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# CHAPTER I

# BEFORE CHRISTIANITY

At the beginning of the Christian era, the region which we now call the Middle East was disputed, for neither the first nor the last time in the thousands of years of its recorded history, between two mighty imperial powers. The western half of the region, consisting of the countries round the eastern Mediterranean from the Bosphorus to the Nile delta, had all become part of the Roman Empire. Its ancient civilizations had fallen into decline, and its ancient cities were ruled by Roman governors or native puppet princes. The eastern half of the region belonged to another vast empire, which the Greeks, and after them the Romans, called 'Persia', and which its inhabitants call 'Iran'.

The political map of the region, both in its outward form and in the realities which it represents, was very different from the present day. The names of the countries were not the same, nor were the territorial entities which they designated. Most of the peoples who lived in them at that time spoke different languages and professed different religions from those of today. Some even of the few exceptions are more apparent than real, representing a conscious evocation of a rediscovered antiquity rather than an uninterrupted survival of ancient traditions.

The map of southwest Asia and northeast Africa, in the era of Perso-Roman domination and rivalry, was also very different from that of the more ancient Middle Eastern empires and cultures, most of which had been conquered and assimilated by stronger neighbours long before the Macedonian phalanx, the Roman legion, or the Persian cataphract established their domination. Of the older cultures that had survived until the beginning of the Christian era, retaining something of their old identity and their old language, the most ancient was surely that of Egypt. Sharply defined by both geography and history, Egypt consists of the lower valley and the delta of the Nile, bounded by the eastern and western deserts and the sea in the north. Its civilization was already thousands of years old when the conquerors came, and yet, despite successive conquests by the Persians, the Greeks, and the

Romans, Egyptian civilization had preserved much of its distinctive quality.

The ancient Egyptian language and writing had, in the course of the millennia, undergone several changes, but show a remarkable continuity. Both the ancient hieroglyphic script and the so-called demotic, a more cursive style of writing which succeeded it, survived into the early Christian centuries, when they were finally supplanted by Coptic – the last form of the ancient Egyptian language, transcribed in an alphabet adapted from the Greek, with additional letters derived from demotic. The Coptic script first appears in the second century BCE and was stabilized in the first century CE. With the conversion of the Egyptians to Christianity, it became the national cultural language of Christian Egypt under Roman and then under Byzantine rule. After the Islamic Arab conquest and the subsequent Islamization and Arabization of Egypt, even those Egyptians who remained Christian adopted the Arabic language. They are still called Copts, but the Coptic language gradually died out and survives at the present day only in the liturgy of the Coptic Church. Egypt had acquired a new identity.

The country has had many names. The name used by the Greeks, the Romans, and the modern world, though not by the Egyptians, is 'Egypt', a Greek adaptation from an ancient Egyptian original. The second syllable is probably from the same root as the name 'Copt'. The Arabic name is Miṣr, brought by the Arab conquerors and still in use at the present day. It is related to the Semitic names for Egypt found in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient texts.

The other early river valley civilization of the Middle East, that of the Tigris and the Euphrates, may be even older than that of Egypt, but it shows neither the unity nor the continuity of Egyptian state and society. The south, the centre, and the north were often the seats of different peoples speaking different languages, and known by a number of names – Sumer and Akkad, Assyria and Babylonia. In the Hebrew Bible, it is called Aram Naharayim, Aram of the Two Rivers. In the Graeco-Roman world, it was called Mesopotamia, which conveys much the same meaning. In the early Christian centuries, the centre and the south were firmly in the hands of the Persians, who indeed had their imperial capital at Ctesiphon, not far from the present site of Baghdad. The name Baghdad itself is Persian, and means 'God gave'. It was the name of a village at the place where, centuries later, the Arabs established a new imperial capital. The name Iraq in medieval



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philosophers and scientists. The expansion of the Persian Empire offered new opportunities – easier travel and communication, knowledge of languages, and employment for Greek skills at many levels of the Persian imperial government. A new age began with the eastern conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) of Macedon, which extended Macedonian rule and Greek cultural influence across Iran to Central Asia and the borders of India and southwards through Syria into Egypt. After his death, his conquests were divided among his successors into three kingdoms, based on Iran, Syria, and Egypt.

The Greeks had already known something of Persia before the conquests of Alexander; they now became familiar with the mysterious lands of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt, where they established a political supremacy that eventually gave way to that of the Romans, and a cultural supremacy that continued even under Roman rule. In 64 BCE, the Roman general Pompey conquered Syria, and soon after took over Judaea. In 31 BCE, after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium, the Graeco-Macedonian rulers of Egypt too were obliged to submit to Roman domination. In the universal triumph of Hellenistic culture and Roman domination, only two peoples dared to resist: the Persians and the Jews, with very different results.

In about 247 BCE, a certain Arshak led a successful revolt against Greek rule, and established an independent dynasty known to history as the Parthians, after their tribe and region of origin. Despite several attempts to restore Macedonian supremacy, the Parthians managed to preserve, and even to extend, their political independence, becoming in time a major power and a dangerous rival to Rome. They remained, however, open to Greek cultural influence, which appears to have been considerable. This too was changed, after the overthrow of the Parthian dynasty by Ardashīr (226–240 CE), the founder of the Sasanid dynasty and the restorer of the Zoroastrian faith. Zoroastrianism now became the state religion in Iran, part of the apparatus of sovereignty, of society, and of government. This may well be the first example in history of a state religion with a state-imposed orthodoxy and a hierarchic priesthood, much concerned with the detection and repression of heresy. Sasanid practice in this respect was in marked contrast with the broad tolerance and eclecticism both of their Parthian predecessors and of imperial Rome.

The Zoroastrian faith and priesthood gained great power from this



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link with the state, but they suffered the consequences of this relationship when that state was itself overthrown. The Zoroastrian priestly establishment perished with the Persian Empire. After the destruction of that empire by the Arab conquest, Zoroastrianism entered into a long decline, unbroken by any kind of revival, even by any share in later revivals of Iranian political and cultural life in Islamic times. Such religious resistance as was offered to the advance of Islam in Iran came not from the orthodox Zoroastrian priesthood, but rather from Zoroastrian heresies, that is, from those who were accustomed to opposition and repression, not from those accustomed to the exercise of authority.

Some of these Zoroastrian heresies came to be of considerable importance in Middle Eastern and indeed in general history. One of the best known is Mithraism, which won many followers in the Roman Empire, especially among the military, and was practised even in England, where traces of a Mithraistic temple have been found. Another, better known, was Manicheism, the creed of Mani, who lived from 216 to 277 CE, and founded a religion based on a blend of Christian and Zoroastrian ideas. He suffered martyrdom in the year 277, but his religion proved remarkably vigorous, and survived severe persecution at the hands of both Muslims and Christians in both the Middle East and Europe. A third, more local in character but of great importance, was the heresy of Mazdak, who flourished during the early sixth century in Iran, and established a kind of religious communism. It inspired a number of later, dissident Shiʿite movements in Islam.

Zoroastrianism was the first imperial and exclusive orthodoxy. It was however a religion of Iran, and does not seem to have been seriously offered to any other people outside the Iranian imperial and cultural world. It was not exceptional in this, since virtually all civilized ancient religions were initially ethnic, became civic and political, and in due course perished along with the polity which had maintained their cult. There was one exception to this rule, one only of the religions of antiquity, which survived the destruction of its political and territorial base, and managed to live on without either, by a process of radical self-transformation. This was the process by which the children of Israel, later the people of Judaea, became the Jews.

In their political resistance to Greece and Rome, the Jews failed. Initially, under the Maccabees, they were successful in asserting their independence against the Macedonian ruler of Syria, who claimed lordship over them, and for a while restored the independence of the



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blood; that is, by kinship or by what we would nowadays call ethnicity. The Greeks and the Jews, the two most articulate peoples of Mediterranean antiquity, have bequeathed two classical definitions of the Other – the barbarian who is not Greek and the gentile who is not Jewish. The barriers expressed by these terms were formidable but – and herein lay an immensely important innovation – they were not insuperable, and in this they differed from the more primitive and more universal definitions of difference based on birth and blood. These barriers could be crossed or even removed, in the one case by adopting the language and culture of the Greeks, in the other by adopting the religion and laws of the Jews. Neither group sought new members, but both were willing to accept them, and by the beginning of the Christian era, Hellenized barbarians and Judaized gentiles were a common feature in many Middle Eastern cities.

There is another respect in which Greeks and Jews were unique in the ancient world – in their compassion for an enemy. There is nothing elsewhere to compare with the sympathetic portrayal by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus – himself a veteran of the Persian wars – of the sufferings of the vanquished Persians, or the concern for the people of Assyrian Nineveh expressed in the Biblical book of Jonah.

The Romans carried the principle of inclusiveness an important step further, by the gradual development of a common imperial citizenship. The Greeks had developed the idea of citizenship – the citizen, that is, as a member of a polity with the right to participate in the formation and conduct of its government. But membership of a Greek city was limited to its original citizens and their descendants, and the most that a foreigner could aspire to was the status of resident alien. Roman citizenship was originally of the same kind, but in gradual stages the rights and duties of a Roman citizen were extended to all the provinces of the Empire.

This accessibility of Hellenistic culture, Jewish religion and Roman polity all helped to prepare the way for the rise and spread of Christianity, a missionary religion whose followers believed that they were the possessors of God's final revelation, which it was their sacred duty to bring to all mankind. A few centuries later, a second universal religion arose, Islam, and inspired its adherents with a similar sense of certitude and mission, albeit with a different content and method. With two world religions, sustained by the same convictions, driven by the same ambitions, living side by side in the same region, it was inevitable that, sooner or later, they would clash.



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## CHAPTER 2

# Before Islam

The period from the advent of Christianity to the advent of Islam, that is, roughly the first six centuries of the Christian era, was shaped by a series of major developments both in the course of events and in the movement of civilizations.

The first of these developments, and in many ways by far the most important of them, was the rise of Christianity itself – the gradual spread and adoption of the Christian religion, and the consequent disappearance, or at least submersion, of all the pre-Christian religions except for those of the Jews and the Persians. For a while, classical Graeco-Roman paganism lingered on, and even had a last flicker of revival during the reign of the emperor Julian (361–363), known to Christian historians as Julian the Apostate. For the first half of this period, until the early fourth century, Christianity grew and spread as a protest against the Roman order. Sometimes tolerated, more often persecuted, it was perforce separated from the State, and developed its own institution – the Church, with its own structure and organization, its own leadership and hierarchy, its own laws and tribunals, which gradually embraced the whole of the Roman world.

With the conversion of the emperor Constantine (311–337), Christianity captured the Roman Empire, and was, in a sense, captured by it. The conversion of the emperor was followed in gradual stages by the Christianization of the Roman state. Authority was now added to persuasion in the promotion of the new faith, and by the time of the great Christian emperor Justinian (527–569), the full panoply of Roman power was used, not only to establish the supremacy of Christianity over other religions, but also to enforce the supremacy of one state-approved doctrine among the many schools of thought into which Christians were now divided. By this time there was not one, but several Churches, disagreeing primarily on questions of theological doctrine, but often divided also by personal, jurisdictional, regional, or even national loyalties.

The second major change was the shift of the centre of gravity of



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point of departure. There are occasional complaints of the drain of bullion to the East, but on the whole the Roman world seems to have survived this drain surprisingly well.

The most direct route from the Mediterranean lands to the further east lay through the territories ruled or dominated by Persia, but there were obvious advantages, both economic and strategic, in developing routes beyond the reach of Persian arms. The choices were the northern overland route from China through the Turkish lands in the Eurasian steppe towards the Black Sea and Byzantine territory, or the southern sea routes through the Indian Ocean. These led either to the Persian Gulf and Arabia or to the Red Sea, with overland connections, through Egypt and the isthmus of Suez, or through the caravan routes of western Arabia from Yemen to the borders of Syria. The Roman, and then Byzantine interest, was to establish and preserve these external commercial links with China and with India, thus bypassing the Persian-dominated centre. The Persian Empire tried to use its position athwart the transit routes to control Byzantine trade, so as to exploit it in times of peace, or stop it in times of war. This meant a recurring struggle for influence between the two imperial powers in the countries beyond the imperial borders of both of them. The effect of these interventions – commercial, diplomatic, and on rare occasions, military – was considerable in both areas. Those primarily affected were the Turkish tribes and principalities in the north, and the Arab tribes and principalities in the south. Neither Turks nor Arabs are recorded as playing much role in the ancient civilizations of the region. Both of them, in consecutive waves of invasion, later played a dominant role in the Islamic heartlands in the Middle Ages.

For the first six centuries of the Christian era, Turks and Arabs alike were still beyond the imperial frontiers, in the barbarous or semi-barbarous steppe and desert lands. Neither Persians nor Romans, even in their periods of imperial expansion, showed much interest in conquering the steppe or desert peoples, and took care not to get too closely involved with them. The fourth-century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, himself a native of Syria, has something to say of both. Of the steppe peoples, he observes:[1]

> The inhabitants of all the districts are savage and warlike, and take such pleasure in war and conflict, that one who loses his life in battle is regarded as happy beyond all others. For those who depart from this life by a natural death they assail with insults, as degenerate and cowardly. (XXIII, 6.44)



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The desert dwellers to the south he describes as 'the Saracens ... whom we never found desirable either as friends or as enemies' (XIV, 4.1). To conquer such neighbours by armed force would have been expensive, difficult, and dangerous, and the results neither secure nor useful. Instead, both empires followed what became a classical imperial policy, of wooing the tribal peoples in various ways, and trying to gain, and, as far as possible, to retain their good will, with financial, military, and technical aid, titles and honours, and the like. From an early date, the tribal chiefs – the Greek term was phylarch – both north and south, learnt to exploit this situation to their advantage, leaning sometimes one way, sometimes the other, sometimes to both or to neither. Sometimes the wealth accruing from the caravan trade enabled them to establish cities and kingdoms of their own, with their own political role, as satellites or even allies of the imperial powers. Sometimes these imperial powers, when they felt it safe to do so, tried to conquer the border principalities and subject them to direct rule. More often, they preferred some form of indirect rule or clientage.

The pattern is an ancient one, and no doubt goes back to remote antiquity. The Romans had their initiation into desert politics in 65 BCE, when Pompey visited the Nabatean capital at Petra, now in the Hāshimite kingdom of Jordan. The Nabateans appear to have been Arabs, though their culture and written language were Aramaean. In the oasis of Petra, they had established a flourishing caravan city, with which the Romans found it expedient to establish friendly relations. Petra served as a sort of buffer state between the Roman provinces and the desert, and as a valued auxiliary in reaching towards southern Arabia and the routes to Indian trade. In 25 BCE, the emperor Augustus decided to try another policy, and sent an expedition to conquer the Yemen. The intention was to establish a Roman foothold at the southern end of the Red Sea, and thus open the way to direct Roman control of the route to India. The expedition was a dismal failure, and the Romans never tried again. That is to say, they never again tried to penetrate with military force into Arabia proper, but preferred to rely, both for their trade in peacetime and their strategic needs in wartime, on the caravan cities and the desert border states.

It was this Roman policy that made possible the efflorescence of a succession of Arabian border principalities, of which Petra was the first in Roman times. There were several others, notably Palmyra, the modern Tadmur in southeastern Syria. Palmyra grew up around a spring in the Syrian desert. It was an ancient site, where there had



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apparently been centres of settlement and trade in earlier times. The Palmyrenes had an emporium at Dura, on the Euphrates, and were thus in a position to operate the trans-desert route from the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia and the Gulf. This gave them a position of some commercial and strategic importance.

North of the two empires, north of the Black Sea and the Caspian, lay the overland route across Central Asia to China, where a situation in many ways similar prevailed. In the last quarter of the first century CE, there seems to have been a revolt of Central Asian tribes in this region against the authority of China, which had claimed a vague general suzerainty. Among the leaders of this revolt were the people whom the Chinese chroniclers called 'Hiung Nu', apparently identical with the Huns of European history. A Chinese general named Pan Chao led an expedition from China into Central Asia, where he crushed the rebellion and drove the Hiung Nu away from the silk route. But this time the Chinese went further, and conquered the regions in later times known as Turkestan, comprising the territory of the present republics of Uzbekistan and its western neighbours. From there, Pan Chao was able effectively to bring the inner Asian silk route under Chinese control. At the same time, he sent an embassy, led by one Kang Ying, to the west to meet the Romans. This mission is reported to have reached the Persian Gulf in the year 97 CE.

These and other military and diplomatic activities from the East may help to explain the policies of the Roman emperor Trajan, who embarked on an active and ambitious programme of expansion in the Middle Eastern region. In 106, abandoning the previous Roman relationship with Petra, he invaded and conquered it. The realm of the Nabateans was now a Roman province, called Provincia Arabia, governed by a legate of the Roman Legion stationed at Bosra. Trajan also established a water route from Alexandria to Clysma, by linking canals and branches of the Nile so that Roman ships could sail from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. In 107 CE, a Roman embassy was sent to India, and shortly after that, a road was traced from the eastern Syrian borderlands to the Red Sea.

All this, not surprisingly, appears to have alarmed the Parthians, who took the initiative in the war which followed between the two empires. In a campaign which began in 114 CE, Trajan occupied Armenia, one of the main areas disputed between the two empires, made an agreement with the prince of Edessa, an independent Christian ruler, crossed the Tigris eastwards, and in the summer of 116,



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captured the great Persian city of Ctesiphon, not far from the present site of Baghdad, and even reached the shore of the Persian Gulf. It was surely not coincidental that a major revolt took place in Judaea in this period. After the death of Trajan in 117, his successor Hadrian withdrew from the conquered provinces in the east, but retained the Provincia Arabia.

In about 100 CE, that is to say, on the eve of Trajan's expansion, the position in the Arabian peninsula was roughly as follows. The interior was completely free of any sort of authority, local or external, but was surrounded by a number of smaller states, or rather principalities, which had entered into relationships of various kinds with the empires: in the east with the Parthians; in the west, with the Romans. All these made their livelihoods from the trade routes that crossed by caravan through Arabia to the Yemen, and then by sea to east Africa and to India.

The Roman annexation of Petra marked a serious change of policy, and brought about a collapse of the balance of power as it existed at that time. Later the Romans pursued a similar policy with Palmyra, but that too was modified and Palmyra annexed to the empire at an unknown date. By the second century there are references to a Roman garrison stationed in Palmyra.

The advent of the Sasanids in Persia, and the establishment in that country of a more centralized and much more militant regime, again transformed the situation, this time on the northeastern borders of Arabia, where the Persians too subjugated and absorbed some of the border principalities. About the middle of the third century CE, they destroyed Hatra, an old Arabian centre, and seized parts of the east Arabian along the Gulf coast.

Roman historians record an interesting episode in the third quarter of the third century CE, when a remarkable woman ruler, whom the Romans called Zenobia (probably the Arab name Zaynab), made a final effort to restore the independence of Palmyra. It ended when Zenobia was defeated by a Roman force sent by the emperor Aurelian, and Palmyra was once again firmly incorporated in the empire.

Meanwhile, in the far south of the Arabian peninsula, other important changes had been taking place. South Arabia was very different from the semi-desert north, with cultivated fields and cities ruled by dynastic monarchies. But these monarchies had collapsed and a new regime was established, the so-called Himyaritic monarchy, which had become a battleground for external influences – Persian from the east



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and Ethiopian from the west. The militant Christian monarchy which had emerged in Ethiopia developed a natural interest in the events on the other side of the Red Sea. Persians were, of course, always concerned to counter Roman or Christian – for them, the two were much the same – influence.

By this time even these remote outposts of Mediterranean civilization were influenced by the general economic decline of the ancient world, and especially by the drying up of trade from the third century CE. One measure of this is the finds of Roman coins, which become fewer and fewer. There are practically none in India dated later than the reign of Caracalla, who died in 217 CE. Between the fourth and the sixth centuries, Arabia seems to have sunk back into a sort of dark age, a time of impoverishment and a bedouinization; that is to say, a decline in such cultivation as existed, of such sedentary centres as had been established, and a consequent extension of camel nomadism. The memory of this time is vividly recalled in early Muslim stories of the period which immediately preceded the advent of Islam.

At least part of the reason for this decline in Arabia must be sought in the loss of interest by both rival imperial powers. During the long period from 384 to 502 CE when Rome and Persia were at peace, neither was interested in Arabia or in the long, expensive and hazardous trade routes that passed through its deserts and oases. Trade routes were diverted elsewhere, subsidies ceased, caravan traffic came to an end, and towns were abandoned. Even settlers in the oases either migrated elsewhere or reverted to nomadism. The drying-up of trade and the reversion to nomadism lowered the standard of living and of culture generally, and left Arabia far more isolated from the civilized world than it had been for a long time. Even the more advanced southern part of Arabia also suffered, and many southern nomadic tribes migrated to the north in hope of better pasturage. Nomadism had always been an important element in Arabian society. It now became predominant. This is the period to which Muslims give the name Jāhiliyya, the Age of Ignorance, meaning by that of course to contrast it with the Age of Light, Islam. It was a dark age not only in contrast with what followed, but also with what went before. And the advent of Islam in this sense may be seen as a restoration and is indeed presented as such in the Qur'ān – as a restoration of the religion of Abraham.

In the sixth century, the century in which Muḥammad was born, everything changed again. The main overriding fact which determined most of the others was the resumption of Perso-Byzantine conflict and



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under Byzantine control and transferred as a matter of convenience to a Ghassanid prince.

The year 525 CE brought a number of interesting developments. The Jews of Tiran-Yotabe were subjugated, but other Jews appeared at the southern end of the Red Sea where the king of the Himyarites was converted to Judaism, thus establishing, for the first time in many centuries, a Jewish monarchy – this time in the southwestern corner of Arabia. There must surely be some connection between the sudden appearance of a Jewish element at both ends of the Red Sea at about the same time, both engaged in the Red Sea trade, and both reportedly following a pro-Persian and anti-Byzantine policy.

Byzantine policy was of course primarily directly against Persia. Byzantine actions were not only anti-Persian; they were also anti-neutralist, designed to eliminate or subjugate local forces and to establish Byzantine supremacy and commercial monopoly from one end of the Red Sea to the other. At the northern end they were well able to handle it themselves with some assistance from their Arab auxiliaries. At the southern end this was beyond their resources, and they met the challenge by bringing Ethiopia into play – a Christian state which allied itself with Byzantium against the Jews in Yemen and the Persians further east who were behind them. At this point, Ethiopia had already become an international trading power with ships sailing eastwards as far as India and with troops on the Arabian mainland. Newly converted, the Ethiopians were fervent in their Christianity and responded eagerly to Byzantine embassies.

Unfortunately for the Ethiopians, they were not able to complete the task assigned to them. They succeeded initially in crushing and destroying the last independent state in southern Arabia, and opening the country to Christian and other external influences, but they were not strong enough to maintain it. They had even tried to advance northwards from the Yemen, and in 507 CE had attacked Mecca, a Yemenite trading post on the caravan route to the north. The Ethiopians failed and were defeated, and a little later the Persians came to the Yemen in their place.

In the early years of the Prophet's life and for a while thereafter, Yemen was governed by a Persian satrap, and the country was wholly under Persian control. The establishment of Persian power at the southern end of the Red Sea represented a major defeat for the Byzantine policy of developing a separate and open trade route to the East. Ironically, the same period saw a development which significantly



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reduced the importance of the whole issue. For many centuries the manufacture of silk had remained a closely guarded secret in China and the export of silkworms was punishable by death. In 552 CE two Nestorian monks succeeded in smuggling silkworm eggs from China to Byzantium, and by the early seventh century sericulture was well established in Asia Minor. Chinese silk was still valued for its superior beauty and quality, but the Chinese world monopoly was ended.

The sixth century ended with the withdrawal or enfeeblement of both contestants. The Ethiopians were evicted from Arabia and their regime, even in Ethiopia, was much weakened. The Persians managed to hang on for a while, but they, too, were gravely weakened by a disputed succession at home and by great religious problems arising out of conflict within the Zoroastrian faith. The Byzantines had their own problems following the reign of Justinian, notably the great church disputes which convulsed Byzantine Christianity. The last independent centres of power in the Arabian peninsula, the principalities of the south, had disappeared, giving way to successive foreign occupations.

All these changes had considerable effect in the Arabian peninsula. After these events, there were numbers of foreigners in Arabia, colonists, refugees and other groups of outsiders settled in the peninsula and bringing new ways, artefacts, and ideas with them. As a result of the continuing Perso-Byzantine conflict, there were established trade routes passing through Arabia and a significant movement of merchants and commodities. And even in the north, the border states rose again, linked with their imperial patrons, yet remaining part of the Arabian family.

All these external influences produced a number of responses from among the Arabians themselves. Part of the response was material. They learned the use of arms and armour, and the military tactics of the time – a valuable lesson for the events that were to follow. They acquired some of the tastes of the more advanced societies, as the traders brought them commodities which they had not previously known, but which they rapidly learned to enjoy. There was also a certain intellectual and even spiritual response, as the Arabians began to learn something of the religion and culture of their more sophisticated neighbours. They learned about writing, created a script, and began to write their own language. They absorbed new ideas from outside and perhaps most important of all, they began to be dissatisfied with their religion, with the primitive paganism which most of them had followed up to that point, and to seek for something better.



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There were several religions within reach. Christianity had made considerable progress. Most of the Arabs of the borderlands, on the Persian as well as the Byzantine side, were Christians, and there were Christian settlers far to the south in Najrān and the Yemen. There were Jews also, especially in the Yemen, but also in various places in the Hijaz. Some of these were no doubt the descendants of refugees from Judaea, others converts to Judaism. By the seventh century, both the Christians and Jews of Arabia were thoroughly Arabized and part of the Arab community. The religions of Persia won few if any converts – not surprisingly, since the Persian religion was too distinctively national to have much appeal to those who were not themselves Persians.

The early Islamic chronicles tell of a group of people known in Arabic as Ḥanīf who, while abandoning paganism, were not prepared to accept any of the competing religious doctrines on offer at the time. They were among the earliest converts to the new religion of Islam.