

Chapter Twenty

The “Rightly Guided” Califs, and the Establishment of an Arabian Empire

At the death of Muhammad in 632, Islam was still a regional phenomenon, largely restricted to the Arabian Hijaz, and Arabians were of little concern to either the Byzantine or the Sassanid emperor. Within a decade all had changed. Arabians had become the main concern of both emperors, not because the emperors' subjects were converting to Islam (they were not) but because of the astonishing victories that “the Saracens” had won on the battlefield. By 642 the Muslim *ummah* under Umar's direction had taken over the Byzantine empire's most important provinces and had effectively destroyed the Sassanid empire. This overturning of the Byzantine and Sassanid powers, perhaps the most dramatic reversal in any period of history, brought the ancient world to an end. As seen by the Muslims, their enormous military success proved that God was on their side and that they were meant to rule the world.

The Byzantine empire in the early seventh century

In the late sixth and early seventh centuries the Byzantine empire was in the throes of its worst military crisis since the departure of the Visigoths from the Balkans, two hundred years earlier. Justinian (525-565) and his general Belisarius had seemed to succeed in their project of recreating the Roman empire of old - they did reconquer Italy and North Africa - but the success was only superficial, and it was soon undone when Justinian died. For some time Carthage - as an *exarchate* - remained a possession of the empire, but Italy was largely lost. By destroying the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy Justinian had inadvertently opened the way for the Lombards, another coalition of Germanic warriors, to descend upon Italy and carve out a kingdom for themselves. In the Balkans, other adventurers perceived the underlying weakness of the Byzantine empire and began plundering towns and cities. Most of these raiders were Slavic speaking, and others were known as Avars, whose native language was related to Turkish. From their homelands north of the Danube, Slavic and Avar marauders penetrated south to the Peloponnesos, wreaking havoc. When latecomers found little left to plunder they took the choicest land and settled down, and the Byzantine emperor Maurice (582-602) was unable to evict them.

Khusrau's conquests

A coup d'état disposed of Maurice and elevated Phocas (602-610), an unusually bad emperor. The Sassanid ruler at the time was Khusrau II (Chosroes II), one of the ablest in the Sassanid line. Insisting that Maurice had been a personal benefactor, Khusrau used the murder of Maurice as an excuse to attack Phocas and his empire. The Byzantines of course had few troops on their eastern frontier because many units had been drawn off to deal with the Slavic depredations in the Balkans. The Sassanids first overran all of northern Mesopotamia and northern Syria, and then - encountering little opposition - crossed the Tauros range and entered Anatolia. Khusrau's army proceeded all the way to the Bosphorus and laid siege to Chalcedon,

within sight of Constantinople itself. At this nadir of Byzantine fortunes Phocas was eliminated in another coup d'état, this one engineered by Heraclius, who founded a dynasty that lasted for eighty-five years (610-695). Initially, however, Heraclius fared no better than had his predecessor. In 611 Khusrau annexed Armenia. Next he led his forces into the southern Levant, entering Jerusalem in 614. The next year he made his second advance to Chalcedon, and in 619 conquered Egypt.

In his campaigns in the Levant, Khusrau exploited the religious tensions and hatreds of the region. The Christian faith of the emperors, which they called "orthodox" but which their theological opponents called "Melkite" (meaning "royal" or "imperial"), followed the creed adopted by the Council of Chalcedon in 451: Jesus was by nature both True Man and True God. Not readily intelligible, the Melkite doctrine was resented and resisted by most of the Christians in the Levant and Egypt. In these lands a simpler Monophysite Christianity was far more popular than was the Orthodox creed. Because of the Christological polemic, the average Levantine and Egyptian Christian was not at all sure that being conquered by Khusrau was any worse than being subject to Constantinople.

Even more alienated from the Byzantine empire were the million or so Judaeans, the tens of thousands of Samaritans, and the few thousand pagans who still survived in the Levant. Their alienation had been intensified by the penalties that Justinian had imposed - and that his successors had maintained - on all subjects who were not members of the Orthodox church. Because the sympathy of the Judaeans and the Samaritans was clearly with the Sassanids, Phocas had ordered that the Judaeans of Antioch, the largest city in Syria, be forcibly baptized and so converted to Christianity. As a result, when in 614 Khusrau brought his army through the Levant both the Judaeans and the Samaritans welcomed him as a deliverer. Taking the opportunity to attack the Christian majority, they slew thousands of Christians in the few years that Khusrau's troops were in control of the Levant. Adding insult to injury, Khusrau removed the True Cross from Jerusalem to his capital city of Ctesiphon.

Heraclius' victories and the Sassanid debacle

Although staggered by the disasters in the east and the west, Heraclius was able to save the Byzantine empire through drastic reforms.¹ The occupation of the Balkans and most of Greece by Slavic and Avar intruders was too complete to undo, and Heraclius accepted the loss of Europe in order to save his Asiatic empire. Organizing Anatolia in military units called *themes*, he rebuilt his army in hopes of defeating Khusrau. Heraclius' counterattack began in 622. He first recovered Armenia, from which his family had come, and established *themes* there also. With this strategically placed region under his control, and with a large force at his disposal, Heraclius was able to launch an attack on the Sassanids in northern Mesopotamia. A climactic battle was fought near the site of ancient Nineveh in 627. Heraclius defeated Khusrau's army so decisively that Khusrau's hold on the royal power weakened, and he was murdered by his own son in a palace coup. The son took the throne-name of Kavad II and promptly entered into negotiations with Heraclius to end the conflict. His forces depleted, Kavad agreed to surrender to the Byzantines everything that his father had conquered. Egypt and the Levant returned to Heraclius' control, and even the True Cross was brought back to

Jerusalem. Intent on punishing the Judaeans of the Levant for their attacks on the Christian population during Khusrau's brief rule, Heraclius in 629 gave orders that all of them should be forcibly baptized (the order was never carried out).

The Sassanids' troubles, bad enough after the Battle of Nineveh, worsened in the aftermath. Kavad II died of a plague that was ravaging the Near East, a usurper took power but was himself murdered, and for three years (629-32) the Sassanid realm was almost rudderless. Nor was the situation very promising for the Byzantine empire. Heraclius may have supposed, after the victory over Khusrau, that the future was once again bright, but that would have been an illusion. The provinces that he had recovered - Egypt and the Levant - contributed no significant manpower to his army and saw themselves more as occupied territories than as integral parts of the Byzantine state. Unlike the Anatolians, most of whom spoke Greek and belonged to the Orthodox communion, the populations of Egypt and the Levant spoke Coptic and Aramaic respectively, and the religious sympathies of both were with the Monophysite church. Even more ominous for the Byzantines was their loss of Italy, North Africa, the Balkans and Greece.

The “Rightly Guided” califs (632-661) in Sunni and Shiite perspectives

During the exhausting conflict between the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, few observers in either palace would have known or cared very much had they learned about religious developments that were taking place in the Arabian Hijaz. When Muhammad and his Muslims made their descent on Ayla (Eilat) in 631, reports were presumably brought to Heraclius that another force of “Saracens” was causing trouble, but the emperor must scarcely have been worried by the news: Saracen raiders had been a nuisance - but nothing more than that - for almost four hundred years.

But the Arabians were no longer merely raiders. In the last years of his life Muhammad had seen that the forces under his control were sufficient to take and hold territory, and he had also realized that the “people of the book” were potentially a source of vast and reliable revenue: as *ahl al-dhimmah* (“people of protected status”) they could retain their traditional religions, but only in return for an annual tribute (*jizya*). This was the arrangement settled upon with the Judaeans of the Khaybar oasis and with the Christians of Ayla. It was in pursuit of increased *jizya* that the Muslims entered the Levant.

When Muhammad died at Medina in 632 the Muslim Umma's potential for wealth and power was suddenly in jeopardy, unless a leader were chosen to “succeed” Muhammad. The Prophet himself had made no arrangements for a successor, beyond asking his friend and father-in-law, Abū Bakr, to lead the Muslims in their daily prayers. Immediately after the Prophet's death, Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and Abū ‘Ubaydah - the three most influential of the Muslims at Medina - met and decided that Abu Bakr should act in the place of Muhammad in temporal matters, and so be the Prophet's *khalīfah* (“successor”).²

Abu Bakr was therefore the first Muslim calif, and he and the next three successors - Umar, Uthman, and Ali - are regarded by Sunni Muslims as the four “Rightly Guided” califs. In the middle of the eighth century the reigning Abbasid calif labeled the first four califs as “Rightly Guided” (*rashidun*), in order to denigrate as “wicked” the Umayyad califs who followed them

from 661 to 750. This was Abbasid propaganda, most of the Umayyads being no less pious than their predecessors.

The califate of Abū Bakr (632-34) and the Ridda Wars

Abu Bakr spent most of his brief califate (632-34) keeping the fledgling Muslim Umma together. The most serious crisis came immediately. When the Arabian tribes learned of Muhammad's death many of them supposed that their commitment to Islam had come to an end (it was widely assumed that the Day of Judgement would arrive during Muhammad's lifetime, and his death cast some doubt on the validity of his prophecy). Various prominent men proclaimed themselves prophets who would take Muhammad's place, and the stock of Musaylima at al-Yamama rose dramatically.

The *riddah* wars, or "Wars of Apostasy" conducted by Abu Bakr held the tribes in line in the Umma, brought down Musaylima at al-Yamama, and confirmed that Muhammad was the Seal of the Prophets. The Ridda Wars are seen differently by Sunni and Shiite Muslims. In Sunni Islam the victories of Abu Bakr are celebrated as God's work. In contrast, Shiah Islam sees the Ridda Wars as a result not of apostasy, but of the improper selection of Abu Bakr as calif. Shiites hold that before his death Muhammad had designated Ali as his successor, and that Abu Bakr's elevation to the califate was therefore a violation of the Prophet's will. In this view the so-called "apostates" were devout Muslims who objected to the arbitrary selection of Abu Bakr as calif. What evidence is available suggests that Ali was not a serious candidate for the succession until the 640s, by which time Ali's supporters had begun to circulate the story of Muhammad's selection of his son-in-law as his successor.

The Battle of Ajnadain (634) and the conquest of Palestine

By the summer of 634 the recalcitrant Arabians had been subdued, and Abu Bakr sent to Palestine some twenty thousand warriors - under the command of several generals, one of whom was Abu Ubaydah and the most important of whom was 'Amr ibn al-'As - with instructions to capture its chief towns and turn their inhabitants into tax-paying *ahl al-dhimmah*. At the same time, a smaller force was sent under Khālīd ibn al-Walīd to do the same along the western edge of Mesopotamia. The army that had been sent to Palestine won some small and inconsequential victories over local garrisons, after which a large Byzantine force was assembled under the command of Theodore, brother of Heraclius, to defeat the intruders. This force included cavalry from the Arabic Christian tribes (the Ghassan and Lakhm), long-time allies or employees of the emperors.

When news came to Abu Bakr that the army he had sent to Palestine would shortly be in danger, he dispatched riders from Medina to Khalid, who was operating on the western edge of southern Mesopotamia, instructing him to dash across the desert and render assistance to the Muslim force in Palestine. Khalid decided to leave half of his force in Mesopotamia, and to put the rest on horses and camels for a strenuous ride. Theodore and the Byzantine generals had no inkling that Muslim reinforcements were en route, and delayed confronting Amr ibn al-As. Meanwhile, Khalid, having given his camels all the water they could hold and having loaded

them with all the water they could carry, made his way straight across the desert. According to Muslim legend, in one five-day stretch through completely waterless desert many of the camels were slaughtered so that the men could drink the water from the camels' stomachs. In the event, Khalid reached Palestine in time, joined Amr, and on July 30, 634, their armies faced the Byzantines at a place known to Arabians as Ajnadain.³ The location of Ajnadain is unknown, but seems to have been west of the Jordan and not too far from Jerusalem (Byzantine survivors of the battle were said to have fled to Jerusalem for shelter). Slaying thousands of the emperor's troops, the Muslims won a decisive victory and took control of central and southern Palestine. Much of the glory went to Khalid ibn al-Walid, whose reputation as "the Sword of Islam" began with the victory at Ajnadain. The next year the forces of Amr and Khalid moved into Syria, taking Damascus and Emesa (Homs), a hundred miles further north.

With the exception of Orthodox Christians, the inhabitants of Emesa and Damascus, as of the rest of Palestine and Syria, were either indifferent to the victory of the Muslims or gratified by it. The Monophysite Christian majority welcomed the Saracen promise - which was kept - to honor the Monophysite communion as a legitimate religion, and to give it the same protection given to Orthodox Christians and to Judaeans. The tiny minorities of Samaritans and of Nestorian Christians likewise had plenty of reasons to prefer the Muslims to the Byzantines.

The califate of `Umar ibn al-Khattāb (634-644)

Abu Bakr, the first calif, died in summer of 634, even before news of the Muslim victory at Ajnadain had been brought to Medina. The man chosen to replace Abu Bakr as calif was `Umar ibn al-Khattāb, who - like Abu Bakr - had been an early convert to Islam and whose daughter Hafsa had been one of the Prophet's wives. It was Umar's good fortune to preside over the astonishing expansion of the Arabian empire, which by his death was at least ten times larger than it had been at his accession. Umar himself, straightforward and hot tempered, was hardly changed by the great success. His manner of living remained what it had been, simple and even austere, and as ruler of much of the world he dressed as he had before 622, when he was still a persecuted follower of Muhammad at Mecca.

The Battle of the Yarmuk (636) and the taking of Syria

Umar's first challenge was to hold what had already been seized in the Levant, against the attempts of the Byzantine emperor to recover it. In 636, from his temporary palace at Antioch, Heraclius ordered the recruitment of the largest army he could afford and put another Theodore - Theodore the Treasurer - in charge of it.⁴ Including the Lakhmid and Ghassan cavalry, it is reputed to have numbered at least 80,000 men, all of whom trusted that they would reverse the outcome of Ajnadain. The Muslim generals Amr and Khalid, whose force numbered only about 24,000, decided to abandon Homs, Damascus and the rest of Syria, and to fall southward to a position on the Yarmuk rivulet, flowing westward into the Jordan just downstream from the Sea of Galilee. On the Yarmuk's left bank Khalid and Amr erected artificial defenses, arranged for the delivery of supplies, and for well over a month were content to skirmish with the much larger Byzantine force that faced them. Because of the inaction and the dwindling of food supplies (the population of the Levant cooperated more readily with the Muslim quartermasters than with

those of the emperor), morale among the Byzantines had by late August begun to deteriorate and some of their Christian Arabic allies deserted.

Although on the defensive, Khalid and Amr were prepared to attack if conditions were favorable. After weeks of waiting, such conditions materialized thanks to a sandstorm, such as happens periodically in the arid lands east of the Jordan:

The decisive moment arrived on August 20, when a sandstorm began to blow from the south and into the faces of the Roman troops. The impetuous Saracens seized the moment and charged the Roman line, which gave way and was cornered in a position from which no escape was possible. They fell nearly to a man, and Theodore was among the dead.⁵

When news of the battle was carried to Heraclius, the old emperor departed in haste for Constantinople, acknowledging that Antioch too must inevitably capitulate to the Muslims and that the entire Levant was now effectively in the hands of Umar's generals.

The *jizya* that poured into Medina as a result of the conquest of the Levant was a bonanza for the Arabians, and seemed to them ample proof that God was real and all-powerful, and that he was One - as Muhammad had revealed - rather than Three, as the Christians supposed. In 637 or 638 Umar made a journey to Jerusalem, to receive the city's surrender and to visit its famed holy places, and according to legend he entered the city alone. Throughout the Levant Christians and Judaeans alike trusted him, and he honored his commitment to protect them and their places of worship in return for their faithful payment of the *jizya*.

The toppling of the Sassanids

Immediately after the Muslim victory in the Levant, Umar directed the boundless energy and enthusiasm of his Arabic armies against Mesopotamia, most of which was subject to the Sassanids. Sporadic campaigns had been conducted already in 634, and under the command of Khalid the Muslims had taken the city of Hira, but extension of the empire in Mesopotamia was then deferred in favor of operations in Palestine and Syria. After the sandstorm battle of the Yarmuk in summer of 636, further delay was unnecessary: Umar and his advisors almost immediately began to lay their plans for the conquest of Mesopotamia. As we have seen, the Sassanid regime was in a sorry state. After Khusrau's defeat by the Byzantines at Nineveh, Khusrau was murdered and for several years the kingdom verged on anarchy. In 632 Yazdagird III took the throne, the last of the Sassanid rulers.

1. The Battle of Qādisīya and the conquest of Mesopotamia (Iraq)

In spring of 637 the Muslims returned in force to Mesopotamia, the Arabic name for which was *Iraq*. Their orders were to attack Ctesiphon, the Sassanid capital on the Tigris, and to drive the Sassanids out. According to Muslim sources Umar wished to lead this expedition himself, but was dissuaded by his advisors, who argued that although a Muslim defeat on the battlefield would be damaging, if such a defeat were compounded by the death of the calif it

would be disastrous. In any case, Umar remained at Medina and entrusted the campaign to his longtime comrade, Sa‘d ibn Abi Waqqās (another early Quraysh convert to Islam), assisted by Khalid ibn al-Walid. Saad’s army supposedly numbered 28,000 men: although all were on horses or camels for the journey, many of the men were trained to fight on foot as well as on horseback. All of Saad’s men were Arabians but not all were Muslims. His army included, that is, a fair number of Arabian Christians: men of the Ghassan and Lakhm tribes, who traditionally had been employed by the Byzantine and Sassanid empires but who now reckoned that the wiser course was to assist the Muslims and share with them the spoils of victory.

Saad’s force proceeded directly across southern Mesopotamia toward Ctesiphon, and was met by the Sassanids at Qādisiyya, a city not far to the west of the Tigris and of Ctesiphon. The Sassanid army was under the command of Rustam, a renowned Persian general and one of the few whom King Yazdagird trusted, and the army was supposed to have been enormous (120,000 is the figure given). Adding to the challenge for the Arabians was the presence of an elephant corps, beasts that many of them had never seen. According to the Muslim calendar the Battle of Qadisiya took place over four days in the month of Muharram in A.H. 14 (probably the middle of June of 637). Although on the first and second days the Arabians got the worst of it, on the third day they defeated the elephant corps and on the fourth day routed the rest of the Sassanid force. The victory was costly, however, as six thousand of Saad’s troops - almost one man in every four - were killed. But Saad’s army held together while the Sassanid army disintegrated (Rustam was slain, along with all of his personal guards), and from Qadisiya the victors advanced on Ctesiphon, which fell after a two-month siege. Another Muslim legend is that at the fall of Ctesiphon, and the seizure of the fabulous Sassanid treasury, every soldier in Saad’s army - whether Muslim or Christian - was given 12,000 pieces of silver.

More important than the immediate booty at Ctesiphon was the *jizya* that now began to flow from the cities of Mesopotamia to Umar and the Muslim *umma*. In the early seventh century the four or five million people of Iraq spoke the Syriac (or Eastern Aramaic) language and almost all of them were “people of the book.” As rabbinic and non-rabbinic Judaeans, Christians (some Orthodox, but more of them Monophysite or Nestorian), and Zoroastrians, they had been protected by the Sassanid regime and were now eligible for the same protection from the Muslims, so long as they paid their annual poll-tax. For themselves the Muslims built two new cities, whose places of worship were mosques instead of churches and synagogues. One of these cities was Kufa, near Hira on the Euphrates river in central Iraq. The other, in southern Iraq and not far from the Persian Gulf, was Basrah.

As they had also done in the Levant, the Muslim commanders left garrisons at various key places in Iraq to keep the peace and collect the tax. Thus after taking Ctesiphon (al Madā‘in) by siege, Saad asked for volunteers to act as the city’s garrison.⁶ A garrison was typically quartered near a major city but outside its walls. The separation of the garrison from the local population perhaps lessened whatever resentment the Dhimmis may have felt, and certainly reduced the likelihood that the garrison troops would be corrupted by urban temptations. The garrisons and armies of Umar were rapidly becoming professional. The califs did not - as Roman emperors had regularly done - offer a retiring veteran farmland in the subjugated provinces as a reward for his services. Instead, the calif’s troops were given monthly - in gold

and silver - a more generous wage than had been customary in the Roman, Byzantine and Sassanid empires. Much of the *jizya* was expended on the army.

2. Nihāvand and the conquest of western Iran

After his defeat at Qadisiya the Sassanid king, Yazdagird III, had crossed the Zagros mountains into Iran and so was not present at Ctesiphon when the city fell to the Arabian invaders. Iran had fewer cities than Iraq, and less wealth. East of the Zagros the principal languages were Iranian rather than Semitic, and the population was more martial than the essentially urban population to the west of the mountains. It was therefore supposed in some quarters that the Muslims would be content to rule Iraq, and would leave the Sassanids alone in the Iranian plateau. The tribute that the Muslims were collecting from Iraq and the Levant was more than they could easily spend.

Seventh-century Arabians, however, had a lifetime habit of fighting. Even after losing many of their comrades at Qadisiya, the survivors and the many Arabians who subsequently joined their ranks became restive in peace. For the Muslims an added incentive was the promise that anyone killed while fighting under the Prophet or his calif was a martyr who would be welcomed in Heaven and provided with its delights. For all the Arabians, whether Muslim or Christian, the recent and astounding victories at Ajnadain, the Yarmuk and Qadisiya encouraged the taste for more. In contrast to the old days of the *jahiliyya*, when the pagan tribes of Arabia fought against each other for a wadi or a well, now the tribes were united and apparently invincible, and the prizes of victory were vast territories with all their inhabitants.

After a few tentative probes into Iran, in 641 Umar seems to have ordered (or permitted) a large force to cross the Zagros and confront the Sassanids in their own homeland. These campaigns, unfortunately, are poorly known.⁷ What is certain is that Yazdagird met the invaders at Nihāvand, which lies in the mountains due east of Bakhtaran (formerly Kermanshah). The Arabians were once again victorious, and from Nihavand they evidently moved in two directions. One thrust was to Isfahan, 175 miles to the southeast of Nihavand, and the other was north to Hamadan, which city was in antiquity known as Ekbatana. Ekbatana had been the capital of the Median kings in the seventh century BC, and had served as a summer palace for Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes as well as for their Parthian and Sassanid successors. After a siege Ekbatana fell to the Arabians in 642. Even though Ekbatana's wealth did not compare with that of Ctesiphon, the psychological blow that accompanied the fall of Ekbatana was a death-knell for the Sassanid regime. Yazdagird, on the run, survived until 651, but the victory at Nihavand and the taking of Isfahan and Ekbatana effectively put all of western Iran into Umar's hands. The population here included far fewer Judaeans and Christians and many more Zoroastrians than were to be found in Iraq. All now became a part of the tax-paying *ahl al-dhimmah* in the Arabian empire.

Egypt

Early in 640, while Umar's main focus was on the Sassanids in Iran, his general Amr ibn al-As crossed the Sinai and entered the province of Egypt, which at the time seems to have had a population of about five million. Amr invaded the province with a relatively small force, evidently no more than 10,000 men, but it was not so foolhardy a venture as it may initially seem.

When Heraclius withdrew from the Levant in 636, from the army that he had left he detached only a few thousand men for the defense of Egypt. The province depended entirely for its defense on imperial garrisons, since the Egyptians themselves - like the Levantines - were long disused to military service and had no tradition of self-defense. More importantly, most Egyptians had little loyalty to Constantinople. In the towns, villages and countryside they spoke Coptic, not Greek, and their religious sympathies were strongly with the Monophysite creed that the emperors had long opposed. The province was therefore ripe for the plucking.

Amr first besieged and took the city of Pelusium, in the eastern Delta. He next proceeded to the fortress city named (Egyptian) "Babylon," on the east bank of the Nile. Babylon-on-the-Nile controlled the easiest crossing of the river just south of the Delta. The fortress surrendered in April of 641, soon after the announcement that the old emperor Heraclius had died. Amr placed a garrison outside of "Babylon," and called his garrison-town *fustat*, an Arabic word for "tent-encampment." Over the centuries, Fustat would evolve into Cairo. After Amr's capture of Babylon-on-the Nile and his crossing to the left bank, most other Egyptian cities made terms with him. At Alexandria, the best defended and by far the largest city in Egypt, the Byzantine defenders held out until 642 but ultimately negotiated the city's surrender to Amr. That the Arabians burned the famous Library of Alexandria is a late canard, first attested in thirteenth-century sources.⁸ Amr stayed on in Egypt, appointed by Umar to act as its governor. He made Fustat his capital.

Factors in the Arabian conquests during Umar's califate

In their scope, rapidity, and sheer surprise the Muslim conquests in the years 632-642 were almost unprecedented. Alexander the Great had conquered the same area and more just as quickly, but the army commanded by Alexander had already proved its mettle before he set foot in Asia and so his victories were not quite so unexpected as were those of the Muslims. Even before Alexander came to the throne the Macedonian monarchy had shown itself to be the dominant power in the Aegean world, and for a century and a half Greek armies had been defeating the Persians on land and sea. In contrast, when Muhammad died in 632 the Muslims were still virtually unknown outside the Hijaz, and within ten years they conquered more than half of the "Roman" empire and mortally wounded the Sassanid empire. It is understandable that Muslims have traditionally looked upon these dramatic conquests as proof of God's favor to Islam.

The Muslim victories, however, can be explained well enough in historical terms. It is important, first of all, to identify more clearly who the victors were. Although in retrospect we see them as "the Muslims," in the middle decades of the seventh century the Byzantines saw them as "the Saracens." At the Yarmuk and especially at Qadisiya and Nihavand the winners were not all Muslims but they were all Arabians: the Christian Arabic tribes - the Ghassan and Lakhm - contributed much to the victories and shared in the spoils. The Arabians had for a long time been potentially a strong military force. Because Arabic society was still at the pre-state level all Arabian tribesmen were warriors, in stark contrast to the civilian and peaceful population of Mesopotamia, the Levant and Egypt. The Arabians' opponents on the battlefield were professional armies employed by the Byzantine and Sassanid emperors, and both of the

imperial armies had been seriously depleted by the conflicts of Heraclius and Khusrau, culminating in the Battle of Nineveh in 627.

Although the Arabians were inferior to their opponents in arms and armor, and even more so in manpower,⁹ the desert gave them an enormous strategic advantage. Because neither the Byzantines nor the Sassanids could take the offensive against desert tribes, the two empires were regularly on the defensive, necessarily waiting for the Arabians - all of them on horses and camels - to come out of the desert and strike at a time and place that the Arabians had chosen. Khalid's daring dash across the desert in 634 was decisive in defeating the Byzantines at Ajnadain, and Amr's ability to cross the Sinai gave him an access to Egypt that most armies did not have. Tactically too the desert worked for the Arabians, when at the Yarmuk they turned a sandstorm into an opportunity to attack.

The lands that Umar's armies conquered were not truly "hostile" territory. Most of the population in the Levant and Egypt was alienated from Heraclius. All Judaeans and Samaritans and most of the Monophysite Christians regarded the imperial government as oppressive, and believed that the Arabians would be an improvement. Umar's project was simply to add as many "protected subjects" (Dhimmis) as possible to the Arabian empire, in order to increase the Muslims' annual revenue (*jizya*). Even that poll-tax was a fairly light burden for a Dhimmi, because it was lighter than the tax that he had been accustomed to pay to his Byzantine or Sassanid ruler.

Certainly, Umar's men did not come to impose Islam, which was still in its infancy, on anyone. The *hadith* about the Prophet's deeds and words had not yet been established, and in any case do not seem to have become normative before the late seventh century, when they served as a reproach against the "corrupt" Umayyads. The Muslim warriors who won the great battles during Umar's califate supposed that the religion that they had recently adopted was a purified version of the religion that Judaeans and Christians professed, but which over time both of the "peoples of the book" had distorted. The early Muslims also assumed that Muhammad's revelation had been delivered for the benefit of Arabic speakers, and that Judaeans and Christians would therefore continue to worship God in their synagogues and churches as they had always done.

Like the Muslims, the Byzantines did not see the attacks on the Levant and Egypt in religious terms. When the Byzantines faced the forces of Amr and Khalid at Ajnadain, on the Yarmuk, and in Egypt, they knew nothing of Muhammad and his prophecies and did not see the conflict as a clash of two religions. The Byzantines' enemies were simply the Arabians, or "the Saracens," who for centuries had been a concern but who were now - for reasons that the Byzantines did not know - far more formidable than they had ever been. The religion of "the Saracens" was not yet of much interest to the Byzantines. It is remarkable that long after the Muslim conquest of the Levant and of Egypt the Christian population of the Byzantine empire had no clear idea what the religion of their conquerors actually was. Until well into the eighth century most Christians supposed that the religion of "the Saracens" was merely another Christian heresy, rather like the Arian or Nestorian heresy: the conquerors, that is, worshiped God, as the Monophysite and Orthodox Christians did, but although they revered Jesus, and

although many of them supposed that on the Day of Judgment they would see him arriving through the clouds,¹⁰ they did not regard him as God. It was not, evidently, until Christians began to convert to Islam in large numbers that Christian clerics recognized Islam as a religion distinct from - and incompatible with - any of the several forms of Christianity.¹¹ In the 630s and 640s, the Christians of the Levant, Egypt and Mesopotamia saw the invading Arabians as heretics to be sure, but as much more respectful of other communions than the Byzantines had ever been.

The most decisive factor in the success of Umar's armies was the unification (and centralization) of Arabian tribes in the Muslim Umma. The fractious tribes that had from time immemorial been fighting each other, because there was no real community larger than the tribe, were now joined together in a pan-Arabian community that in some important respects functioned as a state.¹² The warlike temperament and traditions of the Arabians were now directed to the *outside*, and with each victory the warriors found themselves enriched, their fortunes eventually soaring beyond anything they had imagined possible. Even death in battle was mitigated by the Prophet's assurances that martyrs in the cause of Islam would be rewarded in Heaven by endless sensual delights.

Throughout most of the ancient world and for much of its history we find two quite different kinds of society. One of these is a centralized and civilianized state, and the other is a tribal society with a warlike population. The northern Arabian peninsula in the 630s and 640s, however, was a rare combination of these two kinds. Here was a population of warriors, who had heretofore fought among themselves, suddenly gathered into a community very much like a centralized state, with the calif enjoying almost monarchical authority over his Muslim warriors and warlords. Something similar had happened among the Germanic barbarians in central Europe in the third, fourth and fifth centuries, as coalitions - the Goths, Franks, Vandals - formed around a warlord with the purpose of plundering and eventually taking over chunks of the western Roman empire. These Germanic coalitions featured both a traditionally warlike population and a newly centralized organization that put an end to the chronic internecine warfare and replaced it with the goal and possibility of foreign conquest. The Slavic and Avar coalitions that ravaged and appropriated the Balkans in the sixth and seventh centuries may also have combined a primitive population with a centralized command.

Unlike the Germanic, Slavic and Avar conquerors, however, the Arabians were held together by something far stronger and more durable than the desire for conquest. Even before they had any such ambitions they had come together under Muhammad in a religious community, and it was only after they had joined the Muslim Umma that they recognized that their new pan-Arabian community had the wherewithal to seize and profit from foreign territory. The successes under Abu Bakr and Umar confirmed the Arabians' belief that Islam was indeed God's gift to them. As they saw it, their empire was the reward that God gave them for having accepted his revelation to the Prophet.

The califate of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān

In 644, at the age of sixty-two, Umar was murdered by one of his slaves.¹³ Umar had set

up at Medina a council of six men to act during an interregnum, and so at his death the councillors were responsible for naming his successor. They selected one of their number, the seventy-year-old ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, as the next *khalīfah*. Uthman’s strongest competitor for the position of calif was Ali, a fellow member of the council but much younger than Uthman. Ali was greatly disappointed at having been passed over, and to this personal rivalry between Uthman and Ali has been retrojected (somewhat anachronistically) the fundamental division between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Sunni Muslims regard Uthman as one of “the Four Rightly Guided Califs” and Sunni traditions about him are generally, although not entirely, favorable. In contrast, the Shiites (the *shī‘atu ‘Alī* or the “party of Ali”) view Ali as the first Imam and as the first true calif, and they suppose that Uthman was an unmixed evil.

Uthman’s credentials for the califate were considerable. He was by birth a member of the Umayyads, the most powerful and prestigious clan of the Quraysh tribe. His conversion to Islam before 620, when he had already reached middle age, was at the time an embarrassment to the clan and a great boost to Muhammad. In recognition of this support, the Prophet gave his daughter Ruqayya to Uthman in marriage, and in 628 entrusted to Uthman the dangerous task of trying to persuade the Quraysh to allow Muhammad to return to Mecca in order to make the circumambulation of the Ka‘ba. In that negotiation Uthman was unsuccessful, but when Mecca was taken over by Muhammad in 630 the Umayyad clan converted wholesale to Islam and was pleased that one of its members enjoyed so high a rank among the Prophet’s advisors. By 644 Uthman was therefore one of the most senior and eminent men in the Muslim Umma. In addition to his own accomplishments and ties to the Prophet, he was fortified by Umayyads in high places, and especially by his second cousin, the brilliant Mu‘āwiya, whom Umar had just made governor of Syria. As calif, Uthman necessarily depended heavily on his kinsmen, bringing some of them to Medina and appointing others to administer newly conquered lands. Prominent Muslims from other clans and tribes - including Aisha, one of Muhammad’s widows - made no secret of their unhappiness with Uthman.

Uthman’s redaction of the Quran

Although Muhammad’s freedman Zayd and other close associates and secretaries had recorded in writing all of the prophecies that Muhammad delivered, many Muslims knew all of the prophecies by heart (the Quran is shorter than the Christian New Testament, and its language more memorable). Certainly Muhammad intended that his prophecies should be published as a book, but no final collection could be made during his lifetime: because his followers expected that so long as he lived he would continue to receive revelations from God, no full corpus of his prophecies could be produced until after his death.

By the califate of Umar at least four such collections were in circulation, but they differed considerably in length and content. Because the written collections did not agree, Uthman took it upon himself to supervise the production of an authorized text of Muhammad’s prophecies. As calif, Uthman ordered the destruction of the earlier collections, and published the text of the Quran that subsequently became familiar to all Muslims. Uthman’s edition of the Quran contained 114 prophecies, each prophecy constituting a single chapter or *sūrah*. Except for the first sura, which is a very brief prayer and a preamble, the prophecies are arranged according to

length, the second sura being the longest of all, and the shortest suras appearing at the end of the Quran.

The Quran was the first book published in the Arabic language, and for a very long time it was the only such book. Late in the Umayyad califate (661-750) a few books were translated from Greek and Persian into Arabic but these translations were made for the calif and his advisors and so initially were not published.¹⁴ Apparently many Muslims in the Umayyad period supposed that if another book in Arabic were to be published it would compete with the Quran as an authority, and the transmission of texts therefore remained oral, as it had always been in Arabic society. The inhibition against publication of books in Arabic may have begun to lapse in the second quarter of the eighth century, with the composition of literary epistles by secretaries of the calif.¹⁵ Even these literary productions, however, were made available only to a few select readers. For well over a century, then, the Quran was the only Arabic book in existence.

Although the written text of the Quran that Uthman produced was necessarily accepted as authoritative, it did not change the oral character of Muhammad's prophecies. The word *qur'ān* means "recitation," and the prophecies were intended to be spoken aloud. After Muhammad's death Muslims regularly recited his prophecies when gathered for communal prayer. Although after Uthman's redaction of the Quran a literate Muslim could refer to the written text in order to be certain of the Prophet's exact words, in worship a sura would be recited from memory rather than read from a script.

Muslim conquests in North Africa (the Maghreb) and designs on Constantinople

Despite internal divisions, the Muslims significantly extended their empire during Uthman's califate. The principal expansion in these years was into North Africa: the lands along the Mediterranean in what is today western Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. This territory was known to the Romans as *Africa*, and the Arabians borrowed the Latin name as *ifriqiyah*. Their traditional Arabic name for North Africa, however, was *al-maghreb*, "the west." The Libyan coast was sparsely settled and unclaimed by an organized state (the only North African territory effectively controlled by the Byzantine empire was the rich agricultural land south and west of Carthage). Linguistically, North Africa was something of a hodge-podge. The Germanic Vandal language was almost extinct, hardly surviving Justinian's demolition of the Vandal kingdom. In the cities the usual languages were Greek and Latin, but in the villages the old Punic (Phoenician) language held on, and the nomadic tribesmen spoke Berber, as they always had. The religious picture was also varied. In the seventh century Judaism - both Talmudic and non-Talmudic - was strong in several cities, but more of the urban population in North African was Christian. The Christians were led by 470 North African bishops, but were divided into many competing sects: Orthodox, Arian, Monophysite, Donatist, and more besides. Many of the Berber tribes had still been pagan in the early fifth century, but by the seventh a few of them had apparently adopted some form - more often Donatist than Orthodox - of Christianity, and more of them had Judaized.

The Muslim conquest of the Maghreb is poorly documented. Byzantine sources do

provide some information on the exarchate of Carthage, or what today is Tunisia. In 647 the exarchate capitulated to Muslim warlords, was recovered eighteen years later by the Byzantines, but was then lost permanently. Although Arabian troops played a role in the taking of North Africa, apparently Berber tribesmen were even more important. Some of the Berber tribes resisted the Muslims stoutly, but others - like many of the Arabic bedouin tribes in the years just before Muhammad's death - seem to have "converted" to Islam through the negotiations of their chiefs. Nominally some of these Berber tribes had been Christian, but they wore their Christianity loosely and were alert to other opportunities. When employment was offered by the Muslims, some Berber chiefs converted and made thousands of their warriors available.

Although Uthman himself did not participate in the wars fought by the Muslims, his kinsman Muawiya - the governor of Syria, resident in Damascus - was an inveterate campaigner. Devout in his faith, Muawiya believed it was God's will that the Byzantine empire come to an end and that the Arabian empire be extended through all the lands still controlled by Constans II (641-668). This would of course require that Muawiya take Constantinople itself, and toward that end he began making yearly expeditions into Anatolia, crossing the Taurus mountains and driving the Byzantine troops out of one fortified place after another. The Anatolians, however, were not so easily conquered as the people of the Levant: speaking Greek, adhering mostly to the Orthodox church, and organized into military *themes*, the Anatolians generally did not cooperate with the Muslims. Muawiya accordingly decided that his God-given mission could not be completed unless he first built a fleet and seized control of the seas from Constans. Umar had prohibited the Muslims from going to sea, but Uthman was persuaded by his cousin and gave him permission to construct a large fleet.¹⁶ In 655 Muawiya's fleet confronted Constans off the coast of Lycia, and was victorious. The way to Constantinople seemed open.

The death of Uthman and the troubled califate of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib (656-661)

But at this juncture fate intervened on the side of the Byzantines. When one of Abu Bakr's sons was killed at Medina, many suspected that the Umayyad clan, if not Uthman himself, was responsible. In 656 the local dissidents at Medina, strengthened by rebels who had arrived from Iraq and Egypt, placed Uthman's house under siege. Partisans led by Muhammad, another son of Abu Bakr, broke into the house and killed the aged calif.

Because Ali had made no secret of his desire to be the next calif, many of the Umayyad clan believed that he had engineered the uprising and the murder of their kinsman. In deciding upon a successor to Uthman the Muslim leadership was therefore riven by factions. The majority eventually favored Ali and he was proclaimed calif, but the opposing faction and certainly the Umayyads favored Muawiya. As governor of Syria, second cousin of Uthman, and the most vigorous champion of the faith against the Christians of Byzantium, Muawiya's claims were strong, but he had no personal ties to the Prophet. Ali, in contrast, had not only been Muhammad's cousin, but was also married to Fātimah, the daughter of Muhammad and (according to the tradition) Khadija.¹⁷ As Abu Talib's son, in his childhood and adolescence Ali's relationship to Muhammad was almost that of a much younger brother, and during an extended drought and famine Ali lived with Muhammad and Khadija.¹⁸ That close affection lasted throughout Muhammad's lifetime, and tradition holds that because the Prophet had no surviving natural son he had before his death adopted Ali as his own son.

Given the circumstances in which he was chosen as Uthman's successor, Ali had many critics both at Medina and at large. Of the early critics Aisha was the most outspoken. Although she had also found much to criticize in Uthman, when he was killed she denounced Ali for conniving in the calif's murder, and called for partisans to join her in resisting Ali's rule. She and her supporters seized the city of Basrah in southern Iraq, and there late in 656 Ali had to confront her badly outnumbered band in the "Battle of the Camel" (so called because the fighting was fiercest around Aisha's camel). This was the first time that Muslims fought each other, and in his easy victory Ali was magnanimous both to Aisha and to those of her followers who survived. Aisha was thereafter confined to her quarters at Medina, but given a sumptuous pension.¹⁹ Ali himself, however, now found Medina too quarrelsome a place, and so moved to Kufa, the new Muslim city in Iraq. Although the califate was not destined to remain long in Kufa it would never return to Medina.

The First Civil War: Kharijites and the beginnings of Islamic sectarianism

What is conventionally called the First Civil War in the Muslim Umma was factionalism on a far greater scale than the "Battle of the Camel." Muawiya, the powerful governor of Syria, was no friend of Aisha but was, like her, incensed at the selection of Ali as calif. Muawiya believed, and never abandoned his belief, that Ali had in some way been responsible for the murder of Uthman, who was Muawiya's kinsman. This crisis in Ali's califate is what deflected Muawiya's energies from the Byzantine empire to his own backyard. Instead of pursuing his plan to take Constantinople, Muawiya began to make himself an independent ruler in Damascus. The *jizya* from Syria he kept for himself, rather than forwarding it to Ali.

A military showdown between Ali and Muawiya was inevitable. Muawiya assembled a large army, with intentions of marching on Kufa, where Ali had taken up residence. In 657 Muawiya's men crossed the north Syrian desert to the Euphrates and headed downstream, while Ali's equally large army moved upstream along the river. The two armies met at Siffin, in northern Syria. The traditions about this "battle" at Siffin are almost hopelessly mythicized, a popular legend maintaining that Ali's men would have prevailed had not Muawiya's troops protected themselves with copies of the Quran, against which Ali's men would not strike. It seems that the "Battle of Siffin" was a drawn-out series of skirmishes between two armies that were reluctant to fight against each other. After a month of these skirmishes, and of negotiation between representatives of Ali and Muawiya, many of the troops mutinied and the two sides parted without a decisive battle.

Many of the mutineers became the Kharijites, "the seceders," and formed the first of what would eventually become a constellation of Muslim sects. Important in the late seventh and the eighth century, and close to becoming mainstream Islam, the Kharijites then dwindled in number and are today a very minor sect. The original Kharijites believed that God wanted the Muslim Umma to appoint either the most righteous Muslim as calif or to have no calif at all, and they found neither Muawiya nor Ali worthy of the position. The secession of thousands and perhaps tens of thousands of troops badly tarnished the prestige of the califate. Although the hostility between Ali and Muawiya continued, the prize was no longer the formal title of calif (which Ali

kept, and which Muawiya allowed him to keep), but something more substantial: power and tribute. In 659 Muawiya used his fleet to capture Alexandria and take over Egypt, depriving Ali of one of his most important provinces.

Embattled in his last years at Kufa, Ali was and remains a polarizing figure within Islam. He was the calif, but he had many enemies, some of them devout and some of them powerful. He also, obviously, had loyal followers, especially at Kufa and elsewhere in Iraq. It would be anachronistic to call these supporters of the living Ali “Shiites,” but etymologically Shiites are the “party of Ali,” the *shī‘atu ‘Alī*, and the dangers that beset Ali during his brief califate were to play an important part in the evolution of Shiah Islam.

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1. For a comprehensive study of Heraclius’ reign see Kaegi 2003.
 2. Newby 1988, p. 150, n.2: “The Arabic term *khalīfah*, ‘successor,’ has the original sense of riding behind someone on an animal or following behind someone. It starts as an indistinct term, for there was no designated ‘office’ of calif. The political history of Islam after Muhammad is, in large part, an attempt to define and legitimize the office.”
 3. Donner 1981, p. 129.
 4. For a detailed description of the Yarmuk battle see Donner 1981, pp. 132-34, or Kaegi 2003, pp. 241-43.
 5. Jenkins 1969, p. 34.
 6. Donner 1981, p. 227.
 7. See Donner 1981, p. 236: “The traditions describing the eastern campaigns in the Zagros during this period are confused and difficult to reconcile.”
 8. Little of the library seems to have survived the burning of the Sarapeum by Christian mobs in 391, and further plundering occurred in the 530s, in the wake of Justinian’s campaign against paganism.
 9. Donner 1981, p. 221: “Perhaps the most striking fact about the armies that carried out the Islamic conquest of the Fertile Crescent was their small size.”
 10. This was at least a view of many Muslims in Umayyad Syria. “The first call of Jesus when he returns to earth, declares Muslim tradition, will come from one of the minarets of the mosque of Damascus, and the free space next to Muhammed’s grave at Medina will serve for the grave of Jesus when he dies after his second advent.” (Vasiliev 1958, vol. I, p. 237)

11. See Vasiliev 1958, vol. I, p. 207: “The first chronicler who records some facts about the life of Muhammed, ‘the ruler of the Saracens and the pseudo-prophet,’ was Theophanes, who wrote in the early part of the ninth century. In the conception of medieval western Europe Islam was not a distinct religion, but a Christian sect, akin in its dogmas to Arianism; and even in the later part of the Middle Ages Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, considered Muhammed a heretic and calls him a ‘sower of scandal and schism.’”

12. After listing several subsidiary factors in the speed and extent of the Arabians’ conquests, Donner 1981, p. 268-69, singles out the most significant: “But to these factors must be added one more that was perhaps the single most important one contributing to the success of the conquests: the remarkable degree to which a new Islamic state with an expansionist policy could harness for its purposes the rugged warriors of Arabia. The rise of the state made it possible to weld into an incredibly effective fighting force those tribesmen whose energies had hitherto been consumed by petty quarrels among themselves and whose political horizons had hitherto usually been limited to their own tribe and its affairs. The success of the conquests was, then, first and foremost the product of an organizational breakthrough of proportions unparalleled in the history of Arabian society until modern times. However important other factors may have been, it is difficult to believe that the conquests could have succeeded without the rise of a state with the capacity to integrate Arabia's fragmented society and draw on it to attain well-defined political and military objectives. It is not even too rash, perhaps, to suggest that the Islamic conquest might have met with great success even had the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires not been reeling from their recent quarrels. The Muslims succeeded, then, primarily because they were able to organize an effective conquest movement, and in this context the impact of the new religion of Islam, which provided the ideological underpinnings for this remarkable breakthrough in social organization, can be more fully appreciated. In this sense, the conquests were truly an Islamic movement. For it was Islam -- the set of religious beliefs preached by Muhammad, with its social and political ramifications -- that ultimately sparked the whole integration process and hence was the ultimate cause of the conquests’ success.”

13. Muslims could not enslave another Muslim (although they had no obligation to free a slave who converted to Islam). Umar’s domestic slaves were “people of the book,” and the slave who murdered him was variously identified as a Sabaeen or as a Zoroastrian from Iran.

14. The mechanism for publishing in the centuries before the invention of the printing press was to gather together a group of literate men and have them write out a text as it was slowly read to them. At the end of a day a group of twenty men would have produced twenty copies of the text at hand.

15. On the first literary epistles see Latham 1983.

16. Jenkins 1969, pp. 36-38. See also Donner 1981.

17. That Fātimah was the daughter of Muhammad is certain, but it is not certain that she was the daughter of Khadija. According to Watt 1961, p. 131, Ali and Fatima were probably married in 624 (Hassan, their first son, was born in 625). Unless she was much older at her marriage than

was the typical Arabian girl, Fatima was probably not born much before 610. At that date, according to the traditional chronology, Khadija would have been 55 years old.

18. Peters 1994, p. 153, quoting Ibn Ishaq (1955), p. 114.

19. Ochsenswald and Fisher 2004, p. 46.