

A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE
**MIDDLE
EAST**

ELEVENTH EDITION

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Shi'ites 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, Iranian or Turkish in culture, took over 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 adapted to Middle Eastern culture. By the late tenth century, numerous Turks on horseback entered the eastern lands. Some, notably the Ghaznavids and the Seljuks, formed large empires.

During this time, the Byzantines briefly retook northern 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. The general effect of the Christian onslaught 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 until then had 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 Genghis 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, thrived despite Turkish infiltration and domination, drove out the Christian Crusaders, and subverted the Mongol vision of a universal empire. Some of the greatest Muslim dynasties of this era were Shi'ite, 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'ite Muslim had just begun to form. Once people started to think in these terms, though, leaders often rose to power by exploiting the sectarian leanings of influential groups in a given area. As soon as these rulers were securely entrenched, they tended to adopt policies that maintained a Muslim consensus. Muslim civilization survived because a growing majority of the people wanted to keep the coherent and comprehensive way of life made possible by Islam.

SHI'ITE 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 will look to broader trends, social as well as political, to spot the turning points. This chapter's first theme is the rise of Shi'ism as a political force in the Middle East, during roughly the tenth and eleventh Christian centuries.

The Major Sects of Islam

As you know, we tend to identify Muslims as being Sunni, Shi'ite, or Kharjite. Sunni Islam is often misidentified as the "orthodox" version. Some Muslims call anyone "Sunni" who follows the recorded practices (*sunna*) of Muhammad. But most people identify a Muslim as a Sunni if he or she acknowledged the Rashidun, Umayyad, and 'Abbasid caliphs as legitimate leaders of the *umma* because most other Muslims accepted their rule. The person in question might have been a mystic, a rationalist freethinker, or a rebel against Islam's laws; the "Sunni" designation is more political than theological. But it usually indicates that the particular Muslim adhered to one of the four standard "rites" of Islamic law, which we will explain in Chapter 7, though these rites were not clearly established until the ninth or tenth century.

A Shi'ite Muslim, in contrast, is a partisan of 'Ali as Muhammad's true successor, at least as imam (leader) or spiritual guide of the *umma*, and of one of the several lines of 'Ali's descendants, shown in Figure 4.1 (see page 57). Shi'ites reject all other caliphs and all of 'Ali's successors not in the "correct" line, whose members supposedly inherited from him perfect knowledge of the Qur'an's inner meaning and Muhammad's whole message. Given its essentially genealogical differences, Shi'ism split into many sects. Some grew up and died out early, such as the Hashimites, who supported a son of 'Ali born of a wife other than Fatima—Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah. Others stayed underground until the 'Abbasid caliphate grew weak, then surfaced in revolutionary movements.

The three Shi'ite sects you are most likely to read about are the Twelve-Imam (or Ja'fari) Shi'ites (sometimes called Twelvers), the Isma'ilis (sometimes called Seveners), and the Zaydis (sometimes called Fivers), all shown in Figure 4.1. The first group believed in a line of infallible imams extending from 'Ali to Muhammad al-Muntazar, who is thought to have vanished in 874 but will someday return to restore peace and justice on earth. The Isma'ilis had by then broken with the Twelve-Imam Shi'ites over the designation of the seventh imam, maintaining that Isma'il was wrongly passed over in favor of his brother. The Zaydis had broken off even earlier. Zayd, who rebelled against Umayyad Caliph Hisham (r. 724–743), was to his followers the legitimate imam. By 900 Zayd's descendants were leading independent states in the mountains of Yemen and Tabaristan. Under the Zaydi system, each imam named his own successor from among his family members. The Zaydi imams of Yemen ruled up to 1962, when an army coup ousted them and set off a long civil war. The Zaydis are believed to be the closest to Sunnis in terms of Islamic beliefs and practices. Although the majority of the Shi'a belongs to the three major groups outlined above, there were other small splinter Shi'ite groups known as Ghulat "extremes" including Kaysanites, Ghurabiyya, and the Hurufiyya.

To round out this overview, let us remind you that the Kharijites were the Muslims who had turned against 'Ali in 657. They believed that neither he nor his descendants nor the Umayyads nor the 'Abbasids had any special claim to lead the *umma*. The Kharijites were prepared to obey any adult male Muslim who would uphold the laws of Islam. But if he failed to do so, they would depose him. Even though their doctrines seemed anarchistic, some Kharijites did form dynastic states, notably in Algeria and Oman, where they are known today as the Ibadis.

As political unity broke down during the ninth and tenth centuries, various dynastic states emerged in the Middle East and North Africa in response to local economic or social needs. Most are little known, but two

Shi'ite dynasties threatened the Sunni 'Abbasids in Baghdad: the Fatimids, who challenged their legitimacy, and the Buyids, who ended their autonomy.

The Fatimid Caliphate

The Fatimids appeared first. You may note that their name looks like that of Fatima, Muhammad's daughter who married 'Ali and bore Hasan and Husayn. This choice of name was deliberate. The dynasty's founder, called Ubaydallah (Little Abdallah) by the Sunnis and al-Mahdi (Rightly Guided One) by his own followers, claimed descent from Fatima and 'Ali. Hoping for Shi'ite—specifically Isma'ili—support, he proposed overthrowing the 'Abbasid caliphate and restoring the leadership of Islam to the house of 'Ali. The Isma'ilis had become an underground revolutionary movement, based in Syria. During the late eighth and ninth centuries, Isma'ili Shi'ism slowly won support from disgruntled classes or clans throughout the Muslim world. Toward this end, it formed a network of propagandists and a set of esoteric beliefs, the gist of which had allegedly been passed down from Muhammad, via 'Ali and his successors, to Isma'il, who had enlightened a few followers before his death.

Ubaydallah overthrew the Aghlabids, Muslim Arabs tied to the 'Abbasid caliphate, and seized their North African empire in 909 by allying themselves with Berber nomads. These spirited rebels embraced Shi'ism in rejecting their Sunni Aghlabid overlords. To the Fatimids, however, Tunisia seemed too remote a base from which to build a new universal Muslim empire to replace the faltering 'Abbasids. Initially, they hoped to capture Baghdad. Instead, they found Egypt, which had played a surprisingly minor role in early Islamic history. It had been ruled by various dynasties since Ahmad ibn Tulun had broken away from Baghdad in 868. While fighting the Byzantine navy in the Mediterranean, the Fatimid general Jawhar saw that Egypt was in political chaos and gripped by famine. In 969 Jawhar entered Egypt unopposed and declared it a bastion of Isma'ili Shi'ism. Then the Fatimid caliph, al-Mu'izz, brought his family and government from Tunis to Egypt. It is said that a welcoming deputation of *ulama* challenged him to prove his descent from 'Ali. Al-Mu'izz unsheathed his sword, exclaiming, "Here is my pedigree!" Then he scattered gold coins among the crowd and shouted, "Here is my proof." They were easily convinced.

The Fatimid caliphs built a new city as the capital of what they hoped would be the new Islamic empire. They called their city *al-Qahira* (meaning "the conqueror," referring to the planet Mars); we know it as Cairo. It

soon rivaled Baghdad as the Middle East's leading city. Its primacy as an intellectual center was ensured by the founding of a mosque-university called al-Azhar, where for two centuries the Fatimids trained Isma'ili propagandists. Cairo and al-Azhar outlasted the Fatimids and remained, respectively, the largest city and the most advanced university in the Muslim world up to the Ottoman conquest in 1517. Today Cairo, with its 12 million inhabitants, is again Islam's largest city, and al-Azhar remains a major university, drawing Muslim scholars from many lands.

The Fatimid government in Egypt was centralized and hierarchical. It promoted long-distance trade but not agriculture, for it neglected the Nile irrigation works. Like many Muslim states then and later, the Fatimids set up an army of slave-soldiers imported from various parts of Asia. Their strong navy helped them to take Palestine, Syria, and the Hijaz, but they lost control over their North African lands.

Surprisingly, the Fatimids did not try to convert their Sunni Muslim subjects to Isma'ili Shi'ism. They respected the religious freedom of the many Christians and Jews over whom they ruled. The exception was Caliph al-Hakim (r. 996–1021), who has been depicted as a madman who persecuted Christians, destroyed their churches, killed stray dogs, outlawed certain foods, and finally proclaimed himself divine. Modern scholars think al-Hakim's hostility was aimed mainly against Orthodox Christians; he accused them of backing the Byzantines, who had just retaken part of Syria. He issued sumptuary laws to fight a famine caused by his predecessors' neglect of Nile irrigation. Far from claiming to be God, he ended distinctions between Isma'ilis and other Muslims. One day he vanished in the hills east of Cairo; his body was never found.

Possibly al-Hakim's bad name among Muslims is due to the preaching done on his behalf by an Isma'ili propagandist, Shaykh Darazi, who convinced some Syrian mountain folk that al-Hakim was divine. These Syrians built up a religion around the propaganda of Darazi, from whom they got the collective name of Duruz, hence Druze. The Druze faith is a secret one that combines esoteric aspects of Isma'ili Shi'ism with the beliefs and practices of other Middle Eastern religions. As mountaineers, the Druze people could not be controlled by Muslim rulers in the low-lying areas. Muslim historians therefore called them troublemakers and heretics. The Druze survive today and take part in the tangled politics of modern Syria and Lebanon and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. A proud and hardy people, they share the language and culture of the Arabs, but their desire to retain their religious identity has kept them distinct politically.

The Fatimids ruled Egypt for two centuries, a long time for a Muslim dynasty, but they seem to have done better at building a strong navy and

a rich trading center than at spreading their domains or their doctrines. Could they have won more converts? Sunni Islam seemed to be waning in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. The 'Abbasid caliphs were no longer credible claimants to universal sovereignty, for they had become captives of the Buyids, who were Persian and Shi'ite. In fact, the strongest states resisting Fatimid expansion were already Shi'ite and not impressed by these self-styled caliphs, with their propagandists and their fake genealogies.

The Buyid Dynasty

Best known for having captured Baghdad and the 'Abbasids in 945, the Buyids were one of several dynasties that helped revive Persian sovereignty and culture. By this time Persia had fully recovered from the Arab conquest. During the tenth century, all Persia came to be ruled by such families: the Shi'ite Buyids in the west and the Sunni Samanids in the east. Both consciously revived the symbols and practices of Persia's pre-Islamic rulers, the Sassanids. Persian language, literature, and culture made a major comeback at this time, but attempts to revive Zoroastrianism failed.

The Buyid family consisted of several branches concurrently ruling different parts of Iraq and western Persia; indeed, the dynasty was founded by three brothers, each with his own capital. The most important was Isfahan, in the prospering province of Fars, rather than Baghdad, whose politics were turbulent and whose agricultural lands were declining. All Buyids were Twelve-Imam Shi'ites, but they tolerated other Muslim sects. Although they allowed the 'Abbasids to retain the caliphate, they confined them to their Baghdad palace and took away their means of support. One 'Abbasid caliph was blinded, and another was reduced to begging in the street; but the institution of the caliphate was a useful fiction because it stood for the unity of the *umma*. The Buyids' foreign policy was friendly to Christian Byzantium, to whoever was ruling Egypt, and to the Isma'ili Qarmatians. They were hostile to their Twelve-Imam Shi'ite neighbors, the Hamdanids of Mosul, and to their fellow Persians, the Samanids of Khurasan. In short, when making alliances, the Buyids heeded their economic interests more than any racial or religious affinities.

Domestically, the Buyids let their viziers govern for them, promoted trade and manufacturing, and expanded a practice begun by the 'Abbasids of making land grants (*iqta'*) to their chief soldiers and bureaucrats instead of paying them salaries. The *iqta'* was supposed to be a short-term delegation of the right to use a piece of state-owned land or other property. Under the Buyids, though, it came to include the right to collect the land tax (*kharaj*) and to pass on the property to one's heirs. The *iqta'* system

often caused landowners to gouge the peasants and neglect the irrigation works so necessary to Middle Eastern agriculture. More harmful to Buyid interests was the shifting of trade routes from Iraq toward Egypt and also toward lands farther east.

THE TURKS

Before we can learn the fate of the Buyids, we must turn to Central Asia. Both the century of Shi'ism and the Persian revival were cut short by events taking place there, notably the rise of the Turks. The origin of the Turkic peoples has been lost in the mists of legend; we will know little until archaeologists have excavated more of Central Asia and Mongolia, where the Turks probably began. We do know that they started as nomadic shepherds who rode horses and transported their goods on two-humped camels, although some became settled farmers and traders. Their original religion revolved around shamans, who were wizards supposedly capable of healing the sick and communicating with the world beyond. They also served as guardians of the tribal lore.

Early Turkic Civilization

Around 550 the Turks set up a tribal confederation called Gokturk, which Chinese sources call the Tujueh. Its vast domains extended from Mongolia to Ukraine. But soon the Tujueh Empire split into an eastern branch, which later fell under the sway of China's Tang dynasty, and a western one, which became allied with Byzantium against the Sassanids and later fell back before the Arab conquests. This early empire exposed the Turks to the main sixth-century civilizations: Byzantium, Persia, China, and India. It also led some Turks to espouse such religions as Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, and Buddhism. Some had even developed a writing system.

The transmission of cultures among the various Eurasian regions seems incredible until you stop to think that people and horses have crossed the steppes and deserts for ages, forming one of the world's oldest highways, the Great Silk Route. In the eighth century a group of eastern Turks, the Uighurs, formed an empire on China's northwestern border. Its official religion was Manichaeism, and its records were kept in a script resembling Aramaic. This shows how far the Turks could take some of the ideas and customs they had picked up in the Middle East. Meanwhile, one of

the western Turkic tribes, the Khazars, adopted Judaism, hoping to get along with its Christian and Muslim trading partners, while distancing itself from both sides.

The Islamization of the Turks

Eventually, though, most Turkic peoples became Muslim. The Islamization process was gradual, and it varied from one tribe to another. Once the Arab armies crossed the Oxus River—if not long before then—they encountered Turks. Even in Umayyad times, some Turks became Muslims and served in the Arab armies in Transoxiana and Khurasan. Under the 'Abbasids, you may recall, the Turks became numerous and powerful in the government. The first Turkic soldiers for Islam were probably prisoners of war who were prized for their skill as mounted archers but were viewed as slaves. Most historians think that the institution of slavery grew in 'Abbasid lands to the point where some tribes would sell their boys (or turn them over as tribute) to the caliphs, who would have them trained as disciplined soldiers or skilled bureaucrats. These slaves became so imbued with Islamic culture that they no longer identified with their original tribes. In addition, whole Turkic tribes, after they had embraced Islam, were hired by the 'Abbasids or their successors (notably the Samanids) as *ghazis* (Muslim border warriors) to guard their northeastern boundaries against the non-Muslim Turks. As for Sunnism versus Shi'ism, those Turks who served a particular Muslim dynasty usually took on its political coloring. The *ghazis* cared little about such political or doctrinal disputes. Their Islam reflected what had been taught to them by Muslim merchants, mendicants, and mystics, combined with some of their own pre-Islamic beliefs and practices.

The Ghaznavids

Two Turkish dynasties, both Sunni and both founded by *ghazi* warriors for the Samanid dynasty, stand out during this era: the Ghaznavids and the Seljuks. The Ghaznavids got their name from Ghazna, a town located 90 miles (145 kilometers) southwest of Kabul (the capital of modern Afghanistan), because their leader received that region as an *iqta'* from the Samanids in return for his services as a general and a local governor. The first Ghaznavid rulers, Sebuktegin (r. 977–997) and his son Mahmud (r. 998–1030), parlayed this *iqta'* into an immense empire, covering at its height (around 1035) what would now be eastern Iran, all of Afghanistan

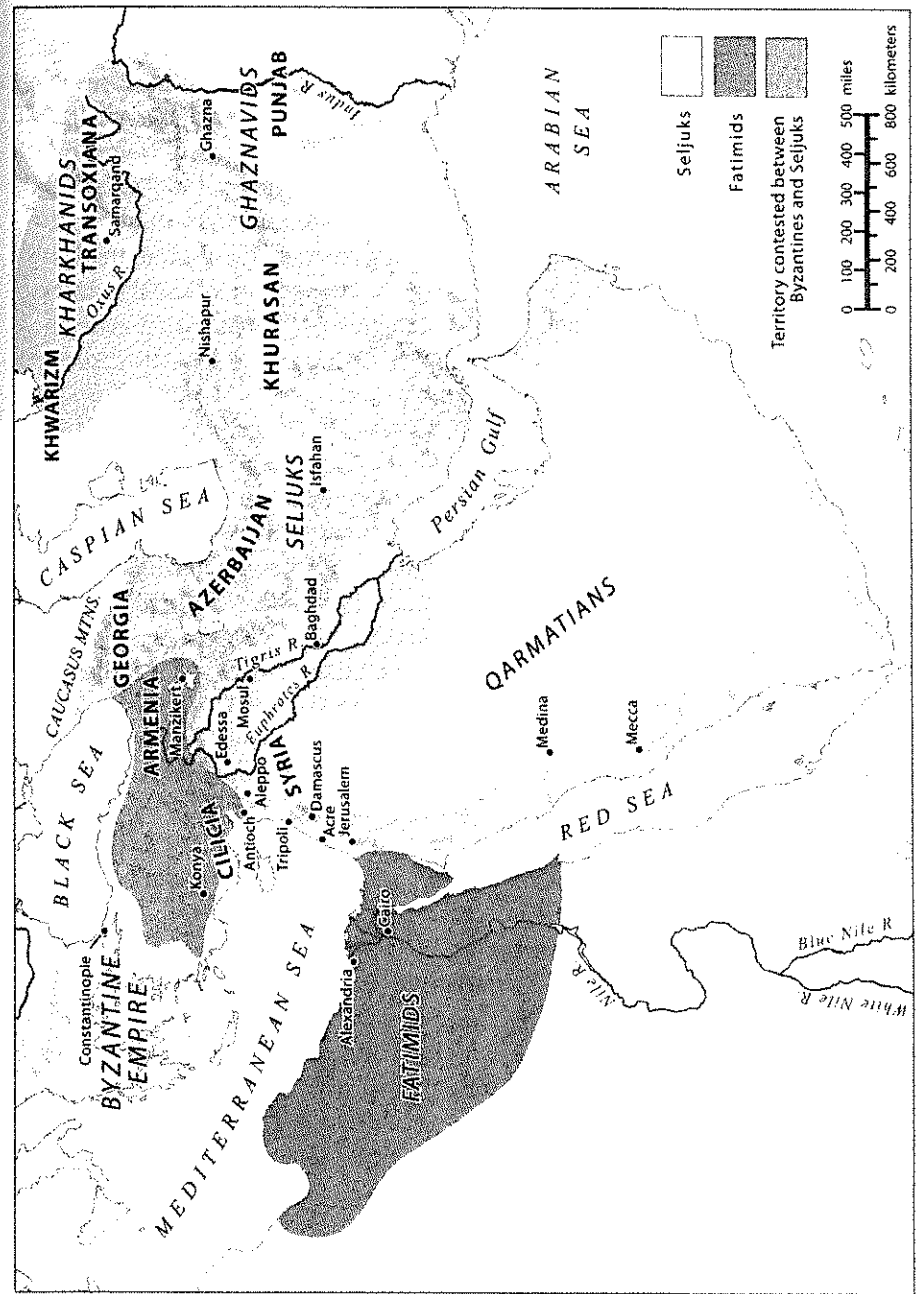
and Pakistan, and parts of northern India. It was the Ghaznavids who extended Muslim rule into the Indian subcontinent, although their efforts to force Hindus to adopt Islam have discredited them among some Indians.

The Seljuk Empire

The other major dynasty, the Seljuks, takes its name from a pagan Turkic chieftain who converted to Islam about 956. Later Seljuk enrolled his clan as warriors for the Samanids. His descendants became one of the ablest ruling families in Islamic history (see Map 6.1), making themselves indispensable first to the Samanids and then to the Ghaznavids as *ghazis* in Transoxiana against the pagan Turks. In return, they received *iqta's*, which they used to graze their horses and to attract other Islamized Turkic tribes, who would occupy the grazing lands with their sheep and goats, horses and camels. As more Turkic tribes joined the Seljuks, they increased their military strength as well as their land hunger. The trickle became a flood; in 1040 the Seljuks and their allies defeated the Ghaznavids and occupied Khurasan. The Buyids had grown weak, leaving western Persia and Iraq open to these military adventurers who had the encouragement of the 'Abbasid caliph himself, eager to welcome Sunni Muslims.

When the Turks, thus encouraged, entered Baghdad in 1055, it was not to wipe out Arab sovereignty but to restore caliphal authority, at least in name. The Turco-'Abbasid alliance was cemented by the marriage of the Seljuk leader to the caliph's sister, and the caliph recognized him as regent of the empire and *sultan* (which may be translated as "authority") in both the East and the West. Soon the title was real, as the Seljuks went on to take Azerbaijan, Armenia, and, finally, most of Anatolia following a major victory over the Byzantines at Manzikert in 1071. You would have to go back to the ninth century, when the Aghlabids took Sicily and raided the coasts of France and Italy, to find a time when a Muslim ruler had so successfully waged a war against Christendom. Not since the early 'Abbasids had so much land been held by one Muslim dynasty. Malikshah, the sultan at the height of Seljuk power, ruled over Palestine, Syria, part of Anatolia, the Caucasus Mountains, all of Iraq and Persia, plus parts of Central Asia up to the Aral Sea and beyond the Oxus River. The Seljuk Turks claimed to be the saviors of Islam.

The Seljuks' success story was too good to last. Soon after Malikshah's death in 1092, the empire began to crumble. By the end of the twelfth century, nothing was left except a part of Anatolia ruled by a branch called the Rum Seljuks. Rum meant Anatolia, which historically was part of the Byzantine Empire. That empire, in turn, called itself Rome, which is why the



Map 6.1 The Fatimids and the Seljuks, circa 1090

Arabs, Persians, and Turks all called the area *Rum*. The Turkish "Rome," with its capital at Konya, lasted until about 1300.

The Seljuk legacies helped transform the Middle East. Let us summarize them: (1) the influx of Turkic tribes from Central Asia; (2) the Turkification of eastern Persia and northern Iraq, most of Azerbaijan, and later Anatolia (the land we now call Turkey); (3) the restoration of Sunni rule in southwest Asia; (4) the spread of Persian institutions and culture (which the Seljuks greatly admired); (5) the development of the *madrassa* (mosque-school) for training *ulama* in Islamic law; (6) the regularization of the *iqta'* system for paying the tribal troops; and (7) the weakening of the Byzantine Empire in Anatolia, long its main power center.

THE CRUSADES

The last of these enumerated results of Seljuk rule opened a new chapter in the history of Christian-Muslim relations. The Byzantines worried about the encroachment of Muslim Turkic nomads and were alarmed by the Seljuks' rise to power during the eleventh century—so alarmed, in fact, that the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I begged the Roman pope, with whom the Greek Orthodox Church had broken definitively forty years earlier, to save his realm from the Muslim menace. Pope Urban II, hardly a friend of the Byzantine Empire, responded to the call for help—but for his own reasons. Eager to prove the papacy's power in relation to the secular rulers of Christendom, Urban in 1095 made a speech inviting all Christians to join in a war to regain Jerusalem's Holy Sepulcher from "the wicked race." This call to arms inaugurated the first of a series of Christian wars, known to history as the Crusades.

As the Crusades have inspired so many popular novels, films, and television programs, you may know something about what seems a romantic episode in the history of medieval Europe. Many Catholics and Protestants have learned a positive view of the Crusaders from their religious education. You will soon see why this early confrontation between the Middle East and the West is less fondly recalled by Muslims in general and by Syrians and Palestinians in particular.

Their Beginning

The success of Christian armies in pushing back the Muslims in Spain and Sicily encouraged travel overland or across the Mediterranean to the Middle East for trade or pilgrimage. One of the telling points in Pope Urban's

speech was his accusation that the Muslims (probably the Seljuks) were disrupting the Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Thousands of volunteers, mighty and lowly, rich and poor, northern and southern Europeans, left their homes and fields in response to the papal call. Younger sons from large noble families, unable to inherit their fathers' lands, wanted to win new estates for themselves. Led by the ablest European generals of the day (but not by kings), the soldiers of the cross joined up with the Byzantines in 1097. They took Antioch after a nine-month siege, progressed southward along the Syrian coast, and reached the walls of Jerusalem in June 1099. Only 1,000 Fatimid troops guarded the city. After six weeks of fighting, the 15,000 Crusaders managed to breach the walls. Both Muslim and Christian accounts attest to the bloodbath that followed, as thousands of noncombatant Jews, Muslims, and even native Christians were beheaded, shot with arrows, thrown from towers, tortured, or burned at the stake. Human blood flowed knee-deep in the streets of Jerusalem. The Dome of the Rock was stripped of hundreds of silver and gold candelabra and turned into a church.

Once the Holy Sepulcher was back in Christian hands, some of the European and Byzantine soldiers went home, but many stayed to colonize the conquered lands. Four Crusader states were set up: the kingdom of Jerusalem, the principality of Antioch, and the counties of Tripoli and Edessa. The Crusaders also shored up a tiny state called Little Armenia, formed in southwest Anatolia by Armenian Christians who had fled from the conquering Seljuks. The Armenians would remain the Crusaders' staunchest allies.

Muslim Reactions

You may ask how Islam, supposedly reinvigorated by the Turks' influx, stood by and let the Crusaders in. To some extent, the Crusaders were lucky. By the end of the eleventh century, Seljuk rule in Syria and Palestine had broken up. The successor states were fighting one another. The Shi'ite Fatimids farther south cared little about stopping an invasion that, until it reached Jerusalem, took lands from Sunni rulers. The 'Abbasid caliph in Baghdad was helpless; it is wrong to suppose that he was an Islamic pope who could command all Muslims to wage jihad against the Crusaders. Besides, the lands taken by the Crusaders were inhabited mainly by Christians of various sects, some of whom did not mind Catholic rule, or by Jews, Druze, or dissident Muslims. The Crusaders never took a city that really mattered to the political or economic life of Islam, such as Aleppo, Damascus, Mosul, Baghdad, or Cairo. Relative to the Muslim world in 1100 as a whole, the First Crusade was only a sideshow.

Why, then, did it take the Muslims so long to expel the Crusaders? Part of the reason is that then, as now, they were divided into many quarreling states. Some Muslim rulers even formed alliances with the Crusaders against their own coreligionists. Fatimid Egypt usually had close ties with the Crusader states because of the lucrative trade going on between Alexandria and such Italian ports as Venice and Genoa.

The first turning point came in 1144, when Mosul's governor, Zengi, who had carved himself a kingdom from the decaying Seljuk Empire in eastern Syria, captured Edessa from the Crusaders. The Second Crusade, led by the Holy Roman emperor and the king of France, tried to take Damascus and thus the Syrian hinterland, including Edessa. The Crusaders botched the attack, however, and Islam resumed the offensive. Zengi had meanwhile been killed by one of his slaves, but his son, Nur al-Din, proved to be a worthy successor. Soon he controlled all of Syria, except for the narrow coastal strip still held by the Crusaders.

The Rise of Salah al-Din

The scene then shifted to Egypt, still under the Fatimid caliphs, who were by then declining. They had gradually given their powers over to their viziers, who commanded the army and directed the bureaucracy. Both Nur al-Din in Damascus and the Crusader king of Jerusalem coveted the rich Nile Valley and Delta. But Nur al-Din got the upper hand through the political acumen of his best general, a Kurd named Shirkuh. Now Shirkuh had a nephew aiding him, Salah al-Din, known to the West as Saladin. Serving their patron, Shirkuh and Salah al-Din fended off a Crusader invasion of Egypt and won for themselves the Fatimid vizierate. As the last Fatimid caliph lay dying, Salah al-Din quietly arranged to replace mention of his name in the Friday mosque prayers with that of the 'Abbasid caliph. In effect, Egypt rejected Shi'ism, a change hailed by the country's Sunni majority. In practical terms, it meant that Egypt was now led by a lieutenant of Nur al-Din, Syria's ruler, for Salah al-Din proclaimed himself sultan as soon as the Fatimid caliph died in 1171.

Salah al-Din seized power in Syria after Nur al-Din died three years later, but he needed at least a decade to overcome challenges by the Shi'ites. Then he managed to take Jerusalem and most of Palestine from the Crusaders between 1187 and 1192. Salah al-Din was a master at perceiving his enemies' weaknesses and his own opportunities in time to exploit them. Both Muslim and Christian historians portray him as a paragon of bravery and magnanimity (what we call chivalry and the Arabs call *muruwwa*),

unlike some of his Christian foes. For example, Reginald of Chatillon, one of the Crusader princes, raided caravans of Muslim pilgrims going to Mecca. When Salah al-Din sought revenge, he held off attacking Reginald's castle when told that a wedding feast was going on inside. Yet he could be vindictive toward Muslims who disagreed with him; he had many of the Fatimid courtiers and poets publicly crucified in Cairo.

Most Europeans thought Salah al-Din had a master plan to drive the Crusaders out of the Middle East. If so, he did not wholly succeed, for he failed to dislodge them from much of what we now call Lebanon. The Third Crusade, which lured France's King Philip and England's Richard the Lionheart to Palestine, took Acre from Salah al-Din in 1191. Some scholars think he wanted to restore Muslim unity under the 'Abbasid caliphate, but his aims were less grandiose. Salah al-Din did manage to unite Egypt and Syria under his own family, which became the Ayyubid dynasty. The Ayyubids went on ruling these lands, though not always wisely or well, for almost two generations after Salah al-Din's death. Although the 'Abbasid caliphate did revive at this time, the lands it recovered were in Iraq and Persia. Stranger still, in 1229 the Ayyubid sultan in Cairo chose to lease Jerusalem back to the Crusaders, who also held the coast of Syria and Palestine. Twice they raided the Egyptian Delta. Egypt's Ayyubids resisted the Christian raiders, using their Turkic slave soldiers, called Mamluks, who then took over the country for themselves.

In general, Muslim militancy and intolerance grew in response to the Crusader challenge. The Ayyubid dynasty's founder, Salah al-Din, is still revered as a hero of Muslim resistance to the Christian West. Because he took Jerusalem back from the Crusaders, Muslims regained their self-confidence—just in time to face a far fiercer challenge from the East.

THE MONGOL INVASION

The unwelcome interlopers from Asia were the Turks' cousins: the Mongols. For centuries these hardy nomads had inhabited the windswept plateau north of the Gobi Desert, occasionally swooping down on China or on the caravans that plied the Great Silk Route linking China, India, and Persia. Most Mongols had kept aloof from the civilizations and religions surrounding them, worshiping their own deity, Tengri (Eternal Blue Sky). But in the late twelfth century, a warrior chieftain known as Genghis Khan united the eastern Mongol tribes into a great confederation. He made forays into northern China but then turned abruptly toward Central Asia

in response to a call for help from Turks who were being oppressed by a rival Mongol confederation called the Kara-Khitay. After he annexed their lands, Genghis faced the ambitious but foolhardy Prince Muhammad of the Khwarizm-Shah Turks.

From 1218 to 1221 the Mongols chased Muhammad's army, laying waste to the great cities and some of the farmlands of Transoxiana, Khwarizm, and Khurasan. The atrocities perpetrated by the Mongol armies defy description: they slaughtered 700,000 inhabitants of Merv; their engineers broke the dams near Gurganj to flood the city after it had been taken; they poured molten gold down the throat of a Muslim governor; they carried off thousands of Muslim artisans to Mongolia as slaves, most of them dying on the way; they stacked the heads of Nishapur's men, women, and children in pyramids; and they even killed dogs and cats in the streets. The Mongols hoped to paralyze the Muslims with such fear that they would never dare to fight back.

Genghis Khan's death in 1227 gave Islam a respite, during which his successors ravaged China, Russia, and Eastern Europe. But one of his sons sent a large army into Azerbaijan, from which the Mongols could threaten both the Christian kingdoms of the Caucasus Mountains and the Muslims of Iraq and Anatolia. One result of this incursion was the defeat of the Rum Seljuks in 1243. The Mongols reduced them to vassal (subordinate) status and let the Turkish tribes carve up Anatolia into dozens of principalities. Another result was a lasting alliance between the Mongols and the kingdom of Little Armenia (which had earlier backed the Crusaders against Islam). This led many Europeans to hope that a greater alliance between the Mongol East and the Christian West would crush the Muslim world forever.

Destruction of the Caliphate

But the Mongols needed no help. In 1256, Hulegu, Genghis's grandson, renewed the attack. He may have been spurred into action by the envoys sent by the kings of Europe to the Mongol court, but he spurned their alliance offers. Although Hulegu was a pagan, his wife was a Nestorian Christian who might have inspired his hatred of Islam. The continued existence of the 'Abbasid caliph, with even a shadowy claim to the obedience of millions of Muslims, offended Hulegu, who could brook no rivals. The Mongols crossed the Zagros Mountains into Iraq and proceeded to bombard Baghdad with heavy rocks flung from catapults until the caliph surrendered in February 1258. Then the Mongols pillaged the city, burned its

Box 6.1

Hulegu Khan

Hulegu Khan (c. 1216–1265) was the grandson of Genghis Khan and the younger brother of Mongke Khan. In 1255 Mongke, as ruler of the great Mongol khanate, dispatched Hulegu at the head of a large army to conquer the Muslim lands of Persia, Iraq, and greater Syria. As a young man Hulegu was interested in philosophy and science, but he gave them up when summoned to command a great Mongol horde. Although by religion he was a lifelong pantheist, both his mother and favorite wife were Nestorian Christians.

Hulegu moved slowly southwest with his army and crossed the Oxus River, the frontier between Mongol-ruled lands and Persia, only in 1256. Then he rapidly subdued the Isma'ilis and put an end to their infamous Assassins headquartered at Alamut. In 1257 he sent emissaries to Caliph Mustasim in Baghdad, calling on him to accept Mongol suzerainty, as his predecessors had submitted to the Seljuk Turks. Mustasim, the thirty-seventh 'Abbasid caliph, was sure that any attack on Baghdad would unite the Muslim world behind him and rejected the Mongol demands. Hulegu then replied as follows:

When I lead my army against Baghdad in anger, whether you hide in heaven or in earth I will bring you down from the spinning spheres; I will toss you in the air like a lion. I will leave no one alive in your realm. I will burn your city, your land and yourself. If you wish to spare yourself and your venerable family, give heed to my advice with the ear of intelligence. If you do not, you will see what God has willed.

Hulegu carried out his threats in January and February 1258. He destroyed Baghdad, killing at least 90,000 of its inhabitants, including the caliph. He then withdrew his forces into Azerbaijan, which became the center for the Mongol Il-Khanid dynasty, which would rule the eastern Muslim lands. Later in 1258, he once more set out to conquer Syria, taking Aleppo and Damascus with ease. By 1260 the Mongols had reached southern Palestine and Egypt's Sinai frontier.

At this point Hulegu received news that his brother Mongke Khan had died. This made him return home with most of his army to take part in the ensuing succession struggle. This turn of events enabled the Mamluk forces from Egypt to defeat a diminished Mongol army at 'Ayn Jalut in 1260.

Even if the Mongols had maintained their forces at full strength, they probably could not have conquered Egypt. The Mongol armies traveled with thousands of horses and tens of thousands of sheep and cattle. A pastoral society on the move needs plenty of land to support its animals. The Sinai and Arabian deserts would have posed an impenetrable barrier to Hulegu's hordes.

schools and libraries, destroyed its mosques and palaces, murdered possibly a million Muslims (the Christians and Jews were spared), and finally executed all the 'Abbasids by wrapping them in carpets and having them trampled beneath their horses' hooves. Until the stench of the dead forced Hulegu and his men out of Baghdad, they loaded their horses, packed the scabbards of their discarded swords, and even stuffed some gutted corpses with gold, pearls, and precious stones, to be hauled back to the Mongol capital. It was a melancholy end to the independent 'Abbasid caliphate, to the prosperity and intellectual glory of Baghdad, and, some historians think, to Arabic civilization itself. (See Box 6.1.)

Mamluk Resistance

The world of Islam did not vanish. Its salvation came from the Mamluks (their name literally means "owned men"), who in 1250 had seized Egypt from their Ayyubid masters, the descendants of Salah al-Din. In 1259–1260, Hulegu's forces pushed westward, supported by Georgian and Armenian Christians eager to help destroy their Muslim enemies. They besieged and took Aleppo, massacring its inhabitants. Damascus, abandoned by its Ayyubid ruler, gave up without a fight. Then Hulegu sent envoys to Cairo with this message:

You have heard how we have conquered a vast empire and have purified the earth of the disorders that tainted it. It is for you to fly and for us to pursue, but whither will you flee, and by what road will you escape us? Our horses are swift, our arrows sharp, our swords like thunderbolts, our hearts as hard as the mountains, our soldiers as numerous as the sand. Fortresses will not detain us. We mean well by our warning, for now you are the only enemy against whom we have to march.

But then Hulegu learned that his brother, the Mongol emperor, had died. Grief stricken (or perhaps power hungry), he headed home from Syria, taking most of his men with him. In the meantime, the Mamluks murdered his envoys and entered Palestine, where they defeated the Mongols at 'Ayn Jalut (Goliath's Spring) in September 1260. This battle was doubtless a climactic moment in history, as it marked the high point of Mongol expansion against Islam. Thus the Muslim world survived its Mongol ordeal. But it was hardly an Arab victory, for the Mamluks were mainly Turks at most one generation removed from the Central Asian steppes.

CONCLUSION

Hulegu and his descendants did settle down in Iraq and Persia, calling themselves the Il-Khanid dynasty. Eventually they adopted Persian culture, including Islam, and repaired some of the damage they had done. The Mamluks survived for centuries, driving the last Crusaders out of Palestine in 1293. The kingdom they founded in Egypt and Syria became the major Muslim center of power, wealth, and learning for two centuries.

What can we learn from this mournful chronicle of invasions, conquest, and destruction and from the bewildering succession of dynasties, few of which are known outside the Middle East? The rise and fall of Shi'ite power and the Turkish influx benefited the area; however, the Crusaders and the Mongols did the Middle East more harm than good. But people cannot wish away the bad things that happen in their lives, nor can a country efface the sad events of its history. People learn from their misfortunes and overcome them. The religion and culture of Islam survived and grew stronger. The sources of its resilience will be the subject of Chapter 7.