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northern Arabian frontiers as client states of Byzantium and the Sasanians, respectively. Both of these Arab confederations were Christian, providing evidence of the spread of the concept of monotheism among the Arabs before the time of Muhammad.

At the southwestern tip of Arabia, Yemen was another source for the entry of external influences into the peninsula. Unlike the rest of Arabia, Yemen was a fertile and well-watered region able to support a settled agricultural society. By the fourth and fifth centuries AD, several Arab communities in southern Arabia had adopted Christianity, and the ruler of Yemen's last pre-Islamic dynasty converted to Judaism. Yet despite the fermentation of religious doctrines in the settled regions of northern and southern Arabia, most of the tribes of the interior continued to practice various forms of animism, worshipping local idols or deities.

During the two centuries before Islam, Arabia acquired increasing importance as a commercial transit route between the Middle Eastern empires and Yemen. The wars between Byzantium and the Sasanians disrupted the east-west overland routes and gave rise to a brisk north-south caravan trade through the Hijaz, Arabia's coastal plain adjacent to the Red Sea. The main Arabian beneficiary of this commercial network was the city of Mecca, which developed into the most important commercial center of the peninsula. By the early seventh century, Meccan merchants had accumulated sufficient capital to organize their own caravans and to provide payments to an extensive network of tribes in exchange for pledges to allow the caravans to pass in peace.

In addition to its role as a commercial center, Mecca was a religious site of major significance. The city's shrine, the Ka'ba, became the center of an animistic cult that attracted worshipers throughout western Arabia. By the time of Muhammad's birth, the Ka'ba had become the site of an annual pilgrimage during which warfare was suspended, and Mecca's sanctuary became a kind of neutral ground where tribal disputes could be resolved. The city derived considerable income from its religious role, and its leading families recognized the importance of the sanctuary as a source of wealth and influence.

The leading clans of Mecca were all members of the Quraysh tribe that settled the city, established its religious role, and dominated its political and commercial life. Although formal municipal organizations did not exist, the affairs of the city were loosely regulated by a council of prominent Quraysh merchants. Historians have suggested that Mecca was in a state of transition between the vanishing tribal ways and a nascent urbanism spawned by merchant capitalism. The customary tribal values were being displaced, but no fully developed set of communal values suitable for an urban setting had yet emerged.

MUHAMMAD AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF ISLAM

Muhammad ibn Abdullah, the future Prophet of Islam, was born in Mecca around 570. His early life gave little indication of the compelling prophet and skillful statesman he would later become. He was born into the clan of Hashim, a subtribe of the Quraysh. Orphaned at the age of two, Muhammad was raised and sheltered by his uncle, Abu Talib. As a young man, he engaged in the caravan trade and may have journeyed to Damascus. His financial position was secured when, in his early twenties, he married a wealthy widow, Khadijah. Khadijah holds an honored place in the history of Islam; she was the first convert to the new faith.

after Muhammad himself, and she supported him during the difficult early years of his prophethood when he was scorned by most of Mecca's population.

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Although Muhammad was widely respected as a decent and trustworthy individual, he lived an otherwise ordinary life as merchant, husband, and father to the four daughters born to Khadijah. But as Muhammad neared his fortieth year, his behavior gradually began to change. He often left Mecca, sometimes for days at a time, to meditate in solitude in the mountains outside the city. Some scholars have conjectured that Muhammad was reflecting on what he saw as the problems that afflicted Meccan society and was seeking ways to resolve them. It was during one of his solitary vigils on Mount Hira that Muhammad was summoned to his prophetic mission, an event known in Islam as the Night of Power. The summons came as a command from God, transmitted through the angel Gabriel, for Muhammad to recite to his fellow Meccans the divine messages that he had been chosen to receive. The Night of Power marked the beginning of a movement that would transform Arab life and lead to the emergence of a universal monotheistic religion.

For the remaining twenty-two years of his life, Muhammad continued to receive revelations, which his companions recorded, memorized, and later collected into a single book, the Quran (Recitation), which constitutes the core of the Islamic faith. The Quran is a sacred work in both form and content. Not only does it contain God's commands, it also represents the direct word of God; its language is therefore divine and unchangeable. Throughout the centuries since the Night of Power, non-Muslims, especially the Christian and Jewish monotheists for whom Islam represented the most direct challenge, have found it difficult to accept the idea that the Quran contains God's words, not Muhammad's. The point here is not to debate the contesting claims to religious truth but to insist on the depth of Muhammad's experience and the utterly convincing language in which that experience was conveyed. The verses of the Quran, especially those from the Meccan period, reveal an individual possessed of a compelling sense of urgency and inspired by a commitment that transcended his previous existence and pushed him into the role for which he believed he had been chosen—as the Prophet of God.

Muhammad's prophethood can be divided into two phases, the period at Mecca (610–622) and the years in Medina (622–632). The difference in the Prophet's circumstances during these two periods of his life is reflected in the style and content of the revelations. The Quran was revealed in a series of chapters (suras) and is organized according to the length of the chapters, with the longest first and the shortest at the end. The shorter chapters are from the Meccan years, when Muhammad concentrated on establishing the theological foundations of the faith. The central element of the Meccan period was an uncompromising monotheism. As an early Meccan revelation insisted,

Say: He is God, One, God, the Everlasting Refuge,
who has not begotten, and has not been begotten,

and equal to Him is not anyone.

(Sura 112)¹

The Arabic word for one supreme God, *Allah*, refers to the monotheistic deities of Judaism and Christianity as well as Islam. It is thus incorrect to employ the term *Allah* in an exclusively Islamic context. The term translates as *God*, and that is how it should be employed and understood.

1 A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York, 1955). All subsequent Quranic quotations are from this translation.