

History Research Center

history of the Islamic world

In the year 610 a 40-year-old Arabian merchant given to lengthy periods of fasting and spiritual withdrawal received a divine message from the archangel Gabriel. The angel told him, "Recite: 'In the name of thy Lord who created, created man of a blood-clot.' Recite: 'and thy Lord is the most bountiful, who taught by the pen, taught man what he knew not. No, indeed: surely man waxes insolent for he thinks himself self-sufficient. Surely unto thy Lord is the returning.'" (Q:96: 1–5) Over the course of the next 22 years until his death in 632, the prophet [Muhammad](#) continued to receive divine revelations commanding him to profess and obey the one true God and concerning the end of the world, the last judgment, the infinite mercy of God, and the delights of heaven awaiting those who followed his path and submitted to his will; the torments of the hellfire awaiting unrepentant sinners; social, religious, legal, and ethical norms; and the moral injunction to enjoin whatever God prescribed and forbid whatever he prohibited.

Muhammad was born into a family of the [Quraysh](#) tribe in Mecca, a town now in Saudi Arabia. The Quraysh were polytheists, as were many of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. But the peninsula was also inhabited by tribes of Jews and by Monophysite and Nestorian Christians, and Muhammad's contacts with these people and their sacred texts probably spurred his desire to restore the pure unadulterated monotheism that the patriarch Abraham practiced. In the two decades that Muhammad preached the message of submission (*Islam*, "submission") to God revealed to him in the divine revelations, Muhammad created the third monotheistic religion as a culmination and perfection of Judaism and Christianity. After his death his disciples gathered together all the revelations and arranged them into the Quran. Muslims believe that the Quran is not a human creation; it is entirely the literal word of God dictated to Muhammad, whom God calls the messenger of God (*rusul Allah*) and the "seal of the prophets (*khatm al-anbiya*)" (Q 33:40), after whom there shall be no further prophets.

The impact of Muhammad's preaching created a social revolution comparable to that sparked by the preachings of [Jesus of Nazareth](#). Attracted by the beauty of the quranic recitations and Muhammad's charismatic preaching, more and more tribes converted to Islam and entered into formal agreements with Muhammad, promising him and his followers political support and protection. But his own tribe, the Quraysh, opposed him: As custodians of the shrine of the pagan gods at Mecca, they had a vested interest in preserving polytheism and tribal customs that the new religion explicitly condemned. At first it appeared that the Quraysh would prevail: In the year 622 they forced Muhammad and his followers to emigrate to Medina.

Yet Muslims cherish the year 622 and consider it the beginning of the Islamic era. The migration (or *hejira*) from the city of Mecca to the oasis of Yathrib, later called Medinat al-Nabi, city of the Prophet, marks the birth of the Islamic community, the [umma](#). The *umma* was a revolutionary concept. Its individual and tribal members were bound together not by bloodline and tribal affiliation but by adherence to a new religious, political, and social order based upon the precepts of the [Quran](#) and the divine authority invested in Muhammad as God's chosen messenger. Indeed, the revelations that Muhammad received during the Medinan period were overwhelmingly social, ethical, and legal, and the decisions he took to structure and consolidate the Medinan community would lay the foundations for the formation of the Islamic state ([caliphate](#)) and Islamic law ([sharia](#)).

The people of Medina who had welcomed Muhammad to the oasis and heeded his revelations of Allah's truths were called *ansar*, "the helpers." The Quraysh enemies controlled the lucrative trade routes into and out of Mecca. Unable to operate freely as merchants or nomads, Muhammad and his fellow migrants from Mecca, traditionally known as his companions, initially supported themselves by staging raids (*ghazu*) upon these caravans. Their raiding yielded valuable booty and livestock. Pitched battles broke out between Muhammad's supporters and the Quraysh and their allies. Though outnumbered, Muhammad won decisive battles at the Well of Badr in 624 and after a defeat at the Battle of Uhud in 625 a stunning victory at the Battle of the Trench in 627. This win encouraged many more tribes to join the *umma* in Medina.

These battles also had important repercussions for Muhammad's relations with the Jewish tribes of Medina. In 622 the Meccan Muslims, Jews, and Medinan Arabs signed the [Constitution of Medina](#), an agreement of mutual cooperation pledging, among other things, to assist one another actively in defending Medina from outside attacks and not to side with an external enemy. The Jewish Banu Nadhir tribe, who allegedly reneged on this agreement and plotted to kill Muhammad, were expelled from Yathrib to the town of Khaybar. There they joined forces with another Jewish tribe, the Banu Qaynuqa, against Muhammad. They were

brave fighters but lacked strategic skill and organization. The Jews of Khaybar, after having "fought like lions," let go of the proud Hasmonean sword and surrendered. Hundreds of Jewish Khaybar warriors were killed, and their wives and children were sold into slavery. A third Jewish tribe called the Banu Qurayza also resided at the oasis of Medina. Initially they fought alongside the Muslims in the Battle of the Trench. Yet they later were persuaded by the exiled Banu Nadhir to change allegiances and support the rival Meccans. After the defeat and withdrawal of the Meccan forces from Medina, Muhammad led his troops into the neighborhood of the Banu Qurayza, who finally surrendered unconditionally after some 25 days of fighting. Despite their unconditional surrender, however, in the ensuing negotiations the arbitrator of the conflict convinced Muhammad to massacre the rebels and sell their women and children into slavery.

Partly as a response to the political conflict with the Jewish tribes, in the second year of his Hijra from Mecca to Medina, Muhammad decreed that the direction of prayer, called the *qibla*, was no longer to be toward Jerusalem but rather in the direction of the cubelike shrine that had been a center of worship for previous Arab tribes, the shrine or stone house called the [Kaaba](#) in the city of Mecca. The Kaaba stood on the same site on which the exiled patriarch Abraham and his son Ishmael had built the sacred house. When Muhammad returned in triumph to Mecca in 630, he reconsecrated the Kaaba to Allah (God) utilizing the habits, symbols, and customs of the old religions to invigorate his new religion.

The sanctuary of the Arab forefathers as well as the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca, both of which were important in pre-Islamic religions, now were consecrated to Islam. Muhammad therefore was welcomed as less of a dangerous revolutionary than a necessary restorer of the best of the past, to reach its culmination in Islam.

The prophet Muhammad succeeded in doing what no other Arab ruler had done before him: unite the disparate and fractious tribes under a single ruler and a single monotheistic faith. Muhammad's new theocratic state had united Mecca, Medina, and many of the neighboring Bedouin tribes. When the Prophet died in 632, the area threatened a political volcanic explosion. Various tribal leaders created the famous secession, known in Arabic as the *ridda*. Muhammad had named no successor and left no clear guidelines of how a successor should be chosen, other than expressing a desire that he should be a member of the Quraysh. His Muslim community elected a vicar, or deputy, of the Prophet as guardian and executor of the law and as the temporal head of the community, called a caliph. [Abu Bakr](#), Muhammad's father-in-law, was the first caliph, ruling from 632 to 634.

Muhammad's sense of divine mission to lead all people, not just the Arabs, to surrender to the will of God prompted Muhammad to send expeditions to Byzantium to urge the Byzantines and others to submit to Islamic rule. Within 80 years after the Prophet's death, the Muslims created a vast empire that extended from Sind (India) in the east to the Iberian Peninsula in the west, ruling over an area encompassing much of the old Roman Empire.

The Islamic empire was an heir of the Roman Empire not only geographically but also culturally, for it, too, created a new civilization. As the Romans had before them, the Muslims succeeded in uniting an immense territory of ethnically and religiously diverse peoples into a distinct civilization conjoined by religion for those who embraced Islam, language ([Arabic](#)), culture, and the rule of Islamic law.

Unifying Features of Islamic Society and Culture

Muhammad created the institutions that defined the contours of Islamic society and culture. Islam as a religion was based upon five pillars: the profession of the one true God, ritual prayer five times a day, fasting during the month of [Ramadan](#), payment of the alms tax, and pilgrimage to Mecca. Specific rules for waging the just or "holy" war ([jihad](#)) were also instituted. At Medina Muhammad built a mosque adjacent to his house that became not only the place of religious worship but the political and administrative center of the community. From the mosque pulpit Muhammad preached and announced policies, declared war or peace, and arbitrated disputes between members of the community. After Muhammad's death the mosque continued to be the focus of Muslim religious, cultural, social, and political life.

The principles of communal life as revealed in the Quranic revelations and the personal experiences of Muhammad revolved around three basic notions: (1) spiritual fraternity and love among all Muslims; (2) mutual respect, loyalty, and collaboration between the Muslims and those non-Muslim tribes with whom Muhammad established political alliances; and (3) warfare against the enemies of the *umma*. The laws regarding the collection of communal alms tax (*zakat*), the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the just distribution of war booty, and the proper norms of waging jihad instituted at Medina were fundamental in the consolidation of Islamic society as it spread beyond the borders of Arabia.

The Constitution of Medina

The Constitution of Medina was a treaty that Muhammad entered into with the Jewish and Arab tribes of the oasis of Medina in 622. Muslims and Jews were each to profess and strictly follow their respective religions. Each community was to be economically autonomous, but the obligatory attendance at communal councils would ensure political solidarity. In the event of an external threat, all the signatories of the constitution should band together to defend the community, protect its inviolability, and contribute to financing the war effort. As described previously, the treaty between the Jewish tribes and the Muslims fell apart, resulting in the expulsion and murder of many Jews. The Constitution of Medina did, however, lay the blueprint of the systematization of relations between the state and its religious minorities. Such an arrangement was possible with Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, whom the Quran identified as the "[People of the Book](#)," whose revelations were recognized as divine and valid.

The Quran forbade forcible conversion, but it did stress that the People of the Book should be coerced into submitting to Muslim rule, under which they were allowed to practice their religions and manage their internal affairs in exchange for governance and payment of a poll tax called *jizya*. On the other hand, they were exempt from paying or benefiting from the Islamic religious tax (*zakat*).

Competing Powers: The Byzantines and Sassanians

Muhammad's new religion competed with two major powers, the Byzantine and the Sassanian (Sassanid). The Byzantine Christians had their capital at Byzantium, formerly the city of Constantinople. The Byzantine emperor ruled through Greek-speaking civil servants the great cities of the eastern Mediterranean, Antioch, Syria, and Alexandria in Egypt. Christianity with local doctrinal variations was practiced by Armenians in Anatolia, Syrians in Syria, and Coptic Christians in Egypt.

The second great empire was the Sassanian. Their rule arched over Iran and Iraq into Central Asia. The original Sassanian family state was a Persian-speaking people of southern Iran who practiced Zoroastrianism. This religion was associated with the philosopher Zoroaster (d. ca. 1200 BCE), who believed the universe beneath the supreme God was a battleground upon which good and evil spirits contended for control. Though the victory of good over evil was assured, men and women of virtue and ritual purity could hasten the outcome. The Sassanian followers of Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism had their capital at Ctesiphon, located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

The Byzantines and Sassanians had long been bitter rivals engaging in a seemingly endless cycle of invasions, wars, and truces, only to be ended by further outbursts of warfare. Often a truce might come about because each side was also simultaneously under the threat of the barbarian invasions. Protracted wars, epidemics of plague, and the economic decline due to the disruptions in agricultural production and trade that these engendered left both empires weakened and ripe pickings for the strong and motivated armies of Islam. An important factor contributing to the swiftness of the Islamic conquests was the religious persecution that minority populations within each realm had suffered. Jews suffered under both the Byzantine emperor [Heraclius](#) and the Persian shah Khosrau II. The defection of the Ghassanid Monophysites from Heraclius's army resulted in the Islamic conquests of Syria and Palestine.

The area that was to come under Islamic rule was a rich tapestry of languages, cultures, and religions. In Ctesiphon Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Christian Nestorianism, and Judaism flourished. Persian language dialects, particularly Pahlavi, were spoken, as were Aramaic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew and Arabic, and Syriac. Across the Red Sea the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia celebrated Coptic Christianity as its official religion. Yemen, in southwest Arabia, had its own language, which differed from Arabic spoken elsewhere in Arabia, and its own polytheistic religion. Much of the Arabian Peninsula was open desert or steppeland with isolated oases. [Bedouin](#) Arabs were nomads who pastured camels, sheeps, and goats. Other people cultivated grain and palm trees in the oases. Still others were traders and craftsmen in small market towns.

Nomads who rode camels were a numerical minority but were a mobile, armed, powerful group that joined with the town merchants to dominate the farmers and craftsmen. Nomadic groups had a strong ethos of courage, hospitality, loyalty to family, and pride of ancestry. Prominent tribal members led them. They worshipped gods thought to dwell in a sanctuary place or town sacrosanct from tribal conflict called a *haram*. A *haram* was a center of pilgrimage, sacrifice, meeting, and arbitration. A family protected the *haram* from neighboring tribes' incursions and desecrations. Religions coexisted in the oasis cities even though one particular faith predominated. Hira was a Christian center controlled by the Lakhmids, and nearby were the Ghassanids. Hijaz, in western Arabia, was a home for Jewish craftsmen, merchants, and farmers.

Caliph Umar and the Expansion of Islam

In 634 [Umar ibn al-Khattab](#) (r. 634–644) was elected to succeed Abu Bakr as the caliph of the Islamic *umma*. Umar's rise to prominence as the leader of the Islamic community is the culmination of a remarkable tale of religious conversion. Umar, a member of the Quraysh tribe, had been an archenemy of Muhammad, battling against him and going so far as to plot to kill him. Yet upon hearing his sister recite a verse from the Quran, he is said to have been so moved by the beauty of the recitation that he converted on the spot. From then on he became one of Muhammad's closest and staunchest allies and a zealous defender of Islam.

During Umar's caliphate the religious ideal of jihad was preeminent. Umar intended to create from the energetic Bedouin tribes the Dar al-Islam (Abode of Islam). In 634 Islamic warriors conquered the Byzantine fortress of Bothra. The following year they subjugated Damascus. The next year, 636, they overcame Syria. In 638 they stormed the gates of Jerusalem, invaded the city, and entered Caesarea in 640. They also took Mesopotamia. Persia in 636 and 637 suffered defeat at Qadisiyya, near the center of Hira, where Umar's men put the Sassanid army to flight. Arab armies rushed into the city of Ctesiphon. In the year 641–642 the Persian Empire succumbed at the Battle of Ninavand, near Hamadan. Next the Muslims attacked Egypt. The invaders established a center at Fustat, near modern Cairo. Alexandria fell to Muslim forces in 641. Thereafter they conquered Cyrenaica. Advance parties penetrated as far as Tunisia.

Administrative Reforms, *Jizya*, and the Pact of Umar

The expansion of Islamic rule abroad necessitated administrative and legal reforms to consolidate the caliphate. Native political and fiscal institutions were largely kept intact. Umar established an administrative superstructure to rule the newly conquered lands, introduced a public treasury to finance the needs of the empire, organized the census of the realm, was the first Muslim ruler to mint coinage, and began the process of codifying Islamic law.

Umar also contributed to the systematization of the legal status of religious minorities. Most scholars believe that the document called the Pact of Umar was redacted by doctors of the law sometime between the eighth and the 11th centuries but was attributed to Umar to lend it legitimacy. It may have been inspired by practices instituted during his rule. The Pact of Umar outlines in detail the personal status, duties, and rights of Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian *dhimmis*. [Dhimmis](#) pledged not to build new temples without obtaining permission from the ruler. They vowed to honor their allegiance to the Muslims in times of peril and not to use their places of worship to hide, aid, or abet enemies of the Muslims. They promised not to practice their religion ostentatiously, to proselytize others, or to forbid members of their community to convert to Islam. *Dhimmis* were also obliged to show deference to Muslims.

The Pact of Umar aimed to define clearly social boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims and to reinforce the superior status of the former over the latter. Hence, *dhimmis* were not to imitate the Muslims in their manner of dress, speech, or customs such as the use of honorific titles. They also could not ride horses or have temples or houses higher than those of the Muslims. While *dhimmis* were second-class citizens with respect to the Muslims, the institutionalization of *dhimmitude* contrasts with the arbitrariness of the policies governing the status of religious minorities in the Latin West and the Byzantine Empire. Moreover, the strict provisions were mainly honored in the breach during the course of the Muslim Middle Ages. In the dynasties of Umayyad Spain, Abbasid Iraq, and Fatimid and later Mamluk Egypt, Muslim rulers heavily relied on their non-Muslim subjects such as Jews and refugee European Christians whom they paid to work for them. The Christian persecution of the Jews and the Catholic and Byzantine persecutions of each other created an ample supply of skilled translators, diplomats, mediators, tax collectors, and other administrative and court officers.

The Islamization of the populations under Muslim rule was a gradual process. Contrary to popular myth, Islam was not a religion that "spread by the sword." As scholar of Islam Fred Denny notes, the aims of the conquests were not primarily religious but economic and political (Denny 36). Some converts to Islam were undoubtedly tempted by the prospect of the fiscal advantages of being a Muslim, since the *dhimmi* poll tax was higher than the Muslim [zakat](#). Large landowners and major urban merchants may have found conversion to Islam convenient and expedient. Muhammad himself as a merchant cultivated and celebrated the commercial classes. The earliest forms of Islam were urban centered and business tolerant. Not all converts were motivated by purely economic considerations, however. Many, such as Umar himself, had been drawn to Islam by the beauty of the Quran and by the simplicity of its message of this-worldly prosperity and otherworldly salvation.

Uthman, Ali, and the Seeds of Schism

The Prophet's son-in-law, [Uthman ibn Affan](#) (r. 644–656), succeeded Umar as caliph of the Islamic state. During his reign Islamic rule spread into North Africa, Cyprus, and the Caucasus. Most significantly, it was Uthman who formed a committee to fix the canonical version of the Quran and the norms of its recitation. This version was dispatched around the Islamic world, and Uthman ordered variant versions to be destroyed. Uthman ensured that Muslims globally would use the same sacred text in a process analogous to the fixing of the Bible by Christian doctors of the law in the third and fourth centuries.

Uthman was a wealthy Meccan merchant belonging to the Umayyad branch of the Quraysh tribe. He was elected to the caliphate for his piety, closeness to the Prophet as one of his first disciples, and wealth. Yet as a member of the aristocracy of Mecca, he had a heritage and acted in ways that stimulated grave discord. Some accused him of nepotism. Others accused him of violating Caliph Umar's insistence that all conquered land belong to the new Islamic state rather than to individual Arab landowners. Uthman was assassinated in 656 and succeeded by [Ali ibn Abi Talib](#) (r. 656–661), Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, who had married the Prophet's daughter, [Fatima](#). The murder of Uthman had not been avenged, and therefore Ali was at considerable risk of revenge attacks from the family.

Ali had been one of the first members of Muhammad's family to accept Islam and was among his most faithful supporters. A brilliant and brave soldier, Ali distinguished himself in all the early Islamic battles. Islamic popular legends about Ali's sword, Zulfiqar, may be likened to the Arthurian legends about Excalibur. Ali was exalted for his piety, asceticism, and perfect knowledge and understanding of the Quran and was considered a faithful, expert interpreter of the correct customs of the Prophet, the Sunna.

Ali only reluctantly accepted the caliphate, fearing suspicion of seeking to benefit from the death of Uthman. However, when he refused to try the murderers of Uthman, Uthman's nephew Muawiyya ibn Abi Sufyan (602–680), a governor of Syria, rose up against him. His rebellion was supported by Muhammad's wife, [Aisha](#), daughter of the first caliph, Abu Bakr. Civil war broke out between Ali's supporters and the partisans of Muawiyya. Ali was assassinated in 661 at Kufa, thereby making him the third of the first four caliphs to die by assassins' hands. Leadership passed to Muawiyya. Ali's assassination led to a schism between Sunnis and Shiites.

Sunnis and Shiites

The Sunnis, derived from [Sunna](#), the proper orthodox way, recognized the legitimacy of Muawiyya as well as the first four caliphs, whom they called "the rightly guided ones," whose authority was derived from the principle of the consensus of the community established from the time of the election of Abu Bakr.

Against the Sunnis were the Shiites, who were the partisans of Ali, from the Arabic *Shiat Ali*, the party of Ali, who denied the legitimacy of the three preceding caliphs and believed that Muhammad had nominated Ali to succeed him as head of the Islamic community during an event whose interpretation is disputed among Sunnis and Shiites. Ali's partisans believed that the caliphate should remain in the direct line of descent of the Prophet's family.

The political and theological dimensions of this division were comparable to those that gave rise to the Great Schism between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The Sunnis viewed the caliphs as the vicars of the Prophet and defenders of the law. The caliph was the temporal leader of the community. Authority to determine religious orthodoxy and define and adjudicate matters of religious law was invested in the *ulema* (scholars), who were specially trained in the study and interpretation of the Quran and in the interpretation of the law based on scripture, the Sunna of the Prophet, and the consensus of the community, called *ijma*. Shiism, on the other hand, did not recognize any consensus interpretation of the Quran or the law. It believed in preeminent authority of the *imam*, the leader, for imparting lessons, and it held that Muhammad had named Ali as the interpreter of doctrine. Ali, in turn, was to name his own successor, and each would name a holy recipient in a long line of succession. This line of succession was thought to have inherited the divinely endowed charisma of the Prophet.

Sunnis considered such succession blasphemy. During the conflict between Ali and Muawiyya a third group emerged and came to be known as the [Kharijites](#), meaning "those who go out." They were so called because in 658, during the arbitrations between Ali and Muawiyya over who should inherit the caliphate, the Kharijites withdrew their support from Ali and Muawiyya, claiming that the matter should be decided by God alone, who would determine the outcome of the battle. Their strict conformity to the Quran

denied that the Quraysh tribe had any special rights and asserted that the caliph could be any Muslim, irrespective of race or tribal affiliation, so long as he had the necessary talent and qualities, especially the purity, to make him the finest of all Muslims.

Various branches of the prophet Muhammad's family clamored to rule, but in the end Muawiyya and the Umayyads would prevail in the majority opinion of Islam. The Shiites, who regarded Ali and his descendants as the legitimate rulers (imams) of the community, did not relinquish their conviction that they were the rightful heirs. They had also promulgated the idea that Ali had received from Muhammad a special knowledge and spirituality that gave him a unique, esoteric understanding of the Quran. In the year 680 Ali's second son, Husayn ibn Ali, along with a group of kinsmen moved to Iraq to gather an army near Kufa to combat the forces of Muawiyya's son, Yazid. Husayn and his followers were killed in the [battle at Karbala](#). The event occurred sometime during the first 10 days of the month of Muharram, when many Muslims observed the voluntary fast of Ashura in imitation of the Prophet's custom. For Shiites the feast of Ashura would be converted into a day of great mourning, a ritual celebration of the "passion" of Husayn similar to the commemoration of Christ's crucifixion during Holy Week.

The Umayyad Caliphate

Despite the conflict of succession that resulted in the violent death of three of the four first caliphs, Muslims regard Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali as "the rightly guided caliphs," or *Khulafa' al-rashidun*, by virtue of their proximity to the Prophet as his closest companions, the consensual process by which they were elected, and the egalitarian nature of their leadership as a first among equals rather than as monarchs. This model of traditional tribal leadership broke down during the reign of Muawiyya, who ruled from about 661 to 680. Muawiyya was the first of a virtually hereditary line of Umayyad caliphs. He selected his son, Yazid, to succeed him and convinced the council of men who elected the caliph to recognize his son as ruler. This new model of caliphal succession virtually transformed the caliphate into a monarchy. The Umayyad dynasty lasted from 661 to 750 until their overthrow by the Abbasids and from 711 to 1031 in Spain.

As a sign of his break with the previous tradition, Muawiyya moved the capital to Damascus, Syria. That city was situated in a country of abundance and surplus that could feed and clothe a court, government, and army. Damascus also was a convenient city for controlling the eastern Mediterranean coastlands and the land to the east of them. Strategically, Damascus certainly was superior to Medina, and from its base the caliphate expanded across North Africa, called the [Maghrib](#) ("the Far West"). The first important Maghribi city was Qayrawan, in the Byzantine province of Africa, in modern Tunisia. The armies of Islam moved westward, reaching the Atlantic coast of Morocco by the end of the seventh century. Then they crossed into Spain, beginning in 703–704, ostensibly to intervene in the civil war between the Visigoth rulers, and would conquer most of the Iberian Peninsula by 716. In the other direction the Umayyads moved beyond Khurasan, reaching as far as the Oxus Valley and northwestern India.

This new empire of the Umayyads required a new style of government. The inhabitants of Arabia had been accustomed to a form of egalitarian tribal rule. Muhammad and the rightly guided caliphs did not distinguish themselves in any visible way from their subjects and lived modestly and unpretentiously. The former subjects of the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires were accustomed to a different model of leadership in which the leader was all-powerful and distant, enmeshed in dazzling court ritual and ceremonial. The Umayyad rulers imitated the courtly customs of the Byzantine Empire and the Persian kingship. They built magnificent palaces richly decorated with courtly motifs that find their obvious precedents in Roman art. The Umayyads inaugurated a courtly and monarchical culture in which the ruler was the patron of the arts and architecture.

They built proud mosques as a visible sign of the splendor and rule of Islam. They drew their inspiration from the Byzantines in remodeling the fiscal and administrative systems. They also reformed the army along Byzantine and Sassanian models. Early voluntary and unpaid armies that had worked as holy warriors on jihad were replaced by regularly paid forces. New rulers associated with army captains and tribal chiefs replaced the leading families of Mecca and Medina that had led Islamic politics. Cities of Iraq were controlled by local governors loyal to the caliphs in Damascus.

Under the Umayyads the Arabic language became the universal unifier in the vast empire. Arabic, the language in which the new Islamic doctrine had been revealed, also became the language of commerce and administration. During the caliphate of [Abd al-Malik](#) (r. 685–705), Arabic was also printed on new coinage. Money symbolized power and exemplified national identity. New coins proudly proclaimed in Arabic the oneness of God and the truth of his messenger, Muhammad. In a way strikingly parallel to the Latinization of the new provinces conquered by the Romans, Arabic was the language of power and elite culture. Converts and *dhimmis* throughout the Islamic lands adopted Arabic and made it their own, competing with the Arabs in the composition of poetry, prose, historical, and other genres.

Although the Umayyads were for the most part efficient and effective rulers, the opulence and secular trappings of Umayyad court culture began to disaffect many Muslims, who yearned for a return to a more pietistic traditional lifestyle and model of rulership. When Caliph Hisham died in 743 the Kharijites, Alids, and other factions rebelled. The Abbasids, a branch of the prophet Muhammad's family descended from his uncle, Abbas, seized power in a bloody coup, murdering all the members of the Umayyad family. One Umayyad prince managed to escape the slaughter and fled to Spain.

The Umayyads in Spain (755–1031)

As the expansion of Islamic rule progressed during the Umayyad caliphate, newly conquered territories were governed locally by Umayyad princes (amirs), whose rulership, called an emirate, was subject to the caliph at Damascus. This was the situation in which the Umayyads ruled Spain until the Abbasids rose to power. When the surviving Umayyad prince [Abd al-Rahman I](#) (r. 756–788) arrived in Spain, he declared the emirate independent of the Abbasids and established its capital at Córdoba. In a bid to strengthen his position vis-à-vis the newly formed Fatimid caliphate established in Egypt and the Maghrib (910–1171), [Abd al-Rahman III](#) (r. 912–961) declared the Umayyad caliphate of al-Andalus in 929.

Contemporaries of Caliph Abd al-Rahman III lauded Córdoba as the "ornament of the world," for the Umayyads had raised the culture of the court to new heights of splendor, imitating its rival, Abbasid Baghdad, in the patronage of the secular and religious sciences and the arts. Abd al-Rahman III's successor, al-Hakam II (961–976), built the magnificent library at Córdoba, housing reputedly over 400,000 volumes containing Arabo-Islamic religious, literary, and secular scientific texts as well as all the Greek sciences, and organized a joint committee of polyglot Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars to translate Greek texts into Arabic. The halls of this library would later be graced by luminaries such as the philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 1198). The Emirate of Córdoba was immensely wealthy, drawing income from lucrative trade throughout Africa, the Mediterranean, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Andalusian manufacturers of silk, paper, luxury items, and agricultural products were the envy of Christian Spain and western Europe.

The Córdoba Umayyads conducted war against the Christian kingdoms of Castile, León, Navarre, and the Carolingian Spanish March. The powerful *hajib* (grand vizier) of Córdoba, Abu Amir ibn Abi Amir, more commonly known by his honorific title al-Mansur bi amri Allah ("the victorious by the grace of God") (d. 1002), devastated Santiago de Compostela in 985, sparing only the shrine of Saint James, which Muslims compared to the Kaaba at Mecca, and from there marched onward to Barcelona, destroying that city in 997. Al-Mansur's exploits were not unlike those of El Cid (Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar) of Christian Spain: They were an indication of the weakened position of the ruler, whose power was usurped by an ambitious strongman. Al-Mansur went so far as to build a palace called al-Zahra, "the resplendent," as an affront to the legitimate Umayyad caliphs. In 1010 civil war (*fitna*) broke out between the successors of the Umayyad caliph al-Hakim and al-Mansur, leading to the fall of the Umayyad caliphate in 1031 and its partition into various *taifa* ("party" or "faction") kingdoms.

The history of the kingdom of al-Andalus from this point onward is intermingled with that of the fractious kingdoms of Christian Spain. Muslim and Christian kings forged alliances with each other against a common Christian or Muslim enemy among the kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, resulting in the inability of the Muslims to revive definitively the strong and united caliphate enjoyed under the early Umayyads. The [Almoravids](#), a Berber dynasty of orthodox, puritanical, and reformist Muslims who rose to power in the Maghrib circa 1040, extended their rule into al-Andalus in 1086, but they were unable to recover all the Spanish territories lost to Islam in the aftermath of the Christian conquests of Toledo. The same may be said of their pious, messianic successors, the Berber Almohads (1147–1212), whose control over the peninsula had been further reduced by Castilian and Portuguese conquests. Internal wars among the Christian kingdoms protracted the final "[Reconquest](#)" of the Iberian Peninsula until 1492.

The Abbasids

Abu l-Abbas ibn Abdallah al-Saffah (d. 754) engineered the bloody rebellion that ousted the Umayyads. (The name *al-Saffah* is an epithet that means "the blood shedder.") Abu l-Abbas, who belonged to the Banu Hashim clan, based his claim to the caliphate on his descent from the Prophet's uncle, Abbas, the progenitor of the Abbasids. The Abbasids created an organization centered at Kufa and under a proud black banner moved westward from Khurasan and defeated the Umayyads in various battles between 749 and 750, killing the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II (r. 744–750). The powerful new caliph was proclaimed in a stunningly theatrical political event.

To consolidate their new rule and distance themselves from the now defunct Umayyads, the Abbasid caliph Abu Jafar Abdallah ibn Muhammad al-Mansur (r. 754–775) founded the city of Baghdad, Iraq, in 762 and made it the Abbasid capital. Baghdad had the advantage of being closer to the Abbasids' Persian allies. Despite their Arab Hashimite pedigree, the Abbasid caliphs attracted many Persians and other non-Arabs into their court and government to the consternation of the old guard of their Arab supporters, who believed preference should always be given to the Arab tribes associated with the family of the Prophet. They also disappointed their Shiite allies by declaring themselves to be staunch defenders of Sunni Islam. A terrible battle was fought in Mecca in 786 between the now Sunni Abbasids and the Shiites. The latter lost, and most fled to North Africa, where they would establish independent kingdoms. In an effort to shore up the ranks of the army, the Abbasids began to recruit Turkish soldiers, whose ferocity and effectiveness in battle were legendary. These three factors—Persian prominence in government, the fallout with the Shiites, and the dominance of Turkish soldiers over the army—would have tremendous consequences for the Abbasids in the long and short terms.

Byzantine armies seized upon the opportunity that the civil war of 786 had presented to renew their attacks upon the Muslims in an effort to recover some of their lost provinces in Syria and Anatolia. In the midst of the Byzantine-Abbasid wars, the Barmakids, a powerful Persian family who swelled the ranks of al-Mansur's government, rebelled against him and attempted to establish an independent kingdom in Khorasan between 786 and 809. Although the Barmakids were defeated, other Persian dynasties such as the Buyids (945–1055) and the Ghaznavids (962–1187) exercised de facto rule over the Abbasid Persian, Iraqi, and Afghan provinces.

Abbasid Religion and Administration

The Abbasids legitimated their rule by appealing overtly to religious symbolism and cultivating the support of the ulema. They claimed the caliphate as a divine mandate based upon their ties to the family of the Prophet. They went out of their way to demonstrate that their leadership followed the prescriptions of the Quran and the Sunna to the letter. To this end, they sought the support of the ulema, who, as the guardians of the prophetic tradition, could vouchsafe the caliphal claims. Prominence was accorded to the office of the Islamic judge (*qadi*), who, working independently of the governor, adjudicated according to the emerging system of Islamic law.

Administratively, the Abbasids also made innovations. Government bureaucracy was divided into a number of offices (*diwans*) that oversaw the treasury, army, and chancellery. The Abbasid rulers sought to ensure that no officer would abuse his power or challenge the caliph by establishing an extensive network of spies, as is so vividly depicted in the *Thousand and One Nights*. The Abbasids also built a garrison city of Samarra, south of Baghdad, to station the army there as a means of keeping the soldiers away from the civilian population.

Harun al-Rashid's Baghdad: A Cultural Revolution

The historian al-Tabari (d. 923) preserves an anecdote of how al-Mansur founded Baghdad. Inspired by a dream he had while staying overnight near Qasr al-Salam, he is said to have stated: "This is the place which I shall build. Things can arrive here by way of the Euphrates, Tigris, and a network of canals. Only a place like this will support the army and the general populace.... In the name of God, and praise to him: The earth is God's. He causes to inherit of it whom he wills among his servants. The results come to them that fear Him.... Build, and God bless you!" (Hourani 1991, 33). Baghdad, located at a junction between the Tigris and Euphrates, was built as an exquisite round citadel and was dubbed Medinat al-Salam (The City of Peace). Mansur was correct in assuming a rich city could be built on that fertile site. Not only did the land produce abundantly, but so did merchants, artists, and scholars from many nations and creeds.

The Byzantine, Persian, Indian, and Chinese territories under Abbasid rule were the homeland of peoples with ancient civilizations scientifically and culturally advanced in the fields of agriculture, irrigation, industry, physics, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, botany, philosophy, and literature. The Abbasids wisely incorporated these peoples in their court, government, and administration. Their knowledge became part of Islamic culture and civilization, and they in turn were Islamized and Arabized culturally. Scholars began to translate the works of these foreign texts into Arabic during the reign of al-Mansur, but this process took a decisive step forward when Harun al-Rashid and his successor, Abu Jafar al-Mamun ibn Harun (r. 813–833), founded the Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad. Seminal works were translated. To name just two: the *Siddanta*, an Indian mathematical and astronomical text that introduced Indian number symbols, including the concept of zero, and Ptolemy's *Almagest*, an encyclopedic compendium of astronomy and mathematics. Practically the entire legacy of Greek philosophical thought, metaphysics, medicine,

and other realms of knowledge was translated into Arabic and disseminated throughout the Islamic world, from there to enter Europe via the translation schools of Spain and Sicily from the 12th century onward. The Persians and Indians also bequeathed a legacy of literature, such as the *Kalila wa Dimna* (Kalila and Dimna) and the *Hazar Afsana* (Thousand stories), the latter being the precursor of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which later became favorites in the European West.

Islamic Law and Arabic Literature Flourish

The Abbasids did not only cultivate foreign wisdom and arts. Under their rule Islamic sciences—which generated the codification of Islamic law—flourished, and a beautiful and sophisticated Arabic literary tradition that would be imitated by non-Arab Muslims as well as Jews and Christians began. True to their desire to gain religious legitimacy, the Abbasids invited the best scholars from the Arabian Hijaz to teach the Islamic sciences of quranic exegesis and recitation, Arabic philology, Hadith (the traditions of and about the Prophet), and the Sunna. The science of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) took shape during the Abbasid period as the legal scholars Abu Hanifa al-Nu'man (d. 767), Malik ibn Anas in Medina (d. 795), Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafii (d. 820) in Palestine, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal al-Shaybani in Baghdad (d. 855) began to theorize and debate about the bases for deriving Islamic laws that would guide the entire Muslim community. They would be considered the founders of the four major Sunni schools of law (*madhhabs*), Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii, and Hanbali, which would be consolidated by the 10th to 11th centuries. Students from all over the Islamic world converged upon Iraq to study the different schools of law.

All genres of Arabic letters flourished in the Abbasid era. Court secretaries (*katib*) cultivated florid diplomatic epistles. Al-Mansur's commissioning of the traditionalist Muhammad b. Ishaq to write a history of the Prophet's life generated a new genre of historical writing as his successors wrote specialized histories of the entire Islamic world or of particular cities or dynasties. It also inspired the emergence of biographical dictionaries of Muslim notables categorized according to profession or place of origin. Last but not least, courtly culture stimulated the patronage of poets and musicians who vied with each other for a place in the Abbasid court.

The Rise of Colleges: The Madrasa

Traditionally Islamic learning took place in the mosque in special galleries reserved for this purpose. The 10th century witnessed the emergence of a new academic institution called the madrasa ("the place where one studies"). The first madrasa was reputedly founded by a Seljuk Turkish vizier of Abbasid Baghdad, Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092) and was called the Nizamiyya Madrasa. Nizam al-Mulk wanted to create a bastion of Sunni Islamic learning that would counter the increasing advances of Fatimid Shiite missionary propaganda, called *dawa*. Students at the Nizamiyya studied all four schools of Sunni Islamic law, as well as the Quran, the Hadith, and Arabic philology. The institution spread to numerous other countries from India to Granada under the Nasrid dynasty.

Abbasid Court Splendor

A Byzantine embassy arrived to see Caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–932) in 917 and was dazzled by the spectacles and splendors of his court. These Byzantine ambassadors already were accustomed to great art and ostentatious wealth but were unprepared for the caliph's graciousness to his guests as they toured the magnificent palace: its halls, courts, parks, soldiers, eunuchs, pages, treasuries, and elephants caparisoned in peacock silk brocade.

In one chamber called the Room of the Tree they saw a tree standing in the midst of a great circular tank filled with clear water. The tree had 18 branches mainly made of silver with some crafted of gold. Every branch had numerous twigs on which sat gold and silver birds that piped and sang. On the branches of the trees were leaves of different colors. The leaves of the tree moved as the wind blew and the birds sang.

The caliph himself wore opulent clothing embroidered in gold. He sat on an ebony throne surrounded to the right and left by precious gems of different colors. His city of Baghdad was lusciously decorated with fruit-bearing palm trees.

The Emergence of Islamic Mysticism: The Sufis

From the eighth century pietistic and ascetic mystics could be found roaming the deserts of Iraq and Syria and haunting the corridors of mosques throughout the Islamic East. Scholars do not agree upon the historical origins of Sufism. To be sure, purely

Islamic precedents may be found in the more cryptic passages of the Quran, which beg for an esoteric interpretation, as well as in the example of Ali ibn Abi Talib, whose mystical interpretation of the Quran was admired, and the group of ascetic companions of the Prophet known as the Ahl al-Suffa ("the people of the veranda") who lived lives of extreme asceticism and poverty. Foreign origins are also possible, since a number of the Ahl al-Suffa were from Persia and Christian Byzantium, where ascetic and esoteric traditions were strong. Socially, the rise of Sufism would appear as a rejection of the wealth and worldliness of the Islamic polity and a desire to shun the vanities of the world and extol piety and asceticism as the Islamic ideal.

The Fatimid *Dawa* (Mission)

Descendants of the Shiites who fled Baghdad to North Africa during the civil war against the Abbasids in the late eighth century seized power in Ifriqiya (Tunisia) in 910. Their leader, Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi Billah (r. 909–934), claimed descent from Ali and his wife, Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, and thus called the dynasty the Fatimids. Driven out of Ifriqiya by a popular revolt in 970, the Fatimids relocated to Egypt, where they founded the city of Cairo in 972. At the height of its power, the Fatimid empire stretched from the Maghrib to Sicily, Palestine, Syria, the coast of the Red Sea, Yemen, and the Arabian Hijaz.

Fatimid Shiism spread through the mechanism of a highly organized propaganda machine known as the *dawa* ("invitation, call"). Fatimid Shiites organized the *dawa* in the late ninth century originally out of Iraq, where it began as a secretive centralized missionary movement whose propagandists, known as *dais*, were trained in Shiite beliefs and sent forth eastward to Rayy, Merv, Khorasan, Nishapur, Transoxania, Sijistan, and India; southward to Yemen and Bahrain; and westward into the Maghrib. Charismatic *dais* beguiled their audiences with their esoteric interpretations of the Quran and the heroic legends of the Shiite imams. The Fatimids' most famous missionary was the great Persian poet and travel writer Nasr i-Khosraw (1004–ca. 1072), the author of the famous travel book *Safar-nama* (The book of the journey), in which he describes his conversion from Sunni to Shii Islam.

The Fatimids' greatest rivals were the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad, at whose expense many of their conquests were made. Abbasid propagandists repulsed Fatimid claims of legitimacy by issuing in 1011 the Baghdad Manifesto, a document commissioned by the Abbasid caliph al-Hakim bi Amri Allah (r. 996–1021) to be redacted by a joint commission of Sunni and non-Fatimid Shiite scholars. They accused the Fatimids of lying about their descent from Ali and Fatima and claimed instead that their true founder was a Jew and therefore an "infidel." Al-Hakim also competed intellectually with the Abbasids, founding in 1005 the rival Dar al-Ilm ("House of Knowledge"), where philosophy and astronomy were taught alongside the Islamic sciences. (A paranoid and erratic ruler, al-Hakim is also known for his persecution of Jews and Christians and his destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.) Fatimid propagandistic rituals included the invention of the *mawlid*s, the official celebration of the birthdays of Muhammad Ali, Fatima, and the other members of the Prophet's family (Ahl al-Bayt) and the emotive celebration of Ashura with passion plays (*taziya*) reconstructing the martyrdom of Husayn.

The Fatimid dynasty began to decline during the mid-11th century as Maghribi Zirid Berbers rebelled and founded their own dynasty circa 1040. Their control of the Levant diminished under pressure from the Seljuks and the crusaders, reducing their holdings to Egypt. In 1169 the Ayyubid prince Saladin (d. 1193) conquered Egypt, ousting the Fatimid dynasty.

Ayyubids and Mamluks

The term *mamluk* means "slave," and in the context of Islamic history it refers specifically to the institution of recruiting slaves, most often of Slavic and Turkish origin, into the ranks of the army. The practice began during the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Mutasim (r. 833–842), whose unpopularity led him to create an elite regiment of soldiers exclusively loyal to him. Turkish youths captured during the course of battles were taken to Samarra, where they were given a rudimentary Islamic education and trained in the art and strategies of war. The slave system ensured that the mamluks had no ties with the political establishment and thus would pose no threat to the Abbasid rulers.

The institution of slave soldiers spread across the Islamic world. They were especially prominent in the army of the Ayyubids, the Kurdish dynasty who vanquished the Fatimids. Saladin, the conqueror of Egypt, broke away from his Seljuk patrons and declared his own dynasty, assuming the title of sultan in 1174. He inflicted stunning defeats upon the crusaders at the Battle of Jacob's Ford (1179) in Jerusalem. When the Latin Crusader States began to harass and murder Muslim pilgrims and traders, Saladin launched an offensive against Jerusalem, capturing the entire city in 1187. The Ayyubids would extend their domain over the whole of Egypt, Syria, Yemen, parts of Iraq, Mecca, and southern Arabia.

After Saladin's death in 1193, the Ayyubids descended into civil war, each party using its mamluk soldiers against those of rivals. Such squabbles over succession became endemic to Ayyubid rule. Each time a ruler prevailed he had to grant more power to the mamluks who supported him, including many positions in the government and extensive landholdings (*iqtas*). Finally, a mamluk soldier-general named Aibek (d. 1257) murdered the Ayyubid sultan Turanshah in 1250 and seized power for himself, establishing the Bahri Mamluk dynasty (1250–1382). By far the most extraordinary Mamluk sultan was al-Zahir Baibars (r. 1260–77), who vanquished the French king Louis IX in the Seventh Crusade. A decade later Baibars killed the Mamluk sultan Qutuz and seized power.

Successive Mamluk dynasties would continue to reign over Egypt and Syria until 1517. The Mamluks formed an unprecedented military state in which many senior posts were in the hands of these slave-soldiers, and civilian officials were subject to their supervision. Because of their slave origins, non-Arab pedigree, and relative unfamiliarity with the intricacies of Islamic law and culture, the Mamluks wisely cultivated the support of the religious establishment and the Sufi orders that had grown in importance by this time. Using the Islamic system of pious endowments (*awqaf*), they covered all their bases and founded numerous mosques and madrasas where all four Sunni legal schools (*madhhabs*) were represented. To increase their popularity further, they also patronized popular religious festivals, such as Muhammad's birthday, and gave generously to the Sufi orders and the shrines of Muslim saints. The Mamluks excelled in architecture, creating their own distinct style of lavishly decorated motifs carved in stone, marble mosaics, towering minarets, and exquisitely carved marble *mihrabs* (the niche in the mosque indicating the direction of Mecca).

The Crusades from the Muslim Perspective

Christians and Muslims in the Middle Ages had remarkably different concepts for the same war and warlike events. For medieval Christians the Crusades were religious wars to recover the lost lands of Christendom, especially the Holy Land, where Christ had lived, taught, and died. These had been conquered by the Muslims, but the majority of the population was still Christian. Arab historians do not view the Crusades in the same manner nor did they ever use the word *crusade* or *crusader*. Muslim chroniclers describe the battles against the invaders in meticulous detail referring to their enemies by more neutral ethnic or geographic names, such as "the Franks" to describe the Latin Christians and "the Romans" (*al-Rum*) to describe the Byzantines. Muslim chroniclers, as did their Christian counterparts, also used generic pejoratives such as "the infidels" (*al-kafirun*) to describe their enemies. Some even used wicked plays on words, converting the name of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Arabic (*Kanifat al-Qiyama*) to the Church of the Dungheap (*Kanifat al-Qumama*). Muslim chroniclers also emphasized the perfidy of the Christians who time and again reneged on truce agreements. They were truly stunned by the barbaric cruelty of the crusaders, whose capture of Jerusalem in 1099 resulted in the slaughter of tens of thousands of civilian Muslims and Jews.

Muslims may also have been aware of the theological and literary assault upon them being waged simultaneously with the crusader mission. During the Fifth Crusade (1219) no less than Saint Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan friars, attempted to convert the sultan. Convinced of their religion's superiority and threatened by the Muslims' military successes, theologians in the monasteries and universities of Europe produced a great amount of religious polemic. Even prior to the launching of the First Crusade, Christian theologians feared Islam as a threat in view of the fact that so many of the Islamic conquests had occurred in Christian lands and that many Christians had converted to Islam or become culturally Arabized. The Christian conquests of Muslim Spain and Sicily led to the beginnings of Arab scholarship in Europe, the discipline that later became known as Orientalism. In the monasteries of western Europe, studious monks learned Arabic, translated the Quran, and studied other Muslim texts in order to be able to save Christian souls from converting to Islam and, they hoped, at a future time to convert Muslims to Christianity. The monk-scholars also read the biographies of the Prophet and began to write their own versions in order to "prove" that he was a false prophet. Franciscan preachers operating in the Holy Land, Spain, and North Africa used such propaganda in the sermons they preached to captive Muslims.

Khanate of the Golden Horde and the "Tatar Yoke"

Muslims and Christians alike had reason to fear the Mongol invasions during the 13th century. In a process similar to the Gothic invasions of Europe in the third to fifth centuries, the Mongols were driven out of Mongolia in East Asia and conquered much of Russia and eastern Europe. Numerous reasons have been suggested for the invasions, from climatic change affecting crop production, to threats to their trade routes from the Chinese, to a sense of divine mission of their ruler, Genghis Khan (ca. 1162–1227). The Mongols established a state known in Russian annals as the Khanate of the Golden Horde. Their mighty empire

extended from China to central Europe. Indiscriminately, Mongol armies conquered territories under Islamic, Byzantine, and German rule, seizing Samarkand and Bukhara in the 1220s; Russia, central Europe, northern Iran, and the Caucasus in the 1250s; and perpetrating the devastating sacking of Baghdad in 1258, burning and destroying what was the ornament of the civilized world. From there they moved on to Syria and Palestine, where the Mamluk sultan al-Zahir Baibars routed them in one of the most extraordinary victories in all world history, the Battle of Ayn Jalut.

Possibly as a result of his defeat at the hands of Baibars, in the third quarter of the century Berke Khan (1257–66), the grandson of Genghis Khan and lord of the Golden Horde, converted to Islam. He entered treaties and political arrangements with the Mamluk sultan of Egypt and began the process that forged the Mongol and Turkish people of his realm into a unified Muslim nation. They were known in eastern Europe as the Tatars, after the name of one of the Mongol tribes. Their period of domination from the 13th to the 15th century was called in Russia the Tatar Yoke.

The Ottomans

Already in the 11th century Turkish armies and migrating Turkish tribesmen had won the greater part of Anatolia from the Byzantines, transforming a land once Greek and Christian into a Turkish and Muslim land. The eastern bastion of Christendom, which for so many centuries had withstood the Arabs, suffered the first of a series of defeats. In time these redrew the frontier between Christendom and Islam. First under the Seljuk sultans and then under the Ottoman sultans, the Turks created one of the greatest and most enduring of the Islamic empires. Reminiscent of the first Arab arrival in Spain, a Turkish force in 1352 was recruited as allies of a Christian contender for power. The Turks occupied the fortress of Tzympe north of Gallipoli on the eastern shores of the Dardanelles.

A century later the Muslim masters of the whole Balkan Peninsula mounted the final attack that in 1453 added Constantinople to their new imperial structure in Europe and Asia. From their capital in Istanbul—as they renamed Constantinople—the Ottoman sultans launched a series of further military expeditions that took them to the plains of Hungary. Twice, in 1529 and again in 1683, the Muslims reached the walls of Vienna. For a century and a half Turkish armies operated from bases in Buda and Belgrade.

Warfare as Vehicle of Cultural Exchange

Turks and Byzantines fought and slaughtered one another mercilessly even before the rise of Islam. However, Turks and Arabs taught Byzantine soldiers important military tactics that they used to advantage. Byzantine commanders watched Turks and Arabs both on the battlefield and in the war camp. Stated as rules, these Muslim military concepts were the following: Always take a steady and sufficient body of infantry into the field. Maintain an elaborate screen of pickets and vedettes, mounted sentries placed in advance of the army outpost to observe enemy movements and guard against surprises. Avoid fighting in broken ground where the enemy's dispositions and arrangements cannot be appreciated or understood. Keep large reserves and flank guards. Fight with the rear guard always protected, and, if possible, the army's wings also covered by natural obstacles such as rivers, marshes, or cliffs. [That would foil the usual Turkish device of circular attacks on the army's wings or on the camp guard.] Always fortify the camp. Never rashly pursue a retreating force, and never allow the infantry to get separated after a first successful battle.

After the breakup of the Khanate of the Golden Horde, the successor khanates based in Kazan, Astrakhan, and the Crimea continued to rule. Where they could not rule, they raided parts of eastern Europe. The last khanate was extinguished in the Crimea in 1783. From 1475 the khans of the Crimea became vassals of the Ottomans. Tatar forces often fought under Ottoman commanders against European enemies. By the close of the medieval period and the dawn of the early modern period, Muslims evinced increasing respect for the material wealth and armed might of Europe. This was manifested in the opulent, efficient European manufactures and the changing conditions of trade that favored Europe over the Muslim nations. The balance of military power shifted to the Christians, who inflicted on the Muslims a long succession of military defeats.

Key Personalities of the Islamic Empire

Prophet Muhammad (ca. 570–632) Muhammad ibn Abdallah was the prophet Muhammad, the recipient of a series of divine revelations known as the Quran. Muhammad founded a new religion, Islam; a new polity, the *umma*; and a new civilization, Dar al-Islam, on the basis of these revelations. Forced to migrate from his native Mecca to Medina in 622, he went on to establish the religious and legal structure that guided the organization of the burgeoning Islamic community. The Quran and Muhammad's personal example, the Sunna, are the two edifices upon which the Islamic civilization was built.

Umar ibn al-Khattab (592–644; r. 634–644) The second of the rightly guided caliphs of Islam and one of its most important military commanders. The Islamic empire was built mostly during Umar's reign. He conquered Mesopotamia and Persia from the Sassanians and Egypt, Syria, Palestine, North Africa, and Armenia from the Byzantines. He began the process of the codification of Islamic law. The Mosque of Umar was built on the site where he prayed on the Temple Mount after the capture of Jerusalem. He was assassinated in 644.

Ali ibn Abi Talib (ca. 599–661; r. 656–661) The nephew and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad and the fourth of the rightly guided caliphs. His conflict with the Umayyad governor Muawiyya over the succession to the caliphate sparked the great schism in Islam between Sunnis and Shiites and the emergence of the Kharijite movement. Ali and his partisans, the Shia, were convinced that the Prophet had designated Ali to succeed him. Despite the schism between Sunnis and Shiites, the former also recognize him as one of the most authoritative sources of the life of Muhammad and quranic interpretation and extol his heroism in the battles of Islam. Sufi mystics claim him as inspiring the rise of mysticism.

Harun al-Rashid (766–809; r. 786–809) The most famous of the Abbasid caliphs, whose court is immortalized in *The Thousand and One Nights*. During his reign Baghdad flourished as the preeminent capital of the world. Harun al-Rashid had established diplomatic relations with the ruler of China and with Charlemagne, sending him the extraordinary elephant Abu l-Abbas as a present. He waged successful battles with the Byzantine Empire, financing his sumptuous court with the tribute from the Greeks.

Abd al-Rahman III (891–961; r. 912–961) Emir and later caliph of Córdoba, he had the longest and most successful of the reigns of the Umayyads of al-Andalus. He declared the Córdoba Umayyad caliphate in 929 to counter his rivals in Fatimid North Africa and Baghdad. During his reign Córdoba rivaled Baghdad.

Saladin (1138–1193; r. 1169–1193) Kurdish Ayyubid sultan who defeated the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt in 1169 and founded the Ayyubid dynasty. Saladin was the hero of the Muslim jihad against the crusaders in the Holy Land. He dealt a crushing blow to the Latin crusaders by reconquering Jerusalem from them in 1187. In 1192 Saladin and the English king Richard the Lionhearted (r. 1189–99) signed the Treaty of Ramla, whereby it was agreed that Jerusalem would remain under Muslim rule. The mutual respect of the two rulers was extolled in the courtly romances of Europe.

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