In any ranking of the greatest survivors in world history, Abd al-Rahman I would have to be near or at the top of the list. The grandson of the last distinguished caliph (leader of the Muslim faithful) of the Umayyad dynasty, he had barely survived the vengeful slaughter of the many male descendants of that first house of Muslim rulers by the warriors of the Abbasid coalition that had seized power in 749. After narrowly escaping capture and beheading on his estate on the upper Euphrates River, Abd al-Rahman, dodging Abbasid pursuers and bounty hunters alike, fled through Syria and Palestine and across north Africa. After a half decade as fugitive, he finally found uneasy sanctuary in Morocco at the western end of the lands to which Islam had spread to that point in time. In 755, the 24-year-old crossed the narrow Straits of Gibraltar that separated north Africa from the Iberian peninsula. Rallying to his cause several hundred Syrians, whose homelands had been the mainstay of the vanquished Umayyad dynasty and who had joined in earlier Arab-Berber campaigns to conquer the peninsula, Abd al-Rahman began his quest to become master of Iberia.

Despite continuing resistance by rivals and rebels from within and invasions plotted by Abbasid rulers in distant Baghdad, Abd al-Rahman steadily consolidated his control over Iberia. His early victories, particularly the capture of Cordoba in 756, secured his position as the paramount lord on the peninsula within years of his arrival. In the following decades as the capital of a flourishing Muslim kingdom, Cordoba grew rapidly into one of the most cosmopolitan and celebrated cities in the Mediterranean world. Cordoba boasted well-paved and well-lit streets, houses with running water, one of the world's finest universities, and a library with over 400,000 volumes at a time when the largest collections in Christian Europe contained a few thousand at best. But Cordoba's crowning glory was its great mosque. It was famed for its hundreds of splendid marble columns topped by ornate horseshoe arches and its elaborately decorated vaulted ceilings, shown in Figure 7.1. But even more remarkable than its distinctive architecture and decoration were the ways in which the mosque encapsulated the exceptional synergy generated by cooperation among the diverse peoples and cultures that came together in Islamic Spain.

Like the development of Muslim civilization more generally, the construction of the great mosque of Cordoba owed much to earlier and even contemporary rival civilizations. It was built on the ruins of a Christian church, and many of the pillars that supported the signature horseshoe arches were taken from Roman ruins. And although the influence of Syrian-style Islamic architecture is apparent, the mosque's bell tower and thick walls decorated with geometric stone carvings shared key features with the Romanesque churches then found throughout Latin Christendom. Much of the mosque's stone masonry, and especially its intricate mosaics, were crafted by Christian Orthodox artisans from Constantinople, and its architects, laborers, and overseers were drawn from Arab and Berber Muslim migrants as well as the majority Christian population of Iberia. The cross-cultural influences and interethnic and religious cooperation that played such vital roles in the construction of the grand mosque of Cordoba were also prominent features of Muslim Iberian society as a whole. Under the Muslims the peninsula became a key locus for the transmission of ideas, technology, and material culture between the Middle East, north Africa, and Europe. Arab and Berber migrants brought paper (originally invented, as we have seen, in China) and refined steel working to al-Andalus (the Arab name for Iberia), and their descendants carried leather working skills back to Morocco and the broader Muslim world. Muslim migrants to Iberia also introduced sophisticated irrigation systems and a wide variety of staple foods and plants, including oranges, sugar cane, and cotton.

Jews and Christians, as "people of the book," were allowed in Iberia as in the rest of the Muslim world to worship openly, to regulate their everyday lives according to their own laws, and to collaborate with Muslims in trade, scholarship, and the arts. Arab and Jewish scholars in Cordoba, Seville, and other urban centers, for example, were renowned throughout the Mediterranean for their translations of classic Greek texts. By the tenth and eleventh centuries, their collaboration had become pivotal for the recovery in Latin Christendom of the writings of the great Greek
In the chapter that follows we shall see that in many ways Muslim Iberia was a microcosm—albeit a very forward-looking one—of much of the Islamic world in its early centuries. Although spread initially mainly by nomadic camel-herding peoples of Arabia, Islam was from its inception a religion of the towns and trade. Muhammad himself was a successful caravan leader before he began to receive the divine revelations that transformed him into the founder of one of the great world religions. As in Iberia, conversion to Islam as it spread from Arabia was generally peaceful and voluntary, and in the early decades the faithful were, if anything, reluctant to recruit new believers. Even after the new faith came to undergird vast and expansive empires, such as those fashioned by the Umayyads and Abbasids, adherents of other religions based on divinely inspired scriptures—from the Jews and Christians to the Hindus—prayed and practiced their rituals openly and their communities very often flourished economically. As was the case in Iberia, many of the most brilliant contributions of early Islamic civilization came from the openness of Arabs to borrowing from the ancient civilizations that surrounded the Arab heartlands. The Arabs' absorption and then innovations on the sciences, arts, and technologies of Greece, Rome, Byzantium, Persia, Egypt, India, and China were essential to the rise of the first genuinely global civilization in human history.

### DESERT AND TOWN: THE HARSH ENVIRONMENT OF THE PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIAN WORLD

The Arabian Peninsula (Map 7.1) was a very unlikely birthplace for the first global civilization. Much of the area is covered by some of the most inhospitable desert in the world. An early traveler wrote of it,
springs and wells or small rivers that fed the oases. Travelers' and traders' caravans stopped at the oases to centers of permanent settlement and trade in the desert. Major towns usually grew around the underground FIGURE
the bedouin world in which the religion arose shaped the career of its prophet, his teachings, and the tribal culture of the camel nomads. Their populations were linked by kinship to bedouin peoples. For bedouin clans. The safety of the trade routes on which the towns depended was in the hands of the language and religion—were much like those of the nomads.

Towns and Long-Distance Trade

Although bedouin herders occupied most of the habitable portions of Arabia, farmers and town dwellers carved out small communities in the western and southern parts of the peninsula in the classical era. Foreign invasions and the invasions of bedouin peoples had all but destroyed these civilizations centuries before the birth of Muhammad. But a number of cities developed farther out from their wells, they were likely to kill them. Wars were often fought as a result of one clan's encroaching on the pasture areas of another clan. In a culture in which one's honor depended on respect for one's clan, the slightest pretense could lead to inter-clan violence. For instance, an insult to a warrior in a market town, the theft of a prize stallion, or one clan's defeat in a horse race by another clan could end in battles between clan groups. All the men of a given clan joined in these fights, which normally were won by the side that could field several champions who were famed for their strength and skill with spears or bows and arrows. These battles were fought according to a code of chivalry that was quite common in early cultures. Although battles usually were small in terms of the numbers involved, they were hard-fought and often bloody affairs. Almost invariably the battles either initiated or perpetuated clan feuds, which could continue for hundreds of years. The deaths of the warriors of one clan required that revenge be taken on the clan that had killed them. Their deaths led in turn to reprisals. This constant infighting weakened the bedouins in relation to the neighboring peoples and empires and allowed them to be manipulated and set against each other.

Clan Identity, Clan Rivalries, and the Cycle of Vengeance

The harsh desert and scrub environment of Arabia gave rise to forms of social organization and a lifestyle that were similar to those of other nomadic peoples. Bedouin herders lived in kin-related clan groups in highly mobile tent encampments. Clans, in turn, were clustered in larger tribal groupings,

but these were rarely congregated together and then only in times of war or severe crisis. The struggle for subsistence in the unforgiving Arabian environment resulted in a strong dependence on and loyalty to one's family and clan. Survival depended on cooperation with and support from kin. To be cut off from them or expelled from the clan encampment was in most cases fatal. The use of watering places and grazing lands, which were essential to maintaining the herds on which bedouin life depended, was regulated by clan councils. But there could be wide disparities of wealth and status within clan groups and between clans of the same tribe. Although normally elected by councils of older advisors, the shaykhs, or leaders of the tribes and clans, were almost always men with large herds, several wives, many children, and numerous retainers. The shaykhs' dictates were enforced by bands of free warriors whose families made up a majority of a given clan group. Beneath the warriors were slave families, often the remnants of rival clans defeated in war, who served the shaykhs or the clan as a whole.

Clan cohesion was reinforced by fierce inter-clan rivalries and struggles to control vital pastures and watering places. If the warriors from one clan found those from another clan drawing water from one of their wells, they were likely to kill them. Wars were often fought as a result of one clan's encroaching on the pasture areas of another clan. In a culture in which one's honor depended on respect for one's clan, the slightest pretense could lead to inter-clan violence. For instance, an insult to a warrior in a market town, the theft of a prize stallion, or one clan's defeat in a horse race by another clan could end in battles between clan groups. All the men of a given clan joined in these fights, which normally were won by the side that could field several champions who were famed for their strength and skill with spears or bows and arrows. These battles were fought according to a code of chivalry that was quite common in early cultures. Although battles usually were small in terms of the numbers involved, they were hard-fought and often bloody affairs. Almost invariably the battles either initiated or perpetuated clan feuds, which could continue for hundreds of years. The deaths of the warriors of one clan required that revenge be taken on the clan that had killed them. Their deaths led in turn to reprisals. This constant infighting weakened the bedouins in relation to the neighboring peoples and empires and allowed them to be manipulated and set against each other.

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Allah The Arab term for the high
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Persecution, Flight, and Victory

At first Muhammad's following was small, consisting mainly of his wife, several members of his clan, and some servants and slaves. As his message was clarified with successive revelations, the circle of the faithful grew so that the Umayyads no longer dominated Meccan life. By a threat to their own wealth and power. Above all, the new faith threatened to supplant the gods of the Ka'ba, whose shrines had done so much to establish the city as a center of commerce and bedouin interchange. Although he was protected for a time by his own clan, Muhammad was increasingly threatened by the Umayyads, who plotted with other clans to murder him. It was clear that Muhammad must flee Mecca, but where was he to find refuge? Muhammad's reputation as a skillful and fair negotiator prepared the way for his successful flight from Meccan persecution. The quarrels between the clans in the nearby city of Medina had set off increasingly violent clashes, and the oasis community was on the verge of civil war. Leaders of the bedouin clans in Medina sent a delegation to invite Muhammad, who was related to them on his mother's side, to mediate their disputes and put an end to the strife that had plagued the town.

Clever ruses and the courage of his clansman Ali, who at one point took Muhammad's place and thus risked becoming the target of assassins, secured in 622 the safe passage of Muhammad and a small band of followers from Mecca to Medina. His hijra (HIH, or flight) to Medina, marks the first year of the Islamic calendar. In Medina he was given a hero's welcome. He soon justified this warm reception by deftly settling the quarrels between the bedouin clans of the town. His wisdom and skill as a political leader won him new followers, who joined those who had accompanied him from Mecca as the core believers of the new faith. In the eyes of the Umayyad notables, Muhammad's successes made him a greater threat than ever. Not only was he preaching a faith that rivaled their own, but his leadership was strengthening Meccan competitors. Medina. Muslim raids on Meccan caravans provided yet another source of danger. Determined to put an end to these threats, the Quraysh launched a series of attacks in the mid-620s on Muhammad and his followers in Medina. These attacks led to several battles. In these clashes, Muhammad proved an able leader and courageous fighter. The ultimate victory for Muhammad and his followers was signaled by a treaty with the Quraysh in 628, which included a provision granting the Muslims permission to visit the shrine at Ka'ba in Mecca during the season of truce. By then Muhammad's community had won many bedouin allies, and more than 10,000 converts accompanied him on his triumphant return to his hometown in 629. After proving the power of Allah, the single god he proclaimed, by smashing the idols of the shrine, Muhammad gradually won over the Umayyads and most of the other inhabitants of Mecca to the new faith.

Arabs and Islam

Although Islam was soon to become one of the great world religions, the beliefs and practices of the prophet Muhammad were initially adopted only by the Arab town dwellers and bedouins among whom he had grown up. There is a striking parallel here with early Christianity, which focused on Jewish converts. The new religion preached by Muhammad had much to offer the divided peoples of Arabia. It gave them a form of monotheism that belonged to no single tribe and transcended clan and class divisions. It provided a religion that was distinctively Arab in origin and yet the equal of the monothestic faiths held by the Christians and Jews, who lived in the midst of the bedouin tribes. If anything, the monotheism preached by Muhammad was even more uncompromising than that of the Christians because it allowed no intermediaries between the individual and God. God was one; there were no saints, and angels were nothing more than messengers. In addition, there were no priests in the Christian or Jewish sense of the term.

Islam offered the possibility of an end to the vendettas and feuds that had so long divided the peoples of Arabia and had undermined their attempts to throw off the domination of neighboring empires. The umma, or community of the faithful, transcended old tribal boundaries and made possible a degree of political unity undreamed of before Muhammad's time. The new religion provided a single and supernaturally sanctioned source of authority and discipline. With unity, the skills and energies that the bedouins had once channeled toward warring with each other were turned outward in a burst of conquest that is perhaps unmatched in human history in its speed and extent. From vassals, borderland warriors, or contemptible "savage" of the desert waste, the Arab bedouins were transformed into the conquerors and rulers of much of the Middle Eastern world.

The new religion also provided an ethical system that did much to heal the deep social rifts within Arabian society. Islam instilled the dignity of all believers and their equality in the eyes of Allah. It promoted a moral code that stressed the responsibility of the well-to-do to do and strong for the poor and weak, the aged and infirm. Payment of the zakat, a tax for charity, was obligatory in the new faith. In both his revelations and his personal behavior, Muhammad enjoined his followers to be kind and generous to their dependents, including slaves. He forbade the rich to exploit the poor through exorbitant rents or rates of interest for loans.

The prophet's teachings and the revelations of the Qur'an soon were incorporated into an extensive body of law that regulated all aspects of the lives of the Muslim faithful. Held accountable before Islamic law on earth, they lived in a manner that would prepare them for the Last Judgment, which in Islam, as in Christianity, would determine their fate in eternity. A stern but compassionate God and a strict but socially minded body of law set impressive standards for the social interaction between adherents of the new faith.

Universal Elements in Islam

Although only Arabs embraced the religion of Islam in its early years, from the outset it contained beliefs and practices that would give it a strong appeal to peoples at virtually all stages of social development and in widely varying cultural settings. Some of these beliefs—Islam's uncompromising monotheism, highly developed legal codes, egalitarianism, and strong sense of community—were the same as the attributes that had won it support among the peoples of Arabia. Its potential as a world religion was enhanced by the fact that most of the attributes of Islam were to some degree anticipated by the other Semitic religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, with which Muhammad had contact for much of his life. He accepted the validity of the earlier divine revelations that had given rise to the Jewish and Christian faiths. He taught that the revelations he had received were a refinement of these earlier ones and that they were the last divine instructions for human behavior and worship.
five pillars The obligatory religious duties of all Muslims: confession of faith, prayer, fasting during Ramadan, zakat, and pilgrimage to Mecca The national observance requiring Muslims to demonstrate their fervor. (4) The zakat, or tithe for charity; also strengthened community duties of all Muslims; confession of principles that must be accepted and followed by all believers, provided the basis for an underlying religious observance requiring faithful to demonstrate their fervor. (5) The hajj, or pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, to worship Allah at the Ka'ba.

Despite a time of crisis after the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E., the Muslim community held together. Eventually, Muhammad's old adversaries, the Umayyad clan, seized leadership of the Muslim faithful and began a sequence of conquering conquests throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The political and religious community was deeply divided as to who should succeed him.

Many of the bedouin tribes that had converted to Islam denounced the new faith in the months after Muhammad's death, and his remaining followers were faced with ongoing war. Eventually, his successors were able to hold together. Although 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 major offensive 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, which 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. These groups had little desire to convert the subject populations, either Arab or otherwise, to the new religion.

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 would be chosen. Opinion within the Muslim community was deeply divided as to who should succeed him.

In this moment of extreme danger, a strong leader who could hold the Islamic community together was urgently needed. On the afternoon Muhammad died, one of the clans that remained committed to the new faith called a meeting to select a leader who would be designated as the caliph, the political and religious successor to Muhammad. Several choices were possible, and a deadlock between the classes 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 later proved to be 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 (ah-BOO BA-kru). The first caliph or leader of the Muslim faithful elected after Muhammad's death in 632. Renown for his knowledge of the nomadic tribes who then dominated Arabia, Abu Bakr oversaw raids to the north of Arabia into the sedentary zones in present-day Iraq and Syria and westward into Egypt (Map 7.1). The unified bedouin forces had originally intended to raid for booty and then retreat back into the desert. But their initial probes revealed the vulnerability of the Byzantine and Persian empires, which dominated or ruled the territories into which the Muslim warriors rode. The invaders were also encouraged by the prospect that many of the Arab bedouin peoples who had been migrating into the Fertile Crescent for centuries. These peoples had long served as the vassals and frontier guardians of the Byzantine and Persian empires. Now they joined their brethren in a combined assault on both of them.

Motives for Arab Conquests

The Arab warriors were driven by many forces. The unity provided by the Islamic faith 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 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 muslim faithful who now sought to lead (see Figure 7.4). 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 towns that came under Arab rule. As an early Arab writer observed, the bedouin foresaw their life as desert nomads not out of a promise of religious rewards, but because of 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 exacting from some of the more lucrative taxes levied on Christian, Jewish, and other non-Muslim groups. Thus, the vision of jihads, or holy wars launched to forcibly spread the Muslim faith, which has long been associated with Islam in the Christian West, misrepresents the forces behind the early Arab expansion.

Weaknesses of the Adversary Empires

Of the two great empires that had once fought 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 rarely exploited the farmers who made up most of the population of the empire. Zoroastrianism, the official religion of the emperor, lacked popular roots. By contrast, the vision of a messianic hero who would unify and overcome the empire was one of the most compelling of the days.

At first, the Sasanian commanders had 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 clear by decisive Arab victories in the Fertile Crescent region and the defection of the Arab tribes on the frontier, 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 exacting from some of the more lucrative taxes levied on Christian, Jewish, and other non-Muslim groups. Thus, the vision of jihads, or holy wars launched to forcibly spread the Muslim faith, which has long been associated with Islam in the Christian West, misrepresents the forces behind the early Arab expansion.
Copts: Christian sect of Egypt; tended to support Islamic invasions of this area in preference to Byzantine rule.

Nestorians: A Christian sect found in Asia; tended to support Islamic invasions of this area in preference to Byzantine rule; cut off from Europe by Muslim invasions.

Muslim warriors had broken into the Sassanian heartland. Further Muslim victories brought about the rapid collapse of the vast empire. The Sassanian 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 Sassanian rulers was assassinated, Muslim victory and the destruction of the empire were ensured.

Despite an equally impressive string of Muslim victories in the provinces of their empire, the Byzantines proved a stronger adversary (see Chapter 10). However, their ability to resist the Muslim onslaught was impeded by both the defection of their own frontier armies 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, which reduced them heavily and 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 expansion, the Byzantines relied on 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 (Map 7.2). 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 province of Syria and the holy city of Mecca. Just as Ali was on the verge of defeating the Umayyad forces at the Battle of Siffin in 657, he was won over by a plea for mediation. His decision to accept mediation was fatal to his cause. Some of his most fervent supporters renounced his leadership and had to be suppressed violently. While representatives of both parties tried 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, directly challenging Ali's position. A year later, Ali was assassinated, and his son Hassan was pressured by the Umayyads into renouncing his claims to the caliphate.

In the decades after the prophet's death, the question of succession generated deep divisions in the Muslim community. The split between the Sunnis, who backed the Umayyads, and the Shi'a, or supporters of Ali, remains to this day the most fundamental in the Islamic world. Hostility between these two branches of the Islamic faithful was heightened in the years after Ali's death by the continuing struggle between the Umayyads and Ali's second son, Husayn. After being killed by the Caliph 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 on, the Shi'a mounted sustained resistance to the Umayyad caliphate.

Over the centuries, factional disputes about who had the right to succeed Muhammad, with the Shi'a 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'a. 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.

The Problem of Succession and the Sunni-Shi'a Split

The new rulers of Syria, western Iraq, and Palestine were the Umayyad caliphs. From 661, when Mu'awiya established himself in Damascus, the Umayyads ruled the whole of Syria, western Iraq, and Palestine. From their base in Syria, the Umayyads swiftly turned their attention to the eastern territories that they had occupied.

The First Global Civilization: The Rise and Spread of Islam

The Umayyads were a powerful and formidable force, capable of maintaining control over a vast empire. They built on the foundations laid by the early conquests of the Prophet Muhammad and his successors, the caliphs. The Umayyads were known for their military prowess, effective administration, and sophisticated system of governance.

The Umayyad Caliphate

The Umayyad Caliphate was the first Islamic caliphate, established by the Umayyad dynasty in 661 CE after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. It was centered in the region of modern-day Syria, with its capital in Damascus.

The Umayyads expanded the caliphate rapidly, conquering vast territories across the Middle East and North Africa. They established a robust system of governance, which included the appointment of governors to rule over different provinces. The Umayyads supported Muslim armies, who expanded the caliphate's control into what is now Spain and Turkey.

The Umayyad Caliphate was known for its cultural achievements, such as the establishment of new cities and the construction of public works like bridges and roads. They also patronized the arts and sciences, promoting education and intellectual pursuits.

The Umayyad Caliphate faced challenges from within and without, including internal disputes over succession and foreign invasions. By the 9th century, the Umayyad Caliphate had begun to weaken, paving the way for the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate.
Damasco: Syria was the capital of the Byzantine caliphate.

Although Mecca remained the holy city of Islam, the Umayyads political center of community shifted to Damascus in Syria, where the Umayyads chose to live after the murder of Uthman. From Damascus a succession of Umayyad caliphs strove to build a bureaucracy that would bind together the vast domain of an Arab conquest state. Except in the Arabian peninsula and in 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 they often served as the center of 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 "People of the Book"

Umayyad attempts to block extensive interaction between the Muslim warrior elite and their non-Muslim subjects had little chance of succeeding. The civilised bedouin tribes were soon interacting intensively with the local populations of the conquered areas and intermarrying with them. Equally critical, increasing numbers of those peoples were voluntarily converted to Islam, despite them conversion did little to advance them socially or politically in the Umayyad period. In this era Muslim converts, mawali, 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 gain 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. By far the greater portion of the population of the empire were dhimmis, or "people of the book." As the name suggests it was originally applied to Christians and Jews who shared the Bible with the Muslims. As Islamic conquests spread to other 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. As the early illustration of Jewish worship in Muslim Spain in Figure 7.5 shows, the Muslims overlords generally tolerated the religions of dhimmis. Although 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 because many had been oppressed by their pre-Muslim overlords.

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 subordination that were characteristic features women's lives through much of the rest of the pre-Islamic Middle East. Muhammad's teachings and the dictates of the Qur'an stressed the moral and ethical dimensions of marriage. The kindness and concern the prophet displayed for his own wives and the now effectively tallied in the hadiths, or traditions of the prophet Muhammad, epitomizes the independent-mindedness of Muslim women in the early Islamic era. When chided for going about without a veil, she replied that Allah 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 his grace.

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, and he forbade female infanticide, which apparently had been widely practiced in Arabia in pre-Islamic times. Men were allowed to marry up to four wives. But the Qur'an forbade multiple marriages if the husband could not 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 would marry and greatly strengthened the legal rights of women in inheritance from distant Damascus. He insisted that the bride-price paid by the husband's family be given to his future wife rather than to her father.

The prophet's teachings proclaimed the equality of men and women before God and in Islamic law. Women, most notably his wife Khadijah, were some of Muhammad's earliest and most constant followers. In the battle with the Meccans, women accompanied the forces on both sides, and a woman was the first martyr for the new faith. Many of the hadiths, or traditions of the prophet, which have played such a critical role in Islamic law and ritual, were recorded by women. In addition, Muhammad's wives and daughters played an important role in compiling the Qur'an.

Although women were not allowed to lead prayers, they played an active role in the politics of the early community. Muhammad's widow, Aisha, actively promoted the claims of the Umayyad party against Ali, while Zainab, Ali's daughter, went into battle with the ill-fated Husayn. Though much of the Umayyad period is little known about Arab women, and women 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 Allah 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 his grace.

FIGURE 7.5 Jewish worshiping in a synagogue. As dhimmis, or "people of the book," Jews were allowed to build impressive synagogues and worship freely throughout the Muslim world. Jewish merchant families amassed great wealth, often in partnership with Muslims, and Jewish scholars were revered from Spain to Baghdad for their many contributons to learning.
Civilization and Gender Relationships

WITHIN A CENTURY OF MUHAMMAD'S DEATH, the strong position women had enjoyed as a result of the teachings and example of the prophet had begun to erode. We do not fully understand all the forces that account for this decline. Ambiguities in the Qur'an often were interpreted to mean inferiority to men in key legal rights (differential punishments for men and women, for example, to property). But newly recovered texts also stipulate women's inferiority to men in key legal rights (differential punishments for men and women, for example, to property). But newly recovered texts also stipulate women's inferiority to men in key legal rights (differential punishments for men and women, for example, to property). But newly recovered texts also stipulate women's inferiority to men in key legal rights (differential punishments for men and women, for example, to property).

Islamic law preserved for women property, inheritance, divorce, and remarriage rights that were often denied in other civilizations.

Islamic thinkers argued that women were more likely than men to be sinners. But more critically, urbanization and the declining position of women in many of the ancient and classical civilizations treated thus far. In China, India, Greece, and the Middle East, women enjoyed broader occupational options and a stronger voice within the family, and in society as a whole, before the emergence of centralized political and highly stratified social systems. In each case, the rise of what we have called civilizations strengthened paternal control within the family, inheritance through the male line, and male domination of positions of power and the most lucrative occupations.

Women in these societies became more and more subject to men—their fathers and brothers, husbands and sons—and more and more confined to the roles of homemakers and bearers of children. Women's legal rights were reduced, often sharply. In towns such as Mecca, they experienced considerable freedom in terms of sexual and marriage partners, occupational choices (within the limited range available in an isolated pastoral society), and opportunities to influence clan decisions. The position of Muhammad's first wife, Khadijah, is instructive. Her position as a wealthy widow in charge of a thriving trading enterprise reveals that women were able to remarry and to own and inherit property. They could also pursue careers, even after their husbands died. Khadijah employed Muhammad. After he had successfully worked for her for two years, she asked him to remarry her, not surprised but scandalized her family or Mecce society. It is also noteworthy that Khadijah was 15 years older than Muhammad, who was 25 at the time of their betrothal.

The impact of the bedouin pattern of gender roles and relationships is also clear in the teachings and personal behavior of Muhammad. Islam did much to legalize the strong but by no means equal status of women. Islam, which is the great religion of two centuries, gave greater parity to them from one tribe, town, or region to the next. For a century or two after the prophet's death, women in the Islamic world enjoyed unprecedented opportunities for education, religious expression, and social fulfillment. Then the influences of the cultures into which the Arabs had expanded began to take hold. The practices of veiling and female seclusion that were long followed by the non-Arab dwellers of Syria or Persia were increasingly adopted by or imposed upon Muslim women. Confined more and more to the home, women saw their occupational options decrease, and men served as their go-betweens in legal and commercial matters.

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The bureaucratization of the Islamic Empire was reflected above all in the growing power of the wazir, or chief administrator and head of the caliph's inner councils. It was also embodied in a more sinister way in the fearful guise of the royal executioner, who stood close to the throne in the public audiences of the Abbasid rulers. The wazirs oversaw the building of an administrative infrastructure that allowed the Abbasids to project their demands for tribute to the most distant provinces of the empire. Short, poor communications, and collusion between Abbasid officials and local notables meant that the farther the town or village was from the capital, the less effectually royal commands were carried out. But for more than a century, the Abbasid regime was fairly effective at collecting revenue from its subject peoples and preserving law and order over much of the empire.

Islamic Conversion and Mawali Acceptance

The Abbasid era saw the full integration of new converts, both Arab and non-Arab, into the Islamic community. In the last decades of the Umayyad period, there was a growing acceptance of the mawali, or non-Arab Muslims, as equals. There were also efforts to win new converts to the faith, particularly among Arab peoples outside the Arabian peninsula. In the Abbasid era, when the practice of dividing booty between the believers had long been discarded, mass conversions to Islam were encouraged for all peoples of the empire, from the Berbers of northern Africa to the Persians and Turkic peoples of central Asia. Converts were admitted on an equal footing with the first generations of believers, and over time the distinction between mawali and the earlier converts all but disappeared.

Most converts were won over peacefully through the great appeal of Islamic beliefs and the advantages they enjoyed over non-Muslim peoples in the empire. Not only were converts exempt from paying the head tax, but they had greater opportunities to get advanced schooling and launch careers as administrators, traders, or judges. Many groups demonstrated the new opportunities open to converts as dramatically as the Persians, who, in part through their bureaucratic skills, soon came to dominate the upper levels of imperial administration. In fact, as the Abbasid rulers became more absolute and less interested in affairs of state, several powerful Persian families close to the throne became the real locus of power in the imperial system.

The wazir [wahb-ZEE] chief administrative official under the Abbasid caliphate; virtually recruited from Persian provinces of empire.

FROM ARAB TO ISLAMIC EMPIRE: THE EARLY ABBASID ERA

The rise of the mawali was paralleled in the Abbasid era by the growth in wealth and social status of the merchant and landlord classes of the empire. The Abbasid age was a time of great urban expansion that was linked to a revival of the Afro-Eurasian trading network, which had declined with the fall of the Han dynasty in China in the early 3rd cen-tury C.E. and the slow collapse of the Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th centuries. The Abbasid domains in the west and the great Tang and Song empires in the east became the pivots of the revived commercial system.

The Abbasid capital, Baghdad, was paralleled in the east by the growth in wealth and social status of the merchant and landlord classes of the empire. Baghdad was the capital of the Abbasid Empire, which extended from the eastern Mediterranean to the South China Sea. It was a major center of commerce and culture. Merchants traded in a variety of goods, including spices, textiles, and precious metals. Baghdad was the center of a vast network of trade routes that linked the Islamic world to other regions of the world.

In what ways was the Islamic religion a faith that elevated the status and opportunities of women, and what were the constraints on this process?

7.4

The rough treatment the Umayyad clan had received at the hands of the victorious Abbasids should have forewarned their Shia and mawali allies of what was to come. But the Shia and other dissenting groups continued the support that allowed the Abbasids to level all other centers of political rivalry. Gradually, the Abbasids rejected many of their old allies, becoming more and more righteous in their defense of Sunni Islam and increasingly less tolerant of what they called the heterodox views of the various sects of Shi'ism. With the Umayyads all but eliminated and their allies brutally suppressed, the way was clear for the Abbasids to build a centralized, absolutist imperial order.

The fact that they chose to build their new capital, Baghdad, in Iraq near the ancient Persian capital of Ctesiphon was a clear sign of things to come. Soon the Abbasid caliphs were perched on jewel-encrusted thrones, reminiscent of those of the ancient Persian emperors, gazing down on the great gatherings of courtiers and petitioners who bowed before them in their gilt and marble audience halls. The caliphs' palaces and harems expanded to keep pace with their claims to absolute power over the Islamic faith as well as the non-Muslim subjects of the vast empire.

The ever-expanding corps of bureaucrats, servants, and slaves who strove to translate Abbasid political claims into reality lived and worked within the circular walls of the new capital at Baghdad.
FROM ONE END OF THE ISLAMIC world to the other, Muslim towns and cities can be readily identified by the domes and minarets of the mosques where the faithful are called to prayer five times daily. The illustrations included here trace the development of the mosque and the refinement of mosque architecture, the crowning glory of Islamic material culture, during the early centuries of Muslim expansion. As you look at these pictures and follow the development of the mosque, consider what the functions of the mosque and the evolving style of mosque architecture can tell us about Muslim beliefs and values and the impact of earlier religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, on Islam.

Given the low level of material culture in pre-Islamic Arabia, it is not surprising that the earliest prayer houses were simple in design and construction. In fact, these first mosques were laid out along the lines suggested by Muhammad’s own house. They were square enclosures with a shaded porch on one side, a columned shelter on the other, and an open courtyard in between. The outer perimeter of the earliest mosques was made of reed mats, but soon more permanent stone walls surrounded the courtyard and prayer areas. After Mecca was taken and the Ka‘ba became the central shrine of the new faith, each mosque was oriented to the qibla, or Mecca wall, which always faced in the direction of the holy city.

In the last years of the prophet, his chair was located so that the faithful could see and hear him during prayer sessions. During the time of the first caliphs, the raised area became the place from which sermons were delivered. From the mid-8th century, this space evolved into a genuine pulpit (minbar in Arabic). Somewhat earlier, the practice of building a special and often elaborately decorated niche in the qibla had developed.

Over time, mosques became more elaborate. Very often the remains of Greek or Roman temples or abandoned Christian churches formed the core of major mosques, or the ruins of these structures were mined for stone for mosque construction. In the larger cities, the courtyards of the great mosque were surrounded by columns and arches, and eventually they were enclosed by great domes such as that at the Dôme of the Rock in Jerusalem.

The first minarets, or towers from which the faithful were called to prayer, were added in the early 8th century and soon became a key feature of the mosque complex. As mosques grew larger and more architecturally refined, elaborate decoration in brightly colored ceramic tiles, semi-precious stones, and gold and silver filigree adorned their sides and domes. Because human and animal images were forbidden, geometric designs, passages from the Qur’an in swirling Arabic, and flower and plant motifs were favored. Nowhere were these decorations more splendid than in the mosques of Persia. Thus, in the early centuries of Islam, these great houses of worship became the focal points of Islamic cities, key places of community worship and socialization, and, with the schools that were often attached, vital intellectual and educational centers of the Islamic world.

What do the design and decoration of Muslim mosques tell us about the Islamic view of a supreme being and the relationship between Allah and humans?

Discuss the Christian and Jewish influences you detect in mosque design and the pattern of religious worship conducted there. What do you think is the significance of the lavish application of color and the frequent use of floral and plant motifs and Arabic verses from the Qur’an in the decoration of mosques through much of the Muslim world?

The growth of Abbasid cities was also fed by a great increase in handicraft production. Both government-run and privately owned workshops expanded or were established to produce a wide range of products, from necessities such as furniture and carpets to luxury items such as glassware, jewelry, and tapestries. Although the artisans often were poorly paid and some worked in great
worksheets, they were not slaves or drudge laborers. They owned their own tools and were often highly valued for their skills. The most accomplished of the artisans formed guildlike organizations, which negotiated wages and working conditions with the merchants and supported their members in times of financial difficulty or personal crisis.

In towns and the countryside, much of the unskilled labor was left to slaves, often attached to prominent families as domestic servants. Large numbers of slaves also served the caliphs and their highest advisors. It was possible for the more clever and ambitious slaves to rise to positions of great power, and many eventually were granted their freedom or were able to buy it. Less fortunate were the slaves forced into lives of hard labor under the overseer’s whip on rural estates and government projects, such as those devoted to draining marshlands, or into a lifetime of labor in the nightmare conditions of the great salt mines in southern Iraq. Most of these drudge laborers were non-Muslims captured on slaving raids in east Africa.

In the countryside, a wealthy and deeply entrenched landed elite called the ayān emerged in the early decades of Abbasid rule. Many of these landowners had been long established. Others were newcomers: Arab soldiers who invested their share of the booty in land, or merchants and administrators who funneled their profits and kickbacks into sizeable estates. In many regions, most peasants did not own the land they worked. They occupied it as tenants, sharecroppers, or migrant laborers who were required to give the greater portion of the crops they harvested to the estate owners.

The First Flowering of Islamic Learning

In the first phase of Abbasid rule, the Islamic contribution to human artistic expression focused on the great mosques, such as those featured in the Visualizing the Past box, and great palaces. In addition to advances in religious, legal, and philosophical discourse, learning in the Muslim domains focused on the sciences and mathematics. In the early Abbasid period, the main tasks were recovering and preserving the learning of the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean and Middle East. Beyond the works of Plato, for example, much of Greek learning had been lost to the peoples of western Europe. Thanks to Muslim and Jewish scholars, the priceless writings of the Greeks on key subjects such as medicine, algebra, geometry, astronomy, anatomy, and ethics were saved, recopied in Arabic, and dispersed throughout the empire. From Spain, Greek writings found their way into Christendom. Among the authors rescued in this manner were Aristotle, Galen, Hippocrates, Ptolemy, and Euclid.

In addition, scholars working in Arabic transmitted ideas that paralleled the rise of Arab traders and merchants as the carriers of goods and inventions. For example, Muslim invaders of south Asia soon learned of the Indian system of numbers. From India they were carried by Muslim scholars and merchants to the Middle Eastern centers of Islamic civilization. Eventually, the Indian numerical system was transmitted across the Mediterranean to Italy and from there to northern Europe. Along with Greek and Arab mathematics, Indian numbers later proved critical to the early modern Scientific Revolution in western Europe.