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Essential Histories

The Great Islamic Conquests AD 632–750

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David Nicolle



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Contents

Introduction	7
Chronology	9
Background to war	
Pre-Islamic Arabia	13
Outbreak	
The birth of Islam and the unifying of Arabia	19
The warring sides	
Armies of the Middle East and the Mediterranean	26
The fighting	
A rising religion meets tired empires	48
Portrait of a soldier	
Two warriors of Arabia	63
From conquest to empire	
The Umayyad century	66
How the war ended	
The fall of the Umayyad dynasty	76
The world around the war	
Architecture and religion	80
Portrait of a civilian	
A man of letters and a man of God	86
Conclusion	90
Further reading	92
Index	94

Introduction

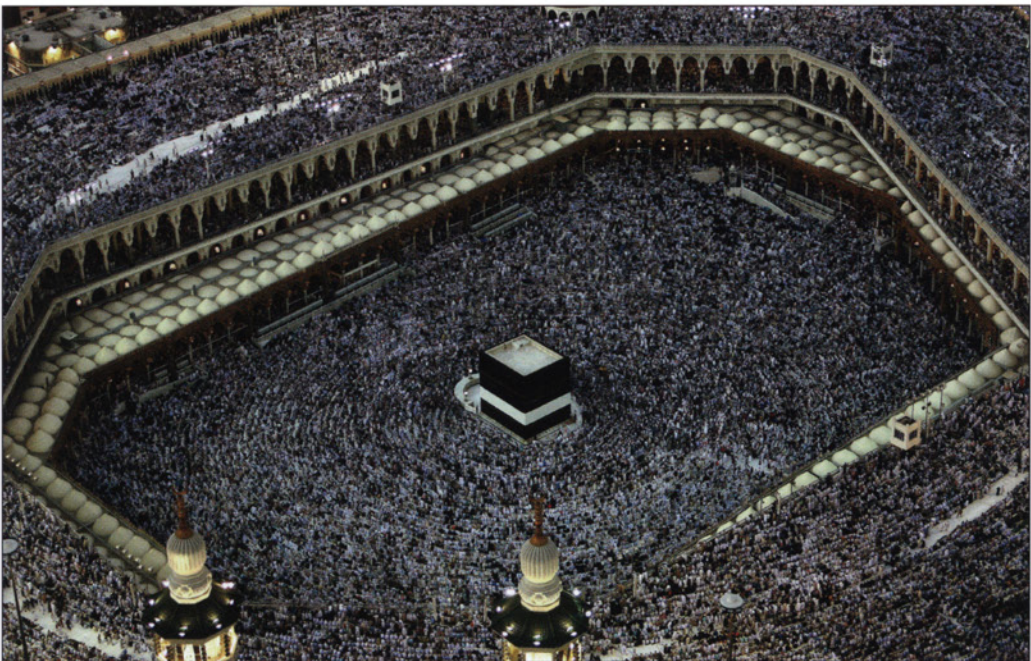
The early Islamic conquests rank amongst the most remarkable feats of arms in world history, being carried out by small and indeed often tiny armies, which were nevertheless some of the most successful ever seen. Within a century, the forces of a new religion had inspired and conquered the entire Arabian peninsula, destroying one empire and humbling another. Beyond Arabia, these armies ranged across North Africa and into Europe, crossing the Pyrenees and reaching into France. From the ancient Roman province of Iberia to the heart of the Persian empires in Iran, the conquering Islamic armies irrevocably altered the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean worlds in a remarkably short period of time.

This successful conquest and subsequent conversion of the Middle East and beyond has inevitably resulted in a variety of myths and prejudices throughout the ages. It is important

to note that the conversion of the peoples of what are now the heartlands of the Islamic world was a largely peaceful process and was separate from the Arabs' military conquest of these same areas. Indeed, the conversion largely resulted from the example set by the early Muslim Arabs themselves and the activities of preachers, missionaries and merchants. A desire for material, cultural and political advantage under the new regime also played a part. This is nevertheless rarely understood by non-Islamic societies, especially in the Western world, where the public often regards Islam as a religion spread by force.

Muslim pilgrims praying towards and walking around the Ka'ba in Mecca. These were among the primary actions required during their *Hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca. The numbers of people making the *Hajj* each year has increased at a relatively steady rate since Muhammad's lifetime, and can now be counted in the millions.

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In fact, forcible conversion is specifically banned by Islamic *Shari'a* or religious law.

Here it should also be noted that Muslims believe that the faith of Islam was the first of all religions rather than one of the last to emerge. It was, according to the Islamic interpretation of the history of religion, the faith of Adam and Eve. This, in modern terms, means that Muslims regard Islam as the natural *din* or religion of mankind and indeed, that of a newborn child before he or she comes under the influence of parents and society. For Muslims therefore, the achievement of the Prophet Muhammad was to bring his followers 'back to Islam'.

In addition to adding a new civilisation and a very vigorous new world power to the existing cultures of the early medieval period, the Great Islamic Conquests, as they are usually known, had a number of other profound impacts. If any major event could be said to have brought the ancient world to an end, it was this sequence of wide-ranging military campaigns. Nevertheless Graeco-Roman civilisation and knowledge did not disappear. In fact no other medieval culture did more than the early Muslims to preserve Graeco-Roman sciences, literature and other forms of knowledge. Their descendants, along with more recent converts to Islam, would then add massively to this store of knowledge, heralding a 'Golden Age' within the ever-increasing realm of Islamic territory. Throughout this period the Islamic world also became the economic powerhouse of the early medieval world, drawing Europe, much of Africa and virtually all of Asia into a new trading network which was for several hundred years centred upon Baghdad. For some centuries, Baghdad was also the biggest city in the world.

Many historians still wrestle with the question of just how the Muslim armies of the first century and a half of Islamic history managed to take control of so much

territory, particularly when it was seized from seemingly powerful and well-entrenched rivals. Many Muslim scholars have also found this difficult to answer, and as a result the concept of 'The Way Prepared' came into vogue. This, in essence, suggested that it was God's will that the great imperial powers of the 7th century weakened themselves by fighting one another, so making it possible for supposedly simple and even primitive early Islamic forces to defeat them only a few years later. Such an interpretation was further refined in an effort to explain why the Sassanian Empire of Iran, whose people were largely Zoroastrian in religion, was totally defeated whereas the *Rumi* (Roman) Byzantines, who were Christians, lost huge swathes of territory yet survived until the end of the medieval period. It was suggested that this was because Zoroastrians were not initially regarded as a 'People of the Book,' meaning that they were not adherents of a 'true' albeit 'corrupted' religion. Christians, on the other hand, were, like the Jews, a 'People of the Book' who shared the same God as Muslims. This commonality supposedly allowed the Byzantine Empire to survive for several centuries – despite the Arab armies' continued attacks – until the final collapse of Constantinople in 1453.

However, theological accounts do little justice to the huge internal debates, power struggles, military triumphs and civil war that characterised much of the early development of Islam and the greater Islamic empire. Indeed, these divisions and how they were ultimately overcome are as much a part of the story as are the huge swathes of territory that were conquered. Nevertheless, however one seeks to explain these early Islamic conquests, they remain extraordinary and truly heroic. The following account will attempt to shed light on the rise of the new faith, the men who fought in its great campaigns, and the world upon which it sprung.

Chronology

Islamic rulers

Muhammad, *Rasul Allah* 'The Prophet of God': born AD 570, invited to rule the town of Yathrib (Medina) AD 622 (beginning of the Islamic or Hijra calendar), died AD 632

The Rightly Guided Caliphs (*al-Khulafa al-Rashidun*), *reigned* AD 632–61

Abu Bakr 'Atiq Ibn Abi Quhafa, *reigned* AD 632–34

Abu Hafs 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab ('Umar I), *reigned* AD 634–44

Abu 'Amr 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan, *reigned* AD 644–56

Abu'l-Hassan 'Ali Ibn Abu Talib, *reigned* AD 656–61

Umayyad Caliphs, *reigned* AD 661–750
Abu 'Abd al-Rahman Mu'awiya Ibn Abi Sufyan, *reigned* AD 661–80

Abu Khalid Yazid I Ibn Mu'awiya, *reigned* AD 680–83

Mu'awiya II Ibn Yazid, *reigned* AD 683–84
Abu 'Abd al-Malik Marwan I Ibn al-Hakam, *reigned* AD 684–85

Abu'l-Walid 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan, *reigned* AD 685–705

Abu'l-'Abbas al-Walid I Ibn 'Abd al-Malik, *reigned* AD 705–15

Abu Ayyub Sulayman Ibn 'Abd al-Malik, *reigned* AD 715–17

Abu Hafs 'Umar II Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, *reigned* AD 717–20

Abu Khalid Yazid II Ibn 'Abd al-Malik, *reigned* AD 720–24

Abu'l-Walid Hisham Ibn 'Abd al-Malik, *reigned* AD 724–43

Abu'l-'Abbas al-Walid II Ibn Yazid, *reigned* AD 743–44

Abu Khalid Yazid III Ibn al-Walid, *reigned* AD 744

Ibrahim Ibn al-Walid, *reigned* AD 744

Abu 'Abd al-Malik Marwan II Ibn Muhammad, *reigned* AD 744–50

('Abd al-Rahman Ibn Mu'awiya, *reigned* AD 756–88 as *amir* or autonomous provincial governor of al-Andalus)

'Abbasid Caliphs, *reigned* AD 750–809 (Caliphs until c. AD 1453)

'Abdullah Ibn Muhammad al-Imam Abu'l-'Abbas al-Saffah, *reigned* AD 750–54

'Abdullah Ibn Muhammad al-Iman Abu Ja'far al-Mansur, *reigned* AD 754–75

Muhammad Ibn al-Mansur Abu 'Abdullah al-Mahdi, *reigned* AD 775–85

Musa Ibn al-Mahdi Abu Muhammad al-Hadi, *reigned* AD 785–86

Harun Ibn al-Mahdi Abu Ja'far al-Rashid, *reigned* AD 786–809

When the last Umayyad Caliph, Marwan II, fled to Egypt after being defeated by the 'Abbasids in 750, he may have been heading for the Iberian peninsula, as one of his younger relatives managed to do only a few years later. Marwan II was, however, caught and killed in the Fayyum area. Centuries later this magnificently decorated bronze ewer was found where the unfortunate Marwan and his remaining followers are believed to have buried their treasure before making a final stand. (Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Egypt; David Nicolle photograph)



Events

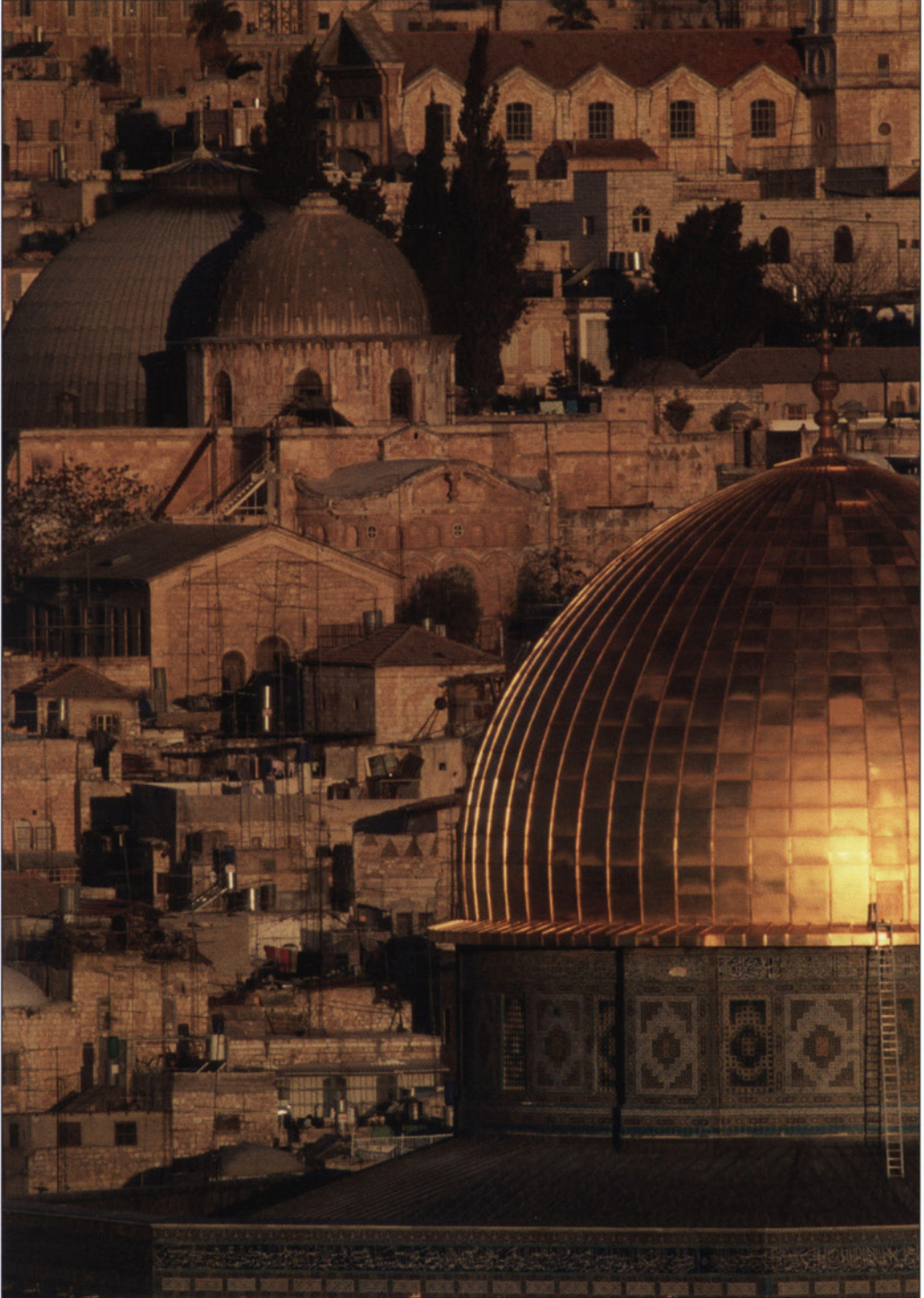
- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>522 Ethiopian occupation of Yemen</p> <p>570 Birth of the Prophet Muhammad; failure of attempted Ethiopian attack on Mecca</p> <p>574 Sassanian Empire occupies Yemen and expels Ethiopians</p> <p>581 Romano-Byzantine authorities downgrade autonomy of Arab Ghassanid frontier rulers</p> <p>602 Sassanian abolition of autonomous Arab Lakhmid rulers on the Iraqi frontier, and invasion of Romano-Byzantine Empire</p> <p>615 Some of the first Muslims emigrate to Christian Ethiopia to escape persecution in Mecca</p> <p>616 Sassanian conquest of Romano-Byzantine Syria and Egypt</p> <p>622 Muhammad's emigration (<i>Hijra</i>) from Mecca to Medina; Romano-Byzantine Emperor Heraclius begins reconquest of territory occupied by the Sassanians</p> <p>624 Muslims defeat pagan Meccans at battle of Badr</p> <p>625 Pagan Meccans defeat Muslims at battle of Uhud</p> <p>627 Pagan Meccans unsuccessfully besiege Muslim-ruled Medina; Romano-Byzantines defeat Sassanians at battle of Nineveh</p> <p>628 Conclusion of peace between Romano-Byzantine and Sassanian Empires</p> <p>629 Muslim raiders defeated by Arab Romano-Byzantine frontier forces at the battle of Muta</p> | <p>630 Muslims take control of Mecca; Muslims defeat army and allies of Ta'if, also take control of the northern Hijaz and part of southern Jordan; Romano-Byzantine authorities massacre Jews in Palestine</p> <p>632 Death of the Prophet Muhammad; start of Ridda Wars of attempted apostasy, when many Arab tribes attempt to throw off Islamic rule; Muslim raid into southern Jordan led by Usama Ibn Zaid Ibn Harithah</p> <p>633 Muslims defeat 'false prophet' Musailama at battle of Yamama, reimpose their authority in Oman and Yemen; Muslim force raids Sassanian frontier territory in southern Iraq; three small Muslim armies raid Romano-Byzantine Jordan and Palestine</p> <p>634 Muslims defeat pro-Romano-Byzantine Ghassanid Arab frontier forces at Marj Rahit and seize Bosra, defeat Romano-Byzantines at Ajnadayn in Palestine and Sassanians at battle of Babylon in Iraq; Sassanians defeat Muslims at battle of the Bridge in Iraq</p> <p>635 Muslims defeat Romano-Byzantines at Pella, temporarily take Damascus and Hims; Muslims defeat Sassanians at Bawaib in Iraq</p> |
|---|---|

The first half-century of Islamic history saw massive cultural changes, not least in the design of the Caliphate's coinage. From left to right: gold dinar high-value coin of the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik, AD 685–705, showing the ruler with a sword; Sassanian-style bronze dirham low-value coin minted at Bishapur in Iran in 76 AH (AD 695–6); bronze dirham low-value coin showing a banner-spear in front of a prayer niche, in an early attempt to design a distinctly Islamic form of coinage. It was minted between AD 634 and 643.



636 Muslims defeats Byzantines at the battle of Yarmuk, retake Damascus, conquer most of Syria and Lebanon

The gilded dome of the Dome of the Rock shines above the Old City in Jerusalem at sunrise, with the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the background.
© Annie Griffiths Belt/Corbis



- 637 Mostly likely date when Islamic army defeats Sassanians at Qadisiyah
- 638 Muslims take Sassanian capital of Ctesiphon in Iraq, defeat Sassanians at Jalula; Jerusalem surrenders to the Muslims; Muslims conquer northern Syria and invade south-western Iran
- 639 Muslim invasion of Egypt; plague in Syria and famine in Arabia
- 642 Muslim occupation of Alexandria completes conquest of Egypt; Muslims defeat Sassanians at Nihawand
- 643 Muslims take Isfahan and Rayy in Iran; Muslims temporarily conquer western Libya; Muslim raid into Nubia defeated
- 645 Byzantines temporarily retake Alexandria
- 647 Muslims defeat Berbers at Sbeitla in Tunisia and invade Cyprus
- 652 Muslims defeat Byzantine fleet off Alexandria (first Muslim naval victory)
- 656 Rebellion against the Caliph 'Ali defeated at the battle of the Camel in the first major civil war in Islam
- 657 Indecisive battle of Siffin between supporters of Caliph 'Ali and of Mu'awiya, the Muslim governor of Syria (civil war continues into 659)
- 670–77 First Islamic siege of the Byzantine capital of Constantinople
- 680 Massacre of several of the Prophet Muhammad's descendants at Karbala, including his grandson Husayn
- 682 Revolt against the Umayyad Caliph Yazid I causes anarchy across much of the Caliphate for several years
- 683 A Muslim force crosses North Africa as far as the Atlantic but is destroyed at Tahuda on its return march
- 695 *Kharaji* (Sunni fundamentalist) revolt in Iraq; Umayyad force takes Carthage in Tunisia
- 700 Berber rebellion in North Africa
- 702 Berber rebels defeated at Tabarka; Muslim authority restored in central North Africa
- 707–08 Muslims conquer Sind (southern Pakistan)
- 710 Nominally Byzantine Count Julian of Ceuta (northern Morocco) accepts Umayyad suzerainty; first Muslim raid into the Iberian peninsula
- 711 Umayyad force defeats Visigoth army at Wadi Lakka (Guadalete)
- 712 Umayyad force conquers Samarkand in Central Asia; Umayyad force invades India
- 714 Completion of the Muslim conquest of the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal)
- 716–17 Second, unsuccessful, siege of Constantinople
- 718 Umayyad invasion of southern France
- 730 Turkish Khazars invade Muslim-ruled Azerbaijan
- 732 Umayyad army defeated by Franks at battle of Poitiers
- 737 Umayyads defeat Western Turks at Juzjan
- 740 Berber *Kharaji* revolt in North Africa
- 742 Berber rebels defeated outside Qairawan
- 743 Umayyad authority re-established across North Africa
- 744 Umayyad civil war in Syria
- 746 Umayyad army defeats *Kharajis* at Kufar Tutha; suppression of uprising in Jordan and Palestine
- 747 Abu Muslim launches pro-'Abbasid rebellion in Khurasan
- 749 Western Iran and southern Iraq fall to pro-'Abbasid forces
- 750 Umayyad army defeated by 'Abbasid army at Greater Zab river; flight and death of last Umayyad Caliph Marwan II
- 751 Provincial Islamic army defeats Chinese at Talas in Central Asia
- 756 Revival of Umayyad rule in al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia) but recognising the religious authority of the 'Abbasid Caliph
- 788 Beginning of Idrisid (Shi'a Muslim) rule in Morocco, first fragmentation of the 'Abbasid Caliphate

Pre-Islamic Arabia

Arabia was the fountainhead of the Semitic peoples who, throughout recorded history, spread northwards through the Arabian peninsula into what is known as the Fertile Crescent and – to a lesser degree – westward into Africa. Here they and their descendants, speaking a variety of related Semitic languages, developed various ancient civilisations. From the 6th century BC, however, it seemed that Semitic energies were temporarily exhausted and other peoples came to dominate the region. Empires rose and fell, but the Fertile Crescent was always ruled by non-Semitic peoples, including Persians from the east and Greeks or Romans from the west.

By the 1st century AD the region was almost entirely under the control of two such empires. The eastern half formed part of the Parthian Empire, centred upon modern-day Iran, but with its economic and cultural heartland in Semitic Iraq, while the western

half had long been incorporated into a Graeco-Roman world now represented by the Roman Empire. This, although its main centres were in Italy and Greece, had a third economic, cultural and more recently religious powerhouse in Semitic Syria – or *Bilad al-Sham* as it came to be known by Arabic speakers – which then included much of present-day Syria plus Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and part of southern Turkey. Further south, Nubia, the Sudan and Ethiopia also lay within the sphere of influence of the Late Roman or Byzantine Empire.

Two late Sassanian or early Islamic helmets found in the ruins of Nineveh, next to what became the medieval city of Mosul in northern Iraq. They almost certainly date from the early years of the 7th century when Nineveh saw fighting, first between Sassanians and Byzantines and then a few years later between Sassanians and Muslim Arabs. (British Museum, inv. 22495 and 22497, London, UK; David Nicolle photographs)





Muslim Arab warriors from the time of the Prophet Muhammad, based upon a small amount of archaeological and illustrative evidence, plus an abundance of detailed written recollections dating from only a few decades later. The military equipment ranges from armour and helmets of equal quality to those used by neighbouring Byzantine and Sassanian armies, to simple weapons including arrows tipped with stone rather than metal heads. (Angus McBride © Osprey Publishing Ltd)

empire of the Sassanians in the 3rd century AD. They dominated not only modern Iran, plus parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, but also Iraq, most of the Caucasus region and at times the east of what is now Turkey. The Sassanian Empire survived as a great power – one of the two powers that mattered in Arabia – until, to the astonishment of both contemporaries and

A millennium of Graeco-Roman influence had left a profound imprint upon Syria, Egypt, Turkey and the many other lands which subsequently became Muslim or Arabic-speaking. Graeco-Roman civilisation had also deeply influenced neighbouring Iran and the Arabian peninsula despite the fact that, apart from some disastrous Roman attempts at conquest, Arabia had never been ruled by Alexander the Great, his Hellenistic Greek successors, or the Romans. Instead it was trade, culture, art and religion that had drawn Arabia into the orbit of Graeco-Roman civilisation – not Rome's legions.

A parallel process could be seen in Arabia's relationship with its other mighty neighbour, Iran. Here the Parthian Empire, which had emerged on Iran's Central Asian frontiers in the 3rd century BC, was replaced by the

many modern historians, it collapsed when challenged by remarkably small Muslim armies in the 7th century.

However, Western historians have tended to be preoccupied with the relationship between the Graeco-Roman world and pre-Islamic Arabia, while neglecting the influence of the Sassanian Empire. In fact, the relationship between Arabia and Sassanian-ruled territories was just as important as that between Arabia and the Mediterranean world; so much so that Iran eventually provided the model for most secular and non-literary aspects of medieval Islamic civilisation.

Contrary to popular perception, the indigenous inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia were not exclusively camel-riding, sheep- or goat-raising nomads who raided their settled

neighbours whenever an opportunity arose. In reality the regions south of the Fertile Crescent were home to a remarkable variety of cultures based upon differing ways of life, economic and socio-political systems and, even as late as the 6th century AD, different languages.

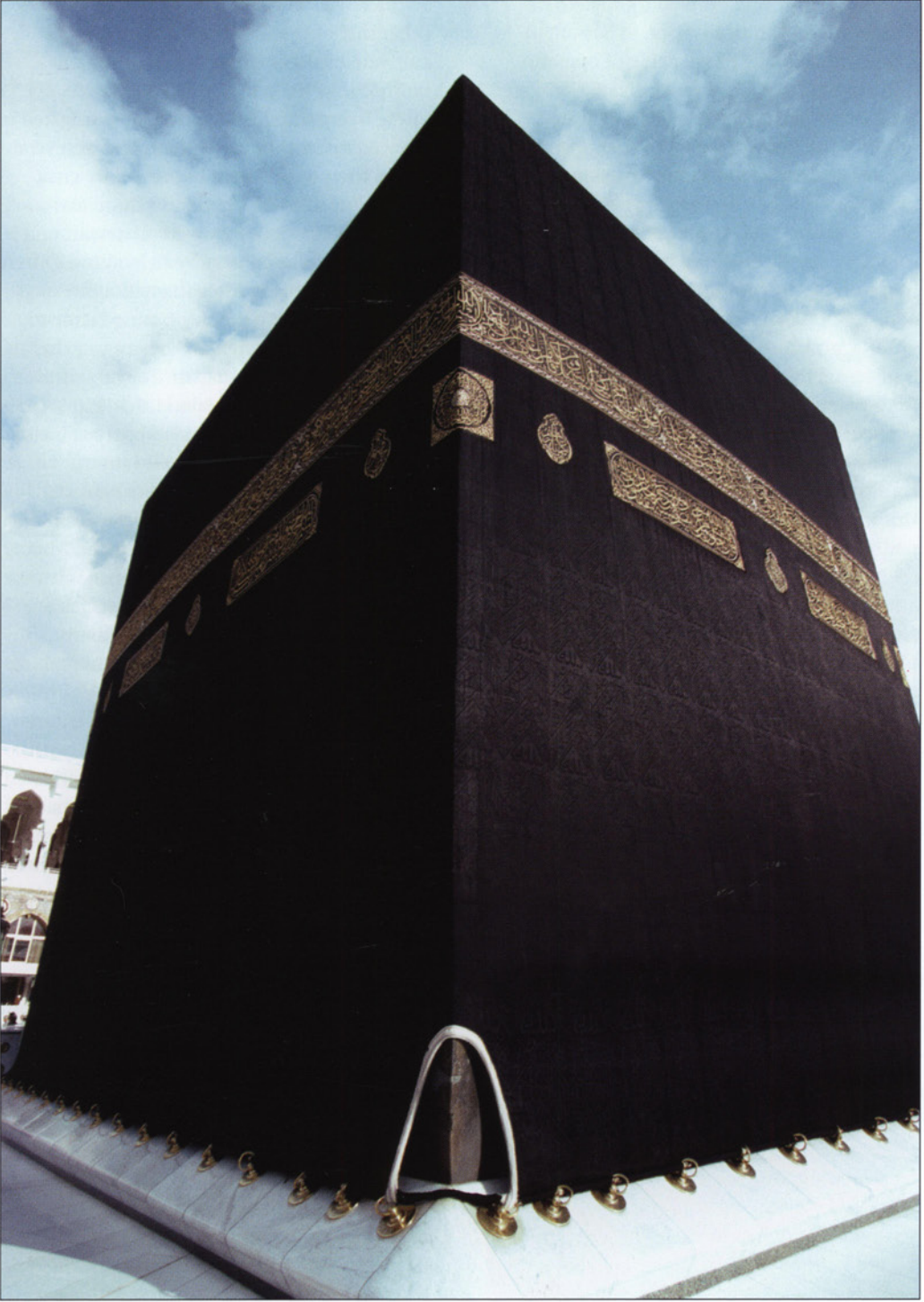
Its tribal organisation was based upon families or clans, which grew or dwindled according to political, economic, ecological and other circumstances. Similar changes characterised the relationships between tribes, many of which had, or claimed, kinship with one another. The powerful supported the weak to build alliances, while the weak sought protection from the strong. The volatile relationships between the pre-Islamic Arab tribes were largely the result of interference by the Roman or Sassanian Empires. Both intended to extend their imperial influence over the strategically and economically important region of Arabia, which stood at the hub of international trade. In return the Arab tribes tried to use great-power rivalry to further their own local interests. Over the years these political manoeuvrings led to the emergence of two major but internally quarrelsome associations of Arab tribes. One group, the Yemeni tribes, was widely regarded as being 'southerners', though several of the tribes actually dominated territory in the centre and north of Arabia. The other group was considered 'northern', though again they were found in other parts of the peninsula.

Northern Arabia, including the desert and steppe of what is now Syria, Iraq and Jordan, was neighbour to the 'great powers' which dominated coastal Syria, Anatolia and Iraq. Here it was only the harshness of the landscape which enabled the inhabitants to maintain their independence. Occasionally they were conquered but more often they survived as 'clients' or allies of the Roman and Sassanian empires. In return the peoples of northern Arabia kept trade routes open, were respectful to whichever empire was their patron, and confined themselves to raiding each other, or the rival empire and its clients. As the northern Arabian states maintained their precarious independence, many of them developed sophisticated societies which boasted wealthy merchants and farmers.

The most powerful of the Sassanians' Arab client states was the Lakhmid tribal kingdom, which enjoyed a relatively large degree of autonomy and a close relationship with its Sassanian nominal rulers. In fact, the Lakhmid capital at al-Hira lay within Sassanian territory in Iraq, but by the 6th century the Lakhmids had grown strong enough to pose a very real threat to Sassanian control of Iraq. Pre-empting a feared challenge of the part of the Lakhmids, the Sassanians abolished their autonomous dynasty and took direct control

One of the best illustrations of a fully armoured cavalryman from the early Islamic period was painted on a shield. It was found in the castle of Mug and dates from the early 8th century when this part of Central Asia was an autonomous frontier province of the Umayyad Caliphate. (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia)





The Ka'ba, the holiest structure in Islam, as seen from the Yemeni (southwest) corner. The simple rectangular building has been repaired or even rebuilt more than once since the days of Muhammad. For many centuries

it has, however, consisted of a plain, rectangular stone building, seen here entirely covered by a huge black cloth decorated with gold-embroidered Arabic inscriptions.
© Kazuyoshi Nomachi/Corbis

of the desert frontier. It would prove to be a monumental strategic error, as Sassanian Iranian forces were less capable of operating in the desert beyond their cultivated, irrigated zone than their indigenous clients were. As a result of the loss of control of their frontier, the subsequent Arab-Islamic invasion was made much easier. Moreover, the abolition of the Lakhmid sub-kingdom also led the militarily significant Arab peoples living in Iraq to no longer feel that they had much of a stake in the preservation of the Sassanian Empire, and consequently, a large majority transferred their allegiance to the new Arab-Islamic Caliphate almost as soon as the Islamic invasion began.

The camel-riding, nomadic bedouin warriors of popular imagination who ranged through the entire northern region were neither well enough armed, nor had the social organisation, to form strong enough armies to dominate these tribal associations. Nevertheless the bedouin did enjoy a special place in pre-Islamic Arab culture, and were widely regarded as the embodiment of Arab virtues; especially in contrast to the inhabitants of the neighbouring empires, who enjoyed a rather more luxurious existence. Consequently Arab pride in their real or adopted tribal identity would survive long after the coming of Islam, despite the fact that the tribal structure upon which it was theoretically based underwent fundamental changes during the first two centuries of Islamic history.

Southern Arabia was distinct from the rest of the peninsula. It had seen the rise and fall of several sophisticated urban civilisations, most of which thrived upon long-distance trade through Yemen or along its coasts, ranging from India and Africa to the mighty empires of the ancient Middle East. Its dominant languages were Semitic, though there were significant communities whose languages belonged to the Hamitic or African linguistic family. At the same time the civilisations of Yemen fell into two distinct categories. Those of the coast were well known to merchants from Egypt, Greece, India and even China, yet they were not necessarily the wealthiest. Some of the most remarkable

southern Arabian states were, in fact, on the other side of the mountains, centred upon cultivated valleys whose seasonal streams ran not into the sea but into the desert. These rivers sustained sophisticated irrigated or terraced systems of agriculture, and in several places their waters were harnessed by great dams. One of these, the Marib Dam, was so important that its supposed collapse around AD 450 was alleged to have helped cause the decline of southern Arabian civilisation.

However, another contributing factor to the decline of this ancient society was the collapse of the spice market. For thousands of years, southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa had earned considerable revenues by cultivating frankincense and myrrh. These two aromatic 'spices' were essential for religious observances in the classical civilisations of the Mediterranean and Middle East, but with the triumph of Christianity the market for them slumped, which struck a grave blow to the economy of southern Arabia. Trade routes shifted elsewhere, taking with them the wealth they spread. As a result southern Arabia in the 6th and 7th centuries, immediately prior to the coming of Islam, was a pale shadow of its former glory. This no doubt helped propagate the myth that pre-Islamic Arabia was a cultural backwater.

Throughout the pre-Islamic centuries there had been several attempts to unify the peoples of the Arabian peninsula, usually encouraged by one of the neighbouring great empires which envisaged Arabia becoming a strong but subordinate ally. However, the unification of Arabia by the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate successor – the first Caliph Abu Bakr – was something different, something far more important. Out of these disparate peoples of Arabia, with contrasting ways of life and different languages, would emerge a religious revolution; and for the first time in their recorded history, the Arabs would be united by an indigenous leader, inspired by their own ideology. With the coming of Muhammad, a unifying religious force was created for the region, which fuelled the conquest of not only Arabia itself but lands and hearts far beyond.

The birth of Islam and the unifying of Arabia

Pre-Islamic Arabia was largely pagan, but it also contained substantial minorities of Jews and Christians. Our knowledge of indigenous pagan religions within the region is very limited, however, with only a few inscriptions and carvings surviving the intervening centuries. Like the pagan Pantheon of ancient Greece, the deities of ancient Arabia were ranked according to seniority, with Allah as the supreme God. The deities of al-Lat, al-Uzza, Manat and Hubal were also significant, with the first three considered to be the daughters of Allah, and these were the focus of a number of popular cults. Pilgrimage was also a key component of faith, with several centres of pagan pilgrimage throughout the region, including Mecca. With the coming of Islam all the pagan gods would be swept away, with the concept of only one God – Allah – becoming a central tenet of the faith. Nevertheless the ancient gods and goddesses were not entirely forgotten, surviving in legends, folk tales and children's stories, and evolving into a host of devils, angels and *jinn* – the mythical immortal creature made of fire.

The Prophet Muhammad

Muhammad is believed to have been born into this pagan Arabia on 20 August 570. His father, Abdullah Ibn Abd al-Muttalib, had died a few months before so the baby and his mother were protected by Muhammad's paternal grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, who was recognised as the leading figure in his tribe, the Quraysh. Though they dominated Mecca and its surroundings, the Quraysh consisted of sometimes quarrelling clans. As an infant, Muhammad Ibn Abdullah was handed over to a woman of the neighbouring Banu Sa'ad

tribe, it being customary for children of elite families to be brought up in what was regarded as the free and healthy air of the desert rather than in a hot, dusty and perhaps unhealthy town like Mecca.

When he reached six years of age, Muhammad returned to his immediate family, but within a year his mother died, leaving him an orphan to be looked after by a devoted slave woman known as Umm Ayman. When Muhammad was only eight, his highly respected grandfather Abd al-Muttalib also died, leaving the boy with few people to protect him in a dangerous and competitive world. So his uncle, Abu Talib, accepted the responsibility of his upbringing, despite being a poor man with many children of his own.

Muhammad is said to have visited the Syrian frontier town of Bosra twice. Here camel caravans from Mecca and elsewhere in Arabia assembled after their long journeys

The ruins of the church known as the 'Basilica of Bahira in Bosra, southern Syria. Bahira was the Christian monk, or more likely priest or abbot, whom some Muslims believe declared that Muhammad would become a Messenger from God when Muhammad visited Bosra as a youth. Consequently the now abandoned church remains important to Muslims as well as local Christians. (David Nicolle photograph)





Mount Hira, the site of the Prophet Muhammad's first revelation, not far from the town of Mecca, which had been a thriving trade and religious centre even in pre-Islamic times. © Kazuyoshi Nomachi/Corbis

across the desert. Many of their merchants would go on to trade in Damascus or the coastal cities of Syria, though Bosra was a thriving market in its own right. According to some accounts of his life, Muhammad was only twelve years old when he first went to Bosra, having accompanied one of his uncle Abu Talib's trading missions to Syria.

According to a legend, which not all Muslims accept, a local Christian monk named Bahira saw the youthful Muhammad as the merchants were passing through Bosra on their way home. This story maintains that Bahira, who is more likely to have been an abbot or other senior figure in a monastery or church, invited everyone in the caravan to a meal before they set out into the desert. During this meal he questioned Muhammad closely and is said to have told Abu Talib that the boy was destined to become a great man. Some even say that the Christian monk predicted Muhammad would become the last of the Prophets. Few Muslims, however, still believe a

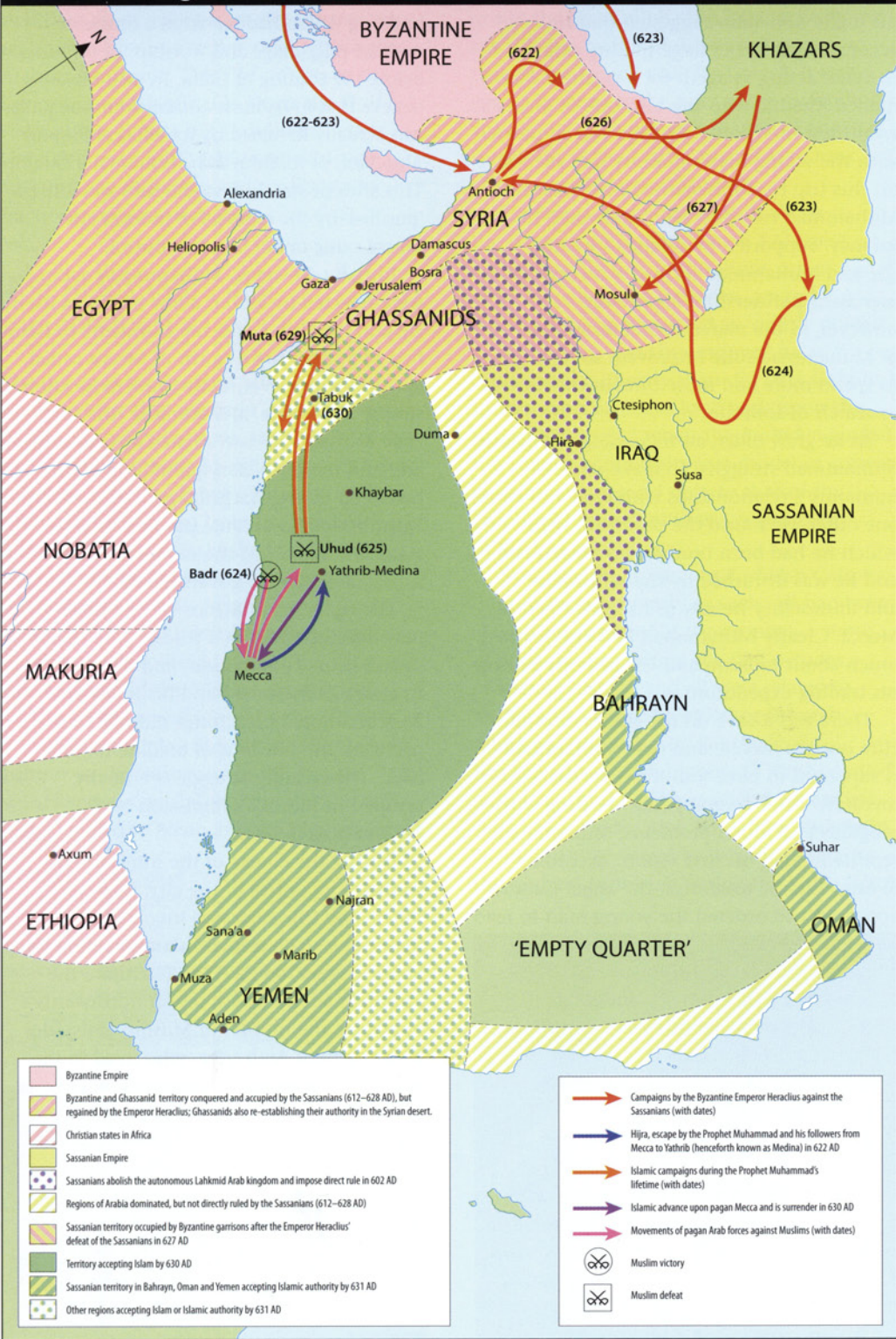
further legend, which claimed that two hollows in a stone in a now ruined mosque in Bosra mark the spot where Muhammad's camel knelt to let the boy dismount.

Meanwhile life remained uncertain and difficult for the young Muhammad. He earned what he could where he could, sometimes as a shepherd, sometimes as a small-scale merchant. Nevertheless he won

The ruins of a medieval Tomb Mosque which marks the site of a Muslim-Arab defeat at the battle of Muta in 629. The minaret was rebuilt by the Jordanian Arab Legion under Glubb Pasha. (David Nicolle photograph)



Arabia during Muhammad's mission



a reputation for being totally reliable and trustworthy. When he was twenty-five, his uncle Abu Talib suggested that he accompany another large trading caravan to Syria, acting as agent for a wealthy widow named Khadija who was also one of Mecca's wealthiest merchants. Khadija was so pleased with the young man's honesty and success on this trip that she married him, bearing Muhammad two sons who sadly died in infancy. Supported by Khadija's wealth, she and Muhammad formed a successful merchant partnership. Reportedly, however, as the material circumstances of Muhammad's life improved, so he began to spend more and more time in the desert in search of solitude.

As he grew older, an increasingly religious Muhammad struggled to make sense of humanity's relationships with God and with one other. He found the paganism with which he had been brought up inadequate, and he was disturbed by the selfishness and immorality he saw in his own town of Mecca. Clearly Muhammad had also learned much about Judaism and Christianity during his trading expeditions.

There was a cave on the slopes of Mount Hira outside Mecca, and here Muhammad is supposed to have found a quiet place to meditate. After several years wrestling with religious and moral problems, Muhammad reportedly had his first vision. According to later Islamic teachings, the angel Gabriel appeared and ordered the young man to read or more literally 'proclaim' an inscription on a brocade which the angel was carrying. Muhammad was reportedly illiterate but after Gabriel repeated the order four times he began to understand. This was the beginning of his mission to preach Islam to the people of Mecca.

Other revelations followed, which in time would form the basis for the text of the Qur'an, Islam's holy book. Muhammad's preaching revolved around what he described as the Five Pillars, or the basic tenets of Islam: the unity of God, the duty of prayer, fasting during the month of Ramadan, paying a *zakat* tax to support the needy, and making the *Hajj*

or pilgrimage to the Ka'ba in Mecca. The Ka'ba was an undecorated, almost cube-shaped building which had served as a centre of Arabian pilgrimage and worship for centuries before the coming of Islam. In fact, Muslims believe that in its most ancient form the Ka'ba was actually designed by the biblical Prophet Abraham, or Ibrahim as he is known in Arabic. This ancient structure would subsequently be 'purified' by the removal of its idols after Mecca came under Muslim control.

Initially, however, Muhammad's actions were rejected by all but a few in Mecca itself. He and the first, persecuted converts to Islam fled to a small town north of Mecca called Yathrib, which eventually came to be known simply as Medina, al-Madina or 'the City'. Here Muhammad was invited to take control and end the inter-clan quarrelling which had been tearing Yathrib apart. As a result, Yathrib-Medina became the first 'Islamic state' and remained the model for all subsequent Islamic governments.

The residents of Mecca viewed these new developments as a threat, or at least as economic competition, and decided to attack Muhammad and his followers. As Muhammad's teachings did not embrace pacifism, the Muslims of Medina fought back. The ensuing struggle eventually resulted in Mecca's submission to Muhammad in 630.

During the course of the intermittent warfare for control of the city, however, other Arab tribes became involved in the fighting. In 629, a small Islamic raiding force under Usama Ibn Zaid Ibn Harithah, the Prophet's adopted son, set off northwards to avenge the murder of Muslim emissaries by a northern Arab tribe, who lived in the nominally Romano-Byzantine frontier zone of what is now southern Jordan. However, the Muslims were defeated at Muta and Zaid Ibn Harithah was killed. It is not clear whether the targets of the raid were indeed 'Roman', but in Islamic historical tradition the defeat at Muta is seen as the first armed clash between Muslims and the Christian Byzantine world, and a foretaste of clashes to come.

Muhammad died a mere two years after Mecca's submission, in June 632, but by that time many tribes from distant regions recognised him as a senior ruler within the Arabian peninsula. This did not mean the imposition of Islamic rule along the Gulf coast nor in Yemen but it did signify that some degree of unity had been achieved amongst the disparate, and traditionally fractious, peoples of Arabia.

The Ridda Wars and the conquest of Arabia

The death of the Prophet Muhammad presented the tiny *umma* or community of Muslims with a serious dilemma. Clearly no one could inherit his spiritual or religious role, but as well as being a spiritual leader, Muhammad had also been the head of a small state with established principles of government, laws and diplomatic relationships with its neighbours. So, Muhammad's death left open the question of who could or should inherit his temporal role as leader of the Islamic community.

This problem was solved by the selection of a *Khalifa* or Caliph – literally 'he who follows behind' or the 'successor' of the Prophet. The word appeared several times in the Qur'an, being applied to Adam and the Prophet David

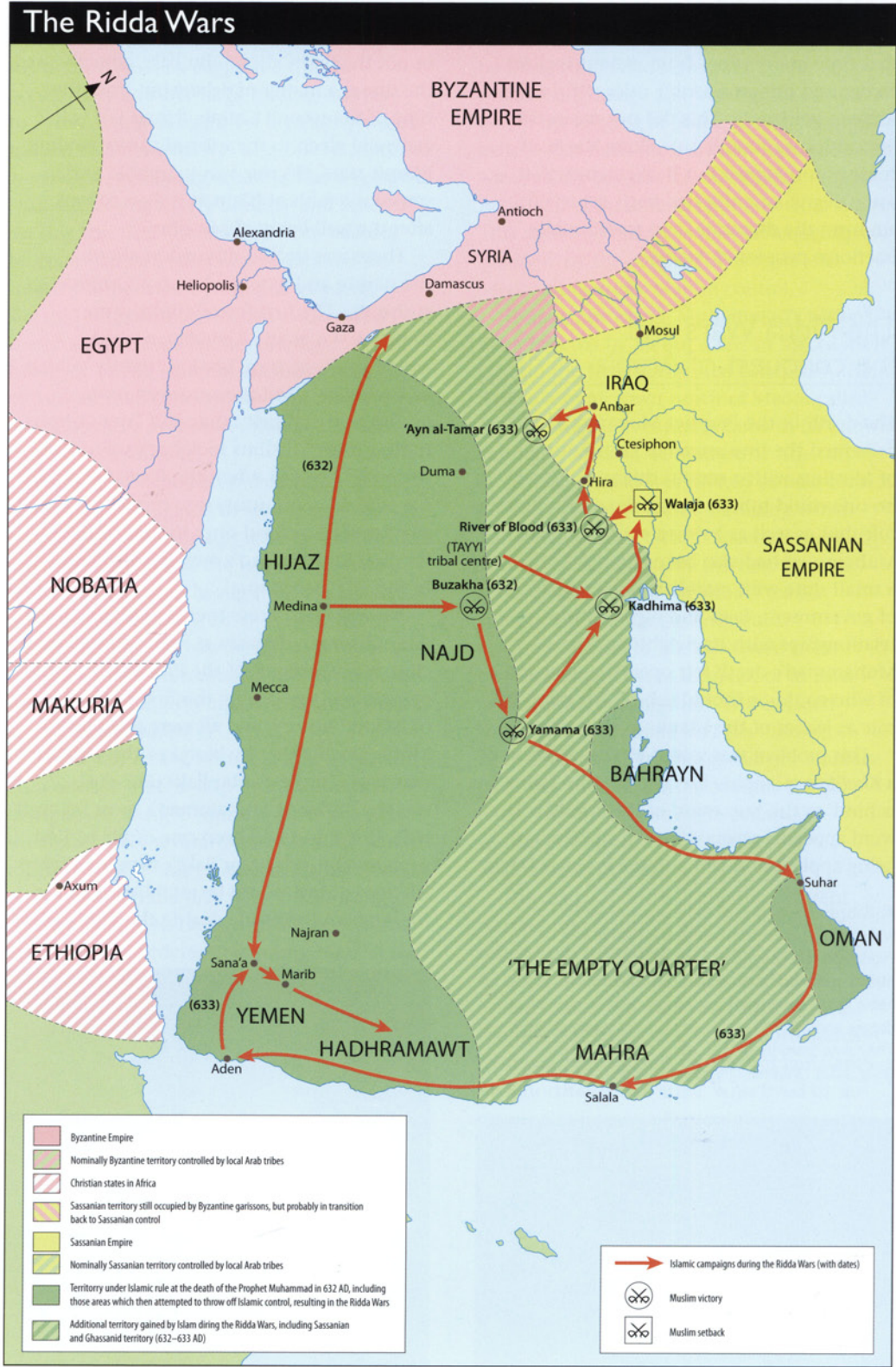
amongst others, and implying responsibility over the world or some aspect of it. Whether or not the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, actually used the title is a matter of debate but from the time of the second Caliph, 'Umar I, it was generally given to the ruler of the expanding Islamic state. His role was to uphold and spread the faith of Islam as well as to look after the well-being of Muslims.

There was heated discussion about the nature and extent of such a Caliph's authority. The first four Caliphs came to be known as the *Rashidun*, a word which could be translated as 'rightly guided' or 'orthodox', and they enjoyed more undisputed authority than did later Caliphs. Indeed most Muslims look back upon the period 632 to 661 when the *Rashidun* guided the Islamic community as a model of correct government, second only to that of the Prophet Muhammad's own government in Medina and Mecca.

Nevertheless, these four *Rashidun* Caliphs did not form a dynasty as such. All had been close 'Companions' of the Prophet, a status of great prestige during the first decades of Islamic history, and all were related to Muhammad either by blood or through marriage. The first, Abu Bakr (632–34), was the father of Muhammad's most beloved wife A'isha and had been one of his earliest supporters. Under Abu Bakr's firm leadership Islamic control would be established across the Arabian Peninsula during the Ridda Wars

Al-Rabadhah was one of the many way-stations and water-holes constructed along the Islamic Hajj or Pilgrimage road between Iraq and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in western Arabia. Amongst many items found there were an iron sword hilt, part of a dagger and the iron chape from the dagger's sheath. They date from the 8th to early 10th century. (King Sa'ud University Museum, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia)





(632–33). The name deriving from the Arabic for ‘apostasy’, the Ridda Wars were fought to re-establish the power of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and to secure Muhammad’s legacy. However, his first military campaign was actually directed against Arabian tribes within the Byzantine sphere of influence. This is likely to have been in revenge for the previous defeat at Muta and had already been planned before Muhammad’s death, and seems to have achieved little other than leaving the Muslim capital of Medina temporarily short of troops.

The real challenge to the Rightly Guided Caliphs would come from the Arabian tribes who had initially accepted Muslim suzerainty, but who now, with the death of the Prophet, rejected such hegemony. The resulting struggle to reassert unitary Islamic control was made even more urgent because other men claiming to be prophets had emerged elsewhere amongst the Arabian tribes. The most dangerous of these ‘false prophets’ were Tulaiha and Musailama, though of course what we know of them is only seen through the eyes of their Islamic foes. Tulaiha Ibn Khuwailid was a commander of the Banu Asad tribe who had already submitted to Muhammad and is said to have converted to Islam. Even before Muhammad’s death Tulaiha had rebelled, assuming the title of a prophet. During the Ridda Wars he joined a widespread revolt before being defeated at the battle of Buzakha in 632 by an Islamic column commanded by Khalid Ibn al-Walid. Tulaiha himself escaped and fled, perhaps to

Syria, but subsequently rejoined the Muslim faith, and later fought valiantly during the Islamic conquest of Iraq and western Iran.

Musailama’s correct name was Maslama Abu Thumama and he came from the Banu Hanifa tribe. Proclaiming himself a prophet during or perhaps even before Muhammad’s own mission, Musailama seems to have been strongly influenced by the Christianity which was already widespread in the Yamama region of eastern Arabia. According to some sources he offered to divide Arabia between himself and Muhammad. The Banu Hanifa tribe followed Musailama into battle against the Muslims during the Ridda Wars but, like Tulaiha, he was defeated by Khalid Ibn al-Walid, the early Islamic community’s finest general. Though Musailama and many of his followers were killed at the battle of Yamama in 632 or 633, several sayings attributed to him have survived and were still quoted in central Arabia during the 19th century.

Over the following months Islamic forces retook control of Oman in the far east of Arabia, which was followed by Yemen in the deep south. By the time the Ridda Wars were over in June 633, the Muslim *umma* had suffered appalling casualties, but the Islamic state had proved its cohesion. It had also acquired a highly experienced, battle-proven army, which was capable of overcoming enemies far stronger than itself. Arabia was, for perhaps the first time in its history, truly united under a single ruler. And under its new rulers and new religion, it was ready to burst onto the world stage.

Armies of the Middle East and Mediterranean

The Islamic forces of Arabia

The military technologies of Arabia at the time of the Prophet Muhammad remain little known, but Muhammad's forces were clearly strongly influenced by technologically advanced neighbours such as the Romano-Byzantine Empire, the Sassanian Empire and India. While the traditionally short, early medieval Arab *sayf* sword had more in common with the Roman *gladius* than with the longer Persian cavalry sword, Indian swords were the most highly prized in Arabia, as Indian steel was then considered the finest available in the Middle East. Whether such swords were normally imported as completed blades or were forged within southern Arabia from imported ingots of Indian steel remains unclear, though Yemeni blades were almost as renowned as those from India.

In general terms, early Byzantine military influence dominated in the north and west of Arabia, Sassanian in the east and, to a less certain extent, Indian in the south. Swords and spears remained the favourite weapons, while archery played a minor role and then

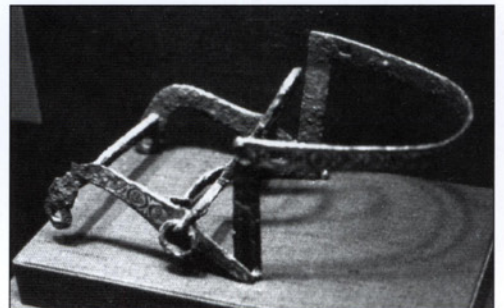
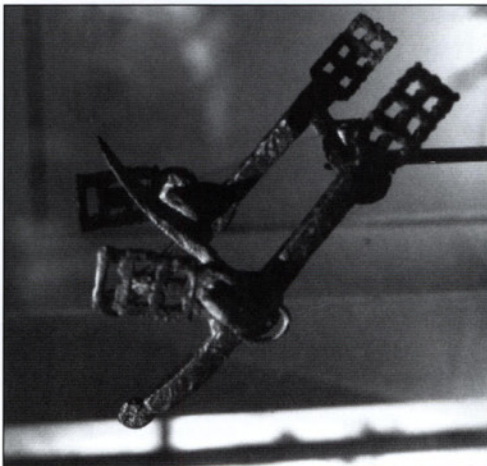
only amongst infantry. Most armour was of mail although leather protection was widespread, with many such items probably being manufactured in Yemen. In this period, the people of prosperous but strife-torn trading regions such as the Hijaz appear to have been relatively rich in weaponry.

With the rapid conquest of a vast region from Central Asia and India to Spain, Portugal and the Atlantic Ocean, other military techniques began to appear in the arms and armour of Arab armies during the 8th century. After the establishment of the Islamic 'empire', such armies became largely territorial, which encouraged the development of distinct regional styles. Thus Central Asian Turkish military techniques made their first impact in Transoxania and what is now eastern Iran, while Sassanian military practices remained dominant in western Iran and eastern parts of the Arab

The period of Arab-Islamic expansion was also one of considerable technology development, much of it stimulated by sweeping campaigns which brought different military traditions up against one another.

Left: an iron curb-bit with very long psalions, late Visigothic Spain or Portugal, 7th or early 8th century (Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 1947.47.100.24, New York, USA; David Nicolle photograph).

Right: partially gilded iron curb-bit with an iron nose band, late Sassanian, 3rd–5th centuries AD (Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 1971.223a-b, New York, USA; David Nicolle photograph).



world until the 9th and 10th centuries. Early Byzantine military styles survived in areas like eastern Anatolia well into the 10th century, and in Syria and Egypt until considerably later. Yet the pre-Islamic legacy was less clear in North Africa and the Iberian peninsula. Here the indigenous military techniques had been more primitive than those of the conquering Muslim Arabs, despite a residual Late Roman military heritage.

Although the Islamic forces did not simply adopt the military styles of those whom they conquered, their main contribution to the development of military tradition came about because they absorbed and then spread the military equipment, techniques and customs of others. Thus Sassanian influence was eventually felt in North Africa, Byzantine technology reached Iberia and, above all, Turkish Central Asian military traditions spread throughout the Middle East. Such

Turkish influence would also serve as a conduit whereby Chinese military techniques spread westward; perhaps as far as the Iberian peninsula, though in very diluted form.

A truly Islamic tradition of arms, armour and associated tactics developed rapidly, but this was neither uniform nor monolithic. Large variations could always be seen between different regions of the Islamic 'empire', resulting both from local traditions or conditions and from the recruitment of troops from areas with their own distinctive

A 6th century Coptic Egyptian carved limestone relief, probably illustrating the story of Joseph being taken to Egypt. Note that the 'Arab' horsemen leading the camel on which young Joseph probably rides is himself riding side-saddle. This seems to have been a bedouin habit and can be seen in a few other sources, including at least one wall-painting from Transoxania which was made around the time of the Arab-Islamic invasion. (Coptic Museum, inv. 8001, Cairo, Egypt; David Nicolle photograph)



styles. In general, however, it could be said that Sassanian and Turkish influences were the most powerful, whereas those of the Byzantine or Mediterranean countries declined to secondary importance after the first century of Islamic history.

Islamic archery

Given that it played such a significant role in Islamic military history, it is understandable that archery is the aspect of Islamic military technology which has received most attention from historians. Archery certainly enjoyed high status and was sometimes regarded as an almost mystical activity. However, it is important to note that Islamic archery traditions were not synonymous with horse-archery, as is often assumed. Archery amongst the early Muslim Arabs was an infantry affair and largely remained so until after the 'Abbasid take-over of the

Caliphate in the mid-8th century.

Furthermore, this infantry archery tradition continued to remain dominant in the western regions of the Islamic world, though even here the simple Arab bow was largely superseded by Sassanian and Turkish styles of composite bow.

Although early Arabic poetry made much of individual combat by champions armed with swords, battles involving northern Arabian tribal forces seem largely to have been fought by infantry archers, with a small elite of spear-armed cavalry preceding the foot soldiers into battle. Similarly the traditional battle array of southern Arabian kings, as preserved in a 13th century Indo-Persian military manual, consisted of substantial units of foot soldiers supported by very small mounted formations.

Given such a heritage, it is not surprising that the Arab-Islamic armies which launched the first wave of conquests were largely composed of infantry, a large proportion of whom were archers. The early Muslim Arabs fought tactically defensive battles within an overall offensive strategy. These tended to begin with archery skirmishing, though the bulk of infantry archers were often placed on

Stucco carving was abundant in the Umayyad palace whose ruins are now known as Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi. The largest and most striking was this bas-relief of a mounted archer whose quiver, hung from straps to a waist-belt, is within a local Middle Eastern style of horse archery. (National Museum, Damascus, Syria; David Nicolle photograph)

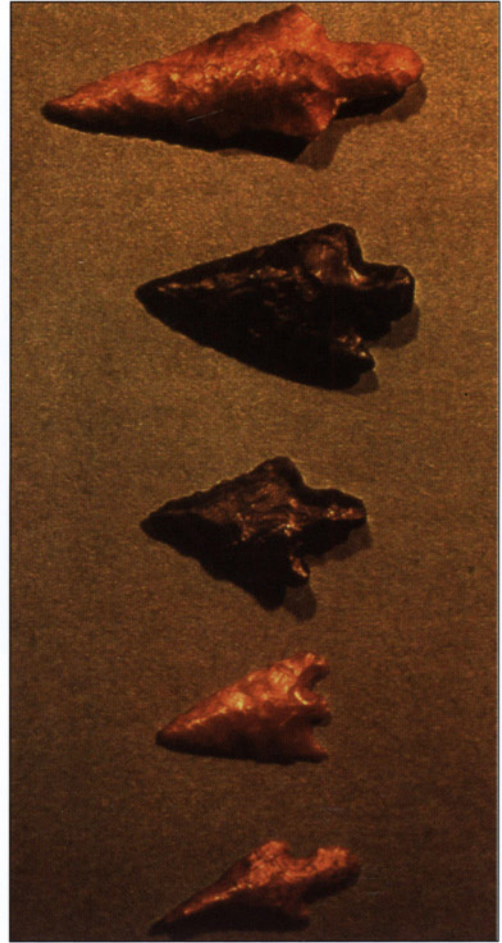


Stone arrowheads from Qaryat al-Faw, central Arabia, 5th century AD. Early Islamic written sources record that the bedouin used stone arrowheads, supposedly as late as the 9th century. (King Sa'ud University Museum, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia)

the flanks. Such tactics continued to be used until the 8th century, despite an increasing reliance on offensive cavalry as well as an increasing tendency to use infantry archers in direct support of other foot soldiers.

Byzantine armies, having learned so much from their Avar foes,¹ may have been the leading Middle Eastern archers during the 7th century and by this time the Arabs seem largely to have been using Byzantine rather than Sassanian archery techniques. The early Byzantine archery tradition advised archers to vary their methods of pulling back the bowstring by using various finger-draws as well as the more powerful Central Asian thumb-draw. When on foot they were trained to shoot at an angle to the enemy's ranks in the hope of getting around the opposition's shields. Byzantine archery also emphasised the importance of penetrating power over rapidity of fire, which was clearly also the case amongst early Arab archers. Unlike the Arabs, however, the armies of the two great pre-Islamic Middle Eastern empires also included large numbers of horse-archers, and in both cases these normally shot while their mounts were standing in ordered ranks; a tactic which would be continued by the professional, though not by the nomadic, horse-archers of the medieval Islamic world.

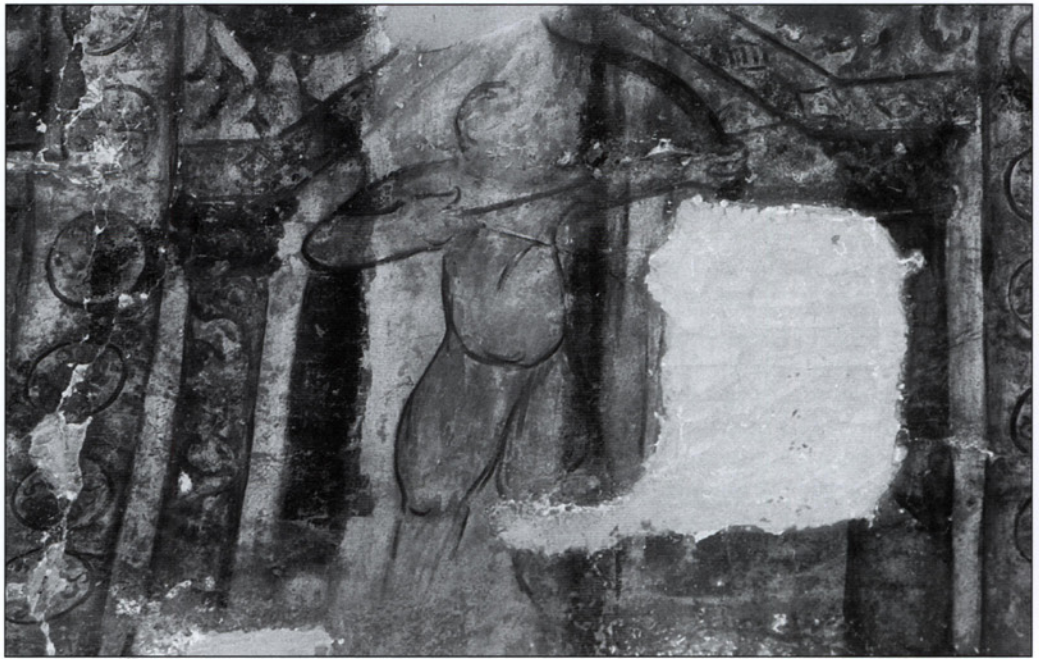
Bows of composite construction had long dominated Middle Eastern archery, though bows of simple one-piece wooden construction continued to be used in many regions, notably amongst the Nubians from whom, according to the chronicler al-Mas'udi,² the pre-Islamic Arabs of the Hijaz and Yemen 'adopted the use of the bow'. In reality this tradition probably reflected a common heritage of infantry archery technology and tactics. The traditional or typical Arab bow was clearly an infantry weapon and, although some were simple bows made of a single stave of wood, others were constructed from several



layers glued together. Other references seem to indicate that imported composite bows were known but as yet rare.

Another distinctive weapon to make its appearance around this time was the arrow-guide, which enabled an archer to shoot small, dart-like arrows using an ordinary bow. Its precise origins remain unclear, though it is first mentioned in the Middle East in Byzantine sources. The Muslims probably learned of it from the

- 1 The Avars were a powerful multi-ethnic tribal confederation which appeared in Central and Eastern Europe in the 6th century. They clashed with the Byzantine Empire on a number of occasions throughout that empire's border regions.
- 2 Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn al-Mas'udi was born c. 896 in Baghdad and died September 956 in Cairo. He was the most famous Arab historian of the period and is often referred to as 'the Arab Herodotus'.



An infantry archer or huntsman, clearly using a form of finger- rather than thumb-draw. This painted ceiling dates from the first half of the 8th century. (*in situ* Qusayr 'Amra, Jordan; David Nicolle photograph)

Byzantines and, like them, found it useful against Central Asian horse-archers.

By the time Mu'awiya, the governor of Syria, took over as the first Umayyad Caliph in 661, Islamic armies were professional forces consisting of largely Arab troops, many of whom were garrisoned and settled within the conquered territories. The elite of what became the Umayyad army were the *Ahl al-Sham* or 'people of Syria', including the descendants of Arab tribesmen who had previously fought for the Romano-Byzantine Empire within Syria. In addition to this urban-based force, there were tribesmen from the Syrian desert and a loosely defined frontier zone facing the Byzantine territories. Interestingly, this Islamic military elite was often supported by troops from Christian tribes in northern Syria, some of whom were known as *musta'a'riba* or 'those who became Arabs'.

By the mid-8th century non-Arab soldiers had become an important element within

the eastern armies. They sometimes came as volunteers, and sometimes as levies from conquered Iranian and Turkish peoples. Other troops were recruited or captured in the mountains of Afghanistan and Transoxania, some of whom were then formed into guard units for the Arab commanders who had conquered them. The non-Arab ranks of the Islamic army also included Armenian mercenaries, Christian auxiliaries from the coastal mountains of Syria, and Coptic Egyptians. Of greater military significance, however, were the large numbers of Berber tribesmen who were enlisted by the Umayyad governors of North Africa.

The organisation of these varied armies was increasingly sophisticated. The *jund* or regional structure of Islamic armies is traditionally attributed to 'Umar, the second *Rashidun* Caliph, but in reality it was probably due to the first two Umayyad Caliphs, Mu'awiya and Yazid. These *junds* were based upon fortified provincial cities, and each *jund's* soldiers were registered with the Army Ministry, the *Diwan al-Jaysh*, and received regular pay. Mu'awiya similarly turned the old communal treasury and weapons store into a government

department dealing with military salaries and pensions.

The earliest Syrian *junds* of Damascus and Hims were those closely associated with the Caliph himself but others soon followed, the most important consisting of loyal *Ahl al-Sham* Syrian Arabs. There was also a clear distinction between internal security forces whose role was essentially static, and the field or frontier armies. The *Ahl al-Sham* troops based in the east were rotated back to the Arab heartlands with each change of governor.

Provincial governors normally relied upon *jund* troops from the same tribe as themselves. However the entire tribal system was restructured during the Umayyad period of Islamic rule (661–750) because the original tribes were too small to provide effective units for a foreign-going army. As a result, smaller tribes were assembled into larger tribal divisions while several artificial tribes were created to accommodate those who fell outside the existing system. These new artificial tribes may also have camouflaged the presence of a large number of non-Arab troops. Regimental units were commanded by *qa'id* (plural, *quwwad*) officers while senior command positions went to members of the Umayyad ruling family. In several cases *jund* armies had a dual leadership, with one man leading those units on campaign while another commanded those remaining on garrison duty, in the reserve, or in a second column if the army marched on two fronts.

While Umayyad armies swept east and west, by the early 8th century conquering Transoxania, north-west Africa and even penetrating into southern France, a relatively static situation developed along the Byzantine frontier. Here the second Umayyad Caliph strengthened the previously improvised defences in order to protect Damascus and to serve as a launch pad for further invasions of Byzantine territory. By the late Umayyad period proper, military frontier provinces called *thughur* faced the Byzantine Empire. Their structure was intended to challenge the three major strategic passes that cut through the mountains – the Cilician Gates, and

what are now called the Derende Pass and the Karahan Geçidi Pass – and these frontiers would be greatly strengthened by the subsequent 'Abbasid Caliphal dynasty.

The Byzantine Empire

Unlike the Roman Empire in the west, whose Christian civilisation was overrun by largely Germanic 'barbarians', the eastern half of the Roman Empire survived the fall of Rome itself to become what is now generally known as the Byzantine Empire. Since AD 330, the capital of the Roman Empire had been the ancient Greek city of Byzantium (renamed Constantinople, after the Roman emperor who orchestrated the move to the city). For much of its existence, this remnant of the Roman Empire was a significant power in the east of Europe and the Middle East, occupying the southern Balkans and Asia Minor. At the time of the rise of Islam, the Byzantine Empire was one of the two main powers which controlled Arabia, and its power stretched through the Levant into North Africa. In the 7th century, its great rival to the east was the Sassanian Empire, centred on Iran, which it had fought repeatedly.

The armies of Rome had, like those of the Sassanian Empire, developed recruitment systems under which frontier peoples were often enlisted as auxiliaries or allies. A feature of eastern Roman armies in the early 5th century, however, was their increasing focus on internal recruitment. This did not guarantee loyalty, of course, as its people included Jews, Manichaeans and assorted 'pagans' who were widely distrusted by the majority of Roman Christians.

This internal recruitment probably provided the bulk of the infantry. However, during the 6th century effective cavalry, and in particular horse-archers, were being raised and trained in traditionally warlike regions of what was left of the Empire, such as Thrace and Illyria in Europe, and Isauria in Asia. However, the 6th century revival of eastern Roman military fortunes under Emperor Justinian was carried out with an

Facing a pair of soldiers on the other side of an enthroned member of the Umayyad ruling family are more spear-armed soldiers who, lacking helmets, may represent light cavalry. One or perhaps two of them have their hands open in the welcoming gesture which also appears on other wall paintings in this ceremonial reception hall. (*in situ* Qusayr 'Amra, Jordan; David Nicolle photograph)

army that may have had a larger 'barbarian' element than was normal during the previous century. Large numbers of such outsiders continued to be recruited in the late 6th and early 7th centuries, ranging from Germanic Lombard mercenaries to Armenians who, being 'heretical'



Monophysite Christians, were still regarded as outsiders even if they actually dwelt within the boundaries of the Empire.³

However, the military situation evolved differently in Byzantine Syria. Even as early as the 4th century AD, many Roman units in Syria had been called *indigenae* or 'locals' and their ranks clearly included many Arabs. By the mid-6th century the few Romano-Byzantine forces in northern Syria included urban militias, whereas the *limitanei* frontier troops were now grossly under-strength. Other forces had meanwhile risen to prominence on the desert frontier, where the early Byzantine authorities continued to try to attach nomadic frontier peoples to the Romano-Byzantine Empire by enlisting them as allied or auxiliary *foederati*.

The Late Roman recruiting systems continued throughout the 7th century in the Byzantine Empire, and it appears that the core of the army defending Anatolia against the Muslim Arabs were Greek-speaking. During the 7th century, however, a greater variety of distinct military groups also migrated into Anatolia, including Germanic Goths, refugees from the Syrian coastal mountains, Macedonian Slavs and Central Asian Turks, while at the same time the Byzantine authorities moved large numbers of people from the threatened eastern frontiers to the Balkans in Europe.

Byzantium faced particular problems in raising good-quality cavalry and these difficulties would become acute following Byzantium's massive losses of territory to the Muslims. In response the Byzantine Empire increased recruitment within its shrunken frontiers, and the armies of the later 7th and 8th centuries included far fewer foreigners than had Justinian's army in the 6th century. Nevertheless, internal recruitment remained expensive, slow and disruptive to the local economy. As a result, more warlike frontier peoples were enlisted



One of the most famous pieces of early 7th century Byzantine metalwork, the 'David Plates', found at Lampousa in Cyprus and probably made to celebrate the Emperor Heraclius' victory over the Sassanians before his catastrophic defeats by the Muslims. The two figures on the right are Philistine warriors in the service of the Byzantine Army and are shown wearing stylised Romano-Byzantine mail armour of the period. However, their helmets are in the style of late Sassanian Iranian troops. (Author's collection)

where possible. Although many such sources of troops continued to be lost as the Muslim conquest advanced, some remained, and Armenians in particular still achieved positions of high command. It is particularly interesting to track the fate of the Arab Ghassanids, since some followed their tribal leader into Byzantine Anatolia, remaining Christian, loyal to Byzantium and serving as effective frontier troops against their Muslim fellow Arabs, while other Ghassanids stayed in Syria under Muslim rule, where most eventually converted to Islam.

³ Monophysite Christians differed from the Orthodox Church in that they believed that Jesus Christ had one 'inseparable nature' which was partly divine whilst also having a subordinate human element.



Men swearing fidelity to the first 'Abbasid Caliph, al-Saffah, in the mosque built by his Umayyad predecessors at Kufa in Iraq, as illustrated in a late 14th or early 15th century Persian manuscript. (Ancient Art Architecture)

Unlike their counterparts in western Europe, the *limitanei* on the eastern frontiers did not melt away, but were gradually replaced by new defensive structures which proved highly effective until the coming of the Islamic era. Of these, the most distinctive was the *phylarch* system of the Syrian desert frontier, which replaced the old border forts

which had been abandoned by the late 5th century. On this frontier, the steppe-grassland or semi-desert of what is now eastern Syria, western Iraq and much of Jordan remained an area where pro-Romano-Byzantine and pro-Sassanian nomadic tribes competed for valuable grazing land, while their sponsors struggled to extend their own influence or control.

The *phylarch* system had developed during the 5th century, almost certainly in response to the effectiveness of the comparable pro-Sassanian Lakhmid kingdom on the

other side of the desert in Iraq. Both the *phylarch* and the Lakhmid systems used friendly Arab tribes on their frontiers as a buffer force, keeping a safe zone between the empire's heartland and hostile forces further afield.

At first there were a number of separate small Arab *phylarchs* – or tribal chiefs – with no great prestige or power, but early in the 6th century the Emperor Justinian elevated the system into a tribal monarchy. A new dominant *phylarch* of the Ghassanid tribe was made responsible for the entire frontier from the river Euphrates to the Gulf of Aqaba. From then on the Ghassanids provided an 'inner shield' for Byzantine Syria, protecting merchants' caravans, policing the tribes, guarding the frontier and providing auxiliaries for the regular army even on distant

A. Early Byzantine short sword and knives from Hadithah on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, 5th–7th century AD. The similarity between these and the even more fragmentary dagger from Pella highlights the degree of technological continuity from the Late Roman to the early Islamic periods. (Castle Museum, Karak, Jordan; David Nicolle photograph)

B. Dagger, part of an iron cloak pin, four coins, a gold earring and a pruning hook, all found on the body of a man killed during the earthquake which devastated Pella in Jordan in AD 747. These items are unusual in being fixed to such a specific date and illustrate the fact that the Arab-Islamic conquest of Syria initially made very little change to the lives of ordinary people. (Archaeological Museum, Amman, Jordan)

C. Knife with a wooden grip from Qasr Ibrim, Nubia, 8th–9th century AD. Late Roman or early Byzantine material culture continued almost unchanged in the Christian Nubian states of what is now northern Sudan, long after Islamic civilisation began to have an impact upon neighbouring Egypt. (British Museum, inv. EA 71935, London, UK; David Nicolle photograph)





A relief carving of Prince David Saharouni, an Armenian ruler; on the western portal of the Cathedral of Mren in Armenia. It was made around 640 at a time when Armenia was an autonomous, self-governing frontier province within the still-expanding Arab-Islamic empire. (Lucy Manuelian photograph)

campaigns. An 'outer shield' operated under less direct imperial control, policing the more distant tribes and helping to spread Byzantine power through conversion to Christianity.

The ancient kingdom of Armenia had straddled the rarely changing but war-torn northern part of the frontier between the Romano-Byzantine and Sassanian Empires. Though Armenia lost its independence in 428, the Armenian military aristocracy of higher *ishkhan* and lesser *nakhharar* nobles continued

to play a dominant role under foreign rulers – including the Muslim Arabs – until the re-emergence of the medieval Armenian kingdoms. This warlike aristocracy led the armies of the area, each senior nobleman having his own small military following. Under Byzantine domination, however, Armenia's defences largely depended upon Byzantine garrisons in the main fortresses.

The central armies of the Romano-Byzantine Empire had revived during the 6th century and remained formidable even after suffering a series of major defeats at the hands of the Muslim Arabs. However, these armies were small when compared with the great days of the Roman Empire, though they were well equipped and trained.

One of the most serious weaknesses of the Byzantine armed forces was the Emperor's reluctance to allow potentially ambitious generals to build up large forces loyal to themselves. Such a personal following, of which the Emperor had the largest, was called a *comitatus*.

The *foederati* evolved into regular regiments largely recruited from non-Romano-Byzantine 'barbarians'. They were stationed in many provinces and could be sent on rotation to garrison frontier fortresses. While these *foederati* were a front-line elite, the *Optimates* were now the heavy cavalry elite of the centrally based or reserve forces of the Romano-Byzantine army. The 6th century similarly saw the first references to a type of almost territorial soldier who would come to dominate later Byzantine military history. These were the *stradioti*, who emerged as garrison troops in Egypt, apparently as locally recruited volunteers or perhaps levies. Though they were available to go on more distant campaigns, their function was primarily to support their province's own frontier forces. Such *stradioti* would remain

characteristic of Byzantine armies until the empire's final demise in the 15th century.

During the 7th century Byzantium faced an awesome array of foes against whom efficient, mobile and organisationally autonomous field forces seemed to offer the only answer. As a result, this period resulted in huge changes in the Byzantine Empire. The Emperor Heraclius not only broke with tradition by leading his army in person, as much earlier Roman emperors had done, but more importantly he initiated an era of profound military reorganisation, a process continued by his successors as they struggled in the face of defeats and huge losses of territory. During the struggle against the Islamic Caliphate, various fragmented imperial guard units were

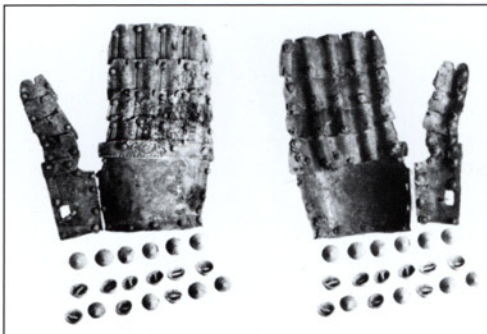
The most realistic illustration of early Byzantine armour is on the 'Isola Rissa Dish', found in northern Italy and dating from the late 6th or early 7th centuries. The horseman wears a plumed segmented helmet and a short-sleeved *lamellar* cuirass, and he rides without stirrups. The man on foot, vainly trying to protect himself with an oval shield, probably represents a defeated Germanic Goth or Lombard. (Author's collection)



brought together into a smaller number of regiments known collectively as the *Opsikion*. Further reforms during the 8th century reflected the declining prestige of certain units and the establishment of new ones, a process typical not only of the Byzantine army but of almost all regimentally structured medieval armies.

The *Opsikion* regiments were one of the most efficient field units throughout this period, first emerging in Bithynia by 626 to defend the capital from Muslim attack. The operational area of the *Opsikion* regiments was at first very large but later, with the development of *themes* or military districts with their own small field armies, the *Opsikion* was split into three. At this stage there were no territorial *themes* as such, only regional field armies which gradually became known as *themes*. In reality the famous Byzantine *theme* system of military provinces, each with associated garrisons, evolved over a considerable time, and was initially a response to Muslim military pressure. It existed in a rudimentary form by the end of the 7th century, though the term *theme* still referred to a provincial army and did not strictly apply to the province itself until the second half of the 8th century.

A late Sassanian or early Islamic Iranian iron cavalry gauntlet, 6th or 7th century AD, from the Amlash region. These are the most dramatic examples yet found highlighting the advanced military technology of immediately pre-Islamic Iran. (Römische-Germanische Zentralmuseum, inv. 0.38824, Mainz, Germany)



The Sassanian Empire

The Sassanian Empire, the great pre-Islamic empire in what we now consider the Middle East, ruled Iran for four centuries, from the overthrow of the last Parthian king to the empire's defeat at the hands of the Caliphate. The frontiers of the Sassanian Empire were in many areas even more blurred than those of the Roman-Byzantine state, particularly in the east and north-east, where even the Iranian-speaking regions of what is now northern Afghanistan were not always under Sassanian control. Many such areas had local rulers descended from Hun invaders. A considerable increase in the use of local royal titles in the northern and north-eastern frontier regions also indicated that large areas were only nominally Sassanian at the time of the Islamic conquest.

The Byzantine description of the armies of the Sassanian Empire as consisting of cavalry recruited from freemen, and infantry enlisted from serfs or slaves, is grossly oversimplified. Yet it does contain an element of truth, as Sassanian society had important structural features in common with Hindu India. The population was divided into virtual castes based upon supposed 'conquering Aryan', or 'conquered Semitic or Dravidian' ancestry – the Iranians being the higher castes, and indeed, 'Iran' translates as 'land of the Aryans'.

Theoretically this meant that warfare should only involve the upper military castes, while the peasantry were supposedly immune. In reality this was not practical, and the majority of *paighan* infantry were probably enlisted from some sections of the peasantry, while the free *azatan* minor aristocracy formed the Sassanian cavalry elite. In addition some Sassanian magnates appear to have had their own personal bodyguards consisting of highly trained military slaves. These may indeed have been prototypes of the later Islamic system of slave-recruited but then freed *mamluk* elite troops.

In reality the Sassanian army on campaign included many mercenaries, particularly in the forces of the provincial governors on the main frontiers, plus huge



The huge and almost freestanding rock-relief carving of one of the last Sassanian *Shahinshah* shows a horseman in full mail armour, with a face-covering mail *aventail* hanging from the rim of his segmented helmet. He is armed with a heavy spear plus archery equipment and rides a partially armoured horse. (*in situ* Taq-i Bustan, Iran; David Nicolle photograph)

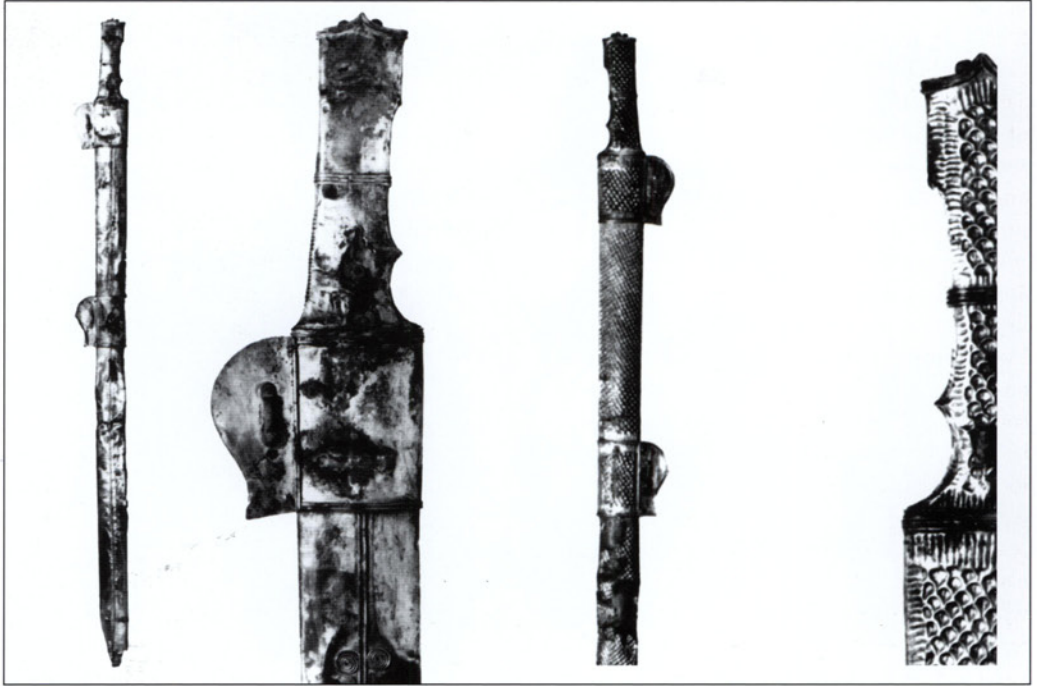
numbers of allied, tributary and tribal auxiliaries. Mercenaries and auxiliaries often seem to have come from the same areas. The men most often mentioned in this context were from the eastern province of Sijistan, the mountains and coastal plain south of the Caspian Sea, and northern Afghanistan.

On the western frontier of the Sassanian Empire, allies, auxiliaries and mercenaries were recruited from the southern Caucasus mountains, from Armenia with its highly regarded armoured cavalry, and from Khuzistan with its mountain warriors on what is now the frontier with Iraq. The plains of Mesopotamia (now Iraq and eastern Syria) were largely inhabited by peaceful Aramaean peasantry and urban populations amongst whom Christianity was spreading rapidly by the start of the 7th century. Along the desert

frontier, and increasingly also within the settled zone, were more warlike Arab tribes. There was also a substantial Jewish community, perhaps the largest in the ancient world, which had earlier provided soldiers for the Herodian kings in Palestine.

The question of Sassanian and Arab relations during the immediate pre-Islamic period remains unclear, although Arabs were now playing a major military and even political role within the Sassanian Empire. This had earlier been true of the Lakhmid subordinate frontier kings, but ironically this notably effective dynasty of Arab rulers was removed by the Sassanians only a few years before the Muslim Arabs erupted across that same frontier to overthrow the Sassanian Empire. It is also clear that the Sassanian system of 'client' Arabian tribes was in disarray by the time the Muslims invaded Iraq, probably destroyed during the Ridda Wars.

Shahinshah (King-of-Kings) Khusrau I's military reforms of the 6th century had attempted to convert the Sassanian *dihqan* 'knights' from a class of minor gentry into paid professional troops. At the same time



this ruler's reforms led to the downgrading of indigenous Iranian troops and a greater reliance on mercenaries, allies, and tributary peoples from the frontier regions or beyond. The Sassanian policy of large-scale deportations of defeated enemies or rebels also led to unexpected communities appearing far from their original homes.

The elite of the Sassanian army now largely consisted of *asvaran* armoured cavalry who, though not strictly forming part of the nobility, were given landed estates in return for military service. The largest formation in a Sassanian army was a *gund* or corps under a *gundsalar*. Next came a *drafs*h and a *vasht*, perhaps comparable to a regiment and a battalion respectively. Entirely separate from this regular army were the very large auxiliary forces recruited from the many nomadic peoples who lived within the empire.

The importance of the military reforms carried out in the mid-6th century by the *Shahinshah* Khusrau I is difficult to exaggerate. Not only did the reforms have an enormous impact within the Sassanian Empire but they also influenced reforms within the Romano-Byzantine Empire and,

Two late Sassanian or early Islamic long-swords, as used by cavalry, each still in its decorated silver scabbard, 6th to 8th centuries AD, from the Amlash region. This style of weapon is illustrated not only in late Sassanian art but also in art from the early Islamic period, though it never became popular further west. (Römische-Germanische Zentralmuseum, inv. 0.38822a-b, Mainz, Germany)

even more significantly, they subsequently came to be seen as a military ideal throughout much of the Islamic world and remained so for centuries. Most obviously, Khusrau I divided the frontiers of the Empire into four large defensive military regions, each under a senior *marzban*, or member of the military aristocracy. These regions were sub-divided into smaller provinces governed by a lesser *marzban* who had civil as well as military responsibilities. Meanwhile the interior of the Empire was also under lesser *marzbans* whose small governorates varied in size and autonomy. Khusrau I's reforms similarly changed the command structure of the Sassanian army. The chief minister or *vuzurg-framadhar* remained deeply involved in military affairs but the role of the permanent army commander-in-chief was replaced by a *spahbadh*, appointed for a specific campaign

outside the frontiers of the Empire and senior to the resident great *marzban* of that front.

Like their Romano-Byzantine foes, the Sassanian armies had already suffered a series of serious defeats at the hands of the Huns; the remarkable confederation of nomadic and displaced peoples, some of Central Asian origin, others Iranian or Germanic, and all ruled by a still little-known but apparently Turco-Mongol elite. However the Sassanians, unlike the more experimental Romano-Byzantines, do not appear to have developed any new tactics to face this threat. Western sources indicated that a typical Sassanian battle array divided the army into a centre, ideally placed upon a hill, and two wings, with herds of spare horses being kept at the rear. Other accounts portrayed Sassanian cavalry placed ahead of their infantry while archers were concentrated on the traditionally defensive left flank. Another variation had war-elephants either drawn up between the cavalry and infantry or forming a wall behind the foot soldiers. Certainly, war-elephants were used at the battle of Qadisiyah, where the Arab cavalry was obliged to dismount and attack the Sassanian elephants' eyes with long lances.

North Africa

When the Islamic forces swept south through the Byzantine Empire around the Mediterranean, they were to encounter the societies and forces of pre-Islamic North Africa, from Christian Ethiopia to the tribal Berbers. Although very little is known about the organisation of Ethiopian, Nubian or Blemye (Beja) Sudanese forces at the time of the great Arab-Islamic conquests, it is known that the Ethiopian kingdom of Axum and the emerging Christian Nubian kingdoms of northern Sudan were already structured states, while even nomadic Blemye society had some sort of state structure. The ruling elite of the Axumite kingdom in Ethiopia had converted to Christianity in the 4th century at approximately the same time that Axum grew into a considerable military

power. In this period, a command structure similarly developed for an army which consisted of *sarawit* regular troops and a larger number of *ehzab* irregulars or auxiliaries. A Greek description of an Axumite ruler in procession shows the kingdom to have been wealthy and to have used ceremonials similar to those of the Arab *phylarchs* in Syria. On the other hand, evidence from Arabia suggests that the Ethiopian occupation army in Yemen suffered deep social divisions between a rich leadership and very poor common soldiers, which resulted a series of mutinies.

Even less is known about strategy or tactics west of the Red Sea, though the introduction of the camel during the early centuries AD had a military and economic impact comparable to the introduction of horses to the Plains Indians of North America. Quite suddenly the Sahara desert could be traversed with relative ease, while those nomadic tribes who possessed camels could now raid and trade far afield. By the 6th century great numbers of camels were available to both the Ethiopians and the Blemye of the Sudan who used them as beasts of burden, and as mobile, living fortifications. The camels would be hobbled and made to kneel in a large circular formation, inside of which women and children would shelter, while their menfolk defended its perimeter with shields and javelins. This formation was known in Arabic as an *'awd* and to the Romano-Byzantines as a *kuklos*.

The Ethiopian army also fought with elephants, although their tactics differed from the war-elephants of India or the Sassanian Empire. In Africa the animals were placed with the infantry in the front rank or even thrust ahead as a vanguard. Such war-elephants are said to have carried on their backs leather-covered towers, each carrying six men, though this number is almost certainly an exaggeration. However, we have no recorded evidence of war-elephants being used by African forces to counter the invading Islamic armies.

Major changes within the military organisation of North Africa had taken place





by the time of its conquest by the Muslim Arabs in the 7th century. The tribal Berbers – the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa, who had been virtually demilitarised under Roman rule – rediscovered their military heritage under both Germanic Vandal rule and the eventual Romano-Byzantine reconquest. The Berbers served both as *federates*, or auxiliaries for the restored Romano-Byzantine Empire and as cavalry and even camel-mounted infantry.

However, by the 7th century Romano-Byzantine control had once again declined, until it covered little more than the coastal ports and a few inland towns. In the absence of imperial control the Berbers had developed a system of local tribal leadership, particularly in Morocco; and it was an organised Berber force that met the Muslim Arabs when their armies campaigned ever deeper into what they knew as al-Maghrib – ‘the West’. No longer simple, tribal hordes, the Berbers could muster large cavalry units that operated as co-ordinated forces. This certainly enabled them to put up a formidable defence against the Arab forces.

However, larger Berber armies tended to go to war with their families, tents and flocks

The introduction of the single-humped camel or dromedary to the Sahara desert in the immediate pre-Islamic period had a profound impact. Quite suddenly, this vast expanse could be navigated by merchants and armies who possessed these ‘ships of the desert’. In military terms, therefore, the Muslim Arab would-be conquerors were in a much stronger position than their ancient Egyptian or Greek and Roman predecessors had been. Trade across the desert, between the Mediterranean world and sub-Saharan Africa could also flourish in a way that it had never done before. (© Frans Lemmens/zefa/Corbis)

which made them slow-moving and vulnerable to attack. Previous Byzantine sources again recorded that Berber women also fought in defence of their tents whilst camels were used to create a ‘living defensive wall’ around these tents.

Early Berber military equipment seems to have been limited in quantity rather than quality. Only the wealthy could possess a broadsword and there are virtually no references to armour or helmets, although tribal commanders would probably have possessed such items. Berber foot soldiers were also skilled with a slingshot – this rudimentary piece of military kit proving particularly effective against Arab cavalry during the rebellion against Umayyad Caliph Hisham. Eventually, however, Berbers would



be wholly subsumed within the Islamic world and would prove to be some of their most effective fighting forces.

Turks

Amongst the most formidable foes faced by the Islamic armies were the peoples who inhabited the steppes of Central Asia, now the territory of the largely Turkish republics of Central Asia and the southernmost regions of European Russia. During the period of the Arab-Islamic conquest, the territory was ruled by the Khans of such tribes as the Great Turks, Eastern and Western Turks, and the Uighurs. Their armies appear to have been recruited almost entirely from within the dominant tribe or tribal confederations; only on the southern and western fringes did the presence of other, sometimes non-Turkish peoples, encourage more varied recruitment.

The Khazars – who expelled the Bulgars from the western steppes and established a long-lasting state in what is now southern Russia and the eastern Ukraine in the

This well preserved wall-painting from the Umayyad fortified complex now known as Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi on the western edge of the Syrian desert has many features in common with the damaged stucco relief carving of a horse-archer from the same site. In the painting, however, the man rides with stirrups which were only now being introduced to the Middle East from Central Asia. He also wears a Turkish Central Asian style belt with decorative pendants while a bowcase containing a second unstrung bow is visible on his left hip. (National Museum, Damascus, Syria; David Nicolle photograph)

7th century – were at first just such a typical Turkish tribal force. However, their ruling elite converted to Judaism in the 8th century and thereafter developed a sophisticated army which also recruited non-Turkish Alans, eastern Magyar horsemen and Slav infantry. Iranian-speaking Alan tribal nomads played a prominent role in the western part of the Khazar state and remained as a wealthy warrior class in the valleys of the north Caucasus mountains throughout the Middle Ages. However, the core of the Khazar army remained a Turkish Khazar cavalry force, modelled upon the heavily armoured troopers of neighbouring Islamic states and including an elite of Muslim mercenaries.

Fragmented Transoxania, on the southern fringes of the steppes and largely independent of Sassanian rule at the time of the Muslim Arab invasions of the 7th and 8th centuries, generally seems to have recruited troops from a local Iranian-speaking Sughdian rural *dihqan* aristocracy and its retainers. Yet these local states were themselves mostly ruled by a Turkish military elite.

The settled regions of Transoxania were politically fragmented at the time of the Arab-Islamic invasion, with many petty rulers recognising the suzerainty of one of roughly five larger kingdoms, some of whom acknowledged the occasional suzerainty of the Sassanian Empire or more rarely that of China. Unlike a Sassanian emperor, a Transoxanian ruler was little more than 'first amongst equals' and came from the local landholding aristocracy. Many of these local rulers were known as an *ikhshid*.

The countryside was meanwhile dominated by an aristocracy of *dihqans* who lived in manors or small castles. Beneath them in the social scale came the *kadivar* farmers, *khidmatgar* 'servants' and *atbai*

military 'clients' or followers. Among the professional troops of Transoxania were a group of armed retainers known as *chakaran*, whom Chinese visitors described as cavalry of great valour. They were enlisted by rich merchants as well as the local aristocracy and it has been suggested that these *chakaran* influenced the subsequent development of the medieval Islamic system of *mamluk* or *ghulam* slave-recruited elite troops.

The settled – rather than nomadic – regions of Central Asia, in particular Turkestan, would have an enormous influence upon many aspects of medieval military history, organisation and technology. For example, Turco-Iranian Khwarazm south of the Aral Sea had probably already played a leading role in the early development of heavily armoured

The small fortified town of Bobastro in the mountains behind Malaga in southern Spain would become a rebel stronghold in the 9th century, though it is perhaps better known for rock-cut churches in an early 'Moorish' architectural style. The unfinished example seen here dates from the 8th or 9th century. (David Nicolle photograph)





The Alto de Perdon area between Pamplona and Puerta la Reina was a fertile region close to the river Ebro in northern Spain. Good communications and the fact that nearby were several passes through the Pyrenean mountains made this a suitable place for Abd al-Rahman al-Ghafiqi to assemble his army before invading Aquitaine in south-western France in 732. (Author's collection)

spear-wielding cavalry, replacing horse-archer cavalry. Early Arabic evidence reveals that Central Asian Turkish cavalry was lighter and swifter than their Muslim counterparts, and these Turks also employed novel tactics such as driving herds of panic-stricken sheep ahead of them as they surged down upon an Arab force during a surprise night attack.

Ultimately, however, it was the fragmented nature of society throughout these regions that ensured that a single, cohesive force could not be fielded against the Islamic armies. As a result, most of this territory fell under Islamic influence, if not outright control. Paradoxically the Turks then had a huge influence on Islamic society, providing one of the strongest models for the true warrior, an ideal which would be upheld throughout the Islamic world.

The Germanic tribes

Visigoths

One of the major Germanic tribes, the Visigoths were originally from the eastern regions of the Danube, and during the decline of western Roman power, fought their way across Italy – famously sacking Rome in 410 – before settling in southern Gaul and the Iberian peninsula. By the time of the Great Islamic Conquests, the Visigoths had been driven out of most of Gaul by the Franks, but had cemented their control of Iberia.

During the early stages of the conquest of the western Roman Empire, the Germanic forces had largely consisted of the freemen of the *volk*, tribe or people, led by its chief or king. By tradition, this remained the case even after the *volk* in question established a territorial state with a recognisably structured army. In Visigothic Spain, for example, from the 6th to early 8th centuries the army elite consisted of the nobility and their followers, with the *comitatus* or elite force raised by the king himself, and a lesser role going to provincial levies. But by the fall of the Visigothic state to the Muslim Arabs early

in the 8th century neither the local levies nor the urban militias had any discernible Germanic characteristics.

Like all early Germanic rulers, the primary role of the Visigothic king was that of war-leader. A king who failed in battle could easily be replaced by another member of the senior aristocracy. The Visigothic army also seems to have been influenced more by the Byzantines than the neighbouring Franks to the north were. For example, the king's guards and closest followers were known as *gardingi* and *fideles*, with the followers of the nobles known as *bucellarii*. Since the mid-7th century the king's *fideles* had also been guaranteed the permanent possession of lands by the king, but a few years later King Wamba attempted to reform his army, just as several Middle Eastern rulers had done a century before. He established a noble bodyguard of Byzantine-style *spatharii* or swordsmen in addition to the existing *gardingi* palace troops. Unusually, he also proclaimed that one-tenth of the slave or serf population was also liable for military service. Whether this was ever put into practice remains a matter of doubt.

Certain aspects of Germanic tactics during the Age of Migrations which overwhelmed the western Roman Empire seem to reflect Sassanian influences, perhaps transmitted via the nomadic peoples who invaded eastern and central Europe. The Visigoths clearly used the typically eastern tactic of a feigned retreat, perhaps having learned of it during their long migrations across eastern Europe. Once settled within the Iberian peninsula, however, Visigoth cavalry seems largely to have relied on tactics of repeated attack and withdrawal almost certainly learned from their Late Roman or Romano-Byzantine foes.

This, then, was the first Western European army to face – and be entirely defeated by – the Muslim Arabs in the early 8th century.

Franks

The Franks were another Germanic tribe, who gradually established control over most of the former Roman province of Gaul – what is now France – in the 5th and 6th centuries. Initially the Frankish armies were heavily Germanic with some Roman influences, including both Late Roman elite cavalry and 'barbarian' Germanic auxiliary troops. However, the army of the Frankish kingdom would change a great deal in the 8th century, although this was not a direct result of having to face Muslim pressure from the south. During this period a professional body of troops began to be established, in which cavalry became a significant part.

Military service of three months a year became a civic duty enshrined by law, and this meant that military commanders such as Charles Martel had a body of trained men on which they could depend. Furthermore, the need to hunt for food and defend their herds against raiding parties throughout the year ensured that the Franks were a highly skilled fighting body. Fighting men were also expected to arm and equip themselves according to their social status, which led to the militarisation of Frankish society, while military commanders provided a new elite. Volunteers also formed part of the Frankish forces. They were all paid, irrespective of their rank in society, and significant victories such as that at Poitiers in 732 could result in a significant boost in pay. This all made for highly motivated and almost professional armies.

A rising religion meets tired empires

At first there was doubt within the Islamic community about whether Islam should be 'exported' to non-Arab peoples. Some aspects of the Prophet Muhammad's religious mission seemed to suggest that he was 'The Prophet of the Arabs' whose role was to overcome paganism amongst the Arab peoples alone. Even if this interpretation had been accepted, the fact remained that many Arab peoples already lived within the territories or spheres of influence of neighbouring empires. To unify the Arabs – even just those who clung to paganism rather than those who had already converted to Christianity – meant inevitable conflict with the great powers of the Middle East. This was, in fact, how the first serious clashes with Romano-Byzantine and Sassanian troops began. Once that confrontation was under way there seemed no turning back, especially as both empires had been so

weakened by their recent mutual wars that resistance to Arab-Islamic incursions rapidly proved ineffective.

Operations had already started in an increasingly anarchic Iraq during the final year of the Ridda Wars, though it is not entirely clear whether they had been authorised by the first Caliph. Instead they initially seemed more like an overspill of the conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim Arab tribes. As the territory of several important northern tribes also straddled the frontier with the neighbouring Byzantine Empire, the first raids into nominally Byzantine territory perhaps fell into the same category as Khalid Ibn al-Walid's first

The gorge of the river Yarmuk joining the river Jordan, with the Golan Heights on the right and Lake Tiberius in the distance. Near here the Muslims defeated the Byzantines at the battle of Yarmuk.
(David Nicolle photograph)



operation within Iraq, which was against Arab tribes rather than imperial forces. By the winter of 633–34 three Muslim forces were operating in what are now Jordan, Palestine and southern Syria. They were then reinforced by Khalid Ibn al-Walid and his small army early in 634. A skirmish at Marj Rahit near Damascus in April that year was followed by an Islamic victory at the battle of Ajnadayn in southern Palestine in July. Even the death of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, on 23 August 634 barely slowed these operations, though it did lead to changes in the senior command of the Islamic army. By then the Muslims had also won a notable victory against the Sassanians in Iraq, at the battle of Babylon in spring 634.

The second Caliph, 'Umar (634–44), was the father of another of the Prophet's wives⁴ and is credited with introducing the first rudimentary civil administration as well as establishing a *diwan* or register of troops, which began to change the tribal Arab-Islamic army into a modern fighting force. Under 'Umar's rule the Islamic conquests extended in four main directions. Forces moved north-eastward into Iraq, northwards into the Jazira (Mesopotamia) and then Armenia, north-westwards into Syria and westwards into Egypt. On what might be called the Sassanian front in Iraq the Muslims suffered a bloody setback at the Battle of the Bridge in October 634, but won a much more significant victory at Bawaib just over a year later.

Meanwhile Muslim commanders in the west won a number of relatively minor victories over the Byzantine forces garrisoned in Palestine, and even took control of Damascus in September 635, though

this first conquest of the great Syrian city was only temporary. But it would be the following year, in August 636, that the Islamic forces would first challenge the full might of the Byzantine army, at the battle of Yarmuk.

Yarmuk: Byzantium humbled

It is normal for more to be known about victors than the vanquished, but information is particularly skewed where the battle of Yarmuk is concerned. The only well-documented Byzantine figure is the Emperor Heraclius himself.

By the time of the Muslim invasion of Syria, Heraclius was already a sick man, suffering from hydrophobia and 'dropsy' (probably cancer). His greatest triumph was to have regained the Byzantine provinces lost to the Sassanians by previous rulers. His tragedy was to then lose an even greater territory to the rising power of Islam. Heraclius had adopted the Greek title of *Basileos* in 629, thus claiming to rule by divine right and finally shedding the Roman titles used by previous emperors. His propagandists portrayed Byzantine wars in a very religious light, using the most potent of Christian relics; the Wood of the Holy Cross, to inspire the fighting fervour of his troops.

Heraclius was also the first emperor in generations to lead his armies in person, although his field commander at Yarmuk was Vahan, an Armenian. He commanded the main body of Byzantine troops including those from his own homeland and from the capital, Constantinople, as well as local Arab forces. Although this battle can easily be portrayed as a great clash between Islamic and Christian forces, in reality not all of those fighting would have been wholeheartedly committed to either theology. Certainly, the Byzantines relied heavily on non-Christian Arab auxiliary forces whilst Khalid Ibn al-Walid, the Muslim commander at Yarmuk, despite being known as the 'Sword of God', was not particularly religious.

⁴ Polygamy was normal and unlimited in pre-Islamic Arabia, but Muhammad overturned this custom and placed a strict limit of four as the number of wives any man could have. Meanwhile, he also actively tried to strengthen the position of both married and unmarried women. Muhammad himself remained monogamous until the death of his first wife, Khadija, with whom he had lived for twenty-five years. Thereafter, the Prophet remarried several times, usually for political or diplomatic reasons or to support a woman in distress, but sometimes clearly for love.



The two forces had already clashed at Ajnadayn in late July 634, the first large-scale battle between the Muslim and Christian armies, where the Byzantines had suffered a crushing defeat – although the bulk of their army had managed to escape. Another Muslim success outside Pella in the Jordan Valley, in the aptly named ‘Battle of the Mud’ in January 635, was followed by an inconclusive clash at the second battle of Marj al-Suffar south of Damascus. Following these setbacks the Byzantines pursued a largely defensive policy, preferring to avoid facing Muslim forces in the open. One of those cities to come under siege by the invading Islamic forces was Damascus itself. The siege lasted six months until the city eventually surrendered.

Heraclius could not accept the loss of the jewel in the crown of Byzantine Syria, and it was inevitable that the two sides would have to face each other again. Heraclius ordered a major counter-offensive which succeeded in retaking Damascus, but neither army had gained overall supremacy. The decisive

The ancient walled city of Damascus is now surrounded by the modern Syrian capital. However, it is still identified by the great Umayyad Mosque which stands in the centre of this view from the eastern end of the medieval hillside suburb of Muhajirun. From the mid-7th to mid-8th century Damascus was the centre of the biggest empire the world had yet seen. (David Nicolle photograph)

battle would come at Yarmuk, the river that marks the border between modern-day Syria and Jordan.

Estimates of the size of the Muslim army at Yarmuk vary from 20,000 to 40,000. Forces had been steadily flowing into the area in the months preceding the battle, and more than likely numbered approximately 25,000. According to all accounts the Byzantines still greatly outnumbered the Muslim army, and were able to establish a ‘frontline’ up to 8 miles (13 km) long.

The Muslim commanders adopted a defensive position from which they could control, but not entirely close, the Dera’a Gap between the precipitous valleys of the river Yarmuk and its seasonal tributaries on one side, and the barely passable Hawran

lava plain on the other. Heraclius seems to have expected the Arabs to tire and begin to drift homeward. Instead they received reinforcements and held their positions, demonstrating to the Byzantines how highly motivated their armies were and how they differed from pre-Islamic Arab raiders.

The battle itself was a major confrontation with many days of hard fighting. On 16 August the Byzantines finally moved forward, but although they succeeded in driving back the Muslim flanks they were unable to take the main Arab encampments. The retreating Muslim forces were met by their womenfolk, who abused them for fleeing the enemy – throwing stones, singing songs and beating drums to shame their men back into action.

On 18 August the Muslims counter-attacked, their relatively small cavalry forces making a successful advance around the Byzantines' northern flank. The Byzantines fell back but, despite being trapped between the steep gorges and their enemies, they do not seem to have broken until 20 August. However, after four days of fighting, the result was a rout; Byzantine resistance

collapsed, their losses so great that the army defending Syria virtually ceased to exist.

As a result Damascus surrendered on the same terms as it had the previous year and an Islamic governor of Syria was installed. The Emperor Heraclius summoned a church assembly at Antioch, and the general opinion was that Byzantine disobedience to God was to blame for the Christian disaster. Reportedly Heraclius himself left the area more in sorrow than anger, supposedly with the words, 'Peace be with you Syria – what a beautiful land you will be for your enemy.'

Retrenchment

After the initial catastrophes of the 7th century, the Byzantines largely pulled back to defend their heartland of Asia Minor.

For several decades during the second half of the 7th century the Ansariyah Mountains, between the inland cities of Syria and the Mediterranean coast, provided a refuge for a pro-Byzantine guerilla movement. It took several bitter campaigns and a great deal of money before Umayyad authority was recognised, and even in later centuries the Ansariyah Mountains remained a refuge for vulnerable minority communities. (David Nicolle photograph)



Their defensive strategy proved highly successful, and would preserve the heartland of the eastern Empire for centuries. In the mountainous terrain of Anatolia, for example, Byzantine forces had developed a sophisticated system of defensive guerrilla warfare. This had been intended to guard against Sassanian invasions, but it would prove its worth in future Islamic incursions. The strategy was known as 'shadowing warfare', as it avoided battle with major Muslim invasions and instead attacked smaller raiding parties on their return when they were laden with booty, captured livestock or prisoners.

Caution remained the hallmark of Byzantine warfare until the 10th century. Following the loss of its Middle Eastern territory to Islamic forces, major battles were avoided and prolonged attrition campaigns seem to have been preferred. This was true even during the early stages of the defence of Syria against the Muslims, when no attempt was made to meet the enemy on the frontiers. Instead the enemy would be harassed while the local population took refuge in fortified towns and cities, on the assumption that, like previous raiders, the Muslim Arabs would eventually grow weary and return to the desert.

However, the new Muslim enemies were no mere raiders, and refused to tire and retreat. To the Byzantines' surprise, the Muslims also succeeded in defeating their local forces almost every time they met. Once it was recognised that Muslim strength in Syria was growing rather than decreasing, the Byzantine emperor gathered a field army in Anatolia and met the Muslims in the full-scale battle of Yarmuk. Defeat here meant that Byzantium's loss of Syria and Palestine rapidly became complete.

Though pockets of resistance continued in the form of bands of irregular warriors operating in the hills of north-western Syria – as well as further south – a large swathe of mountainous terrain further north was abandoned. Its fortifications were razed to create a no-man's-land between Byzantine Anatolia and Muslim Syria, which remained

for many decades. Secure behind this barrier, the Byzantines used Cappadocia as their main military base area to fight the increasingly numerous and determined raids by Muslim forces. The main field army in Anatolia was that of the *Opsikion* whose primary role was to defend the capital.

Meanwhile other gradually territorialised and dispersed Byzantine field armies undertook increasingly independent action. This was usually on a small scale, though the Byzantines did attempt counter-raids by both land and sea, mostly with minimal success. Many decades would pass before this Byzantine system of fragmented local defence became sophisticated enough to muster sufficient troops to meet enemy raiders in force, and subsequently to undertake effective counter-raiding.

When the Muslims conquered Jerusalem in 637 their leader, the Caliph 'Umar, refused to pray inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre because he knew his followers would then insist on converting that Christian holy site into a mosque. Instead the Caliph prayed outside at a spot now marked by the largely 14th-century Mosque of 'Umar. (David Nicolle photograph)



Nonetheless, Byzantium's cautious defensive policy, together with its willingness to abandon frontier provinces if necessary, ensured the continued survival of the empire even in the face of the Islamic onslaught. But the Islamic victory was the start of an unstoppable tide, whose significance for Europe cannot be overestimated. If the

A battle between Arabs, Persians and probably Ethiopians, depicted on a Coptic textile fragment from Egypt, late 6th or early 7th century. The subject is so unusual for a textile woven in early Christian Egypt that it may have been made during the brief Sassanian occupation at the start of the 7th century, or shortly after Egypt fell under Arab-Islamic rule. The fact that the horseman in the centre appears to be using stirrups would suggest the latter date. (Musée des Tissus, Lyon, France)



Byzantine forces had won, Graeco-Roman domination of the Middle East could have continued and medieval Europe might never have been exposed to the cultural explosion of the new Islamic civilisation.

The surrender of Jerusalem

Even after the great Muslim victory at the battle of Yarmuk, and their second, conclusive conquest of Damascus, pockets of Byzantine resistance remained. These were not only in north Syria and the coastal mountains where the struggle would be long and bitter, but also in the cities of Palestine.

With the Byzantine field army to the north defeated, Jerusalem was gradually surrounded by the Islamic armies moving west, and besieged. Yet the siege of Jerusalem was less a direct military assault than an ever-tightening blockade, cutting the city and its inhabitants off from any realistic hope of relief. Two years after the Byzantine defeat at the battle of Yarmuk, Jerusalem finally opened its gates to the Caliph 'Umar in person in 638.

Because this surrender was negotiated and peaceful, the Christian population was not punished, and nor was their great Church of the Holy Sepulchre taken over as a mosque. Instead the Caliph prayed outside the church, on a spot where the much smaller Mosque of 'Umar would later be built. This left Caesarea Maritima as the only Byzantine stronghold remaining in Palestine. Unlike the situation in Jerusalem, its garrison could be resupplied by sea, despite the Muslim forces blockading it by land. Even so, in 640, Caesarea Maritima and all the remaining Byzantine-held coastal enclaves except Tripoli fell to a series of determined Muslim assaults. With the coasts secure and their armies powerful and confident, the Islamic forces were ready to push further into the extremities of the Byzantine Empire.

Like so many Arab military commanders during the early decades of Islamic expansion, 'Amr Ibn al-Aasi was also an effective provincial governor: 'Amr Ibn al-Aasi made his name during the conquest of Egypt in the 640s AD. As a result several of the oldest mosques in the country are named after him, including this one in the port-city of Damietta which, at the time this photograph was taken, was abandoned and partially flooded. (David Nicolle photograph)





The conquest of Egypt

A famine and outbreak of plague in 639–40 slowed Islamic military operations down, although these did not entirely halt and by the end of 640 the Muslim conquest of the lowlands of Iraq, the Jazira and most of Syria was virtually complete. Further west the vital Byzantine province of Egypt was invaded by an Arab army under 'Amr Ibn al-Aasi in December 639. 'Amr was clearly a subtle politician as well as an excellent military commander. Of all his campaigns, his conquest of Egypt remains his greatest achievement. 'Amr's army appears to have been particularly well equipped and contained a larger proportion of cavalry than was normal for Muslim forces at this time. It also included armourers and assorted specialist support personnel.

The military structure of Byzantine Egypt was different from that of most other areas, perhaps because it was expected to face relatively minor military threats. Within Egypt proper there were three separate *Duces* (singular, *Dux*) plus the two *Duces* of what is now Libya. Each had his own corps of mercenaries, though the *Dux* of Alexandria

A procession through the medieval heart of Cairo, marking the annual anniversary of the murder of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at Karbala in 680. Although this event is of particular significance to Shi'a Muslims, it is also marked in some Sunni countries like Egypt. Here the horseman representing the martyr is distinguished by his flowing green robes and turban. (David Nicolle photograph)

was the most senior. The bulk of the military strength in Egypt was, however, a locally recruited Coptic force which was entirely defensive and largely served as a police force.

The central part of North Africa had been reconquered from the Vandals by Justinian's army and continued to have a more formidable military establishment until the Arab-Islamic conquest. Here the governor or *Exarch* commanded the armies, led military expeditions and had considerable freedom of action. Though the Byzantine army in North Africa was small compared to its imperial Roman predecessors, and had an almost entirely defensive function, its units may have been rather larger than was normal elsewhere, perhaps because the militarily primitive Berbers still relied upon numbers rather than sophisticated skills or training. This would remain a feature of most North

African armies throughout the subsequent medieval Islamic period.

The conquest began with the Islamic armies making a difficult but successful crossing of the northern Sinai desert from Palestine. After taking Pelusium on the edge of the fertile Nile Delta, 'Amr defeated a Byzantine counter-attack near Bilbays before leading his army against the major Byzantine fortress known as Babylon (not to be confused with the more famous city of Babylon in ancient Iraq). Though this was not the administrative centre of Byzantine Egypt, which was in Alexandria, Egyptian Babylon stood at the southern edge of what became the Egyptian capital of Cairo. As such it was a key strategic location where the fertile Nile Valley met the equally fertile Nile Delta. After defeating the main Byzantine army in Egypt at the battle of Heliopolis (now a suburb in northern Cairo) in July 640, 'Amr pressed the city of Babylon which eventually surrendered after a siege of several months, the fortress falling to the Muslims on 9 April 641.

The offensive against Egypt continued for more than a year, until Alexandria itself opened its gates in September 642. Like so many other Muslim military leaders of this period, however, 'Amr Ibn al-Aasi eventually fell from favour and was obliged to retire to his extensive and extremely valuable estates in Palestine where he lived until his death in 664, having reached a venerable age of over eighty.

The conquests, however, were not a series of uninterrupted military successes for the Islamic forces. One army was virtually wiped out in a battle with the mighty Turkish Khazar Khanate close to the western shore of the Caspian Sea in 644, and for a short period a Byzantine amphibious attack succeeded in seizing back Alexandria. But Byzantium was fighting a losing battle for control over its furthest possessions, and in time these would become indisputably Islamic territory.

As the Caliphate grew, increasing wealth flowed into Medina. This became the first capital of the Islamic state, while the

surrounding Hijaz region of western Arabia became the political and cultural heartland of the new empire. But the Hijaz was a region that remained prone to droughts, which could easily lead to famine, and in 639 Arabia was struck by one such drought. However, this time the efficient and increasingly powerful Caliphal government could arrange for camel caravans to bring supplies of fresh grain and other foodstuffs from the newly conquered provinces of Syria, Palestine and Iraq.

With the conquest of Egypt, the former granary of the Romano-Byzantine Empire, the Islamic territories were guaranteed to survive future droughts without serious shortages of food, and this new conquest led to the clearing of the ancient Amnis Trajanus canal linking the river Nile to the Red Sea. Renamed the 'Canal of the Commander of the Faithful', it enabled ships to travel between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean long before the construction of the Suez canal. The victories in the west, therefore, had succeeded not only in spreading a religious message but also ensuring the prosperity of a new civilisation for generations to come.

The war at sea

For centuries, power in the Mediterranean had depended on naval might. At the end of the 6th century the Byzantine Empire dominated both the Mediterranean and the Black Seas with naval bases at Carthage, Alexandria, Acre and Constantinople. Yet the number of Byzantine warships remained few, because the Empire faced no serious maritime rivals until the Sassanian occupation of Egypt and Syria. Even more threatening were the subsequent Muslim conquests of these areas, as well as North Africa and, eventually, the Iberian peninsula.

In the Islamic forces' first major naval operation in the Mediterranean, they temporarily occupied the island of Cyprus after having driven off a Byzantine fleet near Alexandria in 652 – their first naval victory.

Then, in 655, the Islamic fleet won a convincing victory over the Byzantine navy off the south-western coast of what is now Turkey. For nigh on a thousand years Greeks and then Romans had dominated the Mediterranean Sea. Now, in the first major Mediterranean sea battle for centuries, an Arab fleet had successfully challenged the Byzantines in their home waters.

Surprisingly, given the relative inexperience of the Muslim fleet, this battle saw the Byzantines defeated both at sea and in a skirmish on shore at the same time. This clash in 655 near Cape Chelidonia, off the Lycian coast, came to be known as the 'Battle of the Masts' because the Muslims had landed to cut tall trees for the masts and yards of their new fleets, based in Egypt and Syria. A lack of suitable large timber would in fact hamper Muslim naval development throughout the medieval period, though it did encourage technological innovation in Islamic naval architecture. During this encounter the Byzantine ships seem either to have been moored in close formation or to have been tied together. As a result the Muslims were able to win because of their superior boarding and close-combat tactics.

The possible importance of the Sassanian influence on naval developments in the Middle East has only recently been considered. During their brief occupation of much of the eastern Mediterranean littoral, they had extended as far as to occupy the Greek island of Rhodes, plus some Anatolian coastal towns, though they almost certainly used captured Syrian, Cilician, Egyptian or Greek ships to do so.

The subsequent Muslim conquest of many of the same regions brought the Arabs to the shores of the Mediterranean for the first time as a great military power and as the inheritors of Sassanian naval traditions. On the other hand the Arabian peoples had a far more active naval heritage than their initially cautious attitude to the Mediterranean might suggest. The pre-Islamic Yemenis and perhaps Omanis had, for example, been raiding Sassanian territory by sea since at least the

4th century AD while various other tribes from both the Gulf and Red Sea coastal regions of Arabia had similar maritime traditions. Here it is worth noting that, following the first wave of Islamic conquest, these same Yemeni and other coastal Arab tribes were often selected as garrison troops for strategic coastal bases including Alexandria.

In response to the challenge by new Arab-Islamic fleets, a more powerful Romano-Byzantine navy would emerge in the late 7th century. The 'Battle of the Masts' would not be the last naval encounter between these two rivals. Indeed, later Byzantine attempts to retake Egypt would convince Mu'awiya, the governor of Syria and subsequently the first Umayyad Caliph, of the need for a full Islamic navy in the Mediterranean.

The first such fleet was built in Egypt, where all qualified sailors were registered for naval service. Although many of these sailors were in fact Christians, the bulk were Yemeni in origin and Muslim in religion. The new fleet used Tyre and Acre as forward bases while Iranian and Iraqi shipwrights were brought from the Gulf to build and man the new or restored shipyards at Acre, Tyre and Beirut.

Other naval bases and fleets were established in newly conquered Tunisia and rather later in Libya; the resources of wood, iron and tar essential for medieval naval warfare all being available in North Africa. From the early 8th century onwards these new Islamic fleets undertook almost annual raids against Byzantine territory and islands in the western Mediterranean, mirroring the annual raids undertaken on land.

If there were any real differences between Byzantine and early Islamic warships, it would seem to have been in the increased height of the forecastle of the latter. This was soon being used to mount stone-throwing engines and to provide an advantage when boarding enemy vessels. The main fighting ship was a galley called a *shini* which, like the Byzantine galleys of the day, had between 140 and 180 oarsmen. It is also important to note that, with very few exceptions, the oarsmen in medieval galleys,

be they Christian or Muslim, were paid volunteers not slaves.

By the mid-8th century such galleys defended themselves against the terrifying Byzantine incendiary weapon known as 'Greek fire' using various systems of water-soaked cotton, and would shortly use Greek fire themselves. However, the vessels of the rival naval powers remained remarkably similar, as there was an exchange of both technology and terminology between them.

The main difficulty facing any Islamic fleet continued to be a lack of timber. Indeed, this lack of resources may have stimulated the construction of larger ships, which were better able to defend themselves and were no longer regarded as expendable assets. Certainly, there was also a change from the hull- or skin-first method of construction to the more economical frame-first method, although this change would not be truly complete until the 11th century.

Expansion to the east

Under 'Umar's control as second Caliph, a separate series of operations continued eastwards. Although he initially ordered his commanders not to cross the mountains into the Sassanian home territory of modern-day Iran, the idea that Islam and the Prophet Muhammad's message should focus upon the Arab or at most the Semitic peoples of the Middle East seems to have still been strong. However, the *Shahinshah* Yezdegird was not prepared to abandon the wealthy provinces of Iraq which had been part of the Sassanian Empire for 400 years. So he assembled what would prove to be the last great Sassanian army. Rather than wait for what threatened to be a massive Sassanian counter-attack, the Muslims under Saad Ibn Abi Waqqas moved forward, meeting and entirely defeating the Sassanian army at the battle of Nihawand in 642, which became known as 'The Victory of Victories'.

These last Sassanian armies which failed so catastrophically against the Muslim Arabs



Amongst the many small stucco statuettes found in the late Umayyad palace near Jericho were a pair of guardsmen. This man's headgear is now known to represent a *qalansuwa* quilted hat rather than a helmet. The shoulder belt which carried his scabbard is clearly visible but the painted dots which represented his mail armour can now only just be seen on his chest. (Rockefeller Archaeological Museum, Jerusalem)

were still organised on essentially the same lines that they always had been. However, the abolition of the autonomous Lakhmid Arab principality in Iraq meant that the Sassanians themselves took over defence of this desert frontier, while lacking the numbers of suitable troops to do so effectively. The Sassanian emperor's hold over his *marzbans* also seems to have been failing; the *marzban* of the north-east refused to help the last *Shahinshah*, Yezdegird III (632–51) fight the Muslims, and indeed turned against him. Defeat by the Byzantine Empire, quarrels within the Sassanian imperial family, plummeting prestige amongst the Arabian tribes and a series of serious floods in Iraq also contributed to a weakening of the Sassanian army.

Unfortunately little is known, or can even be deduced, concerning Sassanian strategy during the empire's collapse in the face of Muslim Arab invasion. One tradition states that the regional commander of Iraq advised engaging the Arabs in many small encounters but was overruled by the *Shahinshah*, who demanded a single great victory. The result was the catastrophic defeat at the battle of Qadisiyah. Little has been recorded about the battle itself. It is generally presumed to have occurred at some point between 635 and 639 and to have been a prolonged engagement lasting several days on the banks of the river Euphrates. After this defeat, the remaining Sassanian armies within western Iran seem to have adopted a more defensive approach, but by then irrevocable damage had been done and eventual subjugation became inevitable. By the time Muslim Arab armies reached what had been the furthest eastern and north-eastern provinces of the Sassanian Empire, the empire and state no longer existed in any real, cohesive sense.

Medieval Islamic writers offered several descriptions of the typical late Sassanian battle-array, which either reflected an

accepted tradition or were based upon lost earlier records. For example, a late-10th century Persian source wrote that the Sassanian ruler placed his cavalry on the wings, with infantry in the centre and elephants behind them, plus an elite force of reserves to the rear. Just over two centuries later an Indo-Persian writer even offered a plan of the *Shahinshah's* army in battle, showing a large curved formation at the centre with substantial cavalry forces on the left to protect the herds, a large formation of 'guards' on the right, with baggage, infantry and an army hospital to the rear protected by a rearguard. In general it seems that Sassanian light cavalry was used for skirmishing, to support heavier cavalry, and as scouts; while Sassanian infantry archers shot volleys at order, advancing steadily in ranks with other foot soldiers who relied upon ferocious infantry charges to break the enemy.

A view of the Ark-i Bam, a mud-brick citadel that dates back to the Sassanian period. Bam remained a vital trade and defensive centre throughout the Islamic period, though most of the structures that were devastated by the earthquake of 2003 actually dated from between the 16th and the 18th century. (© Brian A. Vikander/Corbis)



The defeat of the Sassanian Empire was political as well as military. The collapse of the *Shahinshah's* authority resulted in the fragmentation of the empire, with some of his people resisting and some forming an accommodation with their Muslim conquerors. Unlike the defeat of the Byzantine Empire, Sassanian defeat meant the complete destruction of their empire. Paradoxically, its military heritage remained so respected by the conquering Arabs that it would have a much greater influence upon subsequent Islamic armies than that of the only partially defeated Byzantine army.

With a Muslim army now already across the Zagros mountains and inside Iran, with the *Shahinshah* Yezdegird himself in retreat, and with Sassanian authority seemingly

crumbling before his eyes, the Caliph 'Umar was probably only accepting the inevitable when he lifted his ban on further eastern conquests. He now instructed his commanders in Iran to pursue the enemy relentlessly, wherever they might flee. Meanwhile other Muslim forces had been let off the leash in the far west, capturing Tripoli in June 643.

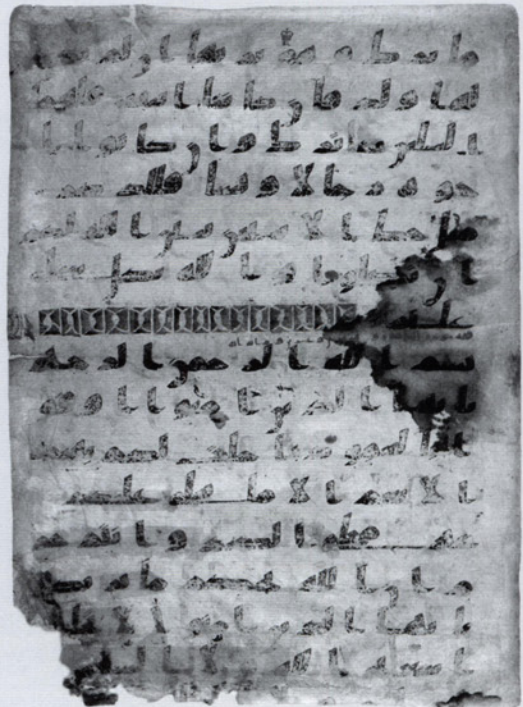
'Umar, the greatest conqueror the Middle East had ever seen, was eventually assassinated on 3 November 644 by a disgruntled victim of the war with the Sassanian Empire. 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan, widely known simply as Abu Layla or 'the father of Layla', was chosen as his successor, holding the position until 656. 'Uthman was the Prophet's son-in-law and was elected by a

The struggle over sacred texts: the role of the Qur'an in Islam

For Muslims the Qur'an is the uncorrupted and unchangeable Word of God. However, in the 7th century there was open discord relating to the formalisation of the revelations of Muhammad – a process which culminated in the written text of the Qur'an as it exists to this day.

The art of writing was known in pre-Islamic Arabia but its use was extremely limited. On the other hand the Muslims enjoyed one major advantage over some other religious groups, in that Islam became an established faith with political power and a recognisable community of believers within the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. Many of those who had heard and memorised his revelations were still alive when the Caliph accepted the need to record them.

One of the earliest surviving copies of the Qur'an to have any form of decoration, Arabia 8th century. In these first Qur'ans the *suras* or chapters were not given headings or titles, instead being separated by coloured bands as seen on this page. (British Library, Add. Ms. 11737, f.1, London, UK)



Furthermore, traditional Arab society was one in which the memorisation of poetic texts had been central to culture. Therefore there was the opportunity to reach an agreement on the Sacred Text, rather than follow the example of Christian and Jewish neighbours.

Muhammad's revelations had been inspired piecemeal, some at Mecca and some at Medina. It was only after the Prophet died that his Companions collected the *suras* or chapters together and began to assemble them into one text. The most widely accepted account of how the final text of the Qur'an was brought together indicates that many of those who could recite the *suras* had been killed during the Ridda Wars. Consequently there was a danger that some sacred verses might be forgotten. So the Caliph 'Abu Bakr had all oral and written texts collected together. This first text was inherited by the second Caliph, 'Umar, who bequeathed it to his daughter Hafsa, one of Muhammad's widows.

Four other men were credited with bringing together texts of the Qur'an but their collections seem to have differed. When the third Caliph, 'Uthman, took over political leadership of the young Islamic state in 644, the potential for minor disagreements developing into significant problems was already apparent. Ubay Ibn Ka'b's version of the Qur'an was accepted in Damascus, Miqdad Ibn 'Amr's in Hims, 'Abd Allah Ibn Ma'sud's in Kufa and Abu Musa 'Abd Allah al-Ash'ari's in Basra. Each city was also the military base of a significant army. Matters had already almost boiled over in the expeditionary force which an Arab leader named Hudhaifa had commanded in Azerbaijan, far to the north, where various units had quarrelled over whose version of the Qur'an was correct.

The Caliph 'Uthman certainly accepted the need to avoid the divisions which afflicted Christians, so he asked 'Umar's daughter Hafsa if he could borrow her father's copy of the sacred book. He then had copies made and distributed amongst the Islamic communities. Whether the Caliph 'Uthman ordered other versions to be destroyed remains doubtful and some medieval scholars claim to have seen copies of those Qur'ans which had been rejected. Indeed, very early Qur'ans with tiny variations have been found in Yemen quite recently. The Islamic world would suffer from plenty of other differences of opinion and interpretation, but 'Uthman's efforts were successful and quarrels about the text of Islam's Holy Book did not become a serious problem.

Some zealous Muslims were nevertheless offended by the destruction of alternative versions of the Qur'an, arguing that the Word of God had been committed to the fire. A more widespread and mundane complaint was that 'Uthman promoted members of his own clan, the Banu Umayya, to positions of authority. Some of those promoted had been enemies of the Prophet Muhammad before converting to Islam. Furthermore many members of this new elite lived luxurious lives, contrary to the example of the Prophet. Discontent was particularly rife in the newly founded barracks-city of Kufa in Iraq, the main base for Islamic armies on the eastern front. There was then a mutiny in Medina, during which the Caliph 'Uthman was murdered in June 656. The bloodstained Qur'an which he was reading at the time would later become an almost sacred relic for those who demanded vengeance for 'Uthman.

The assassination ended the dream of a united Islamic people ruled by a religious theocracy. Although remarkable conquests would follow and a single version of the Qur'an would become accepted, the true unity of the early decades was now over. The Caliphate gradually became much like any other state or empire, though religion always remained at the heart of its ideology.

council of leading 'Companions'. But this third Caliphate heralded a period of discontent as the empire fractured along lines of differing religious interpretation, and disquiet at the perceived self-promotion of the Caliph's own clan.

Assassination and civil war

On 17 June 656 the third Caliph was assassinated. By the time of his death the empire and its sphere of influence had grown to its greatest extent, stretching from Morocco in the west to parts of modern-day Pakistan in the east, Azerbaijan in the north and Aden in the south. His rule had heralded a period of great economic growth and prosperity but there were also the first rumblings of serious internal discontent. Armed revolt erupted in the province of Egypt from where several sympathisers travelled to Medina to rally support and assassinate the Caliph. Following his death and the selection of 'Ali as the fourth Caliph, this strife erupted into a civil war known as the *fitna*, literally meaning the 'temptation' or 'trial of faith'.

Abu'l-Hassan 'Ali Ibn Abu Talib was the Prophet Muhammad's cousin, son-in-law and childhood companion. The Islamic world fractured into two camps, with those who regarded 'Ali as the most suited to be Caliph eventually emerging as the *Shi'at 'Ali* or 'Party of 'Ali'. Known simply as Shi'a today, they form the largest minority within Islam, whereas the majority are known as the Sunni because they base their religious practices upon the *sunnah* or 'customs' of the Prophet Muhammad.

During the *fitna* civil war against the Caliph 'Ali, Muslim campaigns of expansion

came to a virtual halt. Instead, the martial energies of the Islamic forces were directed inwards, culminating in the indecisive battle or, more accurately, the prolonged confrontation at Siffin overlooking the river Euphrates in Syria. This lasted from May to July 657, and was followed by further unsuccessful attempts at arbitration and raids by troops loyal to Mu'awiya Ibn Abi Sufyan, the governor of Syria, against regions dominated by forces loyal to 'Ali.

During the winter of 660–61 a *Kharaji* Sunni fundamentalist plot was hatched which intended to end this debilitating quarrel by assassinating the three most significant leaders on both sides: 'Ali, Mu'awiya, and 'Amr Ibn al-Aasi, who was Mu'awiya's most powerful supporter. However, only one of these attempts succeeded, and 'Ali, the last of the *Rashidun* or 'Rightly Guided' Caliphs was murdered at Kufa in Iraq in January 661. The result was widespread shock and revulsion, which in turn enabled Mu'awiya to end the divisions and reunite the bulk of the Islamic community. In so doing Mu'awiya also became the first of the Umayyad caliphs, ruling from 661 to 680. The Umayyads would themselves become the first hereditary dynasty in Islamic history.

The expansion of Islamic-ruled territory under the four *Rashidun* Caliphs remains one of the least-known sequences of campaigns in military history. Unlike most comparable waves of conquest, Islamic expansion in the 7th century AD had a permanent impact upon the culture, religion and languages of all those regions involved. The exploits of Alexander the Great and the Greeks, Genghis Khan and the Mongols, and even the Roman Empire, pale in comparison.

Two warriors of Arabia

An aristocratic soldier: Khalid Ibn al-Walid

Khalid Ibn al-Walid Ibn al-Mughira al-Makhzumi has been described as one of the tactical geniuses of the early medieval period. Yet his Arabic nickname, 'The Sword of God', implied that he was merely a weapon to be wielded by greater men. This in turn reflected the fact that military prestige counted for relatively little in the early Islamic world, at least when compared to religious or cultural status.

Khalid headed an important clan in Mecca during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime and was, in fact, the tactician behind the only serious victory that the pagans of Mecca enjoyed over Muhammad, at the battle of Uhud. Khalid then converted to Islam around 627 and took part in both the unsuccessful

Muta campaign and the Muslim conquest of Mecca. The Prophet Muhammad sent Khalid Ibn al-Walid to destroy the important pagan idol of al-Uzza in the oasis of Nakhla and to negotiate with the Banu Jadhima tribe which, however, Khalid attacked without orders. Even so Muhammad continued to trust Khalid Ibn al-Walid and next sent him against the Arabian oasis town and power centre of Dumat al-Jandal, where Khalid captured the local Christian Arab ruler and sent him as a prisoner to Mecca. A short time later Khalid was sent to Yemen to invite the important Banu al-Harith tribe to accept Islam.

Khalid Ibn al-Walid was perhaps the greatest amongst the remarkably talented military commanders of the early decades of Arab-Islamic expansion. His tomb in the Syrian city of Hims was restored in the 19th century and was provided with a huge late-Ottoman style mosque. (David Nicolle photograph)



Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, Khalid Ibn al-Walid became an important Muslim military leader during the Ridda Wars – which saw the newly established Muslim Caliphate extend its authority across the entire Arabian peninsula. Even so, Khalid managed to disgrace himself at least twice, once by killing his fellow Muslims in error and then by marrying the widow of one of those he had slain. However, he also proved himself a superb military leader and an honest if unsophisticated man. This was presumably why he was sent to campaign against Sassanian and pro-Sassanian forces in Iraq, which he did with notable success.

Khalid Ibn al-Walid's epic march across the virtually waterless desert from Iraq to attack the Byzantine forces in Syria from the rear caught the imagination of most chroniclers, though it has recently been reinterpreted by some western historians. Khalid is similarly credited with keeping the relatively new Arab-Islamic forces intact even during their long retreat in the face of a Byzantine counter-offensive. His greatest victory came at the battle of Yarmuk, where he was probably the real military leader under the nominal command of others.

Khalid Ibn al-Walid is also credited with organising the first separate Muslim cavalry force, though this remained small. In addition, he may have developed the system whereby light taxes were imposed on conquered peoples to pay for an essentially full-time Muslim army. He showed himself to be an aggressive leader, seeking battle whenever he felt confident of victory, though his temperament resulted in him being dismissed from high command in Syria by the Caliph 'Umar I. Thereafter Khalid continued to fight against the Byzantines, though usually under the command of others, until his death in 642.

In terms of personality, Khalid Ibn al-Walid appears to have been impulsive, sometimes ignoring directives from the Caliph, particularly when the latter was from an Arabian clan which had possessed lower prestige in pre-Islamic times. This, in fact,

suggests that in some respects Khalid was still rooted in the attitudes of his pre-Islamic past. He was also accused of an un-Islamic love of luxury. Khalid Ibn al-Walid was buried at Hims in central Syria where, during the 19th century, a huge mosque was built by the Ottoman Turkish authorities in an attempt to retain the loyalty of their increasingly disaffected Syrian Arab subjects. In subsequent decades Khalid was adopted as a hero and symbol of Arab nationalism.

Risen from the ranks: Tariq Ibn Ziyad

As a *mawla* (plural, *mawali*) or 'client' – one who was originally non-Arab – of Musa Ibn Nusayr, governor of the Umayyad Caliphate's westernmost territories in the Maghrib (North Africa), Tariq Ibn Ziyad was authorised to conduct the first raid across the Straits of Gibraltar against the Visigothic kingdom of Hispania – the first significant Muslim invasion of mainland western Europe.

Although barely recorded, it seems that this raid, rather than direct aggression, may in reality have been an intervention in a Visigothic power-struggle between the current King Roderic and the heirs of a previous king, Witiza. Some of the Jewish Berber tribes of Morocco may also already have been raiding the Iberian peninsula in support of their persecuted fellow Jews, and may even have established footholds there. Furthermore, it has been suggested that Tarif Ibn Malluk and Tariq Ibn Ziyad, the first two Berber Muslim commanders to cross the Straits of Gibraltar, may have taken part in these earlier raids before their own conversion to Islam and recruitment to the ranks of the Berber *mawali*.

Tariq Ibn Ziyad himself, with his new Arabic given name, first appears in historical record as the Muslim governor of Tangier. Whether he really was blind in one eye, as recounted in Spanish legend, is open to question. According to the North African chronicler Ibn Khaldun, Tariq Ibn Ziyad was from a Berber tribe in what is now Algeria.

He is traditionally said to have been born at Wadi Tafna.

According to later Arabic sources Akhila, son of the previous King Witiza, sought aid from Tariq. A certain Count Julian, said to be governor of the remaining Byzantine North African enclave of Ceuta, was also involved in these negotiations and supposedly lent ships to transport the first Muslim raiders across the Straits of Gibraltar.

Tariq's raid followed an armed reconnaissance led by Tarif Ibn Malluk, and the names of both these leaders were subsequently immortalised: in the Spanish coastal town of Tarifa, named after Tarif, and in the great Rock of Gibraltar whose name comes from the Arabic 'Jabal Tariq' – 'Tariq's Mountain'. Tariq and his small army of supposedly 7,000 Berbers, Syrians and Yemenis landed at the Rock on 29 April 711. They then won a decisive victory over King Roderic at the battle of Guadalete, traditionally dated 19 July that same year, where Roderic was killed.

Before the battle Tariq is said to have warned his troops: 'My brothers, the enemy is before you, the sea is behind you; where could you escape? Follow your commander, for I am determined either to be killed or to crush this Roman king.' Following his unexpectedly decisive victory at the battle of Guadalete, and apparently encouraged by both the supporters of Akhila and by Count Julian, Tariq Ibn Ziyad ignored instructions to return to North Africa. Instead he pressed forward, defeating the tottering Visigoths again and winning the support of the Iberian peninsula's substantial – and previously persecuted – Jewish population.

It took Tariq and his men little more than a month to break Visigothic power, though it would take the Muslims much longer to conquer what had been Visigothic territory. Indeed this was never completed because Islamic rule, like that of the Visigoths before them, was never accepted in the mountainous far north of Spain. On the

other hand, in 712, Tariq's superior, Musa Ibn Nusayr, entered the campaign with his own larger army – said to number 18,000 – with the two commanders joining forces at Talavera. Thereafter the main cities fell one by one, Muslim garrisons eventually being established as far north as the Visigothic territory of Septimania in southern France.

Tariq was meanwhile made a subordinate governor of Hispania – or al-Andalus as the Muslim-ruled regions of the Iberian peninsula became known in Arabic – under Musa's overall authority as governor of all the Caliphate's western provinces. Early in 714 Tariq Ibn Ziyad is said to have temporarily taken Barcelona before launching an armed reconnaissance into Gaul, taking Narbonne and pushing along the river Rhone towards Avignon and Lyon before then being forced back by 'Karlo' (Charles Martel).

In 714 Musa and Tariq were summoned to Damascus by the Caliph al-Walid to explain and perhaps justify their barely authorised campaigns in Europe. After some delay they set out, but made their way eastwards in a seemingly leisurely manner, accompanied by a triumphant procession of Arab and Berber chieftains, conquered Visigothic noblemen and what was described as an immense convoy of booty. Delaying again in Egypt and Palestine, they eventually reached Damascus shortly before the Caliph al-Walid died on 23 February 715. The new Caliph, Sulayman, was far from sympathetic to the now wealthy and perhaps dangerously popular governor of his westernmost provinces. Both Musa and Tariq were accused of misappropriation of funds, and Musa Ibn Nusayr soon found himself in prison where he died around a year later. Tariq Ibn Ziyad escaped a similar fate, but spent the last five years of his life in the east in almost total obscurity. A favourable, though almost certainly legendary, account of his final years maintained that, at the conclusion of his illustrious military career, Tariq 'retired to the distant East to spread the teachings of Islam'.

The Umayyad century

An Islamic dynasty

By the end of the *Rashidun* period, the Byzantines had lost their richest provinces of Palestine, Syria, Egypt and Libya along with what is now eastern and south-east Turkey. Even the island of Cyprus was now shared between the Byzantine and Islamic empires, despite the Caliphs' initial reluctance to commit their troops 'across water'. To the east the battered Sassanian Empire had crumbled after a series of hard-fought battles in Iraq and western Iran. Fighting would continue during the Umayyad Caliphate, and the rulers of the Islamic realm eventually found themselves in charge of the main provinces of the ancient Iranian empires. But in so doing, they inherited the Sassanians' troublesome eastern frontier where the Arabs would face much more determined foes, especially among the

traditionally warlike Buddhist peoples of what is now Afghanistan.

When Mu'awiya, the governor of Syria, became Caliph in 661, the administrative centre of the Islamic state was moved from Medina in Arabia to Damascus in Syria. This shifting of the capital to one of the most ancient, prosperous and sophisticated cities in the Middle East would have a profound impact upon the character of the Caliphate, at least in governmental and more particularly military terms. The Arab-Islamic army based in Syria was already an elite force

A wall-painting from the city of Penjikent which is now on the border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It comes from a cycle illustrating an early version of the Persian epic which became the *Shahnamah*. Here both warriors have full mail armour though the man on the ground wears his beneath a short-sleeved coat. (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia; David Nicolle photograph)



It took the Muslim Arabs, Iranians and Turks over a century to conquer what is now Afghanistan. This warlike region was ruled by a number of largely Buddhist local dynasties whose strongest cultural

links were with India, as shown in this carved 8th or 9th century ivory chesspiece in the form of a war-elephant. (Cabinet des Medailles, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France)



by the time Mu'awiya became Caliph, having campaigned with great success against the Byzantine Empire. Under the new Umayyad Caliphate the status of Syrian regiments increased still further. The overwhelming majority of the Syrian population was, however, still Christian, plus significant Jewish and other minorities. These communities were more literate and more experienced in administration, trade, the arts and science than the newly arrived Arabs, who remained a military and ruling class.

On the eastern front, the Muslim governor and commander in Khurasan, Ubaidullah Ibn Zayyad, invaded Transoxania in 674, attacking the powerful Sughdian city-state of Bukhara in what is now Uzbekistan. This city-state accepted Islamic overlordship and agreed to pay tribute, though other campaigns in this north-eastern frontier zone of the Umayyad Caliphate were harder fought. However, the settled and largely Buddhist peoples of what are today the former Soviet republics of Central Asia soon accepted the new regime because it, like themselves, demonstrated an interest in expanding trade. Even so, in Central Asia the Muslim Arabs would shortly come up against a rival expanding power, namely the Chinese Empire, which was trying to extend its domination westward along the network of trade routes known as the Silk Roads.

On the strategically more important central front facing the shrunken but still formidable Byzantine Empire, the Caliph Mu'awiya's most ambitious – but also least successful – campaign was the first attempt to capture Constantinople. This siege, or perhaps more accurately blockade, lasted no less than seven years, from 670 to 677, during which time the Muslim fleet also seized the strategically important Greek island of Rhodes. But the Islamic forces failed to breach the mighty defences that had been built around the city of Constantinople in the 5th century AD during the reign of Theodosius II. As a result, the city itself remained uncaptured. In the same year that the assault upon Constantinople started, Muslim forces in the prosperous

ex-Byzantine province of what is now Tunisia founded the city of Qairawan. It was intended as an administrative centre as well as a strategic jumping-off point for further campaigns. It would also become the main cultural and religious centre of early medieval Islamic North Africa.

Mu'awiya, the first Umayyad Caliph, died in 680. He was succeeded by twelve further members of the Umayyad clan, the first being Yazid I (680–83). None of these Caliphs quite achieved the greatness of Mu'awiya himself, though there would be further significant conquests and the beginnings of a remarkable cultural flowering which reached its peak under the succeeding 'Abbasid dynasty. Some of the Umayyads' campaigns were remarkable for their ambition and strategic daring in regions far removed from the centre of Umayyad power in Syria. During the reign of Yazid I in 682, a small army led by Uqba Ibn Nafi marched all the way from Tunisia to the Atlantic coast of Morocco, but was ambushed and wiped out at Tahuda on its way back. As a result the Muslims abandoned their first tentative occupation of Tunisia and pulled back to eastern Libya.

The start of the Umayyad dynasty did not put an end to all internal strife, as 682 also saw a revolt against Yazid at Medina, followed the next year by an Umayyad siege of the rebel-held Holy City of Mecca itself. Once again, Muslims were divided into competing factions with, at one time, no less than three rival claimants to the title of Caliph. These internal struggles continued for ten years until 'Abd al-Malik, who had ruled since 685, was finally recognised by the majority of Muslims as the legitimate Caliph. As the fifth ruler of the Umayyad dynasty, 'Abd al-Malik (685–705) was in many ways as great as Mu'awiya himself, particularly as an administrator. He confirmed Damascus as the centre of a new superpower and initiated a number of key building works, including the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, that would transform the cities of the Middle East for future generations.

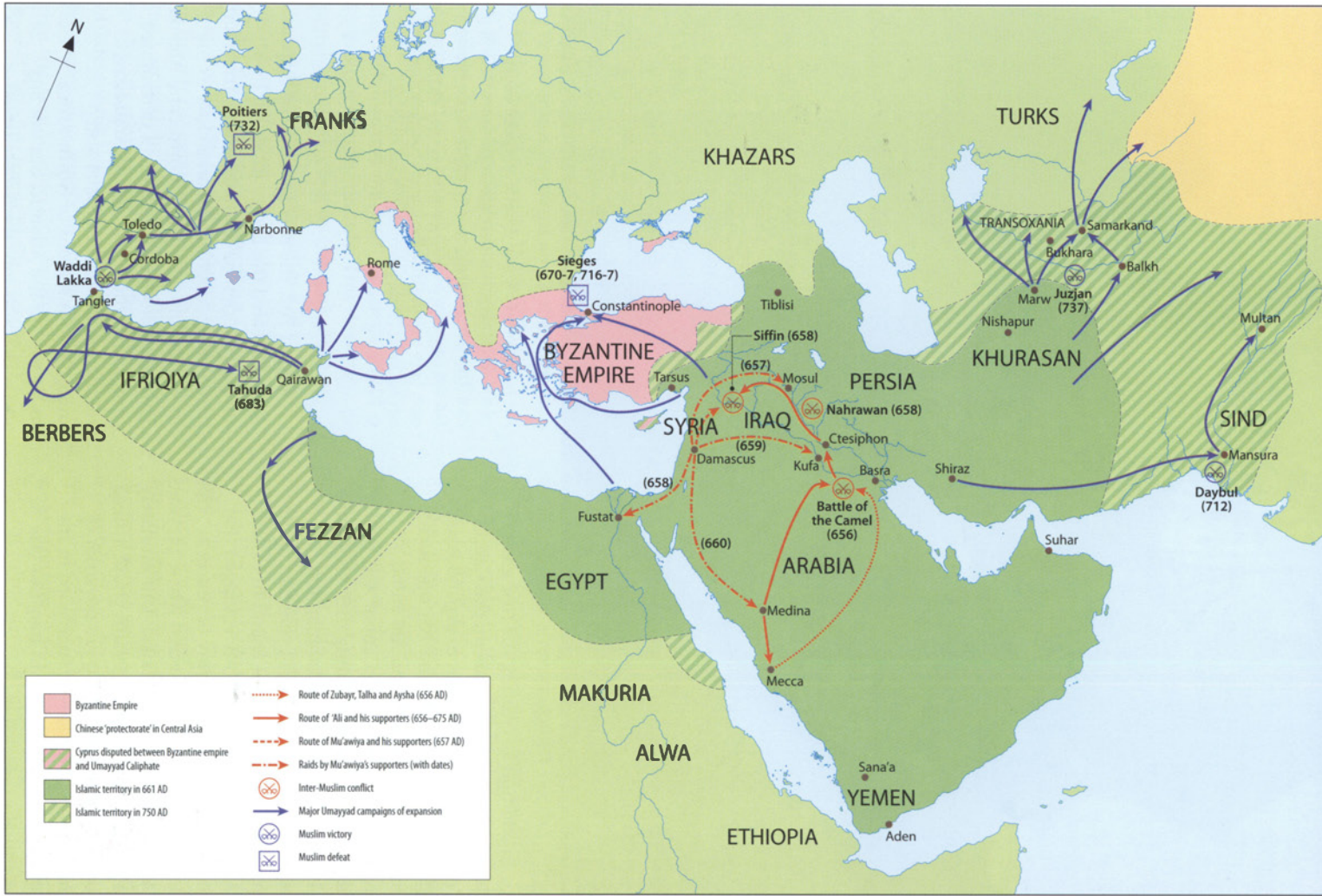


In addition to creating the first great Islamic building in Jerusalem, the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik sent armies to expand Islam's frontiers. Between 697 and 701 one such force, led by Muhallib Ibn Abi Sufra, reconquered territory in Central Asia which the Muslims had lost during their civil wars. Another, under 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn al-Ashath, was sent against the ruler of the fearsomely warlike Kabul region in eastern Afghanistan. So abundantly equipped that it was nicknamed 'the army of peacocks', this force was intended to succeed where previous Arab-Islamic forces had failed. Unfortunately, after achieving little, al-Ashath chose instead to rebel against the Umayyad governor of Iran and Iraq. He almost succeeded in his rebellion, reaching Kufa in Iraq, but was eventually defeated in 702.

Art historians still argue about the precise dating of the remarkable wall-paintings at Penjikent in Central Asia. They are generally considered to be pre-Islamic, but the presence of Arab figures such as the warrior seen here indicate that the Muslim conquerors were not far away. (State Hermitage Museum store, St Petersburg, Russia)

Also in 702, the new governor of North Africa defeated the Berber tribes led by a supposed 'priestess' named Kahina, the main battle being fought at Tabarka close to the modern frontier between Tunisia and Algeria. This was followed by a series of determined campaigns which established Arab-Islamic rule across the fertile coastal and mountainous regions of North Africa as far west as the Atlantic, but not any distance south into the Sahara desert.

Civil wars and the Umayyad conquests



During 'Abd al-Malik's caliphate the frontier between Islamic and Byzantine territory in east-central Anatolia saw no major campaigns by either side, though there was persistent cross-border raiding, mostly by the Arabs and almost invariably during summer. In response, the Byzantine Empire initially sponsored a vicious guerrilla campaign in the coastal mountains of what is now north-western Syria and part of Lebanon, although this petered out after 695.

The invasion of Spain

The great 'Abd al-Malik was succeeded by his son al-Walid I (705–15), the most notable achievement of whose reign in terms of Arabic expansion was the overthrow of the Visigothic rulers of the Iberian peninsula and the creation of what became the culturally magnificent Islamic province of al-Andalus. This dramatic conquest began with a tentative raid across the Straits of Gibraltar during the summer of 710, which was followed by a full-scale invasion and victory

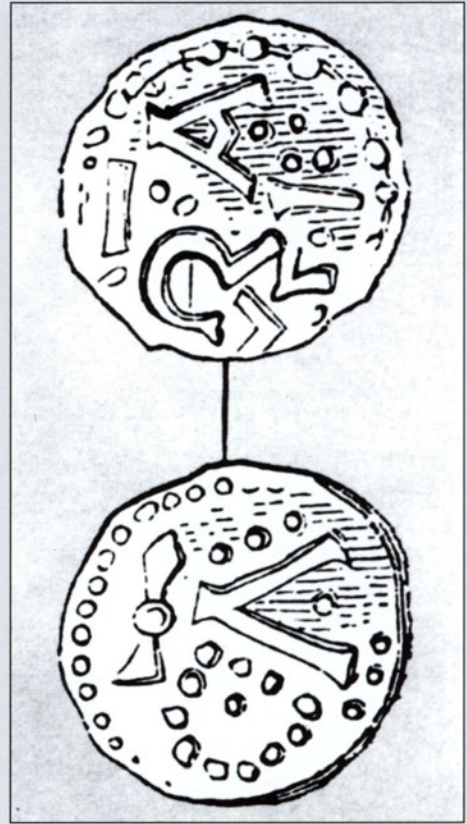
at the battle of the river Guadalete in 711. Here the Islamic forces under the command of Tariq Ibn Ziyad defeated the Christian Visigoths of Hispania under King Roderic, opening the way for the capture of the Visigothic capital of Toledo. Within a decade the whole Iberian peninsula was under Muslim domination apart from what would become the tiny kingdom of Asturias and the tribal, still largely pagan Basques of the Pyrenean Mountains.

The Muslim conquest of al-Andalus had been carried out with an invasion force of around 15,000, mostly Berbers under Arab command, with an elite of Arab troops from the provincial forces of North Africa. The subsequent conquest of the Visigothic kingdom was rapid, and, at first, probably without official sanction. Certainly, it was something of a surprise to the Umayyad

When an Arab-led, largely Berber Islamic army invaded France in 732, the largest contingent crossed the Pyrenean Mountains via the Roncevalles Pass. That invasion failed and within a few decades the Muslim governors of the Iberian peninsula also lost control of these northern mountains. (David Nicolle photograph)



Charles Martel, the 'Mayor of the Palace' of Austrasia or the eastern part of the sprawling Merovingian Frankish kingdom from 719 to 735, was the illegitimate son of Pepin, a previous Mayor of the Palace. He inherited his father's position after a five-year civil war within the Merovingian Frankish state. This also left Charles as the effective if not the official ruler of all the Franks because the Merovingian kings were themselves now little more than titular figureheads and the real power lay with the mayors. Charles probably earned his nickname of Martel, 'the Hammer', as a result of the ruthless way in which he dealt with all his enemies. Charles Martel also subdued the Germanic kingdom of Burgundy, the pagan Frisians of Holland and north-western Germany, but not independent Aquitaine in south-western France. In reality these latter campaigns were more important than his victory over the Muslims near Poitiers, because they laid the foundation of a powerful Frankish empire which would be consolidated and expanded by his sons and by his even more famous grandson, Charlemagne.



A 19th century engraving of a coin minted during the period when Charles Martel was mayor of the Merovingian Frankish palace. (Author collection)

government in Syria who, after suffering naval defeats by the Byzantines, had in fact been considering withdrawing forces from that area. Instead, in the wake of their success, Arabs and Berbers replaced the Germanic Visigoths as the ruling elite, laying the foundations for Islamic influence on the peninsula until the 15th century. Al-Andalus was, nevertheless, never a well-established part of the Umayyad empire, lacking its own provincial governor and substantial forces.

Even the death of Caliph Walid I in 715 had caused little more than a pause in this extraordinary campaign, with Islamic raids even penetrating over the Pyrenees into southern France. Walid was followed in rapid succession by four Umayyad Caliphs: Sulayman (715–17), 'Umar II (717–20), Yazid

II (720–24), and Hisham (724–43). It was in the eighth year of Hisham's rule that this extraordinary western wave of Islamic conquest finally halted, with their defeat at the hands of the Frankish leader Charles Martel at the battle of Poitiers in 732.

The battle of Poitiers

For centuries, the battle of Poitiers has been described as the event that turned the tide of Islamic conquests and saved Western Christian civilisation from wholesale domination by the forces of Islam. In reality, although a hugely significant event, the Arab-Islamic expansion that had begun in the mid-7th century was already drawing to a halt not only in Europe but also in the Caucasus, Central Asia, India and Africa.



Moreover, the clash between Franks and Umayyads was less an ideological clash between Christianity and Islam but resulted more from political rivalry and the desire to dominate a wealthy territory. The battle itself was fought in Aquitaine, not Frankish territory, and it is certainly worth noting that Aquitanian sources often referred to the Franks rather than the Islamic forces as *barbari*, or 'barbarians'. Furthermore, however important the battle became in the eyes of later historians, at the time it was just one event in a period of complex confrontations, during which rulers or governors were as likely to form alliances with those across the religious frontier as they were with those who shared their religion. This was certainly not a period when anyone other than a few church leaders saw events as a major confrontation between Islam and Christianity.

The man opposing Charles Martel at the battle of Poitiers was 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn 'Abd Allah al-Ghafiqi. He commanded the army that invaded France in 732 and was, as his name indicated, from the Ghafiqi clan, one of the earliest tribes to formally settle in the new province of al-Andalus. His campaign was not intended to conquer

While Christian Byzantium survived in the eastern Mediterranean, the Christian Visigothic kingdom in what are now Spain and Portugal fell to Arab-led Berber armies with remarkable speed in the early 8th century. This relief carving illustrates the Biblical story of Daniel in the Lion's Den and, although it is sometimes said to date from a century before the Islamic conquest, the four soldiers in the lower register look remarkably like early Islamic or Umayyad troops. (Museo Arqueológico, Madrid)

France, still less to overrun Christian Europe. It was merely a raid, although a substantial one, and as such was within an established Umayyad strategy of launching small-scale attacks throughout the peripheral fronts of the Arab-Islamic empire.

'Abd al-Rahman al-Ghafiqi started preparing for the raid in 730 and actively recruited volunteers throughout the province. His army assembled in May or early June 732 in Pamplona, before travelling through the mountain passes across the Pyrenees into Aquitaine. Once clear of the mountains, al-Ghafiqi's forces ruthlessly crushed the armies of Prince Eudes of Aquitaine. They then spent the next three months raiding, without facing much opposition, before gathering to head northwards towards Poitiers, the second-biggest city within the principality of Aquitaine.



The Muslim invasion of south-western France in 732 was a major raid rather than an attempt at conquest. This painting depicts the death of its commander, Abd al-Rahman al-Ghafiqi, when Charles Martel's Frankish

army unsuccessfully attacked the Muslim camp. This Frankish-Christian victory would later be interpreted as marking the high-water mark of Arab-Islamic expansion into Europe. (Graham Turner © Osprey Publishing Ltd)



Poitiers' importance rested upon its location at a major road junction and a crossing over a navigable river. It was also a significant religious and economic centre,

the great church of Saint-Hilaire having originally been built in the Late Roman period, and which was vulnerably positioned outside the city walls.

The Islamic forces sacked and looted the church but chose not to attempt to take the strongly defended city itself. Despite the risk of leaving a strong enemy-held city to his rear, al-Ghafiqi continued northwards towards the even richer abbey-church of Saint-Martin outside Tours, another hugely significant Christian centre but one that lay within Merovingian Frankish rather than Aquitanian territory. Unfortunately, history does not record exactly how far north the Islamic army travelled but it certainly did not attack Tours.

It is likely that the Islamic forces established a defensive position in the second week of October, south of the river Vienne. Advance parties of Charles Martel's forces would have clashed with them, but Charles would not make his decisive move until the third week, sometime between 18 and 25 October. Information about the course of the battle is not only very limited but also mostly couched in poetic terms that are difficult to decipher. Certainly at some point the forces of Charles Martel attacked the heavily fortified Islamic encampment and during the fighting al-Ghafiqi was mortally wounded. That night, under the cover of darkness, the Muslim army retreated from the battlefield. Charles Martel's army drew up for battle the next day, only to find the Muslim camp abandoned by its defenders. The Muslim army then staged a masterfully organised retreat back into al-Andalus.

The long-term results of this defeat were mixed. A full-scale invasion north of the Pyrenees had definitely proved unachievable, if it had ever been seriously considered. Meanwhile within al-Andalus a number of revolts were launched by Berber settlers who resented Umayyad rule, as well as amongst some of the Christian populations. If defeat at Poitiers did not cause all of the subsequent civil conflict, it certainly heralded a new period of uncertainty for Caliphal rule.

The fall of the Umayyad dynasty

The Berber revolts which followed the Muslims' defeat near Poitiers did not only occur within the province of al-Andalus; they spread throughout North Africa. There were several reasons for the persistent underlying tension between Arabs and Berbers, not least because the original Muslim conquest had been hard-fought and strenuously resisted. Moreover, whilst there had been substantial and continuing Arab colonisation of Egypt and eastern Libya, there was little Arab migration to North Africa. As such, in North Africa – al-Maghrib, or 'The West', as it was known in the Islamic world – the Arabs were religiously, culturally, politically and militarily dominant, but few in number. Whilst local Berber conversion to Islam was rapid and widespread, this did little to ease the acceptance of Arab rule, particularly when the governors imposed more levies upon the local population than were allowed under Islamic Shari'a law.

There was also the age-old conflict of interests between nomadic and sedentary or urban populations. Most Berber troops of this period were, of course, still nomadic whereas the Arabs, although tribal, were no longer in any real sense nomads. Exacerbating these persistent feelings of discontent on the part of the Berbers was the *Kharaji* religious movement that had first surfaced several decades previously and aimed to implement Sunni fundamentalism throughout the Arab-Islamic empire.

After this series of revolts, effective Arab rule was only re-established throughout North Africa in 743, the year that Hisham, the last truly successful Umayyad Caliph, died. His successors, the last four Umayyad Caliphs Walid II (743–44), Yazid III (744), Ibrahim (744) and Marwan II (744–50), had to concentrate almost all their military energies

upon crushing revolts and preserving the Umayyad state. Only the last, Marwan II, could be described as an effective ruler. He was also an undoubtedly fine military commander, but by the time he came to the throne the situation was probably past repair and the Umayyad dynasty doomed to fall.





OPPOSITE: A partially burned ivory plaque, found in the ruins of the early Islamic settlement at Humaymah in southern Jordan, dates from the mid-8th century AD. It was probably made in eastern Iran. Humaymah was inhabited by members of the 'Abbasid family before their supporters rose in revolt against the ruling Umayyad Caliphs in the eastern Iranian region of Khurasan. (J. P. Oleson photograph)

ABOVE: The wall and ceiling paintings in the early 8th century ceremonial reception hall and *hamam* or bath-complex at Qusayr 'Amra are as remarkable as the stucco carvings found in some other Umayyad princely constructions. The soldiers seen here, one with a long spear and the other with a riveted helmet, are on a wall flanking a very damaged painting of an enthroned member of the Umayyad ruling family. (*in situ* Qusayr 'Amra, Jordan; David Nicolle photograph)

Despite the loyalty and effectiveness of the elite *Ahl al-Sham* Syrian regiments, the last Umayyad Caliphs no longer had enough troops to control the situation. The empire, as in the case of the Roman Empire which preceded it, had simply grown too large to be effectively dominated.

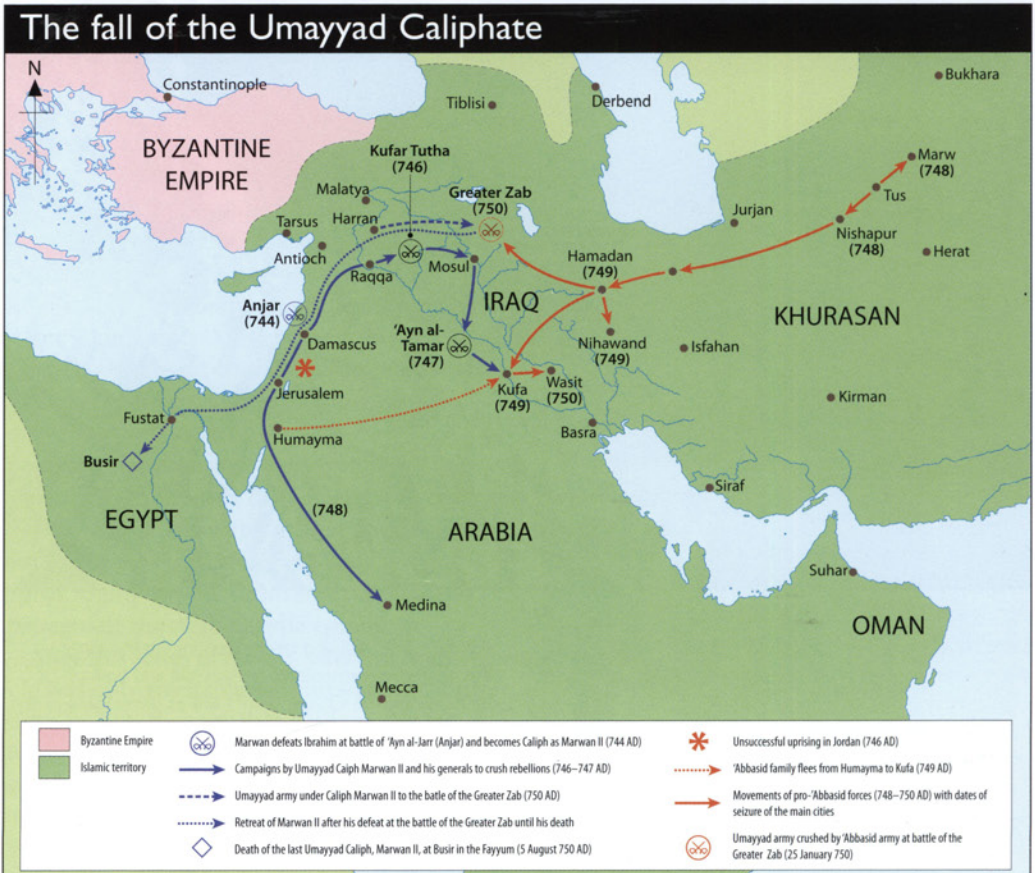
The widespread sources of discontent with Umayyad rule were exploited by a skilful political agitator named Abu Muslim, who operated in the eastern province of Khurasan. This province was a part of the Iranian world that had been heavily colonised by Arab tribes following the Islamic conquest. The descendants of these settlers, some of whom had married locally, were strongly influenced by Iranian culture and military traditions, yet still considered themselves Arabs.

It was here that Abu Muslim, on behalf of the 'Abbasid family, succeeded in creating the revolutionary movement which broke out in

Khurasan in 747, intent on overthrowing the Umayyad dynasty in favour of the 'Abbasids. It proved to be hugely successful, in part because Umayyad forces in the Jazira and Iraq were occupied in dealing with an unrelated series of fundamentalist *Kharaji* rebellions.

Although the Umayyad army succeeded in crushing the *Kharajis* of Iraq and then Arabia in 748, they seemed unable to stop pro-'Abbasid forces taking control of more and more eastern provinces. In August 748 Rayy fell to Qahtaba Ibn Shabib, the commander of 'Abbasid forces in Iran. Nihawand followed in May 749 and, some five months later, Kufa in Iraq. On 28 October the leader of the 'Abbasid clan, 'Abdallah Abu al-'Abbas, was proclaimed Caliph by his supporters and adopted the name of al-Saffah.

This string of victories culminated in a major battle in the valley of the Greater Zab



river in northern Iraq on 25 January 750. Defeated by his rival, the last Umayyad Caliph Marwan II fled westward, perhaps attempting to reach North Africa or al-Andalus where there were still significant Umayyad armies. His capital, Damascus, fell to 'Abbasid forces in June, and early in August Marwan was caught and killed in Egypt, and a number of his key supporters were assassinated. Subsequently the 'Abbasids established their capital in Iraq rather than Syria, largely because this was closer to the 'Abbasid military power base in Khurasan.

This series of events also indicated a seismic shift in the Islamic world as the differences between Shi'a and Sunni boiled over into a struggle for the control of an imperial state which had been created by a century of military expansion. One significant advantage which the 'Abbasid family enjoyed over their Umayyad rivals was that they were descended from the Prophet Muhammad's uncle al-'Abbas, who was himself from the Hashimite clan. This close blood-relationship with the Prophet gave them greater legitimacy in the eyes of orthodox Sunni Muslims. On the other hand, it did not stand them in good stead with the supporters of 'Ali's descendants who also had a strong claim to the role of Caliph. The empire thus split between rival factions, while a survivor of the Umayyad dynasty, 'Abd al-Rahman, re-established Umayyad control of the Iberian peninsula.

The new 'Abbasid dynasty of Caliphs presided over a profound change in attitudes and ambitions. Whereas most of the Umayyad Caliphs had intended their dynasty to become Islamic successors to the Romano-Byzantine Empire, the 'Abbasids either saw themselves as heirs to the ancient Sassanian line of *Shahinshah* 'Kings-of-Kings',



Under the Umayyad Caliphs (661–750) human representation and even sculpture was common in a secular, though not a religious context. This originally painted stucco figure comes from the palace complex built by the Caliphs Hisham and al-Walid II at Khirbat al-Mafjir, near Jericho in the early 740s. It may well represent the Caliph himself. (Rockefeller Archaeological Museum, Jerusalem; David Nicolle photograph)

or as a totally new and dominant world power which had no need to step into the shoes of any predecessor. Following the Great Islamic Conquests would, in fact, be a wholly new period in Middle Eastern and indeed world history.

Architecture and religion

Mosques

One of the key architectural features of the new Arab-Islamic empire was, of course, the mosque. Significantly, a mosque is not normally considered a sacred building in the same way as a Christian church. A mosque is simply a place set aside for prayer, kept scrupulously clean and treated with respect. As such, the first mosque was in fact part of Muhammad's own house in Medina, although it was subsequently rebuilt and extended many times as it eventually housed the Prophet's tomb and needed to accommodate an ever-increasing number of pilgrims.

The prophet's house itself had been a typical early Arabian domestic structure consisting of an enclosed courtyard with covered rooms and storage chambers on two or more sides. This form remained characteristic of other early mosques, including the huge but now ruined example at Kufa in Iraq, which dates from 637.

The entire structure of a mosque was orientated so that one wall, the *qibla*, faced Mecca. Concern to achieve the correct orientation of the *qibla* would lead to medieval Islamic civilisation taking a considerable interest in geography, astronomy and mathematics, but even so, the alignment of a handful of the most ancient mosques or their ruins is slightly incorrect. Other features also began to make an appearance. The first was the *mihrab* on the *qibla* wall, showing worshippers the correct direction of prayer. The second was the *minaret* (tower) from which the *muezzin* (he who makes the call to prayer) cries out. A third feature is the *minbar* which serves the same purpose as a pulpit in a Christian church, enabling a preacher or speaker to project his voice and be seen by the congregation.

Throughout Islamic history, pre-Islamic religious buildings have been modified so that they could serve as mosques, this being one of the factors which influenced the development of different architectural styles.

The Great Mosque in Damascus had originally been a pagan temple but then had a small church erected within its huge courtyard. During the Islamic conquest of Syria, the Muslims' seizure of Damascus is said to have involved one Arab force entering the city after peaceful negotiations while another Arab force broke into the far side, swords in hand. Legendary or otherwise, this story was used to explain the fact that instead of either taking the entire temple-church as their new mosque, or leaving it in the hands of the Christians as was normal when a city surrendered peacefully, the huge temple complex of Damascus was shared between Muslims and Christians for several decades. During these years both communities entered by the south door, and, while the Christians turned left towards their church, the handful of resident Muslims turned right. This is supposedly why a *mihrab* in the eastern section of the *qibla* wall is called the '*Mihrab* of the Companions of the Prophet' – in honour of those who knew Muhammad personally and then went on to serve in the army which conquered Syria.

The Dome of the Rock

Further south in Jerusalem the creation of the Dome of the Rock would be the first great artistic achievement in Islamic civilisation. It stands as the visual centre of the ancient man-made platform known as the Temple Mount to Jews and the *Haram al-Sharif* ('Noble Sanctuary') to Muslims. The platform was originally the site of the Jewish Second Temple, which had been



The first mosque at Qairawan soon became too small for the expanding Muslim population of what is now Tunisia. It was first enlarged by the Umayyad governor Bishr Ibn Safwan. A further enlargement in the

mid-9th century led to the old *mihrab* prayer niche being enclosed in carved marble panels. These had several small holes through which the Umayyad *mihrab* could still be seen. (David Nicolle photograph)

destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

Built in 690–92 during the reign of 'Abd al-Malik, the purpose of the Dome of the Rock remains unclear, although it may have been intended as a statement of Islamic superiority over Christianity and Judaism. However, the Muslims' position in Jerusalem and the wider Middle East was not yet assured and the building may instead have been culturally defensive rather than triumphalist.

Alternatively, the building could have been built to celebrate the defeat of the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires, as indicated by the design and content of the surviving Umayyad mosaics. These include imperial Byzantine and Sassanian symbols of rank and power, perhaps displayed as 'trophy' for a victorious Islam.

Perhaps the building, complete with its inscriptions from the Qur'an, was intended to serve not only as a place of worship but also as focal point for the small, albeit militarily and politically dominant, Muslim community and to stiffen their resolve while they were still surrounded by splendid Christian

churches. The form of the famous rotunda itself was foreign to Islam and may have been intended to rival the Christian Byzantine domes which already dominated the skyline of Jerusalem. With its exquisite dome gilding – reportedly made with 100,000 dinar coins melted down – it was instantly eye-catching, if not also awe-inspiring.

Cities

Architectural innovations were not limited to sites of religious significance. Certainly in Damascus, which became the centre of the Umayyad court, history records how an essentially Roman city quickly adapted Arabic, or Semitic, features. Damascus, before the conquest, had been laid out on a typical Roman rectangular grid with a main colonnaded street, referred to in Christian writing as the 'Street called Straight', which ran directly through the city from the eastern-to-western main gates. Near the centre were two triumphal arches which the Romans had erected to demonstrate their authority. Other typical Roman structures included a theatre, an *agora* or public open square, as well as various imposing administrative buildings. This, then, was the city seized by the Arabs in September 635. Thereafter, the mercantile

This ruin of an originally domed pre-Islamic Sassanian *chechar taq* or fire-temple at Natanz is one of the best preserved pre-Islamic Zoroastrian religious buildings in Iran. Zoroastrians remained a majority in much of what is now Iran for many decades after the fall of the Sassanian Empire, and survive as a minority to this day. (David Nicolle photograph)



character of Semitic culture moulded itself around the authoritarian relics of imperial Rome, as the *suq* markets quickly came to dominate the city centre.

However, with the establishment of Baghdad as the new capital of the 'Abbasid Caliphate, we see for the first time an entire city constructed on Islamic principles and ideals. Building began on the site of a small existing Christian village in 762, as the desire for further conquests slowed. In Islamic

Baghdad we have a capital built to reflect an empire which had matured, the metropolis being dominated by the famous 'Round City' which was itself a vast fortified palatial

The small carved marble *Mihrab* Sulayman or indication of the direction of Islamic prayer in the Well of Souls, a cave beneath the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. It is one of the oldest *mihabs* still in use and is flat rather than consisting of an arched niche. It is even more unusual in having a carved fragment of perhaps meteoric rock set into its centre. (David Nicolle photograph)





Although the beautiful Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem has been restored several times, its mosaics mostly date from the original construction by the Caliph al-'Abd al-Malik in 690 to 692. The decorative motifs seen here come from Sassanian Iranian rather than Byzantine Graeco-Roman art. (David Nicolle photograph)

enclosure complete with barracks and government complexes. However, the fact that the city was built in a circular design, 1¼ miles (2 km) across, shows that it was a development of an Iranian rather than a Roman urban style. Seemingly, early Islamic architects were adept at adopting the best from conquered territories to create a new Islamic world.

Co-existence

One of the most remarkable features of this new Islamic era in the Middle East was the relationship between Islam and other religions, and thus between the Caliphate and neighbouring rulers. In Islamic doctrine, religions considered valid and therefore tolerated are those which, like Islam itself, are the product of divine revelation. Their adherents are known as 'People of the Book', a name which reflects

the importance of a sacred text in Islamic religious thinking. Chief amongst the 'People of the Book' are Jews and Christians, while followers of religions which do not possess a divinely revealed text were generally regarded as heathens. Following the Islamic conquest of the territories where they resided, Jews and Christians were allowed to worship in public, to maintain their own religious buildings and to have their own religious organisations – a privilege rarely extended to 'heathens'. In return for being excused from military service – which was expected of all Muslims – they also had to pay an additional tax, the *jizya*, as their contribution towards the defence of the state. In return, such communities became *ahl al-dhimma* or 'protected people' who were offered unconditional legal and military protection by the Islamic authorities. For any Islamic government to violate the protected status of such *dhimmis* was a serious crime. As the Prophet Muhammad was recorded as saying: 'He who wrongs a Jew or Christian will have myself as his accuser on the Day of Judgement.'

Indeed, several Christian sects which had been persecuted as unorthodox or heretical within the Romano-Byzantine Empire now



supported Islamic rule because they now found themselves on an equal footing with the previously dominant Orthodox Church. In fact, such sects were often treated more favourably than Orthodox Christians, who might have been sympathetic to the Byzantine Empire with which the Caliphate was so often at war. As such, many non-Orthodox Christians played an active part in Islamic campaigns, often in a supporting role but occasionally also as fighting men.

However, there was another strand of Islamic teachings based upon another reported saying of the Prophet: 'Two religions may not dwell together in Arabia.' While conversion

The tombs of Esther and Mordechai in their Mausoleum at Hamadan, Iran. There were flourishing Jewish communities across much of the pre-Islamic Sassanian Empire, especially in Iraq and western Iran, which would become the heartlands of the 'Abbasid Caliphate from the mid-8th century onwards. (David Nicolle photograph)

was merely encouraged elsewhere, in central Arabia – now Saudi Arabia – non-Islamic communities completely disappeared. However, they survived around the edges of the Islamic conquests and in Yemen; where the survival and indeed flourishing of a substantial Jewish community was perhaps an indication that this region was regarded as being separate from Arabia proper.

A man of letters and a man of God

A Muslim civilian: 'Abd al-Hamid Ibn Yahya

'Abd al-Hamid Ibn Yahya Ibn Sa'd was a 'client' or *mawla* of perhaps the most prestigious Arab tribe of the early Islamic period, the Quraysh, from which the Prophet Muhammad himself had sprung. More specifically, 'Abd al-Hamid Ibn Yahya was one of the *mawali* of the Amir Ibn Lu'ayy clan. Because such a connection was so important in early Islamic society, 'Abd al-Hamid's own family origins are virtually unknown. He does, however, seem to have come from al-Anbar, next to the river Euphrates in what is now western Iraq and is said to have been a teacher who moved from town to town in search of patronage and employment.

He first came to prominence when, as a literate and clearly highly intelligent man, he found a job in the secretariat or government bureaucracy of the Umayyad Caliph Hisham, probably in the 730s. There he worked under another *mawla*, the senior secretary Salim. Subsequently 'Abd al-Hamid worked for the Umayyad prince Marwan Ibn Muhammad. This would eventually ensure his fame but also seal his fate, as Marwan II become the last Caliph of the Umayyad dynasty in 744. Following Marwan Ibn Muhammad's defeat at the hands of 'Abassid forces, 'Abd al-Hamid refused to desert his master and, according to one version of his life, died beside the Caliph when he was finally caught and killed in Egypt on 5 August 750. Another source claimed, however, that 'Abd al-Hamid Ibn Yahya briefly found refuge in the home of one of his own students named Ibn al-Muqaffa, but was eventually tracked down and killed. What is clear is that his descendants – the Banu Muhajir – continued to live in Egypt for several centuries, maintaining the family

tradition of loyal service and providing skilled secretaries to Ahmad Ibn Tulun, the autonomous ruler of Egypt and much of Syria in the second half of the 9th century.

'Abd al-Hamid Ibn Yahya himself was best remembered as the supposed founder of a style of Arabic literature based upon the format of *rasa'il* (singular, *risala*) – epistles or letters. Six of his own letters survive and were for centuries used as models for this form of written Arabic. Several other fragments of his writing also survive and show that he was actually capable of a great variety of literary styles. Nevertheless his most famous *risala* was addressed to his patron's son and designated heir, Prince 'Abd Allah.

It contains sections offering advice on correct conduct, the organisation of proper ceremonies and, of particular interest, the conduct of warfare. This latter section deals with the organisation of armies, strategy, tactics, the maintenance of morale, discipline and loyalty. As such it is generally seen as the forerunner of a whole school of Arabic and other Muslim treatises on the art of warfare – what would, in fact, become the highly influential *furusiyya* form of military literature.

It is also interesting to note that 'Abd al-Hamid Ibn Yahya's student, Ibn al-Muqaffa, himself became a renowned exponent of Arabic literary style. They both also drew upon pre-Islamic Sassanian texts and together illustrated the way in which Sassanian forms of government and bureaucracy were already having a profound impact upon the government and administration of the Caliphate. For reasons which nevertheless remain unclear, the greater part of 'Abd al-Hamid's military advice to Prince 'Abd Allah was, however, drawn from Graeco-Roman rather than Sassanian traditions.

A Christian civilian: John of Damascus

The tolerant and open character of society under early Islamic rule, especially in the Umayyad Caliphate's heartland of Greater Syria, is nowhere better illustrated than in the life of one of the most important Christian figures of this period. John of Damascus, who would be raised to the status of Saint by Pope Leo XIII in 1890, was born around 675. Belonging to one of the most distinguished Orthodox Christian families in Damascus, he grew up in a wealthy and flourishing city where the majority of the population was Christian – though divided between several often mutually hostile Churches – living alongside a substantial Jewish community and all ruled by a still relatively small Muslim political and military elite. John's own father, named Sergius, was said to have been the 'chief official' of his Orthodox community – society then being divided into separate religious communities for administrative and governmental purposes – and was responsible for

the correct collection of taxes from his community. John apparently succeeded to his father's office but, emulating the Apostle Matthew, eventually renounced this role in order to dedicate his life to Christ.

It is not known when he made this decision, nor whether it was linked to any political or social events in Damascus. He is known to have entered the monastery of St Sabas near Jerusalem and to have been eventually ordained as a priest. As an educated man from a high-status background, John of Damascus was drawn into the Iconoclast controversy which was then in danger of tearing the Orthodox – and by extension eventually also the Catholic – Church apart. This, in essence, concerned the 'veneration of religious

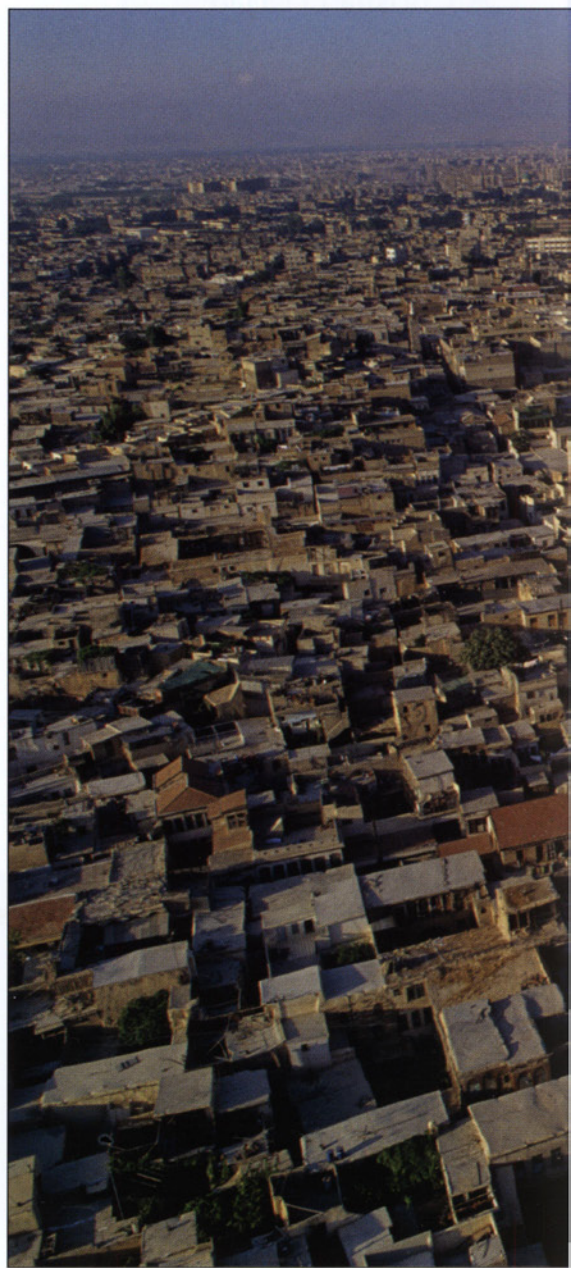
The interior of the now partially subterranean Chaldaean Church of Shimun al-Safar in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Built before the Arab-Islamic conquest of Mosul, its basic architectural form is Sassanian Mesopotamian. This remarkable little church also contains the tomb of several early Christian martyrs killed by a local Jewish community which was notably powerful under pre-Islamic Sassanian rule. (David Nicolle photograph)



images' and strongly reflected the struggle between the Orthodox Christian Byzantine Empire and the Islamic Caliphate. Muslims were almost by definition iconoclasts, abhorring anything which smacked of the worship of idols. The early Byzantine Empire had made great use of images, or icons, as a focus of Christian worship and to motivate soldiers before battle. But the Byzantines had then suffered massive defeats and losses of territory to the iconoclastic or 'icon-hating' Muslims – so perhaps Iconoclasm was doctrinally correct. So went the thinking of the then-dominant Christian Iconoclast thinkers in the Byzantine Empire.

John of Damascus, however, disagreed. Furthermore, his position in a monastery under Islamic Umayyad rule meant that he could speak and write in safety, free from the threat of persecution by his Iconoclast opponents living under Byzantine rule. It would take several decades for John of Damascus and others who argued in favour of icons to win, and John himself was condemned by the Christian Council of Constantinople in 754, though by then he had been dead for some years. His ideas nevertheless won the day at the subsequent Council of Nicea in 787, when the veneration of icons was re-established, to remain a central feature of Orthodox Christianity to this day.

During his lifetime John of Damascus came to be recognised as a great scholar and he wrote on several religious subjects in addition to Iconoclasm, including the role of traditional philosophy in Christian theology. This resulted in his best-known work, *The Fountain of Knowledge*, which was written at the request of the Bishop of Maiuma, the port of Gaza in Palestine. The second part of this work focused on 'heresies' – which, for John of Damascus, included Islam itself, referring to it as 'The Heresy of the Ishmaelites' – as well as Iconoclasm. However, unlike in his polemics against other so-called heresies, John of Damascus presented his discussion of Islam in the form of a dialogue or



conversation between Christians and Muslims. Perhaps this reflected his own early life in Damascus, or it may have been a literary device to make the theological confrontation look more equal and well-mannered.

The fact that a leading Christian monk could write such a book for a leading Christian bishop, both of whom lived close



to the political centre of the Umayyad Caliphate, says volumes about Islamic toleration during this period. John probably died in 749, just as the Umayyad Caliphate which had provided him with a secure refuge was itself tottering to its demise. But by then he was widely recognised as what came to be known as a 'Greek father and doctor of the Church'.

When Damascus, the greatest city in the Byzantine province of Syria, surrendered to the Muslim Arabs in 635, the ancient Graeco-Roman temple complex already contained a Christian church. Rather than take over the entire place as a mosque, the conquerors initially shared it with the Christians. Worshippers from both faiths entered by the now blocked southern door; with the Muslims then turning right and the Christians turning left. The complex is now the Umayyad Mosque, or the Great Mosque of Damascus, but the building still contains the elaborate shrine of John the Baptist. (© Frédéric Soltan/Sygma/Corbis)

Conclusion

Though the great wave of Islamic expansion had ended, at least for some centuries, conflict continued to characterise many frontier areas. There were rarely any formal peace agreements. Instead localised live-and-let-live arrangements emerged. Years without violence or at least without major invasions, raids or counter-raids became more common than years which saw major military operations.

The establishment of the 'Abbasid Caliphate in 750 would be followed by a gradual fragmentation of the Islamic world. As a result, the confrontation between Islam and Christendom became a struggle between many armies deploying a variety of different kinds of military forces, while the naval front in the Mediterranean would have a major influence upon cultural and political developments in southern Europe, most notably in Italy. In most regions Arabs declined in military importance, being increasingly supplemented and in many areas eventually superseded by newly converted Iranians, Turks, Berbers and others. Many peoples were also drawn into the struggle on the Christian side, ranging from Nubians and Ethiopians to Italians, Armenians and Georgians. In some places the religious

frontier remained very blurred. For example, a half-Armenian half-Arab dynasty arose in what is now eastern Turkey, claimed as an ally by neither side and often an enemy to all. Minor religions or heresies found refuge in this area, which would also be where a massive Islamic military breakthrough – in the form of a Seljuk Turkish invasion of Byzantine Anatolia in the second half of the 11th century – prompted the First Crusade.

Much further east, the Muslim Arabs had been the first conquerors of Central Asia to come from the west since Alexander the Great. Here in Central Asia some Turkish peoples had already adopted Buddhism or Nestorian Christianity. Others gradually converted to Islam, while those further afield generally remained shamanist-pagan. One powerful group, the Khazars, adopted Judaism and blocked the northerly advance of Islam for decades.

Far to the west in Morocco and parts of what is now Algeria most, though not all, of the Jewish Berber tribes gradually converted to Islam, though the heretical Judeo-Muslim Barghawata of the Atlantic coast remained a powerful and separate force into the 10th century.



The best preserved piece of art in the mid-8th century Umayyad palace near Jericho on the Palestinian side of the Jordan Valley is a superb floor mosaic showing lions hunting gazelles. It formed part of a highly decorated throne chamber whose walls were originally covered in sumptuous stucco decoration. (David Nicolle photograph)



From the late 9th century onwards the Islamic world, like medieval Christendom, was increasingly wracked by internal conflicts as the central authority of the Caliphate crumbled. Most regional successor dynasties had military origins, while most of these new rulers continued to model their smaller armies on those of the 'Abbasid Caliphate in its age of greatness.

Despite the fluid political and military situation, frontiers became relatively fixed and would remain so until the 10th century, when the Byzantine Empire launched a series of major offensives in the Middle East. The following century the Seljuk Turks, having themselves converted to Islam, seized control of most of the eastern and central Islamic provinces. They then dealt the revived Byzantine Empire an almost mortal blow in Anatolia which in turn prompted the western European Crusades. It could, in fact, be argued that it was these later events which caused the deep rift between Islam and Christendom which continues to echo today – not the initial Arab-Islamic conquests of several centuries earlier.

Viewed from the 21st century, the great Arab-Islamic conquests were without doubt one of the most significant events in world

The entrance of the strongly fortified eastern enclosure of Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi in the Syrian desert. It is the best preserved of the Umayyad 'desert palaces' and is thought to have been the redevelopment project originally named Zaytuna, which was started by the Caliph Hisham during the first half of the 8th century. (David Nicolle photograph)

history. They clearly resulted in the creation of a new civilisation, namely the Arabised Middle East. While some historians have maintained that the creation of the 'Islamic world' deepened divisions and resulted in a 'world of divided religions', others have argued the reverse. Indeed, they have noted that the revival of the Semitic and Iranian Middle East created a new cultural and economic powerhouse which thereafter served as a bridge between 'the East', meaning here the Far East of China, Japan, south-east Asia and the Indian subcontinent, and 'the West' which at that time meant Europe and the broader Mediterranean world.

I believe the latter, more positive interpretations of the emergence of Islamic civilisation, to be correct. Furthermore, I would argue that Islam's role as a bridge between East and West is as valid and important today as it was in the 7th century.

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Index

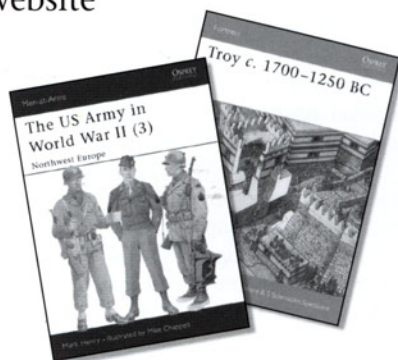
- 'Abd al-Hamid Ibn Yahya 86
'Abd al-Malik, Caliph 68–71
 coin **10**
Abd al-Muttalib 19
Abd al-Rahman al-Ghafiqi
 46, 73–75, **74–75**, 79
Abd al-Rahman Ibn al-Ashath 69
Abu Bakr 23–25, 49, 61
Abu Muslim 78
Abu Talib 19, 20, 22
Afghanistan 66, **67**, 69
A'isha 23
Ajnadayn, battle of (634) 49, 50
al-'Abbas 79
al-Mas'udi 29
Al-Rabadhah: artefacts from **23**
al-Saffah, Caliph **34**, 78
al-Walid I, Caliph 65, 71, 72
al-Walid II, Caliph 76
Alans 44
Alexandria 56, 57
Alexandria, battle of (652) 56
'Ali, Caliph 62
Alto do Perdon area **46**
Amnis Trajanus canal 56
'Amr Ibn al-Aasi 54, 55, 56, 62
Anatolia 52, 90, 91
Ansariyah Mountains **51**
Arabia
 maps **15**, **21**, **24**
 northern 16–18
 pre-Islamic religion 19
 religious tolerance 85
 societies and tribes 14–18
 southern 18
 unification 18, 23–25, **24**
archery 28–30, **28**, **44**
 arrow-guides 29–30
 arrows and arrowheads
 14, **29**
 bows 29
 finger-draws **30**
architecture 80–84
Armenia and Armenians
 36, **36**, 39
armour
 Arab **58**
 Berber 43
 Byzantine **37**
 gauntlets **38**
 Islamic **14**, **16**, 26
 Persian **66**
art: representation of figures **79**
Avars **29**
Axum and Axumites 41
Babylon, battle of (634) 49
Babylon (Egypt), siege of
 (640–41) 56
Baghdad 83–84
Bahira 19, 20
Barghawata 90
Barn **59**
Bawaib, battle of (635) 49
bedouin 18, 27
Berbers
 conversion to Islam 90
 in Egypt 55
 Islamic defeat of 69
 overview of forces 43–44
 revolts 75, 76
 in Spain 64, 71–72, 75
Blemye 41
Bobastro **45**
Bosra 19–20, **19**
Bridge, Battle of the (634) 49
Bukhara 68
Buzakha, battle of (632) 25
Byzantine Empire
 influence in Arabia 13
 military frontier provinces
 facing 31
 and Seljuk Turks 91
Byzantine forces **33**
 archers 29
 battles against Arabs 48–49,
 49–57, 64, 68, 71
 comitatus 37
 in Egypt 55
 foederati 33, 37
 limitanei 33, 34
 naval 56
 Opsikion 37–38, 52
 Optimates 31
 overview 31–38
 phylarch system 34–36
 stradioti 37
 themes 38
Caesarea Maritima 54
Cairo **55**, 56
Caliphate: origins and functions
 23
Caliphs
 list 9
 'Rightly Guided' 23
camels 41, 43, **43**
Cappadocia 52
cavalry
 Frankish 47
 Islamic **16**
 Khazar 44
 Khwarazm 45–46
 light **32**
 Optimates 31
 Sassanian 38, 39, **39**, 40, 59
 Turkish 44, 45–46
Charles Martel 47, 65, 72, 75
China 45, 68
Christianity
 co-existence with Islam
 8, 84–85, 87–89
 Iconoclast controversy 87–88
 later confrontation with Islam
 90, 91
 Monophysite 32–33
cities 82–84
clothing **14**
 cloak pins **35**
 shoulder belts **58**
coins **10**, **35**, **72**
Companions 23
Constantinople, siege of (670–77)
 68
curb-bits **26**
Cyprus 56, 66
Damascus **50**
 Christian community 87
 Great Mosque 80, **88–89**
 Islamic conquest 49, 50, 51
 layout and architecture
 82–83
 as Umayyad capital 66, 68
Damietta **54**
Daniel **73**
David Plates **33**
David Saharouni, Prince **36**

- droughts 56
Dumat al-Jandal 63
- earrings **35**
Egypt **54**, 55–56, **55**, 57, 62
elephants 41, **67**
Esther: tomb **85**
Ethiopia and Ethiopians 41, **53**
ewers **9**
- fire-temples **82**
France 65, **71**, 72–75, **74–75**
Franks 47, 72–75, **74–75**
 coins **72**
- Germanic forces 46–47
Ghassanids 33, 35
Goths **37**
Greater Zab river, battle of the
 (750) 78–79
Guadelete, battle of (711) 65, 71
- Hafsa 61
Hajj **7**, 22
Hamadan **85**
headgear
 quilted hats **58**
 helmets **13**, **14**, **33**, **37**, 43
Heliopolis, battle of (640) 56
Heraclius, Emperor 37, 49, 50, 51
Hims **63**, 64
Hisham, Caliph 43, 72, 76
Humaymah **76**
Huns 41
- Ibn al-Muqaffa 86
Ibn Khaldun 64
Ibn Zaid Ibn Harithah, Usama 22
Ibrahim, Caliph 76
Iran 58, 69, 78, **85**
Iraq
 as 'Abbasid centre of power
 79, 83–84
 Baghdad 83–84
 Islamic conquest of 48–49,
 55, 58–60
 Mosul **87**
 rebellion in 69, 78
- Islam
 beliefs 8
 conversion to 7–8
 Five Pillars 22
 Kharaji movement and
 rebellions 76, 78
 later confrontation with
 Christianity 90, 91
 mosques' function and design
 80
 Muhammad's teachings 22
 Qur'an 22, 60–61, **60**
 religious tolerance 8, 84–85,
 87–89
 spread of 90
 Sunni and Shi'a 55, 62, 79
- Islamic empire
 civil wars and revolts 62, 68,
 69, **70**, 76–79, **78**
 maps of expansion **42**, **70**
- Islamic forces **14**, **32**, **73**, **77**
Ahl al-Sham 30, 31, 66–68, 78
junds 30–31
 naval 56–58
 non-Arab soldiers 30
 officers 31
 organisation 30–31
 overview 26–31
 'Umar's reforms 49
 weapons 26–30
- Isola Rissa Dish **37**
- Jericho: Umayyad palace near
58, **90**
- Jerusalem
 Church of the Holy Sepulchre
 11
 Dome of the Rock **11**, 68,
 80–82, **84**
 Mosque of 'Umar **52**, 54
 Well of Souls **83**
Jerusalem, siege of (638) 54
Jews 39, 44, 64, 84, 85, 90
John of Damascus, St 87–89
Joseph **27**
Justinian, Emperor 31–32, 35, 55
- Khadija 22, 49
Khalid Ibn al-Walid 25, 49,
 63–64
 tomb **63**
Kharaji movement and rebellions
 76, 78
Khazars 44, 56
Khirbat al-Mafjir **79**
Khurasan 78
Khusrau I, *Shahinshah* 39–40
Khwarazm 45–46
Kufa **34**, 61, 69, 78, 80
- Lakhmids 16–18, 34–35, 39, 58
languages 18
learning 8
Libya 68
- literature 86
Lombards **37**
- Marib Dam 18
Marj al-Suffar, second battle of
 (635) 50
Marj Rahit, skirmish at (634) 49
Marwan II, Caliph 9, 76–78,
 79, 86
Masts, Battle of the (655) 57
Mecca **7**, **17**, 22
Mecca, siege of (683) 68
Medina 22, 56, 61, 62, 68, 80
Mesopotamia 39, 49
mihirabs 80, **83**
Mordechai: tomb **85**
mosaics **90**
mosques: function and design 80
Mosul **87**
Mount Hira **20**, 22
Mrèn Cathedral **36**
Mu'awiya, Caliph 30–31, 57, 62,
 66–68
Mud, Battle of the (635) 50
Muhallib Ibn Abi Sufra 69
Muhammad, the Prophet 19–23,
 49, 63, 80, 84, 85
Musa Ibn Nusayr 64, 65
Musallama (Maslama Abu
 Thumama) 25
Muta, battle of (629) 22
 mosque marking site **20**
- Nakhla 63
Natanz **82**
naval operations 56–58
Nihawand, battle of (642) 58
North Africa: Islamic forces in
 68, 69, 76
North African forces 41–44,
 55–56
Nubia and Nubians 41
- Omanis 57
- Palestine 52, 54
 see also Jerusalem
Parthian Empire 13, 14
Penjikent wall-paintings **66**, **69**
Philistines **33**
pilgrimage **7**, 19, 22
Poitiers, battle of (732) 72–75,
 74–75
polygamy 49
pruning hooks **35**
Pyrenees 71, **71**

- Qadisiyah, battle of (637) 41, 59
 Qahtaba Ibn Shabib 78
 Qairawan 68, **81**
 Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi **28, 44**
 Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi **91**
 Qur'an 22, 60–61, **60**
 Quraysh tribe 19, 86
 Qusayr 'Amra **30, 32, 77**
- religion
 co-existence 8, 84–85, 87–89
 pre-Islamic Arabia 19
 see also Christianity; Islam;
 Zoroastrianism
- Rhodes 68
 Ridda Wars (632–33) 23–25, **24**
 riding
 equipment **26, 44**
 styles **27, 37, 44, 53**
 see also cavalry
- risala* 86
 Roderic, Visigothic King
 64, 65, 71
 Roman Empire 13, 14
- Saad Ibn Abi Waqqas 58
 Sahara desert 41, **43**
 Sassanian Empire
 coins **10**
 extent 38
 influence in Arabia 14, 16–18
 relations with Arabs 39
 structure of society 38
 Sassanian forces **39, 53**
 battles against Arabs
 49, 58–60, 66
- marzban* 40, 58
 naval 57
 organisation 40–41, 58
 overview 38–41
 tactics 41, 59
- shields **16, 37**
 ships and shipbuilding
 57–58
 Siffia, battle of (657) 62
 Spain **45**, 46–47, **46**, 64–65,
 71–72, 75
 spices 18
 stirrups **44, 53**
 Sulayman, Caliph 65, 72
 Syria
 historical extent 13
 Islamic conquest of 49–51,
 52, 54, 55, 64, 71
 as Umayyad centre of power
 66–68
 see also Damascus
- Tabarka, battle of (702) 69
 tactics
 Germanic 47
 North African 41, 43
 Sassanian 41, 59
 Tarif Ibn Malluk 64, 65
 Tariq Ibn Ziyad 64–65, 71
thughur 31
 trade 16, 18, 19–20, 43
 Transoxania and Transoxanians
 45, 68
 Tripoli 54
 Tulaiha Ibn Khuwailid 25
 Tunisia 68, **81**
- Turkey 90
 Turkish forces 44–46, **44**, 56, 91
- Ubaidullah Ibn Zayyad 68
 'Umar I, Caliph 49, 52, 54, 58,
 60, 61, 63
 'Umar II, Caliph 72
 Uqba Ibn Nafi 68
 'Uthman, Caliph 60–62
- Vahan 49
 Visigoths 46–47, 64–65, 71–72
- Wamba, Visigothic King 47
 weapons
 Berbers 43
 daggers **23, 35**
 Greek fire 58
 Islamic forces **14**, 26–30
 knives **35**
 long-swords **40**
 short swords **35**
 swords **23**, 26
 see also archery
- Yamama, battle of (632/33) 25
 Yarmuk, battle of (636) 49–51, 64
 site **48**
 Yazid I, Caliph 30, 31, 68
 Yazid II, Caliph 72
 Yazid III, Caliph 76
 Yemeni tribes 16, 57
 Yazdegird III, *Shahinshah*
 58, 59, 60
- Zoroastrianism 8, **82**

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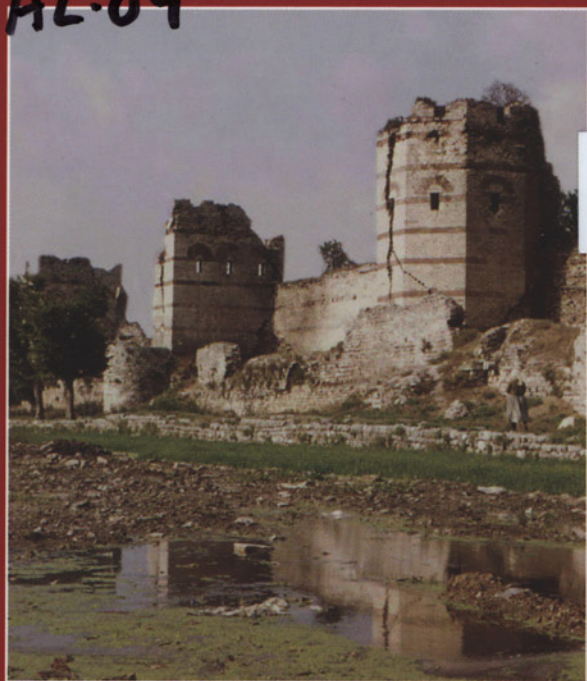
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Above: The first empire to clash with the Islamic forces, the Byzantine Empire's capital at Constantinople was besieged several times during the Islamic forces' early campaigns, but survived behind its massive fortifications. The city was only conquered in 1453. (Author's photograph)

Front cover image: Completed in AD 691, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is one of the earliest and greatest examples of Islamic architecture. 100,000 dinar coins were reportedly melted down to gild its magnificent dome. © Jon Hicks/Corbis

Few military campaigns in history have been as dramatic, as successful, or as far-reaching as the early Islamic conquests. Emerging from a [redacted] [redacted] between two [redacted] the new religion [redacted] and humbled another. Within a century, the Islamic realm had borders with France in the west and with India and China in the east, and this new civilization was on the cusp of a great 'Golden Age' of cultural and scientific blossoming. Yet although Islam's early conquests rank with those of Alexander the Great and the Roman Caesars, its achievements have arguably outlasted both, with large parts of the world still retaining the language, influences and religion that the conquests brought.

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