

Page One

Islam From The Beginning To 1300
Date: 2002

Page Two

Page Three

The Arab Empire Of The Umayyads

Page Four

Page Five

Page Six

Page Seven

Page Eight

Page Nine

Page Ten

Page Eleven

Page Twelve

Page Thirteen

Page Fourteen

Page Fifteen

*May peace and
blessings of Allah
be on thee*

Muhammad's victory over the Umayyads, his capture of Mecca, and the resulting allegiance of many of the bedouin tribes of Arabia created a wholly new center of power in the Middle Eastern cradle of civilizations. A backward, non-agrarian area outside the core zones of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia suddenly emerged as the source of religious and political forces that would eventually affect the history of much of the known world. But when the prophet

Muhammad died quite suddenly in 632, it appeared that his religion might altogether disappear. Many of the bedouin tribes that had converted to Islam renounced the new faith in the months after Muhammad's death, and his remaining followers quarreled over who should succeed him. Though these quarrels were never fully resolved, the community managed to find new leaders

who directed a series of campaigns to force those who had abandoned Islam to return to the fold.

Having united most of Arabia under the Islamic banner by 633, Muslim military commanders began to mount serious expeditions beyond the peninsula,

where only probing attacks had occurred during the lifetime of the prophet and

in the period of tribal warfare after his death. The courage, military prowess, and religious zeal of the warriors of Islam and the weaknesses of the empires that bordered on Arabia resulted in stunning conquests in Mesopotamia,

North Africa, and Persia that dominated the next two decades of Islamic history. The empire built from these conquests was Arab rather than Islamic. Most of it was ruled by a small Arab-warrior elite, led by the Umayyads and other prominent clans, which had little desire to convert the subject populations, either Arab or otherwise, to the new religion.

Unaccustomed wealth and political power, which was reflected in the growth of new cities around Arab garrisons and the expansion of older urban centers, were the Arabs' rewards for these startling victories. The Umayyads, to the dismay of many of the faithful, developed into autocratic rulers who were more concerned with perpetuating their dynastic power than advancing the interests of the Islamic faithful as a whole. Their growing arrogance and adoption of a life-style stressing luxury and material gain exacerbated divisions within the Islamic community that had begun to emerge soon after Muhammad's death.

Consolidation And Division In The Islamic Community

The leadership crisis brought on by Muhammad's death in 632 was compounded by the fact that he had not appointed a successor or even established a procedure by which a new leader might be chosen. Opinion within

the Muslim community was deeply divided as to who should succeed him. In addition, many bedouin tribes broke from the Islamic fold after hearing of the prophet's passing. Several of these tribes produced prophets of their own and some of the larger ones launched attacks on Mecca.

In this moment of extreme danger, there was an urgent need to find a new leader who could rally the faithful and put down the bedouin challenges to the community and the new faith. On the afternoon Muhammad died, one of the loyal

clans called a meeting to select a new leader who would be designated as the caliph, the political and religious successor to Muhammad. Several choices were possible, and a deadlock between the clans appeared likely - a deadlock that would almost certainly have been fatal to a community threatened by enemies on all sides. One of the main candidates, Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, was passed over because he was considered too young to

assume a position of such great responsibility. This decision was later to prove a major source of division in the Islamic community. But in 632, it appeared that a difficult reconciliation had been won by the choice of one of Muhammad's earliest followers and closest friends, Abu Bakr (caliph from 632 to 634). In addition to his personal courage, warmth, and wisdom, Abu Bakr was

well versed in the genealogical histories of the bedouin tribes, which meant that he was well placed to determine which tribes could be turned against each

other and which ones could be enticed into alliances. Initially at least, his mandate was very limited. He received no financial support from the Muslim community. Thus, he had to continue his previous occupation as a merchant on a

part-time basis, and he only loosely controlled the better military commanders of the faithful.

These commanders turned out to be very able indeed. After turning back attacks on Mecca, the Islamic faithful routed one after another of the bedouin tribes. The defeat of rival prophets and some of the larger clans in what were known as the Ridda Wars soon brought about the return of one tribe after

another to the Islamic fold. Emboldened by the proven skills of his generals and the swelling ranks of the Muslim faithful, Abu Bakr did nothing to stop raids to the north of Arabia into the sedentary zones in present-day Iraq and Syria and eastward into Egypt. There is evidence that Muhammad envisioned expansion into these areas, but his death left whatever plans he had unfulfilled.

The unified bedouin forces had originally intended merely to raid for booty and then retreat back into the desert. But their initial probes revealed the deep-seated rot and vulnerability of the Byzantine and Persian empires, which dominated or ruled directly the territories into which the Muslim warriors rode. The invaders were also prodded onward by the growing support of the Arab bedouin peoples who had migrated to the Fertile Crescent decades and even centuries earlier. These peoples had long served as the vassals and frontier guardians of the Byzantine and Persian empires. Now they joined their Arab brethren in a combined assault on the two empires.

Motives For Conquest

The Arab warriors were driven by a number of forces. The unity the Islamic faith provided gave them a new sense of common cause and strength. United they could stand up to the non-Arab rulers who had so long played them against each other and despised them as unwashed and backward barbarians from the desert wastelands. It is also probable that the early leaders of the community saw the wars of conquest as a good way to release the pent-up energies of the martial bedouin tribes they now sought to lead. Above all, the bedouin warriors were drawn to the campaigns of expansion by the promise of a share in the booty to be won in the rich farmlands raided and the tribute that could be exacted from the towns and cities that came under Arab rule. As an early Arab writer remarked, the bedouins forsook their life as desert nomads not out of a promise of religious rewards, but due to a "yearning after bread and dates."

The chance to glorify their new religion may have been a motive for the Arab conquests, but they were not driven by a desire to win converts to it. In fact, other than fellow bedouin tribes of Arab descent, the invaders had good reason to avoid mass conversions. Not only would Arab warriors have to share the booty of their military expeditions with ever larger numbers if converts were made, but Muslims were exempted from some of the more lucrative taxes levied on Christian and other non-Muslim groups. Thus, the vision of Islamic jihads, or holy wars, launched to forcibly spread the faith, which has been associated with Islam, distorts the forces behind the early Arab expansion.

Weaknesses Of The Adversary Empires

Of the two great empires that had once contested for dominance in the Fertile Crescent transit zone, the Sasanian Empire of Persia proved the more vulnerable. Power in the extensive Sasanian domains was formally concentrated in the hands of an autocratic emperor. By the time of the Arab explosion, the emperor was manipulated by a landed, aristocratic class that harshly exploited the cultivators who made up most of the population of the empire. Zoroastrianism, the official religion of the emperor, lacked popular roots. By contrast, the religion of a visionary reformer named Mazdak, which had won considerable support among the peasantry, had been brutally suppressed by the Sasanian rulers in the period before the rise of Islam.

At first the Sasanian commanders had little more than contempt for the Arab invaders and set out against them with poorly prepared forces. By the time the seriousness of the Islamic threat was made all too clear by decisive Arab victories in the Fertile Crescent region and the defection of the Arab tribes on the frontier, Muslim warriors had broken into the Sasanian heartland. Further Muslim victories brought about the rapid collapse of the vast empire. The Sasanian rulers and their forces retreated eastward in the face of the Muslim advance. The capital was taken, armies were destroyed, and generals were slain. When, in 651, the last of the Sasanian rulers was assassinated, Muslim victory and the destruction of the empire were ensured.

[See Persian Prisoners]

Despite an equally impressive string of Muslim victories in the provinces of their empire, the Byzantines proved a more resilient adversary. Their ability to resist the Muslim onslaught, however, was impeded both by the defection of their own frontier Arabs and the support the Muslim invaders received from the Christians of Syria and Egypt. Members of the Christian sects dominant in these areas, such as the Copts and Nestorians, had long resented the rule of the Orthodox Byzantines, who taxed them heavily and, periodically, openly persecuted them as heretics. When it became clear that the Muslims would not only tolerate the Christians but tax them less heavily than the Byzantines did, these Christian groups rallied to the Arabs.

Weakened from within and exhausted by the long wars fought with Persia in the decades before the Arab explosion, the Byzantines reeled from the Arab assaults. Syria, western Iraq, and Palestine were quickly taken by the Arab invaders, and by 640 a series of probes had been made into Egypt, one of the

richest provinces of the empire. In the early 640s, the ancient center of learning and commerce, Alexandria, was taken; most of Egypt was occupied; and Arab armies extended their conquests into Libya to the west. Perhaps even more astounding from the point of view of the Byzantines, by the mid-640s the desert bedouins were putting together war fleets that increasingly challenged the long-standing Byzantine mastery of the Mediterranean. The rise of Muslim naval supremacy in the eastern end of the sea sealed the loss of Byzantium's rich provinces in Syria and Egypt and opened the way to further Muslim conquests in North Africa, the Mediterranean islands, and even southern Italy. For a time the Byzantines managed to rally their forces and stave off further inroads into their Balkan and Asia Minor heartlands. But the early triumphs of the Arab invaders had greatly reduced the strength and magnificence of the empire. Though it would survive for centuries, it would henceforth be a kingdom under siege.

The Lingering Problem Of Succession And Sectarian Strife

The stunning successes of Muslim armies and the sudden rise of an Arab empire covered over for a time continuing divisions within the community. The old division between the tribes of Mecca and Medina was compounded by differences between the tribes of north and south Arabia as well as those who came to identify Syria as their homeland and those who settled in Iraq. Though these divisions were often generations old and the result of personal animosities, resentments had also begun to build over how the booty from the conquests ought to be divided among the tribal blocks that made up the Islamic community. In 656, just over two decades after the death of the prophet, the growing tensions broke into open violence. The spark that began the conflict was the murder of the third caliph, Uthman, by mutinous warriors returning from Egypt. Uthman's death was the signal for the supporters of Ali to proclaim him as caliph. In part Uthman's unpopularity among many of the tribes, particularly those from Medina and the prophet's earliest followers, arose from the fact that he was the first caliph to be chosen from Muhammad's early enemies, the Umayyad clan. Already angered by the murder of their kinsman, the Umayyads rejected Ali's claims and swore revenge when he failed to punish Uthman's assassins. Warfare erupted between the two factions.

Ali was a famed warrior and experienced commander, and his deeply committed supporters soon gained the upper hand. After his victory at the Battle of the Camel in late 656, most of the Arab garrisons shifted to his side in opposition to the Umayyads, whose supporters were concentrated in the province of Syria and the holy city of Mecca. Just as Ali was on the verge of routing the Umayyad forces at the battle of Siffin in 657, he was won over by a plea for mediation of the dispute. His decision to accept arbitration was fatal to his cause. Some of his most fervent adherents repudiated his leadership and had to be violently suppressed. While representatives of both parties sought unsuccessfully to work out a compromise, the Umayyads regrouped their forces and added Egypt to the provinces backing their claims. In 660, Mu'awiya, the new leader of the Umayyads, was proclaimed caliph in Jerusalem, thereby directly challenging Ali's position. A year later, Ali was assassinated, and his son, Hasan, was pressured by the Umayyads into renouncing his claims to the caliphate.

The Sunni-Shi'a Division

In the generation after the prophet's death, the question of succession, which has proved to be a persistent problem in Islamic political systems, generated deep divisions within the Muslim community. The Sunnis, who backed the Umayyads, and the Shi'as, or dissenters who supported Ali, remain to this day the most fundamental divisions in the Islamic world. Hostility between these two branches of the Islamic faithful was further heightened in the years after Ali's death by the continuing struggle between the Umayyads and Ali's second son, Husayn. After being abandoned by the clans in southern Iraq, who had promised to rise in a revolt supporting his claims against the Umayyads, Husayn and a small party were overwhelmed and killed at Karbala in 680. From that point the Shi'as mounted determined and sustained resistance to the Umayyad caliphate.

Over the centuries factional disputes about who had the right to succeed Muhammad, with the Shi'ites recognizing none of the early caliphs except Ali, have been compounded by differences in belief, ritual, and law that have steadily widened the gap between Sunnis and Shi'as. These divisions have been further complicated by the formation of splinter sects within the Shi'a community in particular, beginning with those who defected from Ali when he agreed to arbitration of his and the Umayyads' claims.

The Umayyad Imperium

After a pause to settle internal disputes over succession, the remarkable sequence of Arab conquest was renewed in the last half of the 7th century. Muslim armies broke into central Asia, thus inaugurating a rivalry with Buddhism in the region that continues to the present day. By the early 8th

century, the southern prong of this advance had reached into northwest India. Far to the west, Arab armies swept across North Africa and crossed the Straits of Gibraltar to conquer Spain and threaten France. Though the Muslim advance into western Europe was in effect checked by the hard-fought victory of Charles Martel and the Franks at Poitiers in 732, the Arabs did not fully retreat beyond the Pyrenees into Spain until decades later. Muslim warriors and sailors dominated much of the Mediterranean, a position that would be solidified by the conquest of key islands, such as Crete, Sicily, and Sardinia, in the early decades of the 9th century. By the early 700s, the Umayyads ruled an empire that extended from Spain in the west to the steppes of central Asia in the east. Not since the Romans had there been an empire to match it; never had an empire of its size been built so rapidly.

Though Mecca remained the holy city of Islam, under the Umayyads the political center of community shifted to Damascus in Syria, where the Umayyads chose to reside after the murder of Uthman. From Damascus a succession of Umayyad caliphs strove to build a bureaucracy that would bind together the vast domains they claimed to rule. The empire was very much an Arab conquest state. Except in the Arabian peninsula and parts of the Fertile Crescent, a small Arab and Muslim aristocracy ruled over peoples who were neither Arab nor Muslim. Only Muslim Arabs were first-class citizens of this great empire. They made up the core of the army and imperial administration, and only they received a share of the booty derived from the ongoing conquests. They could be taxed only for charity. The Umayyads sought to keep the Muslim warrior elite concentrated in garrison towns and separated from the local population. It was hoped that isolation would keep them from assimilating to the subjugated cultures, because intermarriage meant conversion and the loss of taxable subjects.

Converts And "Peoples Of The Book"

Umayyad attempts to block extensive interaction between the Muslim warrior elite and the mass of their non-Muslim subjects had little chance of succeeding. The citified bedouin tribesmen were soon interacting intensively and intermarrying in considerable numbers with the local populations of the areas conquered. Equally critical, increasing numbers of these peoples were voluntarily converting to Islam, despite the fact that conversion did little to advance them socially or politically in the Umayyad period. Mawali, or Muslim converts, in this era still had to pay property taxes and in some cases the jizya, or head tax, levied on nonbelievers. They received no share of the booty and found it difficult, if not impossible, to acquire important positions in the army or bureaucracy. They were not even considered full members of the umma but were accepted only as clients of the powerful Arab clans. As a result, the number of conversions in the Umayyad era was low, and mawali were frequently found in the ranks of the dissident sects generated by the struggles over succession.

By far the greater portion of the population of the empire were dhimmis, or people of the book. As the title suggests, it was originally applied to Christians and Jews who shared the Bible with the Muslims. As Islamic conquests spread to peoples, such as the Zoroastrians of Persia and the Hindus of India, the designation "dhimmi" was necessarily stretched to accommodate the majority groups within these areas of the empire. The Muslim overlords generally displayed tolerance toward the religions of dhimmi peoples. Though they had to pay the jizya and both commercial and property taxes, their communities and legal systems were left intact and they were allowed to worship as they pleased. This approach made it a good deal easier for these peoples to accept Arab rule, particularly since many had been oppressed by their pre-Muslim rulers.

Family And Gender Roles In The Umayyad Age

Broader social changes within the Arab and widening Islamic community were accompanied by significant shifts in the position of women, both within the family and in society at large. In the first centuries of Arab expansion, the greatly strengthened position of women under Islam prevailed over the seclusion and domination by males that were characteristic features of women's lives through much of the rest of the Middle East. Muhammad's teachings and the dictates of the Quran stressed the moral and ethical dimensions of marriage. The kindness and concern the prophet displayed for his own wives and daughters did much to strengthen the bonds between husband and wife and the nuclear family in the Islamic community. Muhammad encouraged marriage as a replacement for the casual and often commercial sexual liaisons that had been widespread in pre-Islamic Arabia. He vehemently denounced adultery on the part of both husbands and wives, though the punishment he recommended (100 lashes) was a good deal less draconian than the death by stoning later prescribed by some versions of Islamic law. He forbade female infanticide, which had apparently been widely practiced in Arabia in pre-Islamic times.

Though men were allowed to take up to four wives, the Quran forbade

multiple marriages if the husband was not able to support more than one wife or treat all of his wives equally. Women could not take more than one husband, but Muhammad gave his own daughters a say as to whom they might marry and greatly strengthened the legal rights of women regarding inheritance and divorce. He insisted that the bride-price paid by the husband's family be given to his future wife, rather than to her father as before. By his own example, Muhammad greatly strengthened the position of women within the family. Not only were his wives and daughters prominent figures in the early Islamic community, but he treated them with great respect and even on occasion was known to take a hand in the household chores.

The prophet's teachings proclaimed the equality of men and women before God and in Islamic worship. Women, such as Kadijah, the prophet's first wife, were some of Muhammad's earliest and bravest followers. They accompanied his forces to battle (as did the wives of their adversaries) with the Meccans, and a woman was the first martyr for the new faith. Many of the traditions of the prophet, which have played such a critical role in Islamic law and ritual, were recorded by women, and his wives and daughters played an important role in the compilation of the Quran. Though women were not allowed to be prayer leaders, they played an active role in the politics of the early community. Muhammad's wife Aisha actively promoted the claims of the Umayyad party against Ali, while Zainab, his daughter by Fatima, went into battle with the ill-fated Husayn. Through much of the Umayyad period, little is heard of veiled Arab women, and they appear to have pursued a wide range of occupations, including scholarship, law, and commerce. Perhaps one of Zainab's nieces best epitomizes the independent-mindedness of Muslim women in the early Islamic era. When chided for going about without a veil, she replied that God in His wisdom had chosen to give her a beautiful face and that she intended to make sure that it was seen in public so that all might appreciate God's grace.

Umayyad Decline And Fall

The ever-increasing size of the royal harem was just one manifestation of the Umayyad caliphs' growing addiction to luxury and soft living. Their legitimacy had been disputed by various Muslim factions from the outset of their seizure of the caliphate. But the Umayyads further alienated the Muslim faithful as they became more aloof in the early decades of the 8th century and retreated from the dirty business of war into their pleasure gardens and marble palaces. Their abandonment of the frugal, simple life-style followed by Muhammad and the earliest caliphs - including Abu Bakr, who made a trip to the market the day after he was selected to succeed the prophet - enraged the dissenting sects and sparked revolts throughout the empire. The uprising that would prove fatal to the short-lived dynasty began among the frontier warriors who had fought and settled in distant Iran.

By the middle decades of the 8th century, more than 50,000 warriors had settled near the oasis town of Merv in the eastern Iranian borderlands of the empire. Many of them had married local women, and over time they had come to identify with the region and to resent the dictates of governors sent from distant Damascus. The warrior settlers were also angered by the fact that they were rarely given the share of the booty, which was now officially tallied in the account books of the royal treasury, that they had earned by fighting the wars of expansion and defending the frontiers. They were contemptuous of the Umayyads and the Damascus elite, whom they viewed as corrupt and decadent. In the early 740s an attempt by Umayyad palace officials to introduce new troops into the Merv area touched off a revolt that soon spread over much of the eastern portions of the empire.

Marching under the black banners of the Abbasid party, which traced its descent from Muhammad's uncle, al-Abbas, the frontier warriors were openly challenging Umayyad armies by 747. Deftly forging alliances with Shi'ite rebels and other dissident groups that challenged the Umayyads throughout the empire, their leader, Abu al-Abbas, the great-great-grandson of the prophet's uncle, led his forces from victory to victory. Persia and then Iraq fell to the rebels. In 750, they met an army led by the Umayyad caliph himself in a massive battle on the river Zab near the Tigris. The Abbasid victory resulted in the conquest of Syria and the capture of the Umayyad capital. Desiring to eliminate the Umayyad family altogether to prevent recurring challenges to his rule, Abu al-Abbas invited numerous members of the clan to what was styled as a reconciliation banquet in the same year. As the Umayyads were enjoying the feast, guards covered them with carpets and they were slaughtered by Abbas's troops. An effort was then made to hunt down and kill all the remaining members of the family throughout the empire. Most were slain, but the grandson of a former caliph fled to distant Spain, where he founded the Caliphate of Cordoba that was to live on for centuries after the rest of the empire had disappeared.

Home Page

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