In 600 B.C.E., societies had only limited contacts beyond their frontiers. By 1200 C.E., this situation had changed. Traders, migrating peoples, and missionaries brought peoples together. Products and technologies moved along long-distance trade networks: the Silk Road across Asia, Saharan caravan routes, and sea-lanes connecting the Indian Ocean coasts.

Migrating Bantu peoples from West Africa spread iron and new farming techniques through much of sub-Saharan Africa and helped foster a distinctive African culture. Conquering Arabs from the Arabian peninsula, inspired by the Prophet Muhammad, established Muslim rule from Spain to India, laying the foundation of a new culture.

In Asia, missionaries and pilgrims helped Buddhism spread from India to Sri Lanka, Tibet, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. The new faith interacted
Islamic World Map The oldest surviving world maps come from medieval Islamic culture. This example, a fourteenth-century copy of a presumed tenth-century original, is unusual in being oblong instead of round. South is at the top. The Mediterranean Sea is in blue in the lower right quadrant, with the Nile River extending upward until it ends in two sets of smaller streams at the Mountains of the Moon. Other bodies of water are green, except for the Encircling Sea that surrounds the entire map. The yellow square is Mecca. (Courtesy, Suleymaniye Library, Istanbul)

with older philosophies and religions to produce distinctive cultural patterns. Simultaneously, the Tang Empire in China disseminated Chinese culture and technologies throughout Inner and East Asia.

In Europe, monks and missionaries spread Christian beliefs that became enmeshed with new political and social structures: a struggle between royal and church authority in western Europe; a union of religious and imperial authority in the Byzantine east; and a similar but distinctive society in Kievan Russia. The Crusades reconnected western Europe with the lands of the east.

In the Western Hemisphere, the development of urban, agricultural civilizations in the Andes, the Yucatán lowlands, and the central plateau of Mexico climaxed in the Maya, Aztec, and Inca cultures. The cultural exchanges and interactions that mark this era in Eurasia and Africa have counterparts in the Western Hemisphere.
Baghdad Bookstore  With the advent of papermaking, manufacturing books became increasingly common and inexpensive. As a result, bookstores also became more common. Notice how books are shelved on their sides in wall cubicles.  (Bibliothèque nationale de France)

- How did the traditions and religious views of pre-Islamic peoples become integrated into the culture shaped by Islam?
- How did the Muslim community of the time of Muhammad differ from the society that developed after the Arab conquests?
- Was the Baghdad caliphate really the high point of Muslim civilization?
- How did regional diversity affect the development of Islamic civilization?
The Rise of Islam, 600–1200

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Origins of Islam

The Rise and Fall of the Caliphate, 632–1258

Islamic Civilization

Comparative Perspectives

Diversity and Dominance: Secretaries, Turks, and Beggars

Environment and Technology: Chemistry

Material Culture: Head Coverings

Knowledge of papermaking, which spread from China to the Middle East after Arab conquests in the seventh century C.E. established an Islamic caliphate stretching from Spain to Central Asia, provided a medium that was superior to papyrus and parchment and well suited to a variety of purposes. Maps, miniature paintings, and, of course, books became increasingly common and inexpensive. With cheaper books came bookstores, like the one shown on the opposite page, and one of the most informative manuscripts of the period of the Islamic caliphate is a Fihrist, or descriptive catalog, of the books sold at one bookstore in Baghdad.

Abu al-Faraj Muhammad al-Nadim, a man with good connections at the caliph’s court, compiled the catalog, though his father probably
founded the bookstore. Its latest entry dates to ca. 990, al-Nadim’s death date. Having studied with specialists on Arabic grammar and poetry and various aspects of Islamic religion, science, mathematics, and history, al-Nadim wrote such well-informed comments on books and authors that his catalog presents a marvelous survey of the intellectual world of Baghdad.

The *Fihrist* is divided into ten books. The first book deals with the Arabic language and the sacred scriptures: the Quran, the Torah, and the Gospel. The second covers Arabic grammar, and the third covers writings from people connected with the caliph’s court: historians, government officials, singers, jesters, and boon companions of the ruler. The author’s name, al-Nadim, means “book companion,” so it is assumed that he knew this milieu well. After dealing with Arabic poetry, Muslim sects, and Islamic law in Books 3 through 6, he comes to Greek philosophy, science, and medicine in Book 7.

This progression of topics, in which most things we would find in a bookstore are relegated to the final three chapters, reflects the intellectual priorities of al-Nadim’s customers. Book 8 is divided into three sections, the first being “Story Tellers and Stories.” This is where he lists a Persian book called *A Thousand Stories*, which in translation became *The Arabian Nights*. While most of the works described by al-Nadim no longer survive, a single page containing one of the *Arabian Nights* stories has been found. Nevertheless, the collection we have today comes from a manuscript written five hundred years later.

Then come books about “Exorcists, Jugglers, and Magicians,” followed by “Miscellaneous Subjects and Fables.” These include books on “Freckles, Twitching, Moles, and Shoulders,” “Horsemanship, Bearing of Arms, the Implements of War,” “Veterinary Surgery,” “Birds of Prey, Sport with Them and Medical Care of Them,” “Interpretation of Dreams,” “Perfume,” “Cooked Food,” “Poisons,” and “Amulets and Charms.”

Non-Muslim sects and foreign lands—India, Indochina, and China—fill Book 9, leaving Book 10 for a few final notes on philosophers not mentioned previously.

Taken as a whole, the thousands of titles and authors commented on by al-Nadim provide both a panorama of what interested book buyers in tenth-century Baghdad and a saddening picture of how profound the loss of knowledge has been since that glorious era.

**THE ORIGINS OF ISLAM**

The Arabs of 600 C.E. lived exclusively in the Arabian peninsula and on the desert fringes of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. Along their Euphrates frontier, the Sasanids subsidized nomadic Arab chieftains to protect their empire from invasion. The Byzantines did the same with Arabs on their Jordanian frontier. Arab pastoralists farther to the south remained isolated and independent, seldom engaging the attention of the shahs and emperors. It was precisely in these interior Arabian lands that the religion of Islam took form.

**The Arabian Peninsula Before Muhammad**

Throughout history more people living on the Arabian peninsula have subsisted as farmers or sailors than as pastoral nomads. Farming villages support the comparatively dense population of Yemen, where the highlands receive abundant rainfall during the spring monsoon. Small inlets along the southern coast favored fishing and trading communities. However, the enormous sea of sand known as the “Empty Quarter” isolated many southern regions from the Arabian interior. In the seventh century, most people in southern Arabia knew more about Africa, India, and the Persian Gulf (see Chapter 7, Diversity and Dominance: Travel Accounts of Africa and India) than about the forbidding interior and the scattered camel- and sheep-herding nomads who lived there.

Exceptions to this pattern mostly involved caravan trading. Nomads derived income from providing camels, guides, and safe passage to merchants wanting to transport northward the primary product of the south: the aromatic resin frankincense and myrrh that were burned in religious rituals. Return caravans brought manufactured products from Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronology</th>
<th>The Arab Lands</th>
<th>Iran and Central Asia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>600</td>
<td>570–632 Life of the Prophet Muhammad</td>
<td>711 Arabs capture Sind in India</td>
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<td></td>
<td>634 Conquests of Iraq and Syria commence</td>
<td>747 Abbasid revolt begins in Khurasan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>639–42 Conquest of Egypt by Arabs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>656–61 Ali caliph; first civil war</td>
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<td>661–750 Umayyad Caliphate rules from Damascus</td>
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<tr>
<td>700</td>
<td>711 Berbers and Arabs invade Spain from North Africa</td>
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<td></td>
<td>750 Beginning of Abbasid Caliphate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>755 Umayyad state established in Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>800</td>
<td>776–809 Caliphate of Harun al-Rashid</td>
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<td></td>
<td>835–92 Abbasid capital moved from Baghdad to Samarra</td>
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<tr>
<td>900</td>
<td>909 Fatimids seize North Africa, found Shi'ite Caliphate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>929 Abd al-Rahman III declares himself caliph in Cordoba</td>
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<td>945 Shi'ite Buyids take control in Baghdad</td>
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<td></td>
<td>969 Fatimids conquer Egypt</td>
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<td>1000</td>
<td>1055 Seljuk Turks take control in Baghdad</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1099 First Crusade captures Jerusalem</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1171 Fall of Fatimid Egypt</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1187 Saladin recaptures Jerusalem</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1250 Mamluks control Egypt</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1258 Mongols sack Baghdad and end Abbasid Caliphate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1260 Mamluks defeat Mongols at Ain Jalut</td>
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Nomad dominance of the caravan trade received a boost from the invention of militarily efficient camel saddles (see Chapter 7, Environment and Technology: Camel Saddles). This contributed to the rise of Arab-dominated caravan cities and to Arab pastoralists becoming the primary suppliers of animal power throughout the region. By 600 C.E., wheeled vehicles—mostly ox carts and horse-drawn chariots—had all but disappeared from the Middle East, replaced by pack camels and donkeys.

Arabs who accompanied the caravans became familiar with the cultures and lifestyles of the Sasanid and Byzantine Empires, and many of those who pastured their herds on the imperial frontiers adopted one form or another of Christianity. Even in the interior deserts,
Sasanid Silver Plate with Gold Decoration
The Sasanid aristocracy, based in the courtyard, invested part of its wealth in silver plates and vessels. This image of a Sasanid king hunting on horseback also reflects a favorite aristocratic pastime. (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

Semitic polytheism, with its worship of natural forces and celestial bodies, began to encounter more sophisticated religions.

Mecca, a late-blooming caravan city, lies in a barren mountain valley halfway between Yemen and Syria and a short way inland from the Red Sea coast of Arabia (see Map 8.1). A nomadic kin group known as the Quraysh settled in Mecca in the fifth century and assumed control of trade. Mecca rapidly achieved a measure of prosperity, partly because it was too far from Byzantine Syria, Sasanid Iraq, and Ethiopian-controlled Yemen for them to attack it.

A cubical shrine called the Ka’ba, containing idols, a holy well called Zamzam, and a sacred precinct surrounding the two wherein killing was prohibited contributed to the emergence of Mecca as a pilgrimage site. Some Meccans associated the shrine with stories known to Jews and Christians. They regarded Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic) as the builder of the Ka’ba, and they identified a site outside Mecca as the location where God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. The son was not Isaac (Ishaq in Arabic), the son of Sarah, but Ishmael (Isma’il in Arabic), the son of Hagar, cited in the Bible as the forefather of the Arabs.

Muhammad in Mecca
Born in Mecca in 570, Muhammad grew up an orphan in the house of his uncle. He engaged in trade and married a Quraysh widow named Khadija*, whose caravan interests he superintended. Their son died in childhood, but several daughters survived. Around 610 Muhammad began meditating at night in the mountainous terrain around Mecca. During one night vigil, known to later tradition as the “Night of Power and Excellence,” a being whom Muhammad later understood to be the angel Gabriel (Jibril in Arabic) spoke to him:

Proclaim! In the name of your Lord who created.
Created man from a clot of congealed blood.
Proclaim! And your Lord is the Most Bountiful.
He who has taught by the pen.
Taught man that which he knew not.

For three years he shared this and subsequent revelations only with close friends and family members. This period culminated in Muhammad’s conviction that he was hearing the words of God (Allah* in Arabic). Khadija, his uncle’s son Ali, his friend Abu Bakr*, and others close to him shared this conviction. The revelations continued until Muhammad’s death in 632.

Like most people of the time, including Christians and Jews, the Arabs believed in unseen spirits: gods, desert spirits called jinn, demonic shaitans, and others. They further believed that certain individuals had contact with the spirit world, notably seers and poets, who were thought to be possessed by jinns. Therefore, when Muhammad began to recite his rhymed revelations in public, many people believed he was inspired by an unseen spirit, even if it was not, as Muhammad asserted, the one true god.

Muhammad’s earliest revelations called on people to witness that one god had created the universe and everything in it, including themselves. At the end of time, their souls would be judged, their sins balanced against their good deeds. The blameless would go to paradise; the sinful would taste hellfire:

Quraysh (koo-RAYSH) Ka’ba (KAH-buh) Khadija (kah-DEE-juh)
Allah (AH-luh) Abu Bakr (ah-boo BAK-uh)
Map 8.1 Early Expansion of Muslim Rule  Arab conquests of the first Islamic century brought vast territory under Muslim rule, but conversion to Islam proceeded slowly. In most areas outside the Arabian peninsula, the only region where Arabic was then spoken, conversion did not accelerate until the third century after the conquest.

By the night as it conceals the light;
By the day as it appears in glory;
By the mystery of the creation of male and female;
Verily, the ends ye strive for are diverse.
So he who gives in charity and fears God,
And in all sincerity testifies to the best,
We will indeed make smooth for him the path to Bliss.
But he who is a greedy miser and thinks himself self-sufficient,
And gives the lie to the best,
We will indeed make smooth for him the path to misery.2

The revelation called all people to submit to God and accept Muhammad as the last of his messengers. Doing so made one a Muslim, meaning one who makes “submission,” Islam, to the will of God.

Because earlier messengers mentioned in the revelations included Noah, Moses, and Jesus, Muhammad’s hearers felt that his message resembled the Judaism and Christianity they were already somewhat familiar with. Yet his revelations charged the Jews and Christians with being negligent in preserving God’s revealed word. Thus, even though they identified Abraham/Ibrahim, whom Muslims consider the first Muslim, as the builder of the Ka’ba, which superseded Jerusalem as the focus of Muslim prayer in 624, Muhammad’s followers considered his revelation more perfect than the Bible because it had not gone through an editing process.

Online Study Center
 Improve Your Grade
 Primary Source: The Constitution of Medina: Muslims and Jews at the Dawn of Islam

Some scholars maintain that Muhammad’s revelations appealed especially to people distressed over wealth replacing kinship as the most important aspect of social relations. They see a message of social reform in verses criticizing taking pride in money and neglecting obligations to orphans and other powerless people. Other scholars, along with most Muslims, put less emphasis on
a social message and stress the power and beauty of Muhammad's revelations. Forceful rhetoric and poetic vision, coming in the Muslim view directly from God, go far to explain Muhammad's early success.

The Formation of the Umma

Mecca's leaders feared accepting Muhammad as the sole agent of the one true God would threaten their power and prosperity. They pressured his kin to disavow him and persecuted the weakest of his followers. Stymied by this hostility, Muhammad and his followers fled Mecca in 622 to take up residence in the agricultural community of Medina 215 miles (346 kilometers) to the north. This hijra marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

Prior to the hijra, Medinan representatives had met with Muhammad and agreed to accept and protect him and his followers because they saw him as an inspired leader who could calm their perpetual feuding. Together, the Meccan migrants and major groups in Medina bound themselves into a single umma, a community defined solely by acceptance of Islam and of Muhammad as the "Messenger of God," his most common title. Three Jewish kin groups chose to retain their own faith, thus contributing to the Muslims' changing the direction of their prayer toward the Ka'ba, now thought of as the "House of God."

During the last decade of his life, Muhammad took active responsibility for his umma. Having left their Meccan kin groups, the immigrants in Medina felt vulnerable. Fresh revelations provided a framework for regulating social and legal affairs and stirred the Muslims to fight against the still-unbelieving city of Mecca. Sporadic war, largely conducted by raiding and negotiation with desert nomads, sapped Mecca's strength and convinced many Meccans that God favored Muhammad. In 630 Mecca surrendered. Muhammad and his followers made the pilgrimage to the Ka'ba unhindered.

Muhammad did not return to Mecca again. Medina had grown into a bustling city-state. He had charged the Jewish kin groups with disloyalty at various points during the war and had expelled or eliminated them. Delegations from all over Arabia came to meet Muhammad, and he sent emissaries back with them to teach about Islam and collect their alms. Muhammad's mission to bring God's message to humanity had brought him unchallenged control of a state that was coming to dominate the Arabian peninsula. But the supremacy of the Medinan state, unlike preceding short-lived nomadic kingdoms, depended not on kinship but on a common faith in a single god.

In 632, after a brief illness, Muhammad died. Within twenty-four hours a group of Medinan leaders, along with three of Muhammad's close friends, determined that Abu Bakr, one of the earliest believers and the father of Muhammad's favorite wife A'isha, should succeed him. They called him the khalifa, or "successor," the English version of which is caliph. But calling Abu Bakr a successor did not clarify his powers. Everyone knew that neither Abu Bakr nor anyone else could receive revelations, and they likewise knew that Muhammad's revelations made no provision for succession or for any government purpose beyond maintaining the umma.

Abu Bakr continued and confirmed Muhammad's religious practices, notably the so-called Five Pillars of Islam: (1) avowal that there is only one god and Muhammad is his messenger, (2) prayer five times a day, (3) fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan, (4) paying alms, and (5) making the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during one's lifetime. He also reestablished and expanded Muslim authority over Arabia's nomadic and settled communities. After Muhammad's death, some had abandoned their allegiance to Medina or followed various would-be prophets. Muslim armies fought hard to confirm the authority of the newborn caliphate. In the process, some fighting spilled over into non-Arab areas in Iraq.

Abu Bakr ordered those who had acted as secretaries for Muhammad to organize the Prophet's revelations into a book. Hitherto written haphazardly on pieces of leather or bone, the verses of revelation became a single document gathered into chapters. This resulting book, which Muslims believe acquired its final form around the year 650, was called the Quran, or the Recitation. Muslims regard it not as the words of Muhammad but as the unalterable word of God. As such, it compares not so much to the Bible, a book written by many hands over many centuries, as to the person of Jesus Christ, whom Christians consider a human manifestation of God.

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Primary Source: The Quran

hijra (HIJ-ruh)  umma (UM-muh)

A'isha (AH-ee-shah)  khalifa (kah-LEE-ah)  Quran (kuh-RAHN)
Though united in its acceptance of God's will, the umma soon disagreed over the succession to the caliphate. The first civil war in Islam followed the assassination of the third caliph, Uthman, in 656. To succeed him, his assassins, rebels from the army, nominated Ali, Muhammad's first cousin and the husband of his daughter Fatima. Ali had been passed over three times previously, even though many people considered him to be the Prophets natural heir. Ali and his supporters felt that Muhammad had indicated as much at a place named Ghadir al-Khumm.

When Ali accepted the nomination to be caliph, two of Muhammad's close companions and his favorite wife A'isha challenged him. Ali defeated them in the Battle of the Camel (656), so called because the fighting raged around the camel on which A'isha was seated in an enclosed woman's saddle.

After the battle, the governor of Syria, Mu'awiyah, a kinsman of the slain Uthman from the Umayya clan of the Quraysh, renewed the challenge. Inconclusive battle gave way to arbitration. The arbitrators decided that Uthman, whom his assassins considered corrupt, had not deserved death and that Ali had erred in accepting the nomination. Ali rejected the arbitrators' findings, but before he could resume fighting, one of his own supporters killed him for agreeing to the arbitration. Mu'awiyah then offered Ali's son Hasan a dignified retirement and thus emerged as caliph in 661.

Mu'awiyah chose his own son, Yazid, to succeed him, thereby instituting the Umayyad Caliphate. When Hasan's brother Husayn revolted in 680 to reestablish the right of Ali's family to rule, Yazid ordered Husayn and his family killed. Sympathy for Husayn's martyrdom helped transform Shi'ism from a political movement into a religious sect.

Several variations in Shi'ite belief developed, but Shi'ites have always agreed that Ali was the rightful successor to Muhammad and that God's choice as Imam, leader of the Muslim community, has always been one or another of Ali's descendants. They see the office of caliph as more secular than religious. Because the Shi'ites seldom held power, their religious feelings came to focus on outpourings of sympathy for Husayn and other martyrs and on messianic dreams that one of their Imams would someday triumph.

Those Muslims who supported the first three caliphs gradually came to be called "People of Tradition and Community"—in Arabic, Ahl al-Sunna wa'l-Jama'a, Sunnis.

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The Rise and Fall of the Caliphate, 632–1258

The Islamic caliphate built on the conquests the Arabs carried out after Muhammad's death gave birth to a dynamic and creative religious society. By the late 800s, however, one piece after another of this huge realm broke away. Yet the idea of a caliphate, however unrealistic it became, remained a touchstone of Sunni belief in the unity of the umma.

Sunni Islam never gave a single person the power to define true belief, expel heretics, and discipline clergy. Thus, unlike Christian popes and patriarchs, the caliphs had little basis for reestablishing their universal authority once they lost political and military power.

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The Islamic
Conquests, 634–711

Arab conquests outside Arabia began under the second caliph, Umar (r. 634–644), possibly prompted by earlier forays into Iraq. Arab armies wrenched Syria (636) and Egypt (639–642) away from the Byzantine Empire and defeated the last Sasanid shah, Yazigird III (r. 632–651) (see Map 8.1). After a decade-longull expansion began again.

Tunisia fell and became the governing center from which was organized, in 711, the conquest of Spain by an Arab-led army mostly composed of Berbers from North Africa. In the same year, Sind—the southern Indus Valley and westernmost region of India—succumbed to invaders from Iraq. The Muslim dominion remained roughly stable for the next three centuries. In the eleventh century, conquest began anew in India, Anatolia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Islam also expanded peacefully by trade in these and other areas both before and after the year 1000.

The close Meccan companions of the Prophet, men of political and economic sophistication inspired by his charisma, guided the conquests. The social structure and hardy nature of Arab society lent itself to flexible military
operations; and the authority of Medina, reconfirmed during the caliphate of Abu Bakr, ensured obedience.

The decision made during Umar's caliphate to prohibit Arabs from assuming ownership of conquered territory proved important. Umar tied army service, with its regular pay and windfalls of booty, to residence in large military camps—two in Iraq (Kufa and Basra), one in Egypt (Fustat), and one in Tunisia (Qairawan). East of Iraq, Arabs settled around small garrison towns at strategic locations and in one large garrison at Marv in present-day Turkmenistan. Down to the early eighth century, this policy kept the armies together and ready for action and preserved life in the countryside, where some three-fourths of the population lived, virtually unchanged. Only a tiny proportion of the Syrian, Egyptian, and Iraqi populations understood the Arabic language.

The million or so Arabs who participated in the conquests over several generations constituted a small, self-isolated ruling minority living on the taxes paid by a vastly larger non-Arab, non-Muslim subject population. The Arabs had little material incentive to encourage conversion, and there is no evidence of coherent missionary efforts to spread Islam during the conquest period. In 750 one such rebellion, in the region of Khurasan, in what is today northeastern Iran, overthrew the last Umayyad caliph, though one family member escaped to Spain and founded an Umayyad principality there in 755. Many Shi'ites supported the rebellion, thinking they were fighting for the family of Ali. As it turned out, the family of Abbas, one of Muhammad's uncles, controlled the secret organization that coordinated the revolt. Upon victory they established the Abbasid Caliphate. Some of the Abbasid caliphs who ruled after 750 befriended their relatives in Ali's family, and one even flirted with transferring the caliphate to them. The Abbasid family, however, held on to the caliphate until 1258, when Mongol invaders killed the last of them in Baghdad (see Chapter 12).

At its outset the Abbasid dynasty made a fine show of leadership and concern for Islam. Theology and religious law became preoccupations at court and among a growing community of scholars, along with interpretation of the Quran, collecting the sayings of the Prophet, and Arabic grammar. (In recent years, some Western scholars have maintained that the Quran, the sayings of the Prophet, and the biography of the Prophet were all composed around this time to provide a legendary base for the regime. This reinterpretation of Islamic origins has not been generally accepted either in the scholarly community or among Muslims.) Some caliphs sponsored ambitious projects to translate great works of Greek, Persian, and Indian thought into Arabic. With its roots among the semi-Persianized Arabs of Khurasan, the new dynasty gradually adopted the ceremonies and customs of the Sasanid shahs. Government grew increasingly complex in Baghdad, the newly built capital city on the Tigris River. As more non-Arabs converted to Islam, the ruling elite became more cosmopolitan. Greek, Iranian, Central Asian, and African cultural currents met in the capital and gave rise to an abundance of literary works, a process facilitated by the introduction of papermaking from China. Arab poets neglected the traditional odes extolling life in the desert and wrote instead wine songs (despite Islam's prohibition of alcohol) or poems in praise of their patrons.

The translation of Aristotle into Arabic, the founding of the main currents of theology and law, and the splendor of the Abbasid court—reflected in stories of The Arabian Nights set in the time of the caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 776–809)—in some respects warrant calling the early Abbasid period a "golden age." Yet the refinement of

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Baghdad culture only slowly made its way into the provinces. Egypt remained predominantly Christian and Coptic-speaking in the early Abbasid period. Iran never adopted Arabic as a spoken tongue. Most of Berber-speaking North Africa rebelled and freed itself of direct caliphal rule after 740.

Gradual conversion to Islam among the conquered population accelerated in the second quarter of the ninth century. Social discrimination against non-Arab converts gradually faded, and the Arabs themselves—at least those living in cosmopolitan urban settings—lost their previously strong attachment to kinship and ethnic identity.

Abbasid decline became evident in the second half of the ninth century as the conversion to Islam accelerated (see Map 8.2). No government ruling so vast an empire could hold power easily. Caravans traveled only 20 miles (32 kilometers) a day, and the couriers of the caliphal post system usually did not exceed 100 miles (160 kilometers) a day. News of frontier revolts took weeks to reach Baghdad. Military responses might take months. Administrators struggled to centralize tax payments, often made in grain or other produce rather than cash, and ensure that provincial governors forwarded the proper amounts to Baghdad.

During the first two Islamic centuries, revolts against Muslim rule had been a concern. The Muslim umma had therefore clung together, despite the long distances. But with the growing conversion of the population to Islam, fears that Islamic dominion might be overthrown faded. Once they became the overwhelming majority, Muslims realized that a highly centralized empire did not necessarily serve the interests of all the people.

By the middle of the ninth century, revolts targeting Arab or Muslim domination gave way to movements
within the Islamic community concentrating on seizure of territory and formation of principalities. None of the states carved out of the Abbasid Caliphate after 850 repudiated or even threatened Islam. They did, however, cut the flow of tax revenues to Baghdad, thereby increasing local prosperity.

Increasingly starved for funds by breakaway provinces and by an unexplained fall in revenues from Iraq itself, the caliphate experienced a crisis in the late ninth century. Disputing generals and troops from outlying areas, the caliph purchased Turkic slaves, mamluks, from Central Asia and established them as a standing army. Well trained and hardy, the Turks proved an effective but expensive military force. When the government could not pay them, the mamluks took it on themselves to seat and unseat caliphs, a process made easier by the construction of a new capital at Samarra, north of Baghdad on the Tigris River.

The Turks dominated Samarra without interference from an unruly Baghdad populace that regarded them as rude and highhanded. However, the money and effort that went into the huge city, which was occupied only from 835 to 892, further sapped the caliphs' financial strength and deflected labor from more productive pursuits.

In 945, after several attempts to find a strongman to reform government administration and restore military power, the Abbasid Caliphate fell under the control of rude mountain warriors from the province of Daylam in northern Iran. Led by the Shi‘ite Buyid family, they conquered western Iran as well as Iraq. Each Buyid commander ruled his own principality. After almost two centuries of glory, the sun began to set on Baghdad. The Abbasid caliph remained, but the Buyid princes controlled him. Being Shi‘ites, the Buyids had no special reverence for the Sunni caliph. According to their particular Shi‘ite sect, the twelfth and last divinely appointed Imam had disappeared around 873 and would return as a messiah only at the end of the world. Thus they had no Shi‘ite Imam to defer to and retained the caliph only to help control their predominantly Sunni subjects.

Dynamic growth in outlying provinces paralleled the caliphate’s gradual loss of temporal power. In the east in 875, the dynasty of the Samanids, one of several Iranian families to achieve independence, established a glittering court in Bukhara, a major city on the Silk Road (see Map 8.2). Samanid princes patronized literature and learning, but the language they favored was Persian written in Arabic letters. For the first time, a non-Arabic literature rose to challenge the eminence of Arabic within the Islamic world.

In the west, the Berber revolts against Arab rule led to the appearance after 740 of the city-states of Sijilmassa and Tahert on the northern fringe of the Sahara. The Kharjite beliefs of these states’ rulers interfered with their east-west overland trade and led them to develop the first regular trade across the Sahara desert. Once traders looked to the desert, they discovered that Berber speakers in the southern Sahara were already carrying salt from the desert into the Sahel region. The northern traders discovered that they could trade salt for gold by providing the southern nomads, who controlled the salt sources but had little use for gold, with more useful products, such as copper and manufactured goods. Sijilmassa and Tahert became wealthy cities, the former minting gold coins that circulated as far away as Egypt and Syria.

The earliest known sub-Saharan beneficiary of the new exchange system was the kingdom of Ghana. It first appears in an Arab text of the late eighth century as the "land of gold." Few details survive about the early years of this realm, which was established by the Soninke* people and covered parts of Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal, but it prospered until 1076, when it was conquered by nomads from the desert. It was one of the first lands outside the orbit of the caliphate to experience a gradual and peaceful conversion to Islam.

The North African city-states lost their independence after the Fatimid* dynasty, whose members claimed (perhaps falsely) to be Shi‘ite Imams descended from Ali, established itself in Tunisia in 909. After consolidating their hold on northwest Africa, the Fatimids culminated their rise to power by conquering Egypt in 969. Claiming the title of caliph in a direct challenge to the Abbasids, the Fatimid rulers governed from a palace complex outside the old conquest-era garrison city of Fustat*. They named the complex Cairo. For the first time Egypt became a major cultural, intellectual, and political center of Islam. The abundance of Fatimid gold coinage, now channeled to Egypt from West Africa, made the Fatimids an economic power in the Mediterranean.

Cut off from the rest of the Islamic world by the Strait of Gibraltar and, from 740 onward, by independent city-states in Morocco and Algeria, Umayyad Spain developed a distinctive Islamic culture blending Roman, Germanic, and Jewish traditions with those of the Arabs and Berbers (see Map 8.1). Historians disagree on how rapidly and completely the Spanish population converted to Islam. If we assume a process similar to that in the eastern regions, it seems likely that the most rapid
surge in Islamization occurred in the middle of the tenth century.

As in the east, governing cities symbolized the Islamic presence in al-Andalus, as the Muslims called their Iberian territories. Cordoba, Seville, Toledo, and other cities grew substantially, becoming much larger and richer than contemporary cities in neighboring France. Converts to Islam and their descendants, unconverted Arabic-speaking Christians, and Jews joined with the comparatively few descendants of Arab settlers to create new architectural and literary styles. In the countryside, where the Berbers preferred to settle, a fusion of preexisting agricultural technologies with new crops, notably citrus fruits, and irrigation techniques from the east gave Spain the most diverse and sophisticated agricultural economy in Europe.

The rulers of al-Andalus took the title *caliph* only in 929, when Abd al-Rahman III (r. 912–961) did so in response to a similar declaration by the newly established (909) Fatimid ruler in Tunisia. By the century’s end, however, this caliphate encountered challenges from breakaway movements that eventually splintered al-Andalus into a number of small states. Political decay did not impede cultural growth. Some of the greatest writers and thinkers in Jewish history worked in Muslim Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, sometimes writing in Arabic, sometimes in Hebrew. Judah Halevi (1075–1141) composed exquisite poetry and explored questions of religious philosophy. Maimonides (1135–1204) made a major compilation of Judaic law and expounded on Aristotelian philosophy. At the same time, Islamic thought in Spain attained its loftiest peaks in Ibn Hazm’s (994–1064) treatises on love and other subjects, the Aristotelian philosophical writings of Ibn Rushd (1126–1198, known in Latin as Averroës) and Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185), and the mystic speculations of Ibn al-Arabi (1165–1240). Christians, too, shared in the intellectual and cultural dynamism of al-Andalus. Translations from Arabic to Latin

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*Abd al-Rahman* (AHB-d al-RAH-MAHN)
made during this period had a profound effect on the later intellectual development of western Europe (see Chapter 9).

The Samanids, Fatimids, and Spanish Umayyads, three of many regional principalities, represent the political diversity and awakening of local awareness that coincided with Abbasid decline. Yet drawing and redrawing political boundaries did not result in the rigid division of the Islamic world into kingdoms. Religious and cultural developments, particularly the rise in cities of a social group of religious scholars known as the ulama—Arabic for “people with (religious) knowledge”—worked against any permanent division of the Islamic umma.

Assault from Within and Without, 1050–1258

The role played by Turkish manuks in the decline of Abbasid power established an enduring stereotype of the Turk as a ferocious, unsophisticated warrior. This image gained strength in the 1030s when the Seljuk family established a Turkish Muslim state based on nomadic power. Taking the Arabic title sultan, meaning “power,” and the revived Persian title shahanshah, or King of Kings, the Seljuk ruler Tughril Beg created a kingdom that stretched from northern Afghanistan to Baghdad, which he occupied in 1055. After a century under the thumb of the Shi‘ite Buyyids, the Abbasid caliph breathed easier under the slightly lighter thumb of the Sunni Turks. The Seljuks pressed on into Syria and Anatolia, administering a lethal blow to Byzantine power at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. The Byzantine army fell back on Constantinople, leaving Anatolia open to Turkish occupation.

Under Turkish rule, cities shrank as pastoralists overran their agricultural hinterlands. Irrigation works suffered from lack of maintenance in the unsettled countryside. Tax revenues fell. Twelfth-century Seljuk princes contesting for power fought over cities, but few Turks participated in urban cultural and religious life. The gulf between a religiously based urban society and the culture and personnel of the government deepened. When factional riots broke out between Sunnis and Shi‘ites, or between rival schools of Sunni law, rulers generally remained aloof, even as destruction and loss of life mounted. Similarly, when princes fought for the title sultan, religious leaders advised citizens to remain neutral.

By the early twelfth century, unrepaired damage from floods, fires, and civil disorder had reduced old Baghdad on the west side of the Tigris to ruins. The withering of Baghdad reflected a broader environmental problem: the collapse of the canal system on which agriculture in the Tigris and Euphrates Valley depended. For millennia a center of world civilization, Mesopotamia underwent substantial population loss and never again regained its geographical importance.

The Turks alone cannot be blamed for the demographic and economic misfortunes of Iran and Iraq. Too-robust urbanization had strained food resources, and political fragmentation had dissipated revenues. The growing practice of using land grants to pay soldiers and courtiers also played a role. When absentee grant holders used agents to collect taxes, the agents tended to gouge villagers and take little interest in improving production, all of which weakened the agricultural base of the economy.

The Seljuk Empire was beset by internal quarrels when the first crusading armies of Christians reached the Holy Land. The First Crusade captured Jerusalem in 1099 (see Chapter 9). Though charged with the stuff of romance, the Crusades had little lasting impact on the Islamic lands. The four crusader principalities of Edessa, Antioch, Tripoli, and Jerusalem simply became pawns in the shifting pattern of politics already in place. Newly arrived knights eagerly attacked the Muslim enemy, whom they called “Saracens”; but veteran crusaders recognized that diplomacy and seeking partners of convenience among rival Muslim princes offered a sounder strategy.

The Muslims finally united to face the European enemy in the mid-twelfth century. Nur al-Din Ibn Zangi established a strong state based in Damascus and sent an army to terminate the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt. A nephew of the Kurdish commander of that expedition, Salah-al-Din, known in the West as Saladin, took advantage of Nur al-Din’s timely death to seize power and unify Egypt and Syria. The Fatimid dynasty fell in 1171. In 1187 Saladin recaptured Jerusalem from the Europeans.

Saladin’s descendants fought off subsequent Crusades. After one such battle, however, in 1250, Turkish manuks seized control of the government in Cairo, ending Saladin’s dynasty. In 1260 these manuks rode east to confront a new invading force. At the Battle of Ain Jalut (Spring of Goliath) in Syria, they met and defeated an army of Mongols from Central Asia (see Chapter 12), thus stemming an invasion that had begun several decades before and legitimizing their claim to dominion over Egypt and Syria.

Saracen (SAR-uh-suhn)
Nur al-Din Ibn Zangi (NOOR al-DEEN ib-uhn ZAN-geh)
Ain Jalut (ain-jah-LOOT)
A succession of Mamluk sultans ruled Egypt and Syria until 1517. Fear of new Mongol attacks receded after 1300, but by then the new ruling system had become fixed. Young Turkish or Circassian slaves, the latter from the eastern end of the Black Sea, were imported from non-Muslim lands, raised in military training barracks, and converted to Islam. Owing loyalty to the Mamluk officers who purchased them, they formed a military ruling class that was socially disconnected from the Arabic-speaking native population.

The Mongol invasions, especially their destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad in 1258, shocked the world of Islam. The Mamluk sultan placed a relative of the last Baghdad caliph on a caliphal throne in Cairo, but the Egyptian Abbasids were never more than puppets serving Mamluk interests. In the Muslim lands from Iraq eastward, non-Muslim rule lasted for much of the thirteenth century. Although the Mongols left few ethnic or linguistic traces in these lands, their initial destruction of cities and slaughter of civilian populations, their diversion of Silk Road trade from the traditional route terminating in Baghdad to more northerly routes ending at ports on the Black Sea, and their casual disregard, even after their conversion to Islam, of Muslim religious life and urban culture hastened currents of change already under way.

**Islamic Civilization**

Though increasingly unsettled in its political dimension and subject to economic disruptions caused by war, the ever-expanding Islamic world underwent a fruitful evolution in law, social structure, and religious expression. Religious conversion and urbanization reinforced each other to create a distinct Islamic civilization. The immense geographical and human diversity of the Muslim lands allowed many “small traditions” to coexist with the developing “great tradition” of Islam.

**Law and Dogma**

The Shari'a, the law of Islam, provides the foundation of Islamic civilization. Yet aside from certain Quranic verses conveying specific divine ordinances—most pertaining to personal and family matters—Islam had no legal system in the time of Muhammad. Arab custom and the Prophet's own authority offered the only guidance. After Muhammad died, the umma tried to follow his example. This became harder and harder to do, however, as those who knew Muhammad best passed away, and many Arabs found themselves living in far-off lands. Non-Arab converts to Islam, who at first tried to follow Arab customs they had little familiarity with, had an even harder time.

Islam slowly developed laws to govern social and religious life. The full sense of Islamic civilization, however, goes well beyond the basic Five Pillars mentioned earlier. Some Muslim thinkers felt that the reasoned consideration of a mature man offered the best resolution of issues not covered by Quranic revelation. Others argued for the sunna, or tradition, of the Prophet as the best guide. To understand that sunna they collected and studied thousands of reports, called hadiths, purporting to convey the precise words or deeds of Muhammad. It

hadith (hah-DEETH)
became customary to precede each hadith with a chain of oral authorities leading back to the person who had direct acquaintance with the Prophet.

Many hadith dealt with ritual matters, such as how to wash before prayer. Others provided answers to legal questions not covered by Quranic revelation or suggested principles for deciding such matters. By the eleventh century most legal thinkers had accepted the idea that Muhammad’s personal behavior provided the best role model and that the hadith constituted the most authoritative basis for law after the Quran itself.

Yet the hadith posed a problem because the tens of thousands of anecdotes included both genuine and invented reports, the latter sometimes politically motivated, as well as stories derived from non-Muslim religious traditions. Only a specialist could hope to separate a sound from a weak tradition. As the hadith grew in importance, so did the branch of learning devoted to their analysis. Scholars discarded thousands for having faulty chains of authority. The most reliable they collected into books that gradually achieved authoritative status. Sunnis placed six books in this category; Shiites, four.

As it gradually evolved, the Shari’a embodied a vision of an umma in which all subscribed to the same moral values and political and ethnic distinctions lost importance. Every Muslim ruler was expected to abide by and enforce the religious law. In practice, this expectation often lost out in the hurly-burly of political life. But the Shari’a proved an important basis for an urban lifestyle that varied surprisingly little from Morocco to India.

### Converts and Cities

In many areas, conversion involved migrating to an Arab governing center. The alternative, converting to Islam but remaining in one’s home community, was difficult because religion had become the main component of social identity in Byzantine and Sassanian times. Converts to Islam thus encountered discrimination if they stayed in their Christian, Jewish, or Zoroastrian communities. Migration both averted discrimination and took advantage of the economic opportunities opened up by tax revenues flowing into the Arab governing centers.

The Arab military settlements of Kufa and Basra in Iraq blossomed into cities and became important centers for Muslim cultural activities. As conversion rapidly spread in the mid-ninth century, urbanization accelerated in other regions, most visibly in Iran, where most cities previously had been quite small. Nishapur in the northeast grew from fewer than 10,000 pre-Islamic inhabitants to between 100,000 and 200,000 by the year 1000. Other Iranian cities experienced similar growth. In Iraq, Baghdad and Mosul joined Kufa and Basra as major cities. In Syria, Aleppo and Damascus flourished under Muslim rule. Fustat in Egypt developed into Cairo, one of the largest and greatest Islamic cities. The primarily Christian patriarchal cities of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria, not being Muslim governing centers, shrunk and stagnated.

Conversion-related migration meant that cities became heavily Muslim before the countryside. This reinforced the urban orientation deriving from the fact that Muhammad and his first followers came from the commercial city of Mecca. Mosques in large cities served both as ritual centers and as places for learning and social activities.

Islam colored all aspects of urban social life (see Diversity and Dominance: Secretaries, Turks, and Beggars). Initially the new Muslims imitated Arab dress and customs and emulated people they regarded as particularly pious. In the absence of a central religious authority, local variations developed in the way people practiced Islam and in the hadith they attributed to the Prophet. This gave the rapidly growing religion the flexibility to accommodate many different social situations.

By the tenth century, urban growth was affecting the countryside by expanding the consumer market. Citrus fruits, rice, and sugar cane, introduced by the Sasanids, increased in acreage and spread to new areas. Cotton became a major crop in Iran and elsewhere and stimulated textile production. Irrigation works expanded. Abundant coinage facilitated a flourishing intercity and long-distance trade that provided regular links between isolated districts and integrated the pastoral nomads, who provided pack animals, into the region’s economy.
Secretaries, Turks, and Beggars

The passages below fall into the category of Arabic literature known as adab, or belles-lettres. The purpose of adab was to entertain and instruct through a succession of short anecdotes, verses, and expository discussions. It attracted the finest writers of the Abbasid era and afforded one of the richest sources for looking at everyday life, always keeping in mind that the intended readers were a restricted class of educated men, including merchants, court and government officials, and even men of religion.

One of the greatest masters of Arabic prose, Jabir ibn Hayyan (776-899), was a famously ugly man—his name means “Popeyed”—of Abyssinian family origin. Spending part of his life in his native Basra, in southern Iraq, and part in Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, he wrote voluminously on subjects ranging from theology to zoology to miserliness. These excerpts are from two of his short essays, “Censure of the Conduct of Secretaries” and “The Virtues of the Turks.”

Censure of the Conduct of Secretaries

Furthermore, the foundation on which writing is based [is] that only a subordinate should take [it] up and only one who is in a sense a servant [can] master it. We have never seen an important person undertake it for its own sake or share in his secretary’s work. Every secretary is required to be loyal and requested to bear hardship patiently. The most diverse conditions are imposed on him and he is sorely tried. The secretary has no right to set any of those conditions. On the contrary, he is thought slow at the first lapse even if exhausted and censured at the first error even if unintentional. A slave is entitled to many complaints against his master. He can request his sale to another if he wishes. The secretary has no way to lay claim to his late back wages or to leave his patron if he acts unfairly. He is governed by the rules for slaves. His status is that of a doll.

It should be enough for you to know of this group that the noblest of them is at the bottom of the pay scale. The most wealthy of them are the least regarded by the ruler. The head of the secretariat who acts as spokesman to the nation earns a tenth of the income of the head of land tax. The scribe whose handwriting lends beauty to the communications of the caliph earns a fraction of the income of the head copyist in the land tax bureau. The correspondence secretary is not fetched for a disaster nor is his aid sought in a crisis. When the ministers have settled on a course of action and agreed in their appraisal, a note is tossed him with the gist of the order. He prepares the text. When he has finished his editing and straightened out the words, he brings in his copyist. He sits as near as anyone to the caliph, in a restricted location away from visitors. Once that task is completed, however, there is no difference between those two scribes and the common people. This is true although their craft is not common to all secretaries nor found among the common people. Those of them most copious in knowledge are the least respected and those of them nearest the caliph are the most underrated.

What of the land tax secretary? His knowledge is not extraordinary. The people are not prevented from having a share of it. Anyone who has worked or been worked for could fill his place. His quality which he himself finds most praiseworthy is the ability to make problems for foes. The happiest of his affairs for which he hopes fulfillment are greed and to deprive others of their rights. He thinks himself most proficient in his profession when he can violate the rulings of the Prophet and take advantage of the oversights of the defendant.

The Virtues of the Turks

The Turk has with him at the moment of attack everything he needs for himself, his weapons, his mount, and equipment for it. His endurance is quite amazing for long riding, continuous travel, lengthy night trips, and crossing a land. For one thing, the horse of the Khariji [a warrior identified with a radical Muslim rebellion in southern Iraq] does not have the endurance of the Turk’s mount. The Khariji is not good at caring for his horse except as riders care for their steeds. The Turk is more skilled than the veterinarian and better at teacher his mount what he wants than trainers. He bred it and raised it as a foal. It followed him if he called and galloped behind him when he galloped. . . . If you sum up the life of the Turk and reckon his days you will find he sits longer on the back of his mount than on the face of the earth. The Turk rides a stallion, or a mare, and goes off on a raid, a trip or hunting expedition or some other project.

Then the mare and her foals follow him. If he is unable to hunt people, he hunts wild animals. If he is unsuccessful in that or needs nourishment, he bleeds one of his riding
animals. If thirsty he milks one of his marcs. If he wants to rest the one under him he mounts another without touching the ground. There is no one on earth besides him whose body would not reel against eating only meat. His mount is likewise satisfied with stubble, grass, and shrubs. He does not shade it from the sun or cover it against the cold...

The Turk is a herdsman, groom, trainer, trader, veterinarian, and rider. A single Turk is a nation in itself.

Though rulers, warriors, and religious scholars dominate the traditional narratives, the society that developed over the early centuries of Islam was remarkably diverse. Beggars, tricksters, and street performers belonged to a single loose fraternity: the Banu Sasan, or Tribe of Sasan. Tales of their tricks and exploits amused state, pious Muslims, who often encountered them in cities and on their scholarly travels. The tenth-century poet Abu Duaf al-Khazraj, who lived in Iran, studied the jargon of the Banu Sasan and their way of life and composed a long poem in which he cast himself as one of the group. However, he added a commentary to each verse to explain the jargon words that his sophisticated court audience would have found unfamiliar.

We are the beggars’ brotherhood, and no one can deny us our lofty pride...

And of our number if the feigned madman and mad woman, with metal charms strung from their [sic] necks. And the one who has ornaments drooping from their ears and with collars of leather or brass round their necks... And the one who simulates a festering internal wound, and the people with false bandages round their heads and sickly, jaundiced faces. And the one who slashes himself, alleging that he has been mutilated by assailants, or the one who darkens his skin artificially pretending that he has been beaten up and wounded...

And the one who practices as a manipulator and quack dentist, or who escapes from chains wound round his body, or the one who uses almost invisible silk thread mysteriously to draw off rings...

And of our number are those who claim to be refugees from the Byzantine frontier regions, those who go round begging on pretext of having left behind captive families...

And the one who feigns an internal discharge, or who showers the passers-by with his urine, or who farts in the mosque and makes a nuisance of himself, thus wheedling money out of people...

And of our number are the ones who purvey objects of veneration made from clay, and those who have their breasts smeared with red dye. And the one who brings up secret writing by immersing it in what looks like water, and the one who similarly brings up the writing by exposing it to burning embers.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. Why might the ruling elite have found the descriptions of diverse social groups entertaining?
2. What role does religion appear to play in the culture that patronized this type of literature?
3. How does the personality of the author show up in these passages?

Trade encouraged the manufacture of cloth, metal goods, and pottery.

Science and technology also flourished (see Environment and Technology: Chemistry). Building on Hellenistic traditions and their own observations and experience, Muslim doctors and astronomers developed skills and theories far in advance of their European counterparts. Working in Egypt in the eleventh century, the mathematician and physicist Ibn al-Haytham wrote more than a hundred works. Among other things, he determined that the Milky Way lies far beyond earth’s atmosphere, proved that light travels from a seen object to the eye and not the reverse, and explained why the sun and moon appear larger on the horizon than overhead.

Ibn al-Haytham (ib-uhn al-HY-tham)

Women seldom traveled. Those living in rural areas worked in the fields and tended animals. Urban women, particularly members of the elite, lived in seclusion and did not leave their homes without covering themselves. Seclusion of women and veiling in public already existed in Byzantine and Sasanid times (see Material Culture: Head Coverings). Through interpretation of specific verses from the Quran, these practices now became fixtures of Muslim social life. Although women sometimes became literate and studied with relatives, they did so away from the gaze of unrelated men. Although women played influential roles within the family, public roles were generally barred. Only slave women could perform before unrelated men as musicians and dancers. A man could have sexual relations with as many slave concubines as
Muslim scientists developed sophisticated chemical processes and used them to produce a broad range of goods, including glazes for pottery, rosewater (the distilled essence of roses), hard soap, gunpowder, and various types of glass. The words chemistry and alchemy are both related to the Arabic term for these activities, al-kimiya, and many chemical processes passed from the Muslim world to Europe.

Distillation was used at Baku in Azerbaijan to produce a light flammable liquid called "white naft," roughly equivalent to kerosene, from crude oil. Special military units wearing fire-resistant clothing were trained to use white naft as an incendiary weapon. Flaming liquids, whose exact composition is still uncertain, could be put into pots and thrown, placed in containers attached to arrows, or pumped from a tube.

Islamic Glassware  The glass bottle from Syria shows the skill of Muslim chemists and artisans in producing clear, transparent glass. The scratched decoration reflects the Muslim taste for geometric design. (The Corning Museum of Glass, 68.1.1)

he pleased, in addition to marrying as many as four wives.

Islamic law granted women greater status than did Christian or Jewish law. Muslim women inherited property and retained it in marriage. They had a right to remarry, and they received a cash payment upon divorce. Although a man could divorce his wife without stating a cause, a woman could initiate divorce under specified conditions. Women could practice birth control. They could testify in court, although their testimony counted as half that of a man. They could go on pilgrimage. Nevertheless, a misogynistic tone sometimes appears in Islamic writings. One saying attributed to the Prophet observed: "I was raised up to heaven and saw that most of its denizens were poor people; I was raised into the hellfire and saw that most of its denizens were women."6

In the absence of writings by women from this period, the status of women must be deduced from the writings of men. Two episodes involving the Prophet's wife A'isha, the daughter of Abu Bakr, demonstrate how Muslim men appraised women in society. As a fourteen-year-old she had become separated from a caravan and rejoined it only after traveling through the night with a man who found her alone in the desert. Gossip accused her of being untrue to the Prophet, but a revelation from God proved her innocence. The second event was her participation in the Battle of the Camel, fought to derail Ali's caliphate. These two episodes came to epitomize what Muslim men feared most about women: sexual infidelity and meddling in politics.

The earliest literature dealing with A'isha stresses her position as Muhammad's favorite and her role as a prolific transmitter of hadith. In time, however, his first wife, Khadija, and his daughter, Ali's wife Fatima, surpassed A'isha as ideal women. Both appear as model wives and mothers with no suspicion of sexual irregularity or political manipulation.
As the seclusion of women became commonplace in urban Muslim society, some writers extolled homosexual relationships, partly because a male lover could appear in public or go on a journey. Although Islam deplored homosexuality, one ruler wrote a book advising his son to follow moderation in all things and thus share his affections equally between men and women. Another ruler and his slave boy became models of perfect love in the verses of mystic poets.

Islam allowed slavery but forbade Muslims from enslaving other Muslims or so-called People of the Book—Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, who revered holy books respected by the Muslims. Being enslaved as a prisoner of war constituted an exception. Later centuries saw a constant flow of slaves into Islamic territory from Africa and Central Asia. A hereditary slave society, however, did not develop. Usually slaves converted to Islam, and many masters then freed them as an act of piety. The offspring of slave women and Muslim men were born free.

The Recentering of Islam

Early Islam centered on the caliphate, the political expression of the unity of the umma. No formal organization or hierarchy, however, directed the process of conversion. Thus there emerged a multitude of local Islamic communities so disconnected from each other that numerous competing interpretations of the developing religion arose. Inevitably, the centrality of the caliphate diminished (see Map 8.2). The appearance of rival caliphates in Tunisia and Cordoba accentuated the problem of decentralization.

The rise of the ulama as community leaders did not prevent growing fragmentation because the ulama themselves divided into contentious factions. During the twelfth century factionalism began to abate, and new socioreligious institutions emerged to provide the umma with a different sort of religious center. These new developments stemmed in part from an exodus of religious scholars from Iran in response to economic and political disintegration during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. The flow of Iranians to the Arab lands and to newly conquered territories in India and Anatolia increased after the Mongol invasion.

Fully versed in Arabic as well as their native Persian, immigrant scholars were warmly received. They brought with them a view of religion developed in Iran's urban centers. A type of religious college, the madrasa, gained sudden popularity outside Iran, where madrasas had been known since the tenth century. Scores of madrasas, many founded by local rulers, appeared throughout the Islamic world.

madrasa (mah-draza)
Head Coverings

Covering the head is one of the most universal of human cultural characteristics. It is also one of the most common ways of signaling social status. Examples can be drawn from every part of the world, from earliest times down to the modern era. In premodern Chinese society, the color and design of a man’s cap indicated his rank as clearly as the insignia on military head coverings does today. In most European societies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, men and frequently women of the higher social orders wore wigs, a practice that still survives in the costume of British judges.

Head coverings were particularly important for royalty. From ancient Egypt, where the earliest pharaonic crowns symbolized the union of the northern and southern parts of the Nile Valley, down to the twentieth century and the jewel-studded crown of the shah of Iran, each land developed its own distinctive royal headdress. This also held true for Native American societies in pre-Columbian times and for African and Polynesian societies. In some societies, such as Soso and Iran and the Ottoman Empire in what is today Turkey, each ruler’s crown or turban had a distinctive design that signaled his rule.

Head coverings have also played significant roles in religion. In orthodox Judaism, for example, men wear hats or skullcaps, and married women wear wigs, as signs of acceptance of God’s laws. In Islam, head coverings for women, borrowed from pre-Islamic practice in the Middle East, have become politically controversial in recent years; but prior to the twentieth century it was considered equally improper for a Muslim man to go bareheaded.

Wearing no hat at all was usually a characteristic of slaves or of the poorest elements in society. But it could also signify a deliberate desire to be regarded as humble. Sumerian priests, Buddhist monks and nuns, and certain Sufis in the Muslim world shaved their heads clean. In Europe, early Christian monks and priests shaved the crown of their heads in the Roman Catholic tradition. This form of tonsure competed with and eventually superseded an Irish Catholic practice of shaving the front of the head. Yet head shaving did not always signify humility. Japanese samurai, or warriors, also shaved the front of their heads.

Head coverings for women, as well as wigs and hairdressing styles, sometimes show greater diversity than those for men. This has been particularly true in societies where women of high status mix with men on public occasions. A magnificent wig, hat, or coiffure under these circumstances might speak as much for the social rank of the woman’s husband as for her own.

Given this long history of distinctive head coverings, the abandonment of both men’s and women’s hats in the second half of the twentieth century marked a major turning point in the history of symbolism. Around the world, the hat-making industry has greatly contracted. Whether one visits China, Egypt, India, France, or Brazil, one finds it difficult to determine the rank or status of most people by looking at what they have on their heads. Heads of government typically pose for group photographs with no hats on at all. Aside from conservative religious groups, the head coverings that remain most often indicate occupations: military, police, construction, athletics, and so on.

The reasons for this change are unclear. The spread of democracy may have contributed to it, but hats have become equally uncommon in dictatorships. Head coverings as symbols of national identity persist in a few countries, such as Saudi Arabia, but most distinctive national hats, such as those in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, are worn by only a small minority. A more likely cause of the change is the worldwide role of pictorial media, everything from news photographs to movies. The global media developed in Europe and the United States tend to take Western customs as normal and to portray styles from other lands as “native costumes.” People from non-European regions have thus felt pressure to switch to Western styles, including bareheadedness, to fit into the image of the modern world.
people from religions with mystic traditions who converted to Islam.

The early Sufis had been saintly individuals given to ecstatic and poetic utterances and wonderworking. They attracted disciples but did not try to organize them. The growth of brotherhoods, a less ecstatic form of Sufism, set a tone for society in general. It soon became common for most Muslim men, particularly in the cities, to belong to at least one brotherhood.

A sense of the social climate the Sufi brotherhoods fostered can be gained from a twelfth-century manual:

Every limb has its own special ethics. . . . The ethics of the tongue. The tongue should always be busy in reciting God’s names (dhikr) and in saying good things of the brethren, praying for them, and giving them counsel. . . . The ethics of hearing. One should not listen to indecencies and slander. . . . The ethics of sight. One should lower one’s eyes in order not to see forbidden things.  

Special dispensations allowed people who merely wanted to emulate the Sufis and enjoy their company to follow less demanding rules:

It is allowed by way of dispensation to possess an estate or to rely on a regular income. The Sufis’ rule in this matter is that one should not use all of it for himself, but should dedicate this to public charities and should take from it only enough for one year for himself and his family. . . .

There is a dispensation allowing one to be occupied in business; this dispensation is granted to him who has to support a family. But this should not keep him away from the regular performance of prayers. . . .

There is a dispensation allowing one to watch all kinds of amusement. This is, however, limited by the rule: What you are forbidden from doing, you are also forbidden from watching.  

Some Sufi brotherhoods spread in the countryside. Local shrines and pilgrimages to the tombs of Muhammad’s descendants and saintly Sufis became popular. The end of the Abbasid Caliphate enhanced the religious centrality of Mecca, which eventually became an important center of madrasa education, and gave renewed importance to the annual pilgrimage.
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The Sassanid Empire that held sway in Iran and Iraq from the third to the seventh century strongly resembled the contemporary realm of the eastern Roman emperors ruling from Constantinople. Both states forged strong relations between the ruler and the dominant religion, Zoroastrianism in the former empire, Christianity in the latter. Priestly hierarchies paralleled state administrative structures, and the citizenry came to think of themselves more as members of a faith community than as subjects of a ruler. This gave rise to conflict among religious sects and also raised the possibility of the founder of a new religion commanding both political and religious loyalty on an unprecedented scale. This possibility was realized in the career of the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. Islam culminated the trend toward identity based on religion. The concept of the umma united all Muslims in a universal community embracing enormous diversity of language, appearance, and social custom. Though Muslim communities adapted to local “small traditions,” by the twelfth century a religious scholar could travel anywhere in the Islamic world and blend easily into the local Muslim community.

By the ninth century, the forces of conversion and urbanization fostered social and religious experimentation in urban settings. But from the eleventh century onward, political disruption and the spread of pastoral nomadism slowed this early economic and technological dynamism. Muslim communities then turned to new religious institutions, such as the madrasas and Sufi brotherhoods, to create the flexible and durable community structures that carried Islam into new regions and protected ordinary believers from capricious political rule.

SUMMARY

How did the traditions and religious views of pre-Islamic peoples become integrated into the culture shaped by Islam?

How did the Muslim community of the time of Muhammad differ from the society that developed after the Arab conquests?

Was the Baghdad caliphate really the high point of Muslim civilization?

How did regional diversity affect the development of Islamic civilization?

The creation of an enormous empire ruled by caliphs dramatically changed world history. However, it is often forgotten that for two hundred years or more after Muhammad’s death Muslims remained a minority in the lands they ruled. Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, and polytheists continued to live according to their own beliefs and traditions. When adherents to these faiths converted to Islam, they brought with them many of their cultural characteristics, and Islam was adaptable enough to incorporate some of them into Muslim ways of life that therefore developed somewhat differently from region to region.

The role of the Arabs changed as this process of adaptation proceeded. During Muhammad’s lifetime, virtually all Muslims were Arabs from central or southern Arabia. Their cultural traditions underlie many verses of the Quran. But Arab life changed once the warriors who carried out the conquests moved with their families into camps or cities in the conquered lands. Non-Arabs who converted to Islam became adoptive members of Arab kin groups, and many Arab men married non-Arab women. Over time, most non-Arab Muslims living west of Iran adopted the Arabic language. Thus, despite the dominance of their religion, language, and writing system, the Arabs of the time of the Prophet differed greatly from the people who thought of themselves as Arabs three centuries later.

A division of the caliphate into smaller political units accompanied this change in identity. The glittering cosmopolitan Baghdad of the early Abbasid Caliphate
lost its luster as the conversion of non-Arabs to Islam increased and other cities from Spain to Pakistan evolved into regional Muslim centers. Despite Baghdad's reputation, these later centers, looked at collectively, contributed more to the distinctiveness of medieval Islamic culture than did Baghdad.

Spain, Egypt, and Iran were three regions that flourished as Baghdad declined. Each developed a particular intellectual, religious, and artistic character within the overall unity of Islam. Politically as well, regional variation was important. The coming of the Turks and Mongols left North Africa and Spain mostly untouched, the Crusades were of negligible importance for Iran, and the confrontation of the Muslims of Spain with the Christians to their north meant little to the Egyptians. Yet all of these events contributed to the shaping of medieval Islamic civilization as a whole.

**KEY TERMS**

Mecca p. 218  
Muhammad p. 218  
muslim p. 219  
Islam p. 219  
Medina p. 220  
umma p. 220  
caliphate p. 220  
Quran p. 220  
Umayyad Caliphate p. 221  
Shi'ite p. 221  
Sunni p. 221  
Abbasid Caliphate p. 222  
mamluks p. 224  
Ghur p. 224  
ulama p. 226  
hadith p. 227

**SUGGESTED READING**


Muslims regard the Quran as untranslatable because they consider the Arabic in which it is couched to be inseparable from God's message. Most "interpretations" in English adhere reasonably closely to the Arabic text. For an insightful reading of parts of the Quran, see Michael Sells, *Approaching the Quran: The Early Revelations* (1999).


For a general history that puts the first three centuries of Abbasid rule into the context of the earlier periods, see Hugh N. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphs: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (1986). Harold Bowen, *The Life and Times of Ali ibn Abu Talib* (1936; reprint, 1975) supplements Kennedy's narrative superbly with
a detailed study of corrupt caliphal politics in the tumultuous early tenth century.


