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THE FIRST CIVIL WAR AND THE END OF THE RASHIDUN CALIPHATE

The question of the succession to the caliphate had been largely ignored in the rush of the early conquests. But when the caliph Uthman was murdered by mutinous Arab tribesmen in 656, the succession issue reemerged. It was resolved only after a civil war that left an enduring schism within the Islamic *ummah*. Ali was chosen to succeed the murdered Uthman. Next to the Prophet himself, Ali is the most revered of the founders of Islam: He was the Prophet's cousin, the husband of the Prophet's daughter Fatima, and one of the most dedicated of the early converts to Islam. Indeed, in some quarters of the *ummah*, the belief existed that Muhammad had intended for Ali to be his immediate successor. By the time he was finally selected as caliph, Ali represented a broad coalition of interests calling for greater equality among all Muslims, both Arab and non-Arab, and for the restoration of the leadership of the community to the house of Muhammad. But Ali's right to the caliphate was contested by Mu'awiyah, the powerful governor of Muslim Syria.

The forces of the two claimants to the leadership met at the battle of Siffin in 657. The results of the encounter were inconclusive, leaving both Ali and Mu'awiyah in the same positions they had held before the fighting began. In the aftermath of the battle, a substantial portion of Ali's forces withdrew their support, allowing Mu'awiyah to expand his power in Syria and Egypt and preventing Ali from establishing his uncontested right to the caliphate. Though Ali set up a capital in Kufa, one of the Arab garrison cities in lower Iraq, his position continued to deteriorate, and he was murdered in 661. Ali's caliphate was short and divisive but far from inconsequential. It came to represent the validity of the legitimist position of authority within the Islamic *ummah* and, as we will see in later chapters, stood as an enduring symbol of the desire of a substantial minority of Muslims to embrace a communal leader directly descended from the family of the Prophet. Indeed, attachment to the memory of Ali and his family and the tragedy associated with them was infused with such great passion and vitality that it gave rise to a permanent schism within the Islamic community.

FROM ARAB EXCLUSIVISM TO ISLAMIC UNIVERSALISM: THE Umayyad and Abbasid Empires

Ali's passing marked the end of the first phase in the development of the Islamic community and the beginning of a new period of imperial expansion and consolidation. Mu'awiyah was recognized as caliph throughout the empire and became the founder of the Umayyad dynasty (661–750). He was a pragmatic ruler whose principal concerns were continued expansion of Islam, management of the state's resources, and consolidation of his dynasty. During his caliphate, the political center of the empire was transferred from Mecca, the small caravan city of its origins, to the ancient city of Damascus, with all its Byzantine associations. Mu'awiyah adopted certain Byzantine administrative practices and employed former Byzantine officials and craftsmen, initiating the transformation of the Arab empire into a Byzantine successor state and surrounding the caliphate with the trappings of monarchy.

Although the conquests continued to bring material wealth to Damascus under Mu'awiyah's successors,

the Umayyad Empire was troubled by internal dissension. Part of the dissent was caused by the policy of Arab exclusivism adopted by the Umayyad ruling elite. They continued to equate Islam with Arab descent

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and to administer the empire's fiscal and social affairs in such a way as to favor the Arabs and to discriminate against the growing number of non-Arab converts to Islam. The discontent culminated in a revolution that overthrew the Umayyad house in 750 and brought to power a new dynasty, that of the Abbasids.

The office of the caliphate remained with the Abbasids from 750 to 1258. Under the Abbasids, the heroic age of the conquests gave way to the development of administrative institutions, commercial enterprises, and a legal system. The bureaucrat, the urban merchant, and the learned judge replaced the Arab warrior as the favored element in society. The consolidation of the conquests in the geographical center of a centuries-old admixture of cultural and religious traditions resulted in a complex interaction between the existing cultures and religions of the Middle East and the dynamic infusion of energy from Arabia. The new and vibrant Islamic civilization that arose found its first, but by no means its last, expression in the period of the high caliphate (750–945) of the Abbasid Empire.

The first 150 years of the Abbasid Empire, represented by such caliphs as al-Mansur (754–775), Harun al-Rashid (786–809), and al-Ma'mun (813–833), were a period of relative political stability, immense economic prosperity, and increasing universalism within the central Islamic domains. These conditions, in turn, created the possibilities for the flowering of a rich and diverse civilization. The Abbasids abandoned the Arab exclusiveness that had generated so much discontent under the Umayyads. In its place, they adopted a universalist policy accepting the equality of all Muslims, regardless of their ethnic origins. This attitude, coupled with the revitalization of urban life and the expansion of commercial activity, led to a growing cosmopolitanism within the empire as converts from among the conquered peoples participated fully in the economic and political life of the state.

The universalism of the Abbasids was symbolized by yet another transfer of the imperial capital, this time from the predominantly Arab city of Damascus eastward to a newly created city, Baghdad, which the caliph al-Mansur established on the west bank of the Tigris. The change of location brought the Islamic political center into more direct contact with Iranian imperial traditions, with their emphasis on royal absolutism and bureaucratic specialization, and added yet another layer of influences to the Arab and Byzantine experiences of the Islamic state. Abbasid administration was modeled on Sasanian government and employed large numbers of converted Iranians in its increasingly elaborate bureaucratic structure. Sasanian practices also had an impact on the office of the caliphate. During the era of the Rashidun, the caliphs functioned as first among equals and lived modestly on the model established by Muhammad. This emphasis on simplicity changed under the later Umayyads, who distanced themselves from the population, took pleasure from the riches that flowed into the treasury at Damascus, and became less consultative and more authoritarian. The Abbasid rulers, with their more direct exposure to the Iranian idea of an absolute

king of kings, carried the evolution of the caliphate to absolutist monarchy further than any of their predecessors. The Abbasid caliphs lived in luxurious palaces, isolated from all but their most trusted inner circle of courtiers and advisers. They came to identify themselves not simply as successors to the Prophet but as "shadows of God on earth," and they exercised vast powers over their subjects. Thus the Abbasid solution to the problem of political authority was to centralize it and to place it in the hands of an absolute monarch who exercised the powers of both secular king and spiritual head of the Islamic *ummah*. For nearly two centuries following the revolution of 750, this Abbasid formula worked reasonably well and brought to the empire unprecedented prosperity, dazzling intellectual achievement, and general political stability based on the widespread acceptance of the benefits of caliphal absolutism.