Sufi hospices, and other religious and communal institutions. The empires are newly described in terms of recent scholarship. The Ottoman chapters have been expanded to discuss women, family, and religious minorities. The three great early modern Muslim empires – the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal empires – are discussed in terms of processes of decentralization and networking among central and local elites. The Muslim empires are presented in the context of the worldwide development of early modern empires and are compared with one another.

In the Indian Ocean region, merchants and Sufi missionaries carried Islam from Arabia to India and East Africa (tenth to twelfth centuries). From Arabia and India, Islam reached the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries). From the coastal zones, it spread to the interior of the islands and continents.

In Africa, Arab and Berber traders and settlers in the Saharan and Sudanic regions, Arab and Persian settlers on the East African coasts, and Dyula communities in West Africa were the nuclei of Muslim influences. Often, colonies of Muslim traders allied with local political elites and induced the rulers of the states of Ghana, Mali, Kanem, Songhay, Hausaland, and Dogomba to accept Islam. African history chapters have been expanded and updated to deal with not only Islam but also slavery and European colonialism.

The global diffusion of Islam is discussed in the context of the rising power of Europe and in terms of the regional interconnectedness of Muslim societies – in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and the great inner "seas," the Taklamakan desert in Inner Asia, and the Sahara in Africa.

As I explain later in this volume,

By the nineteenth century, Islamic societies the world over had acquired similar types of Muslim elites, beliefs, religious practices, and social organizations. In each Muslim region, we find not one but several variant types of Islam. There were the scholars who represented formal learning, organized education, and judicial administration, affiliated through schools of law. There were also the scholars-cum-Sufis, who combined legal learning with mystical discipline and contemplation, in an effort to live their lives in imitation of the Prophet. Such religious teachers perpetuated a tradition of learning that combined law, theology, and Sufi wisdom representing Sunni-Shari'a (orthoprax)-Sufi Islam. There were ecstatic visionary Sufis in the tradition of Ibn al-'Arabi and the gnostic forms of Islamic mysticism, as well as the popular forms of Sufi Islam expressed in veneration of saints, faith in their charismatic powers, and belief in the magic of their shrines. Throughout the Muslim world, Sufism in all its forms became the most widespread and popular expression of Islam.

THE BEGINNING OF THE MODERN ERA

By the eighteenth century, Islamic societies had begun to decline in political power. The Safavid state had been defeated by Afghan invaders and, deserted by its tribal vassals, disintegrated completely. The Ottoman Empire went through a period of decentralization that impaired the imperial state. The Mughal Empire disintegrated into numerous competing provincial and feudal regimes. In Southeast Asia, a centralized regime had never been established over the Indonesian archipelago or the Malay Peninsula. In North Africa, Muslim states were being subverted by their declining commercial position in the Mediterranean while provincial, tribal, and Sufi resistance was on the increase. The Sudanic states had long passed the peak of their commercial prosperity, although Muslim communities were growing in influence.

A critical, but hardly the only, factor in the political decline of many Muslim regimes was the rising power of Europe. European societies were generating technological inventions, economic wealth, and military power that would profoundly change the conditions of life not only for Muslims, but for all the world's peoples. On the northern flanks of majority-Muslim areas, the steppes of Inner Asia came under Russian control. China established its suzerainty in eastern Turkestan; Russia and China took control of most of the Muslim populations of Inner Asia.

On the southern flanks of majority-Muslim areas, European expansion began with Portuguese, Dutch, and British merchant adventurers, who won naval and trading empires in the southern seas and ended by establishing colonial regimes. The Portuguese were displaced by the Dutch, who took control of the Southeast Asian trade in the seventeenth century, made themselves suzerains of Java by the middle of the eighteenth century, and conquered the rest of the Indies in the course of the nineteenth. The British also began by establishing trading bases and ended by conquering an empire in India. They took control of the Indian Ocean – with bases in Malaya, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and East Africa – and Egypt. The French took territorial control of North Africa. Africa was the last region with a large Muslim population to be subjected to colonial domination. All of Africa except Liberia and Ethiopia came under European rule by World War I. Only the Ottoman Empire and Iran maintained their political identities without experiencing direct colonial rule.

By the nineteenth century, Europe was not only seizing the trade and the territory of Muslim states, it was beginning to seize the imagination of Muslim peoples. European military and technological efficiency and artistic styles, as well as political (especially nationalist) concepts and moral values, began to influence Muslim populations. These influences opened the modern era in the history of Muslim peoples. Part IV continues the regional histories of Islamic societies from the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European imperialist and commercial interventions until the present. The

central theme is the response of Muslim elites and populations, in each region and country, to the impact of Europe. There were two principal worldwide Muslim responses. Muslim religious leaders attempted to revise and reform Islam itself. They wanted to return to the pristine Islam bequeathed by the Prophet Muhammad. This was to be found in the Quran and in the earliest and most valid sayings of the Prophet (hadith). The reformers rejected later accretions of story and myth, folk practices, and superstitious and magical beliefs. They rejected Sufi veneration of saints' tombs, and beliefs in mystical and spiritual transcendence. The more radical reformers disavowed Islamic law as well. By return to the true Islam the reformers believed that they would restore the integrity, the viability, and indeed the power of Islam and Islamic societies.

The second response came from the political or former political elites, and from a newly developing modern educated intelligentsia of soldiers, administrators, professionals, and intellectuals. They believed that their societies had to adapt to the power of Europe and the conditions of the contemporary world, and that the basic principles of Islam could and should be the foundation of rational, scientific, and patriotic modern societies. The Islamic modernists advocated for scientific education, economic development, and reformed political institutions. The two responses were often combined by modernists committed both to the reform of religious belief and practice and to the adaptation of Islamic societies to the contemporary world.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the government elites and intelligentsias turned from Islamic modernism to secular nationalism. After World War I, Turkey and Iran became independent nation-states. After World War II, nationalist movements overthrew European rule and established independent states throughout Africa and Asia. Most of the new Muslim-majority states declared themselves secular national states. Pakistan, Morocco, Sudan, Iran after the revolution of 1979, and Afghanistan after the rise of the Taliban in 1991 became Islamic states. The Muslims of India, the Soviet Union, and China, and other smaller Muslim populations remained minorities within non-Muslim ethnic-majority states. In each case we explore the political context, the emergence of new elites, and the Islamic and secular national ideologies that defined the struggle for independence and national identity.

In turn, the formation of nation-states set the political framework for Islamic religio-communal and political movements and identities in the present era. Starting in the 1970s, in reaction to political oppression, economic exploitation, and conflicting cultural values, Muslims everywhere began to reassert their Islamic identity. The Islamic revival was in part personal and communal; in part it was a political effort to transform nation-states into Islamic states. The struggle between secular, often military, elites and Islamic parties goes on to the present.

As a work of history this book is shaped by its source materials. The history of each region is based on the prevailing scholarship for each area; the literature of each region emphasizes different concerns. For example, the literature about the Middle East lays heavy emphasis upon questions of women and family. The literature on Central Asia emphasizes economic issues. Historical studies of the Indian subcontinent give prominence to communalism and communal conflict. Here I try to look beyond local issues, and to integrate regional histories with the common themes that define the global impact of Islam, Islamic movements, and Islamic identities.

The scope of the book itself implies that it is not a narrative history, a telling of stories, but history seen as a holistic process in which the relations among and the variations in state, economic, religious, communal, and cultural forms help us to analyze both the organization and the evolution of societies. It is not a history of events, but a history of civilizations.

As a historian, however, my primary interest is not in theory but in the adaptation of theory to the needs of a coherent and meaningful exposition. The central problem of this book is how to present a history of enormous diversity – the history of societies that to sight and sound are utterly

different – and yet preserve some sense of their historical and institutional relatedness. For the reader, this book is intended to provide a coherent overview of Islamic history. As a teacher, I think that the endless everyday flow of events and news confuses rather than enlightens us and that a large “map” of the subject as a whole is essential to the understanding of particular occurrences. Only from an overall point of view can we acquire the poise, distance, and perspective that make it possible to identify basic contextual factors and long-term historical trends, and to distinguish them from accidental and short-term considerations.

The reader should be cautioned, however, that the factual narrative approach of this book conceals great uncertainties of historical judgment, incomplete knowledge, conflicts of opinion and interpretation among experts, and constantly changing research that brings new knowledge and new points of view to the fore. Little has been said about the degree of reliability or the margin of error in the presentation of information, but the book is based on the most reliable research and interpretation. The reader should be aware that parts of the work are provisional and exploratory in nature and represent the author’s best judgment about particular subjects.

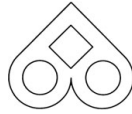
A few comments about the organization of the book may help readers find their way through this large volume. The book is divided into four parts, each of which has an introduction and conclusion that deal with the organizing concepts on which the book is based and summarize the important themes implied in the narrative chapters. For an overview of the transformation of Islamic societies, these introductory and concluding chapters may be read separately or in conjunction with selected period or regional histories. The table of contents and the index are of course the reader’s guide, but the reader or teacher using this book as a text could also create an alternative table of contents, following particular regional or state histories – Middle Eastern, South Asian, African – through successive periods, or following such themes as the roles of religious elites (‘ulama’ and Sufis), women and family, and religious and ethnic minorities. For convenience the medieval and early modern histories of the Arabian Peninsula, Libya, and Afghanistan are combined with their modern histories and are located in Part IV.

The definition of geographic regions requires some arbitrary simplifications. Muslim world areas are by and large defined in regional terms such as Middle East, North Africa, Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and West and East Africa. For convenience of reference, and despite the obvious anachronism, these areas or parts of them are commonly identified by the names of present national states such as India, Indonesia, or Nigeria. This is to simplify identification for readers unfamiliar with the geography of these vast regions and to avoid such cumbersome locutions as “areas now part of the state of ___,” but it should be clear that the use of these terms does not necessarily imply any similarity of state and social organization or of cultural style between pre-modern and contemporary times.

Transliterations from the numerous native languages of Muslim peoples have been simplified for the convenience of English readers. In general, I have tried to follow standard scholarly usage for each world area, modified by the elimination of diacritical marks and sometimes adapted to give a fair sense of pronunciation. Certain standard Arabic terms and names are given in their original, usually Arabic, literary form despite actual variations in spelling and pronunciation the world over. Dates are given in the Common Era.

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The preparation of this new book has provided me with two great joys for nearly five years. One is the joy of learning, catching up and coming to terms with recent scholarship. The other, even more important, is the collaboration of young scholars who contributed their erudition, their methodological sophistication, and their friendship and encouragement. I value them for the opportunity to know and work with them as much as for the work itself.

For the long duration of this project, Lena Salaymeh has contributed her great knowledge of the early Islamic sources and the late antique, early Islamic history; her understanding of Islamic law; her methodological sophistication; and her exacting standards for historical rhetoric. She has reviewed, commented on, and edited the entire book, with a view to each of these considerations. She has done wide-ranging research on women, family, and law, and she is the co-author of new and revised sections and chapters on these subjects. Her practical know-how has been invaluable with computer-connected matters and with the preparation of the text for publication. Our conversations have informed me, sharpened my judgment, and stimulated my interest. I am very grateful for her collegueship. She is writing an innovative and deeply researched book on Islamic legal history.

David Moshfegh has briefed me on the history of Jews in Muslim lands with a sensitive ear for historiographical controversies and the influence of political positions on historical writing. His own dissertation concerns early European orientalism and shows a keen sensitivity to the conjunction of personal needs, cultural controversies, and political engagements in the shaping of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century orientalist scholarship. He is the co-author of the sections on Jews in the early Islamic era and in Spain and has contributed to the history of Jews in the Ottoman Empire.

Kevin Schwartz was my informant about new writing on Persian and Indian history, and the construction and diffusion of Persianate culture throughout western, Central, and southern Asia and in the Indian Ocean region. He was an alert and forthright critic of the previous versions of these topics and helped bring me up to date with current scholarship.

Heather Ferguson provided a fresh orientation to the new historiography on Ottoman history and helped me interpret it and integrate it into the revised account in this volume. She alerted me to the new historiography on empire formation in the early modern period. Her dissertation on the circle of justice gave me a fresh conceptual approach to understanding Ottoman government.

Murat Dagli provided me with valuable important insights from his rich knowledge of Ottoman history, brought me up to date in the new historiography, and read my draft chapter with an informed and critical eye.

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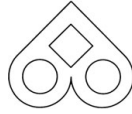
I am especially grateful to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and to its administrative officers and staff. The Mellon Foundation has generously supported this project with an Emeritus Fellowship, and its officers and staff have been throughout responsive and supportive of the special needs of this project.

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A HISTORY OF ISLAMIC SOCIETIES



With continuing gratitude and respect for the many people who helped with the previous editions and versions of this subject, I reproduce the acknowledgments from the first and second editions of *A History of Islamic Societies*.

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"Islam and the Historical Experience of Muslim Peoples," *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems*, ed. Malcolm H. Kerr, Malibu, Calif.: Undena Publications, 1980, pp. 89–102.

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Ira M. Lapidus
Berkeley, California, 1985

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A HISTORY OF ISLAMIC SOCIETIES



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“The Middle East’s Discomforting Continuities,” *Orbis*, 42, 1998, pp. 619–30.

“Between Universalism and Particularism: The Historical Bases of Muslim Communal, National, and Global Identities,” *Global Networks*, 1, 2001, pp. 19–36.

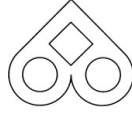
Ira M. Lapidus
Berkeley, California, 2002

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE



The Press Syndicate originally commissioned Ira M. Lapidus to write *A History of Islamic Societies* as a supplement to *The Cambridge History of Islam*, which was published in 1970 in two volumes. His would be a unique enterprise, a monumental work with the status of a Cambridge History, but by one hand and integrated by one coherent vision. Since its publication in 1988, it has surpassed all expectations. The book has become a classic work of history. This volume brings a revised version of this definitive and best-selling book to a new generation of readers.

INTRODUCTION TO ISLAMIC SOCIETIES



The history of Islamic societies will be presented in two dimensions: one historical, an effort to account for the formation of Islamic societies and their change over time; the other analytic and comparative, which attempts to understand the variations among them. Three methodological and historical assumptions underlie these approaches. The first is that the history of whole societies may be presented in terms of their institutional systems. An institution, whether an empire, a mode of economic exchange, a family, or a religious practice, is an activity carried out in a patterned relationship with other persons as defined and legitimized in the mental world of the participants. An institution encompasses at once an activity, a pattern of social relations, and a set of mental constructs.

The second assumption is that the history of Islamic societies may be told in terms of four basic types of institutions: familial, including tribal, ethnic, and other small-scale community groups; economic, the organization of production and distribution of material goods; cultural or religious, the concepts of ultimate values and human goals and the collectivities built on such commitments; and political, the organization of conflict resolution, defense, and domination.

The third assumption is that the institutional patterns characteristic of Islamic societies had their origin in ancient Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE. The constellation of lineage and tribal, religious, and political structures created by the Mesopotamian city-states and empires set the foundations for the later development of Middle Eastern societies before and during the Islamic era. Later Middle Eastern Islamic societies were built on the infusion of ancient institutions with an Islamic cultural style and identity. These Middle Eastern Islamic institutions and cultures in turn interacted with the institutions and cultures of other world regions to create a number of variant Islamic societies. In the modern era these variant societies were again transformed, this time by interaction with Europe. Modern Islamic countries are each the product of the interaction of a particular regional form of Islamic society with different European political, economic, and cultural influences. Thus, the variation among modern Islamic societies may be traced to older patterns.

Parts I and II of this book examine the formative era of Islamic civilization from the revelation of the Quran to the fifteenth century. Part I begins with the Prophet Muhammad and continues through the classical Islamic era. This era gave rise to Arabic literature, Islamic religious teaching, and cosmopolitan artistic achievements – a complex of tribal-ethnic, religious, and courtly-aristocratic cultures from which all later versions of Islamic civilization derive. Here I attempt to explain the development of Islamic civilization in terms of its relationships to past patterns of Middle Eastern societies, and in terms of the cultural effects of urbanization, social change, and the formation of

new empires. Part II discusses the history of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries and attempts to explain the transformation of Islam from a complex of doctrines and cultural systems into the operative principles of Middle Eastern societies. In this period, Islam became the religion of the masses of Middle Eastern peoples, who formed new state and communal institutions (Shi'i "sects," Sunni schools of law, and Sufi brotherhoods) and redefined the relations of political regimes to religious bodies.

The emergence of Islamic civilization is striking for its basic continuity with late Roman and Persian antiquity. In political forms, modes of economic production, religious values, and family structures, it is basically similar to its predecessors. It shares the conceptual world of Judaism and Christianity. The major differences are the accidents of language and vocabulary, and historical and cultural references. Thus, Islamic civilization is not a different civilization from our own, but part of a shared European–West Asian heritage.

In its turn Middle Eastern Islam became a paradigm for the creation of similar societies in other parts of the world. Part III traces the diffusion of the Middle Eastern Islamic paradigm. From the seventh to the nineteenth centuries, Islam became the religion of peoples in the Middle East, North Africa and Spain, Anatolia and the Balkans, the Indian subcontinent, Inner Asia and China, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. In Part III we consider the forces behind the diffusion of Islam, and the interaction between Islamic religious values and existing cultures and societies. We see how Islamic cultural and political norms were subject to change and transformation as they interacted with already-established non-Islamic societies. We also examine the consolidation of Islamic regimes, including the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, and Islamic states in Southeast Asia, Africa, and elsewhere, and their varied ways of integrating political regimes, Islamic religious institutions, and non-Islamic values and forms of community.

By the eighteenth century the Middle Eastern paradigm for an Islamic society had been replicated, multiplied, and modified into a worldwide family of societies. Each was a recognizable variant on an underlying structure of familial-communal, religious, and state institutions. Each also represented a version of the various ways in which Islamic belief, culture, and social institutions interacted with the still-broader complex of human organization – including the non-Islamic institutions of political regimes; systems of economic production and exchange; non-Islamic forms of kinship, tribal, and ethnic communities; and pre-Islamic or non-Islamic modes of culture. We explore the relation of Islamic to pre-Islamic institutions in these regions. What were the similarities and differences among these numerous Islamic societies?

Part III concludes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Islamic societies were profoundly disrupted by the breakup of Muslim empires, economic decline, internal religious conflict, and the establishment of European economic, political, and cultural domination. These forces would lead to the creation of national states, to the modernization of agriculture, to industrialization, to major changes in class structure, and to the acceptance of secular nationalist and other modern ideologies. Part IV presents the successive phases of state formation and ideological development in the modern era. It shows how Muslim religious and political elites developed alternative responses to the challenges of Europe. Islamic reformism was the primary response of the religious elites starting in the eighteenth century and continuing to the present day Islamic revival. The reformist program appears in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the forms of neo-fundamentalist Salafi and Wahhabi movements, in both political and apolitical community building movements. It competes for the allegiance of Muslims with Sufi and neo-Sufi movements, and with Islamic liberalism. Apart from organized movements and articulated religious and intellectual positions, the Islamic revival is also marked by a diffuse Muslim identity built on political sympathies, internet contacts, and youth sub-cultures. The book concludes with an assessment of

the different types of Muslim identities and of the institutional interactions of states and religious movements.

This is not, it should be clear, an effort to define an essential Islam, but rather an attempt to develop a comparative method for assessing the role of Islamic beliefs, institutions, and identities in particular historical contexts. The mechanism I have adopted to do this – the expository framework – is based on the assumptions that Islamic societies are built on institutions and that these institutions are subject to internal variation, to variations in the relationships among them, and to variations over time. The limited number of institutional factors imposes a constraint that allows us to conceive this large subject in some ordered way, but also allows for the depiction of individual societies as concrete and different entities. By exploring the variation of institutions in differing contexts, we may be able to comprehend why Islamic societies are similar in general form and yet differ so much in specific qualities.

In this volume primary emphasis is placed on the communal, religious, and political institutions of Islamic societies rather than on technologies and economies. I subordinate economic to noneconomic institutions because the distinctive historical developments in Islamic societies in the last millennium have been cultural and political, and because differences of culture and institutions differentiate Islamic societies from one another and from other human civilizations. In Muslim societies the basic forms of economic production and exchange were set down in the pre-Islamic era. The forms of agricultural and pastoral production, handicrafts, manufacturing, prevailing systems of exchange, and technological capacities are all older than, and continue through, the Islamic era in their inherited forms. This is not to deny that there has been considerable variation in economic activity in and among Muslim societies – such as in the relative role of pastoral, agricultural, commercial, and manufacturing activities; or in degrees of poverty and prosperity; or in the distribution of wealth – or that these differences have important cultural and political implications, or that economic considerations are an essential aspect of all human values and social action. Still, the fundamental modes of economic production and exchange were basically unaltered until the modern era, and economic and technological changes were not the primary sources of political and cultural variation or of changes in class structure and social organization. Until the modern era economic activity remained embedded in communal and political structures, and class divisions in society did not determine, but were inherent in, state and religious organizations. Although cultures, sociopolitical institutions, and economic and technological forces can be autonomous causal factors in historical change, in the history of Islamic societies, cultural and sociopolitical forces have been the significant loci of historical individuation. Whether twentieth-century technological and economic change now calls into question the existence of an Islamic group of societies is an open question.

PART I

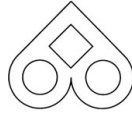
*THE BEGINNINGS OF ISLAMIC
CIVILIZATIONS*



THE MIDDLE EAST FROM c. 600 TO c. 1000

CHAPTER 1

MIDDLE EASTERN SOCIETIES BEFORE ISLAM



Islamic societies were built on the framework of already established and ancient Middle Eastern civilizations. From the pre-Islamic Middle East, Islamic societies inherited a pattern of institutions that would shape daily life until the modern age. These institutions included small communities based on family, lineage, clientage, and ethnic ties; agricultural and urban societies, market economies, monotheistic religions, and bureaucratic empires. Along with their political and social characteristics, Islamic societies also inherited many of the religious, literary, and artistic practices of the pre-Islamic past. The civilization of Islam, although initiated in Mecca, also had its precursors in Palestine, Babylon, and Persepolis.

Islamic societies developed in an environment that since the earliest history of mankind had exhibited two fundamental and enduring qualities. The first was the organization of human societies into small, often familial groups. The earliest hunting and gathering communities lived and moved in small bands. Since the advent of agriculture and the domestication of animals, the vast majority of Middle Eastern peoples have lived in agricultural villages or in the tent camps of nomadic pastoralists. Even town peoples were bound into small groups by ties of kinship and neighborhood, with all that implies of strong affections and hatreds. These groups raised the young, arranged marriages, arbitrated disputes, and formed a common front vis-à-vis the outside world.

The second was the creation of unities of culture, religion, and empire on an ever-larger scale. In pre-modern times, this tendency was manifested in the expansion of trade and the acceptance of common decorative styles and religious ideas, but its most important early manifestation was the emergence of the city-state in ancient Mesopotamia (3500 BCE–2400 BCE). The formation of cities in lower Iraq was a revolution in the history of humankind: it brought about the integration of diverse clans, villages, and other small groups into a single community. It led to new cultural and artistic achievements such as the invention of writing, the creation of great works of myth and religion, the construction of architectural masterpieces, and the fashioning of sensuous sculpture.

The first cities developed from the integration of small village communities into temple communities built on shared commitment to the service of the gods. The Sumerians, the people of southern Iraq, believed that the lands they inhabited were the property of the gods and that their primary duty was the construction of a great temple to worship the forces of the universe. The priests who presided over the worship were also judges and “political” chiefs. Moreover, the temple-cities were necessarily communities of economic as well as religious interests. The construction of the great temples required masses of organized workers; their rituals required specialists in administrative,

professional, and artisanal activities. The earliest cities were communities in which religious leaders and religious ideas governed the economic and political affairs of the temples' adherents.

ANCIENT, ROMAN, AND PERSIAN EMPIRES

Beginning about 2400 BCE, the temple-cities of Mesopotamia were superseded by new unifying institutions – kingship and empires. Kingship in ancient Mesopotamia emanated from two sources: the warrior or warlord houses of the ancient Sumerian cities and the tribal peoples of northern Mesopotamia. Between 2700 and 2500 BCE, city kings established ephemeral states among their neighbors. About 2400 BCE, Sargon of Akkad, the chief of pastoral peoples in northern Mesopotamia, founded the first of the world's empires. Sargon's empire soon failed, and the temple-cities temporarily regained their independence. From Sargon to Hammurapi, the great lawgiver (d. 1750 BCE), Mesopotamian empires rose and fell, but each one, although relatively short lived, reinforced the institutions of kingship and of multicity regimes.

Kingship as it developed from Sargon to Hammurapi increasingly assumed a sacred aura. Kings usurped the authority of priests and became the chief servants of the gods. They took over the priestly functions of mediating between the gods and the people. Kingship was justified as the divine plan for the ordering of human societies. Sacralized political power, as well as religion, became a vehicle for the unification of disparate peoples.

The successive empires of this ancient period also established the institutions that would henceforth be the medium for imperial rule. At the center was the ruler's household; the king was surrounded by his family, retainers, soldiers, servants, and palace administrators. Standing armies were founded; feudal grants of land were awarded to loyal retainers. Governors, administrators, and spies were assigned to control cities and provinces.

The superimposition of empires on smaller communities transformed local life and fostered the emergence of social individuality by providing the linguistic, religious, and legal conditions that freed individuals from absorption into clans, temples, and royal households. Temples were reduced to cogs in the imperial machine, and priests lost their judicial and political authority. The empires also intervened in small communities by freeing individuals from their commitments to clans and temples. To defend, administer, and maintain communications across wide territories required some decentralization of authority and greater mobility and autonomy for individuals. Warriors and administrators were assigned land and became independent proprietors. Merchants became entrepreneurs working with their own capital. Craftsmen began to work for the market rather than for the temple or royal household. A market economy emerged to facilitate exchanges among independent producers and consumers and progressively supplanted the older forms of household redistributive economy. The spread of markets and the introduction, by the seventh or sixth century BCE, of money as the medium of exchange transformed the economic structures of the ancient world. For increasing numbers of people, the cash nexus replaced patrimonial authority as the mechanism that regulated the way they earned a living.

Furthermore, the language of the dominant elites became the language of the cosmopolitan elements of the society; the remote and powerful gods of the king and the empire – the gods of the cosmos, organized into a pantheon – superseded the intimate gods of individual localities. Imperial law regulated the distribution of property, economic exchange, and relations between the strong and the weak. Ancient empires, then, not only were political agencies but provided the cultural, religious, and legal bases of society.

For ancient peoples, the empires symbolized the realm of civilization. The function of empires was to defend the civilized world against outsiders, often called barbarians, and to assimilate them into the sphere of higher culture. For their part, the so-called barbarians, mostly nomadic peoples,

wanted to conquer empires, share in their wealth and sophistication, and join the ranks of civilized peoples. Empires commanded allegiance because they were thought to represent civilized peoples. They commanded allegiance because kingship was perceived as a divine institution and the king a divinely selected agent, who – if not himself a god – shared in the aura, magnificence, sacredness, and mystery of the divine. The ruler was God's agent, his priest, the channel between this world and the heavens, designated by the divine being to bring justice and right order to men so that they might in turn serve God. The king thus assured the prosperity and well being of his subjects. Magically, he upheld the order of the universe against chaos.

From these earliest empires to the eve of the Islamic era, the history of the Middle East may be summarized as the elaboration and expansion of the institutions formed in this early period. While parochial communities and local cultures were a continuing force in Middle Eastern society, empires grew progressively larger, each wave of expansion and contraction bringing new peoples into the sphere of imperial civilization. Empires came and went, but the legacy of interchange of populations – the movement of soldiers, administrators, merchants, priests, scholars, and workers – left a permanent imprint of cosmopolitan culture and a heritage of shared laws, languages, scripts, and social identity.

From Sargon to Hammurapi, Middle Eastern empires were restricted to Mesopotamia, but later Hittite, Kassite, and other “barbarian” empires brought Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Iran into a common network. The empire of Assyria (911–612 BCE) brought Iraq, western Iran, and, for a time, Egypt into a single state. The Achaemenid Empire (550–331 BCE) incorporated eastern Iran and formed the first universal Middle Eastern empire – the first to include all settled peoples from the Oxus River to the Nile and the Dardanelles.

The Roman Empire

With the destruction of the Achaemenid Empire by Alexander the Great, the Middle East was divided into two empires. In the west, the successor states to the empire of Alexander became part of the Roman Empire. In the east, Iraq and Iran as far as the Oxus River became part of Persian empires – the Parthian Empire (226 BCE–234 CE) and its successor, the Sasanian Empire (234–634 CE).

The Roman Empire encompassed the whole of the Mediterranean basin from Spain in the west to Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt in the east. Rome was its capital, but in the fourth century a second capital was founded at Constantinople. With the fall of Rome to “barbarian” invaders, the remaining provinces, governed from Constantinople, constituted the late Roman or Byzantine Empire and continued to rule the Balkans, Anatolia, Syria, and some of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and North Africa. Its official language until the reign of Heraclius (610–41 CE) was Latin, although the ordinary language of Constantinople was Greek.

The emperor stood at the apex of government, in theory an absolute authority in all matters of state, law, and religion. Considered divine in the pre-Christian era, emperors after Constantine (306–37 CE) were thought to be representatives of God on earth. The ruler maintained the cosmic order and suppressed the evils that come from men.

In practice, emperors were not omnipotent. They were dependent on subordinates to carry out their decisions and were strongly influenced by their families and other aristocrats, advisors, and courtiers. The bureaucracies might not implement their wishes; their subjects might circumvent them. To help make their authority effective, emperors tried to rotate appointments and cultivate patronage networks and popular factions. To enhance their prestige, they sponsored court ceremonies and public festivals and placed their portraits on coins.

The Roman Empire ruled its diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious populations through a political machine centered on the emperor, supported by his armies and bureaucratic connections to the cities. Local notables, wealthy and educated landowners, administrators, and lawyers governed the cities.

Cities controlled the land and the taxation of the countryside and supplied a portion of its revenues to the center. A shared Greco-Roman culture linked the elites and provided the rationale for the legitimacy and authority of the empire.

In the sixth and seventh centuries, however, this system was transformed. Professional bureaucrats were replaced by imperial favorites who undermined the civic notables by acquiring large rural estates. Great landed estates and large rural villas were established in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Cilicia, Cyprus, and Asia Minor. The church and its bishops took on ever-larger administrative roles. The new social regime was linked by a Hellenistic Christian – rather than by a Hellenistic pagan – culture.

In Egypt, aristocratic landowning families directly managed some of their estates using peasant labor, leased some to tenants under contract, and used sharecroppers on still other portions of their holdings. As the power of the aristocratic landowners grew, the regional economies declined. Still, a rural bourgeoisie encompassing lower landed gentry, entrepreneurial farmers leasing land, peasant village collectives, and merchants and artisans continued to exist in Egypt and Syria. The peasants and the poor, however, were alienated from the empire and ever more closely attached to their churches. The center was losing power in the periphery.

The consequences of these political and social transformations were marked in the economies and even in the physical appearance of the cities. As town councils lost control over taxes and land, cities lost their classical form. The agoras were turned into churches; the street grid pattern was cluttered with shops; theaters and baths gave way to houses built with enclosed courtyards walled off from the outside world. Churches remained the only public facilities.

The Sasanian Empire

The Sasanian dynasty was founded in 224 CE. The Sasanians grounded their authority in the symbols of ancient Iranian monarchy. Early emperors were considered divine, an echo of Hellenistic and Old Persian ideas of kingship. The themes of Assyrian palace reliefs – the ruler enthroned by the gods, the protector of the fertility of the realm, the heroic warrior – were repeated in Sasanian palaces. Everything from cylinder seals to gardens proclaimed the grandeur of the emperor.

The Sasanian Empire has been described either as a centralized state or as a feudal confederation. In fact, it was a hybrid regime. The power of the Sasanian dynasty was grounded in Iraq and southern Iran, where the state drew its revenues from cities, the taxation of agriculture, land reclamation, and the international Indian Ocean trade. Extraordinary Sasanian development projects – the Nahrawan canal and Diyala basin development, the canalizations of southern Iraq and Khuzistan, the development of Isfahan and the Helmand basin, the fortifications of Ctesiphon, the Darband and the Gorgan walls defending against nomadic invaders – are evidence of a strongly centralized state. Similarly, a hierarchical tax and civil administration, a justice system, an organized Zoroastrian priesthood, and a rigid class hierarchy imply a state with monetary revenues and centralized direction. The power of this regime was manifest in great military victories over the Romans that indicate a large standing army as well as feudal levies.

In Iraq, the state drew its power from the *dibqans* (landowners), soldiers, and courtiers, who manned the Sasanian army and tax administration. They were united by a shared eclectic culture, combining Greek philosophy and medicine, Byzantine architecture, Indian tales, and sports and games such as chess, polo, and hunting. This hybrid culture would flourish again in the ‘Abbasid age.

At the same time, the Sasanian Empire was a confederacy in which the Sasanians, as the Kings of Kings, ruled in conjunction with an aristocracy of Parthian clans. The great Parthian families were subordinate kings or feudal lords, rulers of vast provinces to the north and east of the Iranian plateau – from Azarbayjan to Gilan and Tabaristan to Khurasan – with royal and noble powers

based on landownership. Whereas the Sasanians were Parsi speaking and Zoroastrian in religion, these families spoke Parthian languages and worshiped the god Mithra. The Sasanians relied on the military contributions of the Parthians and maintained their supremacy largely because of the rivalries among the Parthian dynasts. Conversely, Parthian revolts and collaboration with the Byzantines led in 628 to the defeat of the Sasanians in the great Roman-Persian wars and soon after to the extinction of the dynasty by the Arab conquests.

In sum, the Byzantine Empire was built on urban elites, bureaucracy, and a standing army. The Persian Empire was built on an alliance of a warrior, landed, horse-borne fighting aristocracy, with lower-ranking landowners (*dibqans*) as the base of the Sasanian army and tax administration.

RELIGION AND SOCIETY BEFORE ISLAM

The development of more encompassing empires and empire-wide civilizations paralleled the transformation of religions. The earliest religions were based on nature and associated with small communities. The gods of Middle Eastern peoples were the gods of families, tribes, villages, and towns; but with the growing connections among peoples through empire and trade, universal gods came to be recognized. Polytheism evolved toward monotheism. The gods of empires, the gods of dominant peoples, and the gods of conquerors, travelers, merchants, and priests whose activities were not circumscribed by a single locality came to be worshiped over large areas. Mithraism, for example, was a pagan religion uniting soldiers and officials of all races across the Roman Empire, providing uniform places for the worship of a supreme god. Sacred places, such as Rome and Alexandria, allowed the worshiper to be in contact with all the gods at once. The tendency toward unification was expressed by the idea of a pantheon and hierarchy of gods, which allowed different peoples to share in the same universe while preserving local cults and forms of worship. Local gods came to be seen as the manifestations of a universal god.

The concept of the universality of the great gods evolved into a belief in one god, who was the god of the whole universe and of all mankind. The oneness of God was preached by the prophets of ancient Israel and, in the seventh century BCE, by the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. Christianity, and later Islam, would also teach the unity of God, the universality of his sway, and the obligation of all of mankind to acknowledge his glory.

Between the third and seventh centuries, the missionary force of the new ideas and doctrines, the widening net of contacts among Middle Eastern peoples, and especially the support of the great empires made Christianity and Zoroastrianism the dominant religions in the Roman-Byzantine and Sasanian empires. Empires promoted religious conformity to help overcome ethnic and provincial differences. The boundaries between paganism and monotheism disappeared as pagans adopted monotheistic ideas about God and as the confessional religions incorporated pagan practices. Each of these confessional religions was defined by faith in an absolute truth, the possession of a holy scripture, a learned or priestly authority, and communal organizations in the form of congregations, churches, and sects.

Although different in orientation, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity shared a common vision. All were transcendental. They held that beyond the world of this life there is a higher world, the realm of the divine, to be attained either through ethical action or through faith in God. Through sacrifice, prayer, and sacrament, they sought salvation from sin and death, and entrance for men into the eternal reality beyond the ephemeral appearances of this world. Furthermore, they were universal religions, believing that God created and governed the whole universe and all people. Believers are thus brothers in a common religious way of life and a common quest for salvation.

Jews believed that there was a single god of the universe who commanded his people (Israel) to fulfill his holy law and who would judge them in this world and the next. Judaism, however, was not a universal religion but was the religion of an ethnic group or nation. After the Romans destroyed the Jewish state in Palestine in the second century, Jewish communities were scattered throughout both the Roman and the Sasanian empires. Judaism had no political structure but was organized in numerous small communities that shared faith in the Torah (the holy scripture), a national history and law, and similar legal, educational, and charitable institutions. Jews did not have a hierarchical ecclesiastical organization but were linked by informal ties to and respect for the great academies of learning.

Under the Sasanians, Jews had their own law courts, schools, and synagogues. The exilarch was the civic chieftain officer of the Jewish community. He collected taxes and represented the Jews at the imperial court. Rabbis interpreted Jewish law and were employed by the exilarch as judges, market inspectors, and tax collectors.

Jews emphasized the observance of religious law and fulfillment of God's commands in everyday life. There were also mystical, spiritual, and eschatological elements to Judaism. In the seventh century, perhaps in response to the Sasanian-Roman wars, messianic and apocalyptic Jewish sects, including Rabbinites, Karaites, Samaritans, 'Isawiyya, and gnostics, proliferated. There were "hybrid" Jewish-Christian sects that accepted Jesus as a human prophet but maintained Jewish practices. In Iran and Inner Asia, a region with a long tradition as a refuge for deviant groups, there were numerous Jewish communities.

Christianity was in principle not the religion of a particular people but was universal, a religion for all mankind. The central Christian doctrine is faith in a triune God – God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Son is the Logos, the word of God, Christ incarnate, who was crucified so that believers might be saved. Christians developed a strong ethical strand, but their central aspiration was salvation through faith in Christ from the evil and suffering that is inherent in the material world and in man's nature.

By the sixth century, however, Christians differed profoundly among themselves about the nature of Christ's being. Was Christ human or divine, man or God, and how were the two aspects of his being related? Most Christians believed that Christ was both fully divine and fully human, but they disagreed over how to express this. The church Council of Nicaea ruled in 325 CE that Christ was not only human but also unbegotten and consubstantial with God, divine in his being. In 451 CE, the Council of Chalcedon explained that Christ had two natures, divine and human, expressed in one concrete instance (hypostasis) and in one person (prosopon); this was the position of the Orthodox Church. The Miaphysites held that Christ has one nature, one hypostasis, and one prosopon. The Nestorians held that he had two natures, two hypostases, and one prosopon. These arcane distinctions spelled out rivalries among clerics and jurisdictional and regional conflicts, as well as differences in spiritual vision.

These different religious beliefs were the foundation of the various Christian churches. Modeling themselves on the empires, the churches were territorially organized hierarchies in which the highest authority in both doctrinal and organizational matters belonged to popes and patriarchs who appointed the bishops, the heads of provinces called dioceses, who in turn appointed the local parish priests.

Parishes implemented church teachings at the local level in what we would now consider secular as well as religious matters. Bishops were sometimes the governors and administrators of the cities in which their dioceses were located. Formal ecclesiastical courts came into being in the fourth century and had jurisdiction in family, property, and commercial matters, and even in some matters of criminal law. They were also important educational institutions.

Furthermore, Christian affiliations were closely tied to political identifications. The Byzantine Empire enforced the Chalcedonian creed as its official doctrine. Miaphysitism was the religion of the Aramaic-speaking village populations of Syria and of the Coptic-speaking (the Egyptian language written in modified Greek script) peasants of Egypt. Minorities loyal to Chalcedon, known as Melkites or Eastern Orthodox Christians, however, were also found in Egypt and Syria.

Miaphysitism was also the religion of Georgia and Armenia. In the sixth century, Axum (Ethiopia) and Himyar in southern Arabia became Miaphysite. Miaphysites evangelized Nubia in the sixth century. Arabs on the edge of the Syrian desert patronized Miaphysite holy men and clerics. The Ghassanid princes on the Arabian borders of the Byzantine Empire were Miaphysites. (The Lakhmids, on the Arabian borders of Sasanian Iraq, were Nestorians.) Miaphysitism was an expression of provincial autonomy and resistance to Roman-Byzantine suzerainty.

Despite these doctrinal and organizational differences, Christianity created a common culture in multiple languages: Greek or Aramaic in Syria, Persian or Aramaic in Iraq, Greek or Coptic in Egypt. Christian Greek literature influenced and was influenced by Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Georgian, and Arabic literature, thereby generating a shared cultural heritage.

The spread of Christian culture, however, marginalized Greco-Roman culture. Notables and the people came to share a common Christian culture. In the fifth and sixth centuries, the clergy took over many of the functions of the declining town councils. This introduced a period of lavish church constructions and decoration in the village societies of Egypt and Syria.

While urban and rural clergy were implicated in the world of power, holy men, shrines, and monasteries became the popularly accepted intermediaries between humans and God. Holy men and ascetics popularized the spiritual purity of the desert. Pilgrimage to the column of St. Simeon Stylites became a form of mass worship. In the seventh century, veneration of icons and the cults of saints and the Virgin became alternatives to the authority of the emperor and the church. In Egypt, wealthier peasants and townspeople introduced the veneration of icons. Syrian merchants developed fine stone carvings; bands of Syrian monks were noted for their musical litanies. Music, holy relics, and Christian ceremonies became the means of cultural transmission. Personal access to God displaced imperial and church-defined religious ceremony. Throughout the old Roman Empire, east and west, culture and identity were recast in Christian terms.

In the Sasanian Empire, Zoroastrianism was the religion of the political and social elites. Zoroastrians believed in a supreme god, Ahura Mazda, the creator of the world, a god of light and truth. At the creation, however, there were two independent powers: Ohrmazd, the god of goodness and light, and Ahreman, the god of evil and darkness. There was also a third principle, a mediating figure, Mihr, and other gods of the pantheon.

In Zoroastrian eschatology, the destiny of the world was to be decided by God's struggle with the forces of evil and darkness. Zoroastrian teachings included a cosmic struggle for redemption culminating in the coming of the messiah, the resurrection of the dead, and the last judgment. Human beings are part of this cosmic struggle. Both gods and demons reside in the human soul: the goal of human existence is to make the divine prevail over the demonic. Human beings must contribute to the victory of the Good and Light by their actions and beliefs and will be judged at the day of judgment. The fate of the wicked is either to be damned for eternity or to be purified by punishment and accepted into universal salvation at the end of the world. In the end, Ahura Mazda will prevail, evil will be eliminated, and human beings will be transformed into spiritualized bodies and souls. Zoroastrianism, like Judaism, emphasizes individual ethical responsibility.

Zoroastrian worship turned around the mobads (magi) or fire priests, who at some time in the third century acquired a chief mobad, and thus a hierarchy of clergy. The fire temples, tended by

the magi, kept alive the flame of purity. In the fourth century, Zoroastrians collected their scriptures into the Avesta. The magian legal system helped diffuse a magian way of life, parallel to Judaism and Christianity.

Zoroastrianism, however, had no unified tradition and no identifiable orthodoxy, but many varieties of belief and practice. Elite religion involved spiritual programs of self-transcendence. Popular religion included demon worship and magical practices to propitiate the demons. Ritual religious practices included astrology and divination. Mazdakism was a reform movement within Zoroastrianism advocating communal property and marriages.

The Parthian nobility, however, were devotees of Mithra. Mithra was the god of contracts, alliances, pacts, and justice, fighting on the side of goodness and light. Mithraism was the religious heritage of northern and eastern Iran – Khurasan, Tabaristan, Gilan, and Azarbayjan – and of popular opposition to the Sasanians and the mobads.

The Sasanian Empire was also home to numerous other religions and cults, including Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Buddhism, and gnostic sects. In Mesopotamia there was no congruence of language or religion between government and the town populations. Parsi-speaking Zoroastrians ruled Iraq, but the local populations were Aramaic-speaking Nestorians and Jews. Jewish communities were also found in Armenia, Azarbayjan, and Isfahan. Christians were settled in Marw and Soghdia, where they spread their religion among the Turkic nomads. Transoxania also harbored a great diversity of religions, including Nestorianism, local Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and colonies of Jews and Hindus.

Under the Sasanian Empire, from the fourth century, religious communities were organized as legal corporations owning property; maintaining courts; regulating marriages, divorces, and inheritances; and through their chiefs, holding responsibility to the state for taxes and discipline. In 410 CE, Shah Yazadgard recognized the administrative autonomy of the Christians and the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as the head of the church. Bishops began to preside over legal cases. The Sasanians appointed a catholicos or patriarch and a metropolitan to preside over the bishops in parallel with the Sasanian administrative hierarchy. Magians had a hierarchy parallel to that of the state, a hierarchical judicial administration specifically for Zoroastrians, a cult, scriptures, religious laws, and distinctive customs. It was the religion of the elite and rulers.

In the fifth century, the Nestorian Church was reinforced by the migration of persecuted Christians from the Roman Empire. The emperors allowed the transfer of the theological school of Edessa to Nisibis, bringing Christian theology into the Sasanian domains, fortifying the Nestorian Church, and preparing the later amalgamation of Christian theology and philosophy with Arab-Islamic thought. Scholars from Edessa also established a medical school at Gundeshapur.

In the sixth century, Nestorians extended church government and canon law to deal with marriage, inheritance, and property. Unlike the Syriac Church, which referred to Roman codes for civil issues, the Nestorian Church did not distinguish between civil and religious law. Competing clerical and lay factions invoked royal support and brought the government into church decisions. Royal permission was required for the election of the head of the church, construction of buildings, burials, and even the establishment of monastic rules.

Alongside the monotheistic religions, numerous sects and cults continued to flourish. Manichaeism, a universal dualist religion asserting separate cosmic forces for good and evil, was a heresy to both Christianity and Zoroastrianism and flourished in Iraq and Iran. Its founder, Mani (216–76 CE), preached the division of the universe between spirit and matter. Manichaeans believed that spirit was good, but that matter was derived from Satan and was evil. Manichaeism was never attached to a particular ethnicity nor organized as a church. It spread to Iran, India, Central Asia, and North Africa; its texts were translated from Aramaic into Greek and Pahlavi.

In this religious environment, paganism also remained important. Pagans adopted monotheistic ideas about God, and monotheistic religions incorporated pagan practices. In Iraq, there were Marcionites who believed in three principles – good, evil, and the demiurge of justice. Pagan Hellenistic cults – Hermetics, Elkasaites, Mandeans, gnostics, Chaldeans, astrologers, occult scientists, and others – flourished. In Syria, Hellenism was a powerful influence: many towns still had cults of Apollo, Hermes, Ares, and other gods. Even Christians used Greek mythology to decorate homes and churches.

RELIGIONS AND EMPIRES

The relations between religious elites and imperial administrators were ambivalent. Each laid claim to an absolute truth and a universal authority. In principle, they were competitors in representing the highest values, but simultaneously they could be uneasy allies. Empires gained legitimacy and administrative help from cooperative religious elites; religions gained protection, material assistance, power, and glory from the support of empires. Each could either deliver or withhold popular support from the other.

The Roman Empire made Christianity a state religion. Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, enforced orthodoxy and attempted to punish heretics. He thereby joined the emperor and the empire to Christianity, merging a universal religion with missionary goals and a strong scriptural authority to the political and military apparatus of the state. Empire and Christianity under the theme of one God and one empire were united in opposition to heresy and to provincial independence.

After Constantine, the Roman state considered itself the domain of the chosen people, and the emperor considered himself representative of God and defender of orthodoxy. Royal decrees regulated the organization of the church. Roman emperors called convocations of bishops, supplied them authority, and enforced their decisions. False belief was defiance of imperial authority. Emperor Justinian (r. 527–65 CE) persecuted pagans, heretics, homosexuals, and Jews. Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–41 CE) tried to force Chalcedonian doctrine on all Christians.

The Byzantine Empire, however, never succeeded in consolidating its religious domination. Local power holders, including archbishops and bishops, used doctrinal differences to contest the authority of the emperor. Miaphysitism articulated both a doctrinal opposition to the Chalcedonian doctrine and provincial resistance to imperial power. The struggle between competing doctrines and competing political powers resulted in the establishment of several forms of regional Christianity.

The Sasanian Empire sometimes promoted a centralized state collaborating with Zoroastrian clergy in imitation of Byzantine Caesaropapism. There were periods of religious repression – against Manichaeism in the fourth century, Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries, Mazdakism in the late fifth century, and Judaism in the third and fifth centuries. In general, however, unlike the late Roman Empire, the Sasanian Empire accepted its diverse Zoroastrian, Nestorian, and Jewish communities as legitimate social bodies. The Sasanians surrounded themselves with the Nestorian catholicos and the Jewish exilarchs as well as Zoroastrian mobads. Nestorian and Zoroastrian communities had a bureaucracy and system of titles parallel to that of the state. Royal permission was required for the election of the heads of churches, for construction of buildings, for burials, and even for the issuing of monastic rules. Competing clerical and lay factions invoked royal support and brought the government into church decisions. The Sasanian state used the churches as intermediaries to regulate and tax the population. The long-term Sasanian policy was to accept and to utilize all religious communities as instruments of rule.

Thus, Byzantine and Sasanian religious policies differed. The late Roman Empire strove for religious uniformity as a basis for imperial rule. It was prepared to punish and persecute religious deviants. But the rising power of religion as the principle organizing forces in the lives of masses of peoples gave power to bishops, saints, holy men, and icons. The growing importance of religion limited the effective authority of the emperors. By contrast, the Sasanian Empire maintained a preferred cult and, despite episodes of persecution of Jews and Christians, tolerated and utilized all the major religious communities as vehicles of state control. Churches and religious communities saw themselves as both potential collaborators and potential opponents of the empires.

WOMEN, FAMILY, AND SOCIETY (CO-AUTHOR, LENA SALAYMEH)

Empires and religions were the great overarching institutions, but the fundamental units of society were families living in small communities. Unfortunately, we know very little about the legal and social institutions or the patterns of daily life that regulated family behavior and the relations of men and women in late antiquity. Most of what we know comes from the records of royalty and aristocracy and from legal texts; little is known about the populace as a whole. Thus any account of families in antiquity is tentative and must be taken with great reserve.

Still, it appears that all the pre-Islamic Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies had, with variations, similar family institutions and norms for the relations of men and women. In ideology – and to a large degree in behavior – late antique societies made a sharp distinction between men's and women's roles. The middle- and upper-class ideal was the isolation of women from the marketplace, politics, and social life with men. Generally, in the upper classes, war, politics, and worship were men's work, although the wives of kings, public officials, and warriors occasionally rose to unofficial prominence and substituted for men in moments of crisis. In the ancient Persian empires, women of royal and noble rank owned and administered landed estates. In the lower classes, men did craft work and trading, hard labor and heavy agricultural work, including plowing and irrigation. Women of the lower classes were engaged in household and domestic craft work, care of children, light agriculture, and stock herding.

In extended families and lineages, women were subject to the authority of fathers, brothers, husbands, and husbands' male kin. It is probably fair to say that in the pre-Islamic Mediterranean and Middle East men looked on women as inferior in rational, moral, and physical capacities, and as requiring the support, supervision, and control of men. In ancient Greece, women were wards of their fathers and then of their husbands. In early Roman law, only men were considered citizens empowered to act in the political arena and as the heads of families. According to the Jewish scholar Flavius Josephus, "Woman, the Law says, is inferior to man in all things. Hence she must obey not force but authority, because God has given power to man." Although women were subordinated to men, their social, economic, and marital functions were highly valued. Women were socially weak, but men were obliged to be considerate, protective, and solicitous of their women. In all the regional pre-Islamic societies, the authority of men and their social and economic advantages were institutionalized in the arrangements of marriage and divorce, sexual morality, property, and engagement in public life.

Marriage, divorce, and sexual morality

The authority of men was clearly expressed in the institutions of marriage. Ancient Iranian, Greek and Roman, and Jewish and Christian communities had similar concepts of marriage. Marriage was a mechanism for producing children who would carry on the family name and family fortunes.

Betrothal and marriage agreements were entered into by families. Marriages were regulated in the interests of families and their property and were not an expression of the sentiments of the couple. Normally, a father negotiated a betrothal for a female child, possibly before the child had reached puberty. Ancient Roman women, for example, could not marry without the consent or representation of a guardian. According to Sasanian law, a woman had to give her consent before marriage, but her father had to represent her in drawing a marriage contract. However, she had the legal right to keep her wages after marriage. For a Jewish marriage, consent was required, but a woman's consent could be tacit. In general, a very young woman was expected to accept her parents' wishes – silence was considered consent. Women were expected to be faithful and loyal, to bear children, prepare food, and keep house. A bride would ordinarily move to the house of her husband and reside with his kin, but her male guardians were ultimately responsible for her welfare.

In later centuries, a more egalitarian ideal based on mutual affection emerged. By the early Roman Empire period, people above the age of puberty could declare a marriage by mutual consent without parental permission. Upper-class women owned property, were entitled to the return of their dowries if divorced, and attended social and public events without restriction. Women's funeral steles were inscribed with loving sentiments by their husbands. This was the beginning of the ideal of marriage as a monogamous loving union. However, divorce was common, especially in the upper classes.

Throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East, men had privileges and powers regarding divorce that women did not. Mesopotamian, Sumerian, biblical-era, and pre-Islamic Arab practices indicate that men generally had unrestricted rights to divorce, although they had to announce it publicly. According to Sasanian law, divorce occurred either through mutual consent or the husband's repudiation of a wife for committing a sin (adultery, ignoring purity rules, etc.). Sasanian women of the lower classes could not divorce their husbands, whereas upper-class women could.

In early Roman law, only a husband could make a declaration of divorce, but by the time of Constantine (fourth century), either spouse could unilaterally end a marriage. Emperor Constantine at first tried to forbid divorce, but he was unsuccessful. He then ruled that wives or husbands could divorce in cases of grave misconduct. If the wife were responsible for the breakup of the marriage, the husband could retain money from her dowry and take custody of any children. If the husband were at fault, he would have to repay the dowry. In actuality, there was considerable leeway for individual cases.

In rabbinic law, a husband, but not a wife, could end a marriage at will, but he was required to return the dowry – unless the wife was judicially found to be at fault. The rabbis, however, differed on the legal rights of women to initiate divorce. The majority of Babylonian Talmudists gave a woman the right to divorce in the case of a major flaw in the husband, such as impotence or a serious disease. The Palestinian Talmud suggests that Jewish women had the right to sue for divorce. Rabbis acknowledged divorce by mutual consent. A widow or divorcee could remarry after a waiting period to ascertain that she was not pregnant by her previous husband.

The spread of Christianity modified perceptions of divorce. Christian values prohibited divorce except in cases of adultery and prohibited remarriage after divorce. By the eighth century, marriage was widely accepted as an indissoluble sacrament, although this did not enter canon law until 1563.

Late antique sexual morality was governed by a double standard. All late antique societies denounced adultery by women but in practice condoned nonmarried sexual opportunities for men. Roman law recognized concubinage as a long-term relationship between people whose social status precluded the legal arrangements of a marriage; the law permitted concubines in addition to a wife. Although adultery and premarital sex were condemned, the relations of married men with slaves, prostitutes, or other less than respectable women were not considered adultery. Roman society

expected unmarried women to be chaste. The distinctions between wife, concubine, and mistress were ambiguous.

Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian traditions all required virginity in a bride. The Avesta (Zoroastrian scripture) encouraged chastity and forbade sex outside marriage. The Bible (Leviticus) orders that women who have had premarital sex should be stoned to death, and a Jewish bride found not to be a virgin was subject to punishment. In practice, however, Palestinian rabbis developed a process by which a woman could prove that she was still a virgin despite having a “damaged” hymen. Until the tenth century CE, if not later, Jews also practiced polygyny. Rabbinic law permitted multiple marriages if a man could fulfill his commitments to each of his wives. Still, there were hesitations among Palestinian rabbis who recommended that a man divorce his first wife before remarrying. Also some rabbis granted a first wife the right to divorce or to put a provision in the marriage contract to prevent her husband from marrying a second wife.

Early Christians also condemned premarital sex but pardoned the offense if the couple married. Although opposed in principle to extramarital relations, Christians in late antiquity did not in fact penalize a married man’s extramarital relations with women of low status. It was most severely reproved if a man tried to bequeath property to illegitimate children.

Property and inheritance

In late antique societies, women could own property and acquire it by gift, dowry, inheritance, or work. Commonly, however, fathers, husbands, and other guardians were empowered to control their assets. In ancient Greek law, a woman retained legal ownership of her property, but her husband was the manager of his wife’s dowry and received its income as long as the marriage lasted. He had to represent her in court cases and in drawing of contracts in much the same way as he was the guardian of his children. Roman law did not recognize women as legally independent. Their property came under the control of their *patras familias* – father, husband, or other guardian. A woman could own and bequeath property, but her choices had to be approved by her guardian and her heirs. Many Roman jurists believed that these restrictions were justified by women’s weakness of mind. Despite such limitations, women in the Roman Empire often managed their own properties and entered into legal arrangements. Sasanian women had the right to own property, but – because they were not considered full legal persons – a male relative or spouse would administer the property. Jewish husbands acquired control over their wives’ property, because the rabbis reasoned that a husband was entitled to the profits of some kinds of property because he was obligated to ransom her if she were taken captive.

In late antique law, with the possible exception of Roman law, women did not inherit equally with men. However, families commonly arranged to transfer property to wives and daughters by gifts or wills. Under Sasanian rules wives of full legal status could inherit the same portion as sons, but lower-status wives and their children could not inherit. Unmarried daughters received half of a son’s share in an estate; married daughters could not inherit, because, presumably, they had received a dowry equivalent to their share. Under Sasanian law, however, wills and dowries were often used to alter inheritance shares. Biblical laws prevented widows (unless childless) from inheriting and allowed a daughter to inherit only if there was no male heir or if she married within the same clan. By late antiquity, however, it was common for Jewish fathers to give daughters bridal dowries to compensate for their omission from inheritance.

The limitations on women’s control of property extended to their participation in the judicial system. The dominant pre-Islamic norm was to limit women’s testimony or involvement in court proceedings. The Emperor Constantine disapproved of women being present in court. The Zoroastrian clergy did not allow women’s testimony in a court of law. Rabbis considered women incompetent

to testify in court, but they appear to have accepted women's testimony in matters considered under their purview (such as purity).

Seclusion and veiling

Although it is not possible to assess the extent of gender segregation across classes and communities in pre-Islamic Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies, the lives of women in the ruling classes were generally marked by seclusion and veiling. Textual evidence from the mid-Assyrian period (1132–1115 BCE) indicates that women lived in separate areas and were guarded by eunuchs. Elite Greek women were absent from public life. Jewish women in the time of Jesus were admonished to stay within the household. Seclusion may have been related to ritual and social restrictions placed on women during menstruation. In the Zoroastrian tradition, menstruating women were considered polluted and could not perform temple rituals. Rabbinic law also restricted women from social activities during menstruation or after childbirth, even though marriage and sexuality were seen as positive.

The seclusion of women, however, was by no means absolute. Women appeared in public to work. Some Jewish women were educated. Christian and pagan women in Byzantium appear to have studied the classics, but they studied different texts than men and were expected to speak in a distinctive manner. Christian women also played an important role in the church, as patrons, as teachers for women who could not read the gospels, as assistants in the baptism of women, and as caregivers of the sick and the needy. Through their contacts with other women, Christian women could help promote conversions to Christianity or adherence to Christian social and moral norms.

Veiling was widely practiced throughout the pre-Islamic Mediterranean and Middle East. It is known that a style of clothing that covered women from head to toe existed in ancient Mesopotamia around 3000 BCE. The oldest statute regarding the veiling of women known today is in middle Assyrian law (c. 1300 BCE). The pre-Islamic inhabitants of the Iranian plateau practiced veiling of women. Elite Sasanian women (and Sasanian kings) were veiled. Jewish women were required to cover their heads and faces when in public. Some passages in the Talmud indicate that the rabbis associated a woman's hair covering with piety and chastity.

Women in ancient Roman society wore a long cloth called a *palla*, which may have changed into veils of different sizes around the second century BCE. Later, early Christian churches requested women to cover their heads in the chapel, and Tertullian (a second- to third-century Christian writer), in his essay "On the Veiling of Virgins," declared that unmarried women must wear the veil.

There are many different interpretations of veiling. In late antiquity the veil, generally, represented high status. The veil distinguished respectable women from slaves and prostitutes. Numismatic and other evidence from the sixth century BCE to the seventh century CE suggest that veiling may also have been decorative or fashionable. In some contexts, it may have signified that a woman was the ward of her husband or father. Still, how widely veiling was practiced, in what circumstances, or how the veil was actually worn is not known.

The fragmentary evidence suggests that women in third-century Sasanian communities, or fourth-century Jewish societies, or sixth-century Byzantium lived in worlds of similar values and similar social and legal practices. These values and practices would be perpetuated in the Muslim era.

CONCLUSION

On the eve of the Islamic era, the Middle East was divided into two great realms of polity and culture (Byzantine and Sasanian) and two main spheres of religious belief (Christian and Zoroastrian,

Table 1. *Islam in world history*

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| Early village farming communities | c. 7000 BCE |
| Cities | c. 3000 BCE |
| Empires | c. 2400 BCE |
| Axial-age and monotheistic religions | c. 800 BCE |
| Muhammad | c. 570–632 |
| Middle Eastern Islamic societies | 622–c. 1200 |
| Worldwide diffusion of Islam | c. 650 to present |
| Rise of European world empires | 1200–1900 |
| Modern transformation of Islamic societies | 1800 to present |

with Jewish minorities). Religion and empire were intertwined. The empires sustained, patronized, endowed, and enforced organized worship. In turn, the religious communities legitimized the emperors' reigns and helped govern the subjects in their name. Alternatively, Miaphysite churches embodied political as well as religious resistance to the state. Within each society, a myriad of small communities retained their social and cultural distinctiveness. Their headmen, chiefs, and elders mediated their integration into the overarching realms of common religion and empire.

These two political and religious regions – with their common institutional forms and overlapping popular cultures – would become part of a single Middle Eastern civilization. (See [Table 1](#).) In the late sixth and early seventh centuries, the two empires fought exhausting wars for the control of Syria and Egypt, which paved the way for the Arab-Muslim conquests and the formation of an Arab-Islamic empire in the former domains of both. The new empire preserved the continuity of Middle Eastern institutions. The basic forms of state organization – including the emperorship, the bureaucratic administration and large-scale landownership, and the predominant style of religious life focusing on universal and transcendental beliefs and a parish-like community organization – were maintained.

Early Islamic societies adapted both the Roman model uniting imperial authority and religious identity and the Sasanian model of religious pluralism. As in the late Roman and Sasanian empires, culture and identity came to be defined in religious terms – Muslim identity would also be defined by religious affiliation. Both the hierarchical Christian churches and the decentralized Jewish communities would be precedents for the later organization of Muslim religious associations. Just as Christianity had created a translinguistic religious culture, Islam would be expressed in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and many other languages. The basic structures of empire, economy, religion, society, and family continued, but they were gradually redefined in terms of a new religion, new cultures, and new social identities.

Similarly, the regional ecology continued to be based on agrarian and urban communities, and the economy functioned on the basis of marketing and money exchanges. Ancient cultures – philosophy, literature, law, and art – continued to flourish and would be carried on in the Arab-Islamic era.

Family, lineage, clientele, and ethnic communities also continued to be the building blocks of society. Just as the institutions of empire and state and of religious-communal organization descended from the pre-Islamic era and continued to be the governing template for the Muslim era, so too were ancient patterns of family and gender relations – revised, modified, freshly detailed, and given a new religious and cultural context – carried over from the ancient to the Islamic era.

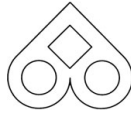
The progressive transformation of late antique societies into Islamic societies took place in three main phases: first, the creation of a new Islamic community in Arabia; second, the conquest of the Middle East by this new Arabian-Muslim community; and third, the generation in the period of the

early caliphate (to 945 CE) of an Islamic empire and culture. In the post-imperial or sultanate period (945–c. 1200) the institutional and cultural prototypes of the caliphal era were transformed into new types of Islamic states and religious communities. In the first phase, we see the emergence of Islam in Arabian society. In the second, we consider Islam as it became the religion of an imperial state and urban elite. In the third phase, we see how Islamic values and elites transformed the lives of Middle Eastern peoples.

THE PREACHING OF ISLAM

CHAPTER 2

HISTORIANS AND THE SOURCES



For more than a century, Western scholarship on the “origins” of Islam – Arabia, the life of Muhammad, the Quran, and the Arab conquests – was based on the traditional Arabic sources. Western scholars added commentaries on themes important in Anglo-European historiography such as the psychology of the Prophet Muhammad, the social and economic environment, and the relationships of early Islam to Judeo-Christian and Arabian cultures. The theme of political and religious leadership was particularly prominent.

In recent decades an intensive reexamination of the Arabic sources has challenged the traditional narratives. A number of scholars have argued that we do not and cannot know much about the early Islamic era. Every aspect of the “origins” of Islam – the paganism of Arabian society, the advent of the Prophet Muhammad, the provenance of the Quran, and the story of prophecy, community, and state formation in early seventh-century Arabia, and many aspects of the Arab conquests – has become the subject of scholarly controversy. The skeptics point out that the sources did not begin to be transcribed from oral to written form until a century or so after Muhammad’s death. Texts in hadith, law, theology, and history were not compiled in written form until the late seventh century, when oral reminiscences began to be written down, scraps of documents collected, stories assembled, biographies remembered, exploits celebrated, and chronologies worked out, decades and even a century after the events in question. These materials were not organized into books until the middle decades of the eighth century and often as late as the ninth century. The historical record could not but be shaped by later political, social, and religious commitments; factional, tribal, sectarian, and ethnic rivalries; the interests of caliphs and scholars; and the competition among elites for political and religious authority.

Because the Arabic-Muslim accounts of the Prophet and early Islamic history are based on later materials, some scholars reasoned that the only way to know the true history is to use non-Muslim sources. One result was an account of the origin of Islam as a messianic Jewish sect in Palestine and North Arabia that much later was redefined as a new religion. In general, however, this effort has failed, because the non-Muslim sources are themselves fragmentary, poorly informed, and prejudiced.

Other scholars argued that the traditional story of the origins and the early history of Islam was a later invention intended to demonstrate, via historical narrative, the mythical, doctrinal, and other beliefs of Muslims and their superiority to religious rivals, including pagan Arabians, Jews, and Christians. Thus, they see the materials in the biography of the Prophet not as a factual history but as part of later interconfessional polemics, and as designed to explicate the Quran, validate Muhammad’s historical role, establish legal precedents, and reinforce the Muslim religious beliefs and

community identity of a later era. The biography of Muhammad is an expression of the superiority of Muslims to Jews and Christians. For this reason we have traditions about his perfect character, his appearance, his miracles, and his triumphs over infidel Arabs and Jews. In the revisionist view, the story of Muhammad is a creation of literary history rather than the documentation of a life. It embodies the construction of a religion rather than a biography.

These interpretations – modeled after biblical criticism and other forms of literary analysis – make a valid point. Given the compositional history of the biography of Muhammad (*sira*), the traditions of his sayings (hadith), his campaigns (*al-maghazi*), and Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*), the intrusion of a later mentality and later religious, political, and social concerns was unavoidable – as it is for any literary tradition in any time period.

This skepticism was part of a larger cultural and political tendency. A far-reaching critique of “orientalist” scholarship rejected the attitudes and the findings of earlier generations of Anglo-European scholars as prejudiced and distorted. This critique merged with a “post-modernist” phase in academic scholarship in which scholars in literature, history, and anthropology began to examine the hidden political and cultural motivations for the production of academic scholarship. Feminism and third world studies were the leaders in this movement. Texts could no longer be taken as objective accounts of reality. We know what people said and we try to decipher what they thought, but we do not know what “actually happened.” In early Islamic studies, radical skepticism has sharpened our minds to the importance of careful questioning of the sources, but it goes too far in its root and branch criticism of the traditional story. From a healthy skepticism the radical view eventuates in the outright rejection of the only historical material we actually possess. It excludes epoch-transforming events from history and makes the origins of a worldwide civilization incomprehensible.

The radical skeptical approach underestimates the abundance and variety of historical materials, culled and transmitted from the very earliest years of Islam and embedded in later texts. We know a great deal about the ancient history of Arabia from inscriptions and archeological findings and from Greco-Roman historical and ecclesiastical sources. Arabian tribal genealogies, poetry, and other lore were passed on in oral form at first and later in writing. Early written documents include contracts, treaties, and diplomatic correspondence such as the Constitution of Medina, the Treaty of Hudaibiya, and Muhammad’s epistles to the tribes. The early written compilation of the Quran suggests that writing was a common method of transmission in the Prophet’s lifetime.

Later in the first Islamic century, Arab scholars collected tribal lore, Judeo-Christian exegetical stories, Yemeni genealogies and battle tales, and the sayings and stories about the Prophet Muhammad and his battles. Materials embedded in later texts show that stories related to the Quran were compiled in the 650s and 660s, within a generation of the death of Muhammad. Tax and pay documents, records of public works, papyri, coins, inscriptions, monuments and archeological remains, and lists of caliphs add to the data. The abundance of data and the variety of sources make it possible to critically reconstruct many aspects of the early period.

Furthermore, the radical skeptical view neglects recent studies of late antiquity. Scholars of the late Roman period, especially versed in Syriac sources, are reexamining the cultural, social, economic, and political conditions of the eastern Mediterranean in the centuries before and after the Arab conquests. The new scholarship emphasizes cultural, social, and political continuities between late antiquity and the early Islamic era. This scholarship has had an important impact on the conception of early Islamic civilization presented in this book.

Finally, the radical skeptical approach is based on a misunderstanding of the transmission of knowledge in late antiquity and the early Islamic era, and on a misleading, anachronistic application of our own culture of book learning and book production to a different culture. In the seventh and later centuries, books – fixed texts transmitted in unchanging detail – were not the only or even the

predominant mode of learning. Late antique and early Islamic cultures were neither book nor oral cultures, but rather a hybrid based on recitations, lectures, and note taking. In this system of learning, poets and scholars presented their work orally, either from memory or from written notes – likely with variations in each repetition. Students made notes during the recitation and/or reproduced the presentation from memory. To control the learning process, teachers might dictate, prepare scripts of their own lectures, or correct and authorize students' notebooks.

At a later stage, the material in notebooks would be compiled and edited into a text, which was still subject to new variations. The ninth century was rich in the production of compilations based on either one authority or an assemblage of earlier authorities. By the tenth century, definitive texts – books – became the norm. Thus, there was a sequence of narrator, note takers, successive compilers, and eventually the editors or authors of books. There was no single act of authoring. This process cannot be described by the dichotomy of oral and written and defies the notion of tracing all books back to an original source.

This system of lecturing and note taking had precedents in both Hellenistic and Jewish learning. The Greek language distinguishes between a mnemonic aid for a lecture (*hypomnema*) and a literary work (*syngamma*). The classical method of instruction was oral lectures and note taking. Galen's medical works were taught in this way into the Muslim era. There were also Jewish, Syrian, and Persian traditions for this type of knowledge transmission. In Jewish learning, Haggadoth (oral traditions) and Talmudic studies were *hypomnemata* (at least until and probably even after the codification of the Talmud in late antiquity). The Bible, however, was probably both read from the text and recited from memory.

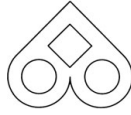
In early Muslim culture this quasi-oral, quasi-written method of transmission was often preferred to fixed texts. Verified auditory transmission was regarded as more reliable than writing, which was easily manipulated. Before the era of mechanical reproduction of books, when texts had to be copied by hand, there was too much leeway for errors, distortions, and forgeries. The uncertainties of early Arabic orthography also led many scholars and poets to prefer recitation to texts. Poets were also suspicious of writing because it could distort the sensory impact of speech. To be accepted in court, legal documents required oral confirmation. Indeed, early Muslim scholars did not necessarily value ownership, originality, or fixity. The goal was not the literal preservation of the text, but continuity, correction, and improvement. Not the fixed text but the living, ongoing adaptation of tradition was the key to truth.

Withal, books did have an important and growing place in this system of transmission. The Quran was the earliest Muslim book. The early caliphs sponsored literary, theological, and historical writing. For example, Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad was commissioned by the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur (754–75). Sibawayhi's (d. 796) grammar – perhaps too complex and theoretical for oral transmission – was composed as a book, and other books followed in the ninth century. The need for tax records, correspondence, and legal administration made writing ever more important.

Thus, the rich, vivid, and extensive materials in the early Arab-Muslim histories were not invented in a later period. Although the Arabic literary tradition was indeed shaped by the later eras in which it was compiled and edited, it embodies an historical recollection of the Arabian milieu and of Muhammad that preserves a core of genuine collective memory. The history of Arabia and the life of the Prophet were passed on by a variety of oral, quasi-oral, quasi-written, and written methods. These methods allowed for the preservation of a multiplicity of voices within the literary tradition and give the rich possibilities that diversity affords for historical reconstruction. A gradual, incremental process seems more realistic than to imagine the creation of a belated and elaborate myth out of whole cloth.

This is not to say that these sources – or any historical sources – can be taken at face value. In later eras historians wanted to explain the conquests as the outcome of Muhammad's teaching and career, and to depict them as both tribal heroism and pious commitment to Islam. The process of historical transmission allowed, indeed inevitably included, variations, selection, and reinterpretations influenced by the mentality, cultural and political contexts, and personal, factional, and sectarian interests of the transmitters and their patrons and students. Moreover, in the transmission of all historical narratives, variation is inevitable. Any history requires selection; combination; a chronological and causal framework; a narrative, dramatic, or thematic strategy; and fitting the data into a coherent narrative that alters and reshapes the story. History is not only a record of past events; it is a story about those events.

ARABIA



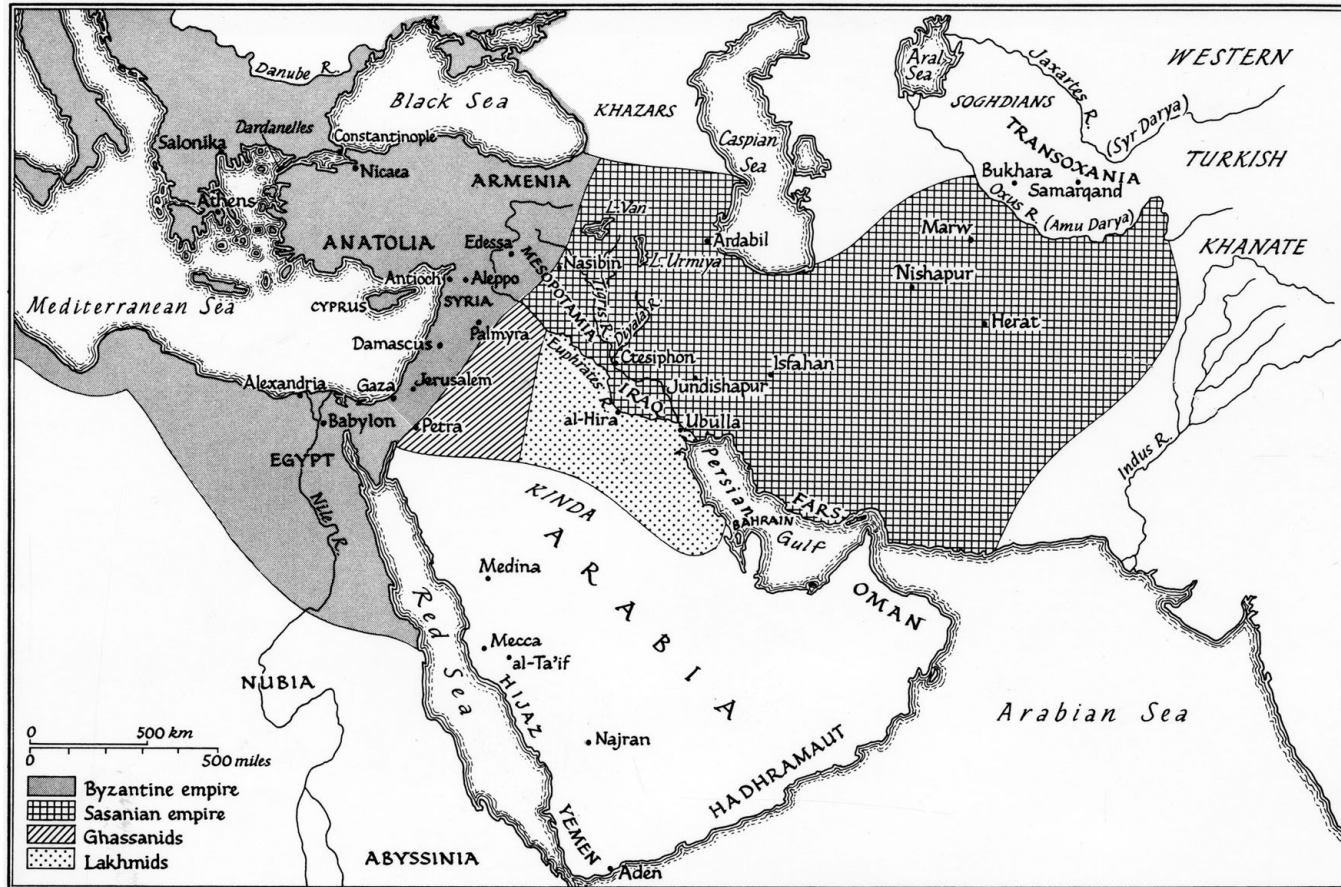
On the eve of the Islamic era, Arabia stood on the periphery of the Middle Eastern imperial societies. (See [Map 1](#).) In Arabia, the primary communities remained especially powerful, and urban, religious, and royal institutions were less developed. Whereas the imperial world was predominantly agricultural, Arabia was primarily pastoral. Whereas the imperial world was citted, Arabia was the home of camps and oases. Whereas the imperial peoples were committed to the monotheistic religions, Arabia was largely pagan. The imperial world was politically organized; Arabia was politically fragmented.

At the same time, pre-Islamic Arabia was in many ways an integral part, a provincial variant, of the larger Middle Eastern civilization. There were no physical or political boundaries between Arabia and the larger region; no great walls, nor rigid ethnic or demographic frontiers. Migrating Arabian peoples made up much of the population of the desert margins of Syria and Iraq. Arabs in the Fertile Crescent region shared political forms, religious beliefs, economic connections, and physical space with the societies around them.

Arabia was also connected to the larger region by the interventions of the imperial powers. The Byzantines and the Sasanians disputed control of Yemen, and both were active in creating spheres of influence in North Arabia. They intervened diplomatically and politically to extend their trading privileges, protect sympathetic religious populations, and advance their strategic interests. The Ghassanid kingdom (in southern Syria, Jordan, and northwestern Arabia) and the Lakhmid kingdom (in southern Iraq and northeastern Arabia) were vassals of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, respectively. The client kingdoms, like the empires, had systems for rapid communications by couriers. From the Romans and the Persians, the Arabs obtained new arms and armor and learned new tactics, often through the enrollment of Arabs as auxiliaries in the Roman or Persian armies. As a result, Arabia was probably more politically sophisticated and institutionally developed than scholars have recognized. The later Arab-Muslim conquests were organized as armies and not as migrating tribes.

Furthermore, the diffusion of Judaism, Christianity, and gnosticism in southern, west-central, and northern Arabia made these regions parts of the Hellenistic world. In southern Arabia, Judaism was established in the fourth and fifth centuries. Monotheistic, probably Jewish, inscriptions in Yemen date to the fifth century, and there were many Jews in the Arabian tribes of Himyar and Kinda. In northern Arabia, there were Jews at Khaybar and Medina. Jewish Arab tribes in Medina were rich in land, fortresses, and weapons.

In the north, Christianity was established in the fifth century. Christian churches were active in eastern Arabia in the Sasanian sphere of influence, especially at Al-Hira (the Lakhmid capital).



Map 1. The Middle East on the eve of the Muslim era.

Christianity was also represented by merchants who traveled in Arabian caravans from Najran (in southern Arabia) to Busra (in Syria). The market fair at ʿUkaz attracted Christian preachers. Extensive networks of monasteries, police posts, and markets carried Miaphysite literary and religious ideas from Edessa, Coptic culture from Egypt, and Ethiopian Christianity to Arabia. Many names, religious terms, and historical references also indicate Iraqi Aramaic influences in pre-Islamic Arabia. In the border regions of northern Arabia, Syrian and Iraqi holy personages, saints, and ascetics were venerated by pagan Arabs and Christians alike.

In the south, Christianity was established in the sixth century by intensive Byzantine missionary activity on both the Ethiopian and the Yemeni sides of the Red Sea. Abyssinians invaded southern Arabia in 525 and left Christian settlements in the small oases of Yemen. Nestorians returned to Najran with the Persian conquest of 570. Najran was also the home of Arians, Miaphysites, and Julianites who believed that not Jesus but a substitute died on the cross. This religious environment tended to emphasize the humanity of Christ.

Arabia included many economically developed, productive areas. Sasanians helped develop silver and copper mining in Yemen; copper and silver were also mined in eastern Arabia. Leather and cloth was produced in Yemen. ʿUman and Bahrayn were agriculture producers; Bahrayn exported grain to Mecca. At least one small town in north-central Arabia – al-Rabadha, on the Kufa-Medina road – produced metal, glass, ceramics, and soapstone wares. Internal Arabian trade linked all the regions together. Trade also linked Arabia with the wider region. Merchants brought textiles, jewelry, weapons, grain, and wine into Arabia. Arabia exported hides, leather, and animals. Arabian markets intersected with Indian Ocean commerce on the east and south coasts.

Thus, by the end of the sixth century, Arabia had experience in trade, stratified elites, royal institutions, and the capacity for large-scale political coalitions. Many Arabians shared the religious identities and cultures of the settled peoples. These political, economic, and religio-cultural contacts allowed for the eventual amalgamation of the empires and the outside areas into a single society. From one point of view, Islam was a foreign force bursting in from a peripheral region; from another, it originated within the framework of the existing Middle Eastern civilization.

CLANS AND KINGDOMS

In many ways, Arabian societies were defined by geography. The interior of Arabia is largely desert with scattered oases, and from the beginning of camel domestication (in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE) the desert was inhabited by peoples who migrated seasonally in search of pasturage. They passed the winter in desert reserves, moving to spring pasturage at the first signs of rain. In the summer they camped near villages or oases, where they exchanged animal products for grain, dates, utensils, weapons, and cloth. They provided caravans with animals, guides, and guards.

We know from ancient poetry, from later histories, and from anthropological observation that the migratory peoples lived in tight-knit kinship groups – patriarchal families formed of a father, his sons, and their families. These families were further grouped into clans of several hundred tents, which migrated together, owned pasturage in common, and fought as one. Each clan was fundamentally an independent unit. All loyalties were absorbed by the group, which acted collectively to defend its individual members and to meet their responsibilities. If a member was harmed, the clan would avenge him. If he did harm, it would stand responsible with him.

As a consequence of this group solidarity (*ʿasabiyya*), bedouin clans recognized no external authority. Each clan was led by a chief (*shaykh*), who was usually selected by the clan elders from one of the prominent families and who always acted in accordance with their counsel. He settled internal disputes according to the group's traditions, but he could not legislate or command. The

chief had to be wealthy and show generosity to the needy and to his supporters; he had to be a man of tact and prudence – forbearing, resolute, and practical.

Bedouin poetry expressed absolute devotion to the prestige and security of the clan. Bedouins were probably animists and polytheists, believing that all natural objects and events were living spirits who could be either helpful or harmful to man. Demons (jinn) had to be propitiated or controlled and defeated by magic. Bedouins also worshiped their ancestors, moon and star gods, and gods in the form of stones or trees placed in protective sanctuaries. The sacred was vested mysteriously in the plethora of forces that dominated the natural world and the being of man.

In contrast with the desert regions, the southwest, the northwest, and the northeast are agricultural regions. Although they were outside of the Roman and Sasanian empires, the oases of Yemen, the borders of greater Syria, and the borders of the Euphrates-Tigris water systems had a long history of agriculture, peasant societies, and monarchical governments. At the points of contact between the fertile parts of Arabia and the desert, the bedouins could be integrated into more inclusive, often stratified, bodies. In these areas, clan confederations organized caravans and trade. The formation of a haram, a common sanctuary, also allowed for worship of the same gods, economic exchange, sociability, and political bargaining. Monarchies were also established on the Arabian peripheries. In South Arabia, royal authority was first founded about 1000 BCE and lasted until the Muslim era. By the fifth century BCE, Yemen was organized into kingdoms encompassing agricultural, trading, and pastoral peoples, with monarchs, landed elites, a religious pantheon, and organized temple worship of the gods. The political elite was drawn from aristocratic tribes and controlled extensive landed estates. Temples also had substantial holdings, whereas the commoners were organized into clans that were obliged to provide agricultural and military services to the elites. South Arabian sedentary communities had a more elaborate institutional framework than tribal groups, including a council with a king and delegates from the principal tribes. Tributary and vassal tribes extended the power of the Yemeni kingdoms well into the interior of Arabia.

However, in the first century BCE, the opening of sea routes for international trade and the collapse of the overland trade routes from Yemen to the north brought financial and political disaster. The Yemeni kingdoms were weakened, and bedouins pushed in against agricultural areas and cut off Yemeni influence in the Hijaz and central Arabia. In 328 CE, Imru' al-Qays b. 'Amr seized control of Najran. An inscription, in Arabic language and Nabatean script, refers to him as King of the Arabs; it is the oldest surviving indication of an Arab identity.

In the north, kingdoms were less fully institutionalized. The Nabatean kingdom (sixth century BCE–106 CE) was ruled by a king but really depended on a supporting coalition of clan and tribal chiefs. From 85 BCE, the Nabateans – their capital at Petra, in modern-day Jordan – controlled much of Jordan and Syria and traded with Yemen, Egypt, Damascus, and the coastal cities of Palestine.

The Nabatean kingdom was destroyed by the Romans in 106 CE. Palmyra, in the desert to the east of Damascus, succeeded Petra, extending monarchical control over the deserts and surrounding border areas. An urban capital, elaborate temples, a strong agricultural base, wide commercial networks, and Hellenistic culture marked Palmyran supremacy. Palmyra was destroyed in 271 CE – a victim, as were the Nabateans, of Roman efforts to incorporate northern Arabia directly into the empire.

Thus, from about 1000 BCE until about 300 CE, Yemen and the northern kingdoms organized the interior of the peninsula and kept the bedouins under the control of the agricultural and commercial economies of the settled kingdoms. By the end of the third century, however, the peripheral kingdoms had lost control of the center of the peninsula. Violent conflicts between clans and tribes became more frequent. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, bedouin marauders harassed the caravan trade, and bedouin migrations converted marginal regions in Yemen and on the borders of

Iraq and Syria to pasturage. The bedouinization of Arabia was a gradual and cumulative process, shifting the balance between organized polities and clan societies in favor of the latter.

From the early fourth century to the end of the sixth century, there were several efforts to reestablish the dominance of the peripheral kingdoms and protect trade and oasis cultivation. In Yemen, the Himyarite kingdom was reestablished, and its influence – mediated by the tribal confederation of Kinda – extended over the bedouins of the Hijaz and central Arabia. But in the sixth century, after the Abyssinians invaded Yemen in 525 CE and a civil war between Jews and Christians, South Arabian agriculture was again in ruins, and Arabian tribes were shifting from sedentary to nomadic life.

In the north, after the destruction of Petra and Palmyra, both the Roman and the Sasanian empires attempted to restore their spheres of influence. By the end of the fifth century, the Romans had come to depend on the Ghassanids, an Arab-Christian clan, to defend Syria and Palestine against the bedouins and the Persians. The Sasanian Empire also maintained a buffer state: a coalition of Aramean and Christian tribes along the border between Iraq and the desert, organized under the leadership of the Lakhmids, whose capital was al-Hira on the lower reaches of the Euphrates.

For a time, the empires promoted sedentarization, trade, and the diffusion of cultural influences (especially Christianity), but the Arabian kingdoms of this later era were less powerful than the caravan city-kingdoms of earlier times. The early kingdoms were based on sedentary populations that were assimilated to Greco-Roman culture, earned a living in agriculture and trade, and sponsored art and architecture. The later kingdoms were tribal confederations, nomadic rather than agricultural. Then, in the late sixth century, the Romans and Persians removed their vassals altogether and attempted to partition northern Arabia and absorb it into their respective empires. By the early seventh century, the empires were at war with each other; the result was a breakdown of the Arabian economy and of political order on the Arabian frontiers of both empires.

MECCA

In the sixth century, only Mecca stood against the trend toward political and social fragmentation. Mecca remained the center of a tribal- and trade-oriented confederation and the most important place for Arabian cultural and religious life. A religious sanctuary whose shrine, the Ka'ba, attracted pilgrims from all over Arabia, Mecca became the repository of the various idols and tribal gods of the peninsula, and the destination of an annual pilgrimage. The pilgrimage also entailed a period of truce, which served not only for religious worship, but also for trade, the arbitration of disputes, and the settlement of claims and debts. The annual trade fair at 'Ukaz and the pilgrimage to Mina and 'Arafat (near Mecca) were important commercial occasions.

In the fifth century, the Quraysh, an alliance of tribal groups, took control of Mecca. The Quraysh were united in a religious cult and defensive coalition, called the Hums, centered on the sanctuary (*haram*) and shrine of the Ka'ba. They governed Mecca through a council of clans (*mala'*). The Quraysh further defined their identity by codes of diet, dress, domestic taboos, and endogamous marriages within the Quraysh confederation. United by religion as well as by kinship, the Quraysh had a social structure similar to that of Jews and Christians, albeit based on polytheistic rather than monotheistic religious beliefs.

The Quraysh were active in local fairs and regional trade. In the mid-sixth century, Mecca participated in the trade linking northeastern Arabia with Yemen or with Abyssinia by sea. The Quraysh were also engaged in trade with bedouin tribes on the borders of Syria and Iraq, exchanging textiles and oil for bedouin products. They ferried goods to the Byzantine frontier and were especially important in selling hides when demand for leather in the empires rose due to its military uses

(such as saddles, bridles, body and horse armor, shields, belts, and straps). It is presumed that Mecca had also been engaged in the international spice trade from Yemen to Syria; however, by the sixth century, these routes had been severed.

Trade gave Mecca a sphere of political as well as commercial influence. Trade required treaties with Byzantine officials and with bedouins to assure safe passage of the caravans, protection of water and pasture rights, and guides and scouts. In association with the Tamim tribes, such arrangements gave Mecca a loose diplomatic hegemony in northern Arabia. With the decline of Abyssinia, Ghassanids, and Lakhmids, Meccan influence was the main integrative force in late sixth-century Arabia.

LANGUAGE, POETRY, AND THE GODS

The political, social, religious, and economic complexity of the several Arabian societies implied a rich and sophisticated cultural environment. Arabia was multilingual. Although Aramaic was probably the most widely spoken language in pre-Islamic Arabia, by the sixth century Arabic was both written and spoken in the region. Arabic script appeared about a century before the Islamic era; it was derived from earlier writing in Aramean, influenced by Nabatean script, and then reshaped in al-Hira by Syriac-writing Christians or Aramean Jews. Arabic writing may have been stimulated by the patronage of the Arab client kings. There was also an Arabic poetic *koine* (a common dialect used by reciters of poems throughout Arabia) that fostered a collective identity transcending the individual clans. Pre-Islamic poetry cultivated an Arab identity manifest in the virtues of *muruwwa* – bravery, loyalty to kin, and generosity.

Arabic was also a language of religion. Iraqi and Himyarite Christians had Arabic translations of the Old and New Testaments as early as the fourth century. There were Christian liturgies and prayer books in Arabic. Arabs in Medina may also have studied Arabic, Aramaic, and Hebrew in Jewish schools.

The Meccan Ka'ba expressed this diversity in religious form. It was the sanctuary of numerous gods. Al-Ilah was the highest deity in the Meccan pantheon. Sacrifices of livestock and produce were made; individuals “called” on their god for help. The gods, then, were not simply identified with nature but were defined as distinct persons separate from the natural forces that, as willful beings, they controlled. Such gods had to be propitiated by sacrifices; one could communicate with them as persons. The formation of a *haram*, a shared sanctuary, allowed for worship of the same gods. The very concept of the worship of numerous gods at festivals or fairs indicates a Hellenistic connection and a parallel with religious practices in Syria.

In the shared sanctuaries, new conceptions of collective identity could emerge. The *haram* focused the worship of tribal peoples on common cults, allowed them to observe one another's mores, and helped standardize their language and customs. Furthermore, Mecca was also one of the few places in Arabia to have a floating, nontribal population of individual exiles, refugees, outlaws, and foreign merchants. Arabian-wide commercial contacts and the very presence of different peoples and clans – people belonging to no clan, foreigners, people with diverse religious convictions – set some individuals free from the traditions of their clans, fostering new conceptions of personal worth and status and new social relationships. In Medina, the beginnings of a new society were based on geographical proximity rather than tribal ties. Individuals or groups from tribes living adjacent to one another began to coalesce into political groups, the “people of a locality.”

Commerce, however, also brought economic competition, social conflict, and moral confusion. Commercial activities intensified social stratification on the basis of wealth and morally inassimilable discrepancies between individual interests and clan loyalty. The Quran would condemn the

displacement of tribal virtues by the ambition, greed, arrogance, and hedonism of the new rich. Mecca, which had begun to give Arabia some measure of political and commercial order, was changing its moral and social identity.

Thus, Arabia was in ferment: a society touched by imperial influences but without a central government; marked by the monotheistic religions but with competing polytheistic and henotheistic beliefs; a prospering society caught in social and moral conflicts. Here Muhammad was born, was entrusted with the Quran, and here he became the Prophet of Islam.

*MUHAMMAD: PREACHING, COMMUNITY,
AND STATE FORMATION*



THE LIFE OF THE PROPHET

Prophecy is a rare phenomenon, and all the more extraordinary is the prophet whose influence permanently transforms the lives of his people and leaves as a legacy one of the world's great religions. Thus the life of Muhammad and the rise of Islam have to be understood in terms of both religious vision and worldly impact. In this chapter, I outline the Prophet's biography as reported in the earliest Muslim sources and review critical themes in the scholarly interpretation of Muhammad's life.

Compared with those of the founders of other great religions, the sources of our knowledge of the Prophet's life are abundant. The life of Muhammad is reported in *sira* (biographical narratives of the Prophet), *maghazi* (campaign and battle narratives of the early Muslim community), and hadith (narratives of the Prophet's words and deeds). They were first transmitted as quasi-oral, quasi-written materials, some of which can be traced back to the students of Muhammad's companions or the companions themselves. 'Abdallah ibn Abi Bakr (d. 747–48 or 752–53) was the first to put them in chronological order. The earliest surviving biography, the *sira* of Ibn Ishaq (d. 768–69) dates to the middle of the eighth century. Ibn Ishaq located Muhammad in Near Eastern prophetic history and emphasized the religious and miraculous aspects of his life. Al-Waqidi (d. 822) highlighted the political and military dimensions of the early Muslim community. Ibn Hisham (d. 833–34) edited the work of Ibn Ishaq, leaving out biblical history from Adam to Abraham and poetry and stories in which the Prophet was not involved. Much of the material rejected by Ibn Hisham is found in the later work of al-Tabari and others.

From these works, we know that Muhammad was born in Mecca around 570 CE into the clan of Banu Hashim. (See [Figure 1](#).) His ancestors had been guardians of the sacred well of Zamzam. Muhammad's father died before he was born. He was raised by his grandfather and then by his uncle, Abu Talib. Muhammad worked as a caravaner and at twenty-five married his employer, Khadija, a wealthy, older widow. They had four daughters and several sons; all the boys died in infancy. In the years before the revelations, Muhammad was wont to retreat to the mountains outside Mecca to pray in solitude. A tradition reported by Ibn Ishaq (but not found in Ibn Hisham's recension) indicates that Muhammad received advice and support from a *hanif* – an Arabian monotheist, a believer in one God, although not a Jew or a Christian – who taught him about the futility of worshiping idols.

About the year 610, this seeker of religious truth received his first revelations. They came upon him like the breaking of dawn. The first words revealed to him were the opening five lines of

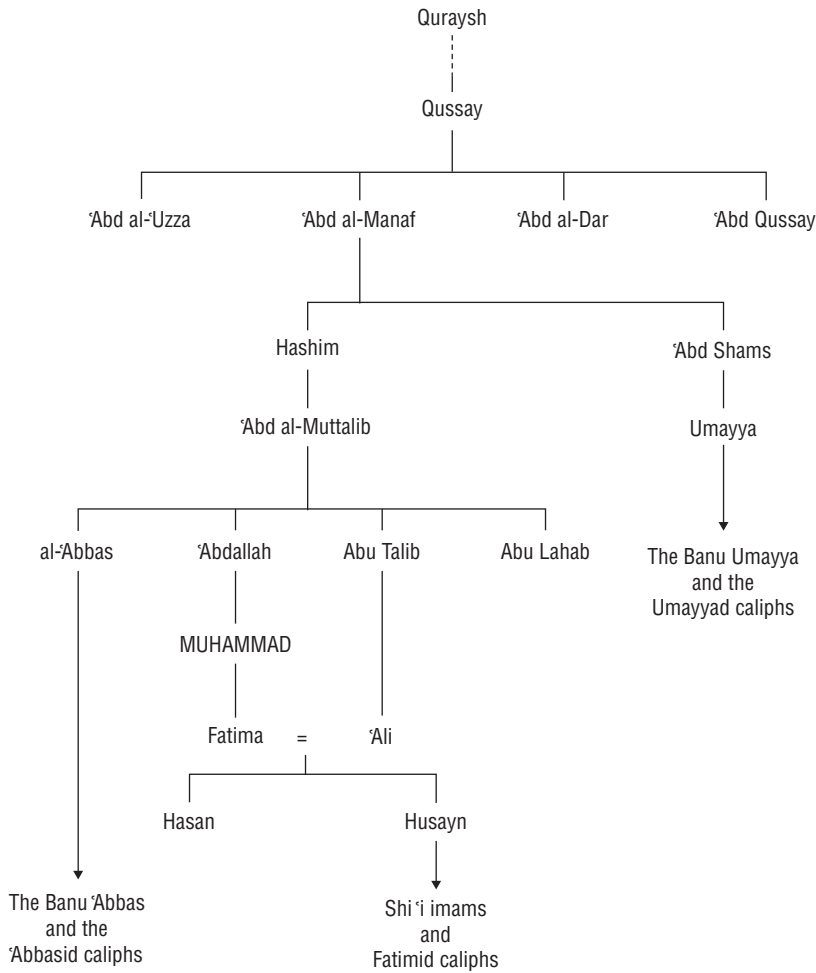


Figure 1. The family of the Prophet.

chapter (sura) 96: “Recite! In the name of thy Lord who created, created man of a blood-clot. Recite! And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the pen, taught man that he knew not.”¹ In the early years, the content of these revelations was the vision of a great, just God (Allah), who would on the day of judgment weigh every man’s deeds and consign him to bliss or damnation. The early revelations emphasized the immanence and fear of the last judgment, piety, and good works and warned against neglect of duties and heedlessness of the final day of reckoning. Opposed to the worship of God and fear of the last judgment were presumption, pride in human powers, and attachment to the things of this world. Such was the false pride of the pagan Meccans that led them to neglect almsgiving and the care of widows, orphans, the weak, and the poor. Eschatological piety and ethical nobility were the bases of Muhammad’s revelatory message.

For three years after the first revelations, Muhammad remained a private person, coming to terms with God’s message. He related his experiences to his family and friends. A small group of people accepted his ideas and gathered around him to hear and recite the Quran. These were the first

¹ A. S. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1955, II, p. 345. Hereafter all quotations from the Quran are taken from the Arberry translation.

converts, and they included Khadija (his wife), as well as Abu Bakr and 'Ali, who later became caliphs, the Prophet's successors as leaders of the Muslims.

About 613 CE, Muhammad received the revelation that begins, "O thou shrouded in thy mantle, arise, and warn!" (sura LXXIV, verse 1). He began to preach publicly. Apart from a small following, Muhammad's preaching met with almost universal opposition. From the Quran and later historical sources, we know that the Quraysh – the traders who dominated Meccan life – belittled Muhammad's revelations. They scoffed at the bizarre notion of a last judgment and resurrection and asked for miracles as proof of his message. Muhammad's only response – still the Muslim response – was that the Quran itself, with its unique beauty of language, is a miracle and a sign of revelation. Nonetheless, the Quraysh denounced Muhammad as a soothsayer (*kabin*), a disreputable magician or madman. Then came insults, harassment of Muhammad and his followers, and an economic boycott that extended to keeping his followers from purchasing food in the markets.

Quranic revelations provided Muhammad with a response to this opposition. He was justified in his preaching because he was sent by God to rescue his people from ignorance and guide them on the path to righteousness. He was a prophet in the long succession of Old and New Testament and Arabian prophets; he was a prophet sent to declare God's will in Arabic.

Nonetheless, his situation in Mecca began to deteriorate. In 615, a group of his followers departed for Abyssinia. Few Meccans were converting. By 619, his wife Khadija and his uncle Abu Talib were dead, and Muhammad's situation became precarious. He began to look for support away from home. He was rejected in al-Ta'if and by bedouins but finally found converts in Medina. In 620, six men of the Khazraj tribe accepted him as a prophet. In 621, a dozen men representing both Khazraj and Aws pledged to obey Muhammad and to avoid sin; in 622, a delegation of seventy-five Medinans paved the way for his coming to Medina by taking the pledge of al-'Aqaba – the pledge to defend Muhammad.

With the guarantees provided by the pledge, Muhammad and his followers made the journey to Medina – the most dramatic event in early Islamic history. The Muslim calendar dates the Christian year 622 as the year 1. The journey is called the *hijra* (meaning the migration) and signifies a change of place and entry into the community of Muslims. The *hijra* is the transition from the pagan to the Muslim world – from kinship to religious belief.

In Medina, Muhammad and his Medinan hosts came to a formal political agreement. The charter specified that all disputes would be brought before Muhammad, and he and his Meccan followers were to form one political group with the clans of Medina, called an *umma* (community).

From Medina, small parties of the exiled Meccans (*muhajirun*) raided Meccan trade caravans for booty. At first, only Meccans were involved in the raids, but in 624, Muhammad assembled a large force of Meccan exiles and Medinan supporters to attack an important Meccan caravan. At the Battle of Badr, he defeated a larger Meccan force and decimated Mecca's leadership. The battle led to the defection of some of the bedouin tribes that protected Mecca's caravan lines, thus disrupting the major trade routes between Mecca and the north. In the following years, the initiative passed to the Meccans, who twice attacked Muhammad and Medina – first at the Battle of Uhud (625) and then at the Battle of the Ditch (627). The former was a defeat for Muhammad and the latter was a stalemate.

Within Medina, pagans and possibly some Jews accepted the politico-religious leadership of the Prophet. A critical issue, however, was the place of the Jewish clans. The early Meccan verses of the Quran presented Muhammad as a prophet sent by God to restore the purity of a faith already revealed, preach a renewal, and end the corruption that had crept into daily life. This implied a message to all Arabians – Jews and Christians, as well as pagans. In Medina, Muhammad instituted religious practices similar to the Jewish Day of Atonement and designated Jerusalem as the direction

of prayer. Some of the Jewish clans, however, rejected Muhammad's claim to being a prophet in the Hebrew tradition; they disputed his accounts of sacred history. New revelations denounced the Jews for having broken their covenant and emphasized that Muhammad was sent to restore the pure monotheism of Abraham. These verses claimed that Abraham, already well known and considered the ancestor of the Arabs, was the prophet par excellence. He was depicted as the first nonsectarian monotheist (*hanif*) and the founder of the Ka'ba. The direction of prayer (*qibla*) was changed from Jerusalem to the Ka'ba. A new form of prayer was introduced that defined a Muslim community different from the others. The religious differences were amplified by political conflict. Allegedly, as punishment for desertion and betrayal in the war with Mecca, two of the larger Jewish clans were exiled, and the male members of a third were executed and their property confiscated.

In 628, Muhammad and a large group of followers made a pilgrimage to the Ka'ba and proposed adopting it as part of Islam. The Meccans intercepted him at a place called al-Hudaybiya, where he concluded a truce in which the Meccans agreed to admit the Muslims for the pilgrimage and Muhammad dropped his demand that the Quraysh recognize him as the Prophet of God.

This proved to be a temporary agreement. Two years later, in 630, a dispute between client tribes of Mecca and Medina broke the truce, and Meccan leaders surrendered the city. Muhammad gave amnesty to almost everyone and generous gifts to the leading Quraysh. The idols of the Ka'ba were destroyed, and it was declared the holiest shrine of Islam. With Mecca finally subdued, many more Arabian tribes accepted Islam.

Muhammad died in 632. His life was at once a story of religious revelation, community building, and political expansion.

THE QURAN

The Quran (Muslim scripture) is believed by Muslims to have been revealed by God through the angel Gabriel and is the ultimate source of belief, the final revelation, which supersedes the previous Jewish and Christian versions.

Muslims believe in the Quran as a book of guidance. It begins:

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,
Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being,
the All-merciful, the All-compassionate,
the Master of the Day of Doom.
Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succor.
Guide us in the straight path,
the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,
not of those against whom Thou art wrathful,
nor of those who are astray. (sura I, verses 1-7)

At the center of the Quranic guidance is a vision of the reality of God's being. God is transcendent, eternal, utterly other, unfettered in will or action, and the almighty creator of the world and its creatures. The Quran demands belief in God and submission to his will and carries strong exhortations to believe, as well as warnings, proofs, threats of judgment, and appeals to gratitude to God. God will judge human beings at the end of days and mete out eternal reward or eternal punishment. The reality of the world to come is presented with potent eschatological symbols whose influence continues to be a living force in Muslim faith.

As guidance, the Quran teaches what people should believe about God, nature, and history. It gives rules about what people should and should not do in religious rituals and in relation to their

fellow men. It prescribes the basic beliefs of Islam and the five pillars: profession of faith, prayer, fasting, the giving of alms, and pilgrimage. It sets out some basic laws of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and business matters. It also presents the spiritual qualities that should infuse ritual, social, and legal obligations. These qualities include gratitude to God for one's existence, repentance, moral earnestness, fear of the last judgment, loyalty to the faith, sincerity, and truthfulness. It condemns arrogance, thanklessness, and pride.

Beyond precise specifications, the Quran leaves each individual to judge what constitutes proper fulfillment of God's command. For example, the law defining the supererogatory night prayers is given not as a rule but as permission to adapt the injunction to pray to individual circumstances:

Therefore recite of the Koran so much as is feasible.
He knows that some of you are sick, and others
journeying in the land, seeking the bounty of God,
and others fighting in the way of God.
So recite of it so much as is feasible. (sura LXXIII, verse 20)

Because the guidance is open, the boundaries of human responsibility are problematic, and the prospects of achieving eternal reward are uncertain. Some passages in the Quran stress the full measure of human responsibility. God is just and he will weigh every deed and thought on the day of judgment. Other passages, however, stress God's power, his predetermination of all events, and man's helpless insufficiency before his majesty.

Recent, conflicting, and controversial scholarship has raised questions about the composition and compilation of the Quran. There are several theories about the origins of the Quran. One is the traditional theory that Muhammad was the sole author, or the sole recipient of the Quranic revelations. A second is that the Quran is a compilation – including Christian hymns and prayers – composed a century before Muhammad and then rendered in Arabic. A third is that the Quran was the product of a much later Muslim community in dialogue with non-Muslims – perhaps as late as the ninth and tenth centuries – intended to validate Muhammad's credentials as a prophet and establish a direct line from Adam to Muhammad, bypassing Moses and Jesus. The definitive edition of the Quran is variously dated to the ninth and early tenth centuries.

The latter two theories are not widely accepted among scholars of the language and history of the Quran. The skeptics all have different theories, and all of them select only the passages that seem favorable to their case. The most persuasive view in my judgment is that of Neuwirth, who holds that the new scholarship has failed to discredit the authenticity of the Quran. The rhyme and literary structure of verses and suras indicate that the Quran has an inner intentional design and is the product of one voice. The Quran is also a dramatic text that bears the marks of direct communication with an audience. The audience responds as it is exhorted, encouraged, commanded, or rebuked. Moreover, reports or comments on contemporary events appear in the Medinan suras, thereby challenging the dating of the two aforementioned theories.

The style of Quranic verses and chapters differs from the Meccan to the Medinan period. The early Meccan suras, powerful short poems, were most likely recited; later Medinan suras, which are long and have multiple topics, were most likely written down or even composed in writing. The Meccan rhymes have the resounding voice patterns of the *sajf* type of oral recitation; the late Meccan and Medinan verses are marked by a *cadenza* – a moral reflection on the significance of a narrative that marks the conclusion of a passage.

Nonetheless the text is unified. The Quran reads like a running commentary on the events of the time. Later suras sometimes presuppose the existence of earlier ones and imply an ongoing discourse.

Nothing about it suggests a deliberate literary work. If it were composed in later centuries, the Quran would presumably have had a more ordered narrative or more formal legal instructions.

The history of the text confirms its early origin. The Quran was probably presented as both recitation and text. Muhammad and the *qurra'* (Quran reciters, similar to the public poetry reciters) recited the Quran. The Prophet himself probably began compiling a written scripture by dictating to scribes and instructing them on how to order the verses of the revelation. In the Medinan period, passages in the Quran imply that it was beginning to be considered as scripture, a proper book (*kitab*), perhaps like the Old Testament. Later suras refer to a heavenly book from which the Quran is taken.

Muhammad did not himself leave a fixed text or book, but after his death a collection was made from oral witnesses and scattered records on slips of papyrus or parchment, chips of stone, bone, leather, palm stalks, or slates. Some traditions say that the first compilation was in the reign of Abu Bakr; other traditions claim that 'Umar and his daughter Hafsa made the first codex. Historical sources indicate that Caliph 'Uthman (r. 644–54) ordered a definitive codex in order to prevent the proliferation of variant versions. The existing materials were arranged in order of the longest suras first and the shortest last. 'Uthman's codex was supposed to be definitive, but many verses defended by their recipients as genuinely Quranic were not included. As many as fifteen major codices were collected by other companions of Muhammad and Quran reciters and were cherished in the garrison towns after the Arab conquests.

Moreover, the 'Uthmanic text was written in a still-incomplete Arabic orthography (related to Nabatean Syriac script), which left uncertainties in the readings of vowels and some consonants. Thus, the early Quran had the qualities both of a fixed text and of a variable recitation and left open a debate as to whether the text or the recited versions were more authentic. In 714, the Caliph al-Walid ordered the governor of Iraq, Al-Hajjaj, to improve the orthography.

Material evidence indicates that the Quran was in existence at the end of the seventh century. Surviving manuscripts are dated to the end of the seventh century by the calligraphy of Arab coins and inscriptions. Inscriptions from the reign of the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685–705), including the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (692), quote or paraphrase the Quran.

In the 'Abbasid period, a developing literature of exegesis, history, and law made a fixed text more important, and, in the late eighth and ninth centuries, a consensus was reached to unify the presentation to conform with the emerging standardized Arabic grammar. Finally, Ibn al-Mujahid (d. 935/6) established the seven canonical readings of the Quran on the basis of literary, lexicographical, and grammatical studies – although alternative readings remained in circulation.

THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN AND ARABIAN HERITAGE

The Quran was produced in a religiously and culturally rich environment; in language and in concepts, it bears the marks of the milieu in which it was delivered. Aramaic dialects were spoken in Arabia, and it is no surprise that the Quran contains many names, religious terms, and historical references derived from Aramaic.

Quranic teachings also resemble Judaism and Christianity, because the revelations came from the same God. Biblical tales were retold. Ideas similar to Judaism – such as uncompromising monotheism, belief in written revelations and divine guidance, the conception of a prophet sent to a chosen people, and religious practices such as regular daily prayer – are found in the Quran. Indeed, the idea of the Apostle is rooted in Jewish-Christian sects.

Christian beliefs and concepts are equally important. The Quran reflects Muhammad's encounter with Arabic-speaking Christian preachers from Najran. Parallels to the preaching of itinerant Christian

monks are evident in the Quranic vision of the last judgment – the prediction that it would come with thunder, trumpets, and earthquakes; that the world would be destroyed and the dead resurrected; and that it would be a terrifying moment when, one by one, all men passed before God, the angels interceding only for the good. The Quranic emphasis on the humanity of Christ suggests the influence of Arab-Christians, such as those in Najran – the home of Arabic-speaking Arians, Nestorians, and Julianites.

The Islamic way of praying may be an adaptation of Syrian monastic prayer – with its sequence of recitations, prostrations, and hand raising – simplified and limited in duration. Also, the month-long fast of Ramadan may be an adaptation of the practice of Syriac monks.

Ethiopian Christian influence was also strong in Mecca. There is a tradition that some Ethiopians read the Torah and Gospels aloud in Mecca. Muhammad must have had information about Ethiopia and contacts with Ethiopians in order to send some of his early followers there. The words “Jesus” and “Bible” appear in the Quran in Ethiopic form: ‘Isa and Injil.

There are also striking parallels to Manichaean beliefs. As in the tradition of Mani, Muhammad insisted on the historical unity of the prophetic messages. The concept of a chain of apostles appears in Manichaean writings. Mani was considered by his followers to be the apostle of his generation. The idea that earlier revelations had been corrupted is also found in Manichaean and Mandaean teachings.

There has been much scholarly debate about the sources of the Quranic versions of biblical stories. Some scholars point to textual sources: parallels to Quranic passages can be found in the Bible, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and in Zoroastrian texts. Yet the Quranic telling of biblical tales does not match the textual sources in detail, for the Bible was not just a written book but an endless flow of stories told by Jews, Christians, Jewish-Christians, and Manichaeans. Scripture was understood not only as text but also as oral tradition. Muhammad had probably heard haggadic stories from Jews and learned about Jesus from Christians. Quranic stories show that there must also have been an Arabian culture of legends and stories about the origins of peoples and the histories of prophets.

Whatever the sources, biblical stories are retold with original variations and with new literary panache. In fact, even within the Quran, stories are amplified and retold from earlier to later verses. The originality of the treatment is more compelling than the derivation of the materials.

The closeness of the Quran to Jewish and Christian beliefs and cultures is not surprising; it was intended. Islam is avowedly a continuation and renewal of the older monotheistic traditions. The Quran teaches the existence of a single God who requires human beings to live righteously and who will reward them with everlasting bliss or punish them with eternal misery. God has sent previous prophets to warn and to instruct his people, give moral guidance, and lay down laws and rules. The Quran tells the stories of the prophets who have preceded Muhammad, but now the divine mission is vouchsafed to him. The biblical elements in the Quran are part of a shared Jewish, Christian, and Muslim heritage. Islam is not “borrowed” from other cultural traditions but inhabits the same cultural world.

These connections are so close that many scholars see early Islam as a reborn version of the previous religions. Ruthven sees early Islam as a hybrid Hebrew monotheism with Christian, gnostic, and Arabian elements. Donner sees early Islam as a pan-religious movement. Muhammad’s early followers were the believers (*mu’minun*), who share belief in one God, the soon-to-be last day, and the need for righteousness on earth. A Muslim, then, is someone who submits to God’s will and his law – or to the law of the Torah or Gospels or earlier versions of revelation – and in particular those who submit to Quranic law.

Many verses in the Quran can be construed as including Christians and Jews in the Muslim community, because Muhammad saw himself at first as a missionary to all peoples but later narrowed

his intended audience to pagan Arabs. Muhammad became disillusioned with the People of the Book and condemned them as “unbelievers.” Conflict with the Jews led to the redefinition of Islam as a new confessional religion and led to new laws and rituals to provide Muslims with a separate identity.

Although identified with the monotheistic religions, the Quran also embodied a summation and transformation of traditional Arabian values. The Muslim *umma* redefined the meaning of the tribe as a group that defended its brothers to include religious as well as blood brothers. The biblical and tribal law of blood revenge was accepted, but now the *umma* as a whole was substituted for the clan. In family life, the patriarchal clan was reaffirmed as the ideal Muslim family but redefined to include a new concern for women and children and the stability of marriages. In the Prophet’s lifetime, acceptance of Islam was probably a gesture at once of political obeisance and of religious allegiance.

In the realm of individual morality, a similar reshaping of values took place. The traditional Arabian virtues were vested with new Islamic meanings. Bedouin courage in battle and reckless bravery in defense of one’s tribe became persistent dedication to the new faith of Islam and the capacity for disciplined sacrifice in the name of the new community. Patience in the face of adversity (*sabr*) became unshakable faith in God in the face of trials and temptations. Generosity – shorn of its impulsive and ostentatious aspects – was transmuted into the virtue of almsgiving and care for the weak and the poor as part of a pious and restrained, but regular, commitment. The Quranic teachings and Muhammad’s leadership extracted the virtues of the bedouin culture from the context of *jahl* (passion, ignorance, and thoughtlessness), to reestablish them on the basis of *hilm* (self-control) and *‘aql* (rational judgment), based on *islam* (submission to Allah).

Thus, the new religion reaffirmed Arabian moral traditions by joining them to new concepts of brotherhood and authority. By giving old concepts new meaning, it made possible a new religious sensibility and the integration of disparate peoples into a new community.

COMMUNITY AND POLITICS

Finally, Muhammad is seen as a warrior, a political leader defending a community’s interests, expanding its domains, and propagating its truths. In the histories of Christianity and Buddhism, the founding teacher is portrayed as a spiritual person divorced from the concerns not only of politics but of everyday life. Muhammad, by contrast, was immersed in both. His teachings and the norms he transmitted bear on the ethics of everyday behavior, marriage, family, commercial practices, tribal relations, politics, and war. Western scholars tend to emphasize the political over the moral and social aspects of Muhammad’s teaching. For Muslims, he encompasses both the holy man engaged in the world and the ideal warrior-saint.

The worldly dimension of his life was implied at the very outset. When Muhammad began to recite his revelations in public, he had launched a worldly mission. Significantly, the first converts were rootless migrants, poor men, members of weak clans, and younger sons of strong clans – those people most dissatisfied with the hierarchical moral, social, and economic climate of Mecca.

Muhammad provoked fierce opposition because preaching was an implicit challenge to the existing institutions of the society: the worship of gods, the economic life attached to pagan shrines, the values of tribal tradition, the authority of chiefs, and the solidarity of clans. Religion, moral belief, social structure, and economic life formed a system of ideas and institutions inextricably bound up with one another. To attack them at any major point was to attack the whole society – root and branch.

As Muhammad’s mission unfolded, it became clear that it involved not only the presentation of the Quranic revelation but also the leadership of a community. Prophecy implied eschatological

vision and knowledge of God's will, which in turn entailed right guidance and social leadership. As early as 615, Muhammad had become the leader of a community. A group of his followers departed for Abyssinia. For the sake of their faith, they were willing to leave their families and clans and take up life together in a foreign land. For them, the bonds of common belief were stronger than the bonds of blood.

Opposition to Muhammad revealed yet another dimension of the relations between religion and society. It exposed the extent to which Muhammad's very survival in Mecca, to say nothing of his preaching, depended on his uncle Abu Talib and his clansmen, the Banu Hashim, who protected him because he was their kinsman. With their support, Muhammad could, despite harassment, continue preaching – although in the later Meccan years, the flow of converts dried up. To protect himself and his followers, to overcome the resistance of the Quraysh, and to gain a hearing from Arabians beyond the small circles spontaneously attracted to him, some kind of political base was necessary.

Muhammad tried to win support at al-Ta'if and from some bedouins but was rebuffed. Then he turned to Medina, which, like Mecca, was inhabited by various clans; however, unlike Mecca, it was a settlement racked by bitter and even anarchic feuding between the leading tribal groups – the Aws and the Khazraj. Prolonged strife threatened the safety of men in the fields and called into question Medina's very existence. Unlike the bedouins, Medinans had to live as neighbors and could not move from place to place. Like Mecca, Medina was undergoing social changes that rendered obsolete the underlying bedouin form of kinship society. Agricultural, rather than pastoral, needs governed its economy. Its social life came increasingly to be dictated by spatial proximity rather than by kinship. Also, Medina had a large Jewish population, which may have made the populace as a whole more sympathetic to monotheism.

A coterie of Medinans invited Muhammad to Medina. This was based on a well-established precedent. Feuding clans often selected someone reputed to have religious vision and to be just, politic, and disinterested to be their arbitrator (*bakam*). It was common practice for a potential arbitrator to interview the disputants and assure himself that they would accept his decisions.

In Medina, Muhammad defined his powers as an arbitrator in the so-called Constitution of Medina. This was an agreement to fight together and to accept Muhammad's authority to resolve internal disputes. The treaty was drawn between the émigré Meccans and Medinans, the latter representing Jewish tribes in alliance with them. There are numerous Jewish tribes mentioned in the treaty, but the three largest Jewish clans (the Banu Nadir, Banu Qaynuqa, and Banu Qurayza) appear not to have been party to this agreement. The Jews who became allies were not expected to embrace Islam. Meccans and Medinans, including several of the Jewish clans, would act as one in the defense of Muhammad and of Medina against outsiders. No clan would make a separate peace. No one would aid the Quraysh of Mecca, the presumptive enemy.

In the next few years, Muhammad consolidated his powers. His political work in Medina was to build the confederation that would extend his teachings and authority to Mecca and to the rest of Arabia. This was part of Muhammad's religious ambition, but it was also a matter of political necessity. If Mecca remained antagonistic, it might eventually defeat him. However, to bring Mecca under his influence required controlling the bedouin tribes whose cooperation was essential to Meccan trade. Both religious ambition and the political logic of Muhammad's removal to Medina required an Arabian confederation. Thus, Muhammad raided the Meccan caravans. In 624, he won a great victory at the Battle of Badr. In the Battle of Uhud (625) and the Battle of the Ditch (627), he successfully resisted Meccan counterattacks.

Within Medina, the pagan clans converted to Islam. Muhammad wanted to include the Jews in his nascent community, for he saw himself as sent by God to all Arabians – Jews and Christians as well as pagans – to restore the purity of the faith already revealed, preach a renewal, and end the corruption that had crept into daily life. Relations with some of the Jewish tribes, however, broke

down because of disputes over the authenticity of Muhammad's teachings and competition over resources. Some of the Jewish clans rejected Muhammad's claim to be a prophet in the Hebrew tradition and disputed his accounts of sacred history. In the course of this struggle, new revelations denounced the Jews for having broken their covenant. These verses revealed that Abraham was the prophet par excellence (the first *hanif*), the builder of the Ka'ba, and the father of the Arabs. The Quran now stressed that Muhammad was sent to restore the pure monotheism of Abraham. In effect, Muhammad's mission and his community would no longer include Jews and Christians but would be a distinct religion alongside them.

Muhammad's disputes with three of the Jewish clans also involved long-simmering political and economic grievances. In the sixth century, the Banu Nadir and the Banu Qurayza had collected taxes on behalf of Persian overlords. The growing hostility may have been related to land and the location of the Muslim community's newly established market. After a quarrel, the Banu Qaynuqa were expelled. The Banu Nadir were accused of trying to assassinate Muhammad and were expelled. The Banu Qurayza were accused of aiding the enemy; the males were executed. The elimination of these powerful Jewish clans enhanced the political and material power of the Muslims. Muhammad seized the lands of the Banu Nadir and the Banu Qurayza, confiscating their weapons and horses. Women and children were sold as slaves. After the Battle of the Ditch and the decimation of the Banu Qurayza, Muhammad's power was clearly established, and there seems to have been a more widespread acceptance of Islam.

At this point, however, Muhammad relaxed, rather than intensified, the pressure on Mecca. In 628, in a seeming turnaround, Muhammad proposed to make a peaceful pilgrimage to the Ka'ba. The Meccans, however, intercepted him at a place called al-Hudaybiya. There, he concluded a truce in which the Meccans agreed to admit the Muslims for the pilgrimage and Muhammad agreed to drop his demand that he be recognized as the Prophet of God. He agreed to an unequal arrangement whereby children who left Mecca to become Muslims would have to be returned if they did not have parental consent, whereas Muslim apostates would not be returned. The treaty may seem like an embarrassment to Muhammad, but he made important political gains. Meccan hostility was allayed, and the treaty confirmed what Meccan failures at the Battle of Uhud and the Battle of the Ditch had shown: that Meccans could not defeat him.

Throughout this struggle, Muhammad tried to gain control of the tribes. Missionaries and embassies were sent throughout Arabia, factions loyal to Muhammad were supported, and tribes were raided to compel them to pay allegiance and the alms tax (*zakat*). Many of the recalcitrant tribes accepted his leadership. Muhammad expanded his sphere of influence to the settled regions in the north. He subdued the oasis of Khaybar, made a foray into Syria in 629, and defeated a bedouin alliance in 630.

As Muhammad's position grew stronger, his attitude toward other Arab tribes became more defined. Early in the Medinan years, Muhammad made alliances with peoples who were not Muslims. He did not require his allies to believe in God and accept him as the Prophet of God. Non-Muslims could choose between accepting Islam or paying an annual tribute. Without one or the other, they would be attacked and, if defeated, killed or enslaved. Typically, Christians and Jews agreed to pay the tribute (*jizya*). In 630/1, he granted the Christians of Najran protection in return for payment of taxes. This was a critical precedent for the later Muslim policies toward conquered peoples.

Muhammad's occupation of Mecca, however, showed that his policy toward non-Muslims would be adapted to circumstances. On his entry into Mecca, Muhammad proclaimed a general amnesty, and it seems that Meccans freely accepted Islam. In 632, the pilgrimage was modified and transformed into a Muslim ritual. (See [Illustration 1](#).)



Illustration 1. The Pilgrimage to the Ka'ba. *Source:* Newspix.com.au.

By the end of his life, Muhammad had created a large-scale Arabian federation of oases and tribes, based in Mecca and Medina, appointing officials and collecting taxes and tributes from the member groups.

Perhaps the most contested aspect of Muhammad's career is warfare and the presumed legacy of jihad (holy struggle). In fact, Quranic statements about war are quite different from later Muslim interpretations and from contemporary Western concepts. Jihad in the Quran does not mean holy war. In the Quran, the words for war are "*qital*" – generally used for religiously authorized war – and "*barb*" – generally used for profane war. "Jihad" means striving to one's utmost, including striving to be pious, showing religious loyalty through the observance of rituals, and supporting one's fellow believers.

The Quran does not present a consistent doctrinal position on warfare. The earliest statements from the Meccan period counsel patient endurance (*sabr*), rather than fighting. In Medina, the Quran specifies that Muslims may fight enemies who attack them and may defend the oppressed. There are verses placing restrictions on fighting, presumably in the sacred month, except in cases of self-defense. Gradually, over time, the tone of Quranic statements changed. Some verses exhort apparently reluctant followers to fight. At Badr, Muhammad first promised paradise to his warriors. Later verses advocate war in the path of God and call on Muslims to subdue their enemies. Thus, in Medina, there was a progression from a time when the early Muslims could not imagine a war against their own kin, to booty raids even against kin, and to war against all opponents of Islam. The changing tone of the Quran may reflect divisions in the community among people less and more willing to fight. It may also reflect changing economic and political realities, and a transition from a more conciliatory to a more militant stance, as the power of the Muslims grew greater.

The Quran set diverse precedents, but later Muslim jurists linked jihad to offensive war. Mid-eighth-century jurists did not consider warfare obligatory, and Hanafi jurists held that war was legitimate only in self-defense, but under the 'Abbasid dynasty the term jihad became increasingly linked to imperial policy. Al-Shafi'i (d. 802) appears to be one of the first jurists to permit offensive war. By the mid-ninth century, collections of hadith generally advocated war on behalf of Islam, although hadith that counseled against war and martyrdom were not eliminated from the tradition. An important concept in the later doctrine of warfare – the concept of *dar al-Islam* (Islamic territory) and *dar al-barb* (non-Islamic territory) and of a constant cold war between the two – has no basis in the Quran. Whatever sanction jihad has in later Muslim thinking, the Quran supports a variety of positions.

CONCLUSION: THE *UMMA* OF ISLAM

By the time of his death in 632, Muhammad had provided his followers with the design for a political community based on religious affiliation. Acceptance of Islam was a gesture at once of political obeisance and of religious allegiance. The word "Islam" could mean submission to the Prophet in both a worldly and a spiritual sense. Religiously, the new community was grounded in the vision of the oneness of God. In the revelations of the Quran, Muhammad synthesized Arabian religious concepts, Judaism, and Christianity into a new monotheism. Eschatological piety and fear of hellfire resemble Syriac monastic preaching. The role of a prophet, the significance of written revelations, obedience to God's commands, and stress on communal life as the context of religious fulfillment all parallel Jewish ideas. Although resembling Jewish and Christian beliefs, emphasis on God's utter transcendence, majesty, omnipotence, and untrammelled will; the submission of one's own will to God's; surrender to God's commands; and acceptance of God's judgment all gave Quranic teachings a special originality within the framework of the monotheistic religions.

The translation of monotheistic values into the principles of a reformed Arabian society and the formation of a new community with its own congregational life, rituals, and legal norms made Islam a new religion. This was the *umma*, the brotherhood that integrated individuals, clans, cities, and even ethnic groups into a larger community in which religious loyalties encompassed all other loyalties without abolishing them and in which a new common law and political authority regulated the affairs of the populace as a whole. In a fragmented society, Muhammad had integrated otherwise anarchic small clans into a larger confederacy and built a churchlike religious community and an incipient imperial organization.

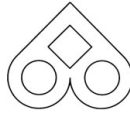
What made Muhammad so rare a figure in history, what made him a prophet, was his ability to convey his vision to people around him so that concepts long known to everyone took on the power to transform other people's lives as they had transformed his. This was accomplished by direct preaching about God, by changing family life and institutions, and by introducing new ritual practices, social mores, and political loyalties. Muhammad was a prophet who caused a religious vision to operate in the body of a whole society.

In the Quran and Muhammad's teachings and example, Muslims have ever after found a revelation of the spiritual reality of God's transcendence and man's humble place in the universe. They find a revelation of the laws by which people should live in a community of believers, dedicated to the care of the weak and the poor, to education, and to social reform. Equally, they are dedicated to a political community organized to administer justice, to defend itself, and to wage war in the name of the true faith. Islam proved particularly effective in unifying tribal societies and in motivating militant struggle in the interests of the community as a whole. To this day, to be a Muslim implies a combination of personal religious belief and membership in the community of fellow believers.

THE ARAB-MUSLIM IMPERIUM (632–945)

CHAPTER 5

INTRODUCTION TO THE ARAB-MUSLIM EMPIRES



The death of Muhammad and the Arab-Muslim conquests opened a new era in Middle Eastern civilizations. The Arab-Muslim conquests initiated the long historical process that culminated in the amalgamation of Arabia, the Sasanian Empire, and the eastern regions of the Byzantine Empire within an Islamic empire; in the eventual conversion of the majority of Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian peoples to Islam; and in the formation of an Islamic society and culture.

On Muhammad's death, many of his followers decided on the appointment of a caliph or executor of the Prophet's legacy. The first four caliphs – Abu Bakr (632–34), 'Umar (634–44), 'Uthman (644–56), and 'Ali (656–61) – ruled by virtue of their personal connections with Muhammad and Arabian ideas of authority. They were later called the Rashidun, the Rightly Guided Caliphs. These caliphs, in part following the precedents set by Muhammad, launched a great wave of military campaigns and a migration of Arabian peoples leading to the conquest of all the lands of the former Sasanian Empire and the Near Eastern and North African provinces of the Byzantine Empire. Iraq, Syria, and Egypt were conquered by 641; Iran by 654. North Africa was conquered between 643 and 711; Spain between 711 and 759. In the east, the region of Inner Asia between the Oxus and the Jaxartes rivers, Transoxania, was fully conquered by 751. Thus, the "Middle East," North Africa, Spain, and Transoxania were incorporated into a single empire. The Islamic religion and related cultures and an Islamic sociopolitical identity would be formed in this region.

The conquests made the caliphs the military and administrative chiefs of the newly conquered lands. The Rightly Guided Caliphs (632–61) represented the religio-political leadership of a coalition of town-dwelling and nomadic tribes. The Umayyad dynasty (661–750) reconstructed the governing apparatuses of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires and began the work of molding them into an Arab-Muslim regime. After several periods of civil wars, the Umayyad were overthrown by the 'Abbasid dynasty, which would reign from 750 to 1258. The 'Abbasids brought the Arab-Muslim empire to the height of its political organization, the furthest boundaries of its conquests, and the peak of its political powers and cultural creativity. The 'Abbasid Empire, however, disintegrated in the course of the ninth and tenth centuries. Although the 'Abbasid caliphs continued as the nominal rulers from 945 to 1258, the territories of the former empire were ruled by new conquerors and new regimes. (See [Table 2.](#))

The historical character of the Arab-Muslim empires was grounded in the economic and social changes generated by the Arab conquests. Economic development and urbanization generated the resources for the organization of a new and powerful empire. The unification of former Sasanian and Byzantine territories and the integration of the trans-Oxus region created a vast new trading zone.

Table 2. *Outline chronology of early Islamic history*

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Muhammad | c. 570–632 |
| Rashidun caliphs | 632–61 |
| First civil war | 656–61 |
| Umayyad caliphs | 661–750 |
| Reign of Mu‘awiya | 661–80 |
| Second civil war | 680–92 |
| Reign of ‘Abd al-Malik | 685–705 |
| Marwanid caliphs | 685–744 |
| Third civil war | 744–50 |
| ‘Abbasid caliphs | 750–1258 |
| Consolidation of empire | 750–c. 850 |
| Reign of al-Ma‘mun | 813–33 |
| Breakup of empire | c. 835–945 |
| Independent succession states | 945–c. 1220 |
| Mongol invasions | c. 1220–c. 1260 |

Basra and later Baghdad became two of the most important trading cities in the world. Samarqand, Bukhara, Nishapur, and many other Iranian cities prospered. New agricultural zones were developed in Iraq and Mesopotamia.

The conquests also had profound demographic, social, and cultural implications. With the defeat of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, a frontier between populations broke down. Families and whole tribes followed the conquering men. Arab-Muslim migrants created new cities and also settled in older towns, villages, citadels, and country estates, mingling with other ethnic and language groups, races, religions, sects, and cults. They interacted as rulers and ruled, patrons and clients, and in marketplaces as merchants and customers, as employers and employees, and as landlords and tenants. The settlements stimulated intermarriages, conversions, and exchanges of religious ideas and languages. A new society came into being integrating Arab-Muslim conquerors and conquered peoples on the basis of Islam and widespread Arabic and/or Persian linguistic identities.

In turn, the elites of cities and empire gave birth to new imperial and religious cultures. Imperial Islam was the Islam of the caliphate, the court, political elites, and the literati and artists patronized by the government. The court milieus contributed especially to Islamic art, architecture, philosophy, science, and Iranian and Hellenistic forms of literature in Arabic. Urban Islam embodied the religious beliefs and moral and social values of Muslim communities as expressed by the companions of the Prophet and their successors, the learned and holy men of Islam. The city milieus contributed to the literatures of Quranic exegesis, law, mysticism, and theology in conjunction with an Arabic belles lettres. Some subjects – such as poetry, theology, and history – were cultivated in both milieus. Both the imperial and the city versions of Islam were the cultural product of the new communities created by the economic and social upheavals of the Arab-Muslim conquests.

In the following chapters, we will explore first the conquests and the economic and social changes that formed the bases for the new empires. In successive chapters, we will discuss the history and politics of the caliphate and then the courtly imperial and the urban religious forms of early Islamic cultures.

*THE ARAB-MUSLIM CONQUESTS AND THE
SOCIOECONOMIC BASES OF EMPIRE*



THE CONQUESTS

With the death of the Prophet Muhammad, a new era began, an era of vast conquests and the formation of a Middle Eastern-wide Arab-Islamic empire. The Arab-Muslim conquests began the processes that culminated in the formation of a new empire, which included all of the former Sasanian Empire and much of the Byzantine Empire, and in the emergence in that geographic and political framework of Islamic cultures and societies.

When Muhammad died in 632, he left no instructions concerning succession, and, in the absence of an agreement with regard to a successor, the Muslim community – a conglomeration of diverse elements – was on the verge of disintegrating. To prevent this, some of the tribes and factions elected Abu Bakr – one of Muhammad’s closest associates and his father-in-law – as caliph or successor. Abu Bakr was the first of those who were later identified as the Rashidun, the Rightly Guided Caliphs: Abu Bakr (632–34), ‘Umar (634–44), ‘Uthman (644–56), and ‘Ali (656–61), who ruled by virtue of their personal connections with Muhammad and Arabian ideas of authority. The conquests made the caliphs the rulers of the newly conquered lands as well.

There are two principal interpretations of what motivated the Arab-Islamic conquests. One finds the origin of the conquest movement in the dynamics of tribal conflict. At Muhammad’s death, many of the allied Arabians sought to regain their independence. Tribes in the Najd and Hijaz – but not tribes living in the region between Mecca and Medina – refused to pay the alms tax or tribute. Some considered their tribute payments personal to Muhammad; other tribes refused tributes and taxes, although they did not renounce Islam. Some put forth prophets and religions of their own. In some tribes, pro-Muslim factions had taken control, and, at Muhammad’s death, other factions tried to subvert their dominance.

Abu Bakr, however, refused any concessions to demands for relief from taxes, waged war on recalcitrant tribes, forced them into subjection, and even expanded the sphere of Muslim power beyond what it had been in Muhammad’s time. At the Battle of al-Aqraba (633), Muslims defeated a rival tribal confederation and extended their power over eastern Arabia. These wars (known as *ridda*) were waged on a scale unprecedented in Arabia; in effect, Medina had become a state capable of marshaling large armies.

The immediate outcome of the Muslim victories was turmoil. Medina’s victories led allied tribes to attack the nonaligned to compensate for their own losses. The pressure drove tribes to Hadramawt and Yemen in the far south, to Bahrain and Oman in the east, and then across the imperial frontiers into Iraq and Syria. The Bakr tribe, which had defeated a Persian detachment in 606, joined forces

with the Muslims and led them on a raid in southern Iraq to Ubulla and al-Hira, the former Lakhmid capital. A similar spilling over of tribal raiding occurred on the Syrian frontiers.

Abu Bakr encouraged these movements. At first, small tribal groups were searching for booty, but, when Arab-Muslim raids forced the Byzantines to send a major expedition into southern Palestine, the raiding parties had to concentrate their forces east of Gaza. There, under the leadership of Khalid b. al-Walid (sent by Abu Bakr from Iraq to take the generalship of the Arab clans), they defeated a Byzantine army at the Battle of Ajnadayn (634). What began as intertribal skirmishing to consolidate a political confederation in Arabia ended in a full-scale war against the two empires.

A second view is that the Arab-Muslim conquests were not spontaneous raids but a planned military venture already under way in the lifetime of the Prophet. New but still controversial research in Persian sources argues that the Muslim campaigns in Iraq had already begun in 628 and that Muhammad's raiding parties had already entered Syria in 629.

In either case, in the wake of the Battle of Ajnadayn, the Arab-Muslims moved against the Byzantine province of Syria. They took Damascus in 636. Baalbek, Homs, and Hama soon surrendered. The rest of the province, however, continued to resist. Only in 638 was Jerusalem taken. Caesarea fell in 640. Finally, in 641, the Arabs took the northern Syrian and Mesopotamian towns of Harran, Edessa, and Nasibin. The conquest of Syria took so long because victories over Byzantine armies did not necessarily bring about the surrender of fortified towns, which had to be conquered individually.

The next Byzantine province to fall to the Arab-Muslims was Egypt. Egypt's attractions were its position as the granary of Constantinople, its proximity to the Hijaz, important naval yards, and a strategic location for further conquests in Africa. General 'Amr b. al-'As, on his own initiative, began the conquest of the province in 641. Within the year, he had taken Heliopolis, Babylon, and the whole of the country except Alexandria, which capitulated in 643. Because Egypt was politically centralized and scarcely urbanized, the conquest was virtually instantaneous. The next Arab-Muslim objective was North Africa. Tripoli was taken in 643, but the subjugation of the rest of North Africa took another seventy-five years. Instead of sudden, dramatic victories, painfully prolonged wars were waged to establish Arab-Muslim suzerainty.

Within a decade, Arab-Muslims had captured Syria and Egypt, but the Byzantine Empire retained its richest and most populous provinces (Anatolia and the Balkans) and would engage in almost continuous border warfare on land and on sea, always threatening to retake territories that had for hundreds of years been part of the Greco-Roman, Christian world. The survival of Byzantium left the Arabs with a contested and dangerous frontier and a permanent barrier to their expansion.

The Sasanian Empire, by contrast, was utterly destroyed. The Arab-Muslims defeated the Persians at the Battle of Qadisiyya (637), seized the capital of the empire (Ctesiphon), and forced the last emperor (Yazdagird) to flee to the protection of Turkish princes in Inner Asia. All of Iraq fell into Arab-Muslim hands. With the collapse of the empire, the Arab-Muslims were faced in Iran with a number of small and weak but inaccessible principalities, protected by mountains and deserts. The problem in conquering Iran was not a strong resisting state but the large number of remote areas that had to be invaded and occupied. It took decades to subdue all the quasi-independent principalities that had comprised the Sasanian Empire.

From the garrison base of Kufa, the Arab-Muslims moved north, occupying Mosul in 641. Nihawand, Hamadhan, Rayy, Isfahan, and all the main cities of western Iran fell by 644. Azarbayjan, to the west of the Caspian Sea, was captured about the same time. Other forces operating from Basra captured Ahwaz (Khuzistan) in 640 but took until 649 to complete the conquest of Fars. Only then did the conquest of more outlying regions begin. Marw was occupied as a military base in 650–51 and Khurasan was conquered by 654.

This first wave of conquests was followed several decades later by new campaigns on a grand scale. To the west, North Africa was conquered between 643 and 711; Spain was absorbed by the Arabs between 711 and 759. In the east, the Transoxus region was fully conquered only after a century of effort. The capitals of Transoxania, Bukhara, and Samarqand fell in 712 and 713. Inner Asian Turkish peoples recognized Arab-Muslim suzerainty after more decades of warfare. In 751, the Battle of Talas secured Arab-Muslim-dominated Transoxania against Chinese expansion. In the north, Arab-Muslims attacked Anatolia and launched in 660, 668, and 717 three great but failed expeditions to capture Constantinople. They fought against the Khazars in the Caucasus and established small principalities in Sind, the lower Indus Valley.

For the first time in history, the region we now call the Middle East, as well as North Africa, Spain, and Transoxania were incorporated into a single empire. Thus the Arab-Muslims established the geographical arena for the eventual diffusion of a common culture and a common sociopolitical identity in the name of Islam. (See [Map 2](#).)

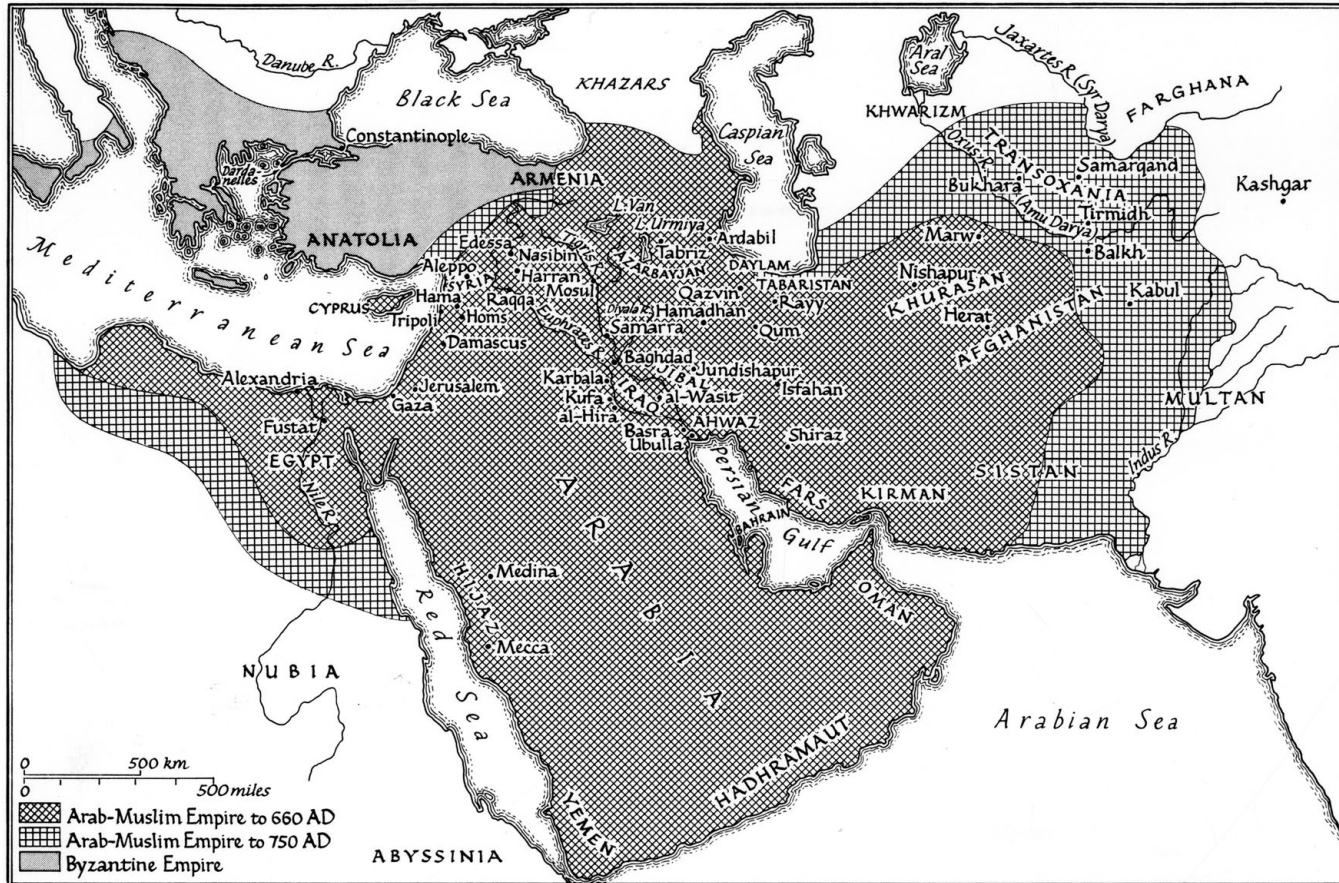
The reasons for the relatively rapid success of the Arab-Muslim conquests are not hard to find. Arabians had long experience of military conflict with the bordering empires and, therefore, acquired military sophistication. The Byzantine and Sasanian empires were both militarily exhausted by decades of warfare prior to the Arab-Muslim invasions. The Christian populations – the Copts in Egypt, the Miaphysites in Syria, and the Nestorians in Iraq – all had long histories of troubled relations with their Byzantine and Sasanian rulers. Their disaffection was important in the cases where Christian-Arab border tribes and military auxiliaries joined the conquerors and where fortified cities capitulated. The conquests, then, were due to victories over militarily weakened powers and were consolidated because, by and large, local populations accepted the new regime.

The conquests were further secured by a large migration of Arabian peoples. With the defeat of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, a frontier between populations broke down. Families and whole tribes soon followed the conquering men, leading to a massive movement of peoples from Arabia into the lands of the Middle East. Arab-Muslim migrants created new cities and settled in a great variety of milieus – older towns, villages, citadels, and country estates – mingling with a great variety of ethnic and language groups, races, religions, sects, and cults. They interacted in marketplaces as merchants and customers, as employers and employees, as patrons and clients, and as landlords and peasants. The settlements stimulated intermarriages, conversions, and exchanges of religious ideas and languages.

In effect, Arab-Muslim settlements promoted the partial integration of Arab and non-Arab populations into new cosmopolitan communities. In turn, urbanization, economic change, and the formation of new communities generated resources for the organization of a new and powerful empire; the elites of city and empire gave birth to new expressions of imperial and religious cultures. What we identify as Islamic civilization was the cultural expression of the integrated elites thrown up by the forces of economic and social change generated by the Arab-Muslim conquests.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE NEW EMPIRE

The conquerors represented an already complex and sophisticated society. The soldiers came from both nomadic and sedentary tribes, but the leaders were primarily Hijazi merchants. They brought with them exposure to the agricultural, urban, and monarchical culture of Yemen; to the Ghassanid and Lakhmid experiences of tribal confederation and intermediation with the empires; and to the court cultures of palaces, poetry, and hunting, as well as the merchant skills of Mecca. They would quickly add Byzantine and Persian landowning and administrative experience and adopt the imperial tax systems.



Map 2. The Arab-Muslim empire to 750 CE.

From the outset, the chiefs of the Muslim community in Medina sought to channel the bedouin migrations for both their individual and the common advantage. Meccans and Medinans decided on the two basic principles of the postconquest government: the bedouins would be prevented from damaging the agricultural society and the new elite would cooperate with the chiefs and notables of the conquered population. The necessary arrangements between conqueror and conquered were implemented in the reign of the second caliph, 'Umar (634–44).

The first principle of 'Umar's settlement entailed the transformation of the Arab conquerors into a military caste that garrisoned the subdued areas and carried out further conquests. To prevent the bedouins from raiding indiscriminately, to forestall the destruction of the productive agricultural lands, and to segregate the Arabs from the conquered peoples, the Arab-Muslim armies were settled in garrison cities (*amsar* [plural], or *misr* [singular]). The three most important were new cities founded in Iraq and Egypt. Basra, at the head of the Persian Gulf, was strategically located for easy communication with Medina and for expeditions into southern Iran. Kufa, on the Euphrates River to the north of the marshes near al-Hira, became the administrative capital of northern Iraq, Mesopotamia, and northern and eastern Iran. Fustat, the new capital of Egypt, was located just below the delta of the Nile and served as the base for Arab-Muslim expansion into North Africa until Qayrawan (Tunisia) was founded in 670.

In other provinces, the Arabs did not usually create new cities but settled in towns, and in suburbs and villages on the outskirts of existing towns. In Syria, the important Arab-Muslim bases were Damascus, Jerusalem, and a number of desert palaces. In Iran, they included Hamadhan, Isfahan, Rayy, and Marw.

The garrisons served not only to house the bedouin migrants and organize the armies but to distribute the spoils of victory. Soldiers were entitled to a stipend paid out of the taxes collected from peasants and the tributes paid by townspeople. In principle, soldiers and clans were not permitted to seize landed property as their own. Conquered property (*fiy'*) was considered the permanent possession of the community; the revenues, but not the land, could be given to the conquerors. These arrangements both protected the cultivated areas from pillaging and distributed the spoils of victory more equitably.

The second principle of 'Umar's settlement was that the conquered populations should be disturbed as little as possible. This meant that the Arab-Muslims did not – contrary to reputation – attempt to convert conquered peoples to Islam. Muhammad had set the precedent of permitting Jews and Christians in Arabia to keep their religions if they paid a tribute tax; the caliphate extended the same privilege to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians in the conquered lands, whom they considered protected peoples (*abl al-dhimma*) or Peoples of the Book, the adherents of earlier written revelations. At the time of the conquests, Islam was primarily understood as a religion of the Arabs, a mark of unity and superiority. When conversions did occur, they could cause embarrassment, because they created status problems and led to claims for financial privileges.

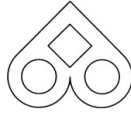
Just as Arab-Muslims had no interest in changing the religious demographics of conquered lands, they had no desire to disturb the social and administrative order. Caliphs sent governors to oversee the collection of tributes and taxes, supervise the distribution of tax revenues as salary to the troops, and lead the soldiers in war and in prayer – but, otherwise, local situations were left in local hands. The old elites and the administrative machinery of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires were incorporated into the new regime. Iranian, Aramean, Coptic, and Greek scribes and accountants worked for their new masters as they had for the old. The old landowners, chiefs, and headmen kept their authority in the villages and assisted in collecting taxes. The former social and religious order was left intact.

In practice, the relationship established between the Arab-Muslims and local elites varied from region to region, depending on the circumstances of the conquests and on the available social and administrative machinery. Some provinces came under direct bureaucratic administration, but many others retained their autonomy. Places that had stubbornly resisted Arab-Muslim incursions forced the invaders to concede favorable terms in return for local compliance. Numerous formal treaties were made with town notables or the chiefs and princes of small provinces, promising to leave the old elites in power and respecting their property and their religion in return for the payment of a tribute, usually a fixed sum, which the notables could collect from their subjects. In these cases, the conquerors simply collected taxes from sub-rulers who were their vassals. In the citted areas of upper Mesopotamia and Syria, in Khurasan and elsewhere, the Arab-Muslims were at first remote suzerains.

The arrangements made in the wake of the conquests, however, were not permanent. As the conquerors consolidated their power, they sought to increase their control over local affairs, to set the bureaucratic machinery of the old regimes to work for the new, and to adapt the preexisting tax system. Taxation was important not only for the incomes of the elites but also for the very viability of the tax-paying societies. Taxes on peasants often reached 50 percent of the value of their produce, and at such levels the incidence of taxation determined whether life for the mass of the people would be tolerable. Taxation affected the care given to soil nutrition, the level of investment in maintaining productivity, and the choice of crops. It determined whether or not the peasants would stay in the villages and work the land or flee, leaving their homes and lands to decay. Furthermore, taxation defined social structure. Taxes were duties levied on some classes of the population for the support of others. Peasants, workers, and merchants paid taxes. Landowners, administrators, clergymen, soldiers, and emperors collected them. To pay taxes was not only an economic burden; it was a sign of social inferiority.

The Arab-Muslim conquests thus followed a pattern familiar from past nomadic conquests of settled regions. The conquering peoples became the military elite, and the settled societies were exploited to support them. The governing arrangements were a compromise between the elites of the conquering peoples and the elites of the conquered or settled peoples: the interests of the former in military power and adequate revenues were assured in exchange for permitting the latter to retain their local political, religious, and financial autonomy. Both leaned on the tax-paying peasantry.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE



Despite conservative intentions, the conquests, the settlement of large Arab-Muslim populations in numerous garrisons, and the consolidation of a new imperial regime set in motion vast changes in the patterns of international trade, local commerce, and agriculture. The unification of former Sasanian and Byzantine territories removed political and strategic barriers to trade and laid the foundations for a major economic revival. The Euphrates frontier between the Persian and the Roman worlds disappeared, and Transoxania, for the first time in history, was incorporated into a Middle Eastern empire. Commercial considerations inspired Arab-Muslim expansion in Inner Asia and India. Cities prospered in Iraq, Iran, and Transoxania. Basra and later Baghdad became two of the leading trading cities in the world. Samarqand, Bukhara, and Nishapur prospered. However, a new frontier was drawn between Syria and Anatolia, which had formerly been part of a single Byzantine state, and trade between these regions declined.

Each region of the new empire fared differently under Arab-Muslim rule. Some prospered, some declined. Agricultural production shifted from one area to another. Arab-Muslim landowners often replaced the previous elites. Soldiers settled on the land, and non-Arabs moved to Arab settlements. These changes created a high degree of mobility and interaction between different peoples and set the basis for the ultimate integration of populations into a shared culture.

IRAQ

The Sasanians had developed Iraq to a level of productivity never to be reached again. Iraq was watered by two great rivers – the Tigris to the east and the Euphrates to the west. In central Iraq, parallel west-to-east canals carried water from the Euphrates to the Tigris. The extensive irrigation system made possible the production of crops such as rice, sugarcane, and cotton. Other common crops were wheat, barley, dates, olives, wine grapes, and alfalfa. In late antiquity, the countryside was organized in village-scale estates, owned by absentee landlords called *dibqans* and worked by servile renters.

On the eve of the conquests, Iraq suffered from neglect of irrigation, exploitative taxation, and wars with the Roman Empire. In southern Iraq, the irrigation works had been allowed to degenerate; in 627–28, a major agricultural disaster took place. In a year of high water flow, the dikes in the Tigris River system of canals burst, and there was a major shift in the riverbed. The Tigris flowed westward through the canals into the Euphrates at a point to the north and west of its previous channel, creating a desert in the east but flooding the lower course of the Euphrates, which remains a marsh to the present day. Repeated floods and plagues devastated southern Iraq, destroying capital

facilities and decimating the population. Agricultural production also declined in the Diyala region, which depended on state-maintained irrigation.

Arab-Muslim rule provided a stable government and encouraged recovery. The conquerors immediately took charge of fiscal and land policy in Iraq. The caliph ʿUmar confiscated the land that once had belonged to the Sasanian crown, along with the estates of notables who had fled with the defeated Sasanian emperor, and made them part of the caliphal domains. However, village-scale estates survived into the Islamic period, and their owners (*dibqans*) paid taxes to the conquerors. ʿUmar adopted the Sasanian system of collecting both a land tax (*kharaj*) and a poll tax (*jizya*). Land was measured, and a tax was fixed for every *jarib* (2,400 square meters); the actual rate of taxation per *jarib* varied with the quality of land, the crop, the expected productivity, and the estimated value of the produce. The rates also varied with distance from market, availability of water, type of irrigation, transportation, and so on. In addition, everyone was expected to pay a poll tax in gold coins. A per-capita tax was levied on the towns based on estimated population.

The caliphate also created a Muslim landowning class. ʿUthman awarded confiscated Sasanian crown estates around Kufa to Meccan and tribal aristocrats, and Muʿawiya (661–80) made similar grants from reclaimed lands around Basra. These lands were tithed rather than taxed at *kharaj* rates, the difference given as patronage for members of the ruling family and other loyalists. These richly productive lands were devoted to market-oriented production of high-value specialized crops such as cotton, sugar, and rice. The composition of the Muslim landlord elite then rotated as new caliphs and governors promoted their favorites.

More drastic changes in landownership followed. Al-Hajjaj, governor under the caliphs ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705) and al-Walid (r. 705–15), broke the power of the old elites in lower Iraq by refusing investments in irrigation; he reduced the *dibqans* to the status of tenants. In 718–19, the Umayyads stopped the sale of *kharaj* taxable lands, extending the concept of *fayʿ* (Muslim communally owned property) to the whole of Iraq. In effect, this eliminated both the remaining *dibqans* and earlier Muslim landowners, giving control of the land to the caliphate. The ʿAbbasids in turn took over Umayyad properties, sometimes by confiscation.

Wherever the Arab-Muslims established garrison and administrative capitals – as at Basra, Kufa, and al-Wasit – efforts were made to stimulate agricultural output and develop fresh sources of food for the new cities. The swamps around Kufa were drained and brought under cultivation. Basra was planted with date-palm forests. To the east of Basra, the salt marshes were reclaimed by caliphs, governors, and rich tribal *shaykhs*, encouraged by the policy of land and tax concessions. Slaves were imported from East Africa to work the newly reclaimed lands. Thus, the Arab-Muslim regime created the only plantation-type economy in the region. This would lead to Zanj revolts in 690 and 760 and to sporadic Zutt rebellions in the early eighth century.

Imperial investments, however, were highly selective and favored new areas to the detriment of old areas of production, probably because the revenues of the latter were already assigned to peasants, local landowners, and the garrison armies. By the end of the eighth century, however, soil exhaustion, salinization, the high cost of irrigation, absentee landlordism, and the use of imported, rebellious slave labor rendered further development uneconomical. Thus the net effect of the government's efforts was to restore regions in Iraq that had Arab settlements and to allow others to decay. All in all, the total output of Iraq was less than the best levels in Sasanian times.

SYRIA AND MESOPOTAMIA

In late antiquity, Syria was prosperous. The first half of the sixth century was a period of agricultural expansion and population growth. There were many prosperous, large villages in northern Syria, the

Hawran, and the Negev (where they were supported by sophisticated water-conserving irrigation). Wine production centered in Gaza. Towns and villages invested heavily in walls, gates, paved and colonnaded streets, and lavishly decorated churches. Churches replaced theaters and bathhouses as the dominant civic institution.

Landownership differed from place to place. Small-scale farming was the dominant form of agriculture in northern Syria, the Hawran, and Palestine – although some monasteries and lords owned villages and extensive tracts of land worked by village-dwelling farmers. In Palestine, Christian landowners dominated a Samaritan peasantry. Arabian tribes had settled in Jordan and in Palestine from the Dead Sea to Gaza. Meccan merchants owned land in Jordan, where the Umayyads would later have their palace-estates.

Urban transformations probably began in the late sixth century. In many towns, the regular classical street plans were converted to the bazaar configuration even before the Arab-Muslim conquests. The Persian invasion of 611–19 caused enormous damage to urban life. The Christian population of Jerusalem and the monasteries of the wilderness of Judaea suffered particularly badly.

The Arab-Muslim conquests, which followed almost immediately after, seem to have allowed for consolidation and rehabilitation. The conquest battles were fought in open country and did little damage to the towns. The invading Arab tribesmen were billeted in the towns and forbidden to engage in agriculture, thus protecting the countryside from some of the risks of nomadic incursions.

Towns, churches, and monasteries continued to flourish; many new churches were built even in the conquest years. Hama remained prosperous into the Islamic era. The dead cities region (a region of deserted stone towns and villages) of northern Syria, the Hawran, and parts of Palestine and Jordan continued to flourish in the seventh and into the eighth century. Production and commerce in olives and wine continued. For a time, the location of the caliphate at Damascus and the creation of “desert palaces” – sometimes the center of agricultural estates – promoted development in selected places. Coastal towns, the locus of Arab-Muslim defenses against Byzantine attack, were fortified and repopulated.

Papyri from the village of Nessana in the Negev give us an intimate glimpse into the social and political structure of the region. They show a village society independent of the larger towns. The village had an informal leadership of local headmen and landowners. There is no evidence of social hierarchy, or of collective leadership or councils, or of tenancy and dependency. Families were constituted by sibling groups.

In Syria and Mesopotamia, the conquerors made innumerable treaties with the local populations, but after a time the Arab-Muslims refused to renegotiate tributes and insisted on payment of taxes in direct proportion to population and resources. Arab-Muslim rule was more closely engaged in village communities than Byzantine rule had been. Mu‘awiya made the first census and levied land taxes on the basis of the *iugum*, or the amount of land that could be worked by one man and a team of animals in a day. A special poll tax was levied on urban, nonfarming populations. In 691–92, the caliphate ordered a census and land survey to record individuals, households, land, crops, and animals and assigned a four-dinar poll tax and a rate for every land unit that varied with distance from the market. In the early eighth century, the Umayyad caliphs took over old crown lands and granted estates to favorites or allowed the Quraysh and tribal notables to buy them. Thus, the countryside was transformed from peasant-owned to large-scale landed estates. The ‘Abbasids eventually took over the Umayyad holdings.

The Arab-Muslim regime also separated town and rural administration. Since classical antiquity, the Mediterranean region had been divided into self-governing city-states. Although the municipalities eventually became cogs in the machine of the Roman bureaucracy, the city-state with its surrounding rural area continued as a basic element in Roman administration. The new conquerors abolished the city-state as a political form and placed Syria and Mesopotamia under a territorial bureaucracy.

By the eighth century, the prosperity of Syria and Palestine was fading. Palestinian exports of wine and olives seem to have declined after 700. Syria ceased to import grain, oil, and pottery from the west. Gaza and Antioch withered. By the mid-eighth and early ninth centuries, many monasteries in Syria and Mesopotamia had been abandoned, and many monks went to Byzantium and some even to Rome. Although coastal trade declined, the interior continued to prosper into the ninth century, producing textiles and ceramics on a small scale. The Iraq trade, built around Aleppo and Aqaba, increased in the ninth century. Ultimately, the loss of Mediterranean markets, the decline of Christian pilgrimage, the rise of the 'Abbasids, and the shift of imperial regime from Damascus to Baghdad rendered Syria a backwater.

In contrast with Syria, the caliphs did not intervene in the administration of Mesopotamia until the reign of 'Abd al-Malik (685–705). Mosul was first ruled from Kufa by a conquest garrison that levied taxes through the local Christian landowning notables. The revenue surpluses probably went to Kufa. The later Umayyads created the first imperial-type administration in Mosul by appointing governors. 'Abd al-Malik ordered a census and land survey for Mesopotamia to record individuals, households, land, crops, and animals; he assigned a four-dinar poll tax and a rate for every land unit.

In northern Mesopotamia, there were areas of economic growth and others of economic decline. Production in the Edessa region was high in the sixth century but was then abandoned in the late sixth and seventh centuries. At al-Raqqa, Marwanid and 'Abbasid investments in irrigation helped increase settlement density and production. At Mosul, the Marwanid caliphs distributed estates and developed urban facilities – including a mosque, a palace, canals, and mills. Lavish construction was both an economic measure and a symbol of legitimacy. In the countryside, Christian landed gentry kept their power well into the tenth century. Progressively, Mosuli families took on a provincial identity. For many of them, scholarship and administration were the keys to preservation of family status.

Apart from these zones of development, the migration of Arab bedouins seeking pasture, Khariji opposition to the caliphate, and banditry damaged the agricultural productivity of northern Syria and Mesopotamia.

EGYPT

In Egypt, Byzantine administration had deteriorated before the conquests, but the Arab-Muslims immediately restored effective government. Arab officials were installed at the highest levels of tax administration and supervised the countryside. The division of taxes among villages and individuals and the collection of taxes were left to local Egyptian lay and church notables. There were both land and poll taxes. The poll tax was assessed on entire village populations and then divided up internally by the villagers. Greek and Coptic continued to be used in administration, but Arabic documents and bilingual Greek-Arabic documents were in use from the beginning.

The conquerors simplified the administrative system by breaking the power of large estates, subjecting them to taxation, and abolishing the fiscally independent estates (*autopragia*) and municipalities. Two essential concerns of the new Arab-Muslim government were to organize the transport of grain from Egypt to the Hijaz and to construct the fleets that would be used to attack Constantinople.

Under the Marwanids, administrative regulation was intensified. The tax registers were translated into Arabic, with a new formulary and fiscal procedures. This began the process of replacing Coptic village headmen with Arab-Muslims and assessing taxes on individuals rather than communities. In 693–94, poll taxes were imposed on monks and a proportional tax was levied on crops. In 705, registers show records of landholdings by lists of individual taxpayers, minors, fugitives, and even

deceased former taxpayers. Between 715 and 718, all travelers were required to have an internal passport identifying name, date, place of origin, and work permit. A comprehensive land survey was undertaken in 724–25. In the next year there was a great Coptic revolt. With the defeat of these rebellions, the influence of the church and of Coptic notables was further diminished.

By the middle of the eighth century, Muslims were living in the countryside. Some Arab-Muslims or converts may have been officials of the postal service, whereas others were landholders. In later Umayyad and early 'Abbasid times, there was no longer a distinction in taxes paid by Muslims and non-Muslims; they were equally subjects of the state. By the time of the Caliph al-Mansur (754–75), Egyptian and Khurasanian documents were using the same formulas, suggesting a highly centralized empire-wide administration.

In general, the Egyptian economy flourished from Byzantine times to the Middle Ages. Wines, woollens, linen, papyrus, textiles, and grain continued to be exported – although they declined somewhat between 800 and 1000. Although the productivity of agriculture probably declined, grain surpluses continued to be exported to the Hijaz rather than to Constantinople.

IRAN

In Iran, the Arab-Muslim conquest and migrations also favored urban and agricultural development. Security, trade, a new population, and new policies regarding settlement, city building, and irrigation stimulated economic growth. In Iran, the conquerors did not found new cities (except Shiraz) but settled in already-established ones. Important places such as Hamadhan, Isfahan, Qazvin, Rayy, Nishapur, and Marw received Arab-Muslim garrisons. These were usually housed in newly constructed quarters and in villages surrounding the town centers.

Moreover, in Iran, construction and settlement continued beyond the initial conquest. Throughout the seventh and eighth centuries, each important governor imported his own clientele of guards, soldiers, and administrators and built new quarters, palaces, mosques, barracks, gardens, and canals. Surrounding agricultural lands were brought into cultivation. Later caliphs also constructed walls and redefined administrative jurisdictions, thus converting groups of quarters and villages into cities. By this process, Isfahan, Rayy, and Qazvin became large cities. Qum grew from a simple complex of agricultural villages into a major town. Whole regions – such as the districts around Samarqand and Bukhara, favored with new quarters and villages, irrigation works, and walls to defend them against Turkish nomads – prospered. Khwarizm, the delta of the Oxus River, which before the conquests had contained small hamlets and farmsteads interspersed with feudal castles, became highly urbanized and densely settled.

In Khurasan and other parts of Iran, however, only the loosest suzerainty and tributes were imposed, and virtually complete autonomy was conceded to local notables. By the 'Abbasid period, however, Iranian lordly families (often continuing from Sasanian times) had been incorporated into the bureaucracy, and taxes were being collected by the central government.

Thus, the net effect of the Arab-Muslim conquests and empire formation was prosperity in Iran, a redistribution of the pattern of development in Iraq, and the partial economic decline of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt.

THE INTEGRATION OF CONQUERING AND CONQUERED PEOPLES

Under pressures of war, migration, and intensive economic changes, the fundamental assumption of the conquest empire – that Arab and non-Arab populations would be segregated, with the former serving as a military elite and the latter as producers and taxpayers – proved untenable. Instead,

conquered and conquering peoples assimilated to each other on the basis of new communities and new Arab and Islamic identities.

Sedentarization itself created pressures for the assimilation of Arabs into the surrounding societies. Under the pressures of town life, Arabian kinship and lineage societies became socially stratified, occupationally differentiated, and communally organized. In the garrison cities, each major clan or tribal group originally had its own quarter, mosque, cemetery, and meeting place. Over time, however, the tent dwellings were replaced by reed huts; the huts were reinforced with earthen walls and then replaced with mud-brick houses. The bedouins, once accustomed to migration, found themselves immured in brick.

The military and administrative systems also generated profound changes by requiring that the preexisting units of Arabian society be rearranged into artificial groups. To make uniform regiments and to pay units of about a thousand men, large clans were subdivided and smaller ones combined. In 670, tens of thousands of families were moved from Basra and Kufa to garrison Marw in Khurasan, and all the remaining groups were reorganized. Also, newcomers who came in continuous streams to partake in the Arab-Muslim wars had to be integrated into the basic units. Even though the military units kept their clan and tribal names – perhaps also their kinship core – they no longer represented the pre-Islamic Arabian social structure.

Furthermore, class distinctions separated the chiefs and ordinary tribesmen. Military and administrative functions widened the gap between the chiefs and their followers. The existence of privately owned palaces and agricultural estates suggests that the chiefs were enjoying wealth, privileges, and a style of life far removed from that of the mass of their clansmen. The military elites began to form a new class stratum, fortified by marriage ties. Tribal society was being transformed into a society stratified into classes based on wealth and power.

Settlement also entailed the transformation of bedouins and soldiers into an economically differentiated working population. As Basra developed into an important administrative capital, a center of cloth manufacturing, and a trading city connected with Iran, India, China, and Arabia, Arab settlers became merchants, traders, artisans, and workers – supplementing their meager military allotments with new incomes. Similarly, the new religion of Islam offered opportunities for social mobility through careers in teaching, scholarship, and legal administration.

Simultaneously, settlements obfuscated the distinctions between Arabs and non-Arabs. As a capital and commercial center, Basra attracted non-Arab settlers. The soldiers and administrators of the old regime came to seek their fortunes. Iranian regiments were enlisted en masse as Arab governors brought back troops from the east. Sasanian soldiers were important as private retainers, bodyguards, and police in the service of Arab elites. The Asawira – Persian archers taken on as clients of the Tamim tribe in Basra – maintained their own language and resided in their own quarter. Bukharan archers were added in 673. Shakiriyya – the personal guards of Persian princes and landowners – became clients of Arab generals, setting a precedent for the Persian and Turkish military units that would later constitute the 'Abbasid armies. Numerous other ethnic groups – Armenians, Azarbayjanis, Ethiopians, Sudanese, Berbers, Qiqaniyya from India, and Saqaliba (freed Slavs from the Antakya region) – were recruited in the course of the Arab-Muslim campaigns to provide loyal, reliable troops for the caliphs, governors, and Arab generals. Progressively, these new forces replaced Arabian forces. As the tribesmen of Basra and Kufa were demobilized and became civilian town dwellers, other ethnicities became the mainstay of the caliphal armies. These diverse ethnic groups were assimilated into Arab-Muslim society.

Furthermore, clerks, tax collectors, estate managers, village chiefs, and landowners flocked to the centers of government. Merchants in lucrative, long-distance trade and humble workers (including bath attendants, weavers, and spinners) migrated to the new towns. Slaves (captured and purchased),

itinerant construction workers, fugitive peasants, and migrant laborers – seeking employment and relief from the harshness of the countryside – also flooded the new cities. The most numerous elements of these diverse, non-Arab groups were Iranians and Arameans (the people of Iraq). Most of them were originally Nestorian Christians, but many were Jews. Indians, Malays, Gypsies, Africans, and Turks also came in small numbers from remote areas. As intermarriage and assimilation occurred, the meaning of “Arab” was less and less definable.

The assimilation of these non-Arabs had important repercussions for Arab society and identity. Arabs tried to absorb the newcomers into the old clan structure as clients (*mawali* [plural], or *mawla* [singular]). The concept of clientage was inherited from pre-Islamic Arabia, where a client was an inferior associate of an Arab clan. Very often, he was a former slave who was freed and then raised to the level of client, although many people were adopted or contracted directly into the status. The client was almost a member of the clan; his heirs were also clients. Clients could expect support and protection and would be helped in arranging marriages. The protection of the powerful was exchanged for the loyalty of the subordinates.

However, as they absorbed clients, Arab clans ceased to be kin units and became stratified political and economic groups built around a kinship core. The gap between aristocratic and plebeian clans widened. For example, in the Tamim tribe, the noble clans acquired former Persian cavalry units as their clients, whereas others had slave laborers and weavers as theirs.

Clientage also generated conflicts between clients and patrons. Even clients with skills in war, administration, commerce, medicine, and religious life were viewed as social inferiors. They were exploited economically and could not intermarry with Arabs or inherit equally. The active soldiers resented exclusion from the military payrolls (*diwans*), because enrollment was not only a financial benefit but a symbol of social privilege. Clients wanted to be recognized as part of the elite, but to the upper class (mostly, but not exclusively, Arabs) this was unthinkable. They clung to their status and privileges and resented the importance of the clients in the army and administration, their religious precocity, their commercial skill, and the shadow they cast over Arab primacy.

In Iran, different circumstances led to similar outcomes. At Isfahan, Marw, Nishapur, and Balkh, the Arab-Muslim garrisons were settled in villages (rather than in cities) and conquerors rapidly became landowners or peasants. Of the 50,000 families initially settled in Marw in 670, only 15,000 were still in active military service by 730. Most of the Arab-Muslim army had by then left active service for civilian occupations. In Azarbayjan, parties of Arabs from Basra and Kufa seized lands and villages and established themselves as a local landowning aristocracy. In Kirman, Arab migrants reclaimed abandoned lands, founded new villages, and settled as a peasant population. In all these provinces, Arab landowning elites came into being. These Arabs refused to take up military duties and found themselves – although in principle an elite caste – in fact absorbed into the occupations of the subject population. Furthermore, in Iran, occupational assimilation was accompanied by social assimilation. Although some Persians became Muslim or Arabized, Arabs by and large assimilated to the Persian milieu. Arabs spoke Persian, dressed like Persians, celebrated Persian holidays, and married Persian women.

Thus, within fifty years, the founding of new cities and the transfer of economic opportunities and political power to new peoples and new places stimulated the interpenetration of Arab and non-Arab peoples. Non-Arabs permeated the Arab-Muslim military caste as converts and associates, and Arabs became landowners, merchants, and settlers. The pressures generated by sedentarization and urbanization and by contact with other Middle Eastern peoples dissolved the lineage structure of the old tribal society, fostered new group and communal structures, intensified the stratification of society and the division of labor, and led to the formation of new mixed Arab and non-Arab communities.

CONVERSIONS TO ISLAM

Conversion was a very gradual process. Although earlier Muslim and Western writers assumed that the region was forcibly, quickly, and massively converted to Islam, nowhere in the sources is there mention of the conversion of large numbers of people, or of whole villages, towns, and regions. The only known exception may be on the Byzantine frontier. The available evidence points, rather, to a slow and uneven process of social and religious transformations. Moreover, the modern notion of conversion does not correspond to the historical process by which individuals came to identify themselves as Muslim for a variety of political, economic, and social reasons. Conversion did not necessarily imply a profound inner spiritual change.

There are a number of reasons for the slow pace of conversions. The Arab-Muslim elite assumed that they would form a dual society in which the conquerors would constitute an aristocracy and the conquered peoples a subject population: the former Muslim, the latter not. Arab elites were resistant to the conversion of masses of people partly to defend their exclusive privileges and partly to preserve the full revenue base of the regime.

The early Muslim regime was also religiously tolerant of the non-Muslim populations. In the highly fluid social world of the seventh century, peoples of all ethnicities and religions blended into public life. Muslims and non-Muslims were not segregated in public spaces such as markets, baths, and festivals. In Syria, they even shared churches before the conquerors were ready to build mosques for themselves. The Muslims recognized or accepted these churches as holy places and may not have fully distinguished Islam from Christianity.

Furthermore, in the seventh century, the Arab-Muslim regime helped reorganize the Christian churches. The Nestorian Church in Iraq resumed its roles in the educational, judicial, and even political administration of the Christian population. In Egypt, the Muslim authorities cooperated with Coptic lay and clerical notables. Christian scribes served in the administration of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. In Iraq, Azarbaijan, Khuzistan, and Sistan, relations with local notables were generally cooperative and allowed for the survival of the fire temples. For the sake of political inclusiveness and effective administration, the empire collaborated with non-Muslim elites, permitted them partial access to power, and protected them against disruptive social and economic changes.

Nonetheless, in the postconquest mingling of peoples, conversions began to take place. The earliest converts to Islam were those Christian-bedouin tribes living on the margin of the Fertile Crescent who were swept up in the great migrations. Later, in the first century of Arab rule, other Mesopotamian Arab tribes also accepted Islam – although many remained Christian. The Taghlib living on the Byzantine frontier, for example, remained Christian well into the ‘Abbasid era but were considered loyal forces and were exempt from the poll tax levied on non-Muslim subjects.

Once the Arab conquests were secure, conversions began among the elites of the former Sasanian Empire. Soldiers, officials, and landowners made common cause with the conquerors and accepted Islam. Client soldiers and scribes serving the Arab elite converted. Conversions implied the ratification of old privileges and paved the way for entry into the dominant elite. Other strata of the population attracted to the Arab garrisons, including merchants, workers, and peasants fleeing the land, also converted. Prisoners were likely converts. In these cases, conversions involved mobile individuals and not classes or whole communities.

Islam was not imposed on the population but attracted people who wanted to escape from social and fiscal constraints and join the ruling elite. Converts might gain tax and political advantages, protection of landed property, employment, or perhaps manumission from slavery. The weakening of the older clerical and political elites facilitated the breakdown of communities and social mobility.

By the beginning of the eighth century, conversions became a policy issue for the caliphate and the Arab elite. Elite elements resisted the dilution of their status and revenues. Religious activists favored conversions. Widespread Arab assimilation into the general population and numerous conversions led many Arabs to accept the equality of Arabs and non-Arabs and to value Muslim as well as Arab identities.

Transoxania reflects both attitudes. In Khurasan and Transoxania, converts began to demand exemptions from the poll tax (*jizya*). The political response was inconsistent. Some governors favored exemption in the interest of mobilizing local support for the struggle against Soghdian and Turkish peoples in the east; others resisted or revoked the changes in order to maintain the revenues and the support of Arab military cadres.

Caliphs also were divided. ʿUmar II (r. 717–21) favored the equality of all Muslims regardless of social origin. He sought to put the empire on a Muslim, rather than a strictly Arab, basis; he accepted the fundamental equality of all Muslims, Arab and non-Arab, and promulgated new laws giving fiscal equality to Muslims regardless of origin. Although later caliphs abandoned this policy, the sporadic attempts at encouraging conversion to Islam marked a turning point in the ongoing integration of Arabs and conquered peoples as Arab religious intellectuals undertook missionary activity in Khurasan and Transoxania.

Moreover, the religious and cultural barriers to conversion were low, because Islam was similar to Judaism and Christianity and because conversion may not have been understood in this period as a radical change. Converts may have signified their conversion by praying, by going to a mosque, by changing their names, or by dressing like an Arab; intellectual study or a change in moral or spiritual beliefs may not have been required. Some Muslim theological and legal schools – such as the Murjiʿa and Hanafis – held that a simple declaration of Muslim allegiance, rather than performance of works, made a true Muslim – a position favorable to new converts. Thus, in the first Muslim century, as myriad converts entered Islam – bringing the cultural, ritual, and legal practices of their old religions and societies – the religious beliefs and practices of new Muslims must have been exceedingly varied.

Reciprocally, Arab-Muslims were open to the incorporation of past religious beliefs, symbols, practices, and holy places into their own culture. This openness would persist for centuries until Islam became fully consolidated in its own cultural identity.

The potential religious position of converts in the seventh and eighth centuries may parallel that of converts in Central and southern Asia during later Muslim conquests. People who worked for the new governments or who had business with them were the first to convert. These converts had many different stances toward Islam. Many were nominal converts who pronounced the testimonial (*shahada*) but who otherwise continued to live in their non-Muslim families and communities, taking part in the worship and festival life of the old religions. They were Muslims without Islamic orthodox teachings and practices. Still others would have been won over by the preaching, piety, and miracles of Muslim holy men. Others would have assimilated more deeply, perhaps taking positions that led to the acquisition of new languages and religious knowledge, perhaps becoming scholars of Islam (*ʿulamaʿ*). They may or may not have remained connected to nonconverted families and communities. In time, with education and incessant pressure from Muslim scholars, their practice would increasingly conform to the Islamic orthodoxy of that period.

Several scholarly efforts have been made to assess the amount and the historical rhythm of conversions. One method is to study family names in later biographical dictionaries and identify the earliest Muslim members. Based on this methodology, Bulliet concluded that conversions before 695 were minimal. The numbers of converts significantly rose between 695 and 762; by then, perhaps