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The Rise and Expansion of Islam

By William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton

On the eve of the rise of Islam, the settled lands of the Middle East were ruled by two competing imperial states, the Roman-Byzantine Empire in the west and the Sasanian Empire of Iran in the east. The Byzantine emperors were successors to the Caesars and presided over an imposing edifice of high cultural and political traditions that blended Greek learning, Roman administration, and Greek Orthodox Christianity. In the early seventh century, the emperor's territorial possessions stretched from the Italian peninsula across southern Europe to the magnificent capital city of Constantinople. The empire's Middle Eastern provinces included Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, as well as parts of Iraq and Anatolia. Supported by a standing professional army, a highly developed bureaucracy, and the priesthood of the Orthodox church, the rulers of Byzantium appeared to be powerful and secure.

In the late sixth and early seventh centuries, however, Byzantium was weakened by challenges to its military, religious, and administrative authority. Beginning in 540, the imperial rivalry between the Byzantines and Sasanians broke out into open warfare that continued almost uninterrupted until 629. Campaign and counter-campaign exhausted the military forces of both empires, depleted their treasuries, and inflicted extensive damage to the lands and cities lying between the Nile and the Euphrates. To meet the financial demands of constant warfare, the Byzantine emperors periodically raised taxes, a measure that alienated their subjects, who had already suffered economic hardships from the passage of warring armies back and forth across their lands.

Religious divisions created additional tensions between the Byzantine state and its subjects. Once the Byzantine Empire adopted Greek Orthodox Christianity as the state religion in the late fourth century, the emperors and the church attempted to enforce popular acceptance of this officially approved version of the faith. But peoples within the empire continued to adhere to other forms of Christianity, and to Judaism, and to use their own vernacular languages for scripture and ritual. Unwilling to tolerate these challenges to official orthodoxy, the state branded them as heretical and undertook to suppress them. The persecution of Jews and of Christians outside the Greek Orthodox community caused great disaffection within the empire and explains in part why many Byzantine subjects welcomed the arrival of the more religiously tolerant Muslim rulers.

The Sasanian Empire of Iran, with its capital at Ctesiphon on the Tigris River, contested Byzantium for control of the territories between Iraq and Egypt. Heir to the 1,200-year-old Acheminid tradition of universal Iranian empire, the Sasanian state was based on the principle of absolute monarchy. The emperor was the king of kings (*shahanshah*), a distant and all-powerful ruler living in palatial splendor and surrounded by elaborate ceremonial trappings. Over the centuries, Iranian bureaucratic practices had become refined, and the Sasanian Empire was administered by a large and experienced scribal class. Like their Byzantine

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counterparts, the Sasanian emperors had at their disposal an effective standing professional army, which was noted for its heavily armed and armored cavalry.

Yet the Sasanian Empire's apparent strength was, like Byzantium's, diluted by popular discontent, much of which stemmed from religious diversity. By the late sixth century, the official Sasanian state religion of Zoroastrianism had become more significant as a ceremonial faith for the ruling elite than as the religion of the population at large. In the western portion of the empire in particular, people were more attracted to various strains of Christianity and Judaism than to the religion of the imperial court. In the absence of a unifying religious affiliation with their ruler, many subjects of the Sasanian Empire lacked feelings of loyalty toward the state.

Although the Byzantine and Sasanian empires were in a period of transition when Islam first extended into them, it is important to recognize their impact on the development of Islamic governing practices and religious doctrine. Formative Islam would be influenced by the Greek legacy of Byzantium, by the bureaucratic tradition of Iran, and by the concepts of emperor that had developed in the courts of Constantinople and Ctesiphon. Islam must be understood as a product of the societies into which it spread as well as of the society in which it originated.

PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

With the exception of Yemen in the south and a few scattered oasis settlements elsewhere, the Arabian Peninsula is a vast desert. It is the home of the Arabs, an ancient Semitic people whose origins cannot be traced with certainty. In contrast to the rigorously administered domains of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, the Arabian Peninsula of the early seventh century lacked any central organizing authority. It had no state structure, no common legal system, no administrative center. Tribes were the largest units of social and political organization to which an individual's loyalties were given. Each tribe was an entity unto itself bound by ties of kinship based on a belief in common descent from a founding ancestor. The majority of Arabia's inhabitants were pastoral nomads engaged in raising camels, sheep, or goats. The scarcity of pasture-lands in the harsh environment of Arabia required constant movement from one grazing ground to another. Competition for the scarce resources of the land created rivalries among the tribes, and warfare became ingrained as a way of life. All males were expected to be warriors, and accounts of the exploits of the most daring among them became enshrined in tribal culture. The widespread experience of the Arabs in warfare was to be a significant factor in the early expansion of Islam.

Notwithstanding the divisions inherent in the tribal structure of pre-Islamic Arabia, forces of cultural unity were present. The Bedouin ethos of bravery and honor was celebrated in a special style of Arabic poetry known as a *qasidah*. The existence of this poetry, which was recited at market fairs and tribal gatherings, has convinced historians that the Arabs of the seventh century possessed a common poetic language that could be understood in different regions of the peninsula. This was of the utmost significance for the spread of Islam because it meant that the Prophet Muhammad's religious message could be communicated to Arabic speakers across a broad expanse of territory.

Isolated though it was, the Arabian Peninsula was not completely cut off from the forces that shaped Middle Eastern civilization. On the eve of the rise of Islam, two Arab tribal confederations guarded the