

troversial conclusions—for example, that the earliest Muslims considered themselves descendants of Abraham through Hagar and Ishmael, that the movement originated in northern Arabia and not Mecca, and that Palestine and not Medina was the movement's principal focus.⁵ Moreover, whereas the traditional Muslim position sees Islam as having appeared fully developed in the form of Muhammad's revelations in Mecca and Medina, contemporary non-Muslim sources depict the slow evolution in the centuries before Muhammad of a monotheistic cult that, heavily influenced by Jewish practice and Jewish apocalyptic thought, absorbed neighboring pagan cults in Arabia in the time of Muhammad.⁶

In sum, the Muslim scholarly tradition generally postulates a dramatic break between the age of pre-Islam (the *jāhiliya*, or "age of ignorance") and that of Islam. In contrast, modern Western interpretations, influenced by nineteenth-century European notions of social evolution, have come to regard the origins of Muslim history in distinctly organic terms, that is, as having logically grown out of earlier socioreligious structures. The important division among Western historians is between those whose work is confined to the traditional Arabic sources and those who have begun tapping into the contemporary non-Muslim sources, resulting in interpretations of Islam's origins and early development that are more complex, and in some instances far more controversial, than earlier understandings.

THE EARLY CONQUESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

During the ten years immediately following the Prophet's death, from 632 to 642, Arab Muslims erupted out of the Arabian peninsula and conquered Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and western Iran. The movement did not stop there, however. To the west, Arab ships sailed into the Mediterranean Sea, previously a "Roman lake," taking Cyprus (649), Carthage (698), Tunis (700), and Gibraltar (711), before conquering Spain (711–16) and raiding southern France (720). Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia suffered repeated pillaging during those years. Meanwhile, Arab armies during the 650s marched eastward across the Iranian plateau and completed the destruction of the Sasanian Empire, forcing the son of the Persian "king of kings" to flee to the Tang court in China. By 712 Arab armies had seized strategic oases towns of Central Asia—Balkh, Samarqand, Bukhara, and Ferghana—and would soon be meeting Chinese armies face to face. To the south, Muslim navies sailed to the coasts of western India where in 711 they conquered and occupied the densely populated Hindu–Buddhist society of Sind. Thus began the long and eventful encounter between Islamic and Indic civilizations, during which time Islamic culture would penetrate deeply into India's economy, political systems, and religious structure.

While Arab rule in Sind was being consolidated, other Arab armies continued the overland drive eastward. Requested by Turkish tribes to

intervene in conflicts with their Chinese overlords, Arab armies in 751 marched to the westernmost fringes of the Tang Empire and engaged Chinese forces on the banks of the Talas River. The Arabs' crushing victory there, one of the most important battles in the history of Central Asia, probably determined the subsequent cultural evolution of the Turkish peoples of that region, who thereafter adopted Muslim and not Chinese civilization. Although Muslims would never dominate the heartland of China or penetrate Chinese civilization as they would India, their influence in Central Asia gave them access to the Silk Route, which for centuries to come served as a conduit for Chinese civilization into the Muslim world. Moreover, Muslim Arabs had already established maritime contact with China, having begun trading along the Chinese coast in the late seventh century.

Thus, within 130 years of Islam's birth, Arab armies and navies had conquered a broad swath of the known world from Gibraltar to the Indus delta and had penetrated both China and Europe by land and sea. How to explain it? Whence came the energy that had propelled Arab Muslims out of the Arabian peninsula, laying the groundwork for the establishment first of an Arab empire and then of a world civilization? Traditionalist Muslim sources generally accounted for these momentous events in terms of a miraculous manifestation of Allah's favor with his community, an interpretation consonant with Islamic understandings of the relationship between divine will and the historical process, but one that tells us more of Islamic theology than of Islamic history.

Theories of the Muslim conquests advanced by many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European Islamicists are hardly more helpful. The general tone is captured in the following lines penned in 1898 by Sir William Muir, a Scot, whose interpretation of the Arab conquests sounds rather like the screenplay for a Cecil B. De Mille film, complete with technicolor, panoramic vision, and stereophonic soundtrack:

It was the scent of war that now turned the sullen temper of the Arab tribes into eager loyalty. . . . Warrior after warrior, column after column, whole tribes in endless succession with their women and children, issued forth to fight. And ever, at the marvellous tale of cities conquered; of rapine rich beyond compute; of maidens parted on the very field of battle "to every man a damsel or two" . . . fresh tribes arose and went. Onward and still onward, like swarms from the hive, or flights of locusts darkening the land, tribe after tribe issued forth and hastening northward, spread in great masses to the East and to the West.⁷

In the end, though, after the thundering hooves have passed and the dust has settled, in attempting to explain the conquests, Muir leaves us with little of substance, apart from simply asserting the Arabs' fondness for the "scent of war," their love of "rapine," or the promise of "a damsel or

two." Muir's vision of a militant, resurgent Islam gone berserk reflected, in addition to the old European stereotypes, colonial fears that Europe's own Muslim subjects might, in just such a locustlike manner, rise up in revolt and drive the Europeans back to Europe. Sir William, after all, was himself a senior British official in colonial India as well as an aggressive activist for the Christian mission there. But his was no fringe school concerning the rise of Islam or the subsequent conquests; indeed, his understanding dominated for decades to follow and, like the traditionalist Muslim interpretation, tells us more about the narrator than the subject.

In the early twentieth century, scholars introduced the thesis that around the time of the Prophet's death, Arabia's grazing lands had suffered from a severe, short-term desiccation that drove the nomadic Arabs to search, literally, for greener pastures. Although it lacked convincing evidence, this theory found plenty of advocates then, as it continues to do today. Variations on the desiccation theory, also lacking firm evidence, held that poverty, overpopulation, or other such social miseries had driven the Arabs out of their homeland. Still other historians shifted attention from the Arabs themselves to Byzantine Rome and Sasanian Persia, the two great empires of western Asia, whose domains included, respectively, Syria and Iraq. These empires were portrayed as "exhausted" from several hundred years of mutual warfare, thus enabling the more "vigorous" Arabs to walk over both with ease. But this thesis likewise lacked empirical evidence, and, above all, failed to account for the Arabs' continued expansion into lands far beyond the domain of either empire. Meanwhile, the notion of the Arabs' supposed militancy, legitimized by the religious doctrine of *jihād*, or holy war, generally still informs popular sentiment about Muslims and has continued to find its way into history textbooks to the present day, though in a somewhat less lurid version than Muir's portrayal.

Whereas older theories saw the invasions as a random or unorganized influx of ragtag hordes pushed out of the peninsula by population pressure or drawn by the love of rapine, recent research has revealed methodically planned and well-executed military maneuvers directed by a central command in Medina and undertaken for quite rational purposes. There was the economic need to provide the growing community with material support—accomplished by the movement's capture of lucrative trade routes and new surplus-producing regions—which the relatively meager economic resources of Arabia could not provide. And there was the political need to contain and channel the tremendous energies released by the Prophet's socioreligious revolution. In this latter sense, the initial Arab conquests resemble the French or Russian revolutions, in which socioideological energies generated in the process of consolidating the original movement proved so intense that they could not be contained geographically and spilled over into adjacent regions.

Above all, what is missing from earlier explanations is any mention of Islam itself. One does occasionally come across references to the lure of an Islamic paradise filled with dark-eyed beauties awaiting the frenzied believer who would martyr himself in battle, but such romantic allusions appear to be holdovers from older stereotypes associating Islam with sex and violence. By and large, Western historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries displayed a chronic inability to accept the possibility that the religion itself could have played a fundamental, as opposed to a supportive, role in the movement. In recent years, however, there has been an effort to bring religion back into the discussion by focusing on the Muslim community's social fragility during the earliest years of its formation, and especially the volatility of divine revelation as the basis of its authority. Thus the death of Muhammad in 632 confronted the community of believers, then confined to the population of western Arabia, with their first genuine crisis: How would the charismatic authority of the Prophet, who for ten years had provided both spiritual and political leadership to the growing *umma*, be sustained or channeled when he was no longer present? Some tribes, apparently supposing that with the loss of the Prophet the continuing authority of revelation had ended, simply withdrew from the community altogether. Others began following rival prophets—at least two men and one woman sprang up in the Arabian interior—who claimed to be receiving continuing revelations from God.

With both the political and the religious basis of the fledgling community thus threatened, Muhammad's first successor as leader of the community, Abu Bakr, moved vigorously to hold the volatile movement together. First, he forbade any tribe to leave the community once having joined; and second, in order to prevent the movement from splintering into rival communities around rival prophets, he declared that Muhammad had been the last prophet of God. These moves amounted, in effect, to a declaration of war against those tribes who had abandoned the *umma* or subscribed to other self-proclaimed prophets. Thus the initial burst of Muslim expansion after the Prophet's death was directed not against non-Muslims but against just such Arab tribes within the peninsula. In the process of suppressing these rebellions, however, Abu Bakr made alliances with tribes on the southern fringes of Iraq and Syria, and as the circle of such alliances widened, Muslim Arabs soon clashed with client tribes of the Sasanians and Byzantines and eventually with Sasanian and Byzantine imperial forces themselves.

Once launched, the movement continued to be driven by powerful religious forces. Islam had derived its initial power from Muhammad's ability to articulate the collectivization of Arabia's deities into a single supreme God, together with the collectivization of its tribes into the single, corporate *umma* under the direct authority of God. After the Prophet's

death, these movements gained momentum as the masses of Arab soldiery participating in the expansion came to regard the movement's social ideals as immediately attainable. Hence, for them the distribution of the riches of conquered lands among members of the community, which looked to the rest of the world like senseless plunder, served to actualize the ideal, preached by the Prophet, of attaining socioeconomic equality among all believers. The importance of this factor is underscored by the fact that one of the first and most serious dissident movements in Islam, the Kharajite movement, was spearheaded in conquered Iraq by men of piety whose military stipends had just been reduced. Leaders of the revolt, which resulted in the assassination of the Caliph Uthman in 656, justified their actions by emphasizing the radical egalitarianism, including social equality for women, that had been preached by the Prophet. In short, recent explanations of the early Arab conquests, unlike earlier European theories, have focused on social processes rather than social stereotypes, and on the internal dynamics of early Muslim society and religion.

Early Islamic Civilization and Global History

From the perspective of global history, perhaps the most significant theme of early Islam is the evolution of a relatively parochial Arab cult into a world civilization, indeed history's first truly global civilization. For the Arab conquests inaugurated a thousand-year era, lasting from the seventh to the seventeenth century, when all the major civilizations of the Old World—Greco-Roman, Irano-Semitic, Sanskritic, Malay-Javanese, and Chinese—were for the first time brought into contact with one another by and within a single overarching civilization. What is more, Muslims synthesized elements from those other civilizations—especially the Greek, Persian, and Indian—with those of their Arabian heritage to evolve a distinctive civilization that proved one of the most vital and durable the world has ever seen. At work here were several factors: the emergence of state institutions and urban centers that provided foci for the growth of Islamic civilization; the conversion of subject populations to Islam; the ability of Muslim culture to absorb, adapt, and transmit culture from neighboring civilizations; and the elaboration of socioreligious institutions that enabled Islamic civilization to survive, and even flourish, following the decline of centralized political authority.

ISLAMIC STATES AND ISLAMIC CITIES

In the early years of the Islamic venture, the community had been ruled from Medina by an Arab merchant aristocracy led by four consecutive successors to Muhammad. By the second half of the seventh century,

however, political power had shifted outside Arabia and into the hands of two successive imperial dynasties—the Umayyad, which governed a de facto Arab empire from Damascus between 661 and 750; and the Abbasid, which overthrew the Umayyads and reigned, if not always ruled, from its splendid capital city of Baghdad until 1258. Thus while Mecca and Medina remained the spiritual hubs of Islamic civilization, reinforced by the annual pilgrimage to the Ka'ba shrine, the Arab rulers in Syria and Iraq inherited from the Persian and Roman empires traditions and structures that facilitated their own transition to imperial rule. These included notions of absolute kingship, courtly rituals and styles, an efficient bureaucratic administration, a functioning mint and coinage system, a standing army, a postal service, and the kind of land revenue system on which the political economies of all great empires of the Fertile Crescent had rested. Even the Iwan Kisra, the famous royal palace of the Persians on the banks of the Tigris River, had been conveniently vacated by the last Sasanian emperor, Yazdegird III, as if to beckon its new Arab occupants to embark on and fulfill their own imperial destiny.

This they certainly did. Earlier historians, writing under the spell of Arabic narratives dwelt on the swiftness and thoroughness of the conquests, emphasized the sense of discontinuity between the old and the new orders. More recent historians, however, especially those drawing on non-Arabic as well as Arabic sources, have tended to see more continuity between the two orders. In fact, recent research suggests that the Arabs' rapid transition from a life of desert nomadism to one of imperial rule resulted largely from the expectations of their non-Muslim subjects. In Egypt, the earliest Arab governor ratified the appointment of church patriarchs just as Byzantine governors had done; in Iraq, the Arab governors adjudicated disputes among Nestorian Christians at the insistence of the Nestorians themselves, for that was what the Sasanian government had done. For the first fifty years of their rule, the Arabs even continued to mint coins in the fashion of the Sasanians, complete with a portrait of the Persian shah on one side. The Persian office of *wazîr*, or chief minister of state, was carried over into Abbasid government. And the caliphs, though technically the successors (*khalifa*) to the Prophet's leadership, adopted the regalia, the majestic court ceremonies, and the mystique of absolutism of their Sasanian predecessors, even adopting the titles "Deputy of God" and "Shadow of God on Earth." The caliphs also carried over the Sasanian practice of patronizing a state religion, substituting Islam for Zoroastrianism. They appointed *qâdîs*, or Muslim judges, and promoted the construction of mosques, just as the Persian shahs had appointed Zoroastrian priests and built fire temples. Moreover, having acquired the taste for urban life that their Sasanian predecessors had cultivated, the caliphs lavishly supported the whole gamut of arts and crafts that subsequently became associated

with Islamic culture: bookmaking, carpet weaving, pottery, calligraphy, ivory carving, wood carving, glassware, and tapestry, among others. Thus the centralized, imperial caliphate, though strictly speaking a violation of Islamic notions of the equality of believers, served as a vehicle for the growth of Islamic civilization in its widest sense.

As the social historian Ira Lapidus has shown, all of this growth took place in the context of the extraordinary urbanization that soon followed the conquests, which became one of the hallmarks of Islamic civilization. While older cities like Damascus, Jerusalem, Isfahan, Merv, and Cordova were simply occupied, others, like Cairo and Basra, began as garrison cities for Arab soldiers, a development resulting in part from a policy of settling and urbanizing otherwise potentially turbulent nomads. Cities, both new and old, also grew in response to the caliphate's need for administrative centers, and these, once in place, drew in and absorbed the surrounding population as urban proletariat classes. The most spectacular such case was that of Baghdad. Established in 756, the new Abbasid capital rapidly swelled to a population of about half a million, or ten times the size of nearby Ctesiphon, the former Sasanian capital. Everywhere from Cordova to Delhi there sprang up great cities, which, stimulated by the appetite of the ruling classes for luxury goods, became burgeoning centers and markets for the production and consumption of numerous crafts and industries. Also, by spatially dividing functionally autonomous communities into separate quarters, these cities projected a social vision, inherited ultimately from the Sasanians' policy toward their own minority communities, whereby the Islamic ruler extended to the communities recognition, tolerance, and protection in return for political loyalty and taxes. By virtue of such arrangements a Muslim city such as eleventh-century Toledo, Spain, could absorb a community of ten thousand Jews without experiencing the sort of anti-Semitic hostility typical of Christian cities of late medieval Europe.

CONVERSION TO ISLAM

Another dimension to the entry of Islamic civilization into global history was the mass conversion of Middle Eastern sedentary communities to Islam. Unlike other great conquests in which the foreign conqueror merely came and went—or perhaps came and assimilated—by the tenth and eleventh centuries Islam was well on its way to becoming the dominant religion in the Middle East. The dynamics of this movement have been fruitfully explored in Richard Bulliet's *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, a book whose subtitle illustrates the entry of new social science techniques into a field that had formerly been the exclusive preserve of classical, textual scholarship. Bulliet's concern was to plot the pace and direction of conversion by tabulating the

patterns of change in personal names recorded in biographical dictionaries for selected Middle Eastern communities.

Other recent studies have emphasized the striking extent of cultural continuity amid the conversion process. In an important study of the cultural effects of the conquests in Iraq, Michael Morony argued that non-Muslims found it easier to accept Islam when ideas, attitudes, or institutions already present in their own cultures shared affinities with those imported from Arabia. For example, the Muslims shared animal sacrifice with pagans and Zoroastrians and ritual slaughter with Jews; they shared circumcision with Jews and Christians; they institutionalized charity, like Jews and Christians; they covered their heads during worship, like Jews; they had a month-long fast followed by a festival, like many other groups; they practiced ritual ablutions, as did Zoroastrians; and their ritual prayer resembled that of Nestorian Christians. Studies like Bulliet's and Morony's thus show a distinct shift away from earlier and cruder models of religious conversion, which, in the tradition of William Muir, tended to conflate the conquests and the conversion of non-Muslims into a single process, thereby reducing Islam to a "religion of the sword."

Moreover, we are now beginning to see that by the late seventh century Muslims were regarding themselves as carriers of a global civilization and not just members of an Arab cult. In their newly won empire they found themselves ruling over a plurality of autonomous and self-regulating religious communities—Greek Orthodox Christians, Monophysites, Nestorians, Copts, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Jews—as well as a plurality of linguistic and literary traditions, including Greek, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Middle Persian, and various dialects of Aramaic. In forging an independent Islamic identity amid these older religious communities, Muslims faced a critical choice: Either they could constitute themselves as one more autonomous community modeled on those they ruled—thereby preserving Allah as an Arab deity, Islam as an Arab cult, and Arabic as the language of the ruling class—or they could try to bring all these diverse communities and traditions together into a new cultural synthesis. During the initial decades after their conquest of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, Muslim rulers generally opted for the former alternative, as Islam remained the proud emblem of the Arab ruling elite. But by the eighth century they had turned to the latter alternative, a move that may have been decided as much on practical as on religious grounds. Convinced of the political imprudence of a tiny ethnic minority ruling indefinitely over an enormous non-Muslim majority, the caliphs openly encouraged their non-Arab subjects to convert. Henceforth the Arabic language and the Islamic religion would provide a sense of civilizational coherence by uniting hitherto separate religious and linguistic communities into a single ethnoreligious identity, initially transcending and ultimately supplanting all other such identities. Because

Muslims chose this second option, Islam became a world civilization and not just one more parochial, ethnic cult.

That Muslims quite self-consciously saw themselves as playing this unifying role seems to be the import of the Qur'an's passages exhorting Jews and Christians to leave aside their differences and return to the pure, unadulterated monotheism of Abraham, their common ancestor. Verses to this effect were inscribed around Islam's earliest surviving monument, Jerusalem's magnificent Dome of the Rock, built in 691:

O mankind! The messenger hath come unto you with the Truth from your Lord. Therefor believe; [it is] better for you. . . .

O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and his messengers, and say not "Three"—Cease! (it is) better for you!—Allah is only One God. Far is it removed from His Transcendent Majesty that He should have a son. His is all that it is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender.⁸

As an invitation clearly intended for the Jews and Christians of Jerusalem, and of Palestine generally, these words point to the unifying, integrative role that Muslims saw themselves as playing amidst the older religious traditions of the Middle East.

ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION AND CULTURAL DIFFUSION

Islamic civilization also became a global civilization because of its ability to receive and absorb culture from one end of the world and then pass it on to other parts of the world. Consider, for example, the art of papermaking. The Islamization of Central Asia was only one consequence of the Arabs' defeat of Chinese armies in the mid-eighth century. The other consequence was that the victors learned from their Chinese prisoners of war the technology of papermaking, which then rapidly diffused throughout the Abbasid Empire. By the end of the eighth century Baghdad had its first paper mill; by 900 Egypt had one, and by the twelfth century paper was manufactured in Morocco and Spain, whence it spread to Europe. Papermaking technology also traveled southeastward. Having learned the technology from the Abbasids, Turks introduced it in North India in the thirteenth century, and for the next several centuries it gradually spread throughout the subcontinent, everywhere replacing the much less efficient palm leaf, just as in Europe paper replaced the Egyptian papyrus. Moreover, since paper is the bureaucrat's stock in trade, papermaking technology greatly contributed to the expansion and consolidation of the Indo-Muslim bureaucratic states from the fifteenth century onward.

The diffusion of paper technology would have religious as well as political consequences. Since Muslims believe that the Qur'an—every syllable of it—is the actual Word of God, the diffusion of the Qur'an, vastly accelerated by the new technology, contributed to the growth of the religion as well. Indeed, when one considers the power of literacy and the role of literate communities in articulating and preserving the substance of law, religion, or education, the spread of papermaking technology must be seen as having played an enormously important role in the post-eighth-century history of the globe, and especially in the expansion of Islamic civilization with which the initial diffusion of paper was most clearly associated.

One of the most exciting areas of recent research is the study of the worldwide diffusion of agricultural products to, through, and from the early Muslim world. In terms of the number of species and the geographical scope involved, this was probably the most dramatic agricultural event in world history prior to the meeting of the peoples of the Western and Eastern hemispheres in the fifteenth century. In a superbly documented study, Andrew Watson has recently laid to rest the myths that the Arabs, because of their desert, pastoral background, were somehow disinclined to agriculture and that early Islamic times had witnessed a decline in agriculture. Watson shows, to the contrary, that between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, while Europeans remained unreceptive to agricultural innovation, Muslims both actively promoted such innovations and vastly expanded agricultural production everywhere they went.

A key event in Watson's analysis was the Arab conquest of Sind in 711, which established a direct and regular contact between India and the Fertile Crescent, the heartland of the Umayyad and Abbasid governments. This conquest in turn threw open western Asia, Africa, and Europe to the agricultural treasures of India, effectively incorporating all these regions for the first time into a single agricultural universe. Between the eighth and tenth centuries Arabs had brought back from India and successfully begun cultivating staples such as hard wheat, rice, sugarcane, and new varieties of sorghum; fruits such as banana, sour orange, lemon, lime, mango, watermelon, and the coconut palm; vegetables such as spinach, artichoke, and eggplant; and the key industrial crop, cotton. From Iraq, these crops (except the mango and coconut) then spread westward all the way to Muslim Spain, which was transformed into a veritable garden under Muslim rule. Other crops passed by ship from southern Arabia to East Africa, and reached as far south as Madagascar, while still others moved by caravan from northwest Africa across the Sahara to tropical West Africa. This was especially true for cotton, whose diffusion in Africa directly paralleled the spread of Islam itself. Finally, beginning in the thirteenth century, most of these crops were introduced into Europe via Spain, Sicily, and Cyprus, but

at a comparatively slow rate owing to the Europeans' inferior agricultural skills, their more limited irrigation technology, and their lower population density, which made it unnecessary to maximize their soil productivity.

Everywhere they were cultivated, the new crops contributed to fundamental social changes. Since the traditional crops of the pre-Islamic Middle East and Mediterranean area had been winter crops, the fields of those regions generally lay fallow in the summertime. But as most of the newly introduced crops were summer crops, adapted to India's hot, monsoon climate, their spread into western Asia vastly increased agricultural productivity by adding, in effect, another growing season for each calendar year. Moreover, since the Indian crops were adapted to high rainfall regions, they required more water than could be provided by the irrigation systems already present in the pre-Islamic Western world. Hence the Arabs' successful diffusion of the Indian crops also involved an intensification of existing irrigation technology (e.g., underground water canals, water-lifting devices) and the invention of still others (e.g., certain types of cisterns). All these innovations, in addition to systems of land tenure and taxation that encouraged land reclamation and a more intensified use of older fields, contributed to a significant increase in food production in the eighth to eleventh centuries, making possible the population increases and urbanization so characteristic of Muslim societies in this period.

Just as they had borrowed, assimilated, and diffused Indian agriculture, Muslims did the same with Greek and Indian knowledge. By the seventh century the Byzantine Greeks had long neglected the classical intellectual tradition of Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Galen, the cultivation of which migrated eastward when religious persecution drove Syriac-speaking Nestorian Christians into Iran. There the Nestorians continued to teach Greek sciences under the late Sasanians. In the eighth and ninth centuries this submerged intellectual tradition resurfaced when the Abbasids established their capital, Baghdad, in the heart of the old Sasanian Empire. Eager for what they deemed practical knowledge—for example, keeping themselves physically well, measuring the fields, predicting the agricultural seasons from heavenly bodies—the caliphs opened a “house of wisdom,” in essence a translation bureau for rendering Arabic versions of Greek, Syriac, Sanskrit, and Persian works dealing with a broad spectrum of foreign thought, especially medicine, astronomy, and mathematics. By the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, Muslim scientists, most of whom were Arabic-writing Iranians, were no longer merely translating but were creatively assimilating this foreign knowledge. From the Greeks they accepted the notion that behind the apparent chaos of reality lay an underlying order run by laws that could be understood by human reason. In addition to this imported rationalist tradition, scholars evolved their own empiricist tradition that developed especially rich knowledge in the field

*Islamic &
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THE FORGING OF A GLOBAL ORDER

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for the
American Historical
Association



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