CHAPTER ONE

Muhammad and the Caliphate

POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE ISLAMIC EMPIRE UP TO THE MONGOL CONQUEST

Fred M. Donner

Islam as a religion and civilization made its entry onto the world stage with the life and career of the Prophet Muhammad ibn Abd Allah (ca. 570–632) in western Arabia. After his death, a series of successors called *caliphs* claimed political authority over the Muslim community. During the period of the caliphate, Islam grew into a religious tradition and civilization of worldwide importance. A properly historical view of Islam's appearance and early development, however, demands that these processes be situated against the cultural background of sixth-century Arabia and, more generally, the Near East.

Historical Setting

The Near East in the sixth century was divided between two great empires, the Byzantine or Later Roman Empire in the west and the Sasanian Empire in the east, with the kingdoms of Himyar in southern Arabia and Axum in the Horn of Africa constituting smaller players in the political arena. This Byzantine-Sasanian rivalry was merely the most recent phase in a long struggle between Rome and Persia that had lasted for more than five hundred years. The two empires not only raised competing claims to world dominion, they also represented different cultural traditions: the Byzantines espoused Hellenistic culture, while the Sasanians looked to ancient Iranian and Semitic cultural traditions and rejected Hellenism as alien.

(Left) Pilgrims to Mecca worshiping around the Kaaba, the cubical stone structure covered with cloth, which stands in the middle of the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca. Muslims revere the Kaaba as the House of God and direct their prayers toward it five times a day.

This cultural antagonism was specifically exacerbated by religious rivalry; in the third and fourth centuries the Byzantine emperors had declared themselves champions of Christianity, which itself had been heavily imbued with Hellenistic culture, whereas the Sasanian Great Kings espoused the Iranian faith known as Zoroastrianism (Magianism) as their official religion. On the eve of Islam, religious identities in the Near East, particularly Greek or Byzantine Christianity and Zoroastrianism, had thus acquired acutely political overtones.

Although both the Byzantine and Sasanian empires espoused official religions, neither empire had a religiously homogeneous population. Large populations of Jews were scattered throughout the Near East; they were especially numerous in such cities as Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, Hamadan, Rayy, Susa, the Byzantine capital at Constantinople, and the Sasanian capital at Ctesiphon. Many more Jews were settled in places like Tiberias in Palestine and in southern Mesopotamia, where Jewish academies continued a long tradition of religious learning and contributed to producing the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds (the authoritative bodies of Jewish tradition) during the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. Christians were numerous, perhaps the majority of the Near Eastern population in the sixth century, but they were divided into several sects that differed on points of theology. Each sect viewed itself as the true or orthodox ("right-confessing") Christianity and dismissed the others as heterodox. The Byzantine (or Greek Orthodox) faith, the official church of the Byzantine Empire, was widely established in Greece, the Balkans, and among the large Greek-speaking populations of Anatolia (Asia Minor). In Syria-Palestine and Egypt, however, the Byzantine church was mainly limited to the towns. A few Byzantine Christians were even found in the Sasanian Empire, mainly in Mesopotamia, but their position was precarious. Christians following the teachings of Bishop Nestorius (Nestorianism)

The great church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was built by the Byzantine emperor Justinian in the sixth century. It was transformed into a mosque after the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, and the minarets were added then.

had been forced to leave the Byzantine Empire after Nestorius was deposed for heresy by the Council of Ephesus in 431. They had to take refuge in the Sasanian Empire, scattered widely between Mesopotamia, Iran, and the fringes of Central Asia. Another Christian sect, the Monophysites, had been declared a heresy by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, but Monophysitism was nonetheless the creed of most indigenous Christians of Axum, Egypt, Syria-Palestine, Mesopotamia, Armenia, and Iran, particularly in the countryside. Zoroastrians were found mainly in Iran and southern Mesopotamia; few lived outside the Sasanian Empire. Communities of all three religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism)—which are called the scriptural religions because they shared the idea of a divinely inspired, revealed scripture—were also found in Arabia.

The Byzantines and Sasanians fought many wars between the fourth and sixth centuries in an effort to secure and extend their own territories. They competed with particular intensity for key border zones such as upper Mesopotamia and Armenia. They also tried to seize key towns from one another to gain control over, and therefore to tax, the lucrative "Orient trade." This commerce brought southern Arabian incense, Chinese silk, Indian pepper and cottons, spices, and other goods from the Indian Ocean region to the cities of the Mediterranean basin. The Byzantines and Sasanians also attempted to gain the advantage by establishing alliances with lesser states in the region. The most important of these client states was the Christian kingdom of Axum, with which the Byzantines established an uneasy alliance. Both Byzantines and Sasanians also formed alliances with tribal groups who lived on the Arabian fringes of their territories. Arabia was wedged between the two empires. The Sasanians established a series of protectorates over tribes and small states on the east Arabian coast and in Oman, whereas the Byzantines brought tribes on the fringes of Palestine and Syria into their orbit.

Arabia occupied a strategic position in relation to the Orient trade, a fact that led both empires to intervene decisively in its affairs during the sixth century. In 525 the Byzantines persuaded Axum to invade and occupy the kingdom of Himyar in Yemen and its important trading ports, thus bringing the Red Sea trade to the Indian Ocean securely within the Byzantine orbit. In 575, however, the Sasanians, invited by the Himyarites, sent an expedition to oust the Axumites from Yemen, which for the next several decades was a Sasanian province ruled

The Sasanians, rulers of Iran and adjacent areas in the centuries before Islam, maintained their capital at Ctesiphon, near present-day Baghdad. The main room of their palace was a giant iwan, a barrel-vaulted space, under which the ruler sat.

by a governor appointed by the Great King. Some time later, the Sasanians inaugurated the last and greatest of the Sasanian-Byzantine wars by launching a series of assaults on Byzantine territories farther north. Between 611 and 620 the Sasanians seized most of Anatolia, all of Syria-Palestine, and Egypt from the Byzantines. But in the next decade the Byzantine emperor Heraclius regained these territories, and in 628 he was able to conquer the Sasanians' Mesopotamian heartlands, depose the Great King, and install another, more docile king. These dramatic events formed the political backdrop to the career of Islam's Prophet Muhammad in the western Arabian towns of Mecca and Medina.

Although distant from the main centers of high civilization in the Near East, Arabia was not isolated. The Arabian peoples were aware of and affected by political, economic, and cultural developments in the more highly developed surrounding lands of the Near East. Trends in religion in particular resonated in various parts of Arabia. Many religions had established themselves in Arabia on the eve of Islam. Christianity was well-established in parts of eastern Arabia along the Persian Gulf coast and in Oman as well as in Yemen. The Yemeni city of Najran in particular later became famous because of the martyrdom of Christians there during the sixth century. Christianity had also spread among some of the pastoral nomadic tribes that occupied the northern fringes of the peninsula, where it bordered on Syria and Mesopotamia, and may also have been current among some pastoral groups farther south, in northern and central Arabia itself. Judaism was similarly widespread; important Jewish communities existed in the string of oasis towns stretching southward along the northern Red Sea coast of Arabia, including the towns of Khaybar and Yathrib (later called Medina, the Prophet Muhammad's adoptive home). Jews were also found in eastern Arabia and especially in Yemen. Zoroastrianism was far less widespread in Arabia than either Christianity or Judaism, but a small following existed, particularly in parts of eastern Arabia and Oman, where the Sasanian Empire had established protectorates among the local populations. Arabian communities of all three scriptural religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism—sometimes maintained contact with their co-religionists in the lands surrounding Arabia, where these religions were much more firmly established. For example, bishops from lower Mesopotamia were sent to Yemen, and Arabian Jews may have had some contact with the great academies of Jewish learning in Mesopotamia.

In addition to the scriptural religions, Arabia also was home to a host of local animist cults, which attributed divine powers to natural objects—the sun, the moon, Venus, certain sacred rocks or trees, and so on. These cults seem to have been late vestiges of the animist religions once widespread among the peoples of the ancient Near East, such as the Babylonians and Canaanites. Although animism still existed in Arabia in the sixth century, it was being supplanted by the scriptural religions in many areas. The remaining strongholds of these animistic cults were in central and western Arabia, especially in towns such as Taif and

Mecca, which contained sanctuaries (*harams*) within whose confines members of the cult were forbidden to fight and had to observe other rules of the cult—a feature that made such harams important centers for markets and for social transactions of all kinds. In Mecca the cultic center was a cube-shaped building called the Kaaba, embedded in which was a meteoric black stone around which cult members performed circumambulations to gain the favor of the cult's dieties.

The religious, cultural, economic, and political environment in Arabia and the Near East was thus a very complex one. Before examining Islam's rise, however, it is important to note a feature of the Near Eastern landscape that profoundly influenced the course of the region's history, including its history during the early Islamic centuries. There are extensive tracts of agriculturally marginal land in the Near East; these marginal lands consist either of arid steppe and desert, as in much of Arabia, or of semiarid mountainous terrain, as in parts of Iran and Anatolia. In these regions settled life, particularly larger towns and cities, tended to be widely scattered and in some cases virtually nonexistent. Some such areas, however, could sustain thinly scattered populations of pastoral nomads or mountaineering peoples living in small settlements and relying on a mixture of subsistence agriculture and herding. These nomadic or mountaineering peoples were often outside the effective control of any state, and they organized themselves politically in kinship-based entities (tribes) or in larger confederations of tribes. In many cases they also had strong martial traditions, apparently rooted in such diverse factors as their skill with riding animals and a culturally based attitude of superiority toward nonpastoralists or lowlanders. The result was that for several millennia the history of the Near East was marked by the repeated intrusion of powerful pastoral nomads or mountain tribespeople into the richer, settled lands and towns belonging to the various states of the region. Sometimes these intrusions were merely raids along a state's borders, usually undertaken when a state was not strong enough to defend a district effectively. During other intrusions, however, nomads or mountain tribes toppled the ruling dynasties of moribund states and supplanted the rulers with members of their own group, who became a new ruling dynasty—usually settling down in the state's heartlands in the process, but keeping a power base in the marginal region from which they had come. This process of periodic intrusion by peoples from the marginal regions into the state-dominated areas of the Near East is one of the main themes in the area's history.

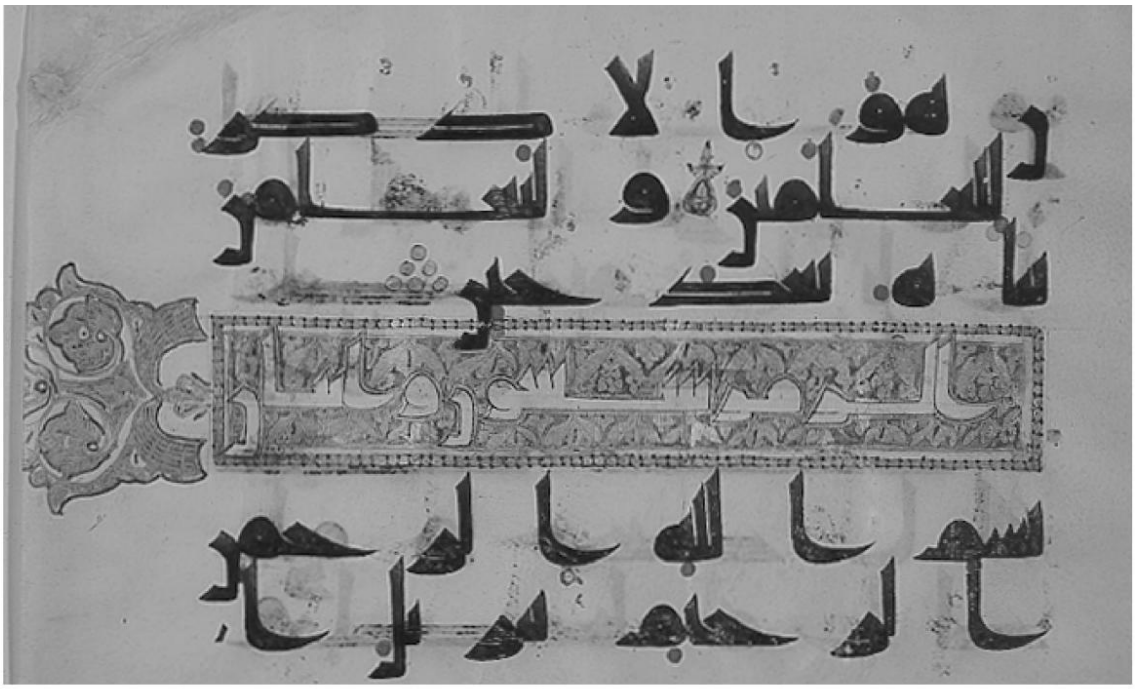
The Prophet Muhammad and the Nascent Community of Believers

The historian, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, who wishes to write about the life of the Prophet Muhammad faces grave problems of both documentation and interpretation. The first rule of the historian is to rely whenever possible on con-

temporary documents—yet for the life of the Prophet these are virtually nonexistent. Fortunately, many accounts produced within the Muslim community in later times provide us with copious information about the Prophet. When dealing with such accounts, however, the historian must try to identify and set aside those features that reflect not the Prophet's life and times but later attitudes and values of all kinds that have been interpolated into the story of his life by subsequent writers, whether consciously or unconsciously. This is never an easy task, and a significant measure of honest disagreement inevitably emerges among historians engaged in the work of evaluating the reported events and providing a sound interpretation of them. The brief sketch of the Prophet Muhammad's life and career that follows is drawn largely on the basis of the traditional narratives, but the choice of traditional materials selected, and the interpretation of their overall meaning, reflect mainly the author's general concerns as an historian interested in questions of social and political integration and in the evolution of religious movements.

Little is known with certainty about the Prophet Muhammad's early life. He was born Muhammad ibn (son of) Abd Allah in the small western Arabian town of Mecca some time around 570 C.E. (traditional accounts differ on the date). He belonged to the Hashim clan, one of the smaller segments of the tribe of Quraysh that dominated Mecca. At an early age Muhammad was orphaned and came under the guardianship of his paternal uncle, Abu Talib, head of the Hashim clan. Mecca was the site of an important pagan shrine, the Kaaba, during Muhammad's youth. The Quraysh tribe served as guardians and stewards of the cult of Hubal, centered on this shrine. The tribe was also involved in trade; although they probably dealt mainly in humble goods such as hides, their commercial activity gave them contact with much of Arabia and the surrounding lands, and it provided them with a measure of experience in the organization and management of people and materials.

Traditional sources portray Muhammad as having been a promising and respected young man who participated in both Mecca's cultic activities and its commerce. He also seemed to have had an inward, contemplative side, however, which expressed itself in his periodic withdrawal to secluded spots for prolonged periods of meditation and reflection. It was during such a retreat, in about 610, that he began to have religious experiences in the form of visions and sounds that presented themselves as revelations from God. These experiences initially so terrified him that he sought comfort from his first wife, Khadijah, but the visions occurred again and slowly Muhammad came to accept both the message itself and his own role as God's messenger. The revelations, coming to Muhammad as sonorous utterances, were eventually collected to form the Quran (sometimes spelled "Koran" in earlier English writings), which is sacred scripture for Muslims.



In the first centuries of Islam, many fine manuscripts of the Quran were copied on parchment in the distinctive angular script known as Kufic and embellished with gold chapter headings.

To Muhammad and to all who have since followed his message, the Quran is literally the word of God, God's own eternal speech.

The message Muhammad received in these revelations was a warning that only through devotion to the one and only God and through righteous observance of the revealed law could people attain salvation in the afterlife. Some revelations thus emphasized the oneness and omnipotence of God, Creator of the world and of everything in it, including humankind. Others warned that the Last Judgment was near; and then those who had lived righteously would be sent to heaven and those who had lived evil lives would be sent to eternal damnation in hell. Other revelations laid out the general guidelines for a righteous existence. These included worship of the one God and rejection of idols and false gods; regular prayer; almsgiving and charitable treatment of the poor, widows, orphans, and other unfortunates; observance of strict modesty in dealing with the opposite sex, and of humility in all one's affairs; the need to work actively for the good and to stand up against evil when one sees it; and many other injunctions. Still other revelations retold stories of earlier prophets (among them Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus) who, like Muhammad, had been charged with bringing God's truth to their people, and who provided for Believers inspiring models of righteous conduct: as the Quran put it, "Surely in this there is a sign for you, if you believe."

Many aspects of Muhammad's message were conveyed in concepts and sometimes in words that were already familiar in Arabia. In part, this was what made Muhammad's message comprehensible to his first audience. The ideas of

monotheism, a Last Judgment, heaven and hell, prophecy and revelations, and the emphasis on intense, even militant, piety were widespread in the Near Eastern scripturalist religions in the sixth century. In this sense Muhammad's message can be seen as an affirmation and refinement of certain trends among the scripturalist religions of the late antique era, perhaps as an effort at their reformation. To adherents of the pagan cults of western Arabia, however, including Muhammad's fellow tribespeople of Quraysh, his message came as a blunt repudiation of all they stood for. He proclaimed their polytheism as incorrect and profoundly sinful, an affront to the one God's unity, in itself sufficient to condemn them eternally to hellfire. He made it clear that in their behavior, they failed in many ways to meet God's demands for humility, for modesty, for charity for the less fortunate, and especially for pious dedication to God himself through regular prayer. Muhammad pointed out that the tribe's pagan ancestors, even his own grandfathers, were similarly destined for perdition—an idea certain to generate outrage in a tribal society that highly revered ancestors. The Quraysh were aghast.

Much of Muhammad's prophetic career, from the time he began publicly preaching in about 613 until his death in 632, was consumed with warding off and eventually overcoming the opposition of his own tribe, the Quraysh. His early followers included some close relatives, such as his paternal cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib (ca. 600–61), as well as a few prominent Meccans of leading clans, such as Uthman ibn Affan (ca. 575–656) of the Umayya clan. He was also joined at first by many people of lower social stature in Mecca—clients, freed slaves, and individuals of lesser clans of Quraysh—perhaps because their weaker family ties made it easier for them to act in accordance with their conscience. As his following grew, however, the opposition and abuse by the remaining Quraysh hardened; conditions became so bad for some that Muhammad arranged for a number of them to take refuge with the ruler of Axum in perhaps about 615. His situation in Mecca became critical with the death, in close succession, of his wife Khadijah and his uncle Abu Talib, in about 619; almost simultaneously, he had lost his main source of emotional support and his main protector, because Abu Talib, although he never embraced the Prophet's message, had nonetheless used the solidarity of the Hashim clan to defend Muhammad.

As Muhammad's situation worsened, he began to look to other towns in western Arabia for supporters. It was around 620 that Muhammad won over a few people from Yathrib, an oasis town about 250 miles (400 km) north of Mecca. For some years the population of Yathrib, which included two predominantly pagan tribes and a number of Jewish tribes, had been riven by intractable internal strife. Over the next two years more people of Yathrib agreed to observe the Prophet's message, until finally a large delegation of people from Yathrib

agreed to follow his teachings and invited him to come to Yathrib as arbiter of their disputes and de facto ruler of the town. Muhammad gradually sent his beleaguered followers from Mecca to safety in Yathrib, following them himself and taking up residence in 622. Yathrib henceforth came to be known as Medina (from the Arabic *madinat al-nabi*, "the Prophet's city"). The Prophet's move (the *hijra*, emigration) to Medina marked the beginning of a new chapter in his life and that of his followers. They were no longer a small, oppressed religious group in Mecca; they were now an autonomous religio-political community of Believers that dominated the oasis of Medina. Muhammad's hijra to Medina in 622 was thus the beginning of Islam's long life as a political force, a fact symbolized by the selection of that year to serve as the first year of the Islamic era.

During his roughly ten years in Medina (622–32), Muhammad consolidated his control over the town's disparate population, and he extended Medina's power and influence in Arabia. When Muhammad first arrived, Medina was still full of smouldering rivalries: between the town's two main Arab tribes; between the *muhajirun* ("emigrants," the Believers who had emigrated to Medina from Mecca or elsewhere) and the *ansar* ("helpers," Muhammad's first followers in Medina, who had invited him and his Meccan followers to find refuge with them); and between some of Medina's Jews and the new Believers. While some of Medina's Jews appear to have supported Muhammad, those who challenged Muhammad's claim to prophecy, and in some cases cooperated with his political enemies (or whose leaders did), were handled harshly in a series of confrontations—exiled with loss of

R. J. Burton's nineteenth-century drawing of Medina with the Mosque of the Prophet in the center. The Prophet settled here in 622, and his new house became the first mosque in Islam and later served as his place of burial.

their lands, enslaved, or executed, depending on the case. Beyond Medina the most determined opponents of Muhammad's efforts to extend his influence and his message were his erstwhile fellow citizens, the Quraysh of Mecca.

Mecca and Medina became locked in an intense struggle to win over other towns and groups of nomads, a struggle in which Mecca, with its established commercial and tribal ties, initially appeared to have the advantage. Muhammad, however, launched raids against Meccan caravans, seizing valuable booty and hostages, and, more important, disrupting the commercial lifeblood of Mecca. After a series of raids and battles against the Quraysh that seem to have been indecisive in their results (at Badr in 624; Uhud, 625; and Khandaq, 627), Muhammad negotiated a truce with the Quraysh at Hudaybiya in 628. In exchange for some short-term concessions, the truce gave Muhammad and his followers the right to make the pilgrimage to Mecca's shrine, Kaaba, in the following year. The treaty also gave Muhammad a free hand to subdue one of Mecca's key allies, the oasis of Khaybar north of Medina, whose large Jewish population (some of them refugees from Medina) was hostile to the Prophet. This done, it was relatively easy for Muhammad to turn on Mecca itself, which submitted virtually without bloodshed in 630. Aware of how dangerous the Quraysh could be if their opposition continued, and wishing to win their support, Muhammad was careful to spare their pride. He tied them to his movement by awarding many of their leaders important commands and positions of authority.

While Muhammad was engaged in his struggle against Mecca, he was also slowly working to bring more and more nomadic groups and towns within Medina's orbit, either as loose allies or as full-fledged members of the community of Believers. In doing so, he used the appeal of his religious message, promises of material gain, or, on occasion, outright force to bring recalcitrant groups under Medina's sway. His conquest of Mecca opened the way for victorious campaigns—with the help of the Quraysh—against the other main town of western Arabia, Taif, and against the remaining groups of powerful nomads in the region. By this time Muhammad's position as the most powerful political leader in western Arabia had become apparent to all, and tribal groups that had until then tried to hold Medina at arm's length now sent delegations to tender their submission. By Muhammad's death in 632, his community had expanded—more by religious persuasion and political alliance than by force—to include all of western Arabia, and he had made fruitful contact with some groups in the northern Hijaz, Nejd, eastern Arabia, Oman, and Yemen.

Early Expansion of the Community and State

Upon Muhammad's death in 632, the young community of Believers faced a set of difficult challenges. The first and most basic challenge was to resolve the ques-

tion: Were the Believers to form a single polity under one leader even after Muhammad's death, or were they to belong to separate communities, each headed by its own political leader? In the end the Believers chose to remain a single community and selected the Prophet's father-in-law and staunch supporter, Abu Bakr, to be his first successor. Abu Bakr and subsequent successors as leaders of the Islamic community are known in Islamic tradition as caliphs (from the Arabic *khalifa*, meaning "successor" or "representative").

Abu Bakr and the Believers in Medina faced a second immediate challenge. Although the towns of Medina, Mecca, and Taif and the nomadic groups between them were for the most part quite steadfast in their support of Abu Bakr, many groups in Arabia that had once tendered their submission to Muhammad tried to sever their political or religious ties with Medina once the Prophet was dead. Some claimed that they would remain Believers but contended that they did not owe the tax that the Prophet had collected, which Abu Bakr continued to demand. Other groups gave no assurances that they would remain Believers. In still other cases religious leaders arose claiming to be prophets themselves.

Against these threats, Abu Bakr acted quickly and decisively in what is usually called the Apostasy (or *Ridda*) wars, during which he sent armed bands of Believers to the main centers of opposition in Arabia: Yemen, Nejd, and Yamama. By making shows of force first among wavering tribes, these campaigns picked up allies as they proceeded, and grew large enough to defeat the more serious opponents, such as the "false prophet" Musaylima of Yamama. These campaigns were followed by incursions into Oman and northward toward the Arabian fringes of Syria and Mesopotamia (what is now Iraq). In 634, at the end of two years of campaigning, Abu Bakr and the Believers of Medina had brought the entire Arabian peninsula under their control, opening the way to further conquests that would, within a few more decades, make the Believers the masters of a vast empire. This was possible partly because the almost ceaseless military activity of the Ridda wars provided the setting in which the loosely organized war parties formed at the beginning of the Ridda wars began to assume the character of a standing army, with a core of devoted supporters (mainly townsmen of Medina, Mecca, and Taif) leading a larger mass of allies drawn from a wide variety of Arabian tribes. It also represented the domination of the pastoral and mountaineer populations of Arabia by the embryonic new state in Medina, which was headed by an elite group composed almost exclusively of settled townsmen.

The Ridda wars brought the Believers to the very doorsteps of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, but they also did more. The emergence in Arabia of a state where none had been before, one that could harness the military potential of the Arabian population, made it possible for the Believers to organize campaigns of conquest that penetrated the great empires and wrested vast territories from

them. The great wave of early conquests was the main work of the second caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–44), whom Abu Bakr upon his deathbed selected to lead the Believers. The conquests were further continued during the first years of the reign of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644–56).

The caliphs launched one set of offensives against the Byzantine-controlled territories of Palestine and Syria, home to many Arabic-speaking tribes (part of the primary audience to which the Quran had been addressed). These incursions elicited defensive reactions from the Byzantine authorities in Syria, against whom several battles were fought. Eventually, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius sent a large army from Anatolia to secure Syria against the threatening Believers, but to no avail; his force was decimated at a battle along the Yarmuk valley (east of the Sea of Galilee) in 636. Most of the countryside and towns of Syria and Palestine fell to the Believers shortly thereafter; the only exceptions were some coastal towns such as Ascalon and Tripoli, which held out for years longer because the Byzantines could supply them by sea. From Syria the Believers sent campaigns into northern Mesopotamia, Armenia, and against the Byzantine frontier in southern Anatolia. An expeditionary force from Syria also wrested the rich province of Egypt from the Byzantines, conquering the commercial and cultural hub of Alexandria in 642.

At the same time as the offensives in Syria and Palestine, the Believers were faced with impending clashes with the Sasanian Empire in what is now southern Iraq. The early contacts of the Believers with the Arabic-speaking pastoral nomads of this region, and their increasing boldness in penetrating Iraq's interior, had caused the Sasanians to mobilize their armies to resist them, but they fared no better than the Byzantines. In a great battle in 637 at al-Qadisiyah (modern Kadisiya) in southern Iraq, the Sasanians were decisively broken, opening the rich alluvial lands of Iraq to occupation by the armies of the Believers. From southern Iraq the Believers sent campaigns into Khuzestan and Azerbaijan, and others pursued the fleeing Sasanians into the Iranian highlands. Gradually the main towns of western Iran, and with time areas farther east, fell to the Believers. By the mid-650s the Believers ruling from Medina had loose control over a vast area stretching from Yemen to Armenia and from Egypt to eastern Iran. And from various staging centers in this vast area, the Believers were organizing raids into areas yet further afield: from Egypt into Libya, North Africa, and Sudan; from Syria and northern Mesopotamia into Anatolia; from Armenia into the Caucasus region; from lower Mesopotamia into many unconsolidated districts in Iran and eastward toward Afghanistan and the fringes of Central Asia.

An important feature of the early expansion of the Believers was its quality as a religious movement, but this was colored by the presence of the state. The caliphs and their followers believed, of course, in Muhammad's message of the

need to acknowledge God's oneness and to live righteously in preparation for the imminent Last Day. They saw their mission as *jihad*, or militant effort to combat evil and to spread Muhammad's message of monotheism and righteousness far and wide. But their goal seems to have been to bring the populations they encountered into submission to the righteous order they represented, not to make them change their religion—not, at least, if they were already monotheists, such as Christians and Jews. For this reason the early Believers collected tribute from conquered populations but generally let them worship as they always had; only pagans and at times Zoroastrians appear to have been coerced into embracing Islam or had their places of worship sacked.

The astonishing extent and rapidity of this process of expansion and conquest can only be understood if the nature of the expansion it represented is recognized. It was, first and foremost, the expansion of a new state based in Medina. The ruling elite of this state were mostly settled townsmen of Mecca, Medina, and Taif, who commanded growing armies composed mainly of pastoral nomads from northern and central Arabia or mountaineers from Yemen. It was not an expansion of nomadic or mountaineering peoples as such. The state-sponsored quality of the expansion is reflected in a significant measure of centralized direction of the expansion movement by the caliphs and their circle, who appear to have coordinated strategy between various fronts, as well as in certain bureaucratic institutions that were established during the early conquests. The institutions included the creation of a regular payroll (*diwan*) for the soldiers, as well as the gathering of the expeditionary forces in distant areas into tightly clustered garrison settlements that became the nucleus of new cities: Kufa and Basra in southern Mesopotamia, Fustat in Egypt, and somewhat later, Marv in northeastern Iran (651) and Qayrawan in Tunisia (670). These garrisons helped the Believers live apart from the vast conquered populations they ruled, and so to avoid assimilation; later, as cities, these garrisons would be among the most important centers in which early Islamic culture was elaborated.

The consequences of the conquests were momentous. They established a large new empire in the Near East, destroying the Sasanian Empire completely and occupying important parts of the Byzantine Empire. Moreover, the leadership of this new empire was committed to a new religious ideology. New economic structures were created with the demise of the old ruling classes and the rise of a new one, consisting at first largely of people of Arabian origin. Property and wealth—as well as political power—were redistributed on a grand scale. Most important, the newly emergent state provided the political framework within which the religious ideas of the ruling Believers, who were but a small part of the population, could gradually spread among the conquered peoples. The many captives taken during

the conquests came to be integrated into the tribes and families of their captors as clients (*mawali*), a fact that facilitated this transformation.

The Early Caliphate and the Question of Legitimacy

It was widely accepted in the early community of Believers that Muhammad could have no successor in his role as Prophet. But the early Believers decided that someone should succeed Muhammad as temporal head of the community. The first documentary references call the leader of the community of Believers not caliph but *amir al-mu minin* ("commander of the Believers"), and this may be the

Interior of the Great Mosque at Qayrawan in Tunisia. Founded in the late seventh century, the mosque owes much of its present aspect to extensive rebuilding by the Aghlabid governors in the ninth century.

original term for the heads of the community, replaced only some time later by the term caliph, which was seen as synonymous but had the advantage of being found in the Quran. Whatever it was called, community leadership was at first informal and personal, much like tribal leadership. Only gradually did the caliphate acquire greater prestige and formality, as the original Islamic state grew into a far-flung empire during the early conquest era.

Although the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and Umar, appear to have enjoyed widespread support among the Believers, dissension arose under the third caliph, Uthman. The reasons for this discontent probably included practical concerns, such as a tapering off in the ready supply of conquest booty for individual soldiers, or feelings that newly conquered lands outside the garrison towns were not being made available for settlement by the soldiers and were instead being dominated by wealthy families. But they also seem to have involved perceptions that Uthman was not ruling with the fairness and disdain for private gain that most pious Believers expected of their commander. Uthman was accused (whether rightly, it may never be known) of favoring his relatives when making important and sometimes lucrative appointments, of diverting monies from the treasury, and of other transgressions, some fiscal, some moral. This dissension grew into a violent uprising, which culminated in the murder of the caliph in 656. These developments began the complicated series of events known as the First Civil War (656–61), which was a struggle for leadership of the community of Believers waged by the prominent heads of several families within the Prophet's tribe, the Quraysh. This is a chapter of the utmost importance in Islamic history, because this is when the main subgroups or sects that have constituted the Muslim community up to the present day first emerged.

After Uthman's murder the people of Medina, including some of the conspirators, recognized as the next caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib—cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, therefore a member of his clan, the Hashim. Ali's acclamation as caliph was opposed by significant segments of the community of Believers, however—in particular by Uthman's kinsmen of the Umayyad clan, led by Muawiyah, and by leading members of some other Quraysh families, including the Prophet's favorite wife, Aishah, and two of Muhammad's early supporters, Talha ibn Ubaydallah and al-Zubayr ibn al-Awwam.

The bid for power by Talha, al-Zubayr, and Aishah was thwarted when their forces were decisively defeated at the "battle of the camel" near Basra in southern Iraq by the supporters of Ali (*shiat Ali*, Arabic for "party of Ali," often referred to simply as the Shia or Shiites). Ali and his backers established their base in the garrison town of Kufa. They eventually felt strong enough to march northward along the Euphrates River, intending to take the war to Muawiyah's base in Syria. Armies of the two sides met at Siffin along the middle Euphrates, near the frontier of Syria

and Iraq, but many on both sides were uneasy about launching an attack against men who also considered themselves Believers, and who until recently had been their own comrades-at-arms. Skirmishing gave way, after many days, to a battle that was broken off when Ali and Muawiyah agreed that the matter should be settled by arbitration rather than fighting and withdrew to Kufa and Syria, respectively, to await the arbiters' decision. Eventually neither side was satisfied with the arbitration results, and a period of desultory raiding between Syria and Iraq ensued. During the period of arbitration and thereafter, Ali's situation was weakened by the withdrawal from his camp of some militant pietists, who came to be known as Kharijites (from the Arabic *khawarij*, possibly meaning "seceders"). Some of them may have broken with Ali because they feared that if he reached an accommodation with Muawiyah, they would be called to account for their participation in the mutiny against Uthman. Others may have felt that Ali's agreement to arbitrate revealed an impious lack of trust in God's ability to render a just verdict between the two rivals on the battlefield. As they said in their battle cry, "Only God has the right to decide." Ali was forced to massacre many Kharijites in a battle at Nahrawan in eastern Iraq, an event that shocked many and did little to advance his cause, because many Kharijites were renowned for their piety.

The First Civil War finally came to an end in 661, when a Kharijite assassin killed Ali (another was thwarted before he could assassinate Muawiyah). Shortly thereafter, the majority of Believers agreed to recognize Muawiyah as caliph, perhaps less because they thought him the ideal ruler than because, after five years of turmoil, they yearned for stability and unity among the Believers. Muawiyah's recognition as caliph marks the beginning of the Umayyad caliphate (661–750). During his two decades as caliph, Muawiyah relied on careful diplomacy and strong governors, especially in Iraq and the east, to maintain an uneasy peace in the community. He kept discontented Shiite supporters of Ali's family under control, and either subdued small uprisings of rebellious Kharijites or forced them to take refuge in frontier zones, beyond the effective reach of the caliph's agents. The relative stability of his reign enabled the Muslim armies once again to embark on raids and campaigns of conquest against neighboring areas.

But the issues that were at the heart of the First Civil War—how leaders of the community of Believers were to be selected, and above all what were the criteria for leadership—remained unresolved. It is hardly surprising that a new wave of internal turmoil, the Second Civil War (680–92), broke out upon Muawiyah's death. The Second Civil War was a continuation of the first, because the same groups were involved, at the remove of one generation. The Umayyads, whose hold on the caliphate from their capital in Damascus was being challenged, were represented first by Muawiyah's son Yazid (r. 680–83), and then, after Yazid's early death and a period of confusion within the Umayyad family, by another relative,

the caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (r. 685–705). The Umayyads faced widespread opposition. From Ali's old stronghold in Kufa, the Shiites, who claimed that the caliphate should belong to someone of Ali's family, rallied first around Ali's younger son, al-Husayn. After al-Husayn and his family were massacred in 680 by Umayyad troops at Karbala in Iraq, the Shiites continued to resist Umayyad rule in Kufa under the leadership of a charismatic leader named al-Mukhtar, who claimed to be acting in the name of one of Ali's sons.

Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr (624–92), son of that al-Zubayr whose bid for the caliphate had been so quickly ended in the First Civil War, established himself in Mecca and was recognized by many in the empire as caliph. His determination and broad support made his resistance to the Umayyads as formidable as his father's had been ephemeral. Meanwhile, several groups of Kharijites took advantage of the political disarray prevailing in the community of Believers to establish themselves in various parts of Arabia, Iraq, and Iran. In the end, after a dozen years of bitter strife, Abd al-Malik and his ruthless lieutenant, al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, were able to pacify first Iraq, then Arabia, and to bring the whole empire under Umayyad control.

The road the Umayyads had followed to victory, however, was littered with mangled dreams, memories of which would haunt the dynasty's future and contribute to its downfall. Yazid's generals, in the first unsuccessful efforts to subdue Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr in Mecca, had ruthlessly crushed an uprising in Medina while en route, and had even laid siege to the sacred precincts in Mecca, in the process starting a fire that destroyed part of the Kaaba. The Shiites had seen their hopes dashed, but the pitiless slaughter of Ali's son al-Husayn and his family at Karbala provided them with an act of martyrdom of mythical proportions.

The golden dome of the shrine at Karbala in Iraq marks the burial site of the Prophet's grandson Husayn and his family, who were murdered by the Umayyads in 680. This act of martyrdom marks the beginning of the separation of Shiites as a political party and distinct subgroup within the Islamic community.

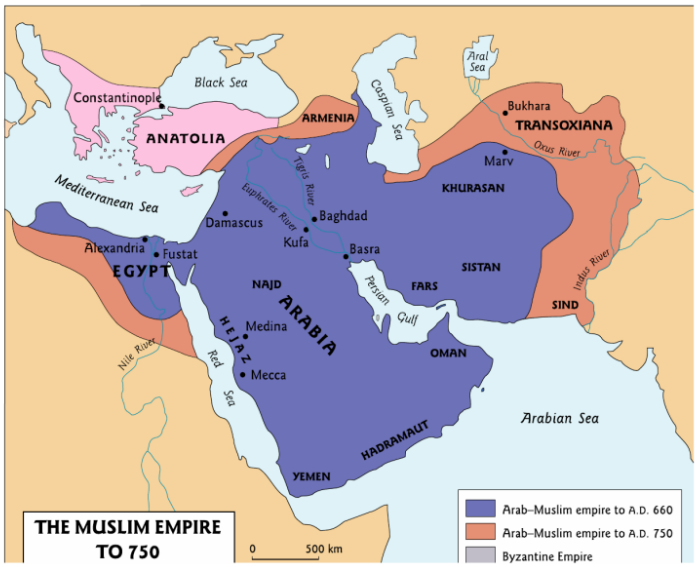
Nurturing the memory of this martydom deepened their hatred of the Umayyads and started a process whereby the Shiites began to feel themselves to be not merely a political party but a distinct subgroup within the Islamic community. In the course of working out the differences within their own house, the Umayyads had even managed to set some Syrian tribes against others in a way that would later undermine their efforts to build a cohesive army on these tribal groups.

The importance of the two civil wars goes far beyond their immediate political impact, however. These civil wars represented the arena in which Believers first openly debated the ways in which authority to lead the Islamic community could be legitimately claimed. Kharijites held that true piety and impeccably righteous behavior were the only qualities that provided true legitimation in an Islamic context. Others, notably the Alids and their Shiite supporters, who contended that only a member of Ali's family or of the Prophet's clan of Hashim should hold power, argued that legitimacy was essentially genealogical. Still others—such as the Umayyads—claimed that the consensus of the community of Believers (*jamaa*, or coming together) was the most important element in establishing a legitimate claim to head the Islamic community. Later, some (including the Umayyads) would argue that their very ascent to power was an expression of God's will and therefore legitimate in its own right. These claims and counterclaims would be raised repeatedly in the centuries ahead.

It is therefore during the civil wars that the main sectarian subdivisions of the Islamic community first emerged: the Shiites, the Kharijites, and (retrospectively, through an ephemeral group known as the Murjia) the Sunni or orthodox majority sect of Islam, which came to be defined as much as anything by their rejection of the central beliefs of the Shiites and Kharijites. All members of these subgroups within the Islamic community justify their particular identity on the basis of their differing readings of the events of the civil wars, particularly the first war. The civil wars are thus the lens through which radiates the spectrum of groups making up the Muslim community. The ideal of a politically unified community of Believers (*ummah*) headed by a caliph eventually became unrealizable in practice, as the empire came to span thousands of kilometers and the community to embrace millions of people. Nonetheless, the institution of the caliphate (and indeed, the caliph himself) played an important role because it stood as a symbolic embodiment of Muslim religious unity. For this reason the institution was retained long after it had ceased to have real political meaning.

Apogee of the Caliphal Empire (700–950 C.E.)

The age of the first conquests and the civil wars (roughly 630–700 C.E.) had seen the establishment of the community of Believers as a loosely organized political



entity headed by the first caliphs. The early community and state had been united (when they were united) not so much by institutional structures, most of which were still embryonic, but mainly by ideology—that is, by the Believers' conviction that they were engaged in a common effort to establish, in God's name, a new and righteous regime on earth. The depth of this conviction underlay the intensity with which the Believers had disagreed over the legitimacy of various rivals for the caliphate during the civil wars; but their commitment to a common cause also enabled the Believers to come together once again as a single political unit after the wars.

By the end of the second war in 692, the Believers had embraced more clearly than before their identity as *Muslims*—that is, as a monotheist confession following the teachings of Muhammad and the Quran, and for this reason distinct from other monotheists such as Jews or Christians. During the two and a half centuries that followed the second war (ca. 700–ca. 950 C.E.), the rudimentary institutional structures of the early community of Believers fully matured, providing the caliphs with the military and administrative machinery needed to contain the divisions that have reverberated down through the subsequent history of the Islamic community since the civil wars. The period of 700 to 950, then, represented the apogee of the caliphal empire—an age of political and communal expansion, great institutional and cultural development, and economic growth. The Umayyad dynasty was overthrown in 750 C.E. by a military uprising organized by the Abbasid family, descen-

dants of the Prophet Muhammad's uncle al-Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib (ca. 566–ca. 653), resulting in a shift of the imperial capital eastward from Damascus, in Syria, to Iraq, where the early Abbasids founded a new capital, Baghdad. But several key aspects of the evolution of the caliphate and the empire continued under both the late Umayyad and the early Abbasid caliphs, and for this reason, despite the change of ruling dynasty, it is fair to view the period of 700 to 950 as a single phase in the history of the caliphate and of the Islamic community.

The most basic fact about this period is that the caliphal empire and the Muslim community continued to expand. The early conquests had ground to a halt during the Second Civil War, as the Umayyads and their rivals devoted military resources to fighting each other. After the war, however, the Umayyads inaugurated a second phase of imperial expansion (the first half of the eighth century). Some of the conquests sponsored by the later Umayyads were motivated by a desire to extend Islamic rule. For example, expansion seems to have been the objective of the great (if unsuccessful) campaigns by land and sea against Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire (669, 674–80, and 716–17), as well as the annual summer raids into Byzantine border territories (a policy continued under the Abbasids until the middle of the ninth century). The caliphs also doubtless hoped to affirm their legitimacy among Muslims by sponsoring such campaigns of jihad against non-Muslim states. The incentive for launching other campaigns, however, seems to have been the desire to benefit from the seizure of booty, particularly captives who could be employed or sold as slaves; this may have been the case with many raids in North Africa organized by the later Umayyads. The throngs of recruits who participated in these campaigns were, of course, responding to a wide range of motivations—from zeal

The mighty land walls of Constantinople, built in the centuries preceding the revelation of Islam, protected the city against repeated invasions, including the unsuccessful Arab campaigns in the seventh and eighth centuries.

to spread the faith or the hope of attaining martyrdom on the battlefield (and hence eternal salvation), to lust for booty or hope of finding new lands to settle, to a simple thirst for adventure. Without the organizing activity of the caliphs and their governors, however, most of these campaigns would not have occurred.

Whatever the motivations, the scope of the second phase of conquests was astonishing. In North Africa the Muslims, who during the civil wars had stayed close to their strong points, such as the garrison town of Qayrawan, finally dislodged the last Byzantine outposts, such as Carthage, and pushed all the way to the Atlantic coast of Morocco. The local Berber population began to embrace Islam, and some were drawn into the expansion process. In 711 general Tariq ibn Ziyad led an army consisting largely of Berbers across the Straits of Gibraltar (named after him) into Spain. Other troops, Berber and Arab, poured in and within a few brief years seized the southern and eastern two-thirds of the Iberian peninsula from the faltering Visigothic kingdom, which vanished, leaving small, impoverished Christian kindgoms only in the northern mountains. From Spain the Muslims sent raids across the Pyrenees into the Languedoc and adjacent regions of France, reaching the high water mark of their expansion in the west somewhere near the Loire region, where in 732 they were defeated by the Frankish ruler Charles Martel. Although the Muslims held several cities in southern France for a few decades, ultimately their conquests there were ephemeral; by the late eighth century they seldom ventured north of the Pyrenees. During the ninth century the Abbasids' governors of Tunisia, the Aghlabids, raided Sicily (starting in 827), southern Italy, and the French and Italian Rivieras, and established over much of Sicily a Muslim political presence that endured until the arrival of the Normans in the mid-eleventh century.

In the east, Umayyad governors launched renewed campaigns from their garrisons in Khurasan (in northeast Iran), particularly Marv and Balkh, into the regions beyond the Oxus River on the fringes of Central Asia. Between 705 and 713, Bukhara in Transoxiana, the region of Fergana and its capital, Shash (modern-day Tashkent), the rich district of Khwarizm (modern-day Khorezm) south of the Aral Sea—all located in what is now known as Uzbekistan—and much of Sogdiana, including its capital at Samarqand, were brought into the Umayyad Empire. Despite numerous rebellions and efforts by local groups to overthrow Muslim rule during the early ninth century, these areas remained forever after part of the Islamic world. Meanwhile, between 711 and 713, the caliphate was establishing its first permanent foothold in Sind (part of the Indus River valley); the teenage commander of Muslim troops, Muhammad ibn al-Qasim, marched through southern Iran to conquer and establish an initial base at Daibul, the main city in the Indus delta. From it he conquered other major cities in the region now known as Pakistan, including the religious center at Multan and the political cap-

ital of Sind, Brahmanabad (where the city of Mansura would later be built under the Abbasids). These first Muslim colonies in Sind lived on, but little about them is documented, and they were doubtless almost completely autonomous. Nevertheless, recent archaeological evidence suggests that they maintained ties of trade, at least with other parts of the Islamic world such as Iran and Syria.

During the expansion of the caliphal empire, the Islamic community itself spread beyond the empire. Whereas the spread of the empire was carried out mainly by armies, the spread of the Islamic faith beyond the caliphate's borders was usually the work of merchants and pious preachers. Kharijite merchants from North Africa, for example, appear to have been the first to bring Islam to the populations of sub-Saharan West Africa. The main spreading of the Islamic community, however, took place within the caliphal empire itself. In many parts of the empire, even in those conquered early on, such as Egypt or Iran, the population remained predominantly non-Muslim for centuries. With time, more of these conquered peoples embraced Islam; estimates suggest that in the Near Eastern provinces Muslims became the majority only after about 850 C.E. In other words, during the golden age of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates Muslims were still a minority in the lands they ruled. The empire's conquered populations were gradually won over to Islam for various reasons. Forced conversions were rare, but in some cases the imposition of higher taxes on non-Muslims may have created an economic incentive for embracing Islam. For the most part, however, the gradual Islamization of the empire's populations was part of a complex transformation of the whole social environment, involving many factors that impinged simultaneously on the individual and the family: economic and political advantage, social mobility, linguistic and cultural affinities, marriage and kinship requirements, and, above all, the intrinsic appeal of Islam as a belief system.

Another important feature of this period was continuing rivalry for the caliphate itself, that is, for supreme political power in the empire. On the pragmatic side there were grumblings or actual uprisings directed against established caliphs, and various measures (such as transforming the army) were taken by the caliphs themselves to safeguard their power. But the ideological struggle over the meaning of the caliphate and the legitimacy of various contenders' claims to it also continued unabated in this period. Although the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik and his successors were able to build a fairly firm support base for themselves after the Second Civil War, they nonetheless faced widespread opposition. The long-standing opposition of the Shiites and Kharijites continued. The Umayyads used garrison troops to control numerous small Kharijite insurrections as well as more serious uprisings such as that mounted by the Alid leader Zayd ibn Ali in Kufa in 740. But the Umayyads were also opposed by many new converts to Islam, most of them *mawali*, or clients, of Arab tribes, who felt that

their conversion should have entitled them to equal treatment with other Muslims, particularly the lower rate of taxes that Arab Muslims enjoyed. A number of pious Muslims backed the new converts in this claim, however, or felt that the Umayyads had discredited themselves in some other way by their earlier actions. Such concerns may have underlain the obscure *qadariyya* movement (on the surface, a debate over the degree to which God's omnipotence limited human independence and responsibility) that plagued the last decades of Umayyad rule. On a more mundane level, the later Umayyads faced a crisis as agricultural lands were abandoned in the two richest provinces of the empire, Egypt and Iraq. The full reasons for this phenomenon are not known—it was probably linked in part to the conversion to Islam of the indigenous peasantry—but whatever the causes, this abandonment disrupted the flow of taxes and in some cases was reversed only through draconian measures that further enhanced the Umayyads' reputation for harsh and unjust rule.

The Umayyads were not blind to their opponents' varied claims, and they made serious efforts to establish themselves as legitimate heads of the Islamic community and rulers of the state. They encouraged scholars to gather and compile reports about the origins of Islam (the Prophet's life and career, the history of the early community, and so on). In this way, the Umayyads played a central role in establishing a Muslim identity, because the origin story affirmed that the Islamic com-

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is the third holiest site in Islam. Built over the remains of Solomon's temple, the structure is thought by many Muslims to mark the spot from which Muhammad began his night journey to heaven.

munity they led was the direct descendant of Muhammad's own, and that it followed his teachings and those of the Quran—propositions to which Muslims still adhere. The Umayyads also asserted their legitimacy by continuing the ancient tradition of royal patronage for sumptuous religious buildings, notably the Dome of Rock in Jerusalem and the Umayyad mosque in Damascus—two of the first outstanding examples of Islamic architecture. The Umayyads' support for campaigns of expansion and conquest also helped bolster their claim to being legitimate rulers of the Islamic community.

Despite these efforts, however, opposition to the Umayyads intensified during the second quarter of the eighth century. At the same time divisions within their Syrian-based army—the product of clashes during the Second Civil War and rivalry over royal patronage—made the army an increasingly unreliable support for the Umayyad regime. Yet it was just at this time that ceaseless campaigning on the Byzantine frontiers and stubborn internal opposition made firm support indispensable. The Alids and their Shiite supporters proved especially troublesome to the Umayyads, fomenting numerous uprisings in the last decades of Umayyad rule. Eventually, it was another branch of Muhammad's family (the Abbasids), however, that finally overthrew the Umayyads and occupied the caliphate in 750. Unlike the Alids and their Shiite partisans, the Abbasids had patiently organized an underground opposition movement and built up a secure power base before rising in open revolt. Moreover, when they organized their rebellion against the Umayyads from the province of Khurasan in northeastern

Courtyard of the Great Mosque in Damascus, founded in the early eighth century. The walls were once entirely covered with glittering mosaics, largely covered with whitewash in this photograph taken in the early twentieth century but now restored.

Iran, the Abbasids carefully kept secret their own identity as claimants to the caliphate, rallying supporters instead in the name of "the family of Muhammad." This vague appeal enabled them both to avoid detection by the Umayyads and to win the backing of many among the Shiites (who naturally assumed that the movement was in favor of an Alid) and of many other disgruntled groups who yearned for more righteous leadership than they thought the Umayyads had provided. Only after decisively defeating Umayyad armies in several battles in Iran and Iraq, and killing the caliph and many Umayyad princes, did the Abbasid leader Abu l-Abbas al-Saffah come out in the open and receive the oath of allegiance as caliph.

For several turbulent years the Abbasid caliphs al-Saffah (r. 750–54) and Abu Jafar al-Mansur (r. 754–75) consolidated their power against rivals within the Abbasid family, disgruntled Alids, and former powerful supporters such as the Abbasids' agent Abu Muslim, who had largely engineered the rebellion in Khurasan. By about 756, however, the Abbasid dynasty's power was securely established, and the Abbasids were to occupy the caliphate for the remainder of its existence (that is, from 750 until 1258), although after about 950 their real power was severely curtailed by a succession of secular powerholders. The first Abbasids claimed to be starting the caliphate anew, purging it of the evils of their Umayyad predecessors. Shortly after coming to power, the second Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur, founded a new imperial capital at Baghdad, on the Tigris River in Iraq, to symbolize this break with the impious Umayyad past. Many Islamic rulers of later periods would follow this precedent by founding new capitals to symbolize the start of what they claimed to be a new era.

Even the Abbasids' overthrow of the Umayyads did not end the struggle over the caliphate, however. The Shiites still believed that only an Alid could legitimately lead the community, so they were usually no more favorably disposed to the Abbasids than they had been to the Umayyads. The complex relationship between these two branches of the Prophet's family, the Abbasids and the Alids, is a central theme of Abbasid history (and of many historical texts written in this and later periods). The reverence that many early Muslims felt for the family of the Prophet Muhammad, indeed for the entire Hashim clan, led some Abbasid caliphs, such as al-Mansur and al-Mahdi (r. 775–85), to favor their Alid contemporaries by including them at court, seeking their advice, and otherwise trying to win their support. Other Abbasids, such as Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809), were suspicious of the Alids, whom they assumed to be conspiring for the caliphate. For their part, the Alids were also divided in their attitude toward the Abbasids, which naturally varied in some measure with the Abbasids' policies toward them. Some Alids—such as the brothers Ibrahim and Muhammad ibn Abd Allah (d. 762–763) and al-

The Abbasid capital at Baghdad, founded in 762 as reconstructed on the basis of medieval descriptions. The caliph's palace and mosque stood in the center of a vast esplanade surrounded by shops and residences.

Husayn ibn Ali (d. 786), and their more radical supporters—could not let go of the idea that they were more entitled to rule than the Abbasid "upstarts," and rose in rebellion, particularly if the reigning Abbasid had taken a hard line toward them. Others, such as Jafar al-Sadiq (702/3–765), were more prudent in dealing with the Abbasids and advanced a special Alid claim to rule in terms of a strictly religious leadership. By the late eighth century, if not earlier, some Shiites had developed a clearly articulated concept of the imamate (the office of the imam, or head of the community), which posited that only an Alid in a certain line of descent from the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib could rightfully claim leadership of the Muslim community. The social upshot of this was a gradually hardening sense among the Alids' Shiite supporters that they formed a distinct, separate group within the Muslim community, identified with the fortunes of the Alid imams.

This sense of Shiite separateness from what was becoming the Sunni majority in the Islamic community begins to be visible by the beginning of the ninth century at the latest; from that time on, Shiites and Sunnis often appear as rival social and political factions in the life of Baghdad and many other places in the Islamic world, independent of the existence in a particular historical moment of an Alid claimant to power. Following the abortive rebellion of al-Husayn ibn Ali in the Hejaz in 786, some Alids and their supporters seem to have decided that the Abbasids were too powerful near the empire's centers of power to be challenged there, and they established small, independent states in inaccessible regions, such as the wild mountain country south of the Caspian Sea, in Yemen, or in the far western reaches of North Africa. From these new bases, and from underground movements secretly organized in the heart of the empire, the Shiites eventually mounted more effective challenges to Abbasid rule.

This struggle for the position of caliph also raged within the ruling dynasty (whether Umayyad or Abbasid), because there was no clear tradition or rule of succession. Many caliphs found themselves confronted by insurrections mounted by, or in the name of, their own brothers, uncles, or other close relatives. Powerful

factions in the army, bureaucracy, caliphal court, and caliphal family (the different mothers of two rival half-brothers, for example) lent their support to the claimant whom they thought would best serve their own interests. Some caliphs, remembering their own close call at accession, hoped to spare their offspring the same tribulations and drew up detailed wills laying out the exact order of succession of several sons. Such arrangements seldom worked out as intended, however.

A major example of this was the bitter civil war that broke out following the death of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid in 809. Despite the fact that al-Rashid had made strenuous efforts to regulate the succession, al-Rashid's son Muhammad al-Amin (r. 809–813) was overthrown by his brother al-Mamun (r. 813–33), who had been governor of Khurasan. Underlying the dispute was a long-lasting tension between Baghdad and Khurasan, with pro-Baghdad and pro-Khurasan factions in the army, the court, and the landed aristocracy backing either al-Amin or al-Mamun. Al-Mamun's attempt to govern the empire from Marv, his capital in Khurasan, aroused great discontent, and in 819 he moved his court to Baghdad. By then, however, the civil war's disruptive events had done much to undermine the Abbasids' legitimacy. These included not only the long siege of Baghdad and its inhabitants and the execution of al-Amin but also al-Mamun's effort to win Shiite support by backing, for a time, an Alid as his heir-apparent—only to drop him from succession later, when the idea proved a political embarrassment. This episode exacerbated tensions between Sunni backers of the Abbasids and the Shiites, both of whom felt victimized in ways that caused people to question Abbasid legitimacy.

Abbasid legitimacy was also undermined by clashes with a religious elite increasingly jealous of its right to interpret nascent Islamic law. By the ninth century religious scholars expert in the Quran and the sayings of the prophet had come to feel that *they*—not the caliphs—should be the final arbiters in matters of law. The *mihna*, or inquisition, instituted by the Abbasid caliphs between 833 and 848—which revolved around a theological doctrine known as *Mutazilism* and focused on the question of whether the Quran text was created or eternal—was in part an effort by the caliphs to enforce their claims to legal absolutism. The main result of this episode, however, was to make heroes out of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855) and other religious scholars in Baghdad who had led the opposition.

Development of the Caliphal Army and Administration

This period (700–950) was also marked by important developments in key institutions of the caliphate and the Muslim empire, particularly the army and the imperial bureaucracy. The later Umayyads tried to build a potent new army based on the Arab tribes of Syria, which they tied to their interests through

lavish caliphal patronage. The early Abbasid armies, by contrast, relied especially on soldiers from Khurasan (often settlers of Arabian origin) whom the first Abbasids had ridden to power. Although the Arabian and Syrian tribes that constituted the core of the Umayyad army were not completely swept away, it was the Khurasanians and their descendants—the *abna al-dawla,* or "sons of the revolution," now mostly settled in Iraq—who dominated the Abbasid military establishment for almost a century after the Abbasids' accession in 750. But both the Umayyad and early Abbasid armies were composed mainly of ordinary men with ordinary social ties (that is, to their families, tribes, places of origin, and so on). In many cases, soldiers were only on duty part time or were recruited by the army as auxiliaries as occasion demanded. Despite their loose structure and lack of professional training, such armies enabled the Umayyads and Abbasids to extend the empire's borders, quell dissident movements, and launch the annual summer raids against the Byzantines in Anatolia.

This pattern of loose army organization was gradually replaced during the ninth century by a new model built around smaller, highly trained corps of full-time professional soldiers (*ghulams*), who lived and worked as tight cadres and who often had few permanent ties to the rest of society (many were not even married). The change began when the caliph al-Mutasim (r. 833–42) assembled a bodyguard of mercenaries—many but not all of them slaves (*mamluks*) of Turkish origin, or recently freed slaves. The idea was that such soldiers would be completely loyal to the ruler who had raised them to power, because they had few ties to the families, tribes, or institutions of the capital and central lands of the empire. Because these mercenaries were professionally trained, they were more effective in the field than other recruits, and they came to form an increasingly large segment of the army. They helped secure al-Mutasim against potential rivals and enabled him to impose much tighter control over the provinces of the empire (especially over their taxes). To reduce frictions between the Arabic-speaking population of Baghdad and the soldiery, who often did not even speak Arabic, al-Mutasim constructed an enormous new capital at Samarra, roughly sixty-five miles (one hundred km) north of Baghdad on the east bank of the Tigris. The vast scale of the new capital offers some indication of the size of his army, and of the wealth he was able to collect in taxes to pay for it.

The growth of the professional army continued under al-Mutasim's successors al-Wathiq (r. 842–47) and al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61). Moreover, governorships of important provinces were increasingly assigned to key commanders in the new army rather than to the caliph's kinsmen or other civilian notables, and more traditional units of the army were sidelined. Eventually, this mighty military machine got out of hand, however, proving itself more effective as an agent of factional politics than as a force of imperial defense. In 861 army commanders

conspired to assassinate the caliph al-Mutawakkil, ushering in a decade of chaos during which military factions fought among themselves for supremacy and for dwindling revenues, making and unmaking four caliphs in Samarra in the process. Meanwhile, the empire's affairs outside Iraq were neglected; many provinces were left on their own, and numerous rebellions sprang up, some of which seized entire regions and established virtually independent states, while others threatened to seize Baghdad itself.

Under the late Umayyads and Abbasids the imperial administration also underwent significant changes, aimed at creating a unified bureaucracy under caliphal oversight that could manage the empire—and particularly its taxes—more effectively. Talented administrators such as Abd al-Hamid ibn Yahya (d. 750) and Ibn al-Muqaffa (720–756) oversaw the first efforts to professionalize the bureaucracy, including the development of a new, lucid Arabic prose style. The Abbasids' rise to power brought an increase in the prominence of individuals and families hailing from Iran, especially Khurasan, not only in the army but also in the caliphal court and in governmental institutions generally, including the administration. The viziers or heads of this administration, such as the famed viziers of the Barmakid family, were highly educated, and as heads of a vast bureaucracy, they often held great power in the Abbasid government. At its height around the mid-ninth century the Abbasid administration was composed of a large number of separate departments (*diwans*), staffed by thousands of clerks or secretaries (*kuttab*) who ran this administrative machinery. The administration dealt with assessment and collection of land taxes from the various provinces, with incomes from state lands and confiscated property and with other kinds of income, as well as with disbursements to the army and to administrators and others on government salary. It included a treasury that balanced receipts and expenses, an accounting office, an intelligence service, a chancery office to handle official correspondence, and a department for the caliph's special court of appeal (*mazalim*). Eventually, the costs of running such a vast bureaucracy outstripped revenues, however. Struggles arose between the caliphs and their increasingly petulant army commanders and troops for control of the bureaucracy and the revenues it could provide. In a few cases, powerful army chiefs actually secured appointments as viziers—usually with disastrous results because most military men lacked the extensive scribal training, in everything from tax assessment and accounting to literature and composition, required of an effective vizier.

After the chaos of the 860s, the caliphate enjoyed a temporary resurgence of power because several caliphs had close ties to the army chiefs. With the help of some cooperative viziers, they were able to put down the most threatening rebellions. The caliph al-Mutadid (r. 892–902) was able to regain control over Iraq, northern Mesopotamia, Al-Jazirah, northern Syria, and parts of western Iran.

Other areas of the empire—including much of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Iran, North Africa, and Yemen—were effectively autonomous under their "governors" or local dynasties, however, and made little or no real financial or military contribution to the caliphate. But even areas that were under Abbasid control at the beginning of the tenth century now consisted of a mosaic of units headed by powerful governors, tribes, or local families, and they were weakly integrated with the caliphate. A vigorous and skillful caliph such as al-Mutadid could rely on them for support, but when the caliphal grip weakened again these areas also could venture to stand on their own. The caliphal grip weakened decisively after 908, and the next forty years in Baghdad were marked by continual infighting of bureaucratic and army factions for control of the caliphs and whatever revenues could be raised by his bureaucracy, culminating in a military takeover in 932. Thereafter the Abbasid caliphs had no trustworthy units to rely on, and key army factions ensured that the civilian bureaucracy paid them first.

The intensity of the struggle was exacerbated by a general shortage of money, generated by disarray and extravagance in the bureaucracy, loss of revenues from independent provinces and recalcitrant tax farmers, and an unfortunate decline in the agrarian productivity of Iraq itself, formerly the caliphate's financial mainstay. To cope with the revenue shortage, the Abbasids began to rely on an institution called *iqta* (loosely translated as "fief," although the term had a wide and variable range of meanings). Iqta was a kind of administrative shortcut whereby a general or soldier was given the right to collect tax revenues directly from a certain district. The advantage in the short term was that the troops were paid even if the treasury was empty, and the relevant parts of the bureaucracy could be eliminated. The disadvantages, however, particularly the potential for abuse of the peasantry and loss of administrative oversight, were significant.

As a result of these developments the once powerful Abbasid caliphs were little more than figureheads by the 940s, endowed with symbolic religious authority, but lacking real political or military power or financial resources of their own. That power and access to resources had passed to powerful military figures, especially the one who could occupy the coveted position as the caliph's commander-in-chief (*amir al-umara*). As the power of the caliphate was choked off, leaders of the regional and local polities that emerged competed against one another for control of Baghdad and the privilege of being the caliph's "protector." The most noteworthy of these protectors were the chiefs of the powerful Buyid family of northwestern Iran (who played this role from 945 to 1055) and the sultans of the Turkish Seljuk dynasty (who dominated Baghdad from 1055 until the mid-twelfth century). From the mid-tenth century until the Mongols ended the caliphate in 1258, the Abbasid caliphs were recognized as overlords in many parts of the Islamic world, but only in a symbolic sense. Only on a few occasions did

the Abbasids succeed in regaining, albeit briefly, some of their lost power.

Knowledge of the caliphs' eventual demise, however, must not overshadow the many positive achievements that took place during the age of the imperial caliphate. The expansion of the empire created the political haven in which the new faith of Islam established itself among new populations from Spain to India. Moreover, the imperial caliphate gave birth to a sophisticated and richly varied new civilization in Eurasia, culturally the most advanced of its day. This cultural genesis was linked to a noteworthy process of urbanization that took place during the early Islamic centuries; although urban life in the Mediterranean basin had declined sharply in late antiquity, the early Islamic era saw a revival of urban centers and of the commerce and culture usually associated with them. The early military garrisons of the first conquest days—Kufa, Basra, Marv, Hims, Fustat, Qayrawan—soon grew into bustling towns to which Muslims of divergent cultural backgrounds, especially new converts, were drawn. In the government offices, private salons, and marketplaces of such towns, as well as of the imperial capitals of Damascus and Baghdad, a new Islamic literary culture in Arabic began to crystallize—all the more remarkable because before the rise of Islam, Arabic had no tradition of written literature. Poetry, grammar, Quranic studies, history, biography, law, theology, philosophy, geography, the natural sciences—all were elaborated in Arabic and in a form that was distinctively Islamic.

The social base supporting this new Arabic-Islamic culture was to a certain extent bipartite. The religiously inclined cultivated such fields as Quranic studies, prophetic traditions, religious law, and theology, while topics such as history, philosophy, and statecraft were sponsored particularly by the scribes of the imperial bureaucracy, who were often learned in Sasanian and other traditions of statecraft. Poetry, from the start the soul of the Arabic literary tradition, was cultivated by both groups in religious and secular varieties. The full development of Arabic-Islamic literary culture continued long after 950, of course, but its foundations were laid, its first remarkable monuments completed, and many of its distinctive genres and forms were first established during the age of the imperial caliphate.

The caliphs also presided, wittingly or not, over economic developments that had global repercussions. The vast extent and relative stability of the empire over almost two centuries—as well as the continuous circulation within it of soldiers, administrators, pilgrims heading to or from Mecca, and scholars wishing to study with renowned teachers—helped to keep routes open and made it easier for merchants to travel far and wide. The rise of Arabic as a common written language made it easier for merchants from distant parts of the empire to communicate. Moreover, merchants in the Islamic domains in this era were usually unencumbered by duties or the need for special travel documents. Meanwhile, the rise of large cities created a base of demand for a variety of products, as well

as centers of culture. In its heyday in the early ninth century, Baghdad appears to have been a city of about a million inhabitants—a staggeringly large size for preindustrial times—and had to import even its basic food supplies from sources some distance away. Some luxury goods in demand in Baghdad, particularly among the political and commercial elites, were brought from halfway around the globe. Baghdad grew to a size unmatched by other cities, but smaller cities also contributed to the economic boom. The flourishing port city of Siraf, on the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf, symbolizes one dimension of this commercial activity. It was a key transit point for foodstuffs coming from Oman, as well as textiles and other goods entering the caliphal domains from east Africa, India, and beyond.

In the other direction hoards of Abbasid gold coins found around the Baltic Sea are silent reminders of a once-thriving commercial connection that helped revitalize the economy of northern Europe and may have helped stimulate the ninth-century revival of culture and economy commonly called the Carolingian renaissance. The discovery of North African coins in Abbasid-period archaeological sites in Jordan, or Iraqi (or Chinese) ceramics found in Egypt, attest to yet other dimensions of this thriving commerce. It is appropriate to think of much of Eurasia in this period as a single, vast economic body, of which Abbasid Baghdad in particular was the heart, pumping the commercial lifeblood that kept the system alive. Iraq's prosperity in particular, with its rich tax base and thriving commerce, was an important element contributing to the political power and cultural brilliance of the high caliphate. When Iraq's agrarian prosperity began to wane in the tenth century—a result of such varied factors as deterioration of vital irrigation works, salinization of the soil, and sheer administrative mismanagement—the caliphs found themselves increasingly unable to pay the bills of their enormous government operations. This in turn sparked the infighting among military and administrative factions that characterized the long decline of Abbasid power.

Local Autonomy, Decentralization, and Regionalism Through 1100

The capture of Baghdad by the Buyids in 945, and their reduction of the caliphs to little more than figureheads, was merely the climax of a long process of change that saw ever more parts of the Islamic empire gradually slip beyond the caliphs' real control. The emergence on the former empire's terrain of autonomous or independent political units—what some historians call a "commonwealth" of regional Muslim states, united by their participation in an emerging Islamic culture—makes tracing the political history of the Islamic community after about 900 C.E. much more difficult than it is for earlier periods, when there existed a single main center of polit-

propagnda efforts, however, the Fatimids failed to gain recognition in Baghdad, then under control of (Twelver) Shiite Buyids.

Under the caliphs al-Aziz (r. 975–96), al-Hakim (r. 996–1021), and al-Zahir (r. 1021–36), the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt became the most powerful state in the Islamic world and displayed a durability that enabled it to weather numerous crisis—even the protracted chaos and terror unleashed by al-Hakim, whose repressions of Egypt's large Christian population, assassination of many of his key advisers and commanders, and many other unpredictable measures would have undone a less stable regime. Fatimid might was based on a prosperous economy, an efficient, centralized administration, a powerful army, and skilled use of military governors to manage complex provinces, particularly Syria. The economy burgeoned partly because of a fortuitous increase in international trade passing through Egypt. This quickening of trade was to some extent the result of increasing demand in Europe, which was reviving economically, but it was also fostered by the instability of Iraq at this time, which caused merchants coming from the east to favor the Red Sea route to the Mediterranean.

The Fatimids also had access to plentiful gold supplies in Nubia (along the Upper Nile), which helped them to pay their armies and to mount the ambitious program of missionary work aimed at spreading recognition of the Fatimid caliphate. Egypt's rich farmland provided a steady flow of tax revenues, thanks to careful management by the Fatimid bureaucracy, supervised by a series of tal-

CHAPTER TWO

Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND PRACTICE IN ISLAM

Vincent J. Cornell

Knowledge without practice is like a tree without fruit.

—The Moroccan Sufi Ahmad ibn Ashir of Salé

Faith in Islam is never blind. Although belief in the unseen is just as important in Islam as it is in other religions, there comes a point at which the spiritually aware human being transcends the level of simple faith. At this point the person is more than just a believer, for his or her spiritual consciousness has penetrated the fog of the unseen, leading to knowledge of the true nature of things. The Quran speaks of this progression from faith to knowledge as an inward metamorphosis in which belief (*iman*) is transformed into certainty (*yaqin*). This certainty is expressed in the Quran in terms of three types of knowledge of God, which were discussed by philosophers, mystics, theologians, and jurists during the Islamic Middle Period (the ninth through fifteenth centuries C.E.).

(Left) Thousands of Muslims gather for communal worship at the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore, Pakistan, to celebrate the Feast of the Sacrifice that commemorates the willingness of Ibrahim (the Biblical Abraham) to sacrifice his son and the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.