

Arab Civilization

The Arabs were originally the people of the Arabian desert. Converted to Islam in the 7th century A.D., they conquered the Middle East from the Sassanian and Byzantine empires and established a succession of Arab-Islamic Middle Eastern empires from Spain to Central Asia and from the Caucasus to India. More profoundly, Islam, as well as its laws and doctrines, became the universally accepted religion and culture of the Persians, Turks, and many other peoples. What is referred to as Arab Civilization is a combination of certain classical Arab values [see Arab], Islamic culture and institutions, the inherited knowledge of the great civilizations of the Old World, and the unity provided by the Arabic language. The Arabs preserved and built upon existing knowledge in the realms of government, literature, philosophy, history, art and architecture, music, physical and mathematical sciences, biology, medicine, engineering, navigation, and commercial law. Although Arab control over Islamic empires proved ephemeral, Islam continued to flourish as a religion and civilization of the Middle East. Currently, one fifth of the world's population is Muslim, and Islam has become the second largest religion in both Europe and North America.

Pre-Islamic Arabia

Arabia was the cradle of Islam and of Arab civilization. In the 6th century A.D., it was a region with some sedentary agricultural and commercial life in the south (Yemen) and on the borders of Syria and Iraq, but the harsh interior was the domain of camel-raising nomads (bedouins). The bedouins were polytheists whose gods did not take the shape of humans or animals, but rather were amorphous spirits usually associated with specific geographic features, particularly those that gave comfort or shelter such as caves or watering holes. Their gods also dwelled in the skies. Additionally, they believed in *jinns* or spirits which could be good or bad and which came to the world in the form of animals. The socio-political unit of organization was the tribe [see Arab]. Among the various tribes of the peninsula, there were numerous disputes over water and pasturage. Culturally, the Arabs relied on poetry as a form of news, entertainment, and history.

The Arabian peninsula was surrounded by two more advanced civilizations, the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires, which were frequently at war with one another. While the peninsula was somewhat insulated from the superpower disputes, they were aware of military techniques, weapons, material goods, and notions of monotheism emanating from spreading settlements, itinerant preachers, and contacts with converted border peoples.

By the 7th century A.D., the most advanced Arab communities were at the oases of Mecca and Medina. Mecca was a sanctuary settled in the 5th century A.D. by the Quraysh tribe. Its shrine, the kaaba, was a center of pilgrimage and trade for pagans, Christians, and Jews. The base of the shrine was a black meteor above which a cabinet-like structure was built—according to legend with some connection to Abraham. The kaaba housed a number of different idols, but it was mainly associated with the local god of Mecca, Hubal. There was also some association with *Allah*, the god of divinity. Allah was the same word used by Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews to refer to their God. The kaaba and the nearby well of Zamzam stimulated the Meccan economy, and a service industry

developed to cater to the food, housing, and clothing needs of the pilgrims. Medina, a town about 200 miles north of Mecca, was an agricultural oasis plagued by feuds amongst its tribes, which included both pagans and Jews.

Arab Empires and Islamic Civilization

Life and Teachings of Muhammad

Muhammad was born in Mecca circa 570 A.D. and earned his living in the caravan trading business of his wife Khadija. Muhammad was troubled by the disparities among certain clans within his tribe and the changes that had taken place in Meccan society with the development of its economy. He used to retreat to a cave on Mt. Hira to meditate, and during one of these sessions around the year 610, the archangel Gabriel appeared and asked Muhammad to recite. After some initial confusion Muhammad found himself reciting. Muslims believe that he directly received the word of God. It was only after Muhammad's death that these revelations were organized and recorded in the Quran. The earliest verses of the Quran were pithy, ear-catching messages regarding the power and goodness of Allah (literally the God), man's duty to Him, the coming of a Day of Judgment, and the role of Muhammad as a prophet.

Initially Muhammad's message did not necessarily contradict the pagan belief system nor did he attract much attention. The existence of an all-powerful God did not mean that there could be no lesser gods. Furthermore, there were numerous itinerant preachers and soothsayers spouting various belief systems, including Christianity and Judaism. Muhammad's first followers were members of his own household, but soon the message began to appeal to the less influential clans of the Quraysh, the younger generation of some of the more powerful clans, slaves, and others, who like Muhammad, were disturbed by the social order in Mecca.

The message of strict monotheism became completely clear after the revelation of the "Satanic verses". Monotheism would threaten not only the social order, but also the economy of a city that depended upon pagan pilgrim traffic. Muslims believe that Satan deceived Muhammad and he received some verses referring to the intercession of three goddesses. Nevertheless, when he recanted the verses, opposition among the powerful clans of the Quraysh became intense. In 619 Muhammad suffered two losses, the deaths of his wife Khadija and his uncle Abu Talib. This uncle was the leader of his clan (Hashim), and Abu Talib had used his position to protect Muhammad. As opposition grew among the wealthier clans, notably the Umayyads and the Makhzum, and death threats mounted, Muhammad moved his community of believers (*umma*) to Medina in 622. This event, the *hijra*, marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

In Medina, Muhammad used his charisma, wisdom, and belief in God to settle the longstanding feuds among the tribes and clans. In the "Constitution of Medina" he formed a confederation of his transplanted *umma* with the city's tribes, spelling out the obligations among them. Pagans were allowed to remain pagan, but they accepted a lesser status than those that converted to Islam or remained Jewish. The revelations that Muhammad received at Medina differed from those of the early Meccan period. No

longer was revelation aimed at converting the non-believer, it articulated a way of life, discussing issues e.g. marriage, inheritance, and divorce. By this point revelation more clearly expressed Muhammad's role not only as a prophet, but as the final prophet in a series that began with those of the Old Testament.

The mid-620s were a time of struggle for Muhammad as he found himself battling both the Quraysh of Mecca and the Jews of Medina, the latter of which tired of supporting Muhammad's battles against the former. Ultimately the Jews of Medina were expelled, and the powerful Meccans agreed to capitulate and accept Islam. In the process of conducting these battles, Muhammad's leadership skills attracted the attention of neighboring tribes, who then converted to Islam and joined the Muslims in their battles. Many of these alliances were cemented by marriage. Muhammad even married the daughter of his biggest Meccan opponent, Abu Sufyan (of the Umayyad clan), in 629.

In 630 Muhammad took the keys to the Kaaba and cleansed it of its pagan idols, and when he returned in 632 he did so during the traditional (pre-Islamic) pilgrimage time and established the rituals for pilgrimage that exist to this day. By the time of his death in 632 virtually all of the tribes of the peninsula had joined Muhammad's confederation. Nevertheless, various levels of commitment to the new religion remained.

Orthodox Caliphate

Muhammad's death in 632 was a test of survival for the Muslims. The powerful among the clans of Medina, as well as the earliest followers from Mecca, sought to preserve the integrity of the religion and the political bonds of the confederation by electing Abu Bakr as a successor (caliph) to Muhammad. There would be no other prophet for the Muslims, but there was a need for someone to fill the many functions that Muhammad had served during his lifetime. Abu Bakr, an early convert, loyal follower, and father-in-law to Muhammad, was a logical choice. Some of the tribes refused to accept his leadership and stopped paying mandatory alms to the central treasury. Abu Bakr sent loyal Arab troops to reign in the rebelling tribes, initiating the so-called Wars of Apostasy. Tribes in flight, or seeking compensations for their losses, soon breached both the Iraqi-Sassanian and the Syrian-Byzantine frontiers. Abu Bakr encouraged raids into Palestine, where success emboldened the Arab tribesmen to merge forces and defeat a Byzantine army near Gaza in 634. From then on, sporadic incursions became invasions. The immediate causes of the Arab conquests were pressures and opportunities generated by wars among the Arabs themselves. Religious motives were in the background. The impoverishment and violence of life on the peninsula was the tinder for the spark caused by the Wars of Apostasy.

The Arabs quickly seized the rest of Syria by 641. Egypt was taken in 641-42, but the conquest of North Africa, begun in 634, required the remainder of the century. In Iraq the armies of the Sassanian Empire were destroyed at the Battle of Qadisiya. Upper Mesopotamia was taken by 641, most of western Iran by 644, Fars by 649, and Khurasan by 654. Imperial armies were not adequate to check the Arab invaders, and many people readily accepted the victors.

Establishing an orderly government was the work of the second caliph, Umar (634-44). Like Abu Bakr, Umar was an early convert, loyal follower, and father-in-law to

Muhammad. His basic principle was that the Arabs were to be a military ruling caste. They were not to settle or mix with the conquered people but were to be garrisoned in all-Arab cities—some created, some adapted for the purpose—where they could be organized for war and the distribution of stipends. The stipends were paid from the central treasury according to how early one had converted and what type of service had been provided in the name of Islam. Masses of Arabs settled permanently throughout the Middle East. According to the “Pact of Umar”, the conquered peoples were left entirely undisturbed in their (monotheistic) religion, community life, and property on the condition that they pay a tribute. Pagans were not afforded such rights. In return, the Arabs offered protection and more reasonable taxes than their predecessors. The rights and obligations spelled out in the “Pact of Umar” would remain the model for relationships between Islamic governments and minority communities until the 19th century. In governing the provinces, the Arabs merely removed the top layer of leadership, replacing it from among their own, and they utilized the bureaucrats and functionaries that were already in place. These individuals had familiarity with the territory and the people that the Arabs lacked. Conversion was not forced, nor even encouraged, since it would diminish taxes and blur the line separating the Arab (Muslim) military elite. The Middle East was not conquered to spread Islam, but to be ruled by Muslims. People did convert to Islam; however, the new Muslims were not treated as equals, but rather as clients, or second class citizens, by the conquering Arabs.

A discontented Christian slave, who reputedly resented the tax levied upon non-Muslims, stabbed the caliph Umar in 644. On his death bed, Umar consulted a council of his companions and instructed them to choose a successor amongst themselves. It was this group that elected Uthman, a son-in-law of Muhammad, caliph. Like the previous caliphs, Uthman had been an early convert to Islam and was linked to the prophet by marriage. Nevertheless, he was from the Umayyad clan, the wealthy clan which had given Muhammad so much trouble during his lifetime. Uthman became the focus of much discontent. The pious resented the increasing secularization of the caliphate, as well as its forays into military and administrative affairs. Uthman in true clan fashion conferred high positions to his kinsmen. In doing so, he often replaced highly capable individuals with less qualified ones. Medinans resented this nepotism and his unfair distribution of lands. Meanwhile the empire that had expanded so rapidly was experiencing growing pains. The Sassanian Empire was not toppled until 651 and pockets of resistance remained. Meanwhile, tribesmen in the provinces resented the authority of the central administration, its inability to pay wages in a timely fashion, and the decline in booty with the slow down of expansion.

In 656 Uthman’s ineptitude led to his assassination by disgruntled Arab troops that had been stationed in Egypt. The assassins declared Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, caliph. Ali had been passed over for the position three times, and there were many that felt that he should not only succeed Uthman, but perhaps he should have been elected earlier. The death of Uthman led to a three way struggle for power, culminating in a five year civil war. The prophet’s beloved wife Aisha (daughter of Abu Bakr), joined forces with two other companions of the prophet, Talha and Zubayr, forming a Triumvirate to challenge Ali’s bid for the caliphate. They represented the interests of the old Meccan

families and early converts to Islam, and they had some support from troops in Iraq. Ali and his supporters from among troops stationed in Egypt and, more importantly, Iraq easily defeated the Triumvirate. Talha and Zubayr died in battle, and Aisha was sent home in disgrace, thus providing later theologians with a justification for why women not to become involved in politics.

Muawiya, the son of Muhammad's former enemy Abu Sufyan, also refused to recognize Ali's authority on the grounds that he did nothing to avenge the death of his kinsman and fellow Umayyad Uthman. Muawiya had risen to power quickly after the Meccan capitulation to Muhammad. He served as a secretary to the prophet during the last years of his life, and he became governor of Syria in the mid-630s. Thus, he had a longstanding power base and seasoned troops under his command, in addition to the power and wealth of his clan. In late 657 the forces of Ali met the forces of Muawiya in the battle of Siffin. Ali had the advantage of the offensive and of greater numbers, but Muawiya's troops were more disciplined. The result was a long, bloody battle which Ali appeared to be winning by early 658. Some of Muawiya's troops hoisted portions of the Quran on their spears, calling for arbitration. Ali's agreeing to negotiate created yet another group of adversaries in the civil war, the *Khawarij*, those from among Ali's supporters who did not agree with this move and withdrew their support.

At issue in the negotiations was whether or not the assassination of Uthman was justified. If it was, then Ali would clearly be in the right; and if it was not, then there would need to be a council called to elect another caliph. By 659 the negotiators took the latter position. Meanwhile, the *Khawarij* had determined that neither candidate should be caliph. Instead, it should be up to the members of the community to choose the best man among them. They conspired to assassinate both Muawiya and Ali. Ali and his supporters were successful in hunting down all but a handful of the *Khawarij*, and it was one from this group, who managed to assassinate Ali in 661. This turn of events left the caliphate open for Muawiya, who had already anointed himself as caliph the previous year. Muawiya moved the capital to Damascus, marginalizing the formerly prominent Mecca and Medina. This move reflected his power base, as well as his military and commercial interests.

While the origins of the various sects of Islam date back to this period, it is important to remember that at the time that the events were taking place there were no doctrinal differences among the participants, but rather people supported one candidate over another one. Over the next two hundred years, this split would become permanent, involving serious doctrinal differences and views of religious authority. Sunnis (from *ahl al-sunna* or those who follow the tradition of the prophet) accept the consequences of succession and this civil war (and others that followed), and they later develop the notion that religious authority would rest in the hands of the caliph, who was advised and informed by a consensus of leading religious authorities. Shiites (from *shī'at Ali* or partisans of Ali), believe in the existence of charismatic leadership following the blood line of Ali and his descendents. Rather than depending upon a consensus of scholarly opinion, Shiites value particular individuals whose talent for interpretation is notable. As Shiism evolved, it became necessary to create some type of ranking for interpreters of

law (*mujtahids*). *Mujtahids* strive to achieve the status of “source of emulation,” a title known more commonly in the past one hundred years as “the eye of God” or *ayatollah*. Finally, the Khawarij believe that authority should rest with the most capable and should have nothing to do with blood lines or lineage. In the years after its inception, Kharijism never coalesced into unified movement, and its most lasting impact was on North Africa.

Umayyad Dynasty

Muawiya’s reign (661-680) marks the beginning of the Umayyad dynasty, sometimes referred to as the Arab Kingdom due to the prominent role played by Arabs. Umayyad rule also marks the beginning of the hereditary principle for the caliphate, a principle that would remain until the dissolution of the caliphate in 1924. It should be noted, however, that although the first four caliphs followed an elective principle, it was a rather narrow group that participated in the election.

Muawiya’s leadership represented an amalgam between Byzantine and traditional Arab elements, and it built upon the success that he had established as governor. He secured his son Yazid’s place as caliph, a move which he nonetheless buttressed with an oath of allegiance from the leading tribes.

Despite these efforts a second civil war broke out between 680 and 692. Yazid (r.680-683) did succeed his father, but not without opposition from the next generation of the same groups that had opposed his father. Husayn, the son of Ali and Muhammad’s daughter Fatima, had quite a following in Iraq and posed a formidable challenge. Nevertheless, due to circumstances beyond his control, he was left with only 72 warriors to fight Yazid’s army, and a horrible massacre took place at Karbala in 680. Shiites commemorate this day every year as a day of mourning when Husayn and a number of other members of the prophet’s family were killed. It is during this era that Shiism brings together not only those who support Ali and his descendents for the caliphate, but also those who are disgusted with Arab privilege, in general, and Umayyad privilege, in particular. Thus, many non-Arab converts to Islam were attracted to Shiism for this reason.

The other contender for power was Zubayr’s son Abdullah, who had a following in the Hejaz (Western Arabia) as well as by some in Iraq after Karbala. As these battles were raging, the Umayyads had some dynastic misfortunes with the death of three caliphs by natural causes between 683 and 685, when Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705) became caliph. Furthermore, another Shiite contender entered the fray, Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, the son of Ali by another woman (not Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad). Abdullah’s forces put down the Shiite threat, which aided the Umayyad forces as much as it did his own. By 692 Abd al-Malik could focus on the Hejaz, where his forces quelled the uprising, slew Abdullah, and ended the second civil war.

The civil war episode was a turning point in the history of the caliphate. Caliphs from Abd al-Malik to Hisham (r. 724-743) generally relied less on the Arabs and built up the powers of the state and the forces of Syria. Administrative centralization began in earnest. The Arab conquests were resumed. Spain, Transoxiana (roughly present day

Uzbekistan), and the Byzantine Empire were all invaded. The translation of administrative records into Arabic, the minting of a new Arabic coinage, and monumental constructions, e.g. the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, dramatized the prestige of the caliphate and its services to Islam and the Arabs.

Despite this centralization of power, tribal disputes remained a latent threat to the stability of the caliphate. In addition, the gradual assimilation of the Arabs and their subjects to one another undercut the basic principles of Umayyad government. Arabs became landowners, merchants, and peasants. Non-Arabs converted to Islam in larger numbers, becoming clients of the Arabs in the garrison towns. These converts began to demand equality in pay and equal fiscal privilege. Their claims, which were vehemently opposed by the Arabs, could not be ignored. Converts played a vital part in administration and an increasing role in the Arab armies, as well as in religious and cultural life. Again it should be emphasized that what made Arab civilization great was its ability to draw on the talents of its subject population. Nevertheless, the caliphate was trapped between conflicting demands from different segments of its supporters.

Umar II (r. 717-720) sought to resolve these difficulties by embodying the principle of equality of all Muslims in reforms that stressed equal pay for military service and tax reforms that made land and property, rather than caste, the basis of fiscal obligations. Later caliphs made similar reforms, but they were only halfhearted and were obstructed by local Arab and bureaucratic interests.

Compounding problems for the Umayyads was the rise of a truly devout *umma*. During Muhammad's lifetime and the early expansion, many followers were more attracted by military success rather than by the principles of the religion. Nevertheless, after the passage of three or four generations of Islamic rule, many individuals in the empire grew up following, adhering to, and firmly believing in the principles of Islam. The Umayyads, known for their wine drinking, hunting retreats, dancing girls, and so on, did little to impress their pious subjects. Their strategy of external conquest to stifle internal problems was a short-sighted solution to much larger structural problems.

The grievances of both Arabs and non-Arabs with the caliphate were exploited by the Abbasid family, which claimed a legitimate title to the caliphate as descendents of the prophet's uncle Abbas. They used Shiism to further their aims, claiming that the family of Muhammad ibn Hanifiyya had bestowed leadership to them, and that they had been carrying on the secret movement for several decades. The Umayyads were exhausted by years of external military efforts in Anatolia, Central Asia, North Africa, and Southwestern Europe. Internally, they were sucked into renewed tribal disputes, bedouin rebellions, Shiite revolts, and Khawarij outbursts. Thus by 749 Umayyad power had effectively collapsed, and the Abbasids easily removed them from power. Abul-Abbas al-Saffah was then declared the first caliph of a dynasty that was to rule for the next 500 years (750-1258).

Abbasid Caliphate—Golden Age of Arab Civilization

The new Abbasid dynasty enacted a revolution in the Arab Empire. The Abbasids accepted the equality of all Muslims, and privilege was no longer based upon Arab blood but on service to Islam and the empire. Not surprisingly, there were widespread conversions during this period. Although the Abbasids embraced Shiite sentiment in bringing down the Umayyads, once in power they turned to more orthodox elements to run the administration. Indeed the caliphate now made defense of Islam a state priority and attempted to stamp out all vestiges of heresy. The Abbasids showed much more compassion to its Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish communities, which were allowed to thrive and in fact had a strong influence on the development of Islam. Arabic, the official language of the empire, was the language of religion and government. Although many in the subject population retained their language, e.g. the Persians, the literate, urban population was often bilingual.

In Abbasid government the Arabs had to share power and privilege with non-Arabs, and the caliphate no longer relied upon a solely Arab army. Arabs remained important as governors, generals, courtiers, and in religious life, but Persian scribes were the backbone of an enormously strengthened bureaucracy. While the Umayyads followed Byzantine tradition, the Abbasids followed Persian models of leadership. The Barmecid (Barmakid) family of viziers (chief ministers) headed the government from about 750 to 803. In some of the provinces the caliphs appointed their own governors, but in others, local princes and notables continued to rule as vassals or tributaries. The empire was not rigidly organized; it adjusted flexibly to the realities of power in all provinces. The ultimate objective of government organization was taxation, and on the local level, government staffs, with assistance from local notables, taxed the peasants. Abbasid government was thus based upon the support of Arab populations and elites, the administrative classes, landowning and local ruling notabilities of every race and religion, the commercial classes who benefited from territorial unification, and finally, on the *'ulama'*, the religious establishment. The vast empire was connected by an updated version of the old Persian postal system. To compare it with some institutions from American history, it combined a pony express system with an FBI/CIA type of intelligence gathering network. The Abbasids also utilized a system of flares and mirrors, creating a pre-modern telegraph network. In the ninth century a message could travel from Baghdad to Tunis in 24 hours. It would be another 1000 years before this method could be surpassed.

The Abbasids were great architects and city builders, the most noteworthy being their new capital, Baghdad, constructed during the reign of al-Mansur (r. 754-775). The location of the capital on the Tigris river where it flows closest to the Euphrates reflected both the eastward orientation of the leadership and the significance of trade. Baghdad was created as a circular city, with the caliphal residence at the center, homes of the caliph's sons in the first layer, followed by the various departments of government in the second layer. Mosques, schools, artisanal workshops, commercial districts, and residential quarters were located in the outer layers. The city was fortified by walls and access limited by four gates, reflecting the city's connection to various trade routes: Syria, Khurasan, Basra, and Kufa. While commerce had been significant under the Umayyads, it grew by leaps and bounds during Abbasid rule, since there was no longer significant warfare conducted against the Byzantines. It would be the wealth from trade that would

finance the efflorescence of Arab civilization. Furthermore the existence of this trade led to other developments: greater unity among the subject population due to uniformity of consumer goods available throughout the empire, dissemination of knowledge, and advances in shipbuilding, navigation, cartography, geography, as well as commercial law and institutions. Arab traders are responsible for promoting the use of bills of exchange (the English word check comes from the Arabic *sakk* meaning document or deed), the joint stock company, and forms of venture capital. As Europeans adopted these ideas and institutions in the late medieval period, commerce greatly expanded.

The Abbasid state's sponsorship of religion and law allowed all aspects of civilization to advance. Education in the empire, as in Europe during the same period, was a religious education. Islam as a religion encourages all adherents to seek knowledge. Students' first experience was usually memorization and recitation of the Quran, as well as the learning the traditions of the prophet Muhammad recorded in *hadith*. Only after mastering these subjects would a student move on to study the other Islamic sciences, jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalam*). Once grounded in these subjects one might then study what were referred to as the "sciences of the ancient ones," including medicine, philosophy, astronomy, biology, physics, engineering, etc. The notion of divisions between these latter fields of knowledge did not exist. Indeed, some of the best philosophers were also the best physicians. Medical training took place in working hospitals located in major urban centers. Such hospitals housed lecture halls, laboratories, libraries, pharmacies, quarantine wards, wards for male and female patients, a resident physician, and sometimes even musicians to play soothing music for the patients. Disparities between the more advanced Islamic medicine and European medicine were made apparent during the Crusades. Arab chroniclers report that indigenous physicians were healing utilizing methods e.g. clinical observation, while Europeans practiced exorcism and blood-letting. By 1200, i.e. about 100 years after the start of the Crusades, one begins to see hospitals, as institutions solely for caring for the ill, in Europe. Nevertheless, Europeans did not adopt the idea of a resident physician nor of clinical instruction within hospitals until the 16th century.

Arabic was the international language of science and learning. Through the medium of Arabic, medieval Islamic scholars preserved the knowledge of the ancient world by translating and compiling huge treatises in all fields, thus enabling further advances. The caliph Mamun (r. 813-833) founded Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) specifically for this purpose. Arabic, as the language in which the Quran was revealed, achieved special significance, and its grammar was regularized. Under the Abbasids, Arabic literature was profoundly influenced by the precedents of their subject populations' literature: Hellenic, Persian, and Indian. Although some of these trends had their beginnings under the Umayyads, it is under the Abbasids that they truly flourish, e.g. the setting of poetry to music. The rhythmic lyrics of Arabic poetry were now set to Byzantine/Persian forms of instrumentation and performance. The Arabic language was also the inspiration for great art since Islam prohibits human representation. Calligraphy and ornamental design reached great heights during this era.

Even as Abbasid learning and culture was still just beginning to reach its heights, the central administration was plagued with civil strife, as early as the reigns of al-Mansur (r. 754-775) and al-Mahdi (r. 775-785). The latter began the systematic persecution of heretics, an institution that would be a hallmark of the Abbasids, who sought to use their self-defined version of Islam as the social glue for the empire. Under Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809), the empire, as defined by caliphal authority, had reached its apogee. Nevertheless, Harun sowed the seeds of destruction when he deposed the Barmecids and made a complicated succession arrangement calling for the division of the empire between two of his sons, al-Amin and al-Mamun, a situation that ultimately led to civil war. The victory of al-Mamun in alliance with Tahir ibn Husayn, a Persian, led to the alienation of Arab populations who resented what they viewed as Persian domination.

Al-Mamun (r. 813-33) sought to regain popular support by manipulating religious beliefs. Nevertheless, his efforts tended to alienate the religious establishment rather than to buttress support for his rule. As compensation for helping him to win the war against his brother, al-Mamun granted Tahir ibn Husayn the hereditary governorship (820-873) of the wealthy province of Khurasan, establishing the precedent of decentralization of power.

Further difficulties stemmed from the efforts of al-Mamun and his successor al-Mutasim (r. 833-842) to counterbalance Tahirid power. The caliphs recruited Central Asian regiments and Turkish slaves for a new army, but the new regiments became the masters rather than the servants of the caliphate. Between 833 and 870 they virtually destroyed the empire. Pursuing their own interests, the praetorian guards seized control of the caliphs and usurped control of the central administration. Chaotic fighting for spoils reduced the central government to impotence. Efforts by al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) to find new military supporters and to revive popular support failed. By 870 the caliphate was at a nadir of power and influence.

Decline of Center

Decline of caliphal authority meant neither the dissolution of empire nor the diminution of the high level of culture and civilization. Instead, competing centers of power emerged, some of which maintained an alliance cemented by tribute to the Abbasids and some of which challenged Abbasid authority and Sunni orthodoxy. In Egypt under the Tulunids (r. 868-905), power fell into the hands of Turkish officers who established their own dynasties. The Saffirids led a popular rebellion, and they ended up controlling most of eastern Iran from 861-900. There was even a slave revolt in the salt extraction marshes in southern Iraq whereby rebels created a small state (868-883) in which private property was forbidden and possessions distributed communally. The caliphate did contrive to restore order by 905, but a total collapse of the imperial system was only postponed. Corruption of the central administration, the division of the bureaus into factions exploiting the government in their own interests, loss of control over taxable rural lands, and loss of revenue meant that military victories could no longer be followed up by routine government. Independent principalities and warlords burgeoned. In the early 10th century the Samanids controlled Khurasan and Transoxiana; the Buwayhids, Western Iran; the Hamdanids, Upper Mesopotamia, and the Ikhshidids, Egypt. Ultimately the

Buwayhids seized Baghdad in 945, and full governmental powers, both military and civil, were vested in them. The caliphate, deprived of all effective power, remained for centuries the legitimate fount of all authority and the symbol of religious unity, but the empire as a single Middle Eastern political entity was lost. Nevertheless, despite the lack of political unity, there existed the notion of *dar al-Islam*, i.e. the abode of Islam, meaning a unity of among those states whose people profess Islam.

Fragmentation and Decentralization

The demise of the unified empire meant the succession of a number of independent provincial dynasties. The Samanids continued to control Transoxiana and Khurasan until 999, when they were defeated by the Karakhanids, who took over Transoxiana, and the Ghaznavids of Afghanistan, who took control of Khurasan. Western Iran and Iraq were in Buwayhid hands until 1055. The Fatimids ruled Egypt (969-1171) and parts of Syria. Other petty princes ruled in Syria and Mesopotamia. These dynasties were relatively unstable and short-lived. They suffered from family quarrels, civil wars, a general decline of bureaucratic organization in all regions except Egypt, and the decentralization of control over the land and its taxable resources in favor of the leading army officers. Instead of centrally controlled revenues and salaries, land was granted to the soldiers, many of whom had little experience in agriculture, in return for military service. This arrangement supported armies composed largely of slaves, usually Turkish in origin, who became the ruling elite. Slavery in the ancient world and in the medieval Middle East was quite unlike New World slavery. Rather than being a permanent status that involved no possibility for upward mobility, slavery was often a temporary status that, if one were serving a powerful individual, could lead to a position of great power and wealth.

Political decentralization was accompanied in many places by economic regression. Exploitation of the peasantry and neglect of irrigation in Iraq and Iran led to severe losses in agricultural capacity. Long before the Mongol invasions the Middle East was losing productive resources.

Intense religious and social changes also began in the 10th century. The 10th and 11th centuries were a period of Shiite preeminence under the officially Shiite Fatimid, Buwayhid, and Hamdanid dynasties. This period witnessed the consolidation of Muslim orthodoxy in the form of the Muslim schools of law and the emergence of the ulama as the social and political chiefs of Muslim communities. They often served as the bridge between the multiplicity of princes/petty rulers and the subject populations. As the Abbasids and the ulama defined a legalistic form of Islamic orthodoxy, individual believers sought a more meaningful relationship with Allah through Sufism, a form of Islamic mysticism. During this period Sufism flourished, crossing lines of gender, location, class, and sect. In Iran and Central Asia, Zoroastrian and pagan peoples were converted to Islam, often intermingling forms of Sufism with their previous belief systems.

Turco-Mongolian Invasions

These important internal changes were all furthered by the Seljuk (Saljuq) invasions. These nomadic Turkish (Turkoman) pastoralists from Central Asia overran the Middle

East in the middle of the 11th century, and they swept away the Ghaznavids, the Buwayhids, and some lesser Syrian principalities, establishing the largest empire in the region since early Abbasid times (1040-1193). They posed the first major threat to the Byzantines since the time of the Umayyads. The Battle of Manzikert in 1071 opened up Anatolia for Turkish settlement. In other words, what we now refer to as “Turkey” was not the original homeland of the Turks.

The invasions introduced substantial Turkish populations into parts of the Middle East, furthering the decline of agriculture and contributing to political instability. The invasions, however, did little to disturb Islam as a religion or the local communities built around it. Their conquest superimposed a new Turkish military elite over the Persian and Arab bureaucratic functionaries, who continued to administer taxation and carry on local government. The Seljuk regime, based on an alliance of Turkish soldiers with native scribes and ulama, was passionately orthodox. Originally pagans, with a belief system similar to pre-Islamic Arabs, the Turks readily adopted Islam before reaching the Middle East. The Seljuks repressed Shiism, and they founded numerous schools to train scholars and scribes, helping to standardize Sunni orthodoxy. After centuries of evolution, Sunni Islam was consolidated into its lasting form and was made the prevailing religion of the Middle East.

Despite these important cultural contributions, there were family disputes, usurpations by governors and a decentralization of fiscal power that resulted in the fragmentation of the Seljuk Empire. Nomadic incursions into the Middle East by Turkic-Altai speaking peoples from Central Asia continued. The Mongols, although similar to the Turks in lifestyle, language, and belief system, did not adopt Islam before entering the Middle East. Genghis Khan, after uniting the Mongol tribes in 1206, expanded into Transoxiana, Afghanistan, Iran, and southern Russia. After Genghis’ death in 1227 his empire was divided amongst his sons. Genghis’ grandson Mongke sent his brother Hulagu to northern Iran in 1253. Five years later, leaving a trail of terror and destruction, Hulagu’s forces marched on Baghdad, bringing down the Abbasid dynasty. For a time, in one place or another, the Mongols threatened to extinguish Islamic civilization. Nevertheless, by the fourteenth century, most Mongols that remained in *dar al-Islam* had converted to Islam.

Egypt and Syria

In other parts of the Middle East, the same tendencies toward political fragmentation, economic regression, and religious ferment, followed by consolidation of Islamic orthodoxy, were manifest. Egypt was a partial exception to these trends. Shiite missionaries of an Ismaili sect conquered Egypt in 969, after half a century of expansion from present day Tunisia. The Fatimids appropriated the title of the caliph and sponsored an Ismaili missionary movement throughout the Islamic world to further their own ambitions for a universal Muslim empire. These missions had little success, and the Fatimid regime remained an Egyptian state with African, Syrian, and Hejazi possessions. The Fatimid state was supported by Berber and other foreign armies, buttressed by a powerful centralized administration. After a century or so, the Fatimids lost portions of their African and Syrian possessions, and they were undermined in their Egyptian capital

by strife among their various army regiments. Deprived of effective power by their generals, divided by schisms within the Ismaili movement, and threatened by European crusaders, in 1171 the Fatimids were easily removed from power by Saladin, a Kurdish general serving a Turkish ruler in Syria. It should be pointed out that notions of national identity did not exist at this time, and loyalty was based upon a variety of other factors.

From the decentralization of the Abbasids until the rise of Saladin, Syria had been divided into small and contending principalities. The Fatimids controlled southern Syrian and Damascus until 1076. The Byzantine Empire, three centuries after the Arab conquests, reconquered Antioch and northern Syrian, and the stand-off between the major contenders allowed small tribal states, independent cities, and sectarian communities to flourish. The Seljuks, invading in the latter half of the 11th century, brought Syria under their rule, but they were unable to provide any lasting unity, as the territory was divided among Seljuk princes. Princes who were too young to rule might be provided with a tutor/regent (*atabeg*) who would marry their widowed mother and rule in their place. Thus, the province of Syria remained divided and exposed to further invasions.

While the Middle East and its various Islamic principalities were reeling from fragmentation and invasion, another threat loomed on the horizon: Crusaders from Europe. The Crusades were a product of papal and Byzantine politics, Norman ambitions, and European social unrest. Crusading armies seized Antioch, Edessa, Tripoli, Jerusalem, and most of Palestine between 1098 and 1109. It should also be noted that the Crusades were not merely Christian Europe against the Muslim Middle East. Vast constellations of alliances shifted back and forth, often crossing lines of religion. The Christian populations of the Middle East received a double blow. They were viewed as traitors by the rulers whom they generally supported, and they were inflicted with the same punishments as Muslims by the European Crusaders. Not surprisingly, it is during the era of the Crusades that another wave of conversion to Islam takes place. The two centuries during which the Crusades took place allowed Europeans to witness the advances of Arab civilization, and they brought those advances back to their homelands.

The Muslims were at first too divided to repulse the invaders, but throughout the 12th century both Muslim power and determination to resist increased. Despite the frustrations of constantly shifting alliances, the Seljuk atabeg Zangi of Mosul, managed to seize Aleppo in 1128 and Edessa in 1144. His son, Nur al-Din, defended Damascus against the Second Crusade in 1147. Several times during the 1160s, Nur al-Din sent his general Shirkuh, and Shirkuh's nephew Saladin, to defend the weak Fatimid state from Crusaders. Shirkuh became grand vizier to the Fatimid caliph in 1168, and upon his death in 1169 Saladin took the title. Within two years, all traces of Fatimid leadership dissolved and a new dynasty, the Ayyubids, emerged.

Saladin's seizure of Egypt began a new epoch. In 1183 he accomplished what his predecessors could not: the unification of Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, and the Hejaz into one state. At the Battle of Hittin in 1187, he defeated the Crusaders' armies and recaptured Jerusalem, as well as most of Palestine. His victories were built on widespread Muslim support rallied by vigorous espousal and patronage of Muslim orthodoxy.

When he died in 1193, Saladin was succeeded by a family coalition that would last until 1249. His successors reversed some of his policies. For example, the Ayyubids temporized relations with the Crusaders in an effort to maintain the lucrative trade that had been advanced over the course of the Crusades.

In 1249 the Ayyubid house was extinguished in Egypt, owing to a bizarre set of circumstances revolving around yet another European Crusade (7th). Louis IX of France had warned the Ayyubid ruler, al-Malik al-Salih, of his impending arrival. Louis managed to take Damietta and was continuing to advance southward. In the midst of planning the next battle, al-Malik al-Salih died. One of his wives, Shajarat al-Durr, conspired with the generals of his slave soldiers (*Mamluks*) to keep the death a secret until his son, by another wife, could return from abroad to replace him. The conspiracy was successful, Louis was defeated, and the last Ayyubid sultan arrived to take power; however, he failed to pay the Mamluks their proper respect, and they assassinated him, proclaiming Shajarat al-Durr their leader. The caliph in Baghdad, who was no more than a figurehead yet still the suzerain, told the Mamluks to find a man to do the job or he would send one. Instead, Shajarat al-Durr married one of the generals, Aybak (Aybeg), and they became co-rulers. In 1257, either due to greed, jealousy, or both, Shajarat al-Durr assassinated Aybak. In turn, the Mamluks engineered her death—by some accounts it involved her being clubbed to death by members of her own retinue, who were wielding wooden bath sandals.

The Mamluks continued to rule Egypt, and they legitimized their government by establishing a shadow Abbasid caliphate in Cairo after the fall of Baghdad. They also earned the respect of the subject population by having repelled the Crusaders and later (1260) by defending Syria (and points beyond) from the Mongol threat. By 1291 they expelled the last of the Crusaders from Acre, in Palestine, and thus they cemented their reputation as protectors of the people. There followed a long period—the Bahri Mamluk regime (1250-1382)—of relative stability and security for the populations of Egypt and Syria. Nevertheless, the bubonic plague which arrived between 1347 and 1349 brought the same devastation and economic repercussions to the Middle East that it did to Europe. In 1382 a new series of mamluk rulers, the Burgi Mamluks, came to power. They differed from their predecessors by their Circassian and Greek origins as well as in their fiercely meritocratic form of rule. 145 years of Burgi mamluk rule saw 23 different sultans, of which 6 ruled 103 years. During these years Egypt and Syria suffered from the long term consequences of the plague, including economic decline and social turmoil.

From the 7th to the 15th centuries, the Arabs founded a series of empires that served to create a new Islamic Middle Eastern civilization. The first two hundred years of this period saw the widespread sedentarization and urbanization of the Arabs, who mixed with the subject population, and created a strong merchant middle class. The urban middle class continued to prosper up until the 11th century. It was this class that fostered the high level of culture associated with Islamic rule.

At the same time that the middle class was rising, a military class was also in ascension. Initially this class was formed by the conquering Arab armies, but over time came to be

dominated by slave armies of Turkish and Circassian origin. The military class supported itself from large estates, and as the cost of warfare rose, it began to look for new ways to tax the urban middle class, which in turn searched for ways to protect its wealth. The latter began investing in religious endowments, which were not subject to taxation, to protect their wealth. Yet another class was a beneficiary of this process, the religious establishment, since they administered the religious endowments.

Urban culture and civilization declined. This decline was not complete, nor did it occur evenly. For example, during the period of extreme decentralization and in the wake of incursions by European Crusaders and Central Asian nomads, some of the greatest political philosophy and history was written by Arab scholars attempting to explain their current predicament. Abd al-Rahman ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), often credited as the father of sociology, wrote an amazing introduction to his study of world history. In this introduction he laid out the factors by which human character evolves and political institutions develop.

Other realms of learning and knowledge did not fare as well. By the late 10th century a consensus of Sunni scholars had determined that the great thinkers of the previous centuries had discerned a body of jurisprudence that needed only to be imitated. Although a great deal is made of this “closure of the door of interpretation,” it should be remembered that individual judges still had great leeway in rendering their decisions.

In conclusion, invasions by outsiders, the plague, and the decline of urban culture mark the years from the 11th century onward. The Ottoman invasion of the early 16th century was no exception to this rule.

The Arabs Under Ottoman Rule

In many respects the Ottoman conquests did not involve substantial changes in Syria, Egypt, the Hejaz, and the parts of Iraq under Ottoman rule. Ottoman domination substituted one elite for another, though in Egypt, the Mamluks continued to serve under Ottoman stewardship. However, Ottoman rule brought the Arab world into the historical rhythm of the larger empire. In the 16th and part of the 17th century, the Ottoman fostered irrigation and agricultural developments, repressed Bedouin violence, and managed a relatively equitable system of taxation.

By the 18th century, however, the decline of central authority within the Ottoman Empire undermined the security of the Arab provinces. Local governors established their effective independence from Istanbul. Factional and communal interests degenerated into fratricidal struggles. Bedouin violence grew unchecked. Agriculture declined. Taxation became rapacious and heedless of the security of the peasantry. Throughout much of the Middle East, Muslim religious and cultural life stagnated. Nevertheless, the autonomy achieved by the 18th century allowed Egypt to thrive.

North Africa and Spain

The history of Muslim North Africa and Spain forms a separate chapter in the history of the Arab world. The Arab conquests proceeded slowly in this region, and only after the establishment of Qayrawan (Kairouan) in Tunisia in 670 was the whole of North Africa

as far as the Atlantic brought under Muslim rule. Despite the slow conquest, it should be pointed out that the Berber tribesmen of North Africa, perhaps owing to a similar lifestyle and belief system as the Arabs, converted rapidly to Islam. Arab and Berber forces invaded Spain in 711, but their advances in Europe were checked at the Battle of Tours in 732.

The power of the caliphate in western North Africa (the Maghreb) and Spain was never fully established. In the 8th century, Arab rule was resisted by the Berbers of the Maghreb, who not surprisingly embraced the Kharijism. The Idrisids, descendants of Ali by his son Hasan, established an independent Moroccan Berber kingdom lasting from the 8th to the 10th centuries. In what is now Tunisia and Algeria, the Aghlabid governors (r. 800-909), originally from Khurasan, balanced the needs of both the Arab settlers and the Berber tribesmen. Although the Aghlabids were effectively independent, technically they were still vassals of the Abbasids. Although removed from power in the central lands after the Abbasid revolution, an Umayyad family in Spain established independent rule in 756.

At the beginning of the 10th century the Fatimids, appealing to Berber support for their Shiite claims to the caliphate, destroyed the Aghlabids and conquered most of North Africa and Egypt. Like the Fatimid ruler in Egypt and the caliph of Baghdad, the Spanish Umayyad ruler Abd al-Rahman III (r. 912-961) also claimed the title Commander of the Faithful, and he contested Fatimid influence in Morocco. His reign was a period of cultural efflorescence for both the Muslim and Jewish communities. Achievements in Quranic interpretation and *hadith* studies, as well as poetry and literature, prompted the Jewish community to pursue Biblical/Talmudic studies and Jewish law, in addition to Hebrew poetry and prose. Christians also participated in public life through positions in government and prominence in the arts. Abd al-Rahman III's capital at Cordoba had running water, paved streets, and city lighting.

In little more than a century both the Fatimid and the Umayyad states declined. The Zirid dynasty in Tunisia declared its independence from the Fatimids, while numerous Berber tribal states controlled Morocco and Algeria. Umayyad Spain collapsed into a multitude of tiny principalities, and the Christians began to conquer territory in Spain from the Muslims. Beginning in the 11th century, North Africa and Spain were overwhelmed by waves of Bedouin invasions. The banu-Hilal (Beni Hilal) from the east destroyed most of Tunisia and Algeria. From the Sahara, Sanhaja Berber tribes united by the Almoravid religious movement led by Yusuf ibn Tashfin conquered both Morocco and Muslim Spain, starting in 1053. The political unification of Morocco and Spain checked the Christian advances and permitted Hispano-Muslim culture to seep into North Africa. The Almoravids, however, were succeeded by a Bedouin confederation and empire, the Almohads. Inspired by the religious reforms of Muhammad ibn Tumart, the Almohads united most of North Africa and Spain between 1130 and 1269, when this empire rapidly dissolved on all fronts. Despite the overall Arabization of North Africa by the 13th century, three Berber dynasties emerged to rule former Almohad territories in North Africa. The Marinids inherited Morocco, which they ruled from the 13th to the 15th century, the Zayyanids ruled Algeria until the arrival of the Ottomans in the 16th century,

and the Hafsids ruled in Tunisia from 1229-1574. The three Berber states lived in near constant competition, each trying to revive the unity of the Maghreb at the expense of the others.

The decline of the Almohads in Spain cost the Muslims control of the country. By 1248 the Christians had recaptured both Cordoba and Seville, reducing Muslim possessions to the kingdom of Granada, which survived until 1492. Despite Christian pressure on North Africa, Tunisia and Algeria came under Ottoman domination. Morocco was ruled by two successive dynasties that claimed descent from the prophet Muhammad and were successful at repelling both Portuguese and Ottoman attempts at control. The latter of these dynasties, the Alawites, still rules Morocco today.

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Online Sources:

See the listing of links listed by the CMES's (Harvard) teaching resource center:

www.fas.harvard.edu/~mideast/links.html

This resource provides links by country and by topic.

Words that may be spelled differently elsewhere in the Encyclopedia—check for uniformity:

Sassanian=Sasanian=Sasanid

Genghis=Genghiz=Chengiz

Suggested Graphics:

Map detailing Islamic expansion and locations of significant battles—should mention locations discussed in reading—Siffin, Qadisiya, Gaza, Mecca, Medina, Fars, Khurasan

Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem—where it is discussed under Umayyad rule

Map of the city of Baghdad—see p. 147 in Robinson, ed., *Cambridge Illustrated History, Islamic World*.

Example of calligraphy

In the section on the flowering of Arab civilization in various fields it would be nice to utilize illustrations from (or like) those in *The Genius of Arab Civilization*

Map of decentralization and fragmentation under the Abbasids

Map of Crusades

Map of Mongol invasions and/or Persian miniature of a Mongol being enthroned: see www.ee.bilkent.edu.tr/~history/pictures2/ul43.jpg