SIX

The High Caliphate

For about a thousand years, history has been playing mean tricks on the Arabs. They have been wracked with internal factionalism and strife, external invasion, subordination to outside rulers, natural disasters, and exaggerated hopes and fears. But in the bleakest moments of their history, the Arabic-speaking peoples of the Middle East have comforted themselves with the memory of a time when their ancestors ruled most of the Eastern Hemisphere, when the Europeans and the Chinese feared and courted them, and when theirs was the language in which humanity's highest literary and scientific achievements were expressed. This was the time of the two great caliphal dynasties, the Umayyads and the Abbasids. This chapter uses a term coined by Marshall Hodgson to denote the years from 685 to 945: the High Caliphate.

During this period, the Islamic *umma* was initially headed by the Marwanid branch of the Umayyad family, ruling in Damascus, and then by the Abbasids of Baghdad. Both dynasties belonged to the Quraysh tribe and were backed by those Muslims who came to be called Sunnis. The caliphal state was militarily strong, relative to western Europe, the Byzantine Empire, India, and China. Territorial conquests continued until about 750, when the Abbasids took over from the Umayyads. After that time some land was lost, and the caliphal state began to break up. As long as any semblance of unity remained, though, the old Roman, Syrian, and Persian political practices and cultural traditions went on combining in new ways. Economic prosperity, based mainly on agriculture, was enhanced by commerce and manufacturing. These factors facilitated the movement of people and the spread of ideas, and hence the growth of an Islamic civilization.

The relative power of the various peoples shifted gradually during the High Caliphate. Under the Abbasids, if not earlier, Arab dominance waned, as many non-Arabs became Muslims and, in most instances, adopted the Arabic language as well. Beware of generalizations about Arab influence. The word *Arab* is ambiguous; it can mean bedouin, someone wholly or partly descended from tribal Arabs, or someone who speaks Arabic, or a person living under Arab rule. When the term pertains to a group, find out whether it bore arms for Islam and how it was paid. During this time, tribal soldiers from Arabia slowly gave way first to salaried troops, notably Persians from Khurasan, then to Turkish tribal horse soldiers paid with land grants.

As the caliphal state grew larger and more complex, it needed more people to run it. The early Umayyads had inherited Roman bureaucratic traditions, but later Persian administrators took over and introduced Sasanid practices. At the same time, there grew up a class of pious Muslims who could recite and interpret the Quran, relate and record *hadith*s (authenticated accounts of Muhammad's sayings and actions), systematize Arabic grammar, and develop the science of law (called *fiqh* in Arabic). Eventually they became known as *ulama,* which means "those who know," or experts on Muslim doctrines, laws, and history. Muslims also became interested in classical philosophy, science, and medicine, as Greek works were translated into Arabic. One result was the evolution of systematic Islamic theology. Muslims also developed more esoteric ideas and rituals, leading to the rise of Sufism (organized Islamic mysticism), which you will read about later.

The caliphate faced ongoing opposition from the Kharijites, who rejected any type of hereditary rule, and from Shi'i movements backing various descendants of Ali. Late in this era, most of the Muslim world came under the rule of Shi'i dynasties. Until about 1000, non-Muslims predominated in the lands of the *umma,* but their relative power and influence were waning.

Restoration of the Umayyad Order

Most scholars list Umar, Mu'awiya, and Abd al-Malik among the caliphs regarded as the founding fathers of Islamic government. You have already learned about Umar, who presided over the early conquests, and about Mu'awiya, who bequeathed the caliphate to his Umayyad heirs. But who was this Abd al-Malik? He took over the caliphate on the death of his aged father, Marwan, who had ruled briefly during what was (for the Umayyads)

the worst year of the second *fitna*. When Abd al-Malik took charge, the northern Arab tribal confederation was rebelling against his family, in league with Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr, who was in Mecca claiming the caliphate. Every province except Syria had turned against Umayyad rule. The martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, Husayn, had further antagonized many Muslims, especially the Shi'is. One of Abd al-Malik's first challenges came from a revolt in Kufa of Shi'i penitents (so called because they regretted not having aided Husayn in 680). This revolt fizzled, but the Kufans rallied around an Arab adventurer named Mukhtar. His cause gained support from Persian and Aramean converts to Islam who, as *mawali,* resented being snubbed by the Arabs. Abd al-Malik could not stop this revolt, but, luckily for him, the army of Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr did. This was a time when Abdallah's partisans in Mecca were stronger than the Umayyads in Damascus.

Abd al-Malik's Triumph

Although he took office in 685, Abd al-Malik waited until 691 to take Iraq from Abdallah's forces. The next year Hajjaj, an Umayyad general famed for his harsh government in Iraq and Iran, captured Arabia. His men had to bombard Mecca (even damaging the Ka'ba) before Abdallah's army surrendered. Hajjaj spent two years wiping out Kharijite rebels in Arabia before he went into Kufa. Wearing a disguise, he entered the main mosque, mounted the pulpit, tore the veil from his face, and addressed the rebellious Kufans: "I see heads ripe for the cutting. People of Iraq, I will not let myself be crushed like a soft fig. . . . The commander of the believers [Abd al-Malik] has drawn arrows from his quiver and tested the wood, and has found that I am the hardest. . . . And so, by God, I will strip you as men strip the bark from trees. . . . I will beat you as stray camels are beaten." The Kufans, thus intimidated, gave no more trouble, and Hajjaj restored prosperity to the Umayyads' eastern provinces.

Abd al-Malik laid the basis for an absolutist caliphate, one patterned after the traditions of the divine kings of the ancient Middle East instead of the patriarchal shaykhs of the Arab tribes. You can see the change not only in the policies of such authoritarian governors as Hajjaj but also in Abd al-Malik's decree making Arabic the administrative language. Before then, some parts of the empire had used Greek, others Persian, Aramaic, or Coptic, depending on what the local officials and people happened to speak. Many bureaucrats, especially the Persians, did not want to give up a language rich in administrative vocabulary for one used until recently only by

camel nomads and merchants. But it is these Persians we can thank (or curse, if you study Arabic) for having systematized Arabic grammar, for they soon realized that no Persian could get or keep a government job without learning to read and write this complicated new language.

Following the old Roman imperial tradition of erecting fine buildings, Abd al-Malik had the magnificent Dome of the Rock built atop what had been Jerusalem's Temple Mount. It was a shrine erected around what local tradition said was the rock of Abraham's attempted sacrifice and what Muslims believe to be the site of Muhammad's departure on his miraculous night journey to Heaven. It was also a message to the Byzantine Empire and to Jerusalem's Christians that Islam was there to stay. With the Dome of the Rock set almost directly above the Western Wall, the sole remnant of the second Jewish Temple, you can see why Arabs and Jews now dispute who should control Jerusalem's Old City, holy to all three monotheistic faiths. Another symbolic act by Abd al-Malik was the minting of Muslim coins, which ended the Muslims' dependence on Byzantine and Persian currency and made it easier for Arabs to sort out the various values of the coins. The use of Arabic-language inscriptions (often Quranic quotations) was a caliphal riposte to the Byzantine practice of stamping coins with the head of Christ. Eventually, Muslim rulers came to think that the right to issue coins in their own names symbolized their sovereignty. Erecting grand buildings served the same purpose.

Resumption of the Conquests

The caliphal state was becoming an empire. The Arab conquests resumed after the second *fitna* ended. One army headed west across North Africa, while a Muslim navy drove the Byzantines from the western Mediterranean. The North African Berbers, after surrendering to the Arabs, converted to Islam and joined their armies. Under Abd al-Malik's successor, a Muslim force crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and took most of what is now Spain and Portugal. It was not until 732—exactly a century after the Prophet's death—that a European Christian army stemmed the Muslim tide in central France. The greatest Arab thrust, though, was eastward from Persia. Muslim armies attacked the Turks, first in what is now Afghanistan, then in Transoxiana (the land beyond the Oxus River, or the Amu Darya), including Bukhara and Samarqand. They eventually reached China's northwest border, which became the eastern limit of the Arab conquests. Another force pushed north to the Aral Sea, adding Khwarizm to the lands of Islam. Yet another moved south, taking Baluchistan, Sind, and Punjab, roughly what is now Pakistan.

There was but one nut too tough to crack, the Byzantine Empire. From the time they conquered Syria, the Arabs seem to have felt that conquering all of Byzantium was their "manifest destiny," much as the US viewed Canada and parts of Mexico in the nineteenth century. The Byzantines, though weakened by the loss of their Syrian and North African lands and shorn of their naval supremacy in the western Mediterranean, regarded the Arabs as a nuisance that, God willing, would soon pass away. They reorganized their army and the administration of Anatolia, making that highland area impregnable to Arab forces. Constantinople, guarded by thick walls, withstood three Umayyad sieges, the last of which involved an Arab fleet of a thousand ships and lasted from 716 to 718. Using "Greek fire," probably a naphtha derivative, that ignited upon hitting the water and (with favorable winds) set fire to enemy ships, the Byzantines wiped out most of the Arab fleet. After that, the caliphs concluded that Byzantium was too hard to take. Gradually they stopped claiming to be the new "Roman" empire and adopted a neo-Persian aura instead.

Fiscal Reforms

Whether the caliphs took on the trappings of Roman emperors or Persian shahs, their government favored the Arabs and depended on their backing. But most of their subjects were not Arabs, and they paid most of the taxes. Even those who became Muslims still had to pay the Umayyads the same rates as those who did not convert. The main levies were (1) the *zakat,* which Muslims paid on their animals, farm produce, or business earnings, as the Quran specified; (2) a property tax paid to the *umma,* mainly by non-Muslims in conquered lands outside Arabia; and (3) a head tax or tribute paid by male Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians in return for exemption from military service. The terminology and administration of these taxes were confusing and rigged against the *mawali,* the converts to Islam who had become as numerous as the tribal Arabs themselves.

This problem was tackled by Umar II (r. 717–720), who alone among all the Umayyad caliphs is praised for his piety by later Muslim historians. Umar wanted to stop all fiscal practices that favored the Arabs and to treat all Muslims equally and fairly. When his advisers warned him that exempting the *mawali* from the taxes paid by non-Muslims would cause numerous conversions to Islam and deplete his treasury, Umar retorted that he had not become commander of the believers to collect taxes and imposed his reforms anyway. As he also cut military expenditures, his treasury did not suffer, and he did gain Muslim converts. He must have wanted conversions, because he also placed humiliating restrictions on non-Muslims:

They could not ride horses or camels, only mules and donkeys; they had to wear special clothing that identified them as Jews or Christians; and they were forbidden to build new synagogues or churches without permission. These rules, collectively called the Covenant of Umar, were enforced by some of his successors and ignored by many others. We cannot generalize about the conditions of Jews and Christians under Muslim rule—they varied so greatly—but conversion to Islam was usually socially or economically motivated, not forced. It was Hisham (r. 724–743) who finally set the taxes into a system that would be upheld for the next thousand years: Muslims paid the *zakat,* property owners (with a few exceptions) paid on their land or buildings a tax called the *kharaj,* and Christian and Jewish men paid a per capita tax called the *jizya.*

The Downfall of the Umayyads

Despite the fiscal reforms of Umar II and Hisham, the Umayyad caliphate remained an Arab kingdom. Muslims could endure this as long as the conquests continued. But as they slowed down in the 740s, the Arab tribes that supplied most of the warriors became worthless because of their constant quarrels. A few of the later caliphs also seemed useless, with their hunting palaces, dancing girls, and swimming pools filled with wine. Some of them sided with one or the other of the tribal confederations, raising the danger that the slighted tribes would stir up bitter Shi'ite or Kharijite revolts. Hisham faced these problems bravely; his less able successors did not.

Meanwhile, the *mawali* had become the intellectual leaders, the bureaucrats, and even the commercial elite of the *umma,* but the political and social discrimination they had to endure dulled their support for the existing system. The best way for them to voice their discontent was to back dissident Muslim movements that might overthrow the Umayyads. Especially popular among the *mawali* was a group of Shi'i revolutionaries called—ambiguously—the Hashimites. As you can see from Figure 5.1 (see Chapter 5), the name denotes Muhammad's family. The "Hashimites," as a conspiratorial group, concealed from outsiders just which branch of Shi'ism they were backing. In fact, their leaders descended from a son born to Ali by a woman other than Muhammad's daughter. In the early eighth century, some of the Hashimites conferred their support on one branch of their clan, the Abbasids, so called because they had descended from Muhammad's uncle Abbas. The Abbasids exploited these Shi'i revo-

lutionaries and disgruntled *mawali* in order to gain power. Their power center was Khurasan, in eastern Persia.

The Umayyads' weakness was the Abbasids' opportunity. The Arab tribes were bitterly divided, the army was demoralized, river irrigation had raised Iraq's importance relative to Syria, popular opinion called for Muslim equality in place of Arab supremacy, and Khurasan was a province in which thousands of Arab colonists mixed with the native Persian landowners. There, in 747, a Persian named Abu-Muslim declared a revolution to support the Abbasids. Despite the heroic resistance of the last Umayyad caliph and his governor in Khurasan, the revolt spread. The Abbasids reached Kufa in 749 and laid claim to the caliphate for an Abbasid named Abu al-Abbas. Abu-Muslim's troops crushed the Umayyads' army in January 750, pursued their last caliph to Egypt, and killed him. Then they went on to wipe out all the living Umayyads and to scourge the corpses of the dead ones. The only member of the family who escaped was Abd al-Rahman I. After a harrowing journey across North Africa, he safely reached Spain, where he founded a rival caliphate that lasted almost three centuries.

The Abbasid Caliphate

The Abbasid revolution is generally viewed as a turning point in Islamic history. People used to think that it marked the overthrow of the Arabs by the Persians. This is partly true. The Abbasids were Arabs, proud of their descent from the Prophet's uncle. Their partisans included Arabs and Persians, Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, all united by a desire to replace an Arab tribal aristocracy with a more egalitarian form of government based on the principles of Islam. Like other historic revolutions, the overthrow of the Umayyads reinforced trends that had already begun: the shift of the power center from Syria to Iraq, the rise of Persian influence in place of the Byzantine-Arab synthesis of Mu'awiya and Abd al-Malik, the waning drive to take over all the Christian lands of Europe, and the growing interest in cultivating the arts of civilization.

Even though most Westerners may not know who the Abbasids were, references to the caliph of Baghdad or Harun al-Rashid conjure up images of Disney's *Aladdin* and *The Arabian Nights*—a never-never land of flying carpets, genies released from magic lamps, and treasures of gold and jewels. One could guess that the country was rich, that its rulers had the power of life and death over their subjects, and that the state religion was Islam. This

conjecture would prove true for the Abbasid Empire under its fifth caliph, Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809).

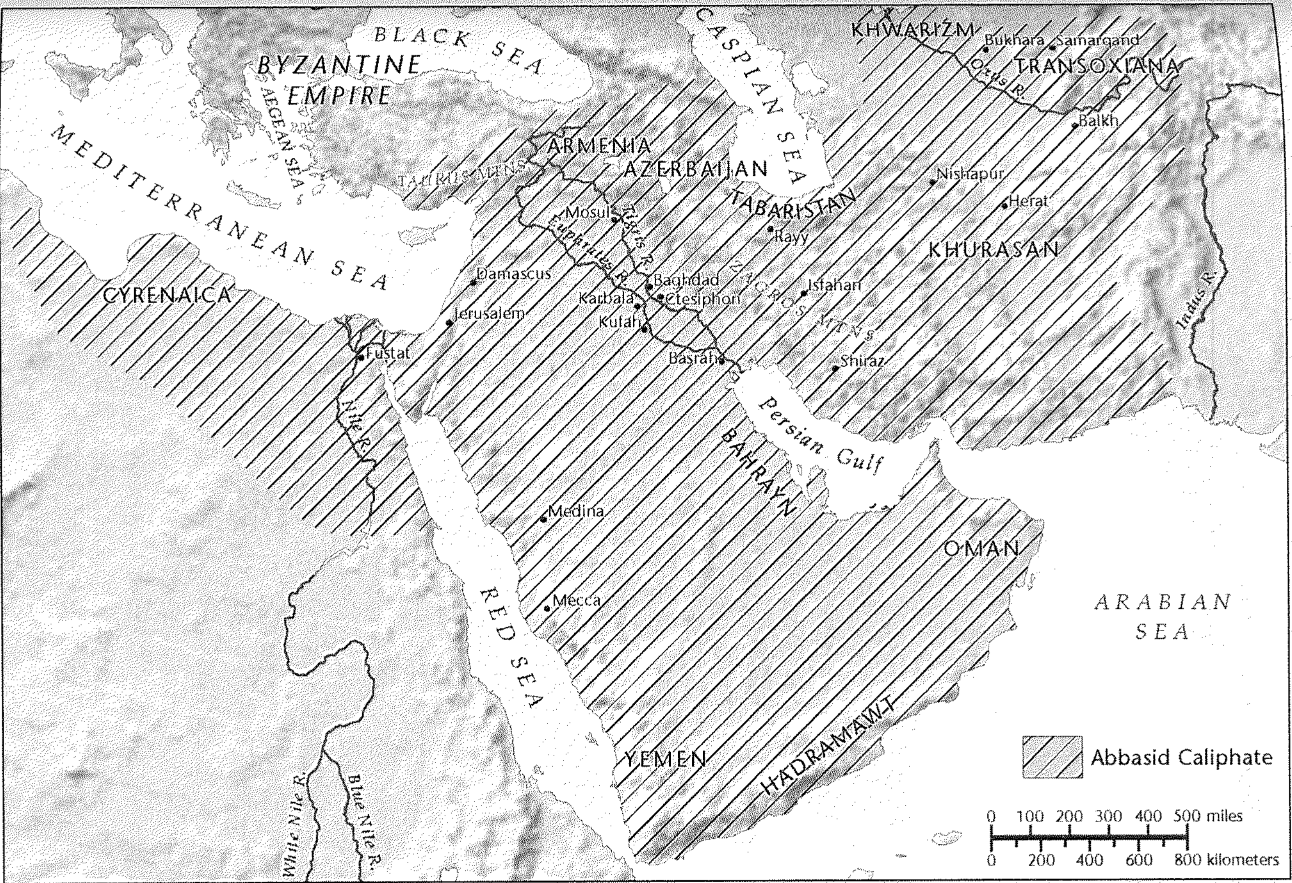
The Building of Baghdad

When Abu al-Abbas, Harun's great-uncle, was acclaimed as the first Abbasid caliph by Kufa's people in 749, Baghdad was just a tiny Persian village a few miles up the Tigris River from the ruined Sasanid capital, Ctesiphon. The early Abbasids wanted to move the government to Iraq, and after trying a few other cities, Abu al-Abbas's brother and successor, Abu Ja'far al-Mansur, eventually chose that site in 762 for his capital. He officially named it the "city of peace," but it soon became better known by the name of the Persian village it replaced, Baghdad. It was located at exactly the point where the Tigris and Euphrates come closest together (see Map 6.1). A series of canals linking the rivers there made it easier to defend the site and also put Baghdad on the main trade route between the Mediterranean (hence Europe) and the Persian Gulf (hence Asia). River irrigation in Iraq was raising agricultural output. It was also an area in which Persian and Aramean culture remained strong. Finally, it was closer to the political center of gravity for an empire still stretching eastward toward India and China.

Mansur wanted a planned capital, not a city that, like Kufa or Damascus, had long served other purposes. His architects gave him a round city. The caliphal palace and the main mosque fronted on a central square. Around them stood army barracks, government offices, and the homes of the chief administrators. A double wall with four gates girdled the city, and soon hundreds of houses and shops surrounded the wall. Across the Tigris rose the palace of the caliph's son, with a smaller entourage. The later caliphs built more palaces along the Tigris, which was spanned by a bridge of boats. The building of Baghdad was part of a public works policy by which the Abbasids kept thousands of their subjects employed and their immense wealth circulating. It was a popular policy, for it led to the construction of mosques, schools, and hospitals throughout the empire, but its success depended on general prosperity, for the people paid high taxes to support it.

Public Piety

The Abbasids made a public display of their piety, which had been their main justification for seizing power from the high-living Umayyads. Mahdi, the third Abbasid caliph, loved wine, music, and perfumed slave



MAP 6.1 The Abbasid caliphate circa 800

girls, but he also paid handsomely to expand the courtyard surrounding the Ka'ba and to set up guard posts and wells along the pilgrimage routes in Arabia. Harun al-Rashid performed the *hajj* every few years throughout his life, hoping to earn divine merit. Most of the Abbasids displayed their generosity during the great Muslim feasts or at family celebrations, such as the birth or the circumcision of a prince. Harun personally led his army in a Muslim *jihad* across Anatolia that almost reached Constantinople before the Byzantines paid enough tribute to persuade the Abbasids to withdraw. Both merrymaking and holy wars were popular activities.

Anti-Abbasid Revolts

With so much public piety, you might think that the Abbasids could have avoided religious uprisings like the ones that had troubled the Umayyads. Not so. The revolts became more frequent and varied than ever before, reflecting economic hardships and social discontent within the lands of Islam. Kharijite groups rebelled in Oman and North Africa, forming states of their own. The Shi'is were more dangerous, for they soon saw that the Abbasids had tricked them by using their help to oust the Umayyads. Two descendants of Hasan revolted in 762, one in Mecca and the other in Basra. To crush their revolts, Mansur's troops killed thousands of Shi'i dissidents. In 788 another Shi'i led a Berber group in a rebellion that permanently severed Morocco from Abbasid rule. Shi'i revolts flared up in more areas than we can cover, but it is important to know that Shi'i Islam had now split into three branches, shown in Figure 5.1 (see Chapter 5). You will learn more about these sects in Chapter 7.

Some of the revolts against Abbasid rule were anti-Islamic in spirit, especially those in which Persians took part. Why were they so restive? A dark curtain had shrouded Persia's history after the Arab conquests destroyed the Sasanid Empire, and for a century the Persians sank into shocked despair. Gradually they became Muslims, learned Arabic, and adjusted to the new power relationships. The Umayyads' fall in 750, followed by Iraq's regeneration, drew the Persians out of their shock. Many would back any hero who could restore their lost prestige.

Abu-Muslim was popular in Khurasan, where the Persians viewed him as their leader, not merely the standard-bearer of the Abbasid revolution. The first two Abbasid caliphs, Abu al-Abbas and Mansur, used him to defeat the Umayyads and crush the Shi'is. But Mansur feared that his own dynasty could be overthrown by the Persians. They charged that Mansur treacherously summoned Abu-Muslim to his court and had him put to

death. Some Arabs called Abu-Muslim a *zindiq* ("heretic"), meaning that he may have practiced a pre-Islamic Persian religion. He remains a controversial figure.

Abu-Muslim's execution brought the Abbasids no peace. Revolts soon broke out in Khurasan. One of his friends, possibly a Zoroastrian, tried to destroy the Ka'ba. Then a "veiled prophet" claiming to be Abu-Muslim began a rebellion that lasted almost twenty years. Backed by thousands, he robbed caravans, wrecked mosques, and virtually ruled Khurasan. Years later, Azerbaijan saw another reincarnation of Abu-Muslim, a Persian named Babak whose rebellion also lasted twenty years. These uprisings were inspired by Persia's pre-Islamic religions, such as Zoroastrianism (the faith of the Sasanid rulers) and a peasant movement called Mazdakism. Moreover, the Manichaeans' philosophical dualism survived or revived in Persia among the Zindiqs, but this group is hard to define, as pious Muslims used that name for most dissidents.

Persians in Power

The resurrection of Persian influence did not always take dissident forms. Hundreds of Persians, mainly from Iraq and Khurasan, rose to high posts within the army and the civil administration, replacing the Arabs and Syrians favored by the Umayyads. These men may have been more interested in the Sanskrit and Persian classics than their Arab colleagues would have liked them to be, but they also learned Arabic and carefully toed the Abbasid line on religious matters. Some Persians became *ulama* and helped to shape Islam. Loyal to their Abbasid masters, they helped them suppress dissenting ideas and movements, but in fact they Persianized the state from within.

As the central administration grew more complex, Persian bureaucratic families rose to power. The greatest of these was the Barmakids, of whom three generations served the Abbasids from Mansur to Harun al-Rashid as bursars, tax collectors, provincial governors, military commanders, tutors, companions, and chief ministers. The title they bore, pronounced *wazir* in Arabic and *vizier* in Persian, came to be applied to any high-ranking official. Originally meaning "burden-bearer," it now is used to mean "cabinet minister" in most Middle Eastern languages. Harun unloaded many of his burdens onto his Barmakid viziers (one of whom, Ja'far, you may recall from *Aladdin*), until he realized that he had let them take too much of his power and wealth. Then he dramatically killed the one to whom he was most attached and locked up his father and brother. So sudden was the

move that many people ascribed it to a thwarted homosexual love affair that also involved a fictitious marriage between the murdered Barmakid and the caliph's sister, who later bore a child attributed to him. This account may humanize a rather pompous caliphate, but a truer explanation is that the Barmakids' power and prestige were eclipsing Harun's own position. Either he or they had to go. How could Harun claim to be God's representative on earth and the fountainhead of justice if everyone looked to the Barmakids for patronage?

A less spectacular ladder for upwardly mobile Persians was a literary movement called the Shu'ubiya. The Persians, especially in the bureaucratic class, used their knowledge of literature to prove their equality with (or superiority over) the Arabs. After all, they reasoned, Persians had built and managed mighty empires, prospered, and created a high culture for centuries while the Arabs were riding camels in the desert. The Arabs were quick to accuse the Shu'ubiya of attacking Islam and the Prophet, but its scholars and bureaucrats really sought equality within the system.

The greatest threat to the Abbasids came from those Persians who broke away to form separate dynastic states in Persia. These included a general who founded the Tahirids (r. 820–873) and a coppersmith who started the durable Saffarids (r. 861–1465). Indeed, the Abbasids themselves were being Persianized by their harems. The caliphs had so many Persian wives or concubines that the genetic mix of the ninth-century Abbasids was more Persian than Arab. Harun's Persian mother pushed him into becoming caliph. The succession struggle between his two sons was intensified by the fact that the mother of Amin (r. 809–813) was Harun's Arab wife, whereas Mamun (the challenger and ultimate victor) was born of a Persian concubine.

Mamun's Caliphate

Mamun (r. 813–833) deserves a high rank among the Abbasid caliphs, even though his rise to power resulted from a bloody civil war that almost wiped out Baghdad. A patron of scholarship, Mamun founded the Islamic equivalent of the legendary Sasanid academy in Jundishapur, a major intellectual center called Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom). It included several schools, astronomical observatories in Baghdad and Damascus, an immense library, and facilities for the translation of scientific and philosophical works from Greek, Aramaic, and Persian into Arabic.

Mamun's penchant for philosophical and theological debate led him to espouse a set of Muslim doctrines known collectively as the Mu'tazila. This system of theology began as an attempt to refute Persian Zindiqs and the Shu'ubiya but became a rationalist formulation of Islam, stressing free will

Al-Mamun

Al-Mamun (786–833) was the son of Caliph Harun al-Rashid by a Persian slave girl named Marajil. Thanks to his mother and a host of non-Arab tutors, Mamun grew up with a wide interest in a variety of philosophical and scientific approaches to knowledge.

Mamun had to fight for the throne against his half brother, Amin, whose mother, an Arab, was a descendant of the Quraysh tribe. The struggle between the two half brothers reflected the last stage of an old battle between the traditional culture of the conquering Arabs and the ways of the non-Arab (mostly Persian) Muslim converts who demanded equality and acceptance of their own cultural and artistic heritage within Muslim society. Mamun's followers came mostly from this latter group. Amin proved to be an incompetent caliph whose best generals deserted him as the struggle proceeded. Mamun's forces prevailed in 813.

Mamun, the seventh caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, proved to be not only an energetic patron of the arts and sciences but also one of Islam's most intellectually eccentric rulers. Apparently a rationalist at heart, he was troubled by the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in some of the more popular Muslim beliefs. For instance, most Muslims adhered to the orthodox view that the Quran was an eternal work that had existed even before it was revealed to Muhammad. They also believed that God foreordained all human actions. These beliefs made little sense to the caliph and the Mu'tazila movement he espoused. How could one maintain that God is the sole eternal entity in the universe and yet believe in an eternal Quran? And if God is all-merciful and the Lord of Justice, how could he create a universe where one may be punished for a foreordained act? In the year 827 Mamun imposed his views on his judges and administrators. His decree and its enforcement against those who adhered to the orthodox view turned many Muslims against the caliph.

Even as he tried to impose his theological views on the people he ruled, Mamun sponsored the search for new knowledge by supporting translations of Greek works of philosophy and science. He sent envoys as far afield as Sicily and Constantinople to find manuscripts for his translation and research center, the "House of Wisdom," which also housed the world's first astronomical observatory. Through such efforts much of ancient Greek thought was preserved. Later it would be transmitted to the West through Muslim Spain. This may well have been Mamun's most important legacy.

In addition to being an intellectual, Mamun was a conqueror; in 830 and in 833, he led his armies against the Byzantine Empire. During the latter campaign he was unexpectedly stricken by a "burning fever" after eating some local dates, and he died soon thereafter, at the age of forty-eight, having reigned for more than twenty-two years.

over divine predestination. Under Mamun and his two successors, each high-ranking Muslim official or judge was tested by being asked whether he believed that God had created all things, including the Quran. A yes answer meant that he was a Mu'tazilite, one who opposed the popular idea that the Quran had eternally existed, even before it was revealed to Muhammad. (We will look at this issue carefully in Chapter 8.) The extreme rationalism of the Mu'tazila antagonized the later Abbasids, who ended the test, and offended ordinary Muslims, who revered the Quran and believed that God had decreed all human acts. Mamun also tried to reconcile Sunni and Shi'i Muslims by naming the latter's imam as his successor. The plan backfired. Iraq's people resisted Mamun's concession to a descendant of Ali. The imam in question died, probably of poison.

The Decline of the Abbasids

Given so many dissident sects, revolts, secessions, and intellectual disputes going on between 750 and 945, you may wonder how the Abbasids managed to rule their empire. In fact, as time passed, they no longer could. In addition to those aforementioned Shi'i and Kharijite states in the remote areas of their empire, the Abbasids appointed some governors who managed to pass down their provinces to their heirs. An Abbasid governor, sent by Harun in 800 to Tunis, founded his own dynasty, collectively known as the Aghlabids. Their rule, over what now are Tunisia and eastern Algeria, was beneficent; they built or restored irrigation works, mosques, and public buildings. Intermittent Arab and Berber revolts did not stop the Aghlabids from raiding nearby Sicily, Italy, and southern France. These raids enhanced their prestige among Muslims at a time when Harun's successors were no longer taking Christian lands. Rather, Egypt's Christians overthrew their Abbasid governor in 832, and a Byzantine navy invaded the Nile Delta some twenty years later. Ahmad ibn Tulun, sent by the Abbasids in 868 to put Egypt in order, made the country virtually independent. As the Abbasids declined, the Byzantine Empire revived. Under its tenth-century Macedonian rulers, that Christian state would briefly retake southern Anatolia and even Syria.

Ahmad ibn Tulun was a Turk. In the ninth century some Turkish tribes from Central Asia entered the Middle East, seeking grazing lands for their horses and employment for their warriors. Moreover, individual Turks were incorporated into the Abbasid ruling system. Some captured in war became slaves for the caliphs. But under al-Mu'tasim (r. 833–842) the induction of Turks into the service of the caliphate became more systematic and perva-

sive. Hundreds of boys were bought from traders in Central Asia, taken to Baghdad, converted to Islam, and trained to be soldiers, administrators, or domestic servants for the Abbasids. Taught from childhood to view the caliphs as their benefactors, these Turkic slaves seemed more trustworthy than the Persian mercenaries. Soon they became the strongest element in the Abbasid army. Then they were able to manipulate the caliphs and murder anyone they disliked. Hardy and disciplined, the Turks took over the caliphal state—both the capital and some of its provinces—from within.

Conclusion

The High Caliphate was the zenith of Arab political power. The Umayyads and Abbasids have come to be seen collectively as great Arab leaders, yet only a few of these caliphs merit such a tribute. Some were brave, generous, and farsighted; most are now forgotten. Naturally, Arab chroniclers praised wise and magnanimous rulers, slighting what was really done by viziers and *ulama,* traders and sailors, let alone artisans and peasants. Improved river irrigation and long-distance trade enriched Muslim lands. The Arab conquests brought together people of diverse languages, religions, cultures, and ideas. Artistic and intellectual creativity flourished as a result.

The political history, as you now know, was turbulent—a chronicle of palace coups, bureaucratic rivalries, and rural uprisings. Islam did not efface ethnic differences. Indeed, Muslim unity was turning into a facade, a polite fiction. No dramatic revolt toppled the Abbasids. Though their power ebbed away in the ninth and tenth centuries, their accumulated prestige and wealth enabled them to outlast most of the usurper dynasties. They went on producing caliphs in Baghdad until 1258, then in Cairo up to 1517. But dry rot had set in during the Augustan age of Harun al-Rashid and Mamun, if not before, for the political unity of the *umma* had ended when the Umayyads had held on to Spain after 750. During the late ninth and tenth centuries, a welter of Muslim dynasties took control of the various parts of North Africa, Syria, and Persia. Finally Baghdad was captured in 945 by a Shi'i dynasty called the Buyids, and the Abbasids ceased to be masters even in their own house.

The decline of the Abbasids mattered less than you might think. As the caliphate declined, other types of political leadership emerged to maintain and even increase the collective power of the Muslim world. New institutions sustained the feeling of community among Muslim peoples when the caliphate could no longer fulfill that function. Our next two chapters discuss these trends in greater depth.

SEVEN

Shi'is and Turks, Crusaders and Mongols

The period of Middle East history from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries challenges us. There is no one dynasty or country on which to focus our attention; our story jumps around. The Arabs were no longer dominant everywhere; they had given way to the Berbers in North Africa and to the Persians and Kurds in the lands east of the Euphrates River. Various Central Asian peoples, Persian or Turkic in culture, came to dominate the successor states to the Abbasid caliphate, which lingered on in Baghdad but now had to obey other dynasties. Most of the Central Asians came in as slaves or hired troops for the Abbasids or their successors. Gradually they adopted Islam, learned Arabic and Persian, and became part of the culture of the Middle East. By the late tenth century, Turks on horseback entered the eastern lands in droves. Some, notably the Ghaznavids and the Seljuks, formed large empires.

Some of the greatest Muslim dynasties of this era were Shi'i, but not all from the same sect. Although these sectarian splits affected what people thought and did, geopolitical and economic interests mattered more. The concept of being a Sunni or a Shi'i Muslim had just begun to form. Once people started to think in these terms, though, leaders often rose to power by exploiting the sectarian feelings of influential groups within a given area. As soon as they were securely entrenched, they tended to adopt policies that maintained a Muslim consensus.

During this time, the Byzantines briefly retook Syria, Spanish Christians began to win back the Iberian peninsula, and (most notoriously) Christians

from various European lands launched a series of crusades to recapture the "Holy Land" from the Muslims. Not all Muslim rulers aided their coreligionists, for some had ideological or economic reasons not to help rival Muslim states under Christian attack. The general effect of the Christian onslaught, though, was to make Islam more militant by the twelfth century than it had ever been before. Declining Byzantine power in the eleventh century enabled the Muslim Turks to enter Anatolia, which had until then been a land of Greek-speaking, Orthodox Christians. Thus Christians were gaining in some areas and Muslims in others. Two centuries later, however, Islam's heartland was hit by a dreadful disaster—the invasion of the Mongols, who had built up a great empire under Jenghiz Khan and his heirs. Nearly every Muslim state in Asia was conquered or forced to pay tribute to the Mongols. Only an unexpected victory by the Mamluks of Egypt saved Muslim Africa from the same fate.

You may be tempted to call this chapter "One Damned Dynasty After Another," because so many ruling families came and went, but you will soon see that Islamic civilization overcame sectarian disputes, throve despite Turkish infiltration and domination, drove out the Christian crusaders, and subverted the Mongol vision of a universal empire. Muslim civilization survived because a growing majority of the people wanted to keep the coherent and comprehensive way of life made possible by Islam. It lived on because, in times of crisis, new leaders seized power and guided the governments and peoples of the various Middle Eastern lands. The dynasties founded by these leaders each underwent a cycle of growth, flowering, and decay, usually lasting about one century. The names of the dynasties mentioned here may be forgettable, but please remember the dynamics of this period in Middle East history.

Shi'i Islam in Power

Periodization is a problem in any historical account, and certainly in Islamic history. How do we decide when one period ends and another begins? Once scholars used the dates of caliphal and dynastic reigns; now we look to broader trends, social as well as political, to spot the turning points. We could start this chapter in 909, when the Fatimids seized Tunis and founded a Shi'i anticaliphate that later moved to Cairo. Or it could begin in 945, when Baghdad, seat of the Abbasid caliphate, was taken by a very different Shi'i dynasty called the Buyids. In either case, this chapter's first theme is the rise of Shi'ism as a political force.

to identify status; for instance, green singled out a man who had made the *hajj* to Mecca. Arab nomads wore flowing *kufiyas* (headcloths) bound by headbands. Muslims never wore hats with brims and caps with visors, as they would have impeded prostration during worship. Women used some type of long cloth to cover their hair, if not also to veil their faces, whenever male strangers might be present. Jews, Christians, and other minorities wore distinctive articles of clothing and headgear. Because the ways in which people dressed showed their religion and status, strangers knew how to act toward one another.

Houses were constructed from those materials that were most plentiful locally: stone, mud brick, or sometimes wood. High ceilings and windows provided ventilation in hot weather. In the winter, only warm clothing, hot food, and possibly a charcoal brazier made indoor life bearable. Many houses were built around courtyards that had gardens, fountains, and small pools. Rooms were not filled with furniture; people were used to sitting cross-legged on carpets or low platforms. Mattresses and other bedding would be rolled out when people were ready to sleep and put away after they got up. In rich people's houses, cooking facilities were often in separate enclosures. Privies always were.

Intellectual Life

We do not have enough space to give the intellectual life of early Islam the attention it deserves. Regrettably, many Westerners still believe that the Arab conquest of the Middle East stifled its artistic, literary, and scientific creativity. On the contrary, it was the Arabs who saved many of the works of Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek thinkers for later transmission to the West. In fact, no field of intellectual endeavor was closed to Muslim scholars. Although the Quran is not a scholarly treatise, nor Muhammad a philosopher, the Arab conquests brought Muslims into contact with the philosophical ideas of the Hellenistic world. Having flourished earlier in the Neoplatonist academy of Alexandria and its Sasanid counterpart in Jundishapur, Hellenistic philosophy found its way into Mamun's Bayt al-Hikma in ninth-century Baghdad. The encyclopedic writings of Aristotle, translated by Syrian Christians into Arabic, inspired such Muslim thinkers as al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Ibn Rushd (Averroës).

As "Philosopher of the Arabs," Kindi (d. 873) rated the search for truth above all human occupations except religion, exalted logic, and mathematics, and wrote or edited works on science, psychology, medicine, and music.

He was adept at taking complex Greek concepts, paraphrasing them, and simplifying them for students, a skill any textbook writer can appreciate. Everything Kindi did was done even better by Abu-Nasr al-Farabi (d. 950), a Baghdad-educated Turk who won such renown that later philosophers called him the "second teacher," the first having been Aristotle. Farabi was the first to integrate Neoplatonic philosophy with Islamic concepts of God, angels, prophecy, and community. A prolific writer on logic, he was also a skilled musician.

Ibn Sina (d. 1037) also combined philosophy with medicine. His theological writings are unusually lucid and logical, though his devout contemporaries shunned them because he viewed the body and the soul as separate entities and argued that every person has free will. He stated that the highest form of human happiness is not physical but spiritual, aiming at communion with God. His scientific writings include an encyclopedia of medical lore. Translated into Latin, this work remained a textbook in European medical schools up to the seventeenth century. Like Kindi, he wrote on logic, mathematics, and music. The greatest Muslim writer of commentaries lived in twelfth-century Spain. Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) is noted for his works on the philosophy of Aristotle and on Muslim theologians. Because of his unorthodox religious views, many of his writings were burned, and some of his original contributions to knowledge may have been forever lost.

Mathematics and Science

Mathematics, science, and medicine came up as we discussed Islamic philosophy. Early Muslims did not divide the areas of human knowledge as finely as we do now. Westerners tend to appreciate Muslim thinkers, if at all, for preserving classical learning until the Europeans could relearn it during the Renaissance. Our debt is really much greater. Muslim mathematicians made advances in algebra, plane and spherical trigonometry, and the geometry of planes, spheres, cones, and cylinders. Our "Arabic numerals" were a Hindu invention, but Arabs transmitted them to Europe. Muslims were using decimal fractions at least two centuries before Westerners knew about them. They applied mathematics to business accounting, land surveying, astronomical calculations, mechanical devices, and military engineering.

In medicine the Muslims built on the work of the ancient Greeks, but they were especially indebted to Nestorian Christians. One of these was Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873), who translated many Greek and Aramaic texts

into Arabic but did his greatest work in optics. We mentioned already Europe's use of Ibn Sina's work as a medical textbook. As a further illustration of the influence of Middle Eastern medicine, see the drawings in Vesalius's pioneering work on anatomy, which show many body parts labeled with Arabic and Hebrew terms. Muslim physicians studied botany and chemistry to discover curative drugs as well as antidotes to various poisons.

Scientific and pseudoscientific methods of observation could be linked. Chemistry would be mixed with alchemy, and astronomy with astrology. A knowledge of the movements of stars and planets aided navigation and overland travel by night. But early Muslims, like most other peoples, thought that heavenly bodies affected the lives of individuals, cities, and states, and thus many of the caliphs kept court astrologers as advisers. Muslims also used astrolabes (devices for measuring the height of stars in the sky) and built primitive versions of the telescope. One astronomer is said to have built a planetarium that reproduced not only the movements of stars but also peals of thunder and flashes of lightning. Long before Copernicus or Galileo expounded their theories, Muslim scientists knew that the earth was round and that it revolved around the sun.

To come closer to earth, descriptive geography was a favorite subject of the early Muslims. Thanks to the Arab conquests and the expansion of trade throughout the Eastern Hemisphere, they liked to read books describing far-off lands and their inhabitants, especially if they could become trading partners or converts to Islam. Much of what we know about Africa south of the Sahara from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries comes from the writings of Arab travelers and geographers. History was also a major discipline. Nearly all Muslim scientists wrote accounts of the development of their specialties. Rulers demanded chronicles to publicize what they had done or to learn from their predecessors' successes and failures. Many Muslims read accounts of the early caliphs and conquests. Muslim historians were the first to try to structure history by seeking patterns in the rise and fall of dynasties, peoples, and civilizations. These efforts culminated in the fourteenth century with Ibn Khaldun's monumental *Muqaddima,* which linked the rise of states to strong group feeling *(asabiya)* between the leaders and their followers.

Literature

Every subject we have discussed so far is part of the Muslims' prose literature. Although Arabic remained the major language of both prose and poetry, Persian was revived during the Abbasid era, and Turkish literature

emerged a little later. Poetry facilitated artistic expression, instruction, and popular entertainment. Some poems praised a tribe, a religion, or a potential patron; some poked fun at the poet's rivals; others evoked God's power or the exaltation of a mystical experience; and still others extolled love, wine, and God, or perhaps all three (you cannot always be sure which).

Prose works guided Muslims in the performance of worship, instructed princes in the art of ruling, refuted claims of rival political or theological movements, and taught any of the manifold aspects of life, from cooking to lovemaking. Animal fables scored points against despotic rulers, ambitious courtiers, naive *ulama*, and greedy merchants. You may know the popular stories that we call *The Arabian Nights*, set in Harun al-Rashid's Baghdad but actually composed by many ancient peoples, passed down by word of mouth to the Arabs, and written in the late Middle Ages. But you may not have heard of a literary figure beloved by many Middle Eastern peoples. The Egyptians call him Goha, the Persians say he is Mollah Nasroddin, and the Turks refer to him as Nasroddin Hoja. One brief story must suffice. A man once complained to Goha that there was no sunlight in his house. "Is there sunlight in your garden?" asked Goha. "Yes," the other replied. "Well," said Goha, "then move your house into your garden."

Art

Muslims do not neglect the visual arts. Some of the best proportioned and most lavishly decorated buildings ever erected were the large congregational mosques in Islam's greatest cities. They had to be monumental to accommodate all their adult male worshipers on Fridays. Some have not survived the ravages of either time or the Mongols, but the congregational mosques of Qayrawan, Cairo, Damascus, and Isfahan are impressive enough. Muslim architects also devoted some of their time and talents to palaces, schools, hospitals, caravanserais, and other buildings, as well as to gardens, reflecting pools, and fountains.

Artists worked in many different media. Although painting and sculpture were rare until modern times, early Muslim artists did illustrate manuscripts with abstract designs, beautiful pictures of plants and animals, and depictions of the everyday and ceremonial activities of men and women. Calligraphy (handwriting) was the most important art form, used for walls of public buildings as well as for manuscripts. Many artistic creations were in media we usually regard as crafts: glazed pottery and tile work; enameled glass; objects carved from wood, stone, and ivory; incised metal trays; elaborate jeweled rings, pendants, and daggers; embroidered silk cloths;

and tooled-leather bookbindings. You have doubtless seen some "oriental" carpets. Most of the genuine ones were woven or knotted in Middle Eastern countries.

Theology

Like medieval Christianity, Islam had to settle some burning issues: Does divine revelation take precedence over human reason? Is God the creator of all the evil as well as all the good in the universe? If God is all-powerful, why are people allowed to deny God's existence and disobey divine laws? If God has predestined all human acts, what moral responsibility do people have for what they do? Philosophical questions led Muslims into theology, as did disputations with their Jewish and Christian subjects, who were often more sophisticated.

Islam developed several systems of scholastic theology, climaxing with the Mu'tazila (introduced in Chapter 6), the system of the self-styled "people of unity and justice." The main tenets of the Mu'tazilites include the following: (1) God is one, so His attributes have no independent existence; (2) God is just, rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked; (3) God does not cause evil; (4) people, responsible for their own acts, are not a tool in God's hand; (5) only reason, which agrees with revelation, can guide people to know God; (6) one should try to justify God's ways to humanity; and (7) the Quran was created. If such tenets seem reasonable, you may wonder why some Muslims rejected them. For example, was the Quran really created? It must have been known to God before Gabriel revealed it to Muhammad. How could God exist without divine knowledge? If God has always existed, then His speech (the Quran) must also have been around since time began, not having been created like all other things. Muslims have always revered the Quran as the means by which to know God; its place in Islam resembles that of Jesus in Christianity. As for free will, if all people are rewarded or punished for what they do, what happens to babies and small children who die before they have learned to obey or to flout God's will? If the innocents automatically go to Heaven, is this fair to those who obeyed Islam's laws all their lives? Despite these doubts, the Mu'tazila was briefly the Abbasids' official theology. As its adherents attacked dissident Muslims, though, a reaction set in, new ideas arose, and the movement declined.

The reaction against the Mu'tazilites was spearheaded by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, founder of the Sunni legal system that bears his name, for he opposed their application of rigid logic to the Quran and the laws of Islam.

His writings influenced a major theologian named al-Ash'ari (d. 935). Though trained as a Mu'tazilite, Ash'ari, deeply concerned with God's justice, concluded that divine revelation was a better guide than reason for human action. The Quran, he argued, was an attribute of God—eternally existent yet separate from God's existence. Faith was absolute. If the Quran mentioned God's hand (or other human features), this allusion must be accepted as is—"without specifying how" or even interpreting the words allegorically, as the Mu'tazilites and some later theologians tried to do. Finally, Ash'ari and his disciples accepted the complete omnipotence of God: Everything people do is predestined, for God created all persons and all their actions; yet God assigned these actions to them in such a way that individuals remain accountable for what they do. Later Muslim theologians proved that Muhammad must have been God's messenger because no human being could imitate the content and style of the Quran. The capstone of early Muslim theology was the work of Abu-Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), one of Baghdad's greatest law teachers. His main achievement as a theologian was his use of Aristotelian logic to prove the main tenets of Islam, but he also wrote a stinging attack on Muslim philosophers. Among Muslims he is best remembered for harmonizing law, theology, and Sufism.

Mysticism

Sufism is an experience, a path into the real nature of things, and ultimately to God. Defining it (as we have in the glossary) as "organized Muslim mysticism" may be too prosaic. Some Muslims scorn Sufism as a nonrational perversion of Islam; others make it the essence of their faith. Some Sufis regard their beliefs and practices as universal, hence no more (or less) Islamic than they are Buddhist, Christian, or Zoroastrian. Each religion, they say, contains the germ of ultimate truth; but when controlled by an unsympathetic and worldly hierarchy, it can degenerate into a meaningless cult. Sufis seek to uncover meaning that is veiled from our senses and impenetrable to human reason. In monotheistic religions such as Islam, finding ultimate truth is called communion with God. This communion can be achieved through meditation or esoteric rites, such as prolonged fasting, night vigils, controlled breathing, repetition of words, or whirling for hours in one spot.

Islam always contained elements of mystical spirituality, but Sufism emerged as a distinct movement during the second century after the *hijra.* At first it was a movement of ascetics, people who sought to exalt their souls by denying themselves the comforts of the flesh. Their driving force was a strong fear of God, but this fear later evolved into belief in God's love. Sufism could cut through the intellectualism of theology and soften the

Ahmad ibn Hanbal

Historians differ on Ahmad ibn Hanbal's (780–855) place of birth. Some state that he was born in Baghdad, whereas others hold that he was born in Central Asia to Arab parents. In any case, it is clear that he grew up in Baghdad, where he excelled in the study of religion.

After receiving his basic education in Baghdad, he became an itinerant traveling scholar in Iraq, Syria, Arabia, and elsewhere. As he traveled, he collected *hadiths* and became committed to their literal textual meanings and the Quran as guides to Muslim belief and behavior. Thus he came to adamantly oppose innovation of any kind.

This devotion to tradition brought Ahmad ibn Hanbal into conflict with the more logic-driven Mu'tazilite school, which taught that mankind possessed free will and that the Quran had not existed for all eternity but was created by Allah when it was revealed to Muhammad. Such ideas suited the reigning caliphs of the day, Mamun and Mu'tasim, but ran counter to the long-standing popular interpretations that the Quran was indeed eternal and that the actions of everyone were foreordained. All this would have remained an esoteric disagreement but for the fact that Mamun and Mu'tasim commanded the *ulama* to adhere to Mu'tazilite doctrines. In order to assure this adherence, they maintained a court to investigate their beliefs.

Ahmad ibn Hanbal became the leader of the opponents of Mu'tazilite ideas. When he was arrested and brought to court, he refused to recant. As a result, he was imprisoned and reportedly suffered greatly; he may have been tortured. His steadfastness made him a popular hero among Muslim believers, and he eventually was released by a new caliph, Mutawakkil, who opposed the Mu'tazilites. Freed from prison, ibn Hanbal became an honored teacher, even a living legend.

Hanbal and his disciples founded one of the four canonical schools of Muslim legal thought, the Hanbali rite. It is the strictest of the four, rejecting such sources as analogy and consensus in favor of close adherence to the Quran and *hadith*. The Hanbali legal rite prevails in present-day Saudi Arabia. When Ahmad ibn Hanbal died in Baghdad at the age of seventy-five, hundreds of thousands of his followers escorted his coffin to the grave.

legalism of "formal" Sunni (or Shi'i) Islam. It did not—as some modern writers claim—negate the Shari'a. Rather, it complemented the exoteric law with an esoteric path. Sufi leaders, such as Ghazali, spoke of the *fiqh* of the heart as the inner version of the *fiqh* of the world. Sufism also enabled Islam to absorb some of the customs of converts from other religions without damaging its own essential doctrines—a capacity that facilitated Islam's

spread to Central Asia, Anatolia, southeastern Europe, India, Indonesia, and Africa south of the Sahara. From the eleventh century to the nineteenth, Sufism dominated the spiritual life of most Muslims. Brotherhoods and sisterhoods of mystics, also called Sufi orders, arose throughout the *umma*, providing a new basis for social cohesion. The Safavid dynasty, which ruled Persia from 1501 to 1736, began as a Sufi order. Sufism also held together the warrior *ghazi*s who founded the Safavid dynasty's better-known rival, the Ottoman Empire. The Safavids were Shi'is, and the Ottomans Sunnis; indeed, both of the main branches of Islam could accommodate Sufism.

Review of Muslim Divisions

Let us review the bases of division in Islam. The first is political: After Muhammad died, should the leaders have been chosen by the *umma* or taken from the male members of his household? The second, overlapping somewhat with the first, is legal: Which rite or system of jurisprudence can best guide the conduct of individual and communal Muslim life? The third raises theological issues: To what extent can people apply reason to expressing or debating Islamic beliefs? Is God responsible for human actions, or is each person accountable for what he or she does? The fourth can be termed spiritual: To what degree should Islamic practice include mysticism, or the search for hidden meanings not contained in outwardly tangible aspects of religion? Do not treat the resulting sectarian divisions as watertight compartments. For instance, an eleventh-century Egyptian could be a Sunni Muslim adhering to the Maliki rite and to Ash'ari's theology, and practicing Sufism within a mystic brotherhood, even while being ruled by the Shi'i Fatimids.

Conclusion

The social, cultural, and intellectual life of early Islam was so rich and varied that it defies brief description. The Muslim peoples of the Middle East drew on their own pre-Islamic traditions and those of the various civilizations that they encountered, many of which had been flourishing for centuries. They absorbed the customs and ideas that fit with their basic belief in the unity of God and the mission of Muhammad. The others they rejected. Over many centuries and under many dynasties they went on developing and enriching this multifaceted civilization, through trade and manufacturing, the spoken and written word, the erection of imposing

mosques and the design of refreshing gardens, and the formulation of lofty theological and philosophical ideas. Even the destruction of Baghdad during the Mongol invasions did not stop these processes. Nor did centuries of Muslim-Christian warfare prevent Europeans from learning the arts and sciences of Islam at the dawn of the Renaissance. In fact, the apogee of Muslim power and artistic expression was not reached until the sixteenth century, the gunpowder era that is the subject of Chapter 9.

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