

Islamic Civilization in Thirty Lives

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The First 1,000 Years

Depiction of the zodiac from a manuscript on automata and water clocks by al-Jaziri, 14th century.

 **Thames & Hudson**

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A 16th-century Ottoman miniature showing the first four caliphs who ruled after the death of Muhammad.

Preface

*Are the Saracens the Ottomans?
No, the Saracens are the Moors.
The Ottomans are the Turks.*

So reads, in its entirety, Lydia Davis's micro-story 'Learning Medieval History'. In conventional (and now obsolete) usage, the 'Saracens' *are* 'Moors', and the Ottomans, Turks. But learning history is more than assigning labels, as Davis's satire tells us. At least to my mind, history is an exercise in critical imagination, and in the case of the Middle East, this exercise has become all the more important.

This is because the Islamic past has never mattered more than now, what with civil war fracturing societies along Sunni and Shi'ite lines, militants reviving traditions of jihad and donning the mantle of caliphs, and those in and out of power making various – and often wild – claims about what constitutes 'true Islam'. Anyone attentive to events in the contemporary Middle East is likely to intuit that history – both real and imaginary – has an enduring and (perhaps) undue influence upon the politics and culture of the region; misunderstandings of that history also condition Western perceptions of Islam and Muslims. The present is not merely shaped by the past: it is constituted of conflicting claims about the past. As Salman Rushdie put it, we are all 'irradiated' by it.

How is one to judge the claims made about the Islamic past? More specifically, how is one to distinguish between fantasy and myth on the one hand, and genuine history (at least as reconstructed according to modern standards of critical scholarship) on the other? My hope in writing this book is to make available scholarship that is typically specialized and inaccessible, and thereby to offer some answers. According to an oft-transmitted Prophetic tradition, 'When God wishes good for someone, He gives him understanding in religion'. In what follows I hope to address some of the misunderstandings and myths that attach to Davis's schoolboy categories.

For reading and improving parts or all of this book, I am grateful to Anna Akasoy, Jere Bacharach, Paul Cobb, Matthew Gordon, David Morgan and John Robinson. Ian VanderMeulen did some invaluable spade-work early on. At Thames & Hudson, I am indebted to Colin Ridler, who launched the balky ship to sea, and to Jen Moore, who steered it safely into port. Julia MacKenzie improved the text in innumerable ways, and Sally

Nicholls did exemplary work in picture research. Finally, two anonymous readers offered useful comments, and one of them spotted a few howlers. I thank them.

I dedicate the book to my own Young Turk.

Conventions, abbreviations & equivocations

Academic writing on Islam and Islamic history typically follows linguistic and dating conventions that are opaque to the non-specialist. For example, the name of the renowned intellectual al-Ghazali, whom we shall meet below, is usually rendered as al-Ghazālī, and his lifetime computed as 450–505 AH/1058–1111 AD. The transliterated letters indicate long vowels in the original Arabic spelling. (Persian and Turkish, the two other languages relevant here, have modified transliteration systems of their own.) And ‘AH’ is an abbreviation of ‘anno hegirae’, ‘the year of the Hijra’, the Latin convention compounding the obscurity of an Arabo-Islamic lunar calendar that differs from the solar model most readers of this book take for granted. For the sake of clarity and brevity – and perhaps even as an act of mercy – I shall dispense with these and many other scholarly conventions.

But I shall not abandon them altogether. Some would simplify Ibn Sa’d to Ibn Sad, and ‘Ā’isha to Ayesha. That would be going too far, in my view, so in what follows one will find Ibn Sa’d and ‘A’isha. Some readers like to know the sounds of the letters they are reading, such as kh (the ch of ‘loch’ or ‘chutzpah’), gh (akin to a gargling), ‘ (produced by a constriction in the throat) and ’ (a glottal stop, like the Cockney ‘bo’uhl’ for ‘bottle’). In the case of figures for whom Anglicized or Latinized versions exist, such as Mohammed and Algazel, I have usually adopted simplified forms of the Arabic: thus Muhammad and al-Ghazali. Similarly, I shall use Qur’an instead of Koran. When it comes to non-Arabic names, I shall simplify as well: purists would transliterate the name of the Ilkhanid ruler who reigned from 1304 to 1316 as Öljeitü, but I shall stick to Uljeitu. It may be some consolation to the purists that I am doing my part to move the world from Genghis Khan to Chinggis Khan.

There are other complications and compromises. Muslim names in this period typically encode genealogical relationships, such as ‘son of’ (‘ibn’, often abbreviated as ‘b.’) and ‘father of’ (‘abu’). In some cases, such

as Ibn al-Muqaffa’, literally ‘Son of al-Muqaffa’’, they have become integral to the name. In fact, names are frequently problematic: we shall see that ‘Ali was the son of someone named Abu Talib, and the father of a son named al-Hasan; it follows that he’s known as ‘‘Ali, son (b.) of Abu Talib’ and ‘Ali, father (Abu) of al-Hasan’. (He’s also called ‘Father of Dust’, and no one knows why.) Muslims naturally used their own geographical terms, but for the most part I shall use modern equivalents. Readers do need to be aware that the nomenclature of modern nation states can mislead: the Arab Republic of Syria covers but a part of historical ‘Syria’, which also encompassed areas now belonging to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

As will become clear, much remains unknown about many of the figures featuring here. For example, childhoods are usually lost to history, and as much as it is the rule that death dates are fairly accurate, birth dates are very rarely so. For most famous people were not born famous; and unless their families or at least their fathers were notable in one way or another, birth dates were usually forgotten. Rumi (d. 1273), whose father was a well-known scholar and mystic, is the exception that proves the rule. Sometimes silence was even filled with legend. We can be fairly certain that Timur died on 17 or 18 February in 1405, but we shall see that his birth date was concocted. I shall therefore dispense with birth dates.

The problems do not end with dates, however. The evidence for these biographies – mainly historical, biographical and literary accounts – is often as misleading as it is exiguous. Because memory and record were often compounded over centuries by legend, myth and misunderstanding, we generally know much more about the *afterlives* of early Muslims than we do their *actual* lives. We shall see that Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya was an eighth-century ascetic, but the compound portrait constituting her after-life belongs mainly to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The later the figure, the fuller and more accurate the historical record tends to be, but even then, fame and infamy meant distortion, as it does now.

And a final qualification: what follows is a work of synthesis and interpretation – with all of the perils that this implies. As Eduard Sachau wrote in his translation of the staggeringly erudite *Chronology of Ancient Nations* of al-Biruni (see below), ‘...even in the simplest historical narrative the editor and translator may go lamentably astray in his interpretation, if there is something wrong with the method of his research.’¹ In a work of this range and scope, it would be sheer hubris for me to imagine that I have not gone astray.

Introduction

One of the most striking features of Islamic 'civilization' (we shall turn to a definition in a moment) is the scale and variety of learning. 'Of making many books there is no end', is how Ecclesiastes 12:12 described the problem that learned Muslims would face throughout their history: there was too much to learn in too little time, and for all that books might be summarized, epitomized and condensed, knowledge never stopped growing. Each generation produced ambitious authors with new ideas or original ways of recycling old ones.

Books were of many, many kinds – on topics from agriculture, algebra and alchemy to zodiacs, zoology and Zoroastrian heresy. One of the most distinctive literary genres was the chronologically or alphabetically ordered compendium of capsule biographies, which could number in the hundreds and thousands. Some of these were restricted to specific professions or schools of thought, such as Qur'an reciters, jurists who belonged to a given school of legal thinking, philosophers or Sufis, to mention only a handful of examples. An early example belongs to an Iraqi scholar named Ibn Sa'd (d. 845). His *Book of Generations* starts with a long biography of Muhammad, and then, in seven volumes, assembles information about Muhammad's contemporaries and followers, most of whom we would call amateur or professional scholars, especially those who transmitted Prophetic traditions – stories, maxims and opinions expressed by or about Muhammad, which were building blocks of Islamic law, ethics and history. Other books were generic, offering to their readers hundreds or thousands of notices of men (and the occasional woman) from the widest variety of professions, occupations and careers – not just scholars, but also poets, rulers, physicians and much more besides. The most celebrated example belongs to a native of Damascus named Ibn Khallikan (d. 1282); his *Obituaries of the Notables* brings together approximately 5,500 capsule biographies, 'notable' here simply meaning 'famous'. It is not unlike a 'Who's Who'. Coming from nearly all corners of the Islamic world and every century of Islam, these figures shared little besides celebrity.

Beyond showing off their inexhaustible energies, what were the compiler-authors of these compendia trying to achieve? It is not always clear, but at least one goal is frequently made explicit: the lives of highly accomplished Muslims were to be preserved and narrated because they told stories, some inspiring, others humbling and chastening, but all edifying. In other words, exemplary lives offered lessons for Muslims.

My goal is not altogether different. I have composed thirty brief biographies, which can hint at the scale, diversity and creativity of Islamic civilization over about a millennium. I should like to emphasize from the start that diversity and creativity, which were generated in large measure by that scale – not merely the size of polities, cities, wealth, networks of learning, even libraries, but also intellectual and political ambition. We shall see that for some Muslim thinkers, the sky – not God – was the limit. In using the terms diversity and creativity, I aim to capture a wide and inadequately acknowledged spectrum of ideas, social practices and personal styles and commitments. There was legalism and dogmatism, of course; but so too was there hyper-rationalism, scepticism, inventiveness, iconoclasm and eccentric individuality. For the Islamic civilization that I shall be describing here, dynamism, experimentation and risk-taking were the rule. And I stop in the early sixteenth century not because that diversity and creativity dried up or that civilization stultified, but because the underlying economic and political framework of the pre-industrial Middle East began to undergo major changes. As a result, the 'early modern' or 'modern' societies that emerged generated fundamentally different cultural forms.

'Civilization' is a loaded term, of course. It is sometimes used stuffily or polemically by those censorious of non-Western societies and cultures, who sometimes imagine that civilizations are monoliths, adjoining and colliding like tectonic plates, and that 'the West' is distinctive or even unique in its traditions of freedom, rationalism and individuality. This is not how I use the term. What I mean here is the distinctive yield, in lived experience and especially high culture, of the religious and political project undertaken by Muslims over the near millennium that spans from the seventh to the sixteenth centuries. The framing conditions of that project were military, political and economic – and so much will be said in what follows about those who conquered and ruled, especially in introductions to each of the book's four sections.

Moreover, those framing conditions explain why the Muslims described here came overwhelmingly from a tiny numerical minority. This uneven coverage is inevitable. We live in an age of great and growing inequality, but in pre-industrial societies, divided as they were between oceans of poor producers (especially peasants, pastoralists, labourers, serfs, slaves) and small islands of wealthy consumers, it was even more extreme. And so it follows that it was the elite who had the capacity to produce the exemplars, the notables, the stars, the powerful and the influential. Of course there is the occasional figure with the singular genius, intelligence or ambition that empowered him or her to escape a modest background.

But there is no getting around the general rule that families and households of means reinvested and so reinforced their social capital, generation after generation, typically by outfitting their children with education, social connections and wealth. Elite Muslims made contributions to Islamic civilization that were disproportionate to their number because they could draw on such resources.

Readers should also be reminded that the cultural categories once used by Muslims naturally differed from those commonplace nowadays: it made little sense a millennium ago to speak of 'fiction', for example, or 'the humanities' (as opposed to 'science'). For the same reason – the divide between the post-Enlightenment world we know and religion-infused Eurasia of the pre-industrial age – unfamiliar readers may be surprised by the extraordinary pull that religious problems and ideas exercised upon men (and a small handful of women) with great intellectual ability and ambition. Nowadays, such men would be drawn into any number of fields in academia, business or creative arts; in those days, they were attracted just as much to theology and law as they were to disciplines, such as mathematics, astronomy or optics, that we would now categorize as science.

Finally, readers should know that the thirty biographies presented here do not capture a scholarly consensus, a 'Who's Who' in Islam or Islamic history. There is no such consensus and nothing special about the number thirty. Although most of the names will be familiar to specialists, at least some will be new. In a few cases, I have spurned the obvious in favour of the less celebrated. I have also omitted some worthies in order to accentuate some themes, such as the permeability of civilization and the breadth of culture: this book is not a pantheon of Muslim intellectuals. Be this as it may, collectively these thirty figures can offer what I hope to be an accessible introduction to Islamic civilization, which, for all its extraordinary diversity, remains poorly understood in the English-speaking world.

Part 1

Islam & Empire

600–850

Islam was born in seventh-century west Arabia when a handful of men and women committed themselves to the proposition that Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah was a prophet sent by God. It prospers in the twenty-first century: there are now about 1.6 billion Muslims, the large majority living outside the Middle East, especially in South and Southeast Asia. Measured by population, Islam is now second only to Christianity as a global religion, and given the growth that occurred in the twentieth century, and the forecasts for the twenty-first century, it is arguably the most successful of the world's religions. Nearly 45 million Muslims now live in Europe, and about 3.3 million in the US.

Much of this population growth took place over the last few centuries, whereas the civilization that I shall be describing took root mainly in what is now known as North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. Through conquest, conversion and demographic growth, Muslims ruled lands that stretched from the Atlantic to Central Asia, knit together loosely or tightly, depending on constantly changing dynamics of economic exchange, and political expansion and contraction. As we shall see, conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries created empires that brought together most of these lands into a single political community, but this unity disintegrated during the ninth and especially tenth centuries. A world-besriding empire was eclipsed by a commonwealth of Islamic states, which shared a

commitment to Islam as the single (if variegated) religion of rule, the use of Islamic languages in government (especially Arabic, Persian and Turkish), high culture, ritual life and a common history of rule by caliphs – those who ruled the great Islamic empires of the earlier period.

Put another way, Islamic states rose and fell, and the societies that they ruled were in constant transformation, but throughout the pre-industrial period, Muslims participated in a common project of transmitting and elaborating a culture inherited from empire. We may usefully begin by understanding how that empire came to be.

Damascus as a model of change

In 600 CE Damascus was an ancient and prosperous town. Fortuitously located on the edge of the Syrian desert, about fifty miles from the Mediterranean, it had long served as a crossroads of trade that linked Middle Eastern markets with the northern and western Mediterranean. The armies of Alexander the Great had once conquered it, but over the previous 250 years, Damascus had been caught up in radical change: it had become progressively monotheist, a multiplicity of Middle Eastern and Roman gods having been eclipsed by Christianity's insistence upon belief in a single god made incarnate in Christ. Christianity had been born in Palestine and Syria, and Christian emperors now ruled from the Bosphorus. The first of those emperors, Constantine (d. 337), called the city that would bear his name 'New Rome'. Nowadays historians call it Constantinople, and the late Roman state, Byzantium; we know it now as Istanbul.

Damascus was thus a provincial capital of what had become an emphatically Christian empire, which legitimized its rule not merely through its descent from Rome, but also by its mission to convert. In some parts of the Byzantine empire, conversion to Christianity remained ongoing, and Constantinople was frequently at war with the Sasanian empire, based in Iraq and Iran, itself closely aligned with a Zoroastrian clergy. In 622, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (d. 641) launched what would be the last of a long string of campaigns against the Sasanians, who had been occupying much of the Middle East (including Damascus and Jerusalem) for nearly a decade. His war was nothing less than a crusade, intended to drive out the Sasanians and restore Christian rule to the Holy Land.

At about the same time that Heraclius was taking power in Constantinople, a figure named **Muhammad** was beginning to preach an alternative, more radical monotheism in west Arabia: Islam, literally 'submission' to God's will. His preaching would inspire belief and action that would reshape the familiar world of late antiquity. Rumours of faraway



Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, Syria,
built by 'Abd al-Malik's son
al-Walid (r. 705–15).

events may have reached Damascus by the early 620s; they must have circulated there in the mid- to late 620s, when armies fighting for Muhammad had reached southern Syria; in 636, the inhabitants witnessed the entrance of Arabian armies into the city. Muslim tribesmen-soldiers had surrounded it, and Byzantine armies put up surprisingly little resistance. Arab raiders were not uncommon, and it's likely that the Byzantines underestimated these Muslim Arabians' resolve and ambitions.

As much as the Damascenes would have wished Muslim rule to be temporary – there was good reason to think that Heraclius's defeated armies would return from Constantinople to restore the old order – Islamic rule was consolidated and concentrated in Syria. In 661, the Muslim governor of Syria became the caliph (the supreme ruler), and he made Damascus, until then a moderately important provincial town on the eastern edge of the Byzantine empire, the capital of an Islamic empire. By this time, Muslim armies had routed Sasanian armies in Iraq and Iran, putting an end to 400 years of Sasanian rule; they had also defeated Byzantine armies elsewhere

in the Middle East and much of North Africa, reducing Byzantium to about one third of its previous size. A political order dating from the early third century and lasting until the early seventh – some sixteen generations of Damascenes – had come crashing down in the space of two.

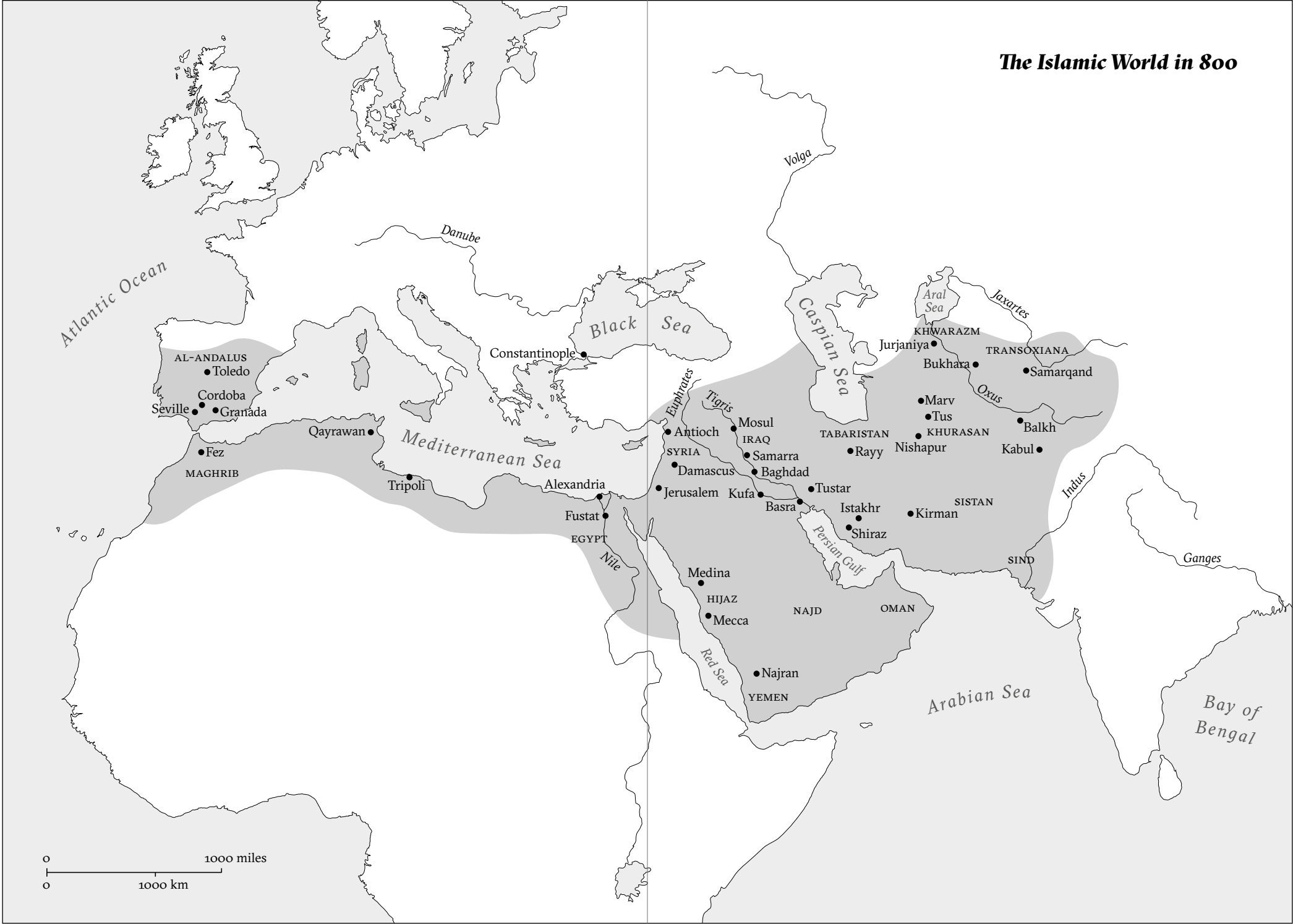
Damascus was as close as the caliphs came to having a capital until the middle of the eighth century, and early in that century there appeared the most poignant symbol of its changing fortunes: in about 706, the bulk of the city's cathedral, originally built on the site of a temple for Jupiter, the Roman god, was demolished and replaced by a congregational mosque. It would be called the Umayyad Mosque, after the ruling dynasty of the Umayyads (r. 661–750); the figure conventionally given credit for this building was a caliph named al-Walid, the son of 'Abd al-Malik. As we shall see, it is to 'Abd al-Malik that the Umayyad state owes much of its success; indeed, that state was in many respects the political shell for a family enterprise driven by 'Abd al-Malik's sons and descendants. It came to an end in 749–50 with a revolution that installed the Abbasid dynasty in power and showed the limits of the patrimonial, Arabian-style politics of the Umayyads. Islam had unleashed powerful forces of integration, creativity and cosmopolitanism, as the case of **Ibn al-Muqaffa'** illustrates. **Al-Ma'mun**, the seventh Abbasid caliph, allows us a glimpse at a systematic attempt to embed rationalism at the heart of the ruling institution.

Still standing in the middle of old Damascus, the Umayyad Mosque is as good a symbol as any for the transformational character of the new order: mosque had eclipsed cathedral, much as cathedral had once eclipsed pagan temple. In fact, the history of the Damascus mosque exemplifies a broader pattern: in general, early Islamic history charts a set of continuities. Earliest Muslims drew from deep springs of religious and political thought, some of which ran back to the ancient Middle Eastern and Hellenistic periods, others from shallower, sixth- and seventh-century currents. The Prophet Muhammad is a case in point: he saw himself as the most recent (and possibly the last) in a succession of prophets that stretched all the way to Creation, when God created Adam, the first prophet. Even so, Muhammad was very much the product of his own time, a figure who accelerated the conversion of Arabia to monotheism, especially the kind of militant monotheism that Heraclius himself had exemplified. The Shi'ites, partisans of the cause of Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law 'Ali agreed, but differed from other Muslims in holding that 'Ali was uniquely qualified to succeed him. This was not merely a polite difference of opinion; it generated political violence and sectarian identity. 'A'isha, one of Muhammad's wives, had an important role in these developments.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of this pattern – how early Muslims appropriated and transformed the political and religious traditions that they had inherited – comes in their political thought. There were several models available, none especially attractive. In Rabbinic Judaism, exile from the Holy Land had severed religious authority from political claims; and in Iran, the collapse of the Sasanian state had discredited Zoroastrian absolutism. Heraclius's militant Christianity was a potent alternative, but one weakened by centuries-long infighting about the nature of Christ. Coming from the sparsely settled environment of west Arabia, where the political order was tribal and the prestige form of religiosity was polytheism, earliest Muslims offered a radical re-invention of a wheel long thought obsolete: they re-ignited prophecy and fused kingship and priesthood. In so doing, they completed the task inaugurated by Constantine three centuries earlier, building a religio-political order that would bring the world under the authority of the One God. **Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya**, a pious exemplar of pure love of God, is a salutary reminder that one response to this extraordinary political change was abandoning the attachments of the world.

In sum, an empire, which claimed and effected political dominion, and a religious tradition, which would generate rituals, a theology and a law, were the twin siblings of seventh-century prophecy. There is probably nothing in recorded history that parallels the explosion of political action and religious innovation that took place in the Middle East in the seventh and eighth centuries. In complementary ways, the figures who appear in Part 1 were all participants in the project of fusing prophecy and politics – and so in creating the caliphate itself: they inspired it, designed it, lived it and rationalized it.

The Islamic World in 800



Inspiring religious leader, paragon of piety and virtue, brilliant political strategist, doting father and grandfather, misguided megalomaniac or instrument of the devil – Muhammad was and remains many things to many people. To the historian, he is above all an enigma. We know that Muhammad founded a religio-political movement in early seventh-century Arabia, which, by the end of that century, can properly be called an Islamic empire. But saying much more than that requires facing two paradoxes.

The first concerns evidence. Pre-industrial history is filled with individuals who founded religious or political movements. It is the enduringly successful ones that especially deserve our attention, however; and since successful endurance always means creative transformation, a given movement's origins are usually obscured by a fogbank of myth and legend. We have surer evidence for Muhammad than we do for the Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus or Mani, but far less than we would like (and far less than we do for earlier figures in history, such as Augustine). It may not be going too far to say that while Islam owes its foundation to Muhammad, it owes its success to the creative transformations of his memory and legacy that were carried out by Muslims who never knew him. Since most of what we know about Muhammad comes from accounts that date from no earlier than two or three generations' remove (and many accounts come from much later), reconstructing his life requires peeling away the accreted layers of legend, myth and model. Research has shown that there is less left than was once thought – and certainly much less than any historian would like. There has recently been some progress in recovering material that is both early and reliable, but we still have too little of it to draw a portrait that is as authoritative as it is detailed.

The second paradox concerns western Arabia. It was a remarkably unpromising place to found a world religion. Lacking water and so extensive agriculture, it was very much the economic, cultural and political backwater of the seventh-century Middle East. Sparsely settled and cohering uneasily through bonds of kinship and tribalism, the Hijaz (as western Arabia is called in Arabic) consisted of small towns and oases, which were peripheral to the economic and military powerhouses that were the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, based in Asia Minor and Iran, respectively. In this most unpromising of contexts Muhammad somehow managed to assemble not merely a movement that gave social shape to his reforming vision – a community of believers – but one that would re-order what remained of the ancient world. The Arabs were barbarians in the

eyes of their civilized neighbours, but unlike Germanic or Turkic tribes (for example), they conquered with an enduring religious vision.

What follows is a reasonable approximation, assembled from some settled facts and informed speculation.

Muhammad in Mecca

Tradition has it that Muhammad was born in about 570 to a middling clan of the high-prestige tribe of the Quraysh. Their prestige was connected to their control of the cultic centre of Mecca that was the Ka'ba, a cube-shaped building that housed the idols worshipped by the town's polytheists. Orphaned at a young age, Muhammad was initiated into the tribe's trading activities, travelling as far north as Syria. Legends have it that a monk (or some other holy man), having recognized 'the mark of prophecy' between Muhammad's shoulder blades, predicted that the boy would become a prophet. Rather than accepting this as genuine history, the modern reader might imagine him or herself as a member of the story's intended audience – perhaps a Christian (or Jew or even sceptical Muslim), who, upon hearing or reading this, is being asked to recognize that Muhammad belonged to a long chain of monotheist prophets sent by God. Other initiation accounts have a young Muhammad's chest opened and miraculously closed; according to one version of this story, the surgery is performed by two angels who remove two black clots of blood, then wash and re-seal the chest with 'the seal of prophethood'. Other accounts are less fantastic, if no more amenable to corroboration. We read that as a young man he married a widow named Khadija, an older woman made wealthy by trade. Khadija offered him financial security and heightened status, and she bore him several children, sometimes numbered at six; two were sons, but neither survived childhood. She is conventionally identified as the first person to acknowledge Muhammad's prophetic claims.

Such were the legends that circulated among Muslims. For their part, Christians wrote for polemical purposes of their own. An eighth- or ninth-century Latin account, for example, has it that Muhammad was 'an avaricious usurer' and 'shrewd son of darkness' who, having committed Christian sermons to memory, manipulated the 'irrational Arabs' to his violent ends.²

For the purposes of historical reconstruction, it can be said that presumptive or manifest legend and polemic begins to yield to something like plausible history when Muhammad starts to make prophetic claims. For this point in Muhammad's career the historian can turn to the Qur'an, which is widely accepted to be a contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous

witness to Muhammad's life and thought. The turning point thus comes when God is given to speak to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. The first words are usually thought to be these, which appear in Qur'an sura (chapter) 96, verses 1–5:

*Recite in the name of your Lord who created
Created man from a blood-clot.
Recite – your Lord is the most generous
Who taught by the pen
Taught man what he did not know.³*

A second sura (74, verses 1–5) is also thought to mark the inauguration of Muhammad as Prophet:

*O you who are wrapped in your cloak
Arise and warn!
Magnify your Lord,
Purify your clothes,
And shun pollution.*

How did the Meccan establishment, especially those who had a stake in its polytheist institutions, respond? The Qur'an, which directly tackles how Muhammad was received, makes plain that many Meccans took him to be a (mere) poet, magician, soothsayer or otherwise possessed, speaking in some cases in God's voice: 'Or they [Muhammad's opponents] say, "He is a poet, for whom we await the uncertainty of fate?" Say "Wait, and I shall wait along with you"' (Q 52:30–31). Elsewhere the Qur'an expressly rejects charges that Muhammad was a sorcerer. In a polytheistic society where sorcerers, seers and other holy men wielded palpable social power, the rejection makes some sense. There were other reasons to find Muhammad unpersuasive or even objectionable. As a 'warner' in the tradition of earlier prophets, he emphasized man's accountability to God, His power, the rewards of Heaven and the punishment of Hell. He also levelled criticism against prevailing social norms, such as female infanticide, and the abuses of wealth.

As his followers grew in number and Muhammad grew in stature, the opposition to his movement stiffened. Muhammad lived in a society where kinship ties provided such protection and safety as were possible, and once these ties were broken, a man could find himself vulnerable. Precisely this happened when his uncle and guardian, Abu Talib, died.



The angel Gabriel blowing a trumpet, from a copy of *The Wonders of Creation* by al-Qazvini, made c. 1375–1425.

A flight by Muhammad's followers to Abyssinia came to little; a flight to the nearby town of Yathrib (later renamed Medina) was successful. This 'emigration', or Hijra, took place in 622, and it quickly came to mark the starting point for the Muslim calendar. It was in Medina, between 622 and his death in 632, that Muhammad established his religio-political movement on a firm footing.

Muhammad in Medina

Something of Muhammad's early activity in Medina can be gleaned from the most important document to survive from the first decades of Islam, which scholars have come to call the 'Constitution of Medina'. An almost unique exception to the general loss and deformation of historical material, the text 'sticks out like a piece of solid rock in an accumulation of rubble', as one scholar has put it.⁴ Beyond the fact that it is very early, much remains uncertain about the text's composition and transmission (some have even argued that in origin there were multiple texts, which were subsequently combined); for well over a century translators have made sense of its obscure clauses in very different ways. Leaving this and its misappellation aside (the text is not a constitution in the conventional sense of the word), one can say with some confidence that much of it only makes good sense when situated historically in Medina shortly after Muhammad's arrival there, perhaps even in the very first year of the Hijra.

According to the most recent edition, the document consists of sixty-four clauses in two main parts, which prescribe relations among people in Medina (here called Yathrib) – the Emigrants (from Mecca to Medina), Helpers (those Medinans who came to their aid), and a number of kinship groups, including Jewish tribes. The following captures something of the document's style and content, including the injunction to prosecute jihad, religiously sanctioned warfare:

1. *In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate. This is a compact from Muhammad, the Prophet, between the Believers and Muslims of the Quraysh and Yathrib, and those who join them, attach themselves to them, and carry out jihad alongside them.*
2. *They are a single community to the exclusion of [other] people.*
3. *The Emigrants of the Quraysh keep to their tribal organization and leadership, cooperating with each other with regards to blood money, and ransoming their captives according to that which is customary and equitable among the Believers...*
14. *The God-fearing Believers are against whosoever of them demands*

an excessive sum of blood money or desires a gift [that involves] injustice, sin, transgression or evil among the Believers. They shall all unite against him even if he is the son of one of them.

15. *A Believer will not kill a[nother] Believer in retaliation for a Non-believer and will not aid a Non-believer against a Believer...*
18. *The Jews who join us will receive aid and equal rights; they will not be wronged, nor their enemies aided against them...*
26. *Whatever you disagree about should be taken to God and to Muhammad.*
27. *The Jews share expenditure with the Believers as long as they are at war...*
39. *The nomadic allies of the Jews are on a par with them...*
52. *Every major crime or dispute between the people of this document, from which evil is feared, should be taken to God and Muhammad.*
53. *God guarantees the truest and most righteous fulfilment of the clauses of this document.*
54. *No protection will be granted to the Quraysh nor to he who aids them.*⁵



The holy cities of Medina and Mecca from the *Dala'il al-khayrat* (Guide to Goodness), a popular prayer book for pilgrims, 19th century.

Much is obscure, but two themes recur. The first is that the parties to the agreement must cooperate, such as by keeping their word, raiding together, refraining from violence against each other or allying with others outside of the community. The second is that religious belief and political loyalty are intertwined, Muhammad being an instrument of God's will. 'Whatever you differ about should be brought before God and Muhammad', one clause prescribes; 'God is the protector of him who is righteous and God-fearing, and so is Muhammad, the messenger of God', says another.

In his capacity as God's Prophet, Muhammad was thus confederating kinship groups in and around Medina, and prescribing their relations so as to minimize internal conflict and maximize their position vis-à-vis their adversaries, the Meccans. In other words, Muhammad was putting the nascent community into shape for engaging polytheist opponents. In this respect, the document conforms to the great stress laid in the Qur'an upon fighting on God's behalf, especially upon the connection between emigration or 'going out' and fighting, as Q 2:218 ('those who emigrate and fight on the path of God'), and other verses put it. The Muslim is 'one who believes in God and the last Day and fights on the path of God' (Q 9:19).

What were the borders of this first community? Outside of it stood polytheists, and within it those who followed Muhammad or publicly allied themselves to his movement – not merely those whom we would conventionally call 'Muslims', but apparently also some Jews (there was no Christian community in Medina to speak of). This model stands in contrast to the one that would emerge over the next century or so, when Muslims began to settle on common doctrines and ritual practices. In this and other ways Muslims became distinct not just from polytheists, but also fellow monotheists. In time, Jews and Christians would enjoy the protection of the state against external enemies and internal compulsion to convert.

So what needs to be emphasized here is the provisional character of belief in this nascent phase. The lines between Muslim and Jew were not yet fully and clearly drawn. We know that practices of fasting and prayer shared commonalities with Jewish traditions. Even a matter as important as the direction of prayer took some time to settle: it seems that Muslims prostrated themselves towards Jerusalem until what the Qur'an and the historical tradition describe as a decisive break with the Jews, which functioned to replace Jerusalem with Mecca. The break would also involve expelling and massacring Jews. This narrative – of a sudden parting of the ways after a period of coexistence and confessional ambiguity – telescopes

a longer period during which Islamic belief and ritual more gradually emerged, disentangling itself from its Jewish and Christian roots. It took at least two centuries before the 'Five Pillars of Islam' (the confession of faith; pilgrimage; fasting in Ramadan; paying alms; daily prayers) were established, on the basis of the Qur'an and the practice of Muhammad (the *sunna*).

Raid and future directions

Insofar as the historical tradition offers anything like an accurate record of Muhammad's concerns, much of Muhammad's attention was focused upon military campaigns outside of Medina. The Medinan phase of Muhammad's life, from 622 to 632, is dominated by raids against passing caravans, settlements and Bedouin tribes, and these culminated in the capitulation of Mecca. The first notable battle was sparked by a caravan raid at a settlement called Nakhla. The battle of Badr, a town that lay about 90 miles southwest of Medina, soon followed. A humiliating defeat of the Meccans is celebrated in the Qur'an as proof of God's providential direction: angels fought alongside the Muslims, we read. Fortunes were dramatically turned at the battle of Uhud, which is conventionally dated to 624 or 625. There, a relatively large Meccan force of 3,000 horsemen avenged the defeat at Badr by killing about seventy Muslims. We read that the Prophet himself was wounded.

At this point – the fifth and sixth year of the Hijra – the traditional chronology leads in two directions. The first is towards Mecca. In 627–28 Muhammad led a group of Muslims on a pilgrimage there, and although he had to abort it, he came away from the negotiations that followed with an agreement that a pilgrimage could be conducted the following year; a ten-year truce was also signed. The following year the oasis town of al-Khaybar fell, delivering large amounts of booty and spoils into Muslim hands. In the same year Muhammad carried out that deferred pilgrimage. Meanwhile, Medina's strength had been growing at the expense of Mecca's, and so the almost bloodless capitulation of Mecca in 630 or so may have come as something of an anti-climax. The Prophet had been carrying out what amounted to a charm offensive against some especially influential polytheists in the town. Muhammad returned to Medina for the final two years of his life.

From about 626 to 628 the chronology also leads in a second direction – towards the conquests in general and Syria in particular. The oasis town of Dumat al-Jandal lay about fifteen days' march north from Medina and about half that distance from Damascus. Its strategic position presumably

explains why it was the target of no fewer than three raids. As early as 627 to 629, the tradition also has Muhammad dispatch letters to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, the Negus (ruler) of Abyssinia, and the Persian shah, inviting them to acknowledge his prophecy and convert to Islam. (They all declined.) After the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad extended his influence in eastern and southern Arabia, chiefly by treaty rather than conquest. Some early, non-Islamic sources have Muhammad active outside of Arabia, leading conquests in Palestine and other provinces, but there is no corroboration for this in the Islamic tradition.

Why did Muhammad take up arms? Leaving aside the vexed question of the vulnerability of Medina to its powerful neighbour, we can be fairly sure that he wanted to secure for his followers the freedom to worship in Mecca or its environs. It was not so much that Mecca was his home; after all, he chose to remain in Medina after it had fallen. It is rather that Mecca was the epicentre of Arabian polytheism. As such, it *had* to submit to God's new dispensation – to be returned to the primordial purity of God's monotheism, a return symbolized by the destruction of idols that had perverted Abraham's religion. Tradition has it that Muhammad's house in Medina served as its mosque; it is now the focal point of a pilgrim's visit to the town. In Mecca, it is the Ka'ba, the cube-shaped building that once housed idols, which became the focal point of the annual pilgrimage rite.

Here what bears emphasizing is the powerfully activist nature of Muhammad's religious convictions. His was no Qumran-like movement of quiet and quiescent piety. Late Antiquity produced both hermetic monks and arms-bearing monks; and no less than the Byzantine emperor himself, Heraclius, had carried out his crusade against the Zoroastrian Persians. What charged Muhammad's movement was belief in the next world and confidence in this one, both fortified by the rewards God offered through the spread of his dominion: 'The earth belongs to God, who bequeaths it to whom He wishes amongst his servants', as Qur'an 7:128 puts it. At about the same time that the Qur'an was being set down into something like the form in which we now have it, an Armenian author described things in similar terms, putting into Muhammad's mouth the following admonition:

With an oath God promised this land to Abraham and his seed after him forever. And he brought about as he promised during that time while He loved Israel. But now you are the sons of Abraham, and God is accomplishing His promise to Abraham and his seed for you. Love sincerely only the God of Abraham, and go and seize your land which

*God gave to your father Abraham. No one will be able to resist you in battle because God is with you.*⁶

In sum, fighting was both a necessity *and* a virtue. Muhammad's forces may have been small, and, with the apparent exception of the battle of Uhud, well managed and skilled. But his ambitions were large, and very possibly focused on the Holy Land.

Be this as it may, the breadth of his ambition, the skill of his politics, and the scale of his charismatic leadership all stand in sharp contrast to the confusion that followed his death in early June 632. Muhammad passed away after a short illness, relatively old by the standards of the day, perhaps in his late fifties or early sixties. According to what emerged as the prevailing tradition, at his death he left behind devoted and committed followers; revelations that would subsequently be assembled into the Qur'an; some clear views on the Hereafter, correct belief and conduct in this world; several wives and daughters, but no sons, successors or explicit plans about where the community he had assembled was to go, literally or figuratively. In the version of the text that has become standard, the Qur'an



Illustration of the Prophet's tomb in Medina (left) and the Ka'ba in Mecca (right), from a Collection of Prayers, Morocco, 16th century.

itself is entirely silent on the question of succession, and vague at best on the larger question of political authority.

Having worked so tirelessly to build his community, why did Muhammad leave the question of its leadership open to doubt? (Shi'ites, as we shall presently see, typically held that the question rests on grossly mistaken premises.) One way to square his careful coalition-building and prudent politics with the absence of any succession arrangement is to speculate that an impending sense of the End, which is a prominent feature of the Qur'an's shorter – and, it is conventionally held, earlier – verses, remained at the core of his world-view until his death. According to this reconstruction, Muhammad had completed his prophetic task, which was to remind his contemporaries that they were accountable to God, and to warn them of the dire consequences, should they choose to ignore that reminder. By delivering the revelations, which would eventually be assembled into the Qur'an, and engineering a community of monotheists, whose victories clearly demonstrated God's favour, Muhammad had put in place a moral order that would hold until the soon-to-come Day of Judgment. His work complete, he died, fulfilled.

An objection to this argument is that evidence for that sense of imminent End is relatively weak; the Qur'an seems to exhibit more interest in prescribing social relations for the long haul than it does in bracing for the end of the world. Leaving aside the Shi'ite view, one can speculate that prudence dictated Muhammad's thinking. According to this alternative, ensuring the success of his movement meant following tribal practices, which naturally privileged kinship but gave short shrift to authority that was purely inherited or transferred; if this is so, we are required to assume that neither of the two men closest to Muhammad by blood – his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali, and his uncle 'Abbas – offered the right mix of kinship and character. A variation on this argument would be that Muhammad sensed that his community remained fragile, what with geography, kinship and commitment to Islam all marking potential lines of fragmentation, and so he thought it unwise to make his wishes clear. What better way for a new leader to establish himself among the believers than for him to respond most ably to the crisis brought on by the death of the Messenger of God?

Whatever the answer and whatever his precise intentions, Muhammad had set in motion a military, political and religious dynamic that proved irresistible: his Arabian raids gave rise to regional conquests that brought about the end of the ancient world. What replaced the centuries-long division of the Middle East between Christian west and Sasanian east was

a unitary empire organized around the caliphate – the ruling office in a post-Prophetic age. The caliphs were the heirs of the Prophet. And much Islamic learning, as we shall also see, would be devoted to preserving, understanding and elaborating upon his legacy.

2 'Ali, cousin, caliph and forefather of Shi'ism (661)

In terms of law and ritual, Islam is now constituted principally of a majority Sunni branch (perhaps about 85 per cent) and a minority Shi'ite branch. In strictly doctrinal terms, these differ in relatively minor ways – the specifics of family and dietary law, for example, and the precise gestures of prayer, for another. The one important exception, as we shall see, comes in the Imamate, the institution of post-prophetic leadership for Shi'ites.⁷ Where Sunnis and Shi'ites have always had serious disagreement comes in their views of early Islamic history, especially the course of events that determined who possessed religious and political authority after Muhammad's death.

Put another way, while virtually all Muslims agreed that the office of the caliphate was at the heart of the polity, they disagreed about who should occupy it; and since they all held that political power exercised legitimately was necessarily religious – that is, exercised on God's behalf and according to His will and law – political disagreement coalesced into sectarian affiliation. The historiographical challenges in making sense of this should not be minimized. Contesting narratives about the lives and careers of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan illustrate how even the relatively recent past can be subject to sharp controversy, particularly when the events or figures in question gave rise to political or cultural movements. The first generations of Muslims gave rise to such movements, and the representations of 'Ali and his adversaries are not merely controversial as a result, but also obscured by the passing of some 1,300 years.

'Ali b. Abi Talib, Muhammad's contemporary and cousin, was the divisive and decisive figure in this dynamic. (While 'Sunni' is a term that entered broad circulation only during the ninth century, the term 'Shi'ite' is considerably older, and derives from the expression *'shi'at* 'Ali' – the 'faction' or 'party' that favoured 'Ali's claims to the caliphate.) A lightning rod for disagreement about the community's leadership in the middle decades of the seventh century, he became much more than that, besides – a claimant to the caliphate, an exemplar to rival Muhammad himself, a figure of veneration and emulation for Shi'ites.



Ottoman miniature dating from the late 16th or early 17th century showing 'Ali receiving the oath of allegiance in Kufa in 656.

Kinship and familiarity between Muhammad and 'Ali form the backdrop to the controversy about succession. 'Ali was born around 600 in Mecca, the son of Abu Talib, who was not only Muhammad's uncle, but also something of a foster-father, who had welcomed the orphaned Muhammad into his home. Upon Abu Talib's death, Muhammad would return the favour by looking after 'Ali. How Abu Talib responded to Muhammad's preaching is unclear, but both the Sunni and Shi'ite traditions leave no doubt about 'Ali's early embrace of Muhammad's cause. Shi'ite historians and biographers even have it that 'Ali was the first male to leave polytheism, while Sunnis typically reserved this special station for Abu Bakr, the first caliph (r. 632–34). All could agree that Muhammad honoured 'Ali by giving him his daughter, Fatima, in marriage.

As was common, 'Ali would have multiple wives (the fourth chapter of the Qur'an, and Islamic law following it, allowed no more than four at any one time), in addition to several concubines; he fathered many children, perhaps as many as twenty-eight. Two, named al-Hasan and al-Husayn, both sons of Fatima, and both said to be favourite grandchildren of Muhammad, would succeed their father as focal points for Shi'ite aspirations. (Those who descended from 'Ali, in some cases preserving or magnifying his claim to rulership over the Islamic polity, are known as 'Alids.)

Kinship and early conversion thus recommended 'Ali as caliph. Given the perilous circumstances of Muhammad's movement, religious conviction was also made manifest by courage. Tales of valour on the battlefield – such as when 'Ali lifted a city gate off its hinges, used it as a shield and then flung it aside – served to illustrate his commitment to the Prophet and his cause. In the risky hours when Muhammad escaped Mecca for Medina, we read, 'Ali served as a body double, lying in the Prophet's bed to confuse his enemies.

According to Shi'ite authors, the significance of these and other accounts was obvious: Muhammad had always intended to appoint 'Ali as his successor. After all, God Himself had made the same idea clear in revelations that would be collected into the Qur'an – and which had been suppressed by those hostile to him. 'Ali, they also report Muhammad saying, was to him as Aaron had been to Moses. If all that were not enough, surely no doubt could survive the last and most unequivocal statement of all, which came early in 632, when Muhammad was returning from Mecca on what became known as his 'Farewell pilgrimage'. At a stopping point called Ghadir Khumm, he took 'Ali's hand and declared that 'Of whom I am master, 'Ali is his master'.

When Muhammad died soon thereafter without male issue, 'Ali's partisans naturally held that as cousin, son-in-law and confidant, he possessed all the knowledge and ability that came from concentrated consanguinity, upbringing, favour and apprenticeship. Little wonder then that he, his family and partisans, were bitterly disappointed when an informal gathering produced Abu Bakr as successor and so first caliph ('successor of the Prophet'). 'Ali himself is said to have been absent from the gathering, busy preparing Muhammad's body for burial. His absence is merely one of several mystifying aspects of the succession narratives, and inclines Shi'ites to the view that the event amounted to nothing less than a *coup d'état*. Whatever the facts of the matter, 'Ali seems to have withheld his support for Abu Bakr for several months, and he lay low during the ten-year reign of 'Umar (634-44), who succeeded Abu Bakr. He re-emerged in opposition to the policies of the third caliph, 'Uthman (r. 644-56), joining a loud chorus of disapproval of his alleged partisanship, nepotism and infidelity to Muhammad's practices.

It was only after nearly twenty-five years – the reigns of three caliphs, all illegitimate in their eyes – that the hopes of 'Ali's partisans were finally fulfilled: 'Ali claimed the office in 656. But the circumstances were unpromising, and more disappointment would follow. For one thing, he never seems to have enjoyed broad support, and none other than 'A'isha, Muhammad's favoured wife, had good reason to oppose him, as we shall see. For another, the third caliph, 'Uthman, had been assassinated in Medina during what became known as the First Fitna (literally 'trial', but in practice 'civil war'). Fairly or unfairly, many thought that 'Ali was complicit. Since 'Ali had been passed over three times, his bid must have appeared desperate to many. This can explain why he never had much appeal outside of Medina and the southern Iraqi town of Kufa, and why almost immediately upon his accession he was challenged by Talha and al-Zubayr, two close contemporaries of the Prophet. To make matters worse, they were joined by 'A'isha. 'Ali survived their challenge, but his was a Pyrrhic victory, the principal cost being his reputation as a leader of men.

More pious and gentle than shrewd, 'Ali was quickly outmanoeuvred by Mu'awiya, who was both kinsman of 'Uthman and powerful governor of Syria, and who argued that 'Uthman's murderers had gone unpunished. The challenge to 'Ali came to a head in the battle of Siffin, which lay on the Euphrates south of the northern Syrian town of Raqqa, in 657. The two armies hesitated to fight, and when they finally did, tradition tells us that 'Ali, on the verge of victory, fatefully agreed to a truce and arbitration. The



Shrine of 'Ali, Najaf, Iraq, one of the holiest sites for Shi'ites.

result was a muddle, and in 661, discredited by the arbitration agreement, 'Ali was himself murdered by a former supporter.

The death of 'Ali meant his rebirth – as a symbol of just rule perverted by kinship, cupidity and corruption. He may have been chubby and bald in appearance, and indecisive and credulous in temperament – or so some accounts have it – but especially at the hands of Shi'ite partisans, 'Ali would emerge as the progenitor of multiple lines of Imams, those 'leaders' of Shi'ite communities, some of whom survive to today. As such, a wide variety of doctrines, some inspired by Gnosticism and other pre-Islamic traditions, others distinctly Islamic in character, would impress themselves upon 'Ali's biography.

Some followers, labelled 'extreme', held views that other Shi'ites (and, all the more so, Sunnis) thought preposterous or even repulsive. For example, a supposed sect called Ghurabiyya are said to have argued that 'Ali and Muhammad so resembled each other in appearance that they were like two ravens (*ghurab*) – and so the angel Gabriel mistook Muhammad for 'Ali. Others, particularly those Shi'ites who crystallized into the Imami (or Twelver) branch during the ninth and tenth centuries, ascribed to him not only all manner of miracle, but also a paradigmatic role in their law and preternatural eloquence: his courage and piety were made legendary,

and his sermons, letters, aphorisms and religious views were collected for commentary and posterity. The Imams who descended from his line preserved his teaching and his infallibility. (We shall meet the eighth in this line, 'Ali b. Musa, below.)

A late ninth or early tenth-century author, having described the materialism and worldliness of his Umayyad predecessors, captures a relatively early moment in the evolution of legend-making:

*'Ali b. Abi Talib was occupied all his days by fighting. Moreover, he never wore new garments, never owned an estate, and never contracted to acquire property other than what he had in Yanbu' and al-Bughaybigha [towns in Arabia], whose income he gave away as alms to the poor. People preserved his speeches and sermons, of which he delivered four hundred. They were retained in people's memories and are circulated among them and made use of in their own speeches and discourses.'*⁸

For Shi'ites and Sunnis inclined to the pietistic or mystical tradition of Sufism, 'Ali possessed esoteric knowledge and unrivalled ascetic credentials. In tongue and on page, he was peerless: his eloquence was legendary, as was the beauty of his writing hand. The earliest style of Qur'anic calligraphy, as a sixteenth-century authority would have it, 'reached perfection at the glorious hand of the Prince of the Faithful and Imam of the Pious, the Conquering Lion of God, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. The reed-riding fingers of no creature have ever passed through the field of writing like the miraculous, cavalier fingers of that majesty.'⁹ His wisdom about wisdom was especially valued:

Knowledge is better than wealth: knowledge protects you, whereas you have to protect wealth. Wealth decreases with spending, whereas knowledge increases with it...

*Those who hoard wealth are dead even as they live, whereas the learned remain as long as the world remains – their persons may be lost, but their teachings live on in people's hearts.'*¹⁰

Precisely where 'Ali was buried is unknown, but during the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, the southern Iraqi town of Najaf came to be recognized as his final resting place. In the shorter term, Mu'awiya claimed the caliphate and ruled for nearly twenty years. In the medium term, non-Shi'ites would reject his claim to the caliphate, and it was only

during the ninth century that the doctrine of the 'Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs' (Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali) coalesced, the caliphs coming in declining order of merit. In this way, the hatchet was mostly buried for Sunnis and Shi'ites. Even so, there were and remain limits to ecumenism. Anyone familiar with the Middle East in the early twenty-first century will know that some Shi'ites carry out rituals that vituperate against those Companions who failed to recognize 'Ali's claims, and that some Sunnis target Shi'ite shrines. Sectarian strife is not easily extinguished.

3 'A'isha, wife of the Prophet

(678)

'A'isha was a native Meccan, and a daughter of Abu Bakr, who was one of the earliest converts to Islam, and, as we have already seen, the successor of Muhammad at the head of the nascent Islamic polity. She was also one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives – the third, tradition tells us, and his favourite, one of the 'mothers of the believers', as Qur'an 33:6 puts it. That Abu Bakr's daughter became Muhammad's wife was no coincidence. In Arabia, as in many pre-industrial societies, marriage was an institution that could serve to ally families, claims, dynasties and political factions. It made good sense for Muhammad to effect a marriage contract that tied together his and Abu Bakr's fortunes, especially in about 620, when his position in still-polytheist Mecca was relatively weak. It was in the company of 'A'isha, we read, that Muhammad would die in 632.

I have quite deliberately identified 'A'isha not so much as an individual in her own right, but as daughter, mother and wife. To say more, we need to understand something about the transmission of historical memory.

The great bulk of what we 'know' about the first century of Islam consists in narratives preserved in collections that were assembled, for the most part, during the ninth and tenth centuries. Some of these narratives are a few lines long, others many pages; some come in the first person, others in the second, still others as transmitted second- or third-hand, preserved or elaborated, from one generation to the next. Fragmentary and rudimentary, or full and well polished, these narratives yield only reluctantly what most historians would regard as reliable information about the events that they purport to relate. As a rule, they are inconsistent, tendentious or just plain implausible; only very seldom can they be corroborated by independent sources. This explains why prudent reconstructions of the lives of Muhammad and 'Ali (and other earliest Muslims) are necessarily schematic: after filtering out the doubtful or dubious, there is often little left.



Detail of a miniature showing prominent members of the Prophet's family. From an 18th-century copy of a 14th-century original.

Still, all historians would agree that such problematic narratives can function as a rich source for understanding what later Muslims *chose* to recall of their past. This is not much of a claim, and is familiar to anyone who thinks seriously about memory and the transmission of texts. What we remember says something about what we think is important, including our underlying, even unacknowledged, values. Similarly, how written accounts transform over time says something about how successive generations adapt and revise their opinions about a given event.

What did Muslims choose to narrate about 'Aisha? Relatively little, as we might have expected: women were marginal to the religious and political development of early Islam, at least in the public sphere. They belonged in domestic space. As we have them, the accounts concerning 'Aisha cluster around three events. But each says something interesting about attitudes to gender.

The first concerns her marriage to Muhammad, especially her age. Dates of birth were of little significance in this period, so age is usually only approximated. Even so, a clear consensus has it that she was a small child (perhaps six) when the marriage was contracted, and only a few years older (usually said to be nine or ten) when she moved into the Prophet's household, a change in circumstance that is often taken to indicate that the marriage was consummated. Muhammad himself would have been around fifty. Naturally, both her age and the age disparity are grist for the mill of modern-day Islamophobes, who would have it that Muhammad was a monstrous paedophile.

It is more noteworthy that the age disparity was of minor interest to those who narrated these accounts. Nor was there any embarrassment, much less squeamishness, about 'Aisha's age when the marriage was consummated: some narrators freely describe how 'Aisha continued to play with dolls after her move into the Prophet's house. In fact, sometimes it is 'Aisha herself, speaking matter-of-factly in the first person, who describes things: 'The Prophet of God married me when I was seven, and he had intercourse with me when I was nine.' This account is recorded in a collection of Prophetic traditions compiled by a widely respected authority named al-Nasa'i (d. 915), here transmitting a tradition that came from 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 713), a prominent early compiler. In contract and consummation, the marriage seems to have been notable, but not especially remarkable: in a world naïve of our modern notions of childhood and adolescence, females were not uncommonly married in their early teens – sometimes even earlier. In fact, some of the very scholars who transmitted such accounts were themselves married to women who had been brides at eleven or twelve.¹¹

The second event that concerns narrators took place six or seven years later, and is known in the sources as the 'Account of the Lie'. Returning with Muhammad from one of his raids against an Arabian tribe, 'A'isha strayed from the caravan, and, delayed because of a misplaced necklace (or so the stories have it), was inadvertently left behind when the caravan set off for Medina. (The transmitters here, too, seem determined to illustrate her youth; she was so light, we read, that the men carrying her litter failed to notice her absence.) She was fortunate enough to be rescued and returned to Medina by a certain Safwan, but both the circumstances of her disappearance and her association with Safwan occasioned all manner of suspicion and gossip. No reputable woman, let alone a wife of the Prophet, was to be alone with an unrelated man. And what was this about a necklace? How could she have lost track of time? To many, the story failed to add up. For weeks, we read, her honour was impugned – and so the Prophet's standing weakened among the fractious tribes of Medina. Matters were settled only when God sent a revelation to Muhammad (Qur'an 24:11), which condemned the slanderers.

What are we to make of 'A'isha's purported adultery? We cannot possibly know if the charges had any substance, although it is certainly very unlikely. That such stories circulated and were subsequently transmitted is noteworthy, however, especially given the reverence that 'A'isha would enjoy among Sunnis: precisely because they are at such an embarrassing variance with the idealized 'A'isha of the mature tradition, they very likely capture something of the highly contentious and controversial nature of early Islam. What the allegation seems to echo is opposition to 'A'isha. But why the opposition?

She certainly was unpopular in some quarters. Widowed by Muhammad's death in 632, 'A'isha recedes from the historical stage for decades. She reappears in detail only in the summer of 656 – and what a spectacular appearance it was. Here we arrive at the third and last event that the storytellers were keen to narrate.

However private and domestic her life had been until that point, she now led a force of some 1,000 men in opposition to 'Ali, who had come to power as a result of the assassination of the caliph 'Uthman (d. 656), as we have already seen. Joined by two other revered Companions of the Prophet, 'A'isha and her force faced 'Ali's armies in southern Iraq at what became known as the 'Battle of the Camel', which took its name from the mêlée that surrounded the camel bearing her litter. Her cause lost, and she would live out the rest of her days in relative obscurity. Still, the Battle of the Camel came to be seen as the pivotal moment in the first civil war of



Miniature of the Battle of the Camel, which took place at Basra in 656. 'A'isha is depicted top left riding the camel that gave the battle its name. From the *Siyer-i Nebi*, a Turkish epic about the life of Muhammad, 16th century.

Islam, which was itself a turning point: the primordial Islam of Muhammad and his original community had come to an end; in the future lay second and third civil wars, revolution from within, and invasion from without.

'Whatever your opinion of 'A'isha, she remains larger than life, an unforgettable heroine who spoke her mind, followed her heart, loved her God, and won a place in her community and in history as the Mother of the Believers.' So writes Sherry Jones, author of two historical novels about 'A'isha. (There are others.) Jones's 'A'isha is a naïve back-projection of distinctly modern ideas about gender, the individual and society; her novels say virtually nothing about either the historical 'A'isha or the role in early Islam that she was given to play by early Muslims. What Jones does unwittingly bring to the surface is how narratives of 'A'isha embed cultural values. A less anachronistic understanding reads these narratives as ways that learned Muslim men projected their own values and politics upon foundational – even mythic – moments in the communal history of Islam. Above all, 'A'isha can be said to represent Sunni honour in the face of Shi'ite aspersions.

The huge polities that historians call the Umayyad and Abbasid empires were organized around the office of the caliphate, which, subject to both gradual transformation and revolutionary convulsion, would survive in recognizable form until the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in the middle of the thirteenth century. After Muhammad himself, 'Abd al-Malik did more than anyone to engineer a religio-political vision of caliphal rule.

Islam was born in tribal Arabia, and this meant that status was determined by a combination of competence and kinship: according to what would become settled theory, Muhammad being a member of the Quraysh tribe, caliphs were to be members of the Quraysh, too. 'Abd al-Malik was born in Medina to Marwan, a leading figure in an especially prominent clan of the Quraysh, the Umayyads, who eventually gave their name to Islam's first ruling dynasty, who ruled from Syria. We have already met the first Umayyad caliph, 'Uthman (r. 644–56), and it happens that 'Abd al-Malik, at the age of ten or so, witnessed the events surrounding his murder. As a teenager and early adult, during the rule of another Umayyad, Mu'awiya (r. 661–80), 'Abd al-Malik was groomed for power, and so served the ruling dynasty in a number of ways. One was to lead armies against the Byzantines. (There was little room for feckless adolescence in this society; childhood ended by twelve or thirteen, when one could wield a sword.) He also served as the governor of the Arabian town of Hajar.

The end of Mu'awiya's reign in April 680 eroded Umayyad power and privilege. Mu'awiya was briefly succeeded by a son and grandson, but neither enjoyed much support, and so it fell to 'Abd al-Malik's father, Marwan, to begin the fight to restore Umayyad rule after the grandson's death in 683, when opposition broke into the open. Syrian supporters proclaimed Marwan caliph, but he died soon thereafter, in 685; son succeeded father, and between 685 (when he, too, was proclaimed caliph) and 692 (by which time he had defeated the Umayyads' adversaries in a bitter civil war), 'Abd al-Malik restored Umayyad power. From 692 to 750, the Umayyad dynasty would occupy the seat of the caliphate, no fewer than seven (four sons and three grandsons) linear descendants following 'Abd al-Malik to the caliphate.

The locus of Umayyad power was Syria and its Syrian Arab army, and the state apparatus itself was organized around 'Abd al-Malik's palace in Damascus. If Damascus was the centre of his political and military power, what was his model of rulership?

At its irreducible kernel was the conception of a political order subordinated to God's representative on earth, the caliph. God was one,



The Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, built on the site of the Byzantine Church of John the Baptist.

and, it followed, His authority, delegated to the Prophet and the caliphs who succeeded him, was indivisible. Such appears to have been the theory at the start, though in practice delegation meant divisibility among civil, military and religious figures: ruling territories the size of the empire made effective absolutism impossible. Put another way, conquest had bequeathed to Muslims sovereignty over much of the Middle East, and they fused late antique traditions of rulership (notably bureaucratic and military institutions legitimated by sacral kingship) with what might be called a tribal monotheism. Virtue and deed combined with biology (the Umayyads' membership in the Prophet's tribe of the Quraysh) to produce an iteration of Middle Eastern sacral kingship that Muslims called the caliphate.

Images of rule

Reconstructing the conceptual framework of earliest Islam – in this case, 'Abd al-Malik's ideas about the religio-political order – means availing ourselves of a narrow range of reliable evidence. It may come as a surprise, but there are many worse places to start than by looking carefully at coinage. For inscribed coins circulated widely in the empire, serving as both media of exchange and tokens of sovereignty. Like coins nowadays, they were both economic and political tools, which served the market and broadcast the claims of the state that struck them. The coin in question comes from one of several issues that appeared between 693 and 697, in all three of the metals in which Muslims struck their money – gold, copper and the

occasional silver – in no fewer than eighteen different mints in the eastern Mediterranean.

One side of this coin need not detain us: it features what appears to be a pole or tower erected on steps, and has no significant ideological value. It is the fossil of a Byzantine prototype, which featured the Christian symbol of the cross. Around this image is an Arabic inscription, which tells us when the coins were dated and in whose name ('Abd al-Malik) they were minted. It is the other side (the obverse) that is of much greater interest. This is because it shows a human figure who, though not explicitly identified, is widely understood to be none other than 'Abd al-Malik himself.

The bearded 'Abd al-Malik has a prominent nose, and parted, shoulder-length hair. He wears a headdress and a long, brocaded robe that obscures all but his feet. His mouth is closed, and so one cannot confirm the presence of the bridgework described in some literary accounts: the written sources report halitosis so severe that he was known as the 'fly-killer': when insects flew by his open mouth, they would drop dead. 'Abd al-Malik's bulging eyes make a menacing look, an impression that is deepened by his pose: he is grasping the pommel of his sword with his right hand, though we cannot tell if he's sheathing or withdrawing it from its ornamented scabbard. Behind his right, bent elbow there hangs what is probably a whip, which would have been attached to his waistband. Around this figure is another Arabic legend (there are slight variations, depending on the coin), which reads: 'For the servant of God, 'Abd al-Malik, commander of the believers' and 'Caliph of God, commander of God'. It has been argued that



Gold coin of 'Abd al-Malik, 695, one of the last coins of the Umayyad empire to include figural imagery.

the figure is Muhammad, but this inscription, along with relevant traditions of non-Islamic coinage, rules that and other alternatives out.

Since descriptions of 'Abd al-Malik's appearance make specific mention of his large eyes and long hair, we can be confident that his portrait is a genuine attempt to capture the caliph's likeness. It is certainly much more than crude realism, however. It is portraiture as propaganda. What the portrait is expressing is an image of a warrior-caliph – that is, the 'commander of God/believers' identified by the encircling inscription. Given that the earliest issues of the coin date from 693, it is tempting to see in this image an allusion to 'Abd al-Malik's victory in the long and bloody civil war of 685–92, which more or less ended with the bombardment of Mecca. This civil war also produced an altogether more celebrated piece of propaganda: the iconic Dome of the Rock, which sits atop the Temple Mount in East Jerusalem. Built at the order of 'Abd al-Malik, and completed in 691 or 692, the Dome of the Rock is a monument of victory – of Islam over its sister religions, and 'Abd al-Malik over his rival claimants.

Our coin also reflects another ideological assertion, for we know from a variety of sources that the caliph sought to project himself in the image of fearless warrior, a beneficent patron, a 'shade' or shelter for Muslims, and a pillar of right belief. One of his provincial governors even mischievously suggested that Muslims should circumambulate 'Abd al-Malik's palace in deference to his religious authority. A poet named al-Akhtal put words to the image that 'Abd al-Malik's court sought to broadcast. (Because poetry occupied a prominent place in the Islamic societies of the Middle East, it shall appear with a frequency that may surprise some readers.)

*To a man whose gifts do not elude us,
whom God has made victorious
So let him in his victory
long delight!
He who wades into the deep of battle,
auspicious his augury
The caliph of God,
through whom men pray for rain...
Like a crouching lion, poised to pounce
his chest low to the ground
For a battle in which there
is prey for him...
In the mighty nab'-tree of Quraysh
Round which they gather,*



The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, c. 692, a shrine constructed on the orders of 'Abd al-Malik.

No other tree can top
its lofty crown.
It overtops the high hills,
and they dwell in its roots and stem;
They are the people of bounty,
and when they boast, of glory,
Rallying behind the truth, recoiling from foul speech,
Disdainful,
If adversity befalls them,
They bear it patiently.¹²

His critics made their own sense of his claims. 'Abd al-Malik was stern, resolute and miserly,' one of them wrote in the late eighth or early ninth century. 'He used to love poetry and panegyrics, which glorified and praised him lavishly...He was known for being exceedingly bloodthirsty, and his governors behaved according to his custom.'¹³

'Abd al-Malik himself was an orthodox and observant Muslim', one of the twentieth century's leading historians of Islam wrote.¹⁴ Since the formation of something comparable to orthodoxy – though certainly different from it – extended well beyond this early period, such descriptions are confusingly anachronistic. To use a topographical metaphor: the shape of early Islam should not be described as a single river that divides at a delta into branches and tributaries. Instead, it is about how mountain springs and streams, some larger than others, sometimes joining, and other times dividing and sub-dividing, some drying up entirely, came together in the ninth and tenth centuries to form a broad, sometimes multi-course, river: a mainstream tradition that included most Sunnis and Shi'ites. Some ingredients of Umayyad religio-political ideology were eventually integrated into this mainstream, perhaps the most important of all being the legitimating penumbra of caliphate. But others were not: 'Abd al-Malik enjoyed a religious authority that caliphs in later centuries could only imagine (or reminisce about).

As obscure as the origins of Sunnism may be, the significance of 'Abd al-Malik is clear. He was the first caliph to broadcast his and the state's claims to rulership beyond a small elite of Muslim Arabs by exploiting what were the mass media of the day – coins, documents of various kinds, inscriptions, speeches and letters. He did so mainly because his state's ambitions were so radical. Earlier caliphs had been content to manage what was in many respects a *laissez-faire* polity, leaving pre-existing bureaucracies in place, and usually insisting on little more than the payment of

tribute and tax. It was during 'Abd al-Malik's reign that Arabic replaced Greek and Persian as the language of the bureaucracy, coinage became uniform in design and weight, irregular tribute was increasingly replaced by regular taxation, and tribal militias became salaried armies. Through such dull measures the foundations of a distinctly Islamo-Arabic empire were being set. The results were spectacular.

This is the case in two ways. First, it was in no small part because the state's power had grown so that a second wave of conquests could wash across the western Mediterranean and Central Asia: both Barcelona and Samarqand fell to Muslim conquerors in 712. Not until the Mongols would a single state rule as much territory. A fledgling polity thus became a hemispheric power. Second, cultural energies were redirected: Arabic language and literature, sanctioned by Islamo-Arab power, had begun to send the prestige traditions of late antiquity – especially Greek and Syriac Christianity and Persian Zoroastrianism – towards obsolescence, irrelevance or extinction. Arabic was becoming *the* prestige language of the Middle East and Mediterranean, a status that it would hold for nearly a millennium.

5 **Ibn al-Muqaffa'**, *translator and essayist* (759)

Ibn al-Muqaffa' was an importer of Persian traditions into Islamic culture, a translator and essayist of exemplary style who was writing when literary Arabic was in its infancy and revolution was in the air. He sought to influence the practice and theory of politics by writing for those in power. With mixed results, he participated in political life as counsellor, confidant and what amounts to cabinet secretary. He left behind several prose works, one of which, a collection of animal fables called *Kalila wa-Dimna*, has become a genuine classic of world literature.¹⁵ Others, both translations and original compositions, illuminate an obscure phase in cultural, religious and political history.

His work cannot be understood independent of place. In large part because Muslims were few in number and pragmatic in approach, the Islamic conquests of the mid-seventh century had limited short-term impact upon the conquered lands: economic and social structures survived the transition from Byzantine or Sasanian to Islamic rule, Muslim governors insisting only that their sovereignty be acknowledged by the payment of tribute or tax. And because economic and social structures remained largely undisturbed, all manner of traditions continued to be transmitted

across the conquest watershed. On the whole, conversion was slow, but Arabicization – the take-up of Arabic as both written and spoken language – was accelerating.

The truism of cultural continuity is illustrated most clearly in Iran, where Muslims, having settled in small numbers, were surrounded by an ocean of non-Muslims, especially ethnic Iranians, in addition to Aramaic-speakers, Jews, Turkic and other Central Asian peoples. Some Iranians were understandably unhappy about the collapse of the Sasanian state; after all, Iranian elites could claim the inheritance of Persian rule all the way back to Cyrus (d. 530 BC), founder of the Achaemenid empire. It is little wonder that spotty rebellions took place for a generation. But by the late 600s, these had come to an end, and save for the mountainous rim of the Caspian Sea, Iranian rule was over. What remained were its cultural and political traditions. The Persian heartland was in Fars (whence the English 'Persian'), in the southwest of the Iranian plateau. And Fars's principal city was Jur (also known as Firuzabad), built by the early Sasanians in the round upon an artificial hill, southwest of the first Sasanian capital of Istakhr.

It was apparently there, in about 720 that a certain Rozbih was born to a high-status Persian family. So far as we can make out, this family's experience was typical. The first Muslim rulers had left Sasanian administrative institutions more or less intact, and Rozbih's father, Dadoye, had found employment in the Umayyad state as a tax administrator. Accounts report that Dadoye was also known by the Arabic name of Mubarak, but it is doubtful that he converted to Islam, there being no expectation at this early stage of Islam that he do so. What is clearer is that another name came to him, al-Muqaffa' ('the shrivelled-handed'), as a result of tortures he apparently suffered at the hands of superiors who were suspicious of corruption. Rozbih would thus come to be known as the 'Son of al-Muqaffa'.

Ibn al-Muqaffa' possessed not only the bureaucratic and courtly nous that came with his high-status Persian background, but also a prodigious ability in Arabic, which he seems to have acquired in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, then a greenhouse of Arabic linguistic study. Thus son followed father in serving the Umayyad state, finding employment as a secretary in southeast and southwest Iran, acquiring great wealth – along with a reputation for spending it ostentatiously. To flourish as a secretary in the late Umayyad milieu one had to put compelling rhetoric in the service of one's patron; it was through the written and spoken word, especially orations and letters, both public and private, that business was conducted. Politics frequently being violent, one also needed toughness and sangfroid, and it seems that Ibn al-Muqaffa' had these in excess. The surviving accounts

have it that he could be caustic and abrasive, and the offence taken by one adversary provides as reasonable explanation as any for his own brutal death a few years later.

Whereas father never advanced beyond local renown, son reached the highest echelons of the state. The Abbasid Revolution of 749–50, which put an end to Umayyad rule, was born in eastern Iran, and opportunities were opened for those who aligned themselves with the winning faction. This Ibn al-Muqaffa' seems to have done, attaching himself to 'Isa b. 'Ali, an influential Abbasid in his own right, who also happened to be the uncle of the caliph-to-be, al-Mansur (r. 754–75). Biographical reports connect Ibn al-Muqaffa's conversion to Islam with his patronage by 'Isa b. 'Ali, but speculation on his religious background and commitments is probably nothing more than that; scholars cannot agree if he had been Zoroastrian or Manichaeen (a then-popular religion founded by Mani, d. 276). From his writings, one infers that he was a sceptic who condemned religious dogma and embraced human reason.

What is clear is that by 759 he was dead, a victim of the sanguinary factionalism of the period. The stakes in participating in the ruling court were always high, and Ibn al-Muqaffa' made matters worse through his arrogance and hubris. Precisely why he was executed is unknown, but we read that the caliph took umbrage of some kind, and, either wittingly or unwittingly, delivered Ibn al-Muqaffa' into the hands of the very governor who had been harbouring a grievance for years. He died a painful death, by amputation, immolation, strangulation or burial alive (or perhaps some combination thereof). A son would later distinguish himself as translator of works on logic and medicine.

Works

Leaving aside works of uncertain attribution, one can divide Ibn al-Muqaffa's corpus between original compositions (three in number) and translations into Arabic from Middle Persian (seven). With one exception, none can be dated securely to any single phase in his life. Among the original compositions belongs the *Greater Adab*, whose chapters are sequentially addressed to the sovereign, courtier and, finally, the man of ambition – the social climber. Its prescriptions are utterly practical (the reader is counselled to follow a life of truthfulness, frugality, industry and self-examination). In framing ethics as an exercise of reason and self-interest, the author lays the foundation for a literary-cultural phenomenon known as *adab* – a distinctly Islamic variety of humanism. Ibn al-Muqaffa' did not have the philosopher's or theologian's temperament, and so never systematized his views. His was

a cosmopolitan scepticism rather than a comprehensive rationalism. So far as we can make out, he was more interested in modelling through language than in demonstrating through argument.

In the matter of religion, the principle is that you hold fast to a correct belief, avoid major sins, and fulfil the religious obligations. Hold fast to this, as something indispensable at every moment, like someone who knows he will perish if he is deprived of it. If, after that, you are able to go beyond this by deepening your knowledge of religion and of worship, then all the better.

In the matter of preserving one's physical wellbeing, the principle is not to burden the body with too much food, drink, and sexual intercourse. If, after that, you are able to learn about everything that is beneficial or harmful to the body, and how to make use of this, then all the better.

In matters of courage, the principle is not to tell yourself to retreat when your companions are advancing on the enemy. If, after that, you are able to be the first to attack and the last to run back, without forsaking due caution, then all the better.

In matters of generosity, the principle is not to withhold from people their rights. If, after that, you are able to give them more than they are entitled to, and to be generous to those who have right at all, it is all the better...¹⁶

Into the window that opens with the beginning of al-Mansur's reign (754) and closes with Ibn al-Muqaffa's death in 759 can be placed the composition of the *Letter on [Caliphal] Companions*, which is explicitly addressed to the caliph. The text may never have made it to the caliph himself, but its obscure style and idiosyncratic vision make it one of a very small handful of texts that date from the extraordinarily contentious aftermath of the Abbasid Revolution, which had the result of moving the centre of political gravity from Syria to Iraq – and thus the afterlife of Sasanian imperial traditions transmitted by the likes of Ibn al-Muqaffa'. One measure of the sovereign's intelligence, he writes in the introduction, is his receptiveness to advice. He then proceeds to give it, on matters that lay at the heart of very early Abbasid statecraft.

Beliefs should be codified, Ibn al-Muqaffa' proposed, for otherwise the caliph's commanders could be carried away by extreme views of God, and



The fox and the drum, a 13th-century manuscript illustration from *Kalila wa-Dimna*, a collection of animal fables by Ibn al-Muqaffa'.

religion that could ultimately imperil his power. But the matter was not just one of *real politik*: the same text evinces a keen interest in perennial problems of theory. For example, how is one to square unitary power with the diversity of doctrines, especially legal ones? What are the limits of the sovereign's authority, and on what matters must the believer obey him? The answer he sketches out accommodates the sovereign's power in exercising wide discretion, not merely over military and administrative issues, but also over areas (such as penal law) that Muslim lawyers would claim for themselves. On the other hand, Ibn al-Muqaffa' certainly does not afford the caliph anything like absolutism: he must conform to fundamentals of religious law (e.g. prayer, fasting and pilgrimage), for they are essential to his legitimacy.

In writing both the *Greater Adab* and the *Letter on [Caliphal] Companions*, Ibn al-Muqaffa' could draw upon both his own experience and the accumulated wisdom of the Persian tradition of history and statecraft, which he translated and interpreted for an Arabic audience. In fact, it is thanks to Ibn al-Muqaffa's translations that otherwise lost episodes, texts, aphorisms and apothegms of Sasanian history and thought were transplanted into a highly receptive Arabo-Islamic milieu. There, sprouting up in historiography, epic, mirrors for princes and other literary genres, and cross-fertilizing with other cultural, literary and linguistic traditions, they became crucial ingredients in Islamic political thought.

Ibn al-Muqaffa's collection of animal fables, *Kalila wa-Dimna*, which takes its name from two protagonist jackals, is a spectacular case of transmission, adaptation and organic growth. A bibliophile of the tenth century named Ibn al-Nadim conceded that its origins were obscure; they remain so. Its original language was Sanskrit, and there is little reason to doubt Indian origins (signs point to both Hindu and Buddhist influences). If dating the putative original is difficult, a version was certainly composed in what scholars call Middle Persian, which was the language used during the Sasanian period. The Sasanian ruler Khusraw Anushirvan (r. 531–79), the preface makes the unlikely claim, instructed his physician, one Barzawayh (or Burzoy), to travel to India to collect entertaining fables that taught lessons. A version of the tales went into Syriac, but it was Ibn al-Muqaffa' who rendered the Middle Persian text into Arabic, supplementing it as well. The date for this rendering is sometimes put in 748.

Tales originally told in India thus travelled to Iraq via Iran. Why did Ibn al-Muqaffa' go to the bother of translating them? The scholar al-Tabari (d. 923), whom we shall meet below, records an account from the early ninth century that illustrates how *Kalila wa-Dimna* was understood as a work

of Persian advice literature, intended to edify rulers and rulers-to-be. The frame story has a philosopher narrating to his king a tale that introduces two jackals named Kalila and Dimna, who tell stories for the edification of their own king, a lion. A story of owls and crows illustrates how ruse is the best defence against one's enemies. A hare sends a murderous lion to his own death. Other stories tell lessons about honesty, friendship, perfidy and much more besides.

It was Ibn al-Muqaffa's version that would form the basis for translations into New Persian (the Arabicized Persian that emerged after the Islamic conquests), and for other mutations as well, such as a rendering into poetry (in no fewer than 14,000 verses), various expansions, abridgements, imitations and illustrated works. Versions and translations were commissioned (often, but not always) for ruling courts, and its sustained popularity explains why it was among the very first Arabic books to be set in moveable type in the late nineteenth century. In the twentieth the text, translated into scores of languages, entered the canon of world literature, but already in the thirteenth it was well on its way: a Jewish apostate named Johannes of Capua translated a Hebrew version into Latin, and two centuries later this translation was set in type in Strasburg.

This is a book of fiction and tribulations

Known as the Kalila wa Dimna.

In it there is guidance and wisdom.

It is a book written by the Indians,

Wherein they described the manners of scholars

As related by the tongues of wild beasts.

Philosophers uphold its merit,

Light-minded people enjoy its humour.

Meanwhile, it is easy to memorize,

Sweet on the tongue to recite.¹⁷

6 **Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, renunciant and saint** (801)

Conquest, immigration, trade, irrigation, urbanization – early Islamic rule transformed not only the natural landscape of Iraq, but also the psychological terrain of late antique religion. Conversion from varieties of paganism, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism captures only very crudely that transformation. Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya illustrates a complementary aspect of it.

Early Islam was protean, taking multiple forms according to geography, status and the social and religious background of new and older Muslims. We cannot send anthropologists out to the Umayyad and Abbasid field, but it is well known that Muslims constituted a diversity of Islamic societies, rather than a singular monolith that was unified by articles of faith and ritual practice. A degree of indeterminacy at the collective level is thus clear. Given the nature of our evidence, how are we to imagine the interior lives of individual Muslims? What were the framing expectations, habits of mind, the cognitive and emotional dispositions, and how did they manifest themselves in culture? Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, the most celebrated female saint of Islam, allows us a first glimpse at one trajectory of pious observance and psychological commitment: an early Islamic spirituality.

We have seen that Muhammad's religious commitments set in train events that would reorganize the political geography of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean world. Still, many Muslims were unable or disinclined to participate in the project of rule; they were oblivious bystanders, indifferent observers or quietly hostile critics of at least some of the change. Some were disposed to transforming their emotional or psychological states rather than conquering or ruling the world. For these – some drop-outs, others rabble-rousers, still others eccentric individualists – there was both the social space and discursive ingredients available to deepen and channel the currents of their internal lives. Put another way, cultural values sanctioned modes of spirituality, and those so inclined could draw upon – and produce – stories, texts, narratives, Qur'anic myth and Prophetic *dicta* that expressed those currents in distinctly Islamic terms. For the legacy that Muslims created for Muhammad was not merely about law, social reform or religio-political hegemony. It was also about remembrance of God, solitary prayer, modesty and even poverty. 'You who believe, remember God often', as Qur'an 33:41 puts it. Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya seems to have embodied an early stage of the ascetic mode of Islamic spirituality.

That embodying was a collective and incremental process, however. Rabi'a left behind no texts of her own; nor was she significant enough in her time to attract the attention of many ninth-century authors. Over the centuries, coat upon coat of myth, legend and polemic came to overlie dim memories of the genuine, eighth-century Rabi'a, transforming an obscure renunciant into a celebrated Sufi mystic. This was a considerable achievement. Asceticism and mysticism may frequently combine; but there is nothing necessary in the combination. Nor did Sufism have a monopoly on mysticism within the Islamic tradition. As a chronological matter, asceticism predated Sufism, which emerged as a recognizable movement only

in the late ninth and tenth centuries. In fact, Sufism's success in carving out for itself a place in Islamic societies was in some measure based on its success in representing eighth-century renunciants such as Rabi'a as Sufis *avant la lettre*. Below we shall turn to al-Hallaj, who was arguably the most spectacular Muslim mystic of all. The largest pieces that compose Rabi'a's almost entirely legendary life were assembled in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and it was her inclusion in a work attributed to the hagiographer Farid al-Din al-'Attar (d. 1221) that fully clinched her position in the pantheon of Sufi saints, a model of female sainthood.

Al-'Attar wrote in Persian for an audience in Iran and Central Asia, but Rabi'a's reputation travelled far and wide. Bibi Jamal Khatun, a seventeenth-century female saint who lived in western India, 'mastered lofty states and stages [technical terms for way-stations on the Sufi mystical path], austerities and exertions, and in renunciation and detachment she is unique'. She was 'the Rabi'a of her time', as a hagiographer put it.¹⁸ Rabi'a's fame also spread to the west: visitors walking around the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem occasionally happen upon her tomb. (The connection is entirely specious. Jews and Christians are known to have claimed the tomb for female prophets or saints of their own, and in its passage into Islamic popular observance it was first connected to a certain Rabi'a of Damascus.) Even more fantastic is her portrayal in modern popular culture. One of the classics of Egyptian cinema is a biopic of Rabi'a, which features Umm Kalthum, the greatest Egyptian singer of the twentieth century. To some writing in a feminist vein, Rabi'a is a model of female independence, a woman of conscience and conviction who spoke truth to male power. As a source of fascination, she is inexhaustible.

A more reasonable Rabi'a

Can we say anything with confidence about the historical Rabi'a? Her ethnic and social background is contested; some sources have it that she was born in the early eighth century to a poor family, orphaned and sold into slavery. According to the most common birth story, Muhammad appeared in her father's dream, promising that his daughter would effect intercession for 70,000 Muslims. Then, instructed by Muhammad to visit the local governor, her father was delivered out of poverty by the governor's gift of thousands of coins. What seem to be the facts are less miraculous and make more sense of her local status.

According to the earliest surviving biographical details, which were circulating within a generation or two after her death, Rabi'a was from a high-status lineage of the Quraysh tribe, and a woman of some means.



Indian miniature of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, c. 1725.

It also seems relatively clear that she was only one of several female renunciants who made names for themselves in eighth-century Basra. One was Mu'adha, who 'slept neither by day nor night, fearing that each would be her last, and wore thin clothes so that the cold would keep her awake'.¹⁹ Rabi'a appeared late in that tradition, and it is unclear why she gained the fame that eluded others. Founded as a garrison for Syrian troops, Basra was then evolving into a thriving port town, largely as a result of trade that was pouring into southern Iraq. It was also becoming a centre of scholarship, especially in law, the closely related discipline of grammar, and theology, as well as a fountainhead of piety. It is tempting to infer that the very worldliness of early Islamic cities such as Basra contributed to the renunciants' otherworldliness.

Renunciation – a turning away from this world for a mindfulness of the Next – is common in religions, both monotheist and otherwise. But it was very much in the eighth-century air. Ascetics prayed and recited the Qur'an constantly; they practised supererogatory fasting and denied themselves pleasures, such as sex and eating anything beyond a starvation diet; they eschewed wealth, sometimes advertising their poverty by wearing rags; moved by fear of God, many were even given to long bouts of weeping. Some separated themselves from society, while others preached in markets and outside mosques; some bore silent witness to sin and malfeasance, and others actively resisted it, protesting and even rebelling. What many quietists shared was a determination to shed the concerns and entanglements of this world, and to make themselves reliant upon God.

'Blessed is he who flees from people, keeps company with his Lord, and weeps over his sin' is a saying attributed to Fudayl b. 'Iyad, a Meccan contemporary of Rabi'a.²⁰ According to al-'Attar, Rabi'a claimed to occupy her time in this world by grieving about the next. One anecdote has it that Rabi'a refused to accept the gift of a slave from members of her family: I'd be ashamed to ask such a thing of God, she says, so how am I to ask it of them? Another has it that she was asked if she thought if any of her acts were acceptable to God; she responded by expressing fear that He would reject them. Such anecdotes cannot be corroborated, but God-fearing was arguably the emblematic practice among early Islamic pietists. Later in the ninth century, such attitudes came in for criticism.

In the hands of her later hagiographers, Rabi'a's evolution from local renunciant to Sufi saint was effected by amplifying her asceticism, associating her with seminal figures of Islamic piety, endowing her with saintly miracles, and ascribing to her the epistemological concerns and practices of classical Sufism. For example, we read that after days of fasting, her abject

reliance upon God compels her to refuse the offer of onions in her soup; a bird then flies by, dropping ready-peeled onions into the bowl. She reacts by eating bread instead. We also read in al-'Attar that when she approached Mecca, the Ka'ba miraculously picked up and moved to her. If she lacked a candle or lantern she would blow on her fingertips for light: they would glow until dawn. This shift – from the concrete and quietly charismatic to the spoon-bending miraculous – can also be seen in other genres of hagiography, including the biographies of the Prophet himself.

Pieces of devotional poetry and prose attributed to Rabi'a express her love of God, sometimes in a febrile emotional tone, other times with almost dialectical precision. 'O Lord, if I worship you out of fear of hell, burn me in hell. If I worship you in the hope of paradise, forbid it to me. And if I worship you for your own sake, do not deprive me of your eternal beauty.'²¹ To symbolize her view that love and fear of God should not be inspired by desire for Paradise or terror of Hell, but rather owed entirely to Him, she carried around a torch and a bucket of water; the former was to set fire to the gardens of Paradise, and the latter to extinguish the flames of Hell. A now-archaic rendering captures the rhyme of one short poem traditionally credited to Rabi'a:

*Two ways I love Thee: selfishly,
And next, as worthy is of Thee.
'Tis selfish love that I do naught
Save think on Thee with every thought;
'Tis purest love when Thou dost raise
The veil to my adoring gaze.
Not mine the praise in that or this,
Thine is the praise in both, I wis.²²*

Hasan al-Basri (d. 728) was as wide-ranging a thinker as very early Islam produced, and later schools of thought, including the Sufis, retrospectively claimed him as one of their own. Being a fellow Basran, he was naturally enrolled in the construction of the saintly Rabi'a, a foil for her uncompromising piety. Rabi'a is given to lay bare his more conventional practices and attitudes: goats and gazelles crowd around her, but are scared off by Hasan because he, unlike her, eats soup made with animal fat. It is in exchanges with Hasan that gender is accentuated – only to be effaced:

*It is related that Hasan Basri said, 'I was with Rabi'a for one full day
and night. We discussed The Way and The Truth in such a way that the*

*thought "I am a man" never crossed my mind, nor did "I am a woman" ever cross hers. In the end when I arose, I considered myself a pauper and her a devotee.'*²³

So far as we can tell, Rabi'a never married, living alone or with servants, one named Maryam, the other 'Abda. Sufis came to speak of the 'friends of God', a phrase that derives from Qur'an 10:63, as the 'brides of God'. 'The marriage knot', she said in response to a question from Hasan, 'can only tie one who exists. Where is existence here? I am not my own – I am His and under His command.'²⁴

7 **al-Ma'mun, caliph-patron**

(833)

Pre-industrial empires were complex systems of power and politics, and the Umayyad and early Abbasid empires exemplify one especially powerful combination of the two. Because they encompassed vast agricultural domains (especially Egypt and the Fertile Crescent), and possessed the bureaucratic machinery and infrastructure necessary to exploit them, the Umayyads and early Abbasids drew their power from salaried armies that were paid almost entirely through taxes levied upon agrarian surpluses. Grains were the staple, and after feeding the peasant and his family, they were usually converted into coins, which filled sealed sacks and trunks that were transported by tax collectors and various middlemen to provincial capitals. Most of the money was then re-circulated, in strictly controlled coinage, to soldiers and bureaucrats.

From the peasant's perspective, relatively little had actually changed from the days of Byzantine or Sasanian rule: if he caught a glimpse of a tax collector, he might have noticed that he spoke a different language or wore different clothing; if a coin passed through his hands, he might have noticed that it bore a different script. But the logic and organization of empire remained the same, and what remained for the peasant was usually enough only for subsistence – and nothing more. The Umayyad and early Abbasid states bore structural resemblance to Mediterranean or Near Eastern agrarian empires (such as the Roman, Byzantine and Sasanian) because they inherited their territories and bureaucratic traditions. In those empires, as in the Islamic empire, the centralization of the fiscal system was echoed in the centralization of political power in the family and person of the emperor. But here, in the ruling institution, the traditions begin to diverge.

Because he had no occasion to enter Basra, Kufa, Baghdad or any of the burgeoning cities, the peasant would have underestimated the scale of cultural change that had taken place during the seventh and eighth centuries, concentrated as it was in the cities. Greek-speaking, Christian emperors and Persian-speaking, Zoroastrian shahs had been superseded by Arabic-speaking, Muslim caliphs, and they fostered their own ruling traditions and patronized nascent Islamic culture. Eventually that culture would spread and deepen, and the caliphate itself disaggregate, leaving the caliphs bystanders; but in the eighth and ninth centuries caliphs were patron-rulers, impresarios of a distinctly Islamic theatre of politics.

Al-Ma'mun, who reigned from 813 to 833, was the seventh Abbasid caliph, and the twenty-fifth after Muhammad, according to conventional reckoning. But his legacy in Islamic letters is uniquely controversial. For many Shi'ites, he was a conniving murderer and oppressor of the Prophet's family; for many Sunnis, he was a hyper-rationalist who threatened Sunnism with an aberrant theology. And for some modern apologists, he was the champion of the sciences, the beacon of an Enlightenment Islam that has been obscured by an insular legalism. In reality, al-Ma'mun's ambitions were altogether more interesting.

The stakes of power

'Abd Allah (as al-Ma'mun was first known) was born in Baghdad in 786, on the eastern bank of the Tigris, where the city had expanded soon after its foundation across the river in 762. The birth came in the first year of the long reign of his father, Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809). It might be supposed that the child could scarcely have wished for a more fortuitous or privileged birth. Unfortunately, a sibling named Muhammad (later called al-Amin), who was born soon before (or after) him, had done even better. For whereas 'Abd Allah's mother was a concubine named Marajil, who seems to have been of very modest, Persian descent, Muhammad's mother, Zubayda, was one of Harun's wives, and she boasted descent from none other than al-Mansur, the second Abbasid caliph and builder of Baghdad. She amounted to Arab royalty. To make matters worse, Marajil soon died, and so 'Abd Allah came into the care of others who were either part of, or connected to, the ruling house. By the time he was six, the favoured brother was named heir-apparent by Harun; by 798 or 799, when he was twelve or thirteen, 'Abd Allah himself was brought into the line of succession – as second, after Muhammad. By this time, al-Ma'mun had received an education that allowed him to demonstrate an intellectual acuity that would characterize his caliphal style. In addition to several well-known



Silver coin minted in 815 in Marv by al-Ma'mun, following his victory in the civil war with his brother, Muhammad al-Amin.

men of learning, his father Harun is named as one of his teachers. Reports of his personality and character are given to stereotype – a favourite is generosity as spontaneous as it is gross – but we occasionally glimpse a brooding disposition, as one anecdote illustrates:

*Al-Ma'mun sent for me one day. I went along to him, and found him with bowed head and sunk in thought. So I refrained from approaching him in that state. Then he raised his head, looked at me and beckoned me with his hand to approach, so I did. He remained downcast for a long time, and then raised his hand and said: 'O Abu Ishaq, the soul's natural state is a feeling of tedium and a love for something strange and new.'*²⁵

Al-Ma'mun's succession was carefully managed because the stakes could scarcely have been higher. It is difficult to exaggerate the scale of the Abbasid achievement at the turn of the ninth century. Baghdad, designed as a series of concentric circular walls, was the symbolic 'navel of the world', and served as capital for a polity whose caliph embodied, at least in theory, a missionary project to rule the world. The caliphate was a hemispheric behemoth and envy of the (relatively) impoverished statelets that occupied what we now call Europe, then an economic and cultural backwater. Even

technology as basic as the potting wheel had been lost to Britain, which remained in a post-Roman depression. When a southern English king named Offa (d. 796) wished to impress, he had gift coins minted to look like Abbasid coins; as symbols of status and purity, they were irresistible, despite (and because) of the Islamic profession of faith that they advertised. The Middle East, by contrast, benefited from bounteous grains and its position within a near-global network of trade. Ninth-century Muslim potters in southern Iraq fashioned 'china' to look like the 'china' potted in China, and Chinese potters, in turn, fashioned 'china' after the fashion of Iraqi pots. Iraq was an engine of globalization before globalization.

The terms of Harun's succession were laid out in a carefully scripted and choreographed ceremony, but whatever the father's wishes – and the conditions and circumstances of the succession document itself are unclear – when he died in 809 they ran afoul of ambition and court factionalism. By late 810, Muhammad al-Amin had designated his own son to succeed him as caliph. Having removed al-Ma'mun from the line of succession, he then ordered a huge army to dislodge him from his governorship of Marv (in current-day Turkmenistan). Thus began a civil war that would end in September 813, with al-Ma'mun's victory and his accession to the caliphate.

The victory was costly. For one thing, the bombardment, fires and flooding caused by a year-long siege had destroyed large tracts of Baghdad; the city was never the same. For another, the Abbasid army, which had brought the dynasty to power in 749–50, had been routed by al-Ma'mun's soldiers, who came from eastern Iran. Order in Baghdad dissolved, and since al-Ma'mun owed his power to these easterners, he remained in Marv until 819, leaving the former capital to lawlessness and chronic violence. Meanwhile, taxes were withheld by provincial governors who sensed the weakness and disorder at the centre; the province of Ifriqiya (current-day Tunisia, and parts of Algeria and Libya), which fell out of Baghdad's orbit during the civil war, was never re-integrated into the Abbasid order. Even worse (at least to some), a commander had executed al-Amin in 813, putting the deposed caliph's head on grim display on one of the city's main gates. Al-Amin was twenty-six when he died. Al-Ma'mun, who would die at the age of forty-eight, and leave behind sixteen sons, would prove less popular.²⁶

A caliphate of surprises

Al-Ma'mun was thus an unlikely caliph, who had come to power through civil war, regicide and fratricide, and found himself ruling an empire that

was breaking apart. It might be said that in the long term, the Abbasid empire never recovered from that civil war: the seeds of political dissolution having been sown, they would bear fruit two and three generations later in successor states that increasingly paid only nominal respect to Baghdad. In the short term, the very precariousness of the caliph's position required extreme measures. And because al-Ma'mun himself seems to have been of a singular disposition, the results were as ambitious as they were futile. Two events, both radical and radically unsuccessful, bookend his reign.

The first, which took place two years before his return to Baghdad in 819, was the announcement of his own succession plan. Umayyad caliphs had designated fellow Umayyads as heirs-apparent, and Abbasids had followed suit, but al-Ma'mun chose a descendant of 'Ali (see above), who was himself named 'Ali b. Musa (known as 'Ali al-Rida), who is counted by Imami Shi'ites as the eighth Imam. 'And the people took up wearing green instead of the [Abbasid] black', as one early tenth-century historian wrote, describing how the change was made emphatically public, 'and sent letters everywhere to that effect. The oath of allegiance was given to 'Ali al-Rida, and silver and gold coins were struck in his name.'²⁷

The appointment was an astounding thing to do, especially since the Abbasids had worked for decades to legitimize their rule independent of – indeed, at the expense of – the 'Alid family and the Shi'ite cause that advanced its members as true caliphs. To the Abbasids and their supporters, the choice was unthinkable, and many members of the family responded by proclaiming a rival caliph in Baghdad. Since 'Ali al-Rida was twenty years older than the caliph, there was also more than a whiff of cynicism about the decision, which deepened when he soon died under mysterious circumstances; the death took place shortly after the murder of al-Ma'mun's vizier (chief minister), which many laid at the doorstep of al-Ma'mun himself. Some said 'Ali al-Rida died accidentally of food poisoning, but many (and virtually all Shi'ite sources of the Imami tradition) have it that he was murdered.

What explains the appointment? Historians disagree, some seeing it as a far-sighted attempt to reconcile the Abbasid and 'Alid families, others a sign of al-Ma'mun's (or his handlers') clandestine sympathies for Shi'ism, the current of religio-political thought that favoured the claims of 'Ali and his descendants to the ruling office. Still others adduce evidence of an apocalyptic expectation on the part of the caliph: the only way to navigate the Eschaton so as to save the community (and the Abbasid family) from destruction was to ensure that a direct descendant of Muhammad's served as the caliph. There is another way to make sense of things, however, without passing judgment on personality or motives. It is to understand

al-Ma'mun as a character in a much larger drama than his twenty-year caliphate. That drama was about religious authority, and its denouement is the second bookend of his reign.

Four months before his death in 833, al-Ma'mun, then in Syria, sent a letter to an official in Baghdad. It set into motion something like an inquisition (the Arabic term is *mihna*): for the next fifteen years, including the reigns of two of his successors, judges and transmitters of Prophetic traditions would be threatened (with dismissal or sometimes even death), imprisoned, sometimes even flogged, if they failed to acknowledge a specific point of theology. An emerging consensus had it that the Qur'an was considered 'uncreated' (in contrast to its manifestations or substantiations, such as uttering its sounds or writing it out). But some theologians, especially of a rationalist bent determined to underline the absolute oneness of God, disagreed, holding that it was 'created'; to them, only God stood outside of time, eternal. The most celebrated of these were the Mu'tazilis, whose reason-based theology has made something of a comeback in the contemporary Middle East.²⁸

It was this view that was being enforced by the caliph. 'Summon the judges in your jurisdiction, and begin to test them to see what they will say and to discover what they believe about the creation of the Qur'an.'²⁹ The letter does not suggest, imply or prod; it dictates. God, it tells the reader, is clear about His having 'created' the Qur'an, and it condemns in no uncertain terms 'the worst of the community', who, in holding that it is eternal, peddle in falsehood and unbelief. 'It must be confessed,' a scholar once wrote, 'that the spirit of the document is that of the bigot, rather than that of a broad and liberal mind.'³⁰ More letters along the same lines were sent, and al-Ma'mun himself carried out some of the interrogations. Some sources have it that other letters, stipulating the imposition of other doctrines, were sent out as well.

There was resistance to the caliph's authority, and it came not only from those who differed in theology, but also from those who opposed the state's taking *any* position on such matters. Most of those interrogated would capitulate, but a small handful held out. Of the *mihna*'s many *dramatis personae*, Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 855), the eponym of the Hanbali school of law, would play the leading role. Ahmad strenuously avoided mixing with rulers, and did not participate in any rabble-rousing opposition to al-Ma'mun; he was targeted because he stubbornly embodied the principles embraced by the partisans of *hadith*, Prophetic traditions – sayings by and about Muhammad that expressed legal norms. And those partisans were voicing the *vox populi*. As narrated by a later historian, a witness reports:

*I was there when Ahmad b. Hanbal was brought to the palace during the Inquisition. He had always been a meek man, but when he saw the members of the community giving their assent, his veins swelled, his eyes went red, and all the meekness was gone. Seeing him, I remember thinking to myself, 'He's standing up for God.'*³¹

Sunni sources generally have it that Ahmad heroically resisted; but according to other sources, he capitulated under torture. What is clearer is that resistance to state-imposed orthodoxy prevailed in the longer run. After fifteen difficult years, the 'inquisition' was scaled back and then broken off by al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61), who ordered that the remaining prisoners be released and those enforcing al-Ma'mun's policy dismissed.

Why such staunch resistance to what may appear to us as an arcane point of theology? To some in the ninth century, it was no such thing: what could be more important than getting one's description of God right? To others, what was at stake was the locus of religious authority – and so legal, theological and moral force. This, it seems, was exactly what al-Ma'mun sought to possess. For his was a model in which prophecy was followed by caliphate as the instrument of divine order:

*When prophethood came to an end, and with Muhammad – may God bless and preserve him – God sealed revelation and the message, He made the mainstay of the religion and the ordering of the government of the Muslims [reside] in the caliphate...It is incumbent upon the caliphs to obey Him...and it is incumbent upon the Muslims to obey their caliphs and to help them establish God's justice and equity...*³²

The battle over theology that al-Ma'mun joined was thus part of a larger war to assert religious authority, to define and then enforce orthodoxy. And he lost. It would be scholars, transmitting Prophetic traditions, who would be the guardians of such orthodoxy as there was. Moments of legal and theological persecution would occasionally return, but pluralism would be the rule.

Between these two bookends – the appointment of 'Ali al-Rida and the *mihna* – we can place al-Ma'mun's patronage of rationalism in the service of theology and much more besides. As we have seen, there is no question of portraying the caliph as a liberal-minded man of Enlightenment reason. Instead, he can be understood as an autocrat who, deeply impressed by the stamp of Iranian cultural and political traditions, fused Sasanian



An illustration by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti from the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri of a library and scholars, Baghdad, 1237.

and Islamic models of wise rulership. In this respect, he seems to have accelerated cultural trends already in operation.

Thus he followed established practice in presiding over (and participating in) theological and inter-religion debates. He also inherited a court library, which employed translators of (primarily) Persian learning and archived their work, but seems to have taken a personal interest in translations, sending at least one high-ranking delegation to Constantinople to acquire Greek texts. To this court library, al-Ma'mun also added the study of astronomy and mathematics. He offered his patronage to the likes of Muhammad b. Musa al-Khwarazmi (d. c. 850), a mathematician, astronomer and geographer, whose *Kitab al-jabr wa'l-muqabala* was written in about 830 and reflects the origin of the English term 'algebra'.

We shall meet al-Biruni below. He preserves an account that illustrates the caliph's personal interest in the geography (and translations from Greek).

Al-Ma'mun had his observations made after he learned from Greek works that one degree was 500 stadia long. The stadion is one of the measures the Greeks used to measure distances. Al-Ma'mun found that the translators did not know for certain what the generally accepted length of the stadion was...[H]e therefore ordered a number of astronomers and skilled carpenters and coppersmiths to produce instruments and choose a suitable place for measuring [the degree of longitude]...³³

As God's representative on earth, al-Ma'mun not only aspired to model and determine belief and law for Muslims. He also sought to assimilate and supplement the patrimony of the ancient world, recorded as it was mainly in Greek, Persian and Sanskrit. Just as their political traditions had been superseded by Islam, so, too, their intellectual and linguistic traditions.

Part 2

The Islamic Commonwealth

850–1050

Early Islam was a period of remarkable change. Before turning to how empire was eclipsed by commonwealth, we may usefully summarize how conquerors became imperialists.

In a short seventh century – the seventy years between c. 622 and 692 – west Arabian tribesmen who had been relatively marginal to the civilized world organized themselves into a religio-military movement that overran much of the Byzantine and all of the Sasanian empires and set the foundations for an empire of their own. Theirs would be called the caliphate, and, expanding into Iberia and Central Asia during the first decades of the eighth century, it would become a political, cultural and economic colossus, unifying much of western Eurasia, fusing and transforming the Mediterranean, the Fertile Crescent and the Iranian plateau. The inspiration was Muhammad's, but the vision belonged to the generations who succeeded him, especially 'Abd al-Malik, who set an Umayyad model that would evolve into Abbasid absolutism.

Like empires before and after it, the caliphate was a highly diverse, multi-region polity stitched together by negotiation and coercion. The caliph stood at its centre, symbolizing continuity with the Arabian past and exercising authority over a wide range of political, military and religious matters. Initially, he was a pope with real power, especially the right to appoint and dismiss provincial governors and commanders, who



Founded in the 8th century, Baghdad experienced meteoric growth under the Abbasids. The Bab al-Wastani (Wastani Gate), reconstructed in 1221, is the last significant remnant of the medieval wall that once encircled the city.

oversaw a huge fiscal machine. Land, people, products and trade were all taxed (in the late eighth century often to unprecedented levels, leading to tax-revolts), the caliphate's regular gold and silver coinage creating extraordinary economic dynamism and unprecedented wealth. No Islamic state of the pre-industrial period can be said to have matched the Umayyad and early Abbasid political achievement that took place between c. 650 and 850. Nor, save the Achaemenid, Roman and early Mongol varieties, can one find a non-Islamic state that compares.

What happened to the tax revenues? Much was lost to inefficiency and corruption along the long road from agricultural producer to provincial city, and the bulk of the tax revenue that did make it to imperial coffers paid for administrators and soldiers who oversaw and enforced the seasonal taxes and irregular levies. Bureaucrats and functionaries then, as now, looked after themselves. But much of the revenue also arrived in the caliphal capitals of Umayyad Syria and then Abbasid Iraq. (In the 740s Iberia fell out of the system, and never returned.) It was in the courts and cities of Umayyad Syria and Abbasid Iraq that this surplus was spent, especially on building, entertaining, displaying wealth, gift-giving, and offering all manner of patronage to men and women of talent. Patronizing poets alone could cost a caliph or prince a small fortune. 'Arib al-Ma'muniyya

illustrates the entertainment that such patronage purchased. And although the caliphs lost in their attempt to legislate and enforce orthodoxy during the late ninth century, they remained the guardians of order and decency long after it. To many, the visionary and ecstatic **al-Hallaj** was a threat to both; it therefore fell to the caliph to make an example of him.

All of this said, culture was not just the creature of court politics or the calculus of legitimation. Underlying economic forces generated urban elites who were just as mindful of status as were their rulers, so there also emerged huge markets for goods and services, including the production of high culture. Everybody had to be fed in Islamic cities, and the regional staple almost always being grains, wheat had to be purchased, transported and milled into flour for bread; all city dwellers were similarly hungry for the meaning that narratives and symbols could deliver, and so they told stories, enacted myths in ritual, and passed down traditions, as all humans typically do. But status-conscious, wealthy elites, sometimes on the edge of political power, other times entirely separated from it, had other appetites, too – for deeper and more sustained pleasure, for more serious reflection, edification and education. Because they had disposable time and money, this *de facto* bourgeoisie can be said to have partnered with ruling courts in investing in a collective project of high culture, not least of all in ensuring that their sons and daughters possessed the skills necessary to navigate the competitive world that they had created. In very different ways, three towering figures of learning, **al-Tabari** (in Baghdad), **Abu Bakr al-Razi** (Iran and Baghdad) and **al-Biruni** (present-day Afghanistan) illustrate the scale and nature of the intellectual project that was pursued through Islamic patronage.

Arabian conquests had fused with a Middle Eastern legacy of empire to create the caliphate, and the great economic and fiscal system that was the caliphate – especially its burgeoning cities networked together through circuits of trade, politics and travel – gave initial impetus to the production of high culture on a grand scale. But imperial unity was shortlived, the lifespan of the integrated empire starting in the late seventh century and ending in the late ninth. In the first decade of the ninth century there were three mints striking gold coins, and in the last decade of that century there were about twenty. The end of Baghdad's monopoly on minting is just one measure of the fiscal and political disaggregation of the ninth century, a process that took the formal shape of political delegation.

Now, the politics of delegation had long been part of caliphal policy; at its height the huge empire functioned only because effective power was in some measure devolved to subordinates and local notables, especially in

distant, frontier provinces. But devolution is one thing, and disintegration another. By the early tenth century, productive regions that had served as tributary provinces of the Umayyad and early Abbasid empires were now coming under the rule of dynasties that paid only nominal allegiance to Baghdad. When **Ibn Fadlan** travelled from Baghdad to southern Russia, he interrupted his journey to spend time in the capital of what was becoming a separate state, which related symbiotically to Baghdad. **Mahmud of Ghazna**, whose state succeeded the Samanids, made an especially showy display of his (conditional) loyalty to the caliphs in Baghdad. In most respects, he was an independent ruler.

So if the emergence of high culture – especially learning and other forms of literary activity – was put in motion by empire, its elaboration and spread were ongoing processes that transcend the oscillating periods of expansion and contraction of Islamic polities. Put more boldly, as crucial as the unitary caliphate was in triggering the cultural forces that produced high culture, it took a *polyfocal* Islamic world, one characterized by a multitude of ruling courts and wealthy cities competing for political power, trade and status, to crystallize that high culture into Islamic civilization.

By the end of the ninth century, the unitary polity had thus been replaced by a commonwealth of independent states that paid little more than nominal obedience to Baghdad, for all that the occasional caliph might manage, through persuasion and alliance building, to project some temporary power. It would fall to the Mongols to put an end to the line of Abbasid caliphs in 1258, but an early *coup de grâce* had fallen already in 945, when Iranian mercenaries-turned-dynasts had conquered Baghdad, placing the caliph under their effective authority. The Buyids were a clan that had come from the Caspian provinces of northern Iran, but they were merely one of many opportunists who took advantage of Abbasid weakness.

What accounts for the political disaggregation?

Several factors were at work. Some were internal, including the deterioration of military and political traditions at the heart of the political system. If the reign of Harun al-Rashid exemplifies the height of caliphal power, that of al-Muqtadir (r. 908–32) symbolizes its vertiginous fall into disgrace. Al-Muqtadir was thirteen years old when he acceded to the office, and thus deeply beholden to the courtiers and commanders who put him there. Office-holding became increasingly politicized as a result: the vizierate alone seems to have changed hands some thirteen times during his reign. Within four years of his death, the power long wielded by commanders was publicly institutionalized in the position of ‘Commander of commanders’, an office that subordinated the caliph to a non-Arab military

elite. This office spelled the end of the career of calligrapher-secretary **Ibn Muqla**, whose life and legend throw light on later Abbasid politics and culture. Al-Muqtadir’s reign also witnessed Byzantine advances in the north, rebellions in the south, along with military and administrative violence and instability in between. As Baghdad’s military and political power waned and then dissolved entirely, the forces of fragmentation, always latent, grew considerably stronger.

For behind, and sometimes interacting with these events, there were taking place structural changes in economy and society. One was the decline of the mid- and southern Iraqi agricultural system, a breadbasket that was to Baghdad what Egypt and North Africa had been to Rome. As labour intensive as it was productive, the system fell prey to financial inattention, short-term exploitation and warfare, which ruined canals and turned fields into desert. Taxation began to be replaced by tax-farming and other forms of land tenure that robbed Baghdad of taxes. As Baghdad found it increasingly difficult to maintain an army, it became reliant upon those who could, such as the Buyids. Meanwhile, as the Iraqi economy declined, the economies of what had been peripheral provinces fared better, in some cases even flourishing. One example is Egypt, which plugged itself into a Mediterranean network of short- and long-distance trade. Another is eastern Iran. ‘The ninth century witnessed the most rapid growth of cities in Iranian history’, one scholar has claimed, arguing that Nishapur reached its peak at the turn of the eleventh century, with a population somewhere between 110,000 and 220,000.³⁴ About a century and nearly 2,000 miles separate al-Tabari from al-Biruni, and this is no coincidence: the centre of political and cultural gravity was moving east.

Another – and closely related – change was conversion. Two of the most striking features of early Islam are how quickly Muslims came to rule, which was a turn of events that can be measured in decades, and how slowly those whom they ruled became Muslim, which was a *process* that took centuries (and remains incomplete). According to one problematic estimate, it may be that as little as 3 per cent of the population of Iraq had converted when ‘Abd al-Malik set upon his policies of state Arabicization and Islamicization in the late seventh century. During the ninth and tenth centuries conversion accelerated markedly, non-Arabs taking up Islam and so securing positions and prestige. Long outnumbered by non-Arabs, the Arabian conquerors had drawn strength from their distinctive identity as Muslims; their monopoly broken, old elites and parvenus alike now exploited opportunities to seek and secure power by raising armies and participating in Islamic political culture.

'Arib confounds the social and gender categories that we typically impose upon Islamic civilization. A slave who sold her musical and personal services to the most powerful men of her time, she was pilot of a career that rode the waves of Baghdad culture for nearly a century, a self-promoting performer and inventor of her own brand of fearless insouciance. In her time, she was at once the most famous and the most infamous of the *qiyān*, female slave performers of the urban elite of Iraq. Nowadays we might call her a 'singer-songwriter' because she composed poetry that she set to music – reportedly some 1,000 songs. But above all she was a celebrity, a mix of Elizabeth Taylor and Amy Winehouse, the glory and scourge of Abbasid Baghdad and Samarra. 'I never saw a more beautiful or refined woman than 'Arib,' the leading ninth-century authority on music opined; 'nor one who sang, played music, wrote poetry, or played chess so well. She possessed every quality of elegance and skill that one could wish for in a woman.'³⁵

'Arib's origins and childhood are murky. Her birth date is typically given as 797, nearly halfway through the reign of Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809). She claimed to have been born to a member of the Barmakid family of viziers, which dominated the caliphal court at the end of the eighth century. But her circumstances were not as advantageous as such a privileged birth might at first suggest: the union that produced her was not lawful marriage, nor, perhaps, even concubinage, and when the Barmakid family fell from power, 'Arib, entrusted after her mother's death to a nursemaid, was sold (or stolen) into slavery. The turn of fortune seems to have taken place when she was around six. At some point she composed lines that may reflect her views on the Barmakids' spectacular downfall from grace: '...for Time possesses things sweet and bitter. And everything no matter how long it lasts is inevitably cut short when its end comes.'³⁶

Slavery in this context typically meant domestic service to urban households with sufficient or extraordinary means, rather than agricultural labour on rural estates. In Iraq alone, such slaves must have numbered in the tens of thousands; because the law proscribed enslaving fellow Muslims, slaves usually came outside of Islamic lands, then especially central and northern Europe. In 'Arib's case, slavery seems to have meant service for the very top of the social and economic elite. Far from consigning the slave to humiliation or ignominy, such service could deliver skills and connections that allowed the slave to capture high status for him or herself. In fact, legal constraints and disadvantages could be shed by securing manumission,

a legal act that was urged upon Muslim owners as an act of piety, and facilitated by the exchange of money. Here it is worth noting that the vast majority of Abbasid caliphs were born to slave mothers; and, as we shall see, some rulers in the later period were themselves emancipated slaves.

'Arib received the beginnings of her education while a very young girl in Baghdad, and some version of it continued in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, where her owner had moved her. Not only would she be literate at a time when just elites could read and write, but she also became deeply cultured: we read that she possessed skills specific to Abbasid high society – in riding, singing and playing instruments and the appropriate board games, such as backgammon and chess. These skills raised the value of her services to her owner and, with her eventual manumission, to herself. They empowered her to mix in the highest social elites.

We cannot track the earliest parts of her rise, but it was meteoric. News of her talents and beauty reached Baghdad while she was still young, and accounts have her in the possession of the caliph al-Amin, who was



Wall-painting of two dancing girls from the Jawsaq Palace, Samarra, 836, reconstructed by Ernst Herzfeld.



Wall-painting of a dancer at the palace of Qasayr 'Amra in present-day Jordan, early 8th century.

deposed and murdered in 813, as we have already seen. At this point she was still in her teens, and at least one account has her appearing in his court wearing boys' clothes. Al-Amin's successor, al-Ma'mun (r. 813–33), is said to have paid no less than 50,000 dirhams (silver coins) to purchase her. The sum – a generous return on her master's investment in education and training – is noted by our sources precisely because it was remarkably high. In the ninth century a skilled labourer would typically make no more than 20 dirhams per month, and 50,000 dirhams could buy a garment of exceptional craftsmanship – the very best of *haute couture* in today's terms.

By 'Arib's time, female slave-singers were widely understood as a more-or-less fixed feature of the indulgent and permissive culture of Baghdad's mega-rich and hyper-powerful. They especially signified the sexual libertinism that palace walls sheltered from public view. Hidden in plain sight, the *qiyan* moved in and out of these private spaces, often attracting as much fascination as opprobrium. Abu Nuwas (d. c. 814), the leading poet of the day, was himself both an observer and participant in this elite culture of transacted sexuality, and his verses about one (unidentified) slave girl capture something of its ambivalence:

*She demonstrates piety outwardly to God's people
Then meets me with coquetry and a smile.
I went to her heart to complain [about her]
But wasn't alone – there was a queue for a mile.³⁷*

Abu Nuwas was a satirist extraordinaire, with an unerringly observant eye for hypocrisy, disingenuousness and pretension, for conventions of piety that disguised the carnal. Iraqi society was ripe for lampooning in large measure because it was so rich.

The caliph, al-Ma'mun, was the second in a long string of caliphs who enjoyed 'Arib's company and talents, along with other Abbasids, courtiers and private figures in Baghdad and the city of Samarra, which served as the empire's capital from 836 until 892. One of these was his successor, al-Mu'tasim (r. 833–42), who is said to have manumitted 'Arib; another was al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61). Since some accounts have it that he was responsible for her manumission, having bought her for 100,000 dirhams, one cannot know for sure when she became legally free. When she died, apparently at the age of ninety-six, she was a woman of considerable wealth who still commanded great respect.

What were these rulers buying? Or, perhaps more aptly, what was 'Arib selling, both literally and figuratively? Female slaves, especially those

hired for entertainment, were 'badges of conspicuous consumption'.³⁸ And in this highly competitive court culture, which prized bravura performance – especially in music, poetry and oral debate – 'Arib had conspicuous skills as a singer, composer, lute-player, poet of popular verse and prose stylist. The aural culture of the early Abbasid period was riven by controversy, contrasting modes of poetry and song being championed by rival traditionalists and innovators; many (though certainly not all) of the controversies were preserved in a monumental encyclopedia of songs and poems, the *Book of Songs*, written by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 967). Several accounts portray 'Arib as a master of musical traditions and styles, and an arbitrator of taste. In the ferociously cultured and competitive setting that was Baghdad and Samarra – one in which leading poets fiercely debated the relative merits of the rose and the narcissus flowers – this mattered.³⁹ It seems that 'Arib was an outspoken advocate of established forms, and to many ears, her compositions were canonical. In the male-dominated world of Iraq's elite culture, she also had the good fortune of beauty.

All of this said, she was much more than a pretty performer. A highly public figure in the private realm of elite households and ruling courts, as quick-witted as she was erudite, 'Arib frequented salons and performances (often with apprentice singers in tow) and oscillated between lovers, leaving the pathetic entreaties of those spurned in her wake, and proudly proclaiming her own (variable) affections.

*As for the lover he went away
In spite of and against my will.
I erred in being separated from one
For whom I have found no substitute.
Because of his absence from my sight.
I have become tired of life.⁴⁰*

The following lines, we read, were set to music.

*Enough! I won't be duped again.
You've made me every kind of fool!
You change so often – what's to be done?
Your heart isn't mine to rule.⁴¹*

The covert affairs were innumerable; at least one secret marriage is also mentioned. By her own account, 'Arib had sexual relations with eight caliphs, but only one gave her any pleasure. She openly narrated at least

parts of her sexual history, and proclaimed that sweet breath and an erection sufficed for a good lover. To Baghdad's ears, she was as coarse as she was refined.

In sum, 'Arib's *life* was performance – a balancing act of sexual infamy, courtly entertainment and social promiscuity. By definition, celebrities belong to the public; because she belonged to the collectivity that was Baghdadi and Samarran high society, she belonged to no one. Born a slave, she found a freedom enjoyed by few men or women of her time.

9 al-Hallaj, 'the Truth'

(922)

Eccentric, visionary, revolutionary and fearless martyr, al-Husayn b. Mansur al-Hallaj was a cause célèbre in tenth-century Baghdad. 'I have seen my Lord with the eye of my heart,' a collection of his sayings has it, 'and I said: "Who are you?" And He said: "You!"' Ecstatic utterances were his stock-in-trade. In fact, three of the most infamous words ever uttered in the Arabic language are imputed to him: 'I am [the] Truth' – infamous because 'The Truth' (*al-haqq*) is an epithet ordinarily reserved for God. Was al-Hallaj saying that he was divine? And was he saying that the law was irrelevant or otiose, and that believers should worship him instead? Stories circulated that he had erected a mini-Ka'ba in his house in Baghdad, and that he had prescribed circumambulating the 'Ka'ba of one's heart', instead of the actual Ka'ba in Mecca. The outrages could be ignored as the ravings of a madman, but al-Hallaj had hundreds of disciples, along with a handful of well-placed sympathizers. Were the miracles ascribed to him sorcery or trickery? And what was one to make of his travels (including, it was rumoured, to polytheistic India), or his connections to the Shi'ites? 'O Muslims,' he would call out to Baghdadis in the streets and markets, 'save me from God...kill me!'

And so they did, spectacularly: by torture, crucifixion and immolation. The scene took place in late March of 922 before a large crowd. The trials began with beatings (or perhaps lashings); half-dead, al-Hallaj was then hanged on a gibbet, exposed not only to the elements but also to the baying crowd; he responded to their provocations several times, presumably in a delirium. Only the next day was he decapitated, his body burned and the ashes thrown into the Tigris. (The ordinary sequence called for decapitation and then gibbeting, but al-Hallaj was extraordinary.)

This, in any case, is how a relatively *modest* account has it. For all manner of sanguinary and legendary details are also related, many expressing an



The hanging of al-Hallaj, from a Mughal copy of a collection of poems by Hasan Dihlavi, 1602.

almost comical *sang-froid* on the part of the poor victim. It was not enough for some narrators that al-Hallaj was gibbeted: the trial of exposure had to be punctuated by dismemberment, each amputation occasioning fearless retort.

When they cut off his hands, he burst out laughing. 'What's there to laugh about?', they asked. 'It's easy to cut off the hand of a person who's chained up, but the true believer is one who cuts off the hand [of God's] attributes, swindling aspiration from the highest throne of heaven.' When they chopped off his feet, he smiled and said: 'With these feet I used to travel the earth. I have other feet that are traversing both worlds at this very moment. Cut off those feet if you can.' Hallaj then rubbed his two bloody, severed hand-stumps against his face and smeared his face and arms with blood. 'Why did you do that?', they asked. 'I have lost lots of blood. I know my face has grown

pale. You might imagine that the pallor of my face comes from fear. I rubbed blood on my face so my face would look red to you. True believers wear the rouge of their own blood.' So they asked, 'If you painted your face red with blood, why then did you smear your arms?' 'I am performing ablutions...'⁴²

Flung into the Tigris, the stories go, al-Hallaj's ashes spelled out (or voiced) 'I am the Truth'. It is little wonder that his biography has captured the imagination of historians and laymen alike. The title of a recent novel says it all: *Death in Baghdad, or: The Life and Death of al-Hallaj, a Fantastic Novel from the Real Orient*.⁴³ How did it come to this?

The education of a misfit

Al-Hallaj's birth in 857 and childhood in southwest Iran and southern Iraq were as ordinary as his death in Baghdad was spectacular. The grandson of a Zoroastrian, and the son of a wool carder (*hallaj*, whence his name), he received a standard primary education, and had memorized the Qur'an by the age of twelve. By sixteen he was apprenticing with Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896), an ascetic whose attitude towards God, so far as we can make out, betrays an incipient form of mysticism: the ascetic's renunciation and self-denial concentrated the mind on God, and prefigured the mystic's full communion with Him. Biographical notices have al-Hallaj walking around the town of Tustar, which lay to the northeast of Basra, sometimes 'dressed in hair shirts, other times in two coats of dyed material, other times with a woollen robe with a turban, or in a greatcoat with sleeves, like a soldier'.⁴⁴ This was not the first time that al-Hallaj would make a spectacle of himself. The imprint of Sahl's piety – particular disciplines of fasting, and carrying out 400 prostrations each day, for example – can be felt in al-Hallaj's practice and thought.

After two years, he left Sahl and Tustar for Basra, attaching himself to another celebrated teacher of mysticism, 'Amr al-Makki (d. 909), a native of Mecca and former student of the day's most celebrated collector of Prophetic traditions, al-Bukhari (d. 870). Al-Hallaj's move to Basra is the first clear indication of a spiritual – perhaps even a psychological – restiveness that would characterize his entire life. In Basra al-Hallaj found himself in one of the empire's hotbeds of mysticism, the others being Baghdad and Khurasan (present-day northeastern Iran and slices of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). 'Amr is given credit for carrying out formal rites of initiation, which were then crystallizing as part of Sufi practice; these included clipping the moustache and bestowing the *khirqā*, the woollen cloak

emblematic of membership in the elect of Sufis. Al-Hallaj may have lived with 'Amr al-Makki, in an extended household of family members and students. What is clearer is that during his stay in Basra he found a wife, the daughter of another member of a Basran-Baghdad network of Sufis, who would bear him three sons. But drama followed al-Hallaj, as it always would: the marriage is said to have displeased 'Amr.

Or so, at least, a personal inflection is given to doctrinal disagreement. What divided the men was not just the wisdom of a marriage. 'Amr is said to have found al-Hallaj composing sentences that he claimed were the likes of the inimitable Qur'an; to a man of Prophetic traditions and a more legalistic frame of mind, this was an outrage. After making a trip to Mecca, where he spent a year in perpetual fasting and silence, sitting in the courtyard of the great mosque, al-Hallaj began to preach openly of communion with God, gathering increasingly large crowds and the attention of both Sufis and the Abbasid authorities alike.

Thus began a series of peregrinations in the east, some around south-west Iran, others much further east, including Central Asia, where he is said to have had a hand in converting Turks, and India; these were punctuated by stays in Baghdad and at least one imprisonment, apparently on suspicion of sympathies with Shi'ite revolutionaries of southern Iraq. It was in this period that his theophanic proclamations gained him his notoriety. Whether these actually included 'I am the Truth' is a matter of dispute. It may be that he never uttered the words by which he gained his infamy. Nor is it at all clear that he regarded himself as belonging to the nascent Sufi tradition.

What is certain is that he was not the only figure whose mystical excesses provoked a response from critics who sometimes enjoyed the sanction of state power; in Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo, other mystics came under intense criticism and occasional persecution in the late ninth century as well. Like Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, al-Hallaj was credited with all manner of miracles: stories circulated that he healed, read minds, and produced food and drink from thin air. To his critics, these were tricks of magic, the conjurings of a sorcerer, or signs of possession by jinn (demons or genies). 'The hold that a saint has over the masses', al-Hallaj's greatest biographer wrote sympathetically, 'is not free from scandal or trouble. The explosion of an authentic miracle, cracking open the walled enclosure of the fossil universe in which hearts have been entombed, does not always induce the masses to taste and ripen in themselves the renewing medical efficacy of this unique grace that God enabled them to attend.'⁴⁵

Reception

This is not to say that al-Hallaj's appeal was limited to the masses. Some elites also came under his spell, and later he is reputed to have cured a caliph. It was presumably because he was part of the elite that he was implicated in a failed coup in Baghdad in 908. From this point on, until his death in 922, he was more or less always in trouble, fleeing from Baghdad, living under house arrest, or imprisoned in the court; one incarceration lasted a full nine years. Al-Hallaj did not write a great deal, and some of his works that did survive – poetry, aphorisms and apothegms, and a collection of essays are attributed to him – date from this period.

Whatever the truth of 'I am the Truth', union with God is a frequent theme of the poetry, and such union can be construed as a challenge to the supremacy of ritual law, as two examples show.

*I am He whom I love and He whom I love is I.
We are two souls dwelling in one body.
When you look at me you can see Him,
And you can see us both when you look at Him.⁴⁶*

And:

*You who blame me for my desire of Him, how great is your blame!
If only you knew Him of whom I speak, you would not blame me.
Other men have their pilgrimage, and I have a pilgrimage towards
my Host.
They immolate their sacrifices, [but] I offer my heart and blood.
There are some men who make the circumambulation, but not with
their limbs.
They circumambulate around God, who frees them from the
sacred Ka'ba.⁴⁷*

God describes Himself as closer to man 'than his jugular vein', as Qur'an 50:16 puts it, but in an Iraqi society that was generally more comfortable with an unknowable and transcendent God than one who was immanent or even 'indwelling' in man, al-Hallaj was going too far. Love of God was all well and good, but extreme love, which left behind fear and effaced the line between Creator and created, amounted to heterodoxy or even unbelief. Even those sympathetic to such a doctrine thought little of expressing it in public, particularly to the unwashed who could not make proper sense of it. At the very least, al-Hallaj was guilty of precisely this.

*I lost myself in finding you
 Till you annihilated me in You.
 O blessing of my life and being
 And salvation in my death!
 None but You are my sustainer;
 It's You who are my fear and solace.
 O Being in whose garden of meaning
 All my qualities are flowering!⁴⁸*

It is sometimes said that the 'official' reason why al-Hallaj was condemned was his aberrant view that one might perform the Pilgrimage without leaving home.⁴⁹ Whatever the precise blend of politics and religion that explain his execution, for leading or aspiring Muslim scholars of subsequent periods – some jurists, both Sunni and Shi'ite alike, along with theologians, Sufis, philosophers and others – the case of al-Hallaj came to be something of a litmus test. Some rejected or excommunicated him, others equivocated or suspended judgment, and still others expressed their approval. Here it is noteworthy that the lines of agreement and disagreement do not fall into easy or predictable categories. Many Sufis, especially early on, condemned him outright or withheld judgment. Eleventh-century collections of Sufi 'friends of God' (that is, saints) tend to pass over him in silence. He was too controversial. It was not until the following century that he was permanently admitted into the Sufi ranks, occupying the closest station, save prophecy, to God. We met the Sufi biographer al-'Attar (d. 1221) in connection with Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. Leaving the best for last, he brings his hugely influential *Memorial of the Saints* to a thundering conclusion with a fulsome hagiography of al-Hallaj.

One might suppose that men of the law would condemn al-Hallaj – and many did. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), whom we shall have occasion to meet again, was a Hanbali jurist who did not mince words. Al-Hallaj's execution was valid. And beyond that:

He was not among the Friends of God, who fear Him. Rather, some of his worship, exercises and spiritual struggles were satanic, some were psychic and some were in conformity with the Shari'a from some viewpoint, not from another. He was confounding the truth with vain things.⁵⁰

This said, many jurists also affirmed that he was a saint.

Abu Ja'far al-Tabari was a man of learning and a creature of empire – a prolific author whose productivity and influence can only be explained with reference to the massive polity in which he lived.

Urbanization and literacy are commonly said to be distinctly modern phenomena, but this is wrong. Conservative estimates put the population of Baghdad in the ninth and tenth centuries at several hundred thousand, and liberal estimates put it as high as 2 million. This would make it more populous than the Tang capital of Changan, which is sometimes called the world's largest at the time. Other estimates calculate Baghdad's size at 7,000 hectares, some four or five times larger than tenth-century Constantinople.

The scale of human activity can be measured in all sorts of ways. River traffic is one: according to what appears to be an official count taken in the late ninth or early tenth century, no fewer than 30,000 gondola-like river-craft were used as ferries in the city. Bathing is another: at about the same time we read that there were 27,000 public baths. Public praying is a third: one reads of 45,000 public prayer spaces (including mosques) in the ninth century (and 300,000 later on). And reading is yet another: the city was filled with libraries, salons and bookshops, the last numbering in the hundreds. For Baghdad was home to tireless writers and insatiable readers – not merely scholars and students, but also courtiers, merchants, landowners and those otherwise wealthy and with a taste for poetry and prose. Baghdad thus produced and consumed both food and knowledge on a scale rarely attested in the pre-industrial world. And al-Tabari had the good fortune to be a scholar when the appetite for scholarship of virtually every variety was growing on an industrial scale.

Al-Tabari was born in 839 to a family from the city of Amul, which lies south of the Caspian Sea in present-day Iran, an area known as Tabaristan (hence his name, 'al-Tabari', 'the man from Tabaristan'). The geographic and financial circumstances of his birth conditioned his formation. In the ninth century most children never received anything like a proper education, of course. Their manual labour was too important for that, and levels of literacy were infinitesimally small, especially outside of towns and cities. Because al-Tabari's was a family of means – they were landowners – his father could afford to live without his son's labour, even to invest in his family's cultural capital by educating that son.

The father had two choices. The first was to send the child to a *kuttab* (or *maktab*), a primary school of sorts, where the basic skills of arithmetic, reading and writing were taught, the latter two being honed for the

purpose of memorizing through an intensive and systematic programme of dictation, copying, reading and re-reading (always out loud) of Qur'anic passages. Pupils typically started at the age of seven or eight, spending up to seven or eight years in mixed-age groups, working with erasable tablets instead of paper and ink. Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 855), whom we met earlier, came from a modest (though certainly not poor) background and attended one such *kuttab*. The alternative to institutional instruction was hiring a tutor, who concentrated on the same skills with fewer pupils. This was the choice made by al-Tabari's father, which presumably reflected his wealth and status, as well as the limited options present in a small city in a modest and inaccessible province. The boy made quick progress. By the age of seven he had completed the task of memorizing the Qur'an – all 114 chapters and 6,200 verses (or so). This would have made him very precocious, although it is not uncommon to read of scholars-to-be who had managed the same feat by eight or nine. (A teacher of mine achieved the feat at the age of six.)

At this stage, there was no question of al-Tabari's having come to anything like a mature understanding of the text. This sounds weird to us moderns: why bother memorizing without understanding? In fact, there were several good reasons. Because the Qur'an was considered God's speech, it exemplified Arabic at its most perfect, and so made for the ideal tool to teach Arabic, which was (and in most respects, remains) the pre-eminent language of Islamic learning. (Al-Tabari would have spoken an Iranian language at home.) Moreover, because the Qur'an stood at the centre of Islamic piety, ritual and law, and so coloured virtually every field of Islamic learning, the memorized command of the text constituted the foundation for further study across the entire curriculum. Finally, the Qur'an was also a source for allusion, inspiration, wisdom and apposite reference, and so it taught not only rules of grammar, but also etiquette and a normative conduct. Knowing the Qur'an did not in itself make one learned, but learning was unthinkable without it.

A year after demonstrating his command of the text, al-Tabari was leading men in prayer. This was freakishly precocious, and suggested an exceptional future. Coming as he did from a relatively small provincial city, al-Tabari set off on study-travels by the age of twelve. Supported by the wealth of his family, he journeyed for about fifteen years, and throughout his travels in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Arabia and Egypt, he filled notebooks with Prophetic traditions and other kinds of orally transmitted learning, much of which he would eventually write up in book form. In the late 850s – that is, while still in his teenage years – he was already collecting material that he would record for good in his *History*, a work that he

finished and published about fifty years later. Still not yet twenty, he had learned 100,000 traditions from a teacher named al-San'ani.

Learning at its most prolific

By about 870 al-Tabari's reputation for learning was such that he had been given his first commission, a collection of responses to questions about the law; by the same year, we also know he had settled in his house in northeast Baghdad, where he remained until his death. In addition to the sharply honed memory that was expected of a scholar, he also seems to have possessed a carefully organized library, consisting of books that he had purchased on his travels or in the bookshops of Baghdad, or that he had copied out himself. Healthy, single and relatively wealthy, al-Tabari then spent the next fifty-odd years adding to the mountains of books growing in Baghdad: according to one account, for forty years of his career he wrote forty folios (that is, eighty pages) every day. The account exaggerates, but there is no exaggerating his industry. Most of his work has not survived (one now-lost book of law is said to have been 2,500 folios in length), but we have some twenty-seven titles, some unfinished or incomplete. Another law book, which we have only in relatively small fragments, was apparently intended to reach 100 volumes; he left it unfinished.

It is upon two huge multi-volume works, which he did manage to finish, that his reputation among modern scholars now rests.



A double page from a 14th-century copy of al-Tabari's *History*, showing the original Arabic alongside a Persian translation.



Double page from a Persian translation of al-Tabari's *Commentary of the Qur'an*, early 13th century. The book was originally written in Arabic, then the main language of learning.

The first is his *Commentary of the Qur'an*, the first such work to attempt a comprehensive understanding of the text. Thirty volumes in length, it includes some 38,000 Prophetic traditions, which he adduces in support of his own linguistic, historical, theological and legal opinions. The second is his *History*, which begins with Creation and ends in about 914–15; edited in more than 8,000 densely printed pages, it has been translated into English in thirty-eight volumes. Like the *Commentary*, the *History* is a summation of transmitted reports otherwise mostly lost, a work of ambition so monumentally successful that no other Muslim historian would attempt the likes of it again. Both works were celebrated in their day and quickly translated into Persian, the *History* also passing into Ottoman Turkish. Both are arguably the greatest examples of their genre in all of Islamic learning.

Given the size and prestige of these two works, it makes good sense that al-Tabari became known principally as a historian and Qur'an commentator, but in his time it was as a jurist that he was celebrated. Within a generation of his death another scholar called him 'the jurist of his day, the ascetic of his age, in whom the sciences of the world's jurists and scholars of traditions were mastered'. ('Science' here is the conventional translation of *'ilm*, 'knowledge', which can denote virtually any discipline of learning.) Al-Tabari was nothing if not confident in his abilities and authority, and he would have regarded himself not only as a jurist, but also as a master of all

the related aspects of religious learning that were required for the correct understanding of God and His law.

How did one come to this understanding? The Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet as preserved in traditions stand at the centre of al-Tabari's method: his works leave no doubt that he held that traditions, both in the form of *hadith* and historical accounts, were the building blocks of knowledge. Theologians and philosophers were wrong insofar as they believed that rationalism could generate truths on its own, some of the latter even dispensing with revelation altogether. Rationalism, in his view – and, in time, the prevailing view – was a tool to be used not to uncover otherwise undiscovered truths, but to prove truths already revealed by God. Law is not to be made, since God had already made it; it is to be *discovered* by the jurist through the application of his carefully acquired hermeneutic skills.

In the culture wars of the ninth century, al-Tabari took a moderate position as a 'semi-rationalist'.⁵¹ He left collecting traditions to others, and parted company from traditionists, who, in the absence of unambiguous texts, were content to leave matters unsettled. Instead, al-Tabari saw his task as giving authoritative opinions on legal, exegetical and theological questions that many texts left unanswered. What did God mean by 'face' when He said that 'To God belong the east and west; wherever you turn, there is the face of God' (Q 2:15)? And what did He mean by Q 17:79, which describes Him as promising to raise Muhammad up to a 'laudable station'? Some hard-core traditionists might answer with crude anthropomorphisms, but these, in al-Tabari's view, were manifestly offensive to God's majesty. Some Hanbalites, for example, held that this meant that He would position Muhammad next to Him on His throne; al-Tabari had the temerity to disagree, and for it apparently had his house shelled by rocks thrown by an angry crowd. He viewed Ibn Hanbal as a mere traditionist, rather than a jurist, and this scarcely endeared him to the Hanbalis.⁵²

In mid- to late ninth-century Baghdad, the time for settling the debates and controversies generated by the exponential growth of knowledge had arrived; synthesis and compromise were now needed. The law required not just reliance upon tradition, but independent reasoning by the jurist. It would be by offering pragmatic compromises and fudges that an end could be put to the embittering debates, battles and struggles that had divided the religio-political parties of earlier periods. What would emerge among scholars was a 'culture of ambiguity',⁵³ one that not merely tolerated disagreement, but assigned it a high value. 'Disagreement amongst my community is a mercy', as the Prophet was given to say. Al-Tabari participated in this process, and on the great debates of the day, he fell in with

(and contributed to) what can reasonably be characterized as a crystallizing, loose Sunni orthodoxy. On the controversial question of the Qur'an, he held that it was created, rather than uncreated (and timeless). He lived through tumultuous times when rulers frequently erred, and his apparent non-response also exemplified what would become a salient feature of Sunnism: its quietism in the face of bad government.

His view of history is not dissimilar. Through much of the seventh and eighth centuries, the legitimacy of 'Uthman was highly contested, with few outside of Umayyad circles recognizing him as a caliph; so, too, the legitimacy of 'Ali, with few outside of Shi'ite circles recognizing him. Al-Tabari held that the caliphate had to be held by a member of the Quraysh, a view that accommodated Shi'ites and Abbasids alike. He further recognized Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali as four 'Rightly Guided' caliphs, their sequence reflecting their relative virtues. For recognizing 'Ali, some would brand al-Tabari a Shi'ite, but these opponents were missing the point. His was a catholic Islam.

It seems to have been al-Tabari's reputation as a middle-of-the-road synthesizer and polymath, rather than the author of a distinctive jurisprudence, that explains the emergence of a school of jurisprudence (the 'Jariri' school), which took his name. In the event, the school appears to have been as short-lived as it was ill-defined: the last adherent died within a century of al-Tabari's death. Among the Sunnis, there would be not five or six schools of law, but only four: the Hanbali, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanafi. It may be that al-Tabari was a victim of his own success – that he had so effectively espoused the emerging mainstream that there was little distinctive about his teaching.

11 Abu Bakr al-Razi, free-thinking physician (925 or 935)

Using a term popularized by Max Weber (d. 1920), one may say that the (western) world of modernity is 'disenchanted'. Weber had his own very subtle thinking on the matter, but according to common sociological usage, our disenchanted world has been emptied of the magical and irrational thinking that characterized traditional societies, where religious belief supplied a polyvalent explanatory power and was institutionalized in all manner of ways. What replaced it was a secularizing rationality, exemplified socially in bureaucracy, and manifested intellectually in science – that discipline of thinking predicated on the use of objective and universal reason to describe and explain. Understanding the world did not



A double page from *Kitab al-Iklil fi'l-Tibb*, a treatise on medicine and health by al-Razi. The manuscript was probably copied in Iraq and is dated 1219.

necessarily entail losing God; Newton was no atheist. But it certainly meant naturalizing Him, subjecting Him to transcendent laws identified by man. Newton famously made Him a 'watchmaker' who created and then left the world to run on its own.

All manner of criticisms can be made of this dichotomous and linear understanding of two spheres, the 'secular' and 'religious'. One line of criticism points to the enduring role of the religious in how we 'moderns' see, understand and experience the world. Another, comparative in inspiration, emphasizes how the divide between 'secular' and 'religious' has a uniquely European history, secularization reflecting 'a particular historical dynamic' rooted in Western Christian theological categories.⁵⁴ The Enlightenment was neither unitary nor secular, it has been argued; it 'made possible new iterations of faith'.⁵⁵ Still another, even more geographically and chronologically expansive, identifies the precursors of Enlightenment scepticism in non-Christian contexts. It is within this line of criticism that the tenth-century Abu Bakr al-Razi figures. For al-Razi was one of a small handful of Abbasid-era 'free-thinkers', along with figures such as Abu 'Isa al-Warraaq (*fl.* ninth century) and Ibn al-Rawandi (d. c. 910). These were harsh sceptics

of religion long before Europe produced the radicals who would subvert Christian dogmas in the early modern period.

An alchemist-turned-physician, al-Razi wrote widely and trenchantly on politics, logic, theology, alchemy, medicine and a great deal more besides. It was principally as a physician that he became known in Europe (as Rhazes), some of his work being read in translation well into the sixteenth century. His was an exceptionally observant eye. He had a temperament to match: what amounts to clinical observation inclined him to criticize received diagnostic traditions, such as those associated with the physician Hippocrates (d. c. 370 BCE) and the physician-philosopher Galen (d. 200). As he puts it in a work devoted to 'doubts' (that is, criticisms) of Galen,

As God is my witness, I would prefer that the doubts I record in this book were not applicable to the books of this illustrious and learned authority whose status is so awesome, whose rank is so majestic, whose legacy is so universal, and whose memory is revered so eternally. That said, however, the discipline of medicine and philosophy does not allow us to submit blindly to prominent leaders or to comply with them, or to avoid thoroughly investigating [their views], and no philosopher would want his readers and students to do that.⁵⁶

In fact, Razi had a deep philosophical streak, about a third of his work addressing philosophical problems. It was his rejection of scriptural religion that made him genuinely radical – and, it follows, deeply unpopular. Reason, he wrote, 'should govern, and not be governed; should control, and not be controlled; should lead, and not be led'.⁵⁷ In a world enchanted (or, perhaps, incarcerated) by pre-commitments to religious dogma, be it Islamic, Christian, Jewish or otherwise, al-Razi was a theist *avant la lettre*.

Before the introduction of modern technologies of preservation and reproduction, thinking that was or became conventional usually survived more readily than unpopular, radical or offensive ideas. For perishable books had to be copied out over and over, and schools of thought, populated by students and disciples, provided both the market and the demand for such books. Similar things can be said about biographies of such figures: followers had a stake in preserving and elaborating upon the life-stories of their founding fathers. Although al-Razi had many students and followers, they never coalesced into a school. All this explains why we have been robbed of many biographical details and the great bulk of his written work, which may have amounted to as many as 200 titles. In many cases, we can only

reconstruct his views from passages and criticisms penned by others. His most explosively iconoclastic work, *On the Fraudulence of Prophets*, which al-Biruni (see below) counted as a work 'of unbelief', was suppressed.

What we know is that he was born in about 865 in Rayy, once an ancient and prosperous city, and now a suburb of Tehran more or less entirely swallowed up by the modern city's urban growth. His first love was alchemy, then a perfectly respectable field of knowledge; accounts also have him writing poetry and playing the lute at an early age. What is clearer is that he made medicine, then dominated by the tradition descending from Galen, the object of intense study. His growing reputation drew him from province to capital, perhaps around the age of thirty, and there, Baghdad, he was put in charge of one of the city's hospitals.

Soon after 907 he returned to his hometown of Rayy for good. He travelled little thereafter, and only within domains that fell under the rule of the Samanids, a dynasty ruling in the east that acknowledged nominal Abbasid authority. He seems to have devoted himself to running a hospital and teaching medicine. Accounts have it that his teaching circles were literally that – circles, at whose centre he would sit, large-headed and impressive, surrounded by concentric ranks of students of decreasing expertise, through which questions would advance, only the most difficult reaching the master himself.⁵⁸ In his old age, failing eyesight and paralysis forced him to rely upon scribes to do his writing from dictation.

It was his diagnostic acumen that put him in demand of those with the resources to pay for his services. And he was not above satisfying it. As he put it a bit tetchily,

I have attended the ruler not as one who bears arms nor as one entrusted with doing his work, but rather as a physician and confidant who has independence of action in one of two cases: either in time of illness, to cure him and improve the condition of his body, or in time of health, to keep him company or to advise him – God knows this of me! – to do all that I hope will lead to his welfare and that of his subjects.⁵⁹

Physicians and philosophers typically required or at least sought the patronage of rulers. His *Book for Mansur on Medicine* was written for a Samanid vizier by that name; his *Comprehensive Work on Medicine* – really a set of notes that may never have been intended for publication – was either commissioned or compiled on the order of the most celebrated Buyid vizier of the day, Ibn al-'Amid (d. 970). Still, he also believed that medical



The section on urine from an undated manuscript of al-Razi's *Comprehensive Work on Medicine*. The book is an important source for now-lost writings of earlier authors.

care was not to be the exclusive privilege of the elite, and so wrote *He Who Is Not Attended by a Physician*, a handbook otherwise known as *Medicine for the Poor*. He also wrote barbed criticism of charlatan physicians.

Al-Razi's views on medicine were based upon his command of accumulated knowledge, both 'foreign' (Greek, Sanskrit and Syriac authorities are cited) and Arabic; Galen naturally figures largely, but he also seems to have worked with Plato's *Timaeus*. And he drew upon empirical observations that he made on his own. The latter not only underlay his critique of the master in his *Book of Doubts about Galen*, but it also generated positive conclusions of its own. For example, he seems to have been the first to distinguish between smallpox and measles in a work that was translated several times into Latin. The encyclopaedic *Comprehensive Work on Medicine* shows his command of the tradition from Hippocrates through to his own time. A Latin translation was made in the thirteenth century and presented to Charles of Anjou (d. 1285), King of Naples.

Medicine, to al-Razi and much of the intellectual tradition in general, was part of the complement of disciplines that the philosopher was to

command. Philosophy offered the broadest possible wisdom, its ethics a course of treatment for the soul. It is a way of imitating God, 'the Creator' and 'Knower Who is not ignorant', as he puts it in his *Philosophical Way of Life*, where he prescribes a life of moderation and rational discipline. Immoderate displays of asceticism and piety, and withdrawal from productive employment, a combination that was very popular in some quarters, he branded as useless; '[i]n all this they do themselves wrong, and inflict pain upon themselves without thereby warding off any corresponding greater pain'.⁶⁰

To al-Razi, the philosopher's role was to redeem the gift of knowledge that God had bestowed upon humankind, a gift activated by reason and reason alone:

*The Creator (Exalted be His Name) gave and bestowed upon us Reason to the end that we might thereby attain and achieve every advantage that lies within the nature of such as us to attain and achieve, in this world and the next. It is God's greatest blessing to us, and there is nothing that surpasses it in procuring our advantage and profit. By Reason we are preferred above the irrational beasts, so that we rule over them and manage them, subjecting and controlling them in ways profitable alike to us and them.*⁶¹

So the empiricism of his medicine is complemented by his philosophical scepticism, which led him, infamously and scandalously, to reject revelation and prophecy as sources of knowledge.

Muslim theologians typically held that the exercise of reason was insufficient to secure the deepest truths. This is why God, in His justice and mercy, chose to share them in scripture and through exemplary conduct carried out by prophets. By contrast, al-Razi held that although revelation (such as the Qur'an) had a social or political function in ordering society, it did not furnish truths, which were ascertainable by humans through their intellect. God has a role as 'Bestower of intellect', as he calls Him elsewhere in his *Philosophical Way of Life*, but it ended there. 'How can anyone think philosophically while remaining committed to those old wives' tales, founded on contradictions, obdurate ignorance and dogmatic stubbornness?', he wrote.⁶² Along with prophecy, he also rejected miracles, which were near-universally accepted as confirmatory proofs of prophecy. For al-Razi, it was 'contemplating philosophy' – that is, making intellectual progress – that held out the promise of salvation, rather than espousing particular dogmas or discharging religious duties. 'Prophets were

imposters who impressed people with their tricks and sleights of hand', is how one scholar characterized his position.⁶³

These were astounding positions to take in the tenth century, be it in the Islamic world, Byzantium or Latin Christendom. Al-Razi 'was to become perhaps the single figure most frequently denounced and disapproved of as a heretic in the subsequent history of Islamic thought'.⁶⁴ How, in tenth-century western Iran and Baghdad, did he get away with such provocative ideas? (Since much of our understanding of his thinking comes from refutations and criticisms of his work, it was once held that many were unfairly imputed to him, but this is no longer argued.)

The answer is elusive. It may lie partly in the high status and esteem he enjoyed by virtue of his unrivalled knowledge of medicine and valued service as a physician. Put very crudely, it may be that he was too valuable to persecute, especially given the power and prestige of his patrons. Another part of the answer may lie in the relatively tolerant and intellectually fecund soil of the eastern Islamic domains in this period, when a cultural cosmopolitanism prevailed such that modern scholars have come to speak of a humanistic 'renaissance'. One of this period's most celebrated patrons was a vizier named al-Sahib b. al-'Abbad (d. 995), and his library in Rayy included books by freethinkers such as Ibn al-Rawandi. This was a particularly fortuitous time and place for free-thinking, but Islamic courts frequently favoured cosmopolitanism and intellectualism.

12 Ibn Fadlan, intrepid envoy

(fl. tenth century)

Arabic literature has its share of fantastic journeys. One late ninth-century Jewish traveller tells of cannibals who patiently fattened up their victims before eating them; one early tenth-century Persian shipmaster in the Indian Ocean also speaks of cannibals (these sporting tails) and various sea creatures, including island-sized turtles, mermaids and elephant-eating snakes. A fifteenth-century writer describes an island named Waqwaq, where trees sprouted women like fruit.⁶⁵

Still, few Muslims have taken journeys the likes of Ibn Fadlan's. He began his in late June of 921 and was last seen in 1999, as portrayed by Antonio Banderas, in the movie *The Thirteenth Warrior*. Hollywood did little justice to Ibn Fadlan, not least because the movie was based on the curious piece of historical bricolage that is Michael Crichton's novel *Eaters of the Dead*, which comingles a fictionalized account of Ibn Fadlan's travels with the legend of Beowulf. The genuine account of Ibn Fadlan's travels to

the Volga region of what is now southern Russia is so impressive that it scarcely requires embellishment. Its truth is more striking and entertaining than its fictionalization.

The account is preserved in a single manuscript that was discovered in the eastern Iranian pilgrimage city of Mashhad in 1923. The beginning provides some meagre circumstantial details about its author:

*This is the account of Ahmad b. Fadlan b. al-'Abbas b. Rashid b. Hammad, a client of Muhammad b. Sulayman, and the envoy [sent by the caliph] al-Muqtadir to the king of the Saqaliba. It records what he saw in the land of the Turks, the Khazars, the Rus, the Saqaliba, the Bashghirds and other peoples, along with their various customs and ways of living, their kings, and many other related matters, too.*⁶⁶

Muhammad b. Sulayman was apparently a member of the Abbasid family who distinguished himself in 905 by leading an army that re-imposed the dynasty's power over Egypt, which had secured a measure of independence in the late 800s. If, as it would appear, this Muhammad was the patron of Ibn Fadlan, we can place our author near the centre of Abbasid power.

There certainly is good reason to think that Ibn Fadlan's mission was dispatched directly by the caliph or his court. It is not just that the travellers carried caliphal letters of introduction and were received by a succession of high-level officials; these could conceivably be literary adornments designed to lend the narrative some verisimilitude. It is also the spare and sober narrative itself. Though not without some legendary features (such as a rumour of rhinoceros in the Russian forest),⁶⁷ it is dispassionate and highly controlled: we seem to have a diplomat reporting intelligence, not a storyteller weaving fantastic tales. What survives seems to be an epitomized version of an envoy's official report – in this case, of the outward journey made by a delegation sent by the caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–32) to the Bulgars of the Volga region.

Because the direct route between the Black and Caspian Seas was blocked by the Khazars (Turkic tribes in a loose confederation), Ibn Fadlan had to take a long detour. On 21 June 921 he set off from Baghdad, following what was known as the Khurasan Road, the artery connecting Baghdad and Iraq with the Iranian plateau and beyond it, to eastern Iran and Central Asia, and one of the many fibres that formed the Silk Road, which tied together the markets and products of China with Central Asia, India, Iran, the Fertile Crescent, the eastern Mediterranean and Europe. No one travelled alone, and his fellow travellers would vary in number



A gold vessel from the Treasure of Nagyszentmiklós (in present-day Romania), showing an armed rider, c. 8th century.

according to the stopping places, much like they do nowadays in a long-distance bus or train. In eastern Iran, he tells us that the group consisted of some 3,000 animals and 5,000 men. On foot, riding beast and boat, stopping and resting several times, they covered the 1,500 or-so miles from Baghdad to Bukhara (in present-day Uzbekistan), passing through Iraq, the central Iranian plateau and eastern Iran.

Having crossed the Oxus, Ibn Fadlan reached Transoxiana – a liminal region between two zones of settled influence, one Islamicizing, the other Central Asian, a hybrid and heterogeneous culture that reflected the bi-directional trade that gave life to its oasis cities: Bukhara was the first of a chain of trading-cities strung together by the transport and sale of goods (silk and other textiles, precious metals and aromatics), animals (horses) and people (including slaves). After a month of rest, they turned north-west, reaching the town of Jurjaniya on the left bank of the Oxus, due south of the Aral Sea (near the present-day border of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). They had begun their journey in June, it was now November, and the frigid weather and frozen river now stopped the travellers in their tracks. Animals died from the extreme temperatures, the markets and streets were empty. Ibn Fadlan's beard, wet from a visit to one of the city's baths, froze solid.

Keenly observant of foreign ways and customs throughout his trip (Bukhara's distinctive silver coins caught his attention, as did the dowries that the locals paid), Ibn Fadlan now reveals himself to be something of an ethnographer. Because the lands north of Jurjaniya were *terra incognita* to Baghdad, what he recorded was especially valuable to his patrons. The cold makes him miserable, the danger posed by marauding Turkic tribes even more so. He makes envious note of their cold-weather clothing and complains about what they were forced to wear to keep warm – *qurtaqs* (a kind of tunic), caftans, bustins, along with a variety of coats, caps, quilted underpants, trousers and boots; they wore so many layers that they could hardly move.⁶⁸

Cold was not the only peril. Ibn Fadlan's group runs into some Turkic tribesmen, and he calmly notes their sinister intentions: 'The way to proceed is to chop these envoys in half, and to take what they have', he reports one of them saying. Another thought robbing was enough: 'No, let's take what they have and leave them naked to go back to where they came from.' Within a few generations these Turks (of the Ghuzz) would begin to convert to Islam, but at this point their exotic, non-Muslim ways – poor hygiene, immodest conduct (their women exhibited their privates in public), animal sacrifices, marriage customs and much more besides – fascinated him. As it happens, his account of the Ghuzz, Pecheneg and Bashkir Turks is one of the very earliest that we possess.

Finally, on 11 or 12 May 922, Ibn Fadlan reached his destination: the court of the 'King of the Saqaliba', a loose term that, etymologically related to both 'Slavs' and 'slaves', describes the newly (but crudely) converted Bulgars of the Volga region.⁶⁹ Here, about halfway through the travelogue, we arrive at what appears to be an anticlimax: greetings from the caliph were read out, gifts (perfume, clothing) bestowed and pleasantries exchanged, but the mission's purpose of creating an alliance between caliph and king foundered. Ibn Fadlan and his delegation had failed to bring sufficient money to purchase the king's favour and cooperation.

Even so, the remainder of the text proves that however misguided it was to think that the Bulgars could be bought cheaply, the wisdom of sending Ibn Fadlan was inspired. Ibn Fadlan's attention catalogues early tenth-century Baghdad's curiosity about an unknown world. Drawing upon both direct observation and informants (he used an interpreter), he comments on nature (light, weather, the barking of dogs, snake-infested trees), on conventions of eating and clothing (the etiquette of caps is especially detailed), on his hosts' naïve conversion to Islam (mistakes are made in prayer; a family adopts Islam, and man, woman and children alike

all take the name Muhammad); he notes their hair-trigger violence and strange funerary practices.

If the tone that characterizes his treatment of the Bulgars can be called detached and frequently bemused, his portrayal of the Rus (usually identified as Scandinavian, i.e. Vikings, though often as Slavs) shows an admirable ability to suppress revulsion for the sake of reportage. For what could be worse than human sacrifice? An account of the funeral of a Rus chief is nothing short of astonishing: it narrates in minute detail the preparations for a floating funerary pyre that consumes the body of the deceased, as well as that of a chosen slave girl, made drunk and violated before her immolation.

Overhearing a conversation about burial practices between his interpreter and one of the Rus, Ibn Fadlan asks what the latter had said. His interpreter replies: “You Arabs are a bunch of fools!” So I said, ‘Why is that?’, and to this he replies:

*‘Because you purposely take those who are nearest and dearest to you and those whom you hold in the highest regard and put them in the earth, where they are eaten by the vermin and by worms. We, on the other hand, cremate there and then, so that they enter Paradise immediately.’ I asked about this [i.e., the entry into Paradise], and he said, ‘My Lord feels such great love for him that he sent the wind to take him away within an hour.’ In fact, it took scarcely an hour for the boat, the firewood, the slave-girl and her master to be burnt to a very fine ash.*⁷⁰

On all of this Ibn Fadlan suspends explicit judgment. Ever the diplomatic envoy, he holds his tongue – but corrects the record.

13 **Ibn Muqla**, vizier, scribe, calligrapher? (940)

In 1544, examples of calligraphy and manuscript painting were collected into a handsome album that was presented to Bahram Mirza (d. 1549), the brother of the Safavid ruler of Iran, Shah Tahmasp (d. 1576), the son of Shah Isma‘il, whom we shall meet below. The Safavid album not only illustrates and exemplifies the cultural significance of calligraphy; it also preserves the cultural memory of scribal practices that account for the rise of calligraphic traditions. And in this memory Ibn Muqla has a special place. For as one thirteenth-century text reads, he ‘was the forefather (literally “master”) of the beautiful and renowned script, its beauty the stuff

of legends...He was the first to produce it, transforming it from the Kufi’ (here an angular, less cursive script).⁷¹

The Safavid album begins with a benediction:

The noblest rescript with which the scribes of the workshop of prayer adorn the album of composition and novelty, and the most subtle picture with which the depictees of the gallery of intrinsic meaning decorate the assemblies of creativity and invention, is praise of the Creator, by whose pen are scriben sublime letters and exalted forms.

Such elaborate benedictions were conventional. Filled with assonance, consonance and parallelism, this one was written in an especially ornate style apposite to a work of such rare beauty. (It sounds much better in the original Persian than in English.) Its stylistic complexity also complements a theme that it develops in subsequent lines: God manifests the beauty of His creation in the technical art of manuscript copying and calligraphy:

*[Praise to] the Omnipotent who adorned the layers of the heavenly seven, inimitable in the manner of seven copies – nay, in organization and systematization they are exemplars of Koranic pages – with verses of beautiful stars and the tenth and fifth of the sun and moon, and made rulings with lines of rays, and with the white ink of dawn and the vermilion of sunset placed a prototype of the four tablets on the azure page of the celest.*⁷²

What this sixteenth-century presentation album reflects is the enormous significance of calligraphy within Islamic visual culture. ‘He who writes “in the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful” in a beautiful script,’ we read in another album, ‘will enter Paradise without question.’⁷³ Calligraphy certainly plays an important role in Chinese and Japanese arts, but it is no exaggeration to say that it is to the Islamic arts what portraiture is to European arts. How did this come to be?

The album’s benediction has an answer. God endorses especially attractive writing: the sixty-eighth chapter of the Qur’an is entitled ‘The [reed] Pen’ and begins: ‘By the pen and what they inscribe, you [that is, Muhammad], by the grace of God, are not possessed.’ The first person to write was Adam himself, ‘who fashioned a pen and wrote on a tanned hide’; thereafter, each of the prophets invented scripts of their own. We also read that ‘Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad and forefather of Shi‘ism, perfected the linear and angular script known as ‘Kufic’. And this writing system

prevailed 'until the time of (the caliph al-Muqtadir, d. 932), at which time 'Ali b. Muqla, who is known as Ibn Muqla, saw 'Ali in a dream, in which he instructed him in the *thuluth*, *muhawraq* and *naskh* scripts'.

The perils of ambition

Ibn Muqla was born in 885–86 in Baghdad. A self-made man in an age when high-powered officials often came from well-established families, he received the patronage of two influential administrators, and landed his first position in the Abbasid bureaucracy at about the age of sixteen. His career began in southwestern Iran, but in his early twenties he was already working at the centre of the caliphal administration, in Baghdad, in the bureau (*diwan*) that was responsible for official correspondence. By this time, an extensive Abbasid bureaucracy had been established, organized around the *diwan*, a term of murky origins that came to denote an administrative office within the state apparatus. The first *diwan* was apparently created to disburse military pay, but in Ibn Muqla's time there was a multitude of *diwans* – from the *diwan al-ahra'* (which managed the state's granaries) to the *diwan zimam al-kharaj* (an auditing sub-*diwan* of the *diwan al-kharaj*, which was responsible for the state's revenues). Responsibility for a *diwan*, especially one with financial functions, meant enormous opportunities for profiteering, graft and corruption. Ibn Muqla, who was put in charge of one such *diwan* in his thirties, did not resist the attendant temptations. In May of 928 (or so at least one historian has it), Ibn Muqla was appointed vizier by the caliph al-Muqtadir. In his mid-forties, he had reached the apogee of Abbasid civilian administration.

This was the first of three short tenures that he would serve as vizier, and it lasted only until 930; the last was between 934–36. What explains such short terms, especially compared to the long terms that viziers would serve elsewhere?⁷⁴ Viziers were at the centre of a huge revenue machine, and so competition for the office was fierce. Factionalism was particularly volatile and deadly during the disastrous caliphate of the twice-deposed al-Muqtadir (r. 908–32), a period of financial collapse, bureaucratic infighting and military mutiny. One of the leading viziers of the day, Ibn al-Furat (d. 924), was so brutal in imprisoning, torturing and extorting rivals that the last year of his third and final term as vizier was infamously known as 'the Year of Destruction'. Ibn Muqla was probably no less ambitious and treacherous than his rivals. He made himself hugely wealthy, building a palace in Baghdad famed for its gardens and collection of exotic animals. In the highly factionalized milieu, families were bulwarks against rivals and adversaries, and Ibn Muqla also distributed positions to several family

members, including two brothers and three sons. One of these sons would succeed him to the vizierate at the age of eighteen.

As a creature of Abbasid politics, Ibn Muqla necessarily involved himself in court and caliphal machinations – and was predictably victimized by those same forces. Caliphal turnover meant vizierial turnover, and three times he was imprisoned, captivity and extortion being the standard measures for recovering the spoils that a vizier accumulated while in office. 'I do not cringe when pinched by misfortune,' he volunteered, 'nor am I haughty when it spares me. I am fire when blown upon by the deep-drawn sighs of envy, but I am running water with my friends.'⁷⁵ His suffering did not end with imprisonment. First, his right (and writing) hand was cut off. Some lines of poetry capture both his despondency and resolve. 'I was not weary of life, but I trusted them...After the loss of my right hand, there is no pleasure in life. My right hand is gone: O soul of mine, depart too!'⁷⁶ Stories had it that he attached a pen to his stump so that he could carry on in his craft. Towards the end of his life, his tongue was cut out, too. By this time, what remained of his wealth and influence could not save him. He died in prison.

Legend and script

At least in retrospect, there was a cruel logic to the maiming. For Ibn Muqla's writing hand earned him special status in Arabic letters. An



Two parchment leaves with parts of suras 18 and 20 of the Qur'an, possibly dating from the 7th century.

eleventh-century library in Baghdad was reputed to have contained one hundred Qur'an copies written by members of the Muqla family. When the caliph al-Mustansir (d. 1242) founded the *madrasa* that took his name, he spared no expense; six years in the building, it was given the very best books, including manuscripts copied by Ibn Muqla and Ibn Bawwab, a great calligrapher of the succeeding generation.⁷⁷ A grammarian named Ibn Dahhan, hunched as an old man, reminisced about his youth when his stature was as erect as the letter 'alif' as written by Ibn Muqla in a Qur'an. 'He is a prophet in the field of handwriting', a littérateur named al-Tawhidi (d. 1023) wrote. 'It was poured upon his hand, even as it was revealed to the bees to make their honey-cells hexagonal.'⁷⁸

The legends grew. And for those of a mystical bent, Ibn Muqla's attractive hand came to represent nothing less than an instrument of God's wisdom. As Bahram Mirza's album preface might be taken to suggest, Ibn Muqla's purported invention of a curved script (and specific script styles) is connected to his insights into nature and the divine. A Persian treatise on calligraphy, which was written in south India in 1454, has it that although 'Ali's hand was slightly curved, Ibn Muqla's impact upon calligraphy was nothing short of cosmic.

And since by the principles of wisdom it is demonstrated that God created the world in circular form, even so the explanation of this meaning has occurred in the words of the sages: 'The world is a circle, the earth is a dot, the heavens are bows, accidents are arrows, and man is a target...The best of shapes is the circle.' The master Ibn Muqla, the scribe, realized that writing could be made circular. He transmitted that method of [round] Kufic in this fashion that is now current, so that it would be related to the creation of the Earth, which is the principle of all principles.⁷⁹



A page of Kufic script from the 'Blue Qur'an', North Africa, 9th century or early 10th century.



A page from a Qur'an in *muhaqqaq*, *naskh* and Kufic script, possibly created in Iran or Turkey, late 13th or early 14th century.

The same author, drawing upon wellsprings of Sufi ideas, depicts Ibn Muqla's invention of script as the product of divine creativity, and models a forty-day period of seclusion and meditation upon the episode in Muhammad's life that preceded his revelation.

He made use of the flashes of divine lights and sought the emanation from the contents filled with grace of [the divine saying] 'I kneaded the clay of Adam with my hands for forty days'. He took a period of forty days in a retreat of meditation to imagine the kneading of the clay of letters possessing elegant forms, transferring them from the lines of Kufic to the heavenly form of round and circular lines.⁸⁰

The development of scripts and styles

In the absence of any Qur'an copies (or anything else) that can be directly credited to Ibn Muqla, judging his contribution to the development of Qur'anic scripts is inferential business. He came to represent a watershed figure in the history of writing styles, but the innovations imputed to him seem to have been diffused in the tenth-century air. As clear as it may be that Ibn Muqla had an exceptionally fine hand – and even this matter is fuzzy since he had a brother who was celebrated for his writing, too – the cultural tradition probably misleads us. Evolution is less compelling than revolution, but in this case it probably lies closer to the truth.

The earliest history of the Qur'an is very obscure, but over the last two decades or so the fog has begun to lift: the careful study of manuscripts that can be dated from the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries has recovered both a great diversity of styles and discerned the outlines of development. Two trends can be identified here. The first describes the shift from highly angular and thick scripts towards a more disciplined palette of styles, which feature thinner, rounded and cursive styles. The second describes the emergence of what might be called a fully comprehensive text.

What survives of the earliest Qur'anic writing styles presuppose on the part of the reader a deep acquaintance with the text: lacking many of the marks that identify several consonants and vowels, and featuring irregular spacing (within words and between words), the manuscripts make sense mostly as *aides-mémoire* for specialists. To draw a parallel from the Christian tradition: who, beyond someone expert in the Book of Genesis, could make sense of 'nt bgn gc rthvns rt' ('In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth')? But as the nature of readership, ritual and worship changed, so, too, did the Qur'ans. The exiguous, it might be said, gave way to the explicit: marks for consonants and vowels appeared, as did stable divisions of the text. What the ninth and tenth centuries witnessed in calligraphic terms was the emergence of a more regular portfolio of Qur'an scripts, which, more consistently rounded and flowing, had to be more regular in size. (A copy of the Qur'an that features this proportionality dates from as early as 876 – nine years before Ibn Muqla's birth.⁸¹) Cursive styles, attested from the very beginning of Islam in administrative documents and the like, converged with the more angular styles used in Qur'ans. And what disappeared was the scribe's freedom to mix and match styles, to space and break up words as he saw fit.

There is another way of making sense of Ibn Muqla's story. As scripts converged to create classical Qur'anic styles, so it may be that political concerns converged in the role he was given to play by subsequent historians. The meting out of brutal treatment to high-ranking administrators and viziers was scarcely unprecedented in the ninth and tenth centuries. But the position that he had occupied was never the same: Ibn Muqla was imprisoned for the last (and lethal) time in 934, and the responsibilities of the vizierate were absorbed into a new, military office, the 'Commander of Commanders'. Because political culture was becoming militarized, Ibn Muqla was 'the last great vizier of the caliphs', as one historian has written.⁸² For scribes, writers, *littérateurs* and the like, Ibn Muqla's fate thus symbolized the unpleasant truth that, as much as they might like it otherwise, the sword was mightier than the pen.

14 Mahmud of Ghazna, conqueror and patron

(1030)

The tenth-century envoy Ibn Fadlan made his way from Rayy to the Bulgars of the Volga via Bukhara, the capital of a Samanid state that ruled eastern Iran and lands beyond the Oxus. This state paid only nominal allegiance to the caliphs of Baghdad. According to the logic of politics at the time, the Samanid rulers were mere 'governors' or 'commanders', their titles being awarded by the Abbasid caliphs, who retained symbolic authority over lands that they had long ceased to rule in any military or fiscal sense. Put another way, while effective power was fragmented among states and statelets that filled the vacuum created by Baghdad's enfeeblement, the authority to exercise that power *legitimately* cascaded from God to the caliphs, who, in turn, delegated it to those who recognized their authority. Ibn Fadlan was the caliph's envoy because the caliph was the symbolic leader of a notionally unitary Islamic community, but much of his journey was made on roads that Samanid armies kept safe.

Delegation was a potent but unstable force. On the one hand, it rationalized the caliphate and legitimated those who could claim to rule on the caliphs' behalf. On the other, since anyone could make such claims – and anyone with a strong army make good on them – it opened political participation to opportunists and parvenus. The huge Ghaznavid state of tenth- and eleventh-century eastern and southeast Iran, Afghanistan and northwest India, which in crucial respects was the creation of Mahmud of Ghazna, exemplifies this dynamic especially well. Mahmud also illustrates political and cultural trends that are as striking to modern sensibilities as they were typical of the time. Jihad-making man of culture, ethnic Turk who patronized Persian letters, and dynast of slave descent who ruled the most powerful state in the Islamic east, Mahmud resolved paradoxes.

Mahmud was the son of Sebuktigin, a Turk who, enslaved at an early age, was one of a succession of commanders who ruled Samanid domains in eastern Afghanistan in the tenth century. When he died in 997, Mahmud fought off his brother and succeeded Sebuktigin, retaining as his capital Ghazna, the Ghazni of present-day Afghanistan, which lies about 80 miles southwest of Kabul. When his Samanid overlord overreached in refusing to acknowledge an Abbasid caliph, Mahmud took the opportunity to expand his domains further west: he routed Samanid armies in 999 and took control of eastern Iran.

Leveraging military power into legitimate political authority required caliphal approval, and this was secured after Mahmud wrote disingenuously to Baghdad, the letter's false obsequiousness fooling no one. 'And if



Mahmud of Ghazna crossing the Ganges,
from Rashid al-Din's *Compendium of
Chronicles*, Tabriz, Iran, c. 1314.

our lord and master, the Commander of the Faithful (may God prolong his life), is agreeable to reading this [letter] and appointing his slave to carry out his commands and prohibitions, let him do so, if God wills.⁸³ The caliph had no alternative, and so honorific titles, documents and other tokens of sovereignty duly arrived from Baghdad; meanwhile, tribute and showy gifts left Ghazna for Baghdad. Mahmud, one reads in the sources, was given the title *sultan* ('power', 'authority') by the caliph, and became known more broadly as *yamin al-dawla*, 'right hand of the [Abbasid] dynasty'.

Warring, Ghaznavid style

As much as it suited Mahmud to associate himself with the caliph, it suited the caliph to have as his nominal subordinate a commander who could pay an army sufficient to project effective power. In fact, paying an army and legitimating its violence were closely connected, the project being combined in a muscular Sunnism, which featured jihad against unbelievers beyond Islam's frontiers. For jihad then, as now, had enormous propaganda value, rallying support to those claiming the mantle of Sunnism. In attractively economical verse, a late eleventh-century Turkish lexicon provides a glimpse of how warring against the Buddhist Uighurs (a Turkish polity then based in the Turfan basin in western China) was presented:

*We came down on them like a flood
We went out upon their cities
We tore down the idol temples
We shit upon the idols' heads.*⁸⁴

Constantinople had once been the principal object of jihad, be it led by caliph or independent warrior. For Mahmud, poised on the eastern edge of the Islamic world, it was to be India, especially its promise of slaves and booty, of glory and fame, and so spectacular illustrations of his faithful service to a Sunni caliph in Baghdad, which in this period was under the thumb of the Shi'ite Buyids.

Having secured his power, Mahmud thus promptly embarked on a quarter century of campaigning against the Hindu kingdoms of north-west India, conquering the Punjab and eventually moving south, where he famously plundered the city and glorious temple of Somnath. 'The hammer of the infidels', he campaigned more-or-less constantly, but Somnath was his most infamous conquest: sources refer to the temple as the Hindus' Mecca, and just as the Prophet Muhammad had cleansed the Ka'ba of its pagan idols, so Mahmud emptied and razed Somnath. 'All the idols', one historian wrote in the middle of the eleventh century, 'were smashed up, burnt and destroyed. The stone embodying [the idol] Manat was wrenched from its base and smashed to pieces. Some of these pieces were loaded on to the backs of mules and brought to Ghaznin, and to this day have been dumped by the gate of the mosque of Ghaznin.'⁸⁵

Somnath's treasures were proverbial, but they were merely one deposit in what amounted to a continuous flow of militarized direct-debiting: Indian wealth was siphoned into the Islamic world, fuelling coffers that paid for further military conquest. Since formerly independent Indian rulers were reduced to vassalage, in the middle and long term what resulted was the Islamicization of northern India and the Sind; more precisely, it was the spread of Sunni Islam that resulted, for many of these areas had been influenced by Shi'ite missionaries, whose work the Ghaznavids reversed. In the long term, the memory of these conquests also influenced relations between Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists.

In the shorter term, it was the growth of Mahmud's stature and his military state that benefited. Court poets immodestly compared his exploits to those of Moses: he led his armies across rivers and drowned enemies in their waves. Missives glorifying his victories were sent to Baghdad. Booty from the Indian campaigns was exhibited, trophy-like, in Ghaznavid palaces; golden idols were melted down to decorate mosques. The remains of Lashkar-i Bazar (located near Bust in southern Afghanistan), a site closely associated with Mahmud's son, Mas'ud (d. 1040), preserve material evidence for the Ghaznavid war machine: it was a sprawling military-palatial site, which featured gigantic palace-complexes, smaller buildings and residences, baths, pavilions and gardens,

its inscriptions and frescoes reflecting martial themes at the heart of Ghaznavid ideology.⁸⁶

The great bulk of the prodigious booty gathered in these conquests was spent not on palaces, much less decoration, however. It was spent on soldiers to conquer, administrators to tax, and guards and retinues to make manifest Mahmud's power. A late eleventh-century account, reporting a caliphal embassy to Mahmud's Ghazna in 1001, paints a vivid picture of spectacle – of fierceness barely tamed – and so the performance of a certain kind of military and natural power:

When I approached the town where the Sultan was, I encountered a vast body of his troops, too numerous to be counted, and all fitted out with the most splendid uniforms and outfits, and the finest weapons and equipment, that I have ever seen. I entered the town itself, and found the army drawn up on parade. I came to a big group of elephants, and around them were Indian troops whose number, I was told, was 30,000. I passed through them and met a large number of young Turkish slave troops, employed as guards in the halls of the palaces, all fully equipped and carrying arms; I was informed that there were some 1,000 of them.

On reaching the gate [of the palace], I noticed two great dragons, the biggest known of their kind, each guarding one of the halves of the gate, and held there by iron chains. I entered, and found the forecourt thronged with wild beasts, chained up on both sides in lines facing each other. I made my way through them, noting first of all lynxes in their natural state, and then panthers likewise, all in great numbers. Finally, I reached Mahmud himself, a fine figure to see, installed in his full court, in a hall richly furnished and equipped.

He was seated on his throne with all the great men of state standing before him in two ranks, all in their finest clothes.⁸⁷

What credence do we attach to this account? To claim to have seen 'two dragons' is obviously taking a step into the territory of unbelievable; the detail – perhaps fuelled by visual culture, which in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries came to feature the mythological, open-jawed beast – serves to underline and exoticize Ghaznavid ferocity. Much else is otherwise attested, however.

By 1028, Mahmud had definitively turned west and taken control of Rayy, Abu Bakr al-Razi's hometown, by defeating the Shi'ite Buyids, who controlled the caliphs. And by the time of his death in the spring of 1030,



Mahmud's tomb, Ghazni, Afghanistan.

he had built an empire worthy of the name: it stretched from Kurdistan in northwest Iran to the upper Ganges, from Central Asia to the Indian Ocean. It was a fragile empire, however, which in this form would not survive the less able rule of his successors. That a Turk of slave descent could build such a polity obviously says something about his ambitions and talents, as well as about the cultural and political preconditions that allowed him to exercise them so spectacularly. It was not just strategic acuity or war-elephants that explain his empire-building. Mahmud could also draw upon distinctly Islamic tropes and political practices, such as jihad and showy (if not entirely disingenuous) obedience to caliphs who symbolized Muslim unity.

The repertoire of Islamic symbols being so rich, and Turkish participation in Islamic political life being so superficial, what he could not do was draw upon a distinctly Turkish cultural tradition, be it linguistic or historical. The ruler of immense territories, he remained an outsider. The solution for a Turk working in a political tradition founded by Arabs was Persian and a Persianized inflection of Islamic culture.

And so Mahmud patronized Persian letters. Historical prose, long dominated by Arabic, was now complemented by Persian. For example, a Persian historian named Gardizi (d. c. 1060) presents Mahmud as a successor to 'the kings of the Chaldeans, the kings of the Persians, the Islamic caliphs and the governors of Khurasan', and writes of 'how he traversed fearful deserts, mountains and tracks; how he undertook military campaigns there; how he subdued mighty monarchs – things the likes of which no-one ever saw or heard about, for warfare and strategies like these may only be regarded as superhuman achievements'.⁸⁸ Ruling courts always featured poets, and Mahmud's was no exception. For poets served to signal his cultural values to Persian elites who held sway in his lands. They also glorified in 'real time' his conquests (war-elephants are catalogued) and splendid rule.

Verdant and flowering gardens were a well-established metaphor for the prosperity and bounty that just rulership yields, as one of Mahmud's poets, Farrukhi (d. 1037), illustrates:

*You have strung the wild rose with patterns of pearls,
You have hung a pearl necklace on the rosebush.
You have brought new colour to every assembly,
You have brought to every garden another beautiful idol.*⁸⁹

By far the most significant literary figure of the day was Ferdowsi (d. 1020), a native of the eastern Persian city of Tus, who completed the compilation of the single most celebrated work of Persian literature, the grand epic called the *Shahnameh* ('Book of Kings'), while in Mahmud's orbit. In some 50,000 couplets of the 'new' Persian language that had evolved during early Islamic rule, the *Shahnameh* narrates the history of the Iranian kings from their primordial origins until the eve of the Islamic conquests. The relationship between ruler and poet seems to have been fraught; legends of Mahmud's generosity and fickleness, and of Ferdowsi's pique, were embroidered, at least in part so as to explain a sharp piece of invective that Ferdowsi composed at Mahmud's expense. However fragile the tie between patron and poet in this and other cases of Islamic history, theirs was a case of co-dependency: as much as the poet needed cash for his product, the ruler needed credibility for his project, too. Both vied for immortality, but Ferdowsi has had the last word:

*I've reached the end of this great history
And all the land will fill with talk of me
I shall not die, these seeds I've sown will save
My name and reputation from the grave,
And men of sense and wisdom will proclaim
When I have gone, my praises and fame.*⁹⁰

15 **al-Biruni**, *cataloguer of nature and culture* (c. 1050)

In 2008, the West African republic of Guinea-Bissau joined an already long list of countries (Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, the Soviet Union and Syria) issuing postage stamps that featured al-Biruni as mathematician or astronomer. The diversity of nations – African, North African, Middle Eastern, and Asian, Muslim and non-Muslim alike – nicely illustrates al-Biruni's



Detail of a Persian miniature from al-Biruni's *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, copied in 1307, showing Bihafarid, a religious leader from Iran, trying to convince a peasant to join his sect.

status as supranational celebrity-scientist, an Asian analogue (and answer) to Europe's Nicolaus Copernicus (d. 1543), Johannes Kepler (d. 1630) and Isaac Newton (d. 1727). The eleventh century has even been called 'the age of Biruni', his genius comparable to that of Archimedes (d. c. 212 BC), Leonardo da Vinci (d. 1519) and Gottfried Leibniz (d. 1716).⁹¹

To judge from his extant works, many of which tackle topics in astronomy and applied mathematics, his celebrity is well earned: not only did he write prolifically, but his work also made an early contribution to the accumulated body of the Arabic scientific tradition that prefigured early modern science. All of this said, al-Biruni's interests and enthusiasms extended not only to fields that were conventionally adjacent to mathematics and astronomy, such as geography, astrology, medicine, pharmacology and mineralogy, but also to what we would now understand to be the humanities – to history, culture, even a kind of comparative religion. No other Muslim scholar – indeed, very few scholars of any tradition – wrote so widely and authoritatively. Al-Biruni's polymathy was staggering, and his linguistic range extraordinary. What conjoined his work in (mostly applied) mathematics and astronomy on the one hand, and history and culture on the other, was an underlying passion for close observation, accuracy and systematization.

Abu Rayhan Muhammad al-Biruni was born in September of 973 near Kath, which was one of the two major towns of the region of Khwarazm. Nowadays in the modern state of Uzbekistan, it figured on the itinerary of



Planispheric
astrolabe, North
Africa, 9th century.

Ibn Fadlan (see above), who passed through it on his way from Bukhara to the Volga in the early tenth century. He received specialized training in mathematics and astronomy early on, and already at the age of seventeen was taking astronomical readings. He grew up speaking a local dialect of Iranian, but he acquired and would write in Arabic and Persian. Arabic was the prestige language of learning, and in one memorable passage he likened the absurdity of a technical term appearing in Persian to seeing a camel standing on a roof gutter.⁹² This may have been a kind of special pleading intended to appeal to Arabophiles; a few of his works may have been composed in Persian. What is clearer is that his travels and training gave him the ability to translate from Sanskrit, and that he could also work with Greek, Hebrew and Syriac. We know that in 995 he took an observation of the summer solstice, and two years later (on 24 May 997), working in collaboration with an astronomer in Baghdad, he and his colleague were able to infer from the differential time of a lunar eclipse the difference in longitude between Kath and Baghdad. Between 995 and 997 political upheaval forced him to leave Khwarazm, perhaps for central or northern Iran (or both).

In any case, by this time he had already begun to receive the patronage of ruling dynasts, who, like those who preceded or followed, were keen to adorn their courts with high culture and learning, in this period especially as exemplified by philosophers and men of science. Avicenna (Ibn Sina; d. 1037) – physician and philosopher extraordinaire – was one such example, and the two men were in correspondence, disagreeing about points of physics. Al-Biruni himself would serve several patrons, both Sunni and Shi'ite. In 1000, he completed the first work of his that survives, the *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, which he dedicated to a ruler of northern

Iran named Qabus; by this time he had apparently already written seven other works, none of which is extant. In 1017, Khwarazm was absorbed into Ghaznavid realms, and al-Biruni was caught up in the tumult; he is often counted among a group of scholars who were sent to the Ghaznavid capital. By 1020 at the latest he had entered into the service of Mahmud himself, perhaps serving as the court's astrologer. For about a decade he was associated with Mahmud's court, a position that gave him invaluable access to elite resources and networks of knowledge. He spent at least some of his time in Ghazna itself, the last of his surviving observations taking place there in 1021. Many years later, in 1034, he composed a bibliography of the works of Abu Bakr al-Razi (see above), to which he added a list of 113 of his own, but he would continue to write until his death sometime after 1050. By that time he had written something like 180 works.

The crucible of Ghaznavid imperialism

The year 1017 can be seen as the hinge upon which al-Biruni's life would swing: serving three generations of Ghaznavid masters (Mahmud, his son Mas'ud, and the latter's son Mawdud) accorded considerable benefits. One anecdote has it that Mas'ud (r. 1030–41) offered him an elephant-load of silver upon the completion of his major work on astronomy, the *Qanun*, a handbook of observations (the coordinates of some 600 cities are recorded, including ninety from India and China) and theoretical discussions. The story has it that al-Biruni declined the gift; perhaps it was simply too ostentatious.

Whatever the case, the impact of Ghaznavid rule went beyond patronage. For war – and the dislocation and new patterns of rule that came with it – opened up India and Indian knowledge to al-Biruni's curious and observant eye. As Mahmud's armies plundered Indian cities, enslaving thousands and enriching Mahmud's treasuries, Indian scholars were transported to Ghazna, and al-Biruni, for his part, travelled in the Punjab and the borders of Kashmir. He was doing science – he established through observation and calculation the latitudes of eleven Indian towns – and acquiring the means and materials of learning: the Sanskrit language (along with some Indian dialects), and scores of Sanskrit works. In a translation and adaptation of a Sanskrit work, Patañjali's *Yoga-Sutras*, al-Biruni notes that it belongs to a set of texts that were read to him 'letter by letter'; his slips nonetheless show that he was in many respects self-taught in Sanskrit.⁹³

What is the significance of his appropriation of Indian knowledge? British and French colonialism of the nineteenth century combined with deeper currents of learning to produce that body of textual and ethnographic

knowledge about the Middle East that is called Orientalism. Several Muslim historians, most notably al-Mas'udi (d. 956) and Rashid al-Din (see below), took serious interest in non-Islamic South and East Asia; but al-Biruni, living as he did in a grand moment of Ghaznavid imperialism, was singular in his sustained interest in cultural comparison. He laid foundations for a Ghaznavid Orientalism that the dynasty was too shortlived to build.

Al-Biruni's absorption of Indian learning bore fruit in his scientific works, especially in astronomy and mathematics; it included, *inter alia*, Indian calculations of Pi. As such, he represents an important figure in both the advance of science and the history of science. A global history of the astrolabe, to take one example, begins in Greece, but runs through Abbasid Baghdad – and al-Biruni's Ghazna. 'The astrolabe is an instrument [invented by] the Greeks', he wrote in a work on astrology; 'by its aid it is possible easily and accurately to know the time and how much of the day or night has passed, as well as other things too numerous to mention'.⁹⁴ In fact, it is in no small part thanks to another of al-Biruni's works, a detailed treatise on the astrolabe, that we know as much as we do about how they were actually manufactured. This said, al-Biruni did more than absorb, transform and transmit Indian exact science, naturalizing it into an Islamic idiom that would give roots to European learning. His vista was wider and his project more ambitious.

The subject of Ghaznavid imperialism, India was given monumental form in a book known in English simply as *India*, which al-Biruni completed in 1030, the year of Mahmud's death. His longest single work, and sufficiently authoritative that it was consulted (and partially translated into Persian) by Rashid al-Din, *India* is a compendium of Indian (especially Hindu) culture, history and learning that draws upon his deep research, along with sustained interaction with Indian scholars. In the precious (and somewhat uncritical) words of its great translator and commentator, it 'is like a magic island of quiet, impartial research in the midst of a world of clashing swords, burning towns, and plundered temples'.⁹⁵ *India* is encyclopaedic in scope, addressing religious ideas and practices (including rites, festivals and worship), literature, philosophy, mathematics and units of measurement, writing systems, astronomy, geography – and much more besides. The observations are patient and exhaustive, his reading and command of the texts so acute that they often qualify as philological in character.

An example is a passage on the issue of intercalation, the practice of inserting an extra unit of time, such as a day, week or month, in order to



A page from one of only three known copies of a treatise by al-Biruni on astrolabes, a tool used to predict the positions of the sun, moon and planets. The illustration shows the internal gearing of this mechanical calendar and may be the first surviving work to illustrate such miniature technology.

align the cultural product that is a calendar with the unalterable rhythms of nature – typically the phases of the moon or sun. The passage, which begins the fifty-first chapter of *India*, brings to the surface his deep interest in dating systems and chronologies, which also sits near the centre of his *Chronology of Ancient Nations*. It also illustrates his penchant for analogy and comparison, techniques necessary to elucidate features of Hinduism, which was more-or-less unknown to an eleventh-century Muslim readership.

The months of the Hindus are lunar, their years solar; therefore their new year's day must in each solar year fall by so much earlier as the lunar year is shorter than the solar [roughly speaking, by eleven days]. If this precession makes up one complete month, they act in the same way as the Jews, who make the year a leap year of thirteen months by reckoning the month Adar twice, and in a similar way to the pre-Islamic Arabs, who in a so-called 'postponing year' postponed the new year's day, thereby extending the preceding year to the duration of thirteen months.

The Hindus call the year in which a month is repeated in the common language malamasa. Mala means the dirt that clings to the hand. As such dirt is thrown away, thus the leap year is thrown away out of the calculation, and the number of the months of a year remains twelve. However, in the literature the leap month is called adhimasa... As the religious reason of this theory of intercalation the Hindus mention a passage of the Veda, which they have read to us, to the following tenor: 'If the day of conjunction, i.e. the first lunar day of the month, passes without the sun's marching from one zodiacal sign to the other, and if this takes place on the following day, the preceding month falls out of the calculation.' The meaning of this passage is not correct, and the fault must have risen with the man who recited and translated the passage to me...⁹⁶

The acute reader of manuscripts, who queries copyists' errors and proposes various emendations, is also the historian who casts a sceptical eye upon implausible historical claims, and the experimentalist who patiently observes eclipses, reckons latitudes and categorizes minerals.

'There are people whose talk within their community is never free from reference to topics concerning transmigration,' he writes in his adaption of Patañjali's *Yoga-Sutras*, 'to the misfortunes of incarnation, unification and generation not according to the mode of ordinary birth. For this reason, their talk, when it is heard, has a flavour composed of the beliefs of the ancient Greeks, of the Christian sects, and of the Sufi leaders.'⁹⁷ Here, as elsewhere, we have the kernel of a comparative method, which aligns major religious traditions in accordance with defining features:

Just as the declaration of the article of faith is the emblem of Muslim belief, Trinitarianism the sign of Christianity and the institution of the Sabbath that of Judaism, so is metempsychosis [the transmigration of souls] the banner of the Indian religion, such that he who does not profess it does not belong to it and is not considered to be a member.⁹⁸

It has become fashionable to argue that Hinduism was 'constructed, invented, or imagined' by nineteenth-century British Orientalists.⁹⁹ The truth of the matter is messier and more interesting: the lineaments of a distinct Hindu tradition predate the colonial period, as both Indian and non-Indian sources attest. Among the latter, pride of place belongs to al-Biruni.

Part 3

A Provisional Synthesis

1050–1250

In about 1165, a traveller and writer named Benjamin of Tudela set off from the north of Spain on a journey that would last about eight years. In the twelfth century there was no question of heading west: for a scholar, pilgrim, merchant or tourist, the world lay to the east, in the great cities and sites of Cairo, Jerusalem, Baghdad and Mecca. Benjamin of Tudela is notable not for the length or ambition of his journey; other travellers were more intrepid, adventurous and tireless. He is notable because he left behind a travelogue. Edited and redacted after Benjamin himself finished with it, the text is something other than a disinterested account. A mix of observation and hearsay (his actual travels seem to have fallen well short of his account, which extends all the way to Sri Lanka), his sometime fanciful 'itinerary' has been called 'a system for organizing diverse stores of information – both empirical and imaginary – about foreign lands.'¹⁰⁰ Still, for all of its flaws, *The Book of Travels* allows us an outsider's views of the twelfth-century Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world – a bit naïve, and vividly observed.

Because Benjamin was a Jew writing for Jewish readers, his travelogue highlights the Jewish communities that lay on his itinerary. Naturally, he visited Baghdad, whose Jewish population he estimated to be 40,000, served by twenty-eight synagogues. The account begins with a description of the caliph: 'All of the kings of Islam obey him,' he writes for a

Hebrew-reading audience that was presumably unfamiliar with Islamic political thought and life in Iraq; 'he occupies a similar position to that held by the Pope over the Christians'. His is a huge residential enclosure of palaces ('great buildings of marble and columns of silver and gold, and carvings upon rare stones are fixed in the walls'), gardens and lakes. There, servants and retainers attend to the caliph's needs, while the caliph himself holds court, proudly. 'He is truthful and trustworthy, speaking peace to all men.' Benjamin then remarks that '[t]he men of Islam see him but once in a year', during the celebrations of the month of Ramadan, when he leaves the palace precinct, witnessed by an array of 'princes', to proceed in great ceremony to a nearby mosque, where he delivers a formal address. 'Afterwards he leaves the mosque and returns alone to his palace by way of the river Hiddekel [Tigris], and the grandees of Islam accompany him in ships on the river until he enters his palace...He does not leave the palace again for a whole year.'¹⁰¹

It is difficult to imagine that Benjamin understood everything that he saw. His list of 'princes' is a stereotyped, quasi-Biblical collection of ethnonyms and toponyms, which include 'Togarma [the lands of the Turks], Daylam [northern Iran], Persia, Media and Ghuzz'. He will not have known that of these the 'Ghuzz' mattered most; for all of the caliph's symbolic gestures, it was the Ghuzz tribesmen who possessed real military and so political power. Nor is it clear if Benjamin realized that the caliph's palace was actually a gilded cage, his only real function being to carry out the solemn ceremony that allowed him a brief escape. Notwithstanding the prestige of his office, the caliph had become a figurehead and symbol of the unity of the Islamic community, who, trading on that prestige and symbolism, only rarely participated in the effective discharge of power.

In order to make our own sense of the period between 1050 and 1250, we can profitably take two features of Benjamin's account in turn.

The Saljuq Middle East

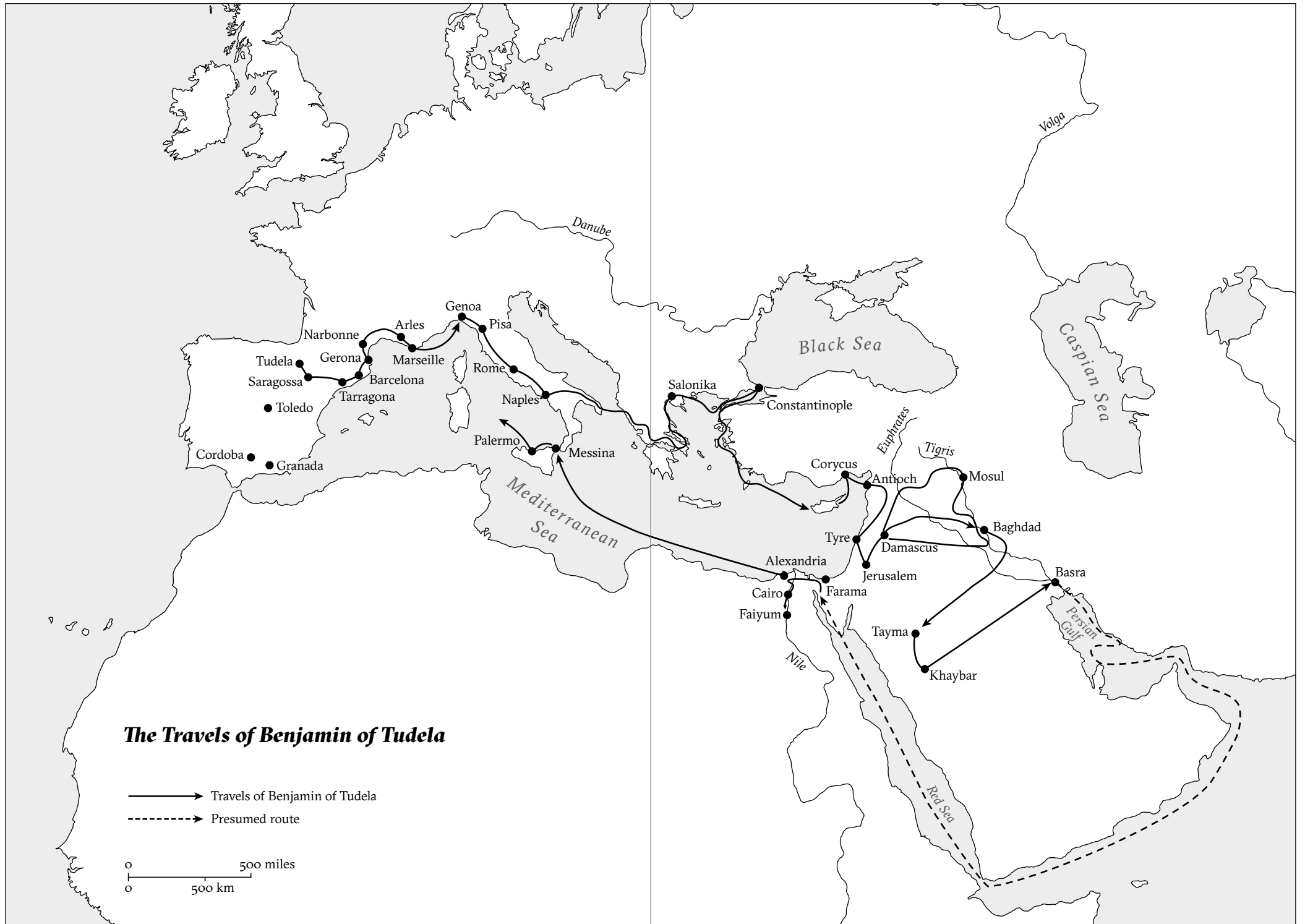
In the early tenth century Ibn Fadlan had run into Ghuzz tribesmen on his way to the Volga region, and here 'Ghuzz' is an Arabic term for a confederation of twenty or so Turkish tribes, ultimate power lying with a clan named after a legendary tenth-century chief called Saljuq. Precisely how these steppe nomads first coalesced remains unclear. Nor can much be said about the eponymous Saljuq himself, whose memory was dim already to historians writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The historian Ibn al-Athir (d. 1233), who only has the vaguest ideas about his conversion and exploits, is an example:

He received the blessing of true faith and the society of Muslims, and his position became more and more exalted and his power and the people's loyalty to him grew. He lived in the region of Jand [the right bank of the Jaxartes river, south of the Aral Sea] and from there he continually raided the pagan Turks. The ruler used to take tribute from the Muslims of those areas. Saljuq drove out his officials and the region passed fully to the Muslims.¹⁰²

What is altogether clearer is that Saljuq's sons expanded upon his successes; one, Mikha'il, is said to have died carrying out jihad. After a series of victories in the 1030s and 1040s, the Saljuqs, now under the leadership of Mikha'il's son, Tughril, entered Baghdad peacefully in 1055, taking permanent control of the enfeebled Abbasid capital by 1059. Their military power made their advance irresistible, but their enthusiastic embrace of Sunnism also made them an attractive alternative to the Shi'ite Buyids, whose century-long rule of Iraq thus ended. The caliph had no choice but to acknowledge their power. The stage direction, which called for the effective ruler to publicize his loyalty to his symbolic partner, was clear from the start: as Ibn al-Athir has it, 'Tughril Beg sent asking the caliph for permission to enter Baghdad, which was granted.'¹⁰³ The Buyids had denuded some of what remained of the caliph's real power in the tenth century, but when the Saljuq Tughril took on the title of 'sultan', their impotence became even more public.

'So began the remarkable career of the Turks as empire-builders in the Islamic Middle East' is how a modern historian has characterized these events.¹⁰⁴ The Turkish conquests and migrations of the eleventh century mark a fundamental transition in Middle Eastern history: the region enters a 400-year phase that would be punctuated by serial migrations and invasions by Turkish and Mongol-Turkish empire-builders. Put in geographical rather than ethnic terms, the military power of steppe nomads, long a feature of the history of Central Asia and the Islamic frontier, had now come to determine the political shape of the Middle Eastern interior. We shall see that the greatest of these empire-builders were the Mongols, whose project was put into motion by Chinggis (Gengis) Khan (d. 1227); the last was by Timur (Tamerlane; d. 1405), who briefly reconstituted, on a smaller scale, Chinggis' polity.

A general pattern is thus discernible from the Saljuq period. Habituated from childhood to riding and hunting, nomad herders and warriors were readily trained into fast, coordinated and highly destructive military forces that could prey upon the armies of settled states, be they Middle Eastern or Chinese. Long on military power fuelled by their horses, these



The Travels of Benjamin of Tudela



An illustration from Rashid al-Din's *Compendium of Chronicles*, which anachronistically depicts late 10th-century armies in Mongol armour, c. 1314.

Turko-Mongol rulers were still short on the cultural and bureaucratic resources necessary to rule the complex societies of the Islamic Middle East. Making durable claims upon land and people thus meant dismounting from those horses – and, inevitably, assimilating the traditions of conquered societies. So in addition to settling in large numbers – the migrations of this period effected a permanent change to the human geography of the Middle East outside of Arabia – the conquerors appropriated the region's traditions and institutions. Administrative and bureaucratic structures were retained, in the Saljuq case the inheritance coming mainly from the Samanids, Ghaznavids and Buyids, whose realms they now claimed. The principal language of learning remained Arabic, but Persian, already growing in usage, supplanted it in the administration, deeply imprinting itself upon Turkish.

Most important, Islamic institutions of rule, not least the caliphate itself, were preserved. Until the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258, Abbasid caliphs and Turkish chieftains-turned-sultans thus co-existed, the former throwing a legitimizing shadow upon the poorly credentialed outsiders who could, at the very worst, claim to preserve order. As we shall see, scholars such as **al-Ghazali** were forced to reconcile the theory of the caliphate with the reality of non-caliphal rule. The Saljuqs (and other Turkish dynasties) were not uniform in their religious loyalties, but championing

Sunnism was a decisive part of their ideological programme, especially as it contrasted with the Shi'ism espoused by their rivals, the Fatimids of Egypt (see below). In this, they were tapping into wells of Sunnism that had been filling for some time; **Karima al-Marwaziyya**, a woman celebrated for her knowledge of Prophetic traditions, is an example.

Crusaders and other westerners

So it was into late Saljuq Baghdad that Benjamin of Tudela entered. In line with Turkish traditions, the Saljuq empire was always a confederated state, with branches in Syria and Iran; the latter was based in the city of Kirman, which projected its power to the west, including the coast of the Gulf, where **Abu al-Qasim Ramisht's** trading ships transported goods to and from South and East Asia. But in the early twelfth century, that confederated state began to fragment. The causes of that fragmentation were in part internal – the very logic of confederation and devolution. But there were external pressures, too. One long-standing one was that Fatimid, Shi'ite empire based in Cairo, whose improbable name derives from a pseudo-genealogy to 'Ali's wife, Fatima. (Benjamin of Tudela, who visited Cairo on the return leg of his journey, reports the gist of this genealogy; 'the commander of the faithful' (that is, the caliph) is a descendant of Abu Talib, as he puts it.) The Fatimid empire had its origins in North Africa,

and by 969 their armies had taken Egypt, which had fallen out of direct Abbasid control earlier that century. Palestine and parts of Syria soon came under their control, too, the latter becoming the frontier between a Shi'ite west and Sunni east.

Another source of pressure upon the Saljuqs came from further west, for in mid-July of 1099, Fatimid Jerusalem fell to another set of conquerors, these coming from the northwest edge of Eurasia. They could hardly have known it at the time, but these conquerors – Latin Christians, most speaking varieties of Old French and Provençale – were participating in the 'First' of what are commonly known as the Crusades. But both the numbering and the terminology postdate these events, and the earliest accounts are as much propaganda as history; it is now clear that this holy warring began earlier in the century, and was a Mediterranean-wide phenomenon that carried on well after the last 'Crusade'. The Norman conquest of Sicily in the 1060s and early 1070s forms part of this broad crusading dynamic, and in Sicily it produced the culturally hybrid society of which **al-Idrisi** was a part.

So, too, the Spain of **Ibn Hazm**. Spain was then under the rule of an Umayyad state, whose origins lie in the eighth century, and which crystallized as caliphate in the early tenth century. A tradition of nationally inflected history writing truncates Spain's Islamic history by dating the Spanish reconquest from the eighth century – 'what was lost in seven years, it took seven hundred years to regain', it was once written and frequently repeated, as if the events of 1492 can be seen as the culmination of processes dating from 715, when Visigothic Spain fell to the Muslims. The term 'Reconquista' usually denotes the major territorial shifts that began in the middle of the eleventh century and lasted until the middle of the thirteenth (Cordoba fell in 1236), whereupon a new stasis was reached until the late fifteenth, when Islamic rule in the Nasrid kingdom of Granada was finally extinguished. **Ibn Rushd** (Averroes), a native of Cordoba, fared better than Ibn Hazm: he received the patronage of the Almohads, who controlled parts of both North Africa and Muslim Spain, and died before the catastrophic defeat in 1212 of the Almohad leader, Muhammad al-Nasir, to Christians from the north.

In the meantime, the Crusaders' victory over the Fatimids in Jerusalem in 1099 installed Christian rule for nearly a century. In 1171, Saljuq, Crusader and Egyptian history converged in the person of **Saladin**, whose armies ended Fatimid rule in Egypt, restoring it to Sunni control. He was a scourge of the Christians – the 'rod' of God's 'fury', as a chronicler of the Third Crusade begins, sent by Him 'to rage and exterminate the obstinate

people'.¹⁰⁵ And he was a scourge of Muslims, too, especially of the non-Sunni variety. The longest lived of the so-called Crusader states survived until as late as 1291.

It has been argued that just as the eleventh century saw the rise of steppe power, so it witnessed a decisive shift in military and political power towards the western Mediterranean – the rise of European naval power in particular, and the ascendancy of European states more generally. One historian has spoken of a 'Mongol-Western European condominium over civilized Eurasia'.¹⁰⁶ It is true that the eleventh and twelfth centuries saw significant demographic growth and urbanization in parts of Europe, as well as increasingly potent navies, including those of Genoa, Pisa and Amalfi, which played a role in maintaining the Crusaders' states and their commercial concessions. To take one of many examples: the once impressive Fatimid capital of al-Mahdiyya (in modern-day Tunisia) was ignominiously sacked in 1087. For reasons not fully understood, Europeans produced heavier and better-armed warships that consistently outfought their Muslim adversaries, especially during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. By the late twelfth century, Italian ships were navigating with compasses, a technology with Chinese origins that had travelled westwards on Muslim ships.

All of this said, the translation of naval power into *durable* European hegemony remained three or four centuries away. Steppe power, as we shall see in the following pages, still ruled the day: it was through the speed of horses and battle skills of nomads, most coming from the inland sea of Central and Inner Asia, that violence was most effectively organized in the service of state- and empire-building.

Ibn Hazm was a brilliant thinker and Umayyad loyalist who was born two generations too late. The Umayyads of Iberia established their own caliphate in 929, but by 994, the year of his birth, the unified polity was already proving brittle, the authority of the office itself having been usurped by the chamberlain. At about the halfway point of his life, this Spanish Umayyad dynasty itself came to an end, a political watershed that more or less corresponds with a redirection of Ibn Hazm's energies from politics to scholarship. Stymied in his ambition to serve what turned out to be fickle power, he found a voice for his frustration in the written word, producing a vast corpus of work that featured an austere model of juridical thought. The model not only satisfied his drive for certainty and consistency, but also put paid to a legal institution accommodating the power that had disappointed him.

Ibn Hazm's early life was as eventful as the hundreds of essays, epistles and books that he wrote would prove controversial. He claimed descent from Persians who had converted in the service of the Umayyads of Syria (r. 661–750), but the claim may say more about his political inclinations than his genes. For information about his birth, we have him in his own words, which are preserved in a twelfth-century source: 'I was born in Cordoba, in the eastern part, in the suburb of Munyat al-Mansur, before sunrise and after the imam's morning call to prayer, at the end of the night of Wednesday, the last day of the moon in the magnificent month of Ramadan, with Scorpio in the ascendant' (7 November 994).¹⁰⁷ His father had served as minister in the Umayyad state until the fall of his patrons, the boy still being in his early teenage years.

The change of fortunes exiled the family from the luxury of their residence in a palace-city outside of Cordoba. His own words make something of how the walls enclosing his cloistered life came crashing down, and modern scholars have followed suit, explaining his interest in the psychology of love with reference to his experience in the female-dominated domestic life of his childhood. Whatever the connection between experience and exposition, Ibn Hazm's father would die when he was about sixteen, and by this time Ibn Hazm himself had been caught up in political intrigues. Between 1018 and 1027, he would serve three times as vizier during the short-lived reigns of three Umayyad caliphs, the brief and bitter highlights of a career otherwise chequered by imprisonment and exile.

It is tempting to anchor the subject matter of his best-known work, *The Ring of the Dove*, in the demoralization that he felt. *The Ring of the Dove*,



The congregational mosque, Cordoba, 785–987. Ibn Hazm reportedly lectured to crowds here until he was forced to leave and move to Majorca.



The title page of the only known manuscript of *The Ring of the Dove* by Ibn Hazm, copied in 1338 and held in Leiden University Library.

which he began to compose sometime after 1022 (apparently at the request of a contemporary), is an exposition of the psychology and conventions of love, delivered in prose and poetry, and based upon his own observations and experience, reading and research. 'I am aware that certain of my fanatical enemies will be shocked by my having composed a book of this kind',¹⁰⁸ he volunteered, mindful that a book devoted to such matters as love at first sight, love letters, lovers' glances, heartbreak and the like would attract criticism. The subject is perennial – he who hasn't loved, hasn't lived, etc. – but there is no confusing his illustrations for our own experience. To exemplify the very worst kind of betrayal, he writes how the promise of a love affair between high-born youth and lowly slave girl was betrayed by the very messenger who was exchanging their missives: he beat the naïve youth to the punch by purchasing the slave girl.

Although *The Ring of the Dove* can be taken to suggest a nostalgic withdrawal from public life – a meditation occasioned by loss – its thirty chapters also reflect a systematic mind. The political culture of the Iberian Peninsula was fragmenting (the caliphate itself imploded in 1031), but a life divided by political and intellectual ambitions was unified by a determination to produce a coherent body of thought. His range and productivity

were extraordinary: apparently some 400 works (about 80,000 pages) written in various branches of law, philosophy (e.g. logic and ethics), theology, genealogy, heresiography and religious controversy, and belles-lettres. The great bulk of these works do not survive, not merely due to the loss that inevitably resulted from manuscript transmission before automated printing, but also because his work was occasionally suppressed: some of his books were destroyed, and others were made the subject of polemic and disapprobation throughout the eleventh century. Penning refutations of Ibn Hazm even became a way of making a name for oneself.

This is because many of his works promoted a distinct – and, ultimately, highly unpopular – hermeneutical approach to knowledge and so law, a 'literalism' that rejected all interpretations and rulings that were not based upon the explicit language of Qur'anic scripture and certain, accepted Prophetic traditions. The Arabic term is 'Zahiri' (English, Zahirite), from the term *zahir* ('external', 'apparent'). The origins of this literalist school of thinking can be found in the teachings of a ninth-century jurist, but it was Ibn Hazm, in the eleventh, who popularized Zahirism in Iberia and, to some extent, outside of it, too.

He did so in a number of ways. One was teaching: accounts have him lecturing to crowds in the mosque of Cordoba until his legal adversaries forced him out; still, he persevered, relocating to Majorca where a favourable governor allowed him to preach openly during his ten-year stay between 1038 and 1048. His followers seem to have been concentrated in Majorca and the region of Seville, but he also passed on doctrines to students, including several sons, who worked to spread their master's views both in Iberia and in the central Islamic lands further east. And of course he wrote copiously, producing among other books what became a standard compendium of Zahirī law, *al-Muhalla*.

An unlikely example

The 'apparent' is not the same as the obvious,¹⁰⁹ Ibn Hazm argues. Because law and theology are so wide-ranging, let us take a single, and perhaps unlikely example: Ibn Hazm's view on the legal status of homosexual acts.¹¹⁰ The example is apt because it illustrates both the discipline of his approach and (perhaps) its surprising results. For a conservative hermeneutic can yield legal judgments that are considerably less unforgiving than one might think. Nowadays Bible-thumpers are apt to adduce Leviticus to inveigh against gays, ignoring any number of the Bible's explicit prohibitions against other practices that were once taboo. Zahirī literalism as practised by Ibn Hazm was altogether more intellectually honest.

What are the legal problems concerning same-sex sexuality? Muslim jurists agreed that sexual contact between members of the same gender was illicit, but, lawyers being lawyers, the discussions are predictably complicated. For example, distinctions were made between 'active' (that is, penetrating) and 'passive' participants, and according to legal status (free or slave, married or single). These and other complications aside, they held that such sex was a serious crime, comparable to adultery (sex outside of marriage or legally recognized concubinage), and so necessarily punishable by death by stoning or severe flogging. Technically, most legal schools regarded it as a *hadd* crime (like banditry, theft, apostasy and a few others), whose punishment, being prescribed in the Qur'an, was not left to the discretion of a judge. Presumably, the Bible-thumpers would find themselves in agreement.

But Ibn Hazm took objection to conventional legal thinking. The Qur'anic text is clear on what belongs in this category of *hadd* crimes, and homosexual acts, he endeavours to show, do not belong to it. God does speak of the 'act' of the people of Lot, but he argues that we cannot say that the people of Lot perished because of homosexual acts, since they were also unbelievers (and may have perished for that reason); besides, Lot's wife perished, too, even though no one would have it that she had committed a homosexual act. Nor is settled legal opinion (*ijma'*, 'consensus') to be respected, since the Prophetic traditions adduced in support of this opinion have problematic transmission histories. On a matter as grave as taking another man's life, one can scarcely depend on traditions passed on by dubious or unknown transmitters, especially since the transmission history of a report that explicitly *excludes* the homosexual act from the *hadd* punishments is sound. A single clear report vitiates a multitude of doubtful ones.

What, then, does Ibn Hazm propose as punishment? Whatever his own attitudes were, as a jurist, Ibn Hazm regarded homosexual acts as reprehensible, apparently no less than his fellow jurists. Some have claimed that *The Ring of the Dove* suggests a certain ambiguity in his views on homoerotic love, but the evidence is itself ambiguous at best. In any case, his concern as a jurist was for physical acts rather than emotional states: love is one thing, sex another, and there was nothing illicit about the pain of unrequited love. Where he therefore differs from most other jurists – and certainly the Malikis, who dominated in Iberia – is in legal reasoning and consequence: in the absence of scriptural clarity, and basing himself upon reports that he regards as sound, he submits that the homosexual is subject to lesser punishment (ten lashes; imprisonment). In other words, the crime



Pyxis of al-Mughira, 968. The exquisite craftsmanship of this ivory container, thought to have been made outside of Cordoba and to have belonged to the son of caliph Abd al-Rahman III, indicates the sophistication of the court circles in which Ibn Hazm grew up.

is punished and the community protected, but the criminal can be given the opportunity to repent and reform.

Ibn Hazm here as elsewhere is thus insisting upon a literal reading of the Qur'an, and recognizing only the consensus of the Prophet's Companions (who, by definition, were contemporaries of the Prophet), provided that it can be rigorously documented. It is only the Companions, he writes, 'who are the ones who saw the Messenger of God and heard him. Their consensus on what they agreed upon is the consensus which one is obliged to follow because they transmitted it from the Messenger of God, who undoubtedly transmitted it from God.'¹¹¹ Ibn Hazm's evidentiary standards being so high, what results is not only a very circumscribed body of law, but also a lean theology: God is knowable only insofar as He revealed Himself in the Qur'an, and attempts to describe Him in more detail than that are to be rejected as anthropomorphism.

In several ways, Ibn Hazm thus breaks from mainstream legal thinking, which, institutionalized in four 'schools' (Hanbali, Hanafi, Shafi'i and Maliki), shared several bedrock hermeneutic tools and techniques. Among

the most important of these was transforming implicit into explicit by inferring judgments from comparable passages (e.g. by analogy). Another was cleaving to settled teaching, especially by following considerably looser constructions of consensus (e.g. of generations of scholars subsequent to the Companions). Both principles were vehemently rejected by Ibn Hazm. And so, perhaps predictably, Ibn Hazm was spurned by the legal establishment. His school of thought found only very temporary favour among some post-caliphal rulers of Iberia.

17 **Karima al-Marwaziyya, *hadith* scholar** (1070)

Earlier we saw that 'A'isha was more than Muhammad's wife: as a protagonist in the drama of the very birth pangs of Islam, she symbolized a certain kind of feminine virtue. But she was more than chaste or courageous: as a contemporary of Muhammad's, she also bore witness to his words and deeds. In the technical terminology of Islamic learning, she was a 'Companion', who passed on her knowledge in the form of legal traditions (*hadith*), which recorded Muhammad's normative conduct (*sunna*) for future generations, the text (*matn*) of each *hadith* being prefaced by the names of those who constituted the chain of transmitters (*isnad*).

Karima al-Marwaziyya belonged to one of these generations of transmitters, and was unremarkable in all respects save one. She was a woman.¹¹² Remarkable, but scarcely exceptional: a recent book has identified no fewer than 8,000 women among the trained specialists who transmitted *hadiths* over the 1,400-year history of Islamic learning. Given the extraordinary scale of the enterprise, the number is less impressive than one might think. Attitudes about gender often did throw up barriers that inhibited or prevented women from participating fully in the culture of learning, much as they prevented women from participating fully in trade and politics. Even so, the more we come to learn about women in Islamic societies, the more variegated the picture becomes and, in general, the less marginal women appear to have been. Tireless, scrupulous and long-lived, Karima occupied an important position within the *hadith* culture of her time.

To understand what makes Karima remarkable, and, more generally, the role women played as transmitters, we should ask ourselves why scholars took the trouble of coining the technical terms that began this entry. What is the logic that lies behind *sahabi* ('Companion') and *sunna* (normative conduct of the Prophet), as preserved by Prophetic traditions?

The trouble becomes understandable in the light of Islamic views on God's providential direction of humankind. For the great majority of Muslim scholars held that God had made His will manifest by sending prophets with scriptures, His messenger and message alike complementing each other in articulating God's merciful guidance: the Torah 'came down' to Moses, the Gospel to Jesus, and the Qur'an to Muhammad. Muhammad's life, doctrine further held, was the last and definitive episode of prophecy. He was the 'seal of the prophets'. His death did not spell the end of God's merciful direction, however. Fulfilling God's commands in the long term required preserving the Qur'an and his exemplary conduct, the latter in *hadith*. And because the Qur'an actually contains little by way of law (500 relevant verses, it is typically said), *hadith* were called upon to answer all manner of legal questions. According to this view, the Prophet understood that his judgments were authoritative and his conduct and words normative, fully consistent with God's will as expressed in the Qur'an. God would neither leave His community without sufficient guidance, nor confuse His believers by sending a message that was inconsistent with what His messenger had said or done.

In the case of the Qur'an, the text was memorized and recorded on writing material (stone, bone, skin) within decades of Muhammad's death. Within two or three generations, an authoritative version was emerging, and, along with it, a set of scribal and scholarly practices that guaranteed the scrupulous transmission of Qur'anic manuscripts. The origins of Prophetic traditions are considerably murkier. Suffice it to say here, from the early ninth century (or perhaps even a bit earlier) the scholarly tradition held that Muhammad's contemporaries functioned as 'Companions' in the technical sense; some (such as the celebrated Abu Hurayra, d. c. 680), it was claimed, knew as many as 5,000 *hadith*. In time, specialist transmitters emerged, some legendary figures with exceptional memories and indefatigable energies. They travelled the length of the Islamic world to collect *hadith*, often taking notes as *aides-mémoire*. What better way to remain faithful to God's will than by establishing practices that preserved it long after original Muslims had passed and their descendants had settled far from Arabia?

The ninth century saw written compilations being assembled to meet exacting standards of authenticity. For the ocean of *hadith* having grown so huge, streams of spurious, dubious or otherwise problematic reports had entered into circulation. A relatively early collection belongs to Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 855), who compiled 28,000 reports that he was prepared to consider sound. At much the same time, al-Bukhari (d. 870) was selecting



Section headings from a copy of al-Bukhari's *Sahih*, a collection of *hadith*, from Ottoman North Africa, c. 1769.

the contents for what would prove the most authoritative of all *hadith* collections, choosing 2,700 reports from the 600,000 that he knew, rejecting the rest. His was eventually counted as one of the 'Six Books', the last of which was compiled by al-Nasa'i (d. 915). We saw earlier that al-Tabari was the last of the seminal jurists of the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, whose students preserved and elaborated distinctive systems that made sense of God's law as it was preserved in *hadith* and the Qur'an. The school that crystallized around his thought came too late to survive; meanwhile, Ibn Hazm's was too exacting and austere. For these and other reasons, the Sunnis settled on four schools that would prevail up until the disruptions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, having taken widespread institutional form in *madrasas* during the twelfth and thirteenth: the Malikis (mainly in the western Mediterranean, including Spain); the Shafi'is; the Hanbalis (who would come to dominate Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century); and the Hanafis (mainly in the Islamic east and Anatolia).

Education and gender

This – an increasingly professionalized scholarly enterprise, one that intertwined reading, reciting and learning, and valued authoritative learning bestowed by revered teacher upon prized student – was the *hadith* culture into which Karima al-Marwaziyya was born.

Virtually nothing is known about Karima's childhood, and a birth date of 975 is just a good guess. But her name (Marwaziyya, 'from Marv') and the identity of her teachers clearly place her in eastern Iran, which, along with lands beyond the Oxus, was a hotbed of *hadith* scholarship. We read that she remained unmarried, a statement which is presumably intended mainly to illustrate her single-minded devotion to learning. It may also be taken to suggest a social advantage that otherwise remains implicit: a family of sufficient resources to educate and maintain her. Much as al-Tabari lived off the rents his family's estates produced, one imagines that she was a woman of means.

A great deal of her education would have been conducted in private or in single-sexed settings, but certainly not all of it. We know that one of her teachers was a man named al-Kushmihani (d. 999), and this compatriot would be instrumental to her success and renown. This is because he had studied with a student of al-Bukhari himself. Although Karima was one of many students of al-Kushmihani (and al-Kushmihani only one of many students of al-Bukhari's student), she was exceptionally long lived – perhaps almost 100 years old at her death. And this, in combination with her reputation for scholarly precision and acuteness, meant that in her senior years especially she possessed a precious commodity: two-remove discipleship from al-Bukhari, the master himself. In this context, the fewer the removes from authoritative texts, the better, for to understand a book properly meant not merely reading it, but also ensuring that one's reading was accurate, and this, in turn, meant being taught it by someone qualified to offer an authoritative reading. One hundred and fifty or two hundred years after al-Bukhari's death in 870, almost anyone with a serious interest in al-Bukhari's book would try to learn it from the likes of Karima al-Marwaziyya.

So it was Karima's command of al-Bukhari's book that made her remarkable, and explains her popularity as a teacher in Mecca, where she lived and died in 1070. There she attracted scholars and scholars-to-be from as far away as Spain, many attending her lectures while in Mecca as pilgrims. Just as she had been granted a certificate (*ijaza*) to teach al-Bukhari, so she granted certificates to her students, perpetuating distinctly Islamic scholarly practices that combined textual and aural transmission. Precisely how Karima operated in the largely male environment of scholarship must be inferred, but one anecdote nicely illustrates how she taught so effectively, even in a 'gendered' context:

She was very precise in her writing, and when she transmitted hadiths [from memory] she would check her own written copy. She possessed

*discernment and knowledge, and transmitted the Sahih [of al-Bukhari] many times...Ubayy [a scholar] reported: 'She took out the copy [of the Sahih], and I sat down next down to her, and copied out seven leaves. I wanted to check what I'd written with her copy by myself, but she said: "No – not until you've done the checking with me". So I did the checking, reading back to her from the hadith about [the Companion] Zahir.'*¹¹³

In the etiquette of mixed-gender teaching, sensitivities were greatest in the case of women of childbearing age, and for much of her career, Karima's advanced age may have worked to her advantage.

Karima had another advantage. Living before the institutionalization of education in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Karima was not burdened with the task of negotiating around the male-only preserves of *madrasas* and *hadith* schools, which tended to exclude females, whether students or professors. In the case of al-Ghazali (see below), appointment to a teaching post in a *madrasa* was a valuable token of status. It is true that there would be alternative institutions, such as the hospices that featured women who taught female residents. Indeed, we know about positions of responsibility that necessarily and exclusively fell to women: Umm Zaynab (d. 1315) was in charge of a hospice in Cairo that cared for divorced or separated women.¹¹⁴ Even so, in scale and prestige, hospices did not rival *madrasas*. For these and other reasons – especially scruples that attached to the prospect of women exercising authority over men – it is that rare woman who is identified as a jurist (*faqih*). A rough parallel can be found in what we would now call health care. For obvious reasons, the craft and profession of midwifery was the preserve of women, who naturally possessed considerable understanding of obstetrics. But when one looks in the relevant sources for female *physicians*, one comes up nearly empty.¹¹⁵

On the other hand, in Karima's period, as before and after it, informal modes of learning – especially study circles that took place in houses, mosques and markets – could and did admit women, both as students and teachers. In Karima's case, she attracted the likes of al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 1071), a scholar who compiled the single most important biographical dictionary of Baghdad. Centuries later, leading historians of the Mamluk period also learned at the feet of women. In fact, there is no doubt that many women were admitted to the ranks of the *very* learned. Another biographical dictionary, this one of the ninth Islamic century (fifteenth, CE), includes among its 12,000 figures about 1,000 women.

In many cases it appears that women went out of their way to train female disciples. It would be anachronistic to propose that Muhammad's

wife, 'A'isha, 'trained' anyone, living as she did before *hadith* were the object of disciplined study. But the fact remains that the most celebrated female scholar of the late first Islamic century, 'Amra b. 'Abd al-Rahman (d. 716),¹¹⁶ was regarded as the best source of *hadiths* from 'A'isha, who, it is no coincidence, was also her aunt. In these early days of Islam, before knowledge became specialized, 'Amra seems even to have exercised some scholarly authority on questions of law. What is the legal status of digging up graves, and selling unripe fruit or damaged crops? She had the answers, at least in part by virtue of her access to 'A'isha's views.

Such reports may be authentic or spurious, relatively early or late; it is usually very difficult to say. The same can be said of another *hadith* credited to 'A'isha, to the effect that modesty should not prevent women from acquiring knowledge. Exemplified by Karima herself, this report is almost certainly a response to a variety of objections, which held that women should busy themselves with spinning, weaving and the like. Some critics accused women transmitters of immodesty. In early Islam, the gender wars were waged in *hadith*.

18 al-Ghazali, 'Renewer' of Islam

(1111)

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali begins what is the most celebrated autobiography written in classical Arabic – *The Deliverer from Error* – with some reflections about both human nature and his own propensities:

*The thirst for grasping the real meaning of things was indeed my habit and wont from my early years and in the prime of my life. It was an instinctive, natural disposition placed in my makeup by God Most High, not something due to my own choosing and contriving. As a result, the fetters of servile conformism fell away from me, and inherited beliefs lost their hold on me, when I was still quite young. For I saw that the children of Christians always grew up embracing Christianity, and the children of Jews always grew up adhering to Judaism, and the children of Muslims always grew up following the religion of Islam...Consequently I felt an inner urge to seek the true meaning of the original fitra [an original religious disposition], and the true meaning of the beliefs arising through slavish aping of parents and teachers. I wanted to sift out these uncritical beliefs...'*¹¹⁷



Abu Hamid al-Ghazali,
*The Revival of the Religious
 Sciences*, frontispiece to
 volume 3, Mamluk, Egypt
 or Syria, 1419 AD.

Introduced into Europe in the seventeenth century, we shall see that *The Deliverer from Error* has determined rather too much the conventional understanding of both man and intellectual project. Or, more precisely: credulous misreadings of the *Deliverer* have done so, the most popular going so far as to miscast text and author as Islamic versions of the *Confessions* of Augustine.

That the book would be read in a confessional vein is certainly understandable. As the brief excerpt illustrates, its tone can be passionate. The author's endearing self-criticism can seduce. And the storyline, which features an intellectual, physical and emotional crisis that turns the author away from the comforts of family, rewards of prestige and incomplete truths of scholasticism towards the direct experience – literally, the 'taste' of genuine knowledge of God – has obvious appeal. Finally, there is the authority that comes from its author's massive erudition. Hyperbole discounted and falsely ascribed works subtracted, al-Ghazali was still immensely productive, especially given his careerism and role as a mediator and negotiator in the oft-lethal politics of Saljuq rule. The most comprehensive bibliography of his work is more than five and a half pages in length, and catalogues well over a hundred volumes in theology, ethics, Islamic law, politics, education and autobiography. His most celebrated book, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, has been subject to countless translations, epitomes and reworkings, more or less from the date of its publication until today.

In no small part due to his autobiography and the *Revival*, al-Ghazali is widely regarded as the single most celebrated figure in all of Islamic learning, his corpus of work a transcending summation and expression of Sunnism. In fact, he has long figured as a crucial figure in what might be called the 'master narrative' of Islamic intellectual history: between his writings (especially the twenty-point 'refutation' of philosophy called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) and his intellectual and psychological crisis (professor abandons prestigious chair and renounces philosophy in favour of mysticism), al-Ghazali can be taken to embody – even enact and so model – a definitive turn from dialectical proof to individual experience.

Still, anyone familiar with autobiographies will know that they can often be the poorest of guides to actual lives. This is the case with the *Deliverer*, which we now recognize to be misleading apologetics. It follows that making sense of al-Ghazali and his work is not just a matter of getting a biography right; it is also correcting that master narrative. We will start with his life and then turn to the narrative.

Life and work

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali was born, apparently in around 1055, near the eastern Iranian city of Tus, into the nascent Saljuq state of Iraq and Iran. Few reliable details of his childhood survive. We can be certain that his father died when the boy was young, leaving both him and a brother orphans; the brother, Ahmad al-Ghazali (d. c. 1125), would himself grow into a leading Sufi scholar. The first teacher whose name we know with confidence was a certain al-Radhakani; by his own testimony, al-Ghazali began his 'advanced' studies at the age of thirteen, and these were presumably pursued under al-Radhakani. Al-Ghazali must have distinguished himself, because within a few years, perhaps by the age of seventeen or eighteen, he had moved to the provincial capital of Nishapur to study with the most celebrated Sunni scholar of the day, al-Juwayni (d. 1085).

In retrospect, al-Ghazali's move to Nishapur appears inevitable. As we have already seen, a small town had exploded into a major city of the Islamic east. Nishapur was also a major centre of learning, the home for a notable *madrasa*, an institution of advanced learning that emerged the century before. Attached to a mosque, *madrasas* typically employed professors and teachers, housed students and visitors, and provided some social services, too. In time, they would spread across the Islamic world. This *madrasa* was known as the Nizamiyya, one of several that took their name from their patron, Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092), who served as grand vizier from 1063 until his death, much of that time the *de facto* ruler of the Saljuq empire.

Nowadays public higher education is often instrumental to the ideological or material requirements of the state, typically neoliberalism and economic growth. A similar instrumentality was at work in Saljuq Nishapur: there, as elsewhere, the Nizamiyya *madrasas* were founded by Nizam al-Mulk to promote his legal-theological vision. He seems to have aspired to be the empire's architect, and the blueprint that he drew featured a Sunnism that favoured the Shafi'i school of law and the Ash'ari school of theology (after al-Ash'ari, d. 935), especially at the expense of the Hanafis and Shi'ites. What this all means is that in Nishapur al-Ghazali was not just embarking upon the final stages of higher education at its most elite and rarefied. In entering an institution that had received Nizam al-Mulk's patronage, he was joining an academic establishment closely tied to the state.

Not only that: in studying under al-Juwayni, al-Ghazali had chosen the leading scholar of Saljuq Sunnism, and the author of a work that implicitly

legitimated not just Saljuq rule, but the person of Nizam al-Mulk himself. Al-Juwayni was a radical theorist of government, who was aligning Saljuq power, now in the hands of the sultan Malikshah (d. 1092), with contemporary history. The institution of the caliphate, to his thinking, had changed; since effective power was no longer exercised by the caliph, the qualifications that traditionally determined eligibility had to be rethought. He even went so far as to hold that the office could be filled by someone outside of the tribe of the Quraysh, a view that broke with long-held Sunni views. Meanwhile, al-Juwayni was also a path by which Avicenna's views on metaphysics, prophecy and the like entered the disciplined study of theology. One infers that it was under al-Juwayni's supervision that al-Ghazali began the systematic study of philosophical texts.

The details of how al-Ghazali spent the next twenty years or so in studying and writing are lost, but there can be no doubt that he had distinguished himself as a faithful member of the Saljuq establishment: in 1091, after spending time as part of what amounts to Nizam al-Mulk's academic retinue, he was appointed by the vizier to serve as professor in the Nizamiyya *madrasa* in Baghdad. The position was prestigious and lucrative. Accounts also have it that Nizam al-Mulk bestowed him with lofty titles ('Brilliance of the Religion' and 'Eminence among the Religious Leaders') and expensive robes. Two or three years before his death, al-Ghazali would allude to the years of service that delivered this coveted appointment:

Know that this applicant has reached fifty-three years of age, forty years of which he has dived in the sea of religious scholarship so that he reached a point where his words are beyond the understanding of most of his contemporaries. Twenty years in the days of the martyred Sultan Malikshah passed, while in Isfahan and Baghdad he remained in favour with the sultan. Often he was the messenger between the sultan and the caliph in their important affairs.¹¹⁸

Appointed to this teaching position in 1091, al-Ghazali gives us to understand that he entered into a four-year period of staggering productivity, teaching and writing on a scale that would humble the most celebrated tenured professor. As we have already seen, al-Ghazali himself was unburdened by humility, and the following, which describes his reading in philosophy, seems to telescope many years of study, writing and reflection.

I devoted myself to that in the moments I had free from writing and lecturing on the legal sciences – and I was then burdened with

*the teaching and instruction of three hundred students in Baghdad. As it turned out, through mere reading in those embezzled moments, God Most High gave me an insight into the farthest reaches of the philosophers' sciences in less than two years. Then, having understood their doctrine, I continued to reflect assiduously on it for nearly a year, coming back to it constantly and repeatedly reexamining its intricacies and profundities. Finally I became so familiar with the measure of its deceit and deception, and its precision and delusion, that I had no doubt about my thorough grasp of it.*¹¹⁹

When he was not occupied in his teaching and writing, al-Ghazali was caught up in political intrigues that had become murderous. Within a matter of months both Nizam al-Mulk and his successor were assassinated; a sultan and a caliph died soon, too. In the competition of status and prestige between the sultan and the caliph, al-Ghazali sided with the latter. In the early 1090s, he also acquired a family. It is at this point in al-Ghazali's biography – traditionally, 1095 – that his famous 'crisis' is said to have taken place.

*Thus I incessantly vacillated between the contending pull of worldly desires and the appeals of the afterlife for about six months, starting with Rajab of the year 488 (July, 1095 AD). In this month the matter passed from choice to compulsion. For God put a lock upon my tongue so that I was impeded from public teaching. I struggled with myself to teach for a single day, to gratify the hearts of the students who were frequenting my lectures, but my tongue would not utter a single word: I was completely unable to say anything. As a result, that impediment of my speech caused a sadness in my heart accompanied by an inability to digest; food and drink became unpalatable to me so that I could neither swallow broth easily nor digest a mouthful of solid food. That led to such a weakening of my powers that the physicians lost hope of treating me and said: 'This is something which has settled in his heart and crept from it into his humours; there is no way to treat it unless his heart be eased of the anxiety which has visited it.'*¹²⁰

Having worked through, in sequence, four approaches to ascertaining the truth (theology, philosophy, Isma'ili Shi'ite thought and Sufism), al-Ghazali realizes that only the last promises that ultimate truth. Abandoning his position and family, he embarks on years of solitary travel (a pilgrimage, sojourns in Jerusalem and Damascus), committed to the Sufi path.



A grave thought to be that of al-Ghazali, who died in 1111, is located near the entrance of this monument in Tus, Iran.

As attractive as this narrative of crisis and conversion may be, we now know that it misleads. It is not just a matter of timing or telescoping years of patient study. It turns out that al-Ghazali's fundamental intellectual orientation continued unchanged in the latter part of his life. Recent scholarship has shown that he remained as committed as ever to philosophy, writing esoteric metaphysics for those few who could make proper sense of it. A so-called 'refutation' of philosophy that he wrote is actually part of a larger, programmatic statement of philosophical commitments. Some scholars have also argued that his view of causation, which is a boundary question between Aristotelianism and a theology that prioritizes the omnipotence of God, leans far more to the former than the latter. This may be why, as late as 1108, he was subject to the charge of 'following the beliefs of the philosophers and the heretics...all of his books are infested with their words and he mixes unbelief and falsehoods with the secrets of revelation'.¹²¹ In sum, it seems that the *Deliverer* was composed more than a decade after a pseudo-crisis, as an apologetic response to such criticisms. As such it was intended to clear his name.

On this reading, there was no psychological or intellectual break that occasioned an embrace of Sufism. Sufism does not replace rationalism in al-Ghazali's intellectual project; it complements it, and also affords

spirituality to those without the ability to realize deeper philosophical truths. To the very end of his day, al-Ghazali was an intellectual elitist, which explains why his last book, finished just days before his death in late 1111, is called *Restraining the Ordinary People from the Science of Theology*. What did change, by contrast, was his willingness to serve the state by teaching at the Nizamiyya in Baghdad. Although he seems to have carried on teaching in private settings, it was only in 1106 that he returned, apparently under duress, to the *madrassa* in Nishapur. An offer to return to his position at Baghdad was refused, and shortly before his death he went back to his native Tus. The last years of his life were devoted to advocating for the applied philosophy of his *magnum opus*, the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* – a combination of Islamic values, ethics and practices that promised eternal bliss.

The narrative

Since al-Ghazali occupies such a prominent role in Islamic letters, more needs to be said about where he fits into that larger picture. This is because al-Ghazali's life story has made sense not only within its own (credulously read) terms, but also as a chapter within a settled narrative of Islamic intellectual history. If the so-called 'crisis' of 1095 was the pivot of his own life, his life has been made the pivot of that history. Debunking the myth of crisis allows us to see that larger history for what it actually was.

We have already remarked that the resources and ambitions of empire made Iraq an emporium for goods and ideas alike. Antique learning entered Islamic letters through translations from Greek (and Persian and Sanskrit) during the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, including specialized systems of Greek rationalism, especially Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism. As a result, a distinctive Arabic philosophical tradition emerged, which, fittingly enough, is called *falsafa*, the Greek loan word assimilated into Arabic. Avicenna is sometimes seen as the crowning achievement of that project, but modes of rationalism influenced other disciplines, too. Cross-pollination bore fruit in theology, in the exact sciences, especially mathematics, astronomy and optics, and in medicine and technology. As al-Biruni has already shown, a global history of the astrolabe begins in Greece, but runs through Baghdad.

It was through the very foundations of this impressive edifice that al-Ghazali sent a wrecking ball – or so much scholarship used to insist. The death knell of rationality was struck: the originality and dynamism of earlier Islamic learning were replaced by sterile legalism and mere mysticism. Or, to put it in ways that make a metaphor of al-Ghazali's path as prescribed by

the *Deliverer*, what resulted from the Mongol *déluge* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was withdrawal and conservative insularity on the part of Islamic learning, which was now impoverished both financially and intellectually. As an early twentieth-century Orientalist named Eduard Sachau put it: '[T]he fourth century [of the Islamic calendar] is the turning-point in the history of the spirit of Islam, and the establishment of the orthodox faith about 500 [1106–07 AD] sealed the fate of independent research for ever. But for al-Ash'ari (theologian, d. 935) and al-Ghazali the Arabs might have been a nation of Galileos, Keplers, and Newtons.'¹²²

As the quaint language might suggest, this was over a century ago. Still, even obsolete ideas can be stubborn. The late twentieth century's most celebrated scholar of Islam had it that '[i]n the Muslim world, independent inquiry virtually came to an end, and science was for the most part reduced to the veneration of a corpus of approved knowledge.'¹²³ Decline, stagnation and insularity – these have always been attractive ideas for Orientalists. For not only did they square with an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rhetoric of decline that enveloped Ottoman culture, but they also conformed to the received understanding of the rebirth of learning in the medieval west. Having passed the torch of reason and science from Athens to Paris, it was thought, Baghdad stopped running. The same narrative – of a civilization that has lost its way and turned inwards – ensnares some modern Muslim intellectuals of a progressive bent, who, grappling with a highly authoritarian culture of learning in the Middle East, still place the blame squarely on al-Ghazali.

In both the role it ascribes to al-Ghazali and its judgment of post-Ghazali learning, this narrative is manifestly wrong. The *Deliverer*, as we have seen, is less self-critical autobiography than deliberate misdirection written in controversial circumstances. And the more we learn about Islamic intellectual history during and after the Mongol period, the clearer it becomes that hostility to logic has been wildly exaggerated, that philosophy continued to be pursued, and that many branches of the exact sciences flourished, and were transmitted to Christian Europe.

'Arabic philosophy did not die after al-Ghazali,' one scholar has written; 'and it was not a fringe activity frowned upon by a so-called "orthodoxy"'. It was a vigorous and largely autonomous intellectual movement that lasted a good ten centuries – some would say it is still alive in Iran.' The same scholar has argued that the 'golden age' of Islamic philosophy extended another two centuries after al-Ghazali's death.¹²⁴ As one influential sixteenth-century Ottoman scholar and judge put it, '[I]ogic is a science of evident certainties, like the sun that cannot but be clear everywhere.

No one doubts its excellence except he who cannot perceive truths, and is incapable of understanding subtleties.¹²⁵ (In the case of logic, the discipline fell into wide disrepute only in the nineteenth century.) Similarly, in theoretical science (e.g. astronomy) and technology (e.g. clocks), it can be shown that Muslim scientists continued to innovate, providing theories and solutions to their European counterparts. In fact, some fields blossomed only after the twelfth century, a good example being astronomy. 'Any one who takes the time to read the scientific production in the post-Ghazali period would have to characterize this period as the most fecund, and in the field of astronomy in particular completely unparalleled.'¹²⁶

Given how much philosophy and science cut across the Mediterranean, ideas and techniques being shared by Muslims, Christians and Jews alike, the useful question is not whether or why Muslims stagnated. It is whether it makes much sense at all to speak of distinctly Islamic, Latin or European trajectories of philosophy and science.

19 **Abu al-Qasim Ramisht,** *merchant millionaire*

(c. 1150)

The rectangular building known as the Ka'ba, which is at the centre of the mosque of Mecca, stands at the heart of Islamic ritual. It is towards the Ka'ba that Muslims orient their daily prayers, and it is the Ka'ba that forms the focal point of the Pilgrimage (the Hajj). Millions of pilgrims follow carefully sequenced and timed rites in and near the city, and the most iconic of these is the counter-clockwise circumambulation around the Ka'ba. When they finish, they exit through what is called the 'Farewell Gate', in the southwest corner of the holy precinct, funnelling out into the town.

Given the special status of the site and the throngs of pilgrims who passed through the Farewell Gate, it is hard to imagine a better place to memorialize. And precisely this was understood in the middle of the twelfth century, which is why a basalt tablet was hung on the gate, inscribed with the following:

In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate. This is what the most eminent sheikh, the sheikh of Islam, the refuge of the two sanctuaries, the prince of the two communities, Abu al-Qasim Ramisht, son of al-Husayn, son of Shirawayhi, son of al-Husayn, son of Ja'far al-Farisi, made as an endowment and gave as alms: the whole of this hospice in the vicinity of 'Azwara near the gate of the noble sanctuary,

for all Sufis, excluding women, who wear patched garments, and all others who have reached the knowledge of God, be they pilgrims or locals in the holy city, as a permanent endowment and inviolate alms, safe until God inherits the earth and all those on it, He being the best of heirs. Whosoever changes or modifies this endowment, may the curse of God and all those who curse, men and angels all, be upon him... Ramadan in the year 529.¹²⁷

Ramadan of year 529 corresponds to parts of June and July of 1135; the 'two sanctuaries' are Mecca and Medina; the 'two communities' are probably the Sunnis and the Shi'ites; and the 'patched garments' were the emblematic garments worn by Sufis. But beyond that, what does this inscription memorialize? And who was Abu al-Qasim Ramisht?

Because it is about poverty and charity, the inscription gives us a glimpse into the world of medieval Islamic wealth. Abu al-Qasim Ramisht paid for the construction of a Sufi hospice, the inscription tells us. In part because many disavowed the comforts of this world for the next, Sufis were paragons of piety, their rag-tag appearance advertising their asceticism. Renouncing property, some needed places to live – thus, the hospice, which was funded by an endowment trust, a legal instrument that assigned revenues (typically from farms, orchards, mills and the like) for charitable purposes. These included building, maintaining and staffing hospitals, colleges of law, mosques, convents, soup-kitchens, orphanages and hospices – indeed, anything that could be reckoned to serve the good of the Muslim community.



A dhow, used in trade in the Persian Gulf, from Rashid al-Din's *Compendium of Chronicles*, c. 1314.



Siraf, Iran. Located on the north shore of the Persian Gulf, this port contributed to Ramisht's success as a trader.

Endowments were more than just acts of piety. For one thing, they were also public gestures made by very wealthy men who wished to secure the goodwill that such showy gestures could generate. For another, endowment trusts were legal mechanisms by which wealthy families could safeguard their wealth against the fragmentation that the Islamic law of inheritance prescribed. In this respect, these trusts presented to wealthy men opportunities that were not unlike those presented by tax-sheltered, financial tools nowadays.

Abu al-Qasim Ramisht was one such wealthy man – a merchant, tycoon and benefactor. A native of the province of Fars, which lay in southwest Iran, he seems to have made his fortune by trade and shipping, especially through the port of Siraf. One observer even has it that Ramisht was one of Siraf's most celebrated men:

Its inhabitants are very rich. I was told that one of them, feeling ill, drew up his will, and a third part of his fortune, which he had in cash, amounted to a million gold coins, not including the capital which he laid out to people who undertook to trade with it in a partnership.

Then there is Ramisht, whose son, Musa, I met in Aden in year 539 [1144–45]. He told me that the silver plate used by him was, when weighed, found to be about a tonne. Musa is the youngest of his sons and he has the least merchandise. Ramisht himself has four servants,

each of whom is said to be richer than his son, Musa. I met 'Ali al-Nili, from the countryside of al-Hilla, who is Ramisht's clerk, and he told me that when he returned from China twenty years earlier, his merchandise was worth half a million gold coins. If that is the wealth of the clerk, what must he be worth? It was Ramisht who removed the silver waterspout of the Ka'ba, replacing it with a gold one, and who draped the Ka'ba in Chinese cloth, whose value is beyond estimate. In sum, I have heard of no merchant nowadays who has equalled Ramisht in wealth or prestige.¹²⁸

How did this benefactor make all his money?

Our passage connects Ramisht, through his name, to the town of Siraf, which lay on the southwest coast of Iran. Nowadays it is a settlement of no significance, with a population of about 2,000, but these 2,000 people occupy the eastern part of what was once an enormously prosperous city, with a population of perhaps 200,000 or even 300,000. The city's climate may be inhospitable in the extreme (it suffers from intensely hot summers and very low rainfall), its soil may be poor, and it may be hemmed into the coast by difficult hills, but it had two very important things going for it. The first was a good, shallow port. The second was a serendipitous location halfway up the Persian Gulf, which functioned in early Islam as one of the principal arteries for the Indian Ocean trade that flowed into the ports of southern Iraq and, in the case of Siraf, from its port via caravans to Firuzabad and then Shiraz, to Iran.

Siraf's poor ecology and pinched hinterland meant that it depended on trade for its economy, and its location on the Gulf meant that it became a hub in the network of routes and ports that imported goods for the markets of Basra, Baghdad and Samarra – aloe, ambergris, camphor, precious stones, bamboo, ivory, ebony, sandalwood, perfumes, drugs and spices (according to one tenth-century geographer). Archaeology allows us glimpses at the scale of ninth-century trade: ceramics from Chinese kilns firing in the Tang period (618–907) have been found not just in Siraf, but as far west as Fustat (Egypt), in Antioch (Syria), and in Iraq, Iran, the Gulf, East Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. When Iraqi markets were hungry, Siraf prospered, its unpromising site being transformed into a vibrant entrepôt. This is precisely what happened during the early Islamic period: Chinese ceramics were imported to Siraf as early as the eighth century, and the port and town reached their peak in the ninth and tenth centuries: in the words of one geographer, Siraf was '...the entry-way [for goods from] China, aside from Oman, the store-house for

Fars and Khurasan. Nowhere in Islam have I seen finer or more wondrous houses, built of teak and baked brick, and towering, a single one costing in excess of 100,000 silver coins...'¹²⁹

Ramisht was a product of this dynamic. He was a merchant-shipper (and thus almost certainly a merchant-banker), one of whom the sources of the period commonly called *na-khudas*, a term used to describe the ship-owning businessmen whose trading ships plied the Indian Ocean, feeding networks of exchange that reached as far as China in the east and Spain in the west. As early as the late ninth century, we read that Canton was home to colonies of Muslim, Christian and Zoroastrian traders that numbered in the tens of thousands. Another account, from the middle of the tenth century, narrates the rags-to-riches story of a Jewish merchant named Isaac, who left Oman for India with 200 gold coins in his pocket, and returned thirty years later with goods valued at something like 3 million. Still another has a Yemeni fisherman turn a ½ silver coin investment into a fortune of 100,000 such coins.

In addition to such stories, we also have records: from a cache of more than 330,000 folio pages, which were deposited in the storehouse (a *geniza*) of a synagogue in Old Cairo (to the south of the centre of the present-day city), we have about 30,000 documentary pieces, written in Hebrew and Arabic (usually in Hebrew script). Credit and partnership, as the careful study of these documents has shown, were widely used by merchants of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, as well as by businessmen more generally. As one eleventh-century lawyer put it, 'selling on credit is an absolute feature of trade', and 'trade is of two types: local, in a man's own town, and long distant, in another town; and a man cannot directly engage in both these types by himself'. As it happens, Ramisht appears in the treasure trove of Geniza material, which documents Indian-Ocean trade in a wide variety of items, both processed or manufactured (e.g. textiles, clothing of various sorts, paper, leather goods, various ceramic, silver and golden wares) and unprocessed or raw: foodstuffs, chemicals, spices (most commonly pepper, but also cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves), aromatics, metals and wood. Ramisht himself was known for trading in copper.

Archaeology tells us that such trade was not uncommon. In the late 1990s, fishermen discovered a ninth-century shipwreck off the eastern coast of Sumatra, recovering a few Chinese-looking bowls and ewers. Subsequent excavations showed that all of its cargo was Chinese, and much of it consisted of bulk goods, rather than the precious, lightweight products (especially spices and aromatics) that one generally associates with long-distance trade in the pre-industrial period. It included bowls,

ewers, jars and the like, most fired in kilns from the city of Changsha, which lies on the banks of the Xiang River in the Hunan province of south-east China. There were also ceramics from other Chinese kilns, along with no fewer than ten tonnes of lead ingots (as ballast that could be sold, if the price was right), cast-iron cauldrons, copper-alloy bowls, grindstones, silverware (bowls, spoons and a flask) and mirrors. Other items included a small blue bottle, some weights, dice carved from bone or horn, and an ink-stone, upon which a Chinese writer would have ground his ink. This, one is entitled to imagine, is the kind of cargo that Ramisht would have been buying and selling.

So Ramisht was one of a type – the well-travelled and well-heeled merchant, of whom our Jewish archive gives several Jewish examples. One is Abraham ben Yiju, a native of the Tunisian town of al-Mahdiyya, who lived in the Indian city of al-Manjrur (present-day Mangalore, on the Malabar coast of southwest India), where he owned a brass factory. Then he moved to the Yemen and later to Cairo, where he tried to marry a daughter off to a cousin hailing from the Sicily of Roger II (see below); daughters being daughters, she had other ideas, and he failed. Other merchants were Christian, Hindu and Zoroastrian: their ships could look similar because they shared routes, goods and the desire for profit. Differing in language, ethnicity and religion, they shared a common interest in the wealth that long-distance trade could generate. They were capitalists before capitalism.

20 al-Idrisi, *cosmopolitan cartographer*

(1165)

What does our world look like? The question is deceptively simple. Familiar with images from satellites and the like, we now know that it is a sphere that orbits in space, and that upon that sphere sit landmasses divided by oceans. Plain as it is, this statement already obscures several issues. What, precisely, is an ocean? Saying much more means using any number of increasingly loaded conventions. We speak of 'continents', for example, disagreeing about how many to count (four, five, six or seven). Similarly, we take for granted the four cardinal directions, placing what we call the Arctic in the north and Antarctica in the south, while knowing that these are mere conventions. It almost goes without saying that the 'Middle East' and 'East Asia' are in the 'east' only relatively speaking.

Our mental map of the world is usually provided by versions that derive from the Mercator projection, which dates from the late sixteenth century. This project of mapping has two salient features. The first, which

stems from a mathematical rigour employed to project the surface of a sphere onto a flat page, is a distortion of continent size, the greater the distance from the Equator, the grosser being the distortion. What results is an elephantine Greenland that approximates South America in size (even though the latter is actually about eight times larger), along with an oversized Europe. The second feature of the Mercator projection is the position of this oversized Europe at its very centre. This is an effect of culture rather than geometry. Because Mercator was a Dutchman living in a world that was being charted by Europeans, his map made good cultural sense: after all, Europe was the centre from which explorers, traders and colonists were projecting European power the world over. Earlier, Christian world maps (*mappae mundi*) had identified Jerusalem as the navel of the world. 'The temptation not only to put one's own land in the centre of the map, but one's own people in the centre of history, seems to be universal.'¹³⁰

Mercator stood in a long tradition of map-making, and just as his way of projecting the world says something about the conventions he either inherited or established, so, too, does the work of Muslim cartographers. None was more significant than Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad al-Idrisi.

Al-Idrisi was a native of the town of Sabta (Ceuta), which lies on the northern tip of present-day Morocco. Born around 1100 to a wealthy family, he took up education at an early age, and in his teenage years embarked upon what ambitious scholars-to-be (such as the young al-Tabari) did as a matter of course: he travelled widely on a study tour, which in his case took him from Lisbon and Cordoba, in his day the greatest city of Europe and one of the greatest the world over, across the Mediterranean, and all the way to Damascus. Little is known about his early adulthood, but of one thing we can be sure: due to some unmeasurable combination of experience, learning and reputation, his renown reached Roger II (d. 1154), the Norman ruler of Sicily.

Sicily had come under Norman rule in the 1060s and early 1070s (Palermo fell out of Muslim hands in 1072), and Roger II himself had ruled since 1112, when, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, he had succeeded his father. On Christmas Day of 1130, he was crowned King of Sicily. Roger II was as covetous of prestige as he was pragmatic in his style of rule. It could not have been apparent to those attending his coronation, but the event ushered in one of recorded history's most striking periods of Islamic-Christian cultural fusion, one in which court ceremonial, architecture and administration were hybrid, drawing upon Christian, Muslim, Arabic, Greek and Latin traditions. An especially striking example of this fusion is Roger II's royal chapel in Palermo, the Capella Pallatina, which

combines design and decorative motifs that are discernibly Norman, Byzantine and Islamic. Islands may seem insular, but oceans and seas have a way of carrying people – and with them their ideas, traditions, designs, goods, germs and technologies – over distances that typically block or slow their movement over land. Al-Idrisi was to be part of this Sicilian mix: sometime around 1138, Roger II invited him to the island and commissioned a work that would be entitled *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi ikhtiraq al-afaq* (loosely, 'The delight of he who desires to travel to the ends of the earth'), which is commonly known by the simpler *Book of Roger*.

As an illustration of his generous patronage and the near and distant lands where Sicilian merchants might trade and exchange, al-Idrisi's work delivered high status and an invaluable tool to Roger II and his Mediterranean court. Some sixteen or so years in the making (al-Idrisi is said to have presented it to the Greek-speaking Roger II in 1154), the *Book of Roger* is one of the greatest works on geography written in this period. It is at once a testament to the accumulated geographical wisdom of the ancient and Islamic worlds, and the product of the twelfth-century Mediterranean, at the centre of which stood Roger II's Islamo-Christian



Detail of a mosaic showing Roger II receiving the crown from Christ, La Martorana, Palermo, 12th century. It was Roger who invited al-Idrisi to Sicily in around 1138.



Reconstruction of a world map from the *Book of Roger*. North is at the bottom. The original book was completed in 1154.

court. Whereas twelfth-century Latin Christians generally had only hazy and fantastic notions about the world beyond Latin Christendom and its immediate neighbours, this is a work based on genuine geographical knowledge, inevitably complemented by errors of theory, and the distortions and indulgences of culture. Depicting a pre-industrial world that stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, al-Idrisi describes a mostly lost geographical imagination that upends the cardinal points and lays bare assumptions that we moderns generally take for granted.

The iconic image from the *Book of Roger* is a circular world map, which shows a contiguous landmass encircled by ocean. Following well-established Islamic cartographic conventions, its north is what is now regarded as south. (What is 'up' is naturally a matter of convention. The first surviving map of New England (1677) belongs to John Foster, and it is oriented to the west, betraying a view of the New World as seen from Europe. In a smaller work that al-Idrisi wrote later, the maps are often oriented towards the east.) The work's vista is wide, from the Canary Islands in the west to China in the east. Coastal cities are described in the most detail, often including features of local geography, ecology and

economy. Al-Idrisi records the verdant gardens of his hometown of Ceuta, along with its varieties of fish and coral reef, both resources for trade. Information such as this was obviously of special interest to merchants.

Here it is worth noticing what is mapped and what is not. The Americas are absent, but not so much because they were lightly populated or had not yet been 'discovered'; intrepid traders seem already to have made a succession of landings on its northeast extensions. The Americas are absent because they remained outside of an Asian-dominated system of trade, commerce, travel and imagination – and would remain so until Mercator's century, when the 'New World' began to make its appearance. (The first map to identify 'America' as a separate continent dates from the first decade of the sixteenth century.) An heir to the Ptolemaic tradition of map-making, and, moreover, a Muslim client of a Christian king, al-Idrisi quite naturally put the eastern Mediterranean at the centre of his world-vision. Pride of place belongs to the Fertile Crescent, Arabia and western Iran: the heartlands of Islam in this period. Mecca dominates Arabia, and Sicily dominates the Mediterranean, grossly outsizing Sardinia, which, in actuality, is only slightly smaller.



A world map from a manuscript of the *Book of Roger* copied in Cairo in 1553. North is at the bottom and Arabia at the centre.

Meanwhile, western and northern Europe is tucked off to the side, its peripheral position mirroring its peripheral status vis-à-vis the world's core areas, created as they were by the world's leading cities, such as Cairo (Egypt), Tabriz (Iran), Beijing and Hangzou (China) and Vijayanagara (India), which, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, continued to outstrip their western European counterparts. Al-Idrisi's mapping – detailed for the Mediterranean, hazy for northern Europe – reflects their relative significance: the latter remained a cultural backwater, which offered little to the civilized world beyond adventure, metals, furs and slaves. And Crusaders, of course: al-Idrisi was born just as the so-called First Crusade came to an end (in 1099); and he must have been hard at work on the *Book of Roger* during the 'Second', which ended in 1149. Crusading had brought the Normans to Sicily, and al-Idrisi to Sicily. The European statelets that the Crusaders left behind were relatively short lived. More penetrating and durable European hegemony still lay centuries away. In the meantime,

ideas hopped across an archipelago of Christian states and statelets in the Mediterranean, Greek and Arabic texts being translated into Latin. One agent of exchange was the philosopher and polymath Theodore of Antioch (d. before 1250), who, working in multiple languages, had an 'intercultural career' that started in (eastern) Christian and Islamic Syria and Iraq, and ended in the court of Frederick II (d. 1250), crowned King of Sicily as a child and ruler of the Holy Roman Empire.¹³¹

The material in the *Book of Roger* comes from a wide variety of sources, some of the written ones collected during the author's travels in Europe and the Middle East; he mentions ten by name. He also drew upon oral informants, including travellers; it appears that his information about Britain came from a French sailor. 'This is an island resembling the head of an ostrich, and contains flourishing cities, lofty mountains, flowing rivers and level ground,' al-Idrisi writes of the British Isles. 'There is abundant fertility in it. Its inhabitants are hardy, resolute and prudent. The winter there is of long duration.'¹³² Little is said about London, but Hastings and Dover are praised.

The material is assembled into an organization that he inherited and transformed. The chief inheritance was seven latitudinal Climes, which originally belonged to Ptolemy of Alexandria (d. 168), whose second-century *Geography* survived the collapse of antique learning; it was accessible to al-Idrisi not in its original Greek, but in an Arabic translation. Ptolemy's work reflects the fate of much of the classical heritage, a great deal of which reached Enlightenment and Renaissance thinkers because it was transmitted, preserved and deepened by Muslim scholars working in the relatively prosperous and cosmopolitan courts of Muslim rulers. Upon this Ptolemaic scheme of latitudinal divisions al-Idrisi overlay ten longitudinal divisions, an organization that produced seventy regional maps included within the *Book of Roger*.

We know that al-Idrisi undertook a Latin edition of his own book, but this perished, and what survives are ten manuscripts of the Arabic version, which, given its Sicilian context, unsurprisingly includes some stray Latin, too. From the middle of the twelfth century, Europeans had the work available to them, but there is no evidence that they bothered to read it until the early fourteenth century. It seems that they were too parochial to take much of an interest. But as they discovered the world, so they discovered al-Idrisi. The first Arabic books printed in moveable type in Europe appeared in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in Italy, and these were religious texts. (The first Qur'an printed in Europe dates from 1530.) The *Book of Roger*, which was set into print in Rome in 1592, enjoys

the distinction of counting as the first non-religious work to be published in Europe; shortly after, in 1619, it was translated into Latin. Centuries after it was written, it still contained information that was new to Europeans.

21 **Saladin, anti-Crusader hero**

(1193)

Until recently, the pre-Ottoman history of the Middle Eastern and Islamic history had a modest hold on the European or North American imagination. The Crusades were the only true exception, especially in Europe. Pope Urban II (d. 1099), Godfrey of Bouillon (d. 1100), Baldwin (d. 1118), Raymond of Poitiers (d. 1149), Raynald of Châtillon (d. 1187), Richard the Lionheart (d. 1199), Saladin (Salah al-Din) – their roles can be celebrated or lamented, but many readers will know that they were characters in a medieval drama that pitched Christianity against Islam. In fact, the Crusades constitute that very rare episode of Middle Eastern history that has entered broader discourse, both European and Middle Eastern. When Muslims have spoken of ‘Crusading occupiers’ or George W. Bush referred to the American response to the attacks of 11 September 2001 as a ‘crusade’, the metaphor resonated. American readers will be familiar with ‘crusades’ on crime, drugs, homelessness and terrorism. And Syrian and Iraqi readers will be familiar with the nationalist appropriation of the anti-Crusader par excellence, Saladin.

That a Turkicized ethnic Kurd could be transformed into an Arab hero – Egypt’s Nasser and Syria’s Hafez al-Assad both appropriated him, and Saddam Hussein branded himself as the Saladin of his age – says something about the power of nationalist discourses. Put differently, what the cultural and political salience of the Crusades reflects is modern politics, rather than pre-colonial history, especially North American and European colonial and military intrusions into the Middle East. For Europeans embarking upon their colonial missions, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a veritable mania for the Crusades, with the likes of Voltaire and Walter Scott writing about Saladin. It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when those misadventures had produced a reflex of their own, that Saladin emerged in the Arab Middle East as anti-Crusading hero.

As strange as it may sound, within the grand sweep of Islamic history – the fourteen hundred years during which Islam spread from Arabia to the Atlantic, Southeast Asia and beyond – it did not matter much that Latin Christians occupied some bits of the Syrian littoral (often no more than



The entry bridge and great gateway to the Citadel of Aleppo. The fortification was an important stronghold against the Crusaders.

50 miles wide) for a few generations. After all, the Crusades may have produced four statelets centred in Edessa, Antioch, Tripoli and Jerusalem, but in the long term they were a political and military failure: after less than a century under Christian rule, Jerusalem fell to Saladin in the early autumn of 1187, a rump kingdom surviving another century. By the end of the thirteenth century, Crusading was a spent military and political force, and Outremer, as the territories were collectively called, a memory. Save for some admittedly spectacular castles, a few churches and residual Christian communities, the Europeans left little mark on the territories they managed to rule. As far as learning and culture are concerned, they certainly had little to offer. By Middle Eastern standards, they were uncivilized and boorish; one twelfth-century observer, a cultured Syrian named Usama b. Munqidh (d. 1188), likened them to brutish animals: they were strong and fought well enough, but otherwise possessed no virtues. Such views were widespread.

Deep and enduring change was taking place elsewhere. The centre of gravity of the Islamic world having moved to the east, the genuinely significant events of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries took place in Iran and Transoxiana: the Mongols, unlike the Crusaders, left a permanent mark upon the Middle East. This explains why the Mongols were almost

instantaneously the source of both febrile attention and deep anxiety for Muslim writers, whereas the Arabic term for 'crusades' is a neologism that appears only with modern Arabic. The Europeans involved in them are almost uniformly called 'Franks' by the medieval Islamic sources. And compared to the terrifying Mongols, whose armies overran long-standing Islamic polities and overturned deeply entrenched assumptions about politics and religion, the Franks were minor players.

Myth and man

To say that the Crusades generated none of the fear or anxiety provoked by the Mongol conquests and rule is not to say that Saladin was unknown to his contemporaries. Quite the opposite: he was a 'darling of historians, dictators and other makers of myths',¹³³ and some of the myths originated in his time. The victories attracted the attention of his contemporaries, and the man was scarcely shy about publicizing himself and his rule. Tales of his chivalry filtered into European courts even before his death in 1193. Building inscriptions were one of the channels that he used for broadcasting and myth-making; in a late example he styles himself, in terms that are unprecedented in hyperbole, as 'the reviver of the dynasty of the commander of the faithful' (caliph).¹³⁴ Letters, proclamations and the like, composed by his spokesmen-secretaries on an appropriately elevated register of rhetoric, were another. Poets recited verse that celebrated his victories, and scholars sang his praises in prose. Usama b. Munqidh, the observer of European boorishness, was one such client, and his rhymed rhetoric, which dates from the early 1180s, leaves little to the imagination. The following captures something of the Arabic style ('Muslimin' is the plural of Muslim):

*Called me to him, the message did, an invitation from our lord
the Victorious King, Salah al-Dunya wa'l-Din, Sultan of Islam and
the Muslimin! Unifier of the creed of faith by his light, subjugator
of the worshippers of the Cross by his might, raiser of the banner of
justice and right. The reviver of the dynasty of the Commander of the
Faithful, Abu al-Muzaffar Yusuf ibn Ayyub. May God embellish Islam
and the Muslims with this continued fruition, and grant them victory
by the sharpness of his sword and his vision. May he enclose them all
in his shadow's protective embrace, just as He has purified of filth the
sources of his grace, and extend across the globe his every commanding
and forbidding, lodging his swords in the necks of his foes to do
his bidding.*¹³⁵

Finally, there were the full-scale biographies. At his death, one of his secretaries, a scholar named 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani (d. 1201), had already composed one such biography, itself in rhyming prose, which had been read to Saladin himself in serial form. Perhaps by as early as 1198 another biography had also been written, this one by Ibn Shaddad (d. 1235), who served in an official capacity as a judge in Saladin's army and in an unofficial capacity as his close confidant. In the words of a modern biographer of Saladin, Ibn Shaddad 'may perhaps be called uncritical, but he was no deluded hero-worshipper'.¹³⁶ Even so, as the prologue makes clear, there is no mistaking that encomium is the rule:

*When I witnessed the events of our Lord, the Sultan al-Malik al-Nasir,
the uniter of Islam, the suppressor of cross-worshippers, the standard-
bearer of justice and equity, The Goodness of This World and the Next,
sultan of Islam and the Muslims, deliverer of Jerusalem from the hands
of the polytheists, the servant of the Two Noble Sanctuaries [Mecca and
Medina], Abu al-Muzaffar Yusuf b. Ayyub b. Shadi (may God moisten
his resting-place with the dew of His good pleasure and let him taste
the sweet reward of faith at the seat of His mercy), I put credence into
the tales told by early generations that improbability had called false.*¹³⁷

Thereupon follows a very terse account of Saladin's birth (in 1137–38) in Iraq to a notable father, a commander-governor who was in the service of Zangi (d. 1146), who came to rule in northern Syria as the Saljuq confederation



Dirham copper coin showing Saladin, 1190–91.



The mausoleum of Saladin, Damascus, restored 1898. The wooden sarcophagus on the right is said to contain Saladin's body.

fragmented; his father's transfer to Syria meant that Saladin grew up in Baalbek (in present-day Lebanon). This and other sources tell us that as a teenager he entered the service of Nur al-Din (d. 1174), a son of Zangi who, as ruler of northern Syria, was on the Crusader frontier; by the 1160s Saladin was serving as a high-ranking commander in his armies, which were now battling Franks for control of Egypt; and between 1169 and 1171, Saladin had not only taken control of Egypt as its vizier, but also put an end to its Shi'ite Fatimid caliphate. In its place he would lay the foundations for what historians now call the Ayyubid state, but in the short term what was advertised was the restoration of Egypt to (purely nominal) obedience to the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad.

At about this point (or shortly before, perhaps in 1168), the sources tell us that Saladin resolved to leave his wine drinking behind and commit himself to religious purposes. The case for a genuine religious awakening in the 1170s and 1180s can be made – he survived two assassination attempts and a serious illness – but there is more than a hint of public reinvention here, occasioned by the position that he had already achieved and the bounty that jihad against the Crusaders promised to deliver. The God-fearing piety that Ibn Shaddad described as intrinsic to Saladin's character was presumably of younger vintage.

So we have a name (Yusuf, or Joseph) born to a father (Ayyub, or Job) in circumstances made favourable by loyal military service to the most powerful ruler of the Fertile Crescent. Still, '[a]part from his skill in polo (inherited from his father) and an interest in religious studies, probably inspired by his admiring emulation of Nur al-Din, nothing is known of his early years'. Thus wrote H. A. R. Gibb, arguably the last great figure of the British Orientalist establishment.¹³⁸ Little can be added to Gibb's appraisal of Saladin's childhood for the simple reason that his youth was of little interest to Saladin's first biographers, formal or otherwise. For them, character did not emerge from experience or formation; instead, it reflected innate qualities, which in the case of a military or political figure generally meant courage, determination, piety and generosity. This is why Ibn Shaddad devotes less than a page to Saladin's upbringing and some twenty pages to a catalogue of those very virtues. 'Saladin's generosity was too public to need to be recorded and too famous to need to be recounted', Ibn Shaddad tells his reader – only to record and recount it all the same.¹³⁹

Here it might be noted that Muslim biographers did not have a monopoly on this brand of biography: Europeans were also busy in the twelfth century writing fulsome accounts of Crusader heroes. A good example on the Latin side is William of Tyre (d. c. 1190), a close contemporary of Ibn

Shaddad, who was commissioned to write a history of Jerusalem by its king, Amalric, and who proceeded to hype Godfrey of Bouillon in similar terms, as 'a religious man, mild mannered, virtuous, and Godfearing. He was just, he avoided evil, he was trustworthy and dependable in his undertakings.'¹⁴⁰

In another respect, one can now do better than Gibb. It seems that Saladin was prefigured by Nur al-Din. In Nur al-Din we have more than a patron in whose service Saladin would distinguish himself (and from whom he would ultimately break). We also have an especially gifted opportunist, one who embraced a muscular Sunnism as a legitimating programme, mainly by currying favour with Sunni scholars, embarking upon numerous building projects (especially mosques, *madrasas*, city walls and hospitals), and proclaiming jihad at nearly every turn. As an inscription in Aleppo has it, the object of that jihad was now recapturing Jerusalem, which was not only the focus for Christian and Jewish veneration, but also the site of Islamic analogues, especially the Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock, both of which sat upon the Temple Mount, overlooking the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In this programme of revitalized Sunnism, which was spearheaded by jihad that aimed to defeat Crusaders and unify a greater Syria, Nur al-Din thus set a model that Saladin, a favoured subordinate, would follow.

Having restored Egypt to Sunni rule, Saladin thus realized his patron's ambitions. The rub was that Saladin had not realized his own. Campaigns in Palestine, Nubia and the Yemen were the precursors to a confrontation with Nur al-Din himself, and it was only his death in 1174 that spared both men the unpleasantness of outright war. Saladin was able to arrange a peaceful and triumphant entrance into Damascus, which he soon left to a son in order to bring other parts of Syria into his domains. Truces with both Muslim and Crusader rulers allowed him to focus upon establishing himself as Sultan of Syria and Egypt, independent and (naturally) loyal to the Abbasid caliph of Baghdad. Crucial to this project was public patronage of Sunnism in what would emerge as the two great cities of the Ayyubid state, Cairo and Damascus, especially through the construction of *madrasas*, those institutions of education that had emerged in the east, accelerated by Saljuq rule. According to one count, by the time of Saladin's death in 1193 there were some thirty *madrasas* in Damascus; he established the first one in Cairo, and scores would be built by his successors. But *madrasas* were only one of several public investments he made as patron of Sunni learning and life; others included building and rebuilding mosques, Sufi hospices and hospitals. As champion of Sunnism, he was certainly



Statue of Saladin before the Citadel of Damascus. It was unveiled in 1993, the 800th anniversary of the ruler's death.

not above suppressing deviant views. Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi was a philosopher who held to a doctrine that prophecy had not ended with Muhammad. Saladin had him executed in Aleppo in 1191.

It was in the early 1180s that Saladin's imperialism would take the direction that would produce myth. The decisive moment was his defeat of the armies from the Kingdom of Jerusalem in the battle of Hattin (in present-day northern Israel) in July of 1187, a devastating defeat that opened the way for his entry into Jerusalem in September of the same year. The event occasioned panegyrics for Saladin's achievement: 'You took possession of Paradieses palace by palace, when you conquered Syria fortress by fortress... You have risen up in the darkness of the battle like the moon when it climbs slowly in the night...'¹⁴¹ The Crusaders were routed; Jerusalem was restored; the 'Third' Crusade would eat away at the territories he had clawed back (he never regained the port of Tyre, for example), but, save a few years under Frederick II, Jerusalem would never fall.

And here, as in so many other episodes in Saladin's life, the more one looks, the more one can see stagecraft at work. From the perspective of that

Third Crusade, his decision to allow Crusaders to leave Jerusalem unmo-
lested seems ill advised. He certainly was not faint of heart: at Hattin, he
had proven himself fully capable of ensuring the execution of Templars
and Hospitallers, in addition to others; he personally struck off the head
of Raynald of Châtillon. But viewed from his own vantage point – as an
opportunity to enact the wise ruler's clemency, which was modelled, after
all, on God's Own mercy – the decision was actually inspired, especially
because it threw Muslim mercy into such sharp contrast with Christian
ferocity and bloodletting. When the Crusaders had taken the city in 1099,
thousands had been massacred.

Saladin thus has a double identity. On the one hand, he exemplifies
the ambition that late Saljuq decline rewarded. On the other, he is an
avatar of something altogether greater, which is Muslim resistance to non-
Muslim rule. If the Crusades were a political and military failure that left
behind no significant impact beyond castle design and the like, it remains
true that the Crusading movement, as well as the kingdoms it generated,
played an important role in the regional politics of Egypt, Palestine, Syria,
Anatolia and northern Iraq. By carving Latin kingdoms out of the terri-
tories that had been under Islamic sovereignty for something close to six
centuries, the Crusaders created a set of shifting internal frontiers, which
had the effect of raising the ideological temperature of the Middle East.
This explains the kaleidoscopic quality to politics in this period, what with
Muslim rulers allying one moment with Byzantines and Crusaders and the
next against Crusaders and Byzantines. In this respect, the Latin Christian
holy warriors contributed to a process already underway, which was the
articulation of militant Sunnism. From this point of view, jihad owes
something to Crusade.

Meanwhile, the long-term effects of the Crusades were felt not in
the Middle East, but in the Latin West. One was to reshape and deepen
European antipathy towards Muslims and Islam; whatever their causes
(and there were several), the Crusades were rationalized as attempts to
liberate Jerusalem and convert the 'pagan' Muslims. Another was to make
more widely available Hellenistic and Islamic learning that had been out of
European reach or interest, but which would now contribute to the scien-
tific revolutions that accompanied the spread of European commercial and
political hegemony. Roger Bacon (d. c. 1292) understood that knowledge of
Arabic was crucial to the advance of science. Thanks in some measure to
Saladin, Muslims won the battle of the Crusades, but they eventually lost
the longer war for political and cultural supremacy.

22 **Ibn Rushd (Averroes),** *Aristotelian monotheist*

(1198)

Nowadays voicing criticism of a secular political order is considered con-
servative, and opposing it by force of arms makes one a radical reactionary.
While conservatives can be found almost anywhere, it is within the Islamic
Middle East that the radical protest against secularism is at its fiercest and
most militant. Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism
have produced their share of radicals by this definition, but among those
who champion secular modernity, it is the Muslim militant – say, Osama
bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – who has become the bogeyman, the
devilish avatar of atavistic resistance to one of the central tenets of western
modernity: the circumscribing and privatizing of religion. Along with
showy practices of wanton violence, it is the imposition of Islamic law,
that very public repudiation of the separation of religion and state, which
explains why one so frequently reads that Islam is 'medieval'. Ibn Rushd
illustrates just how shallow this view actually is.

This is because of a striking irony. In Europe and North America, nor-
mative attitudes about the secular political order only became so because
radicals of a very different stripe – deeply sceptical, rationalist, and of a
decidedly philosophical bent – took on varieties of religio-political ortho-
doxy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and worked to dislodge



Andrea da Firenze, *The Triumph of Saint Thomas*
Aquinas, 1366–67, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.
Detail showing Averroes (centre).

religion from the centre of the political order. These Enlightenment figures laid the intellectual groundwork upon which many taken-for-granted ideas – of freedom, the individual (and individual rights), state and religion – now stand. The irony is that ‘medieval’ Islamic ideas were an important part of the cultural matrix that produced the destruction of religious orthodoxies. If nothing else, that contribution allows us to see that Islamic thought, which is no less rich and variegated as the sophisticated intellectual projects launched by Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, etc., is as amenable to producing radical progressives as it is reactionaries.

It is not just that Arabic and Islamic texts were attractive to deist critics of Christian orthodoxy in the Enlightenment; John Locke (d. 1704), who studied some Arabic at Oxford, was even denounced as having a ‘Mohametan faith’.¹⁴² The genealogy of some of the most genuinely radical critiques of religion can be traced back to the Islamic intellectual tradition. Seventeenth-century thinkers drew upon an ‘underground intellectual heresy’, as one historian of the Enlightenment has put it, which had appeal to the likes of Spinoza (d. 1677) and other fierce critics of establishment religion.¹⁴³ How far back in time did this ‘underground heresy’ travel? It may be that the thirteenth century was the first time that such ideas crystallized into an intellectual and cultural movement that posed a genuine challenge to the Church. In early March of 1277 the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, issued a condemnation of 219 (or 220) philosophical and theological doctrines. The decree was aimed at members of the Arts Faculty at the University of Paris, and followed earlier prohibitions, the most recent coming in 1270. The target was the teaching of Aristotle, especially as his work had come to be propagated by Siger of Brabant (d. c. 1280) and Boethius of Dacia (fl. 1275), the leading ‘Averroists’ of the day.

For Averroists, Ibn Rushd was a radical Aristotelian, who followed lines of argumentation and held doctrines (e.g. the eternity of the world, and collective rather than individual immortality) that were incompatible with revealed religion. How faithful were the Averroists to Ibn Rushd’s actual thought? Was Ibn Rushd an Averroist, as a recent article asked?¹⁴⁴ ‘All I know is that I am not a Marxist’ – so uttered Marx himself, as reported in a formulation that belongs to Engels, Marx’s contemporary and collaborator.¹⁴⁵ Outlining an answer means outlining the achievement of Ibn Rushd before he became Averroes.

Iberia in the twelfth century

Ibn Rushd was born in the southern Iberian city of Cordoba in 1126 to a family of distinguished men of law working mainly within the Maliki

school of jurisprudence, which was the dominant strain of legal thinking in the western Islamic world. Both his father and grandfather, who died a few months after Ibn Rushd’s birth, had served as judges, and part of his education came at the feet of his father. Within the Arabic-Islamic tradition, Ibn Rushd is often called ‘The Grandson’, a sobriquet that distinguishes him from his namesake grandfather, also an eminent jurist and the author of a collection of legal responses (*fatwas*). Little can be said about his intellectual formation or early adulthood, at least not beyond the names of some of his teachers and the texts that he studied under their tutelage; one such text was the *Muwatta’*, an authoritative collection of Prophetic traditions assembled by Malik b. Anas (d. 795), the eponym of the Maliki school. Only one early date seems sure: 1153, when he spent some time in Marrakesh. What is obvious is that he complemented his traditional education with a penchant for the rational sciences, including medicine; in this respect, he bears comparing to al-Razi (see above). The scion of a highly respected family, he had the means to acquire the very best education that a philosopher could then wish for.

He also had timing going for him. The intellectual climate of Islamic Spain was conducive to several strains of legal and mystical thought, but whereas the examples of al-Biruni and Rashid al-Din illustrate the enthusiastic reception given to philosophy and the exact sciences by eastern courts keen to market their cosmopolitanism, political culture in the west had been less accommodating to rationalism. As a contemporary of Ibn Rushd put it,

All of the branches of learning are subjects of interest and importance to them [scholars], with the exceptions of philosophy and astronomy. Both of these are of great interest to the elite, but no work on these topics can be undertaken openly out of fear of the common folk. Any time it is said: ‘So-and-so is giving lectures on philosophy,’ or: ‘He pursues astronomy,’ the common folk brand him with the title of Godless heretic and the name sticks with him to his dying day. And if he lets slip a suspicious statement, they will stone him or burn his books before his case even comes to the attention of the authorities. The ruler might put him to death just to curry favour with the common folk...¹⁴⁶

A turning point in Ibn Rushd’s career came in 1169, when he was introduced to Abu Ya’qub Yusuf (r. 1163–84), the caliph of the Almohad state. The Almohads had taken power in North Africa in the 1120s, and from the mid-1140s had incrementally extended their rule across southern Iberia,

displacing the Almoravids. Like the Almoravids, they drew their military power from Berber tribes from North Africa. But the similarity more or less ends there. Almoravid religio-political culture tended to a conservative legalism associated with the Maliki school of law; at times, the Maliki establishment's opposition to Sufism and rationalist theology was positively militant, such as when the works of al-Ghazali were burned.

By contrast, the Almohads preached a revolutionary rationalism, and championed al-Ghazali. They also offered patronage to theologians and philosophers, the latter including Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185), author of an allegorical tale that illustrates, in the person of an autodidact who grows up on a desert island, the essentially rational nature of man, a theist operating entirely independent of a revealed scripture. (Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* may have been modelled upon Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, which was translated into Latin and Dutch and exercised widespread influence in Europe.) We read that it was Ibn Tufayl, himself the recipient of Almohad favour, who introduced Ibn Rushd to Abu Ya'qub Yusuf.

Almohad patronage turned out to have been decisive. It resulted in Ibn Rushd's appointment to a series of judgeships; the first, in Seville, came in 1169, and the last, as chief judge in Cordoba, came soon after 1180, a position that both his grandfather and father (1137–45) had held. In 1182, he also succeeded Ibn Tufayl as court physician. In addition to providing the standing and means that came with such prime posts, Almohad patronage endorsed and underwrote Ibn Rushd's intellectual project: it delivered to Ibn Rushd favour and benefits, and he repaid the investment by writing in a political vein that was favourable to the Almohad dynasty – the 'sublime rule', as he puts it in one place¹⁴⁷ – and by delivering a series of commentaries on Aristotle's major works. A source preserves Ibn Rushd's first-person account of this commission, which would be a seminal moment in European intellectual history.

When I entered into the presence of the caliph, Abu Ya'qub, I found him with Abu Bakr Ibn Tufayl alone. Abu Bakr began by praising me, mentioning my family and ancestors and generously including in the recital achievements beyond my real merits. The first thing that he said to me, after asking my name, my father's name and my genealogy was this: 'What is your opinion about the heavens?' – referring to the views of the philosophers – 'Are they eternal or created?' Confusion and fear took hold of me, and I began making excuses and denying that I had ever concerned myself with philosophic learning, for I did not know what Ibn Tufayl had told him on the subject. But the caliph understood

my fear and confusion, and turning to Ibn Tufayl began talking about the question of which he had asked me, mentioning what Aristotle, Plato and all the philosophers had said, and bringing in besides the objections of the Muslim thinkers against them...

Abu Bakr Ibn Tufayl summoned me one day and told me: "Today I heard the caliph complain of the difficulty of expression of Aristotle and his translators, and mention the obscurity of his aims, saying "If someone would tackle these books, summarise them and expound their aims, after understanding them thoroughly, it would be easier for people to grasp them". So if you have in you abundant strength for the task, perform it..." This was what led me to summarise the books of the philosopher, Aristotle.¹⁴⁸



The colophon from Ibn Rushd's commentary on Ibn Sina's *Urjuza fi al-Tibb* (Poem on Medicine). The manuscript was copied in 1597 from an earlier version dated 1236.

There is a certain artifice in this too-neat account, which may remind the reader of al-Ghazali; even so, it captures something genuine.

Favour has its perils, of course. When Almohad patronage was cut off, Ibn Rushd was no longer insulated from the ambient intellectual climate. Precisely this happened shortly before his death, when Abu Ya'qub Yusuf's successor proscribed philosophy and many of the sciences, and ordered the burning of books by Ibn Rushd, whom he sent into exile. It can be said that foundational texts of Andalusian philosophy were worked out in the shadow of power, while the Maliki establishment remained hostile.¹⁴⁹ Such difficulties contributed to Ibn Rushd's celebrity among the Islamophiles of the Enlightenment, who held him up 'as the man who found the courage single-handedly to combat the bigotry, credulity and crassness of his time'.¹⁵⁰ He died in 1198, after a short-lived rehabilitation in Marrakesh, the seat of the Almohad caliphate.

Reason and religion

Ibn Rushd's corpus work divides into two halves, a facile line between composition and commentary separating the two. The division is facile because the obscurity, difficulty and fecundity of Ibn Rushd's target texts, Aristotle's major works, allowed – indeed, called – for the elaboration and systematization of distinctive systems of thought. Matters are made even more complicated by the fact that Ibn Rushd varied his views among his various audiences.

Among the compositions are a rebuttal of al-Ghazali's *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, aptly entitled *The Incoherence of the Incoherence; The Decisive Treatise on the Relation between Revealed Law and Philosophy*; and *The Distinguished Jurist's Primer*, a title that disguises the polemical title of the Arabic original (*The Beginning of the One Who Exercises Independent Reasoning and the End of the One Who Limits Himself*). He also wrote on a variety of other subjects, not least of all on medicine. Among Ibn Rushd's commentaries are three series, the *Short, Middle and Long Commentaries* (on Aristotle), and a commentary on Plato's *Republic*. The *Short Commentaries*, which are conventionally considered early, summarize Aristotelian doctrines, while the *Middle Commentaries* paraphrase Aristotle's texts. The *Long Commentaries* reproduce Arabic translations of the Greek and subject them to careful discussion and elaboration. Much of his work was brought to completion in the late 1170s and 1180s. *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* may have been decades in the making.

The intellectual project that undergirds much of his work is a hermeneutic commitment to fundamental texts and principles. Within a

religio-political culture whose indifference towards philosophy and rationalism could be readily transmuted into belligerence, he took the offense, arguing that philosophy was not merely permitted by the revealed law, but made *obligatory* by it. The argument, which is laid out in *The Decisive Treatise*, begins by adducing passages in the Qur'an.

*That the Law summons to reflection on beings, and the pursuit of knowledge about them, by the intellect is clear from several verses of the Book of God, blessed and exalted, such as the saying of the Exalted, 'Reflect, you who have vision': this is textual authority for the obligation to use intellectual reasoning or a combination of intellectual and legal reasoning. Another example is His saying, 'Have they not studied the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and whatever things God has created?': this is a text urging the study of the totality of beings.*¹⁵¹

God has commanded humankind to understand His creation, and since understanding requires reason and inference, the pursuit of ultimate knowledge requires the tools of philosophical inquiry. It will not do, he insists, to argue that intellectual reasoning along these lines is a 'heretical innovation' on the ground that earliest Muslims did not practice it. Turning the tables on his legalist and theological opponents, he responds tartly that 'the study of legal reasoning and its kinds is also something that has been discovered since the first believers, yet it is not considered to be a heretical innovation. So the objector should believe the same about the study of intellectual reasoning.'¹⁵² (As we shall see, such a view was not shared by the likes of Ibn Taymiyya.)

This is not to say that 'legal reasoning' is of a piece with philosophy. Ibn Rushd identifies three categories of 'assent' (that is, asserting a given proposition): rhetorical, dialectical and demonstrative, each characterized by different modes of argumentation. For him, 'demonstration' means the disciplined deployment of syllogisms upon irrefutable principles, such that it generates certain truths. Demonstration, he holds, is practised only by philosophers, who achieve the happiness of true knowledge for themselves, and provide guidance to all those unversed in its methods or conclusions. There is an overtone of intellectual elitism here, an elitism that issues from the variable 'nature' of humans (that is, their innate intellectual capacities), as well as from varying levels of education.

The sovereignty of demonstration is made plain in an oft-cited statement of Ibn Rushd's on the relationship between its conclusions and the revealed law (here *shari'a*):

We affirm definitively that whenever the conclusion arrived at by demonstration is in conflict with the apparent meaning of the shari'a, that apparent meaning admits of allegorical interpretation according to the rules of interpretation in Arabic. This proposition is questioned by no Muslim and doubted by no believer. But its certainty is immensely increased for those who have had close dealings with this idea and put it to the test, and made it their aim to reconcile the assertions of intellect and tradition. Indeed we may say that whenever a statement in the shari'a conflicts in its apparent meaning with a conclusion of demonstration, if the shari'a is considered carefully, and the rest of its contents searched page by page, there will invariably be found among the expressions of the shari'a something which in its apparent meaning bears witness to that allegorical interpretation or comes close to bearing witness.¹⁵³

The Qur'an (and, by extension, all scripture) persuades its reader or listener through rhetoric, but the sovereignty of reason, most powerfully employed through logical demonstration, trumps it.

An example can be found in the question of the creation of the world, which is described in the Bible (and Qur'an). From the tenth century onwards it had become a point of contention between philosophers and theologians. The former, arguing within the Aristotelian givens of motion, matter and time, usually held that the world was eternal (there are some exceptions); the latter, adducing scripture, held that it was created by God at a specific moment in time. The controversy figures prominently in *The Incoherence* (and so *Incoherence of the Incoherence*), and also in the condemnations made in Paris in 1270 and 1277. In several texts and in several ways Ibn Rushd argues patiently that the two positions are actually compatible. "The use of the terms "creation in time" and "eternity" is an innovation in religion and a source of great perplexity that corrupts the beliefs of ordinary people, and especially the theologians among them."¹⁵⁴ Language has got in the way of understanding. In his view, the terms of philosophical thinking – again, motion, matter and time – can be squared with scriptural language (e.g. of 'creation').

Legacy

As a philosopher working within an intellectual framework assembled by Greek physics and metaphysics on the one hand, and Islamic scriptural traditions on the other, Ibn Rushd confronted well before Christian thinkers the collision between truths generated by logic-driven demonstration and

dogmas delivered by divine revelation. He clearly chose the former. The Ibn Rushd who was translated into Latin was mainly (though certainly not exclusively) the commentator of Aristotle, and this explains why in Latin letters he is often called "The Commentator". His *Incoherence of the Incoherence* was also translated into Latin by 1328. Living and working on a western edge of the Islamic world that was contracting in the face of Christian pressure, Ibn Rushd would have greater impact upon the European phenomenon of Christian scholasticism than he would upon later Islamic thought. There Ibn Sina's work had a more productive afterlife.

Arabic philosophical material began to make its way into Latin in the eleventh century, but it was in the second half of the twelfth century, especially in Spain (Toledo) and Sicily, that a systematic project of translation was undertaken. Within a generation of his death in 1198, several of Ibn Rushd's works were circulating in Latin in Paris, and in the middle of the thirteenth century, Aristotle had been made mandatory reading – literally so – for students of philosophy there. (Through translations into Hebrew he also exercised a decisive influence upon medieval Jewish philosophy.) By this time, Greek manuscripts of Aristotle had made their way into western Europe, but there was no minimizing Ibn Rushd's achievement: naturalizing Greek thought into a monotheist world view.

Averroists could later be found not just in Paris, Spain and Italy, but also in central and eastern Europe, from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. One may thus speak of two kinds of Averroism: one that describes the work carried out by Latins who read and used his commentaries, and another that describes a set of propositions and controversies that bear only indirect relation to his actual work. At their most strident, these included the claim that he rejected revealed religion; at their more moderate, they included the claim that he embraced the doctrine of the 'Double Truth', which held that religion and philosophy generated separate (and not incompatible) truths. Such views have plenty of followers nowadays: Stephen J. Gould's 'non-overlapping magisteria' is a version of the 'Double Truth'. But Ibn Rushd took religion too seriously for either. 'Truth,' he wrote, 'does not contradict truth.'

Disruption & Integration

1250–1525

According to the Benedictine monk, historian and illustrator, Matthew Paris (d. 1259), who was writing in St Albans (near London), in 1238 there was a glut of herring. This was because:

*The inhabitants of Gothland and Friesland [the Baltics and the Netherlands] dreading their attacks, did not, as was their custom, come to Yarmouth, in England, at the time of the herring fisheries, at which place their ships usually loaded (with herring, for export); and owing to this, herrings in that year were considered of no value, on account of their abundance...*¹⁵⁵

What kept the traders in their ports was their fear of the Mongols – large-headed, eaters of uncooked (perhaps even human) flesh, ‘impious and inexorable’, as the panicked rumours preserved by the author had it. Never mind that the battles of 1237–38 were taking place well over 1,000 miles away, the closest ones in the Caucasus and what is now southern Russia and the Ukraine. It was not until 1240 that Kiev would fall, and only in the early 1240s that the Mongols reached what is now Poland. The earliest signs of what became their infamous ideology of world conquest seem to belong to the 1240s, too. At that point there certainly was no mistaking how the Mongols saw things. An example is a message of theirs delivered

by a Franciscan envoy to the Pope, Innocent IV, in 1247: ‘In the power of God, all lands, from the rising of the sun to its setting, have been made subject to us... You in person, at the head of the kinglets, should in a body, with one accord, come and do obeisance to us.’¹⁵⁶ Muslims were subject to the same humbling lesson. In 1269, the Mongol khan Abaqa (r. 1265–82) wrote the following to Sultan Baybars (r. 1260–77), the Mamluk ruler of Egypt:

*When the King Abaqa set out from the east, he conquered all the world. Whoever opposed him was killed. If you go up to the sky or down into the ground, you will not be saved from us. The best policy is that you make peace between us. You are a mamluk [that is, a mere slave] who was bought in Sivas [in central Anatolia]. Who are you to rebel against the kings of the earth?*¹⁵⁷

If clear messages of an ideology of world conquest came later than 1238, we should not fault Matthew Paris’s nervous merchants; fears can still be disproportionate to threat, as we all know, especially when people feel terrorized. And there is no doubting that the Mongols terrorized. ‘Incomparable archers’, they ‘abound in flocks, herds, and breeds of horses’, he tells his Latin readers; ‘they are very numerous and are believed to have been sent as a plague on mankind’.¹⁵⁸

The Mongols had numbers, especially as non-Mongol (mainly Turkic) tribes enrolled in their armies, but what made them so effective was a combination of grand strategy and battlefield tactics, both of which were predicated upon discipline. On the battlefield, that discipline concentrated firepower – mainly arrows, but also clubs, lances and other small weapons – to maximum effect. Riding speed was particularly important: concussive attacks were delivered by mounted archers, who, cycling through multiple mounts (perhaps five each), steered their small, fast horses in coordinated waves, and unleashed multiple volleys of arrows. The tactics and technologies for sieges were acquired in the course of their early conquests, walled cities being absent on the steppe. The fortifications and walls that the Mongols faced in Iran, Iraq and Syria they demolished with the skills and equipment provided by 1,000 households of Chinese catapult operators.¹⁵⁹ Cities that capitulated peacefully usually fared much better than those that resisted, but vengeance and terror were sometimes displayed for the sake of display. In 1238, the population of one city in southern Russia was subject to indiscriminate slaughter because a handful of notable Mongols had been killed in battle. News such as this travelled far and wide, and

accounts of Mongol infamies – combatant males were often slaughtered *en masse*, while skilled artisans and many women were enslaved – proliferated as the Mongols advanced into eastern Europe during the 1240s.

It is difficult to overstate the shock. Temujin ('blacksmith', the future Chinggis Khan, d. 1227) had assembled and organized Mongolian and Turkish-speaking tribes into a war machine that was genuinely unprecedented in human history. The population of the harsh Inner Asian steppe was tiny compared to that of its settled neighbours – perhaps less than one million – but Temujin's charisma, leadership and organization transformed fast-moving and highly skilled nomad fighters into disciplined armies that overwhelmed settled states in both the Chinese west and Islamic east. His particular genius lay in transforming fissiparous nomads into retinues loyal to his household, ensuring that the booty generated by conquest was circulated to the soldiers. Accounts of his birth and youth are given to legend and myth, but neither the sequence nor significance of what he achieved as an adult is open to question. After three decades or so of fighting on the steppe, in 1206 Temujin convened a grand assembly, took the name of Chinggis, and had himself proclaimed ruler (Khan or Qan) of the nomadic peoples. He could claim a force of 95,000 fighters, systematically organized into units of thousands.

If the Mongol centre of gravity always lay in the Eurasian east, Islamic lands were caught up in the Mongol vortex too. By 1219, having taken control of the steppe and subordinated northern China, Chinggis turned west, towards the frontiers of those Islamic lands, which were then dominated by a dynasty known as the Khwarazmshahs. Two years later, Bamiyan (in present-day Afghanistan) had fallen, its entire population put to the sword, apparently to avenge the death of a favourite grandson in the siege. By 1223, the Khwarazmshahs had been routed, putting eastern Iran under Chinggis's control. The Mongol advance into the Islamic Middle East, fortified by non-Mongolian fighters, continued after Chinggis's death in 1227: in 1243, the Saljuqs of Anatolia were defeated, and Baghdad itself fell in 1258 to Hulegu, one of his grandsons. Muslims had grown accustomed to political instability and violence, but these events were of another order entirely: Baghdad was sacked, apparently with the loss of tens of thousands of lives. To the shock of almost everyone, the caliph himself was executed. The 500-year line of Abbasid caliphs had come to an end; the symbolic capital of the Islamic world had fallen under the rule of non-Muslims. The advance finally came to a halt in 1260, when Mongol armies were defeated in Syria by the Mamluks, the newly established rulers of Egypt.



A miniature from a 14th-century Mongol manuscript showing the forces under Hulegu attacking Baghdad in 1258.

In the space of three decades Chinggis Khan had thus transformed himself from ruler of 'the people of the felt-walled tents' into world conqueror, his conquests and state legitimated by a Mandate of Heaven.¹⁶⁰ At his death in 1227, the Mongol empire stretched from northeast China to the Caspian Sea – nowadays about 5,000 miles on passable roads. Given the enormous distances, the geographic and topographic diversity, and the ethnic, religious and linguistic heterogeneity, creating a centralized polity would be difficult in any circumstances. A reasonable parallel is the failed Soviet Union, which had the advantage of twentieth-century industrial power and technologies of communication and transport. The Soviets had telephones, supersonic jets and nuclear warheads. The Mongols rode small, pony-like horses and shot arrows.

Because their political thinking was guided by steppe traditions rather than socialist megalomania, the Mongols found it easier than the Soviets to abandon their illusions of continental dominion. Chinggis's grandsons, military expansion and administrative reforms combined to introduce a measure of centralization, but Karakorum, the capital in central Mongolia, would never be Baghdad, much less Moscow: even by Umayyad or Abbasid

standards, power remained diffuse, and the capital itself relatively weak. Money (in paper and coins) was issued locally, and because there was no central treasury for the payment of military salaries, nor even an integrated fiscal system that could account for imperial revenues, army recruitment remained regionally organized.

When the high tide of Mongol military victories receded, it thus left behind four polities that claimed the legacy of Chinggis's rulership. Descendants were at the heads of each of these polities, which controlled vast territories from Korea to Asia Minor, the 'Grand Khan' in Peking initially claiming ultimate authority. Hulegu's domains ranged from Afghanistan in the east to Asia Minor in the west, and in the 1260s these were gathered under the rulership of an Ilkhan (or Il-qan), whence the name scholars have given to the Mongol successor state that ruled much of Iran, Iraq and Anatolia for about a century, either directly or through vassals. Ilkhanid rule would dissolve during the fourteenth century, and it would fall to **Timur** (Tamerlane, d. 1405) to re-enact the grand Mongol project of conquest and empire-building, as we shall see.

Timur's would be the last nomadic empire in world history. Between 1450 and 1525 were born three states that were distinctly Islamic and distinctly successful in negotiating the passage into what historians typically call the early modern period. In different ways, the Ottomans, Mughals and Safavids were heirs to the Mongol venture in world conquest. **Mehmed II** (d. 1481), the Ottoman ruler who conquered Constantinople, brought the first of these states into direct contact with Christian Europe. **Shah Isma'il** (d. 1524) was the founder of the Safavid dynasty.

The question of change

The military successes of Chinggis Khan and Timur are more easily admired than fully explained, at least beyond the imbalance of power between the fighting potency of cohesive nomad cavalry and, on the other hand, internally fragmented settled states. We shall see that **Ibn Khaldun** (d. 1406), who met Timur himself on the outskirts of Damascus, proposed an interpretation of his own. It is more important here to operate a different set of scales. In the longer term what was the balance between continuity and change after this period of severe disruption?

The case for continuity starts with geography and ends with Islam. For reasons that still confound historians, the Mongol *Drang nach Westen* was stopped in the Syrian desert. The result – a frontier that divided Mamluk Egypt and Syria from Ilkhanid Iran, Iraq and (much of) Anatolia – was little more than the most recent iteration of a perennial division imposed by the

geography and topography of the region. The *dar al-Islam* ('abode of Islam') stretched from Egypt and Syria to the shores of the Atlantic, and those states and societies that lay to the west of the divide were affected only indirectly by Mongol and Ilkhanid rule. Ibn Khaldun was born a century after Chinggis's death, but the politics and culture that formed him were post-Mongol only at one or two removes.

Nor should we exaggerate the impact upon those societies that did experience Mongol rule directly. For one thing, they were not so brittle, especially outside of Iraq and Iran; the former had been in economic decline for centuries, and the latter may have suffered the most from a region-wide 'Big Chill' that correlates with an economic downturn.¹⁶¹ The Mongols followed their predecessors by exploiting the land, and although conquest violence was considerable in many places, it was neither uniform nor decisive upon economies subject to those deeper dynamics. There is no discounting the damage done to the agricultural economy early on, but by the end of the thirteenth century policies were put in place to revive it. The Mongols realized that the lands they had conquered had to be returned to productivity.

The argument for continuity can also be made in high culture. The early history of Mongol rule in the Middle East was once written largely in the key of destruction and cultural insularity. Historians would argue that it was only with Ghazan (r. 1295–1304), who converted to Islam at the beginning of his reign, that the Mongols came to patronize culture on a significant scale. But it now appears that when Ghazan converted in June 1295, he was following rather than setting a trend: by this time, sizable numbers of the Mongol military and political elite had already taken up Islam. A Persian 'renaissance' was underway decades earlier.¹⁶² Ghazan's conversion thus signified the enduring potency of Islam as a cultural force, which absorbed and redirected dynamics borne of non-Muslim political power. The Mongols were outsiders to the Islamic Middle East, and in the collision between the religio-political traditions that they brought and the pre-existing culture with which they came into contact, the latter prevailed. (This is a fairly reliable law of history: nomads assimilate the traditions of the civilized whom they rule.) The Mongols conquered the Islamic east, but Islam conquered the Ilkhanids.

So despite the end of the caliphate of Baghdad and the introduction of Mongol traditions of rulership, a recognizably Islamic culture endured. The Muslim scholars, artisans and scientists who received the patronage of Ghazan and other Ilkhanid rulers operated in Arabic and Persian, thus joining a continuous tradition of learning that transcended the Mongol

deluge. **Rashid al-Din** (d. 1318), an exceptional talent among those scholars, was a Jew by birth. Chinggis had decreed that all religious traditions should be respected (provided that they did not contradict those of the steppe), but there was no question of Rashid al-Din's converting to anything other than Islam. **Al-Hilli** (d. 1325), a paragon of Imami Shi'ite learning, may have been instrumental in the conversion to Shi'ism of the Mongol ruler Uljeitu.

Hulegu's descendants would rule the Islamic east as the Ilkhanids for nearly a century. Descendants of Chinggis Khan, they were both partners in a distinctively Mongol project of universal sovereignty and beneficiaries of the cultural energies that had been set into circulation by Mongol rule the length of Asia. The political achievement was so spectacular that Timur was emulating it a century after Chinggis, and Babur (d. 1530), the founder of the Mughal empire, emulating Timur a century after that. Based in a succession of capitals in western Iran, the matrix of Ilkhanid rule was formed by some 600 years of accumulated Islamic tradition and institutionalized Islamic culture – everything from tax and postal systems to *madrastas* and mosques.

And what of the argument for change? Exhibit A is the destruction and mortality that resulted from deliberate and concentrated violence: cities such as Samarqand, Balkh and Nishapur were pulverized, and the agrarian economies organized around them damaged and sometimes even destroyed. Accounts of the destruction make for compelling reading. According to one writer who was exiled by the violence:

It was in the year 1220 that the God-forsaken army of the Tatar [Mongol] infidels – may God forsake and destroy them – gained the mastery over these territories. The confusion and slaughter, the devastation and leading into captivity, the destruction and conflagration that followed at the hands of those accursed creatures were such as had never before been witnessed in any age, whether in the lands of heathendom or Islam. How could slaughter ever be vaster than this that they wrought from the gate of Turkistan to the gate of Syria and Rum [Anatolia], wherein they laid waste so many cities and provinces, so that in one city alone – Rayy [western Tehran], where I myself was born and brought up – it has been estimated that 700,000 mortals were slain or made captive.¹⁶³

The Mongol conquests – both in fact and legend – set families into migration from east to west, and these included the likes of **Rumi** (d. 1273) and **Ibn Taymiyya** (d. 1328). Compelling reading is not necessarily factual

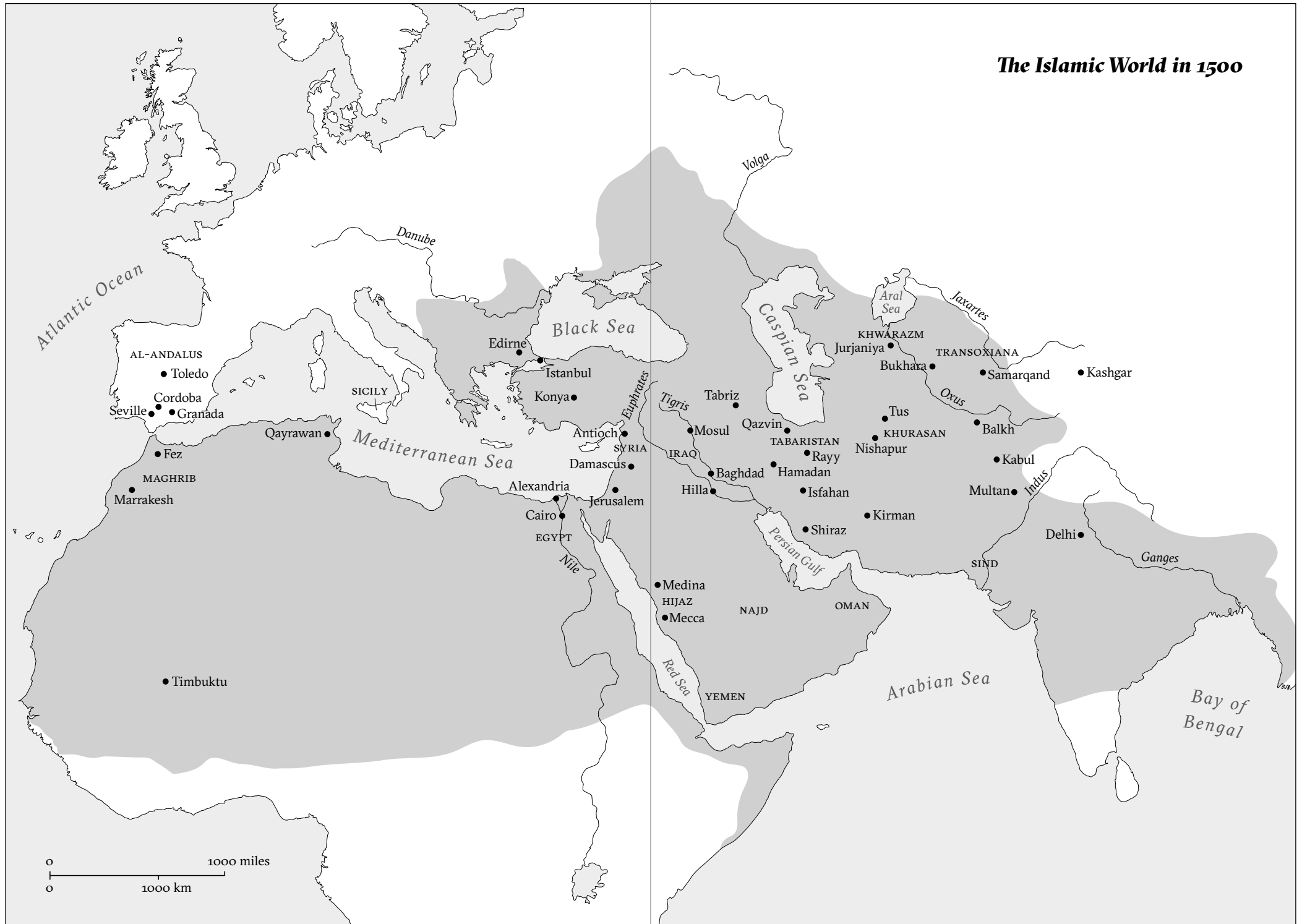
reading, of course; as we have already seen, what is true for some cities and regions does not apply to others. Since policies were aimed (and in some instances, successfully so) to reverse the damage, the argument for enduring change is more persuasive if it also accentuates the practical and symbolic effects of the fall of Baghdad.

For in both theory and practice, Islamic politics had been dominated by the office of the caliphate. The office functioned as a fast anchor into the ocean floor of seventh-century origins, and a broad umbrella that brought into legitimate shade the states, both symbiotic and parasitic, which emerged during the ninth and tenth centuries. Muslims had organized and ruled states that were independent or even hostile to the Abbasid caliphate, in Egypt, North Africa and Spain even establishing their own caliphates. But in the Fertile Crescent and Islamic east, its prestige endured, Abbasid genes, in combination with tokens and rituals of sovereignty (and delegation), engendering a widely accepted myth of unity.

With the sack of Baghdad and execution of the caliph in 1258, that myth died. Within two years an Abbasid branch was grafted onto a Mamluk polity that was hungry for legitimation and prestige, but this 'shadow' caliphate never recaptured the glory and status, both real and imaginary, of Baghdad. Ibn Taymiyya's response to the Mongols and the end of the caliphate was an intense – and intensely learned – outrage that has not been superseded.

The Mongols did far more than prove the obsolescence of the caliphate. In the short term, the loosely integrated khanates that bridged Asia from east to west facilitated land- and sea-based trade. Transaction costs having dropped, trade grew accordingly, creating circuits that tied north-west Europe – Matthew Paris's Yarmouth, for example – to the China coast. This is why commercial, diplomatic and religious missions streamed across Eurasia during what is commonly called the *Pax Mongolica*.¹⁶⁴ Scholars disagree just how far Marco Polo (d. 1324) travelled, but it scarcely matters: he was exceptional only in the effusive press that he received. From this point of view, the thirteenth century saw an incipient form of the integrated exchange of technologies, germs, ideas, goods and people that we customarily associate with globalization. For all their enormous scale, the Achaemenid, Roman and Abbasid empires hardly compared. World history, on this reading, is not a European achievement, but a Mongol one.

The Islamic World in 1500



Jalal al-Din Rumi is reputed to be the best-selling poet in the English-speaking world. Translated, retranslated, extracted and paraphrased, his poetic 'wisdom' finds itself in yoga classes, self-help books, weddings, pop music and, most commonly, anthologies consumed by 'unchurched Westerners hungry for some form of non-institutional religion or non-traditional spirituality'. Especially in America, that promised land of New Age religiosity, the thirteenth-century figure has found his place among a curious pantheon of gurus, seers and sages.¹⁶⁵ Neutered of cultural reference, Rumi's teachings are often reduced to anodyne droplets of near-homeopathic concentration. And when cultural references are confected, matters can be made even worse. What would Rumi himself have made of *The Forty Rules of Love*, a melodramatic novel that interleaves two love stories, one in thirteenth-century western Anatolia, and the second in twenty-first-century western Massachusetts?¹⁶⁶

If Rumi is that rare medieval Muslim who sells well, the cost is higher than the cover price. 'The way that the Self can be met in projection upon a therapist, a spiritual teacher, or a lover is one of the themes to be found in a discussion of the poetry of Jelaluddin Rumi', one reads in *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*.¹⁶⁷ One imagines that Rumi would have found confusing this sense of 'Self', just as he would have found striking his own appropriation as symbol of ecumenical universalism. His highly symbolic and metaphorical poetry deracinated and commodified, Rumi has himself become a symbol of spiritual self-actualization.

What, indeed, would he think of his rebirth as *poet* to English-reading consumers? To that question we have at least a partial answer. Rumi bristled at the expectations of his thronging followers in the city of Konya (southwest Anatolia), lamenting that he was unable to satisfy their appetite for his wisdom:

It is a habit with me, that I do not desire that any heart should be distressed through me. During the session a great multitude thrust themselves upon me, and some of my friends fend them off. That is not pleasing to me, and I have said a hundred times, 'Say nothing to any man on my account; I am well content with that.' I am affectionate to such a degree that when these friends come to me, for fear that they may be wearied I speak poetry so that they may be occupied with that. Otherwise, what have I to do with poetry? By God, I care nothing for poetry, and there is nothing worse in my eyes than that. It has become

*incumbent upon me, as when a man plunges his hand into tripe and washes it out for the sake of a guest's appetite, because the guest's appetite is for tripe.*¹⁶⁸

Immigration and initiation

A *leitmotif* throughout this book has been the task of disentangling the legendary from the reliable. Rumi's life offers yet another example. There is no shortage of biographical material, much of it coming on no less an authority than a son, Baha' al-Din (Sultan Valad) (d. 1312). Still, there remain insoluble problems caused by biographical gaps and chronological confusion, which, in the hands of hagiographers, are compounded by the axiomatic transformation of man into myth. In the case of Rabi'a and al-Hallaj we saw the influential role played by Farid al-Din al-'Attar in elaborating his legend. Rumi found celebrity too late for inclusion in al-'Attar's work, and the claim that the two met in Nishapur, made only centuries later, is spurious. In Rumi's case, we also have to account for the distorting effect of institutionalization. The Mevlevi order of Sufis, famous for their whirling dances, traces its tradition to Rumi ('our master', *mawlana*), and within their number could be found not only *shari'a*-respecting conformists who curried favour with the ruling court (a tendency associated with Sultan Valad), but also ecstatic and antinomian trends. In part, the battle for respectability was fought in biography. For these and other reasons, much of what we know of his lived life is approximate.

The balance of evidence suggests that Rumi was born in late September 1207 in Vakhsh, a small town located in what is now southeast Tajikistan. His father, Baha' al-Din Valad, was a religious scholar and mystic, himself the son of a mystic and scholar, who claimed biological descent from Abu Bakr, the first caliph (d. 634), and spiritual descent from Ahmad al-Ghazali (d. c. 1125), Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's brother. One reads that Rumi's mother descended from a line of local rulers. Such claims are far fetched. Sufi traditions were certainly in the air, including those associated with the most celebrated mystic of the day, Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240). Be this as it may, Baha' al-Din Valad seems to have had ambitions that exceeded his local prospects; having gotten himself on the wrong side of local rulers, he may also have feared arrest. In sum, he had good reasons to leave Vakhsh.

Soon after Rumi's birth, he moved the family to Samarqand, and soon thereafter (perhaps as early as 1216 or as late as 1220) relocated again, this time to Anatolia, travelling through Baghdad, with a detour to Mecca for the pilgrimage. After a few years in eastern Anatolia, he moved to the west, probably first to the town of Karaman, where the seventeen-year-old Rumi

married a woman from Samarqand, who bore him two sons. They finally settled in Konya, where Baha' al-Din would remain until his death in 1231. There he found generous patrons and the standing that came from teaching students and guiding a group of spiritual adepts, the last including Rumi himself. It was only here, on the western periphery of the central Islamic lands, that patrons gave him what he regarded as his due.

Konya was becoming the leading city of Islamic Anatolia, an area historically associated with Byzantium, the Arabicized term 'Rum' (Rome) explaining Rumi's name. The roots of Islamic society still being relatively shallow (the conquest that opened Byzantine Anatolia to Muslim armies had taken place in 1071), what the area lacked were prestigious institutions of learning. To complete his education, Rumi was thus sent to Aleppo and Damascus, both venerable centres of Islamic education. He returned to Konya for good in the late 1230s, the sources emphasizing his establishment bone fides by describing a number of teaching appointments in local *madrasas*. The most cursory reading of his poetry, which is replete with allusions to Islamic scripture and tradition, documents a mind filled with traditional Islamic learning. Alongside this more-or-less conventional education, he seems to have been initiated into Sufi teachings and practices (including ascetic exercises) by his father and a mentor named Burhan al-Din.

To this point, Rumi's early life might be described within a familiar frame of immigration: seeking opportunity (and, perhaps, distancing himself from trouble with the authorities), his father left what was (an Islamic) old world for a new one, leveraging his cultural capital (especially learning and the Persian language) in a society open to newcomers, and preserving some old ways through marriage to a woman from the old country. A hint of the migrant's displacement can even be gleaned from lines that Rumi composed much later in life: 'Limited reason is like a lightning flash: we can't go in a flash from here to Vakhsh.'¹⁶⁹ He was trained to read Arabic, and there are stray lines in his poetry of Turkish and Greek, which he acquired in Anatolia; but Persian was his language of composition. 'Whoever is parted from one who speaks his language', he declaimed, 'becomes dumb though he have a hundred songs.'¹⁷⁰

Poetry and gnosis

At this point the familiar frame must be discarded. For Rumi was not only living in an Islamic society that was still in a relatively early stage of formation, but also at a time when a new social movement was taking shape. This movement featured itinerant charismatics manifesting a 'new renunciatory



An 18th-century miniature of the supposed first encounter of Rumi (on the mule) with Shams of Tabriz, a meeting that would redirect the poet's life.

piety', as one scholar has put it.¹⁷¹ It came into contact with Rumi in late September of 1244, in the person of a preacher-ascetic named Shams of Tabriz (d. 1247), who would come to be Rumi's mentor. Shams would catalyse Rumi's inchoate and latent esotericism, and the spiritual connection that resulted would redirect his life: a geyser of creativity, storytelling, imagination and spiritual insight would be released, the flow of words, verses and sentences pouring out over the last thirty years of Rumi's life – some 60,000 or 70,000 verses in two major poetical works, not to mention a collection of his teachings in prose, and some essays and letters.

One of those works is a collection of over 2,000 odes that has come to be known, after Shams, as the *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabriz*. The other was begun late in life and delivered through dictation, 'whenever it occurred to him, dancing, in the bath, standing, sitting, walking, sometimes in the night until morning'.¹⁷² Compiled into a six-book collection of mystical tales versified into about 25,000 couplets, it is called the *Mathnavi*. Earliest Sufi poetry had been composed in Arabic, but during the twelfth century Persian followed suit, establishing the poetic genres in which Rumi would himself compose. For all the antecedents, the *Mathnavi* is conventionally considered the *ne plus ultra* of the Persian Sufi tradition of poetry, the Qur'an of the Persian language.

'We might be tempted to see Sufism as a kind of alternative Islam, were it not that in many historical contexts it simply was Islam.'¹⁷³ Within the broad tradition that was Sufism there were multiple strands, one of which was mysticism, elaborated theoretically in prose, and embodied as practice, especially in love poetry, where the metaphorical and figurative language of emotion and experience gave voice to the ineffable. The 'beloved' signified God, and the union of lover and beloved (and so the effacement, passing away or 'annihilation' of the individual self) the goal of successive stages of training and contemplation. Rumi's all-consuming love for Shams, which, according to the accounts, sent his friends and followers into a jealous rage, is recorded in his poetry as paroxysms of happiness, despair, longing and communion. But an intense particularization resolves itself into a universal, the discrete claims or truths of revealed religion or philosophy giving way towards a deeper gnosis.

A sense of the project can be gleaned from the following. ('Mount Qaf' is a legendary mountain that surrounds the earth; the 'anqa is a mythic bird that symbolizes God; and 'two bow-lengths' distance' alludes to the setting of Muhammad's revelations.)

*I was, on the day when the heavens were not;
no hint was there that anything with a name existed.
Through us named and names become apparent
on the day when no 'I' or 'We' were there.
A hint came in the revelation of the tip of the Beloved's tress
when the tip of the Beloved's tress was not.
Cross and Christianity from end to end
I traversed. He was not in the Cross.
To the idol-house I went, the ancient cloister;
in that no tinge of it was perceptible.
I went to the mountain of Herat and Kandahar;
I looked. He was not in the depths or the heights there.
With purpose I ascended to the summit of Mount Qaf;
In that place was nought but the 'Anqa.
I turned the reins of search towards the Ka'ba;
He was not in that place to which old and young aspire.
I questioned Avicenna about him;
He was not within Avicenna's range.
I journeyed to the scene of 'the two bow-lengths' distance';
He was not in that sublime court.
I looked into my own heart.
There I saw him. He was nowhere else.¹⁷⁴*

Or, in one of the most celebrated passages of the *Mathnavi*, as rendered into a now archaic English:

*A certain man knocked at his friend's door: his friend asked:
'Who is there?'
He answered 'I'. 'Begone,' said his friend, 'tis too soon!'
At my table there is no room for the raw.
How shall the raw be cooked but in the fire of absence? What else
will deliver him from hypocrisy?'
He turned sadly away, and for a whole year the flames
of separation consumed him.
Then he came back and again paced to and fro beside the house
of his friend.
He knocked at the door with a hundred fears and reverence lest any
disrespectful word might escape from his lips.
'Who is there?', cried the friend. He answered: 'Thou, O charmer
of all hearts.'*

*'Now,' said the friend, 'since thou art I, come in, there is no room
for two I's in this house'.¹⁷⁵*

'Know that the outward (or apparent) form passes away, but the world of reality remains forever', he put it.¹⁷⁶ The project he set for himself and his disciples was to overcome the self, along with the multiplicities of the world, in order to experience the transcendent unity of God.

It should be emphasized that the purpose of the *Mathnavi* is not dramatic storytelling, but lesson-learning. An exciting story about the dangers of eating elephants, which can be traced back to the tenth century, is in Rumi's hands transformed into a homiletic about morality in general, and greed in particular.¹⁷⁷ The purpose of the text being didactic, it delivers on a project that complements the exercise of reason, as the allusion to Avicenna above would suggest.

*Those people who have studied or are currently students reckon that if
they frequent here, they will forget their scholarship and abandon it, but,
on the contrary, when they come here all their scholarship will gain a
soul the same way that a body gains a soul.¹⁷⁸*

This said, the Sufi's gnosis trumps the arid cogitation of the philosophers, lawyers or theologians. 'No man of intellect will ever know the head's ecstasy of the drunkard; no man of reason will ever know the heart's rapture of the reason lost.'¹⁷⁹

24 Rashid al-Din, *physician, courtier and global historian* (1318)

Rashid al-Din was a physician, an author of what has been called the first work of global history, and chief minister to the Ilkhanid ruler Ghazan (r. 1295–1304). And so it was to Ghazan that Rashid al-Din would direct his orotund and grandiloquent words:

*Padshah of the world, Shahanshah of Earth and Time, Sovereign Lord
of the Kings of Iran and Turan, Manifestation of the Copious Grace of
God, the Visible Sign of Islam and the Faith...Animator of the Custom
of World Domination, The Elevated Banner of Sovereignty, Bestower
of the Carpet of Justice...Heir to the Chinggisid Throne, Shadow of God,
Defender of the Faith of God to the Ends of the Earth and Time.¹⁸⁰*

The hyperbole is predictable: how else was one to describe such a ruler's sublime sovereignty? What is striking is the concatenation of symbols, which are at once distinctly Persian ('Padshah of the world, Shahanshah of Earth and Time'), Mongol ('Animator of the Custom of World Domination, The Elevated Banner of Sovereignty, Bestower of the Carpet of Justice') and Islamic ('Shadow of God, Defender of the Faith of God'). How were these political, religious and cultural tokens assembled in the service of Ghazan?

We saw earlier that radical centralization was both impractical and antithetical to Mongol steppe traditions, and so the post-Chinggis state might well have fallen victim to entropy. What took place instead was the institutionalization of Chinggis's divided inheritance. His massive conquest state thus decomposed into four regional empires, each ruled by a descendant of Chinggis: Hulegu (in Iran and Iraq); Qubilai in China (of Coleridge's fame; r. 1260–94); a Chagadai state in western Mongolia and Central Asia; and the Golden Horde in Russia and the steppe to the west. Hulegu, a grandson of Chinggis's, had led Mongol armies into Iran, Iraq and Syria, and by the end of his life in 1265, his rule over the Mongol southwest had been formally acknowledged in the title 'ilkhan'. The title suggested subordination to the Great Khan – it was a title introduced for precisely this reason – but this subordination was always more formal than substantive, and even the formalities were eventually abandoned.

Because decomposition can make for regeneration, what emerged was a hybrid Ilkhanid state – at once discernibly Islamic, Mongol and Iranian. Rashid al-Din was both an agent and symbol of the cultural fusion that produced it.

Multiculturalism, Ilkhanid style

Rashid al-Din was born in about 1250 to a Jewish family in the western Iranian city of Hamadan, which was home to a well-known Jewish community and rabbinic academy. Some have argued that he was raised Muslim, but the consensus is that he converted as an adult, perhaps at about thirty years of age, shortly before his service to Ghazan. A Jewish education would account for his command of Hebrew, including the more-or-less direct contribution of the Hebrew Bible to the section of Jewish history in his *Compendium* (see below). His father was an apothecary, and it was his training in medicine that opened the door to service to the Ilkhanids, initially, it appears, during the reign of Hulegu's son, Abaqa (1265–82). Already then he is identified as a 'boon-companion' (*nadim*), a rather old-fashioned English word that captures only poorly the social function of the *nadim*, which was not merely to provide companionship and entertainment,

but also the sage counsel that a ruler required, embedded, as he usually was, in a perilous political culture.

As it happened, the physician had real political skills. By the 1280s, Rashid al-Din's reputation had spread, and early in the 1290s he was offered the very highest position in the civilian administration of state, the vizierate. He declined, but was given a second chance during the reign of Ghazan. The appointment came in 1298, and from that point, through the reigns of both Ghazan and Uljeitu, his successor (1304–16), he shared the office as co-vizier. His service ended in 1317, when he was dismissed soon after the ascension of a new khan. He was robbed of his retirement by court intrigues, in the course of which he was accused of poisoning Uljeitu. He was executed in the summer of 1318.

His Jewish background may have had something to do with it. The late thirteenth century seems to have been a period of anti-Jewish sentiment (there were even pogroms), and in this context some harboured the suspicion that Rashid al-Din's conversion was disingenuous. The facts are hard to reconstruct. For centuries, Jews and Christians had served in multiple capacities in Islamic courts, often as physicians. Whatever the date of his reputed 'conversion', we should scarcely presume that his was an act of deep spiritual commitment. As early as the 1260s, Hulegu had described himself as a 'kindly exalter of the Christian faith',¹⁸¹ and stories of his baptism even circulated. But this was not a conversion in the sense that we would now understand it, religious affiliation then being one of the currencies of foreign affairs: decades of diplomacy with European courts had taught the Mongols that Christians were gullible, too eager to see in the Mongols an ally in their religious wars against the Muslim Mamluks of Egypt. (When Hulegu died in 1265, his burial rites included interring his female attendants alive.) The conversion of Ilkhanid commanders during the latter thirteenth century seems to explain why Ghazan himself 'converted' in June of 1295, an event that seems to mark a public performance of Islam rather than a complete abandonment of his Buddhist background. Rashid al-Din's conversion should probably be understood along these lines.

Co-vizier, patron and author, Rashid al-Din worked at the heart of the Ilkhanid court, itself the nexus of cultural translation, production and negotiation. A glimpse at Ghazan's version of Ilkhanid cosmopolitanism, as well as his close relationship with Rashid al-Din, comes in an Arabic biographical dictionary that dates from the middle of the fourteenth century.

Oghuz leaving the land of darkness, from Rashid al-Din's *Compendium of Chronicles*, c. 1314.



*[Ghazan] spoke Mongolian and Turkish, and he knew Persian, but did not speak it except with master Rashid [al-Din] and others like him who were favoured in Ghazan's court. He understood most of what was said before him in Arabic, but he did not let it be known that he understood it, out of pride in the deeply rooted Chinggis Khanid and pure Mongol Yasa [law]. When he became king, he took up leadership [in] the way of Chinggis Khan and established the Mongol Yasa.*¹⁸²

Rashid al-Din composed treatises on theology, philosophy and medicine; he is often called 'the physician' because of his renown in medicine. But it is upon a work of history that his celebrity rests: his *Compendium of Chronicles*. Commissioned first by Ghazan in 1300 or so, and recommissioned by his successor Uljeitu, the original version was written in Persian, accompanied by illustrations. (No manuscripts of this version survive, so the reconstruction of the text has to work from multiple and incomplete



Preparation for the Battle of Badr, from Rashid al-Din's *Compendium of Chronicles*, c. 1314.

manuscripts.) The *Compendium* was a collective project, which drew upon what amounts to a research team of scholars with complementary linguistic and cultural expertise. A long section on the life of the Buddha, for instance, is owed to a monk from Kashmir, a certain Kamalashri; the origins of the Mongols, to take another, came in part from archives and documents made accessible only to Rashid al-Din through a Chinese envoy to the Ilkhanid court. Drawing upon an ocean of oral and written accounts, stories and legends, the work reflects in scale and character the background of its author and the cultural eclecticism of the Ilkhanid court.

The work is divided into two volumes, each comprising multiple sections. Pride of place naturally belonged to the Mongolian and Turkish peoples, so it is there that this official history begins, before turning to Chinggis Khan and his successors, and finally the Ilkhanids, from the reign of Hulegu until the death of Ghazan. The second volume survives only in part, a section devoted to Uljeitu having been lost; much else remains in manuscripts, waiting to be edited. What survives of the work is remarkable for its near-hubristic reach. It begins with Biblical and pre-Islamic history, covers the caliphate, and then a number of successor Muslim dynasties that ruled in the Islamic east. Thereupon follows a panoramic view of both the east and west: sections on the Mongols and Turks, Chinese, Jews, Franks (that is, European Christians) and Indians. Rashid al-Din's model of humanity was 'composite',¹⁸³ one of peoples with separate histories now brought into focus within a single narrative frame that captures geography, ethnography, chronology, and cultural, intellectual and religious history.

What are the underlying cultural attitudes that impress themselves upon this material?

On the one hand, Rashid al-Din naturally finds aspects of non-Islamic culture unpalatable, especially the histories of 'infidels and idolaters', which 'are nothing but fabulous concoctions and erroneous myths unacceptable to the rational mind'.¹⁸⁴ An apologetic aim – to provide through such accounts of errant falsehood inspiration and guidance – is unmistakable. On the other hand, he finds laudable many non-Muslim cultural achievements, such as Chinese woodblock printing. His treatment of the Jews, which draws directly from Hebrew texts, seems to betray a lingering commitment to his mother faith. It has even been argued that he saw something of himself in his portrayal of Moses – as an exemplar of a Platonic, philosopher-king.¹⁸⁵ His treatment of the Buddha, which appears within his section on India, taps into deep reservoirs of Buddhist practice and knowledge that lay within the Ilkhanid state, some of which can be traced to Tibet. It is the fullest and most sympathetic account of the Buddha that survives in Islamic letters.

The ambition of the *Compendium* – capacious in scope, at once critical and curious, text and illustration coming together in monumental form – was of a piece with Rashid al-Din's near-industrial-sized project of cultural preservation, synthesis and dissemination. The factory was the Rab'-i Rashidi, a huge complex in Tabriz, then the leading city of Iran, which was established by an endowment deed that Rashid al-Din drafted in August of 1309. Supported by agricultural revenues from adjacent lands, the Rab'-i Rashidi was a hive of learning and teaching that included residence halls, a library and centre for book production (including copying and illustrating or illuminating copies of the Qur'an, collections of Prophetic traditions and his works), and buildings for both social welfare (including a soup kitchen) and medical care (a hospital).

That Rashid al-Din copied the endowment deed himself suggests the degree of control that he wished to exercise. To say he was punctilious and self-interested in his directions is to understate things. Take, for example, a summary of the directions he gave when he commissioned the production of a thirty-volume copy of the Qur'an and a collection of Prophetic traditions:

It must be copied on large-sized fine paper and by means of very fine black ink; it must be beautifully and correctly written, dotted and vocalized according to one of the seven orthodox readings; it must be provided with illuminated indications of individual verses as well as

*groups of five and ten verses; it must be covered with a leather binding and lastly placed in a chest adorned with gilt iron ornamentations. The hadith collection must also be copied on fine paper by means of very fine black ink and in a good and clean handwriting...*¹⁸⁶

Rashid al-Din left nothing to chance, including his place in posterity: he decreed that his works, handsomely and authoritatively produced, were to form part of the required curriculum for students at the Rab'-i Rashidi and elsewhere in the Ilkhanid domains. His sons were appointed to supervise it after his death. But fate decreed otherwise: upon his disgrace and execution, the Rab'-i Rashidi was pillaged and fell into ruin. Efforts to restore it were unsuccessful. Little remains now beyond a masonry foundation. Seven hundred years later, his works are being re-assembled by scholars living in a very different multicultural age.

25 **al-Hilli, paragon of Shi'ism ascendant** (1325)

The sectarian map of Iraq divides into three more-or-less distinct areas, an east-to-west band populated by both Shi'ites and Sunnis dividing a Sunni north from a Shi'ite south. The town of al-Hilla is located in the extreme north of that Shi'ite south, about 60 miles south of Baghdad; it is also equidistant (about 35 miles) from Najaf and Karbala, the two great centres of Shi'ite pilgrimage and thought. Najaf is renowned as the shrine city of 'Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet, and the fourth caliph (r. 656–61; see above). Karbala is the shrine city of 'Ali's son, al-Husayn, who died in 680 in a failed rebellion against Umayyad rule.

None of these towns was especially notable in the first centuries of Islam, and this is because the geography of Shi'ite martyrdom and learning took some time to settle. As late as the tenth century, there was widespread disagreement about the burial place of 'Ali, and Hilla only became noteworthy in the first decades of the twelfth century, when it came to serve as capital of a Shi'ite statelet, which took its name from the ruling tribe, the Mazyadids. Karbala and Najaf emerged as shrine-cities under the Shi'ite patronage of the tenth- and eleventh-century Buyids. Accounts have it that the Shi'ites of Hilla ingratiated themselves with the conquering Mongol armies, thus sparing both themselves and their co-religionists from the wanton destruction that so often took place elsewhere. At about the same time that Oxford was emerging as a centre of learning, al-Hilla was, too.

Ibn al-Mutahhar al-Hilli ('from al-Hilla') was born on the eve of those conquests, in late December 1250, to a family that had already distinguished itself through Shi'ite learning. The polymathic Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274) – scientist, philosopher and theologian – is now the most celebrated Shi'ite of the time, but al-Hilli, who was both a student of Tusi's and a favoured friend of Rashid al-Din, would prove to be the leading *establishment* Shi'ite. Gifted in expressing a crystallizing Imami consensus, al-Hilli authored original works, commentaries, long tracts and short creeds that would themselves be subject to translations and commentaries. Several of his works remain part of Shi'ite education even today.

Varieties of Shi'ism

By al-Hilli's time, there was much that united and divided Shi'ism. Shi'ites were of a piece in believing that 'Ali's claim to the caliphate had been usurped, and that an institution of religio-political leadership (the Imamate), to be held by a succession of 'Ali's descendants ('Alids), was crucial to religious life. They also followed ritual observances and legal practices that set them apart from Sunnis – and, to both lesser and greater extents, from each other. For this and other reasons, during the ninth and tenth centuries they organized themselves into three main branches.

One took its name from a great grandson of 'Ali called Zayd (d. 740), who had led an unsuccessful rebellion against the Umayyads. 'Zaydi' Shi'ites are now almost entirely limited to Yemen, where they constitute a large minority. But in the pre-Mongol period they were much more widespread, and by the end of the ninth century had even formed polities of their own in the Yemen and northern Iran, which were independent of an Abbasid caliphate that had disappointed Shi'ite hopes for a restoration of 'Alid rule. The Shi'ism espoused by the Buyids, whose origins lay on the southern ring of the Caspian Sea, was of this Zaydi persuasion.

A second branch takes its name from Isma'il (d. c. 755), an 'Alid contemporary of Zayd's who contributed little but his name to Isma'ilism, which, both esoteric and revolutionary in its origins and early development, also had significant appeal in the pre-Mongol period. Like the Zaydis, the Isma'ilis subdivided and formed their own polities, by far the most important being the Fatimid caliphate of North Africa and Egypt (909–1171), which, as we have already seen, was extinguished by Saladin. For all their early appeal in the Middle East and Central Asia, Isma'ili sub-sects now survive mainly in South Asia, East Africa and in a global diaspora.

Al-Hilli himself belonged to the third and now most populous Shi'ite branch, whose members are known either as 'Imami' or 'Twelver' Shi'ites.

The latter term relates to their belief in the hereditary line of Imams that began with 'Ali and ended with the twelfth, Muhammad al-Mahdi, who, according to doctrine, began a period of 'occultation' in 940 and will return in the Eschaton to restore justice to the world. Not only are Imamis far more numerous than Zaydis and Isma'ilis – across the globe they number something around 120 million – but unlike the Zaydis and Isma'ilis, who cluster on the periphery of the Middle East, the majority live in the historical heartlands of Islam: in Lebanon, southern Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, eastern Saudi Arabia, and Iran, in addition to Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

How is it that the Imamis survived, even flourished under Sunni rule? As unlikely as it may sound now – what with Iraq rent by a civil war that pits Sunnis against Shi'ites – Shi'ism had begun as a political protest movement against the Umayyads, but the Imamis were especially successful at charting a course out of opposition and into co-existence with their Sunni counterparts. The process began in the eighth century, and it accelerated in the ninth, tenth and eleventh, as their legal and theological doctrines settled, and their ritual life – especially festivals and pilgrimage rites that glorified martyred Imams – was institutionalized. While Zaydis and Isma'ilis tended towards political activism, even revolution, Imamis were pragmatic quietists. Put another way, while Zaydis and Isma'ilis were wont to lodge power in Imams who sought to realize political aspirations, an orientation that necessarily put them at some odds with Sunni rulers, Imamis lodged power in clerics who were content mainly to exert spiritual, intellectual and social authority on a local level.

And in the thirteenth century, the Imamis had timing going for them. Shi'ites had held some positions of favour in ruling courts in Iraq and Iran during the twelfth century, but events in Baghdad in 1258 meant that the caliph's finger had been removed from the Sunni side of the scale. (Some Sunnis even alleged that the Shi'ites were complicit in the murder of the last caliph.) For some, the extirpation of the caliphate symbolized the end of Sunni hegemony, and the *parvenu* Mongols not only patronized Shi'ite scholars, but were open to Shi'ism itself, a situation that stood in stark contrast to the emphatically (and sometimes intolerantly) Sunni Mamluk caliphate of Egypt and Syria.

Shi'ism and Shi'ite scholarship under the Ilkhanids

Al-Hilli was a direct beneficiary of the new dispensation. It is no coincidence that whereas the Isma'ili communities of Iraq and Syria were nearly all destroyed by the Mongols, the Imamis flourished. Between about



Al-Hilli studied under Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, who is shown with scholars at the 'observatory' of Maragha, Iran, in this miniature from Shiraz, 1410.

1310 and 1317, al-Hilli was based at the court of the Ilkhanid ruler Uljeitu (r. 1304–16), the most spectacular part of his grandiose (and short-lived) capital of Sultaniyya, in northwest Iran. Uljeitu, who commissioned several of al-Hilli's works, and employed him in a peripatetic academy that followed his mobile court, even converted to Shi'ism, perhaps under al-Hilli's direct influence, before returning to Sunni Islam later in his life.

Al-Hilli's early education was a variation on a familiar pattern: a promising son from an elite family was educated by his father and, in al-Hilli's case, a well-known uncle. (And just as his father taught him, so he would teach his own family members: a son and two nephews would be among his leading students.) Al-Hilli's advanced learning took place both in informal, individual settings (with Shi'ite and Sunni scholars alike), as well as in Sunni *madrāsas* in Baghdad. There was nothing unique in this working across the Sunni-Shi'ite divide: the meticulous reconstruction of the personal library of an Imami scholar named Ibn Tawus (d. 1266), a contemporary who was also from the town of al-Hilla, shows that of the 2,000 or so books that he owned, about one third were written by Sunnis.¹⁸⁷ Sunnis and Shi'ites tended to live in separate city quarters and villages, but their elites mixed.

A latter part of al-Hilli's education took place in northwest Iran in what is arguably the most famous scientific institution of Islamic civilization, the 'observatory' of Maragha. Founded in about 1258 by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, with whom al-Hilli studied Avicenna, for just over a half-century Maragha enjoyed the patronage of Mongol and Ilkhanid rulers. It functioned as a hemispheric centre of teaching and research in astronomy and related disciplines, its buildings and instrumentation, in addition to a library, accommodation for staff, students and scholars, intended not merely for observations, but also for preserving and advancing astronomy. It was there that some of what amounted to a fundamental revision of Ptolemaic thinking was undertaken, which, probably transmitted to Italy through Byzantine channels, lay the groundwork for the planetary model and heliocentrism that are commonly associated with Copernicus (d. 1543).

Astronomy can take specific cultural forms; Jewish and Muslim calendars obviously differ, but in both traditions astronomy was a useful tool for calculating time. Because its underlying language is mathematics, and its fundamental problems (of observation and measurement) are empirical, it transcends religious tradition. Al-Hilli was not training to be an astronomer at Maragha; he was absorbing thirteenth-century rationalism. And in this respect, his experience exemplifies Imami learning. The fullest elaboration of rationalism *within* religious thought took place in theology and

law. Al-Hilli is credited with about one hundred titles, of which perhaps sixty or so survive. Although he wrote about philosophy, Qur'anic exegesis, grammar and more besides, it was his theological and legal works that were considered both fundamental and irreplaceable. He is especially significant as one of the last Imamis to integrate Mu'tazili theology, a tradition deeply impressed by Greek logic that was largely resisted by the Sunnis, into the heart of the Shi'ite intellectual tradition.

Dialectical reasoning thus is made to stand at the heart of jurisprudence, and such reasoning at the heart of theology. Prophecy, so the argument runs, is not a gift granted by God – in philosophical terms, a contingent 'accident', which is not intrinsic to Him. Instead, it arises necessarily from God's innate attributes of justice and mercy, and accounted for the nature of humankind.

Humankind is a species differing from other animals, being 'political' by nature. Man requires many things in life, things indispensable for social activity, which he cannot contrive except by common activity and cooperation. Further the impetus to domination is naturally present in humankind, so there arises internecine violence, which is opposed to the wisdom of community. Hence there is a need of a uniting factor, which forces them into community: this factor is the law and sunna. But the sunna requires a law-giver to establish it and lay down its sanctions. This person must be distinguished from others of his species...¹⁸⁸

Underpinning the argument is an irresistible causal chain, which leads from God's necessary attributes to prophecy and its successor institution, the Imamate, the qualities of the Imams (as divinely appointed and sinless) mirroring those of the prophets. In sum, al-Hilli brought to completion the project of engineering a theological and legal system that argued for an Imamate that was at once absolutely necessary and entirely delegative in practice: the last Imam being in occultation – that is, alive, but hidden, to return at the end of time – his authority fell to the religious elite. Clerical authority was solidified, and the Imami community preserved.

26 Ibn Taymiyya, stubborn reactionary (1328)

In early 2015 reports circulated that Ibn Taymiyya's works were to be removed from bookstore shelves in Egypt and Jordan. Such official disapprobation was not entirely new: already in the 1980s, state-controlled

newspapers and magazines were drawing attention to the influence that his ideas were exercising upon Muslim youth, and many of his books had been expurgated for some time. But for centuries Ibn Taymiyya's thinking had been mostly ignored by those who constituted the scholarly mainstream, the teachers, thinkers and jurists who occupied prime positions in *madrasas*, or who discharged the law in formal and informal settings. There was just too much of it; and much was inaccessible, idiosyncratic or iconoclastic. According to a contemporary named al-Dhahabi (d. 1348), Ibn Taymiyya drafted the equivalent of almost eighty pages a day; he authored 500 volumes in all, mainly works of law and theology. The same observer noted his poor handwriting, which, along with the sheer volume of his work (a collection of his legal judgments now runs to thirty-seven volumes), meant that his written corpus was dishevelled – a 'bibliographic nightmare', in the words of a contemporary – more or less from the start.¹⁸⁹

It was only in the nineteenth century that interest in Ibn Taymiyya grew, especially as the numbers of readers increased, and as their appetites could be satisfied through books that were mass-produced by mechanical printing presses. At this point, speaking of a scholarly mainstream becomes increasingly difficult, as the institutions underpinning elite education changed quickly and permanently. In an age of colonialism, conservative modernists thus breathed life back into Ibn Taymiyya, and he recaptured a celebrity that he had enjoyed in his own day. Those working within the tradition founded by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), eponym of the Wahhabi school that dominates in Saudi Arabia, found his ideas attractive early on; and during the twentieth century his stature grew enormously among those of an increasingly revolutionary bent. Many of the views that belong to the likes of Osama bin Laden – about law, political power, community and war – spring from selective and opportunistic readings in the massive corpus of Ibn Taymiyya's writings.

What explains his appeal to radicals? And what is it in the ideas of a prolific fourteenth-century jurist and theologian that makes authorities so nervous in the twenty-first? The very short answer is his view on government and war. The less short answer, which I shall provide here, is that he was a radical reactionary. Ibn Taymiyya's writings can be mined for a Sunnism that is as exacting as it is consistent: in arguing for a scripture- and tradition-based legal rigourism, he railed against a great deal of theology and philosophy, against popular practices of worship and piety, against what he saw as the pernicious influence of Christians and Jews, against Shi'ite beliefs and practices (he took on al-Hilli's work

explicitly, especially his views on the Imamate) – and much more besides. Ibn Taymiyya was neither literalist nor anti-rationalist, as is often claimed, but he was fiercely critical of the legal orthodoxy as it had emerged over the centuries, arguing that it had betrayed the pure and uncompromising monotheism of Muhammad. Rather than a complex system of legal subtleties and theological fudges or compromises, indeed, rather than an intellectual project that valorized diversity, Islam consisted of the views and practices of Muhammad and the pious forebears who preserved and embodied those views and practices. Everything later and everything else was innovation.

As Ibn Taymiyya saw things, he lived in a society that had been internally corrupted by intellectual lassitude, permissiveness – even an idolatry legitimated by popular religion – at the very time that it was being threatened externally by foreign metaphysics and the unbelief and military might of the Mongols. A society that is given over to immorality and corruption, and jeopardized by the military, political and cultural beliefs of non-Muslims? It is not so hard to explain why this fourteenth-century thinker resonates in the twenty-first-century Middle East.

Courting controversy

A frequent refrain in this book has been regretting the paucity or implausibility of the historical record. Ibn Taymiyya is the exception that proves that rule: his life is arguably the single best known in this period. He had the good fortune to live at a time, and in the very places (Cairo and Damascus), when biographical writing was flourishing. Scores of biographies have been written about him, two shortly after his death. He attracted attention both as a jurist in a culture dominated intellectually by jurists, and as a demagogic public figure who courted controversy.

Ibn Taymiyya was born in the winter of 1263 to a family of Hanbali scholars in Harran, an ancient town of northern Syria that is now just north of the Turkish-Syrian border. The times were perilous: Baghdad had fallen to the Mongols five years earlier, and although the Mongols never pacified Syria, their armies campaigned and raided several times, occupying nearly all of it in 1260. At the age of seven he and his family abandoned the city for Damascus, leaving at night, a source tells us, 'with his books on a carriage for lack of riding animals'.¹⁹⁰ There was no going back: by the spring of 1272, Harran had been destroyed in the course of the Mamluk-Mongol wars, and left 'desolate and uninhabited'.¹⁹¹ It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that his childhood experience of flight from the Mongol threat somehow affected his thinking as an adult.



The Citadel of Damascus. It came under Mamluk control after they defeated the Mongols in 1260.

The child was precocious. Considering his reputation as an adult, one imagines that he was also insufferable. ‘The eminent were left speechless by the extent of his intelligence’, we read in the same source that reports his night-time escape from Harran, ‘the agility of his mind, the power of his memory and his speed of perception...In his childhood he used to attend places of reading and gathering [where] he would talk and debate, silencing the authoritative men and conveying a knowledge that confounded the notables of the town.’¹⁹² In 1284, he succeeded his father as a teacher in a Damascus *madrasa*. His learning was prodigious. Other men would have assimilated societal and professional norms, and lived a comfortable life of respectability and status, working within the intellectual framework constructed by one of the four schools of Sunni law. He chose otherwise.

Brilliant, combative and obstinate, a celibate when celibacy was far from the norm, Ibn Taymiyya was singularly obsessed with ensuring his vision of the public good, and sought out controversy so as to model resistance to the scholarly establishment. His career as public agitator began in 1294, when he led mobs demanding the scalp of a Christian scribe who had insulted the Prophet; his view was that the crime called for execution, and criticized the authorities for conciliating and equivocating. The tumult only subsided when the Christian converted. This led to the first of several

episodes of imprisonment: between 1294 and his death in 1328, he would cycle in and out of Cairene, Alexandrine or Damascene prisons, spending about six years in jail. For the authorities, imprisonment had the utility of both mollifying his critics, particularly the scholars who constituted the academic establishment in Cairo and Damascus, and retarding his ability to stir up trouble with mobs. Since incarceration gave him the time and peace to write – during his eight months in an Alexandrian jail he composed *The Refutation of the Logicians*, a work so definitive and substantial that it was abridged 200 years later – when the Mamluks jailed him for the sixth and final time, they took his books away.

What landed him in jail? It certainly was not any political, much less revolutionary, position that he took vis-à-vis the Mamluk regime. Unlike many scholars who eschewed contact with the state, Ibn Taymiyya was closely associated with several rulers, and even did the state’s bidding on occasion. His was ‘a structural disposition to cooperate with the state,’ as one scholar put it.¹⁹³ What triggered serial inquiries and imprisonments, along with the suppression, imprisonment and exiling of his followers, was the stringency of his theology and law, which put him at odds with the moderate legal and religious elite that made up the state’s constituents. One example is a ruckus that took place in 1309, when something like 500 Sufis took to the area around the Citadel in Cairo, the Mamluks’ palatial residence and barracks, in order to protest against Ibn Taymiyya’s criticisms of some of their revered leaders. He was tried and imprisoned as a result.

A different example of the commotion that he could cause is recorded by celebrated travel-writer Ibn Battuta (d. 1377), who visited Damascus in 1326. He begins his account by opining that Ibn Taymiyya was slightly deranged. ‘There was something in his head’, wrote Ibn Battuta; he ‘had a screw loose’ is how a modern historian has put it. The following, though presented as Ibn Battuta’s first-person observation, may actually have come on second- or third-hand authority to him:

I was in attendance on a Friday when he was preaching to the people and exhorting them from the minbar [pulpit] of the cathedral mosque. In the course of his speech he said, ‘God comes down to the sky of this world just as I come down now’, and he descended one step of the minbar. A Maliki jurist, known as Ibn Zahra’, remonstrated with him and denounced what he had said, whereupon the congregation rose against this jurist, striking him with their hands and shoes until his turban fell off, exposing a silk skullcap on his head. They rebuked him for

wearing this and bore him to the house of 'Izz al-Din b. Musallam, the Hanbalis' judge, who ordered him to be imprisoned and then flogged.¹⁹⁴

What upset the Maliki jurist was Ibn Taymiyya's outrageously crude anthropomorphism: it was absurd, to the thinking of Ibn Zahra', that God moved like humans moved. His reward, thanks to the mob-like congregation, was the humiliating discovery that he had a taste for silk, a luxury that no self-respecting scholar was to wear.

A world of threats

Ibn Taymiyya's volatility was fuelled by fear. The perils were many and multifarious: intellectual, spiritual, moral, religious and military. We can take three examples in turn.

Logic was one. For Ibn Taymiyya, it encoded a metaphysics that was incompatible with the revealed truths of the Qur'an and Sunna. It followed that the philosophers, whose method was predicated on deductive logic (especially varieties of syllogism) fell into rank error. 'His grievance against logic was not simply that it existed, but rather that it existed in and infested the core of the Islamic religious sciences.'¹⁹⁵

Sufism was another. It was not Sufism *per se* that outraged Ibn Taymiyya, but rather some of its popular practices and esoteric doctrines. Although his personal commitments are not entirely clear, there is good evidence that he himself belonged to a Sufi order. Nor is there any doubt that he approved of asceticism as a disciplining code in the service of God – that is, as a complement to the indispensable discharge of legal obligations. Where some Sufis went wrong was in tolerating or even performing any number of abominable 'innovations', such as practices of piety and worship that took the form of music and dance. God's 'friends' (that is, saints), he averred, could be found among 'Qur'an specialists, scholars, the people of jihad and the sword, traders, manufacturers and farmers'.¹⁹⁶ He bore a special animus against the veneration of saints and their tombs, which he regarded as a mode of idolatry.

Where Sufis went wrong in doctrinal terms was in admitting antinomian tendencies and blurring what he regarded as the inviolate distinction between created and Creator. We saw earlier that al-Hallaj was reputed to have uttered 'I am [the] Truth', a phrase that was taken to express the radical immanence of God. By Ibn Taymiyya's time, a systematic mystical doctrine of 'the Unity of Being' had emerged, and was closely associated with the Andalusian Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), though he himself never seems to have used the term itself. According to Ibn Taymiyya, who devoted

several tracts to the issue (e.g. 'The Exposition of the falsity of the Unity of Being and the refutation of those who adhere to it'), such 'monist' Sufis were wrong – and heretical – in their 'confusion of the cosmos with its Creator'.¹⁹⁷ God's being is fundamentally different from the world's, he held, and any conflating of the two is of a piece with the Christian falsehood of incarnation. It is at once offensive to God's sovereignty and utter uniqueness, and thus grotesque in its consequences, which include idolatry: 'They agree with every form of associationism (that is, idolatry) in the world, equate God with every created thing, and permit worship of everything'.¹⁹⁸ In sum, Sufism's elitist ideas were antithetical to the communitarianism and equality of Islam.

Jihad can serve as a final example. Ibn Taymiyya's views on jihad – or, more precisely, the sense that some Islamists have made of his view on jihad – are one of the primary reasons why his work is now so dangerous in the eyes of censors. Here it bears emphasizing that Islamists are not 'literalist' in the sense that they cleave to the explicit or self-evident meaning of texts, such as the Qur'an or Prophetic traditions. Instead, they privilege those proof-texts that conform to their ideological predispositions, ignoring or explaining away those that do not. They also adduce an idiosyncratic set of historical precedents and scholarly authorities, Ibn Taymiyya being one of the most prominent. This is because they typically find attractive a great deal of his style and thought: his anti-establishment intransigency; his insistence, in a post-caliphal world, upon an uncompromising *shari'a*-based theocracy; his antipathy towards Shi'ites and non-Muslims; his hostility to logic and philosophy; and, most infamously, his muscular definition of jihad.

The thirteenth century had dissolved several presumptions and certainties. One concerned the line of Abbasid caliphs, who had functioned as symbolic centre of the Islamic world. Another, closely related, concerned the political and cultural hegemony of Islamic society. The Mongols were the most powerful solvent of these presumptions and certainties: they had conquered Islamic lands, and they had put an end to the centuries-long Abbasid line. Now, at the turn of the fourteenth century, another wave of Mongol invasions was taking place (three offensives in Syria between 1299 and 1303, and another in 1312), and what made these a doctrinal challenge was that they postdated the ostensible conversions of the Mongol rulers Ghazan and Uljeitu. In fact, Ghazan explicitly justified his invasion on the grounds that Mamluks had violated the 'daughters of Muslims' in the southern Anatolian city of Mardin; on these and other grounds, he was presenting himself as a 'protector' of Islam.¹⁹⁹ Many of Ghazan's troops were also Muslims, some Mamluks who had voluntarily joined his armies.

Traditionally, jihad had been a doctrine that justified and conditioned the persecution of holy war by Muslims against non-Muslims. Under the circumstances, was it lawful for Mamluks to fight fellow Muslims? And what of the Muslims living in Mongol-controlled Mardin? What was the status of the city, and did those Muslims have an obligation to emigrate to Islamic lands?

His answers to these and other questions are given in three *fatwas*, formal responses provided by a properly trained jurist. The arguments are varied and complex, but they boil down to the proposition that the Mongols should and must be fought, especially because their Islam is the heretical Islam of the Shi'ites. The details need not detain us because they have not troubled Islamists, who adduce Ibn Taymiyya in support of their own views. What they prescribe – and some practice – is an offensive (and oft-indiscriminate) jihad that, fundamental to the faith of the individual believer, targets both Muslim and non-Muslim alike. An example is 'Abd al-Salam Faraj (d. 1982), who argued that Ibn Taymiyya's critique of pseudo-Muslim rule by the Mongols in the fourteenth century held for the Egyptian government of the twentieth. The Mongols repressed genuine Muslims and indulged Christians and Jews: 'Are not these characteristics the same characteristics as those of the rulers of this age, and their entourage of clients as well?' Anwar al-Sadat, for Faraj, was a latter-day Chinggis Khan.²⁰⁰

To many, Muslim and non-Muslim, Ibn Taymiyya's views are narrow and pitiless, his anxieties atavistic. But it takes no magnanimity to grant that he would be horrified to see his carefully honed arguments so crudely appropriated in the service of indiscriminate violence.

27 **Timur, sheep-rustler, world-conqueror** (1405)

Arnold Toynbee had a way with words, and this is how he described the entry of Timur into the eastern Islamic world:

Timur's self-stultification is a supreme example of the suicidalness of militarism. His empire not only did not survive him but was devoid of all after-effects of a positive kind. Its only traceable after-effect is wholly negative. In sweeping away everything that it found in its path, in order to rush headlong to its own destruction, Timur's imperialism simply created a political and social vacuum in South-Western Asia...²⁰¹



Bronze bust of Timur, based on forensic facial reconstruction by M. Gerasimov, 1941, from the conqueror's skull.

Toynbee knew that a long shadow of hostility and obsession lay across his subject. While English readers were reading Toynbee on Timur (the first volume of his magisterial *A Study of History* appeared in 1934), Stalin was ordering that Timur's tomb in Samarqand be opened so that his remains could be exhumed. A European fascination had long been evinced in works of history, in plays, operas and poetry, the most celebrated example coming in *Tamburlaine the Great*, the Elizabethan tragedy written by Christopher Marlowe (d. 1593). 'I that am term'd the scourge and wrath of God', Marlowe has his Timur declare. And in terms that would anticipate Toynbee's, he portrays Timur as something like a megalomaniacal nihilist:

*Unhappy Persia, – that in former age
Hast been the seat of mighty conquerors,
That, in their prowess and their policies,
Have triumph'd over Afric, and the bounds*

Of Europe where the sun dares scarce appear
 For freezing meteors and congealed cold, –
 Now to be rul'd and govern'd by a man
 At whose birth-day Cynthia with Saturn join'd,
 And Jove, the Sun, and Mercury denied
 To shed their influence in his fickle brain!
 Now Turks and Tartars shake their swords at thee,
 Meaning to mangle all thy provinces...

Of have I heard your majesty complain
 Of Tamburlaine, that sturdy Scythian thief,
 That robs your merchants of Persepolis
 Trading by land unto the Western Isles,
 And in your confines with his lawless train
 Daily commits incivil outrages,
 Hoping (misled by dreaming prophecies)
 To reign in Asia, and with barbarous arms
 To make himself the monarch of the East...

Marlowe was scarcely the only Renaissance writer to translate the political fantasy of Muslim (Persian or Turkish) defeat into words; according to one critic, *Tamburlaine* fuses 'the Renaissance wish-dream of global empire with the Timur myth'.²⁰² Nor could he have recognized the irony of his own mythic Timur, which imports from Islamic letters biographical pieces that were ingratiating to Timur. In fact, some were originally fabricated in a propaganda machine engineered to produce a heroic figure uniquely fit for conquest and rule, as we shall see.

When it comes to Timur, it is difficult to escape the electromagnetic pull of polar opposites: the heroically legendary and the vituperatively polemical. He occupies a privileged position in the Islamic and European imaginary, at turns celebrated and reviled. How could it be otherwise, given both the scale of the military and political achievement – a veritable re-enactment of Chinggis Khan's spectacular conquests – and the infamies that he committed in realizing it? Towers of severed heads are not easily forgotten. Within a generation of his death a peripatetic scholar with an axe to grind would pen a biography whose title says it all, *The Wonders of Destiny about the Calamities caused by Timur*. Rarely has a biographer written with such 'uncompromising and explicit hostility and contempt', as one historian has put it.²⁰³ He had good reason: the author, Ibn 'Arabshah (d. 1450), apparently along with his mother and sister, had been caught

up as a boy in one of the human disasters that were caused by Timur's oft-genocidal campaigns, this particular humanitarian crisis coming on the heels of his conquest of Damascus in 1401.

By contrast, in the eighteenth century there emerged a wildly successful tradition of heroically legendary biographies of Timur, written in both Persian and Turkish. Here, as elsewhere, his image is burnished through fabulous accounts that have itinerant Sufis set him tests and trials, all of which he naturally passes, thus establishing his bona fides as a just ruler-to-be. Much more recently, Timur has become the subject of a veritable cult in Uzbekistan, his name given to monuments, 'not to mention the roads, parks, and subway station named after him, as well as museums, funds and medals, portraits, films, novels, plays, the publication in Uzbek translation of several Timurid historical chronicles, and the colossal celebration of the 660th anniversary of Timur's birth'.²⁰⁴

Timur originally fashioned himself the champion and restorer of 'two great world orders', those of Chinggis Khan and those of Islam, a cause that



Captives being thrown over a precipice by Timur in Sistan in 1384, from a copy of the *Zafarnama* by Sharaf al-Din Yazdi, 1533.

legitimated his virtually omnidirectional and ceaseless campaigning – that is, world conquest.²⁰⁵ Now he's a nationalist.

Mongol and Muslim

Both the facts and the original fictions of Timur's life can only be understood in the context of Mongol rule in the Islamic east. Because he was operating in a hybrid political culture, he had to exercise a cultural ambidexterity of sorts. On the one hand, the deep grammar of legitimate rule was Islamic. Eastern Iran and Transoxiana had for centuries been governed by dynasties who grounded their rule in Islamic terms, such as by claiming descent from early Muslims, advertising delegation by caliphs, enforcing Islamic norms and laws, or carrying out jihad against infidels. It was not for nothing that the Ilkhanids had converted to Islam; they may have resented it, but they understood that steppe traditions and beliefs had to adjust to ruling settled states.

On the other hand, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Mongol descent separated the ruler from the ruled, descent from the world-conquering Chinggis Khan himself being especially valued; his charisma travelled down the bloodlines, from one generation to the next. In time the extraordinary scale of Timur's conquests, combined with the achievement of his dynasty, would endow him with a charisma of his own. As a result, Timurid descent itself became a genetic credential in its own right. Babur (d. 1530), founder of what became the Mughal dynasty of India, proudly claimed Timur on his patrilineal line and Chinggis on his maternal line.

The political context that Timur entered was a vacuum that had been created by the dissolution of Mongol successor states across Eurasia, including the Ilkhanids of Iran. Residing in capital-cities in northwest Iran, the Ilkhanids had proven themselves very credible rulers and patrons, but in 1335–36, Abu Sa'id, the last effective ruler of that dynasty, died without heir, thus leaving the state vulnerable to succession struggles. Thereafter such centralized rule as had existed dissolved. It is to this same year (the 736th in the Islamic calendar) that the birth date of Timur was eventually assigned. This dating is almost certainly a piece of propaganda designed to position him as a successor to that last, strong Ilkhanid ruler.

The artificial date was one of several ways that Timur compensated for the circumstances of his birth and outfitted for himself a persona commensurate with his ambitions. He was born to a prominent lineage of a Turkicized Mongol tribe called the Barlas. But he could not reasonably claim descent from Chinggis Khan himself, and within a ruling

elite that prized such descent – indeed, insisted upon it – he thus required compensating credentials. One was marriage *into* that lineage – and so he acquired a Chinggisid princess. To accommodate Mongol scruples, he would later install a puppet khan who possessed the requisite Chinggisid genes.

Other credentials were fortune and favour, and these could be made to resonate in Islamic terms. That Timur was raised in Transoxiana among Muslim Mongols does not mean that he was a committed or pious Muslim by the standards of that or any other day; it was in part because he favoured Mongol customary law over the *shari'a* that some Muslims regarded him as non-Muslim. What it does mean, however, is that he could draw upon Islamic myths and tropes in order to illustrate that fortune and favour. Accounts had it that he had been born at the moment of conjunction between Jupiter and Venus, which Muslim astrologers had long considered auspicious; he was accordingly known as 'Master of the Auspicious Conjunction'. His modest beginnings – accounts have him thieving livestock – are also stereotypical, intended to mould his youth around the form set by Chinggis Khan himself. Such legends also did double duty of explaining his lameness. His wounds, we read, were suffered during his days of raiding and sheep-rustling. (That lameness gave rise to the now archaic 'Tamerlane', which derives from the Persian 'Timur-i lang', 'Timur, the lame'.)

The legends circulated because military success – even success as spectacular as Timur's – had to be translated into the language of legitimate political power. His beginnings are untraceable, but by 1360 or so he had emerged as the head of the Barlas tribe. This phase of his ascent was partly constituted by what is sometimes called 'political vagabondage', 'the rough life of brigandage and raiding',²⁰⁶ when an ambitious tribesman, typically operating on the nexus of settled and nomadic zones, gathered a loyal following of increasing size, especially through martial and political skills. In part by entering into alliances with other Mongol khans, within a decade or so Timur had established himself as ruler in a capital that he would build to his own tastes, Samarqand (current-day southeast Uzbekistan). There he lay both the literal and figurative foundations for the considerable achievement that was Timurid architecture, especially garden design – a feature that may reflect the collision of nomadic and settled styles of rulership. Samarqand, and following it, Herat, would serve as the capital of Timurid rule until their collapse in 1507. In a pattern familiar from the Mongol conquests, artisans caught up in his conquests were often spared so as to capture their skills.



Bibi Khanum mosque, built on Timur's orders in his new capital, Samarkand, between 1399 and 1404, and named in honour of his Chinese wife.

For all his interest in the arts, Timur was above all a commander of armies. Campaigns to the north and east extended his power, and a decisive turn to the west took place in 1381, into what is now Afghanistan and eastern Iran. In 1386, the first of several multi-year wars took him into western Iran, and by 1394 he ruled Iraq, including Baghdad. After campaigning in northern India (Delhi was sacked in 1398), he launched an especially long and brutal war in the Middle East. The populations of several cities, including Damascus and Baghdad, were subjected to massacre and mass enslavement. He died in 1404 at the beginning of what was to be an invasion of China.

Ruler of much of western Eurasia, Timur had transformed himself from tribesman to hemispheric figure. After defeating an Ottoman army in the summer of 1402, he wrote to several European courts, offering friendship and opportunities for trade. The response from France and England, which were fearful of Ottoman armies, was nothing short of joyous: Timur was 'amico nostro' ('our friend').²⁰⁷ They preferred the devil they did not know. Diplomacy was carried out through the exchange of words (as written in letters or delivered by envoys), and a variety of high-value gifts – not just textiles (silks and furs especially), but also coins, precious stones and exotic animals. The Timurids gave away steppe horses; they are known to have received ostriches and at least one giraffe.

Brutal conquest thus created a polity that required politesse and genteel culture. It is in the *Zafarnama* (*Book of Victories*) of Sharaf al-Din Yazdi (d. 1454), an encomium to Timur dedicated to his grandson, that we read about the ostriches and giraffe, which were gifts offered by an envoy from Egypt. As it happens, the *Zafarnama*, which was finished in about 1425, encapsulates the paradoxical assembly of Timurid values. On the one hand, it narrates near-universal military conquest. On the other, written in highly literate Persian, peppered with poetry and aphorisms, and frequently illustrated – manuscript illumination and illustration were a glory of the Timurid arts – it is far more than dry military record. In fact, it is one of many examples of the highly developed tradition of Persian history-writing that not only belongs to the Timurid period, but which, in being so closely attached to Timur's court in Samarkand, can also be counted a part of its propaganda machine.

Another cog was Nizam al-Din Shami (d. c. 1410), a native of Tabriz who was commissioned in 1401 to write a history of Timur, also entitled the *Book of Victories*. Still another example is Hafez-i Abru (d. 1430), who also belonged to Timur's court, as well as to that of his son, Shah Rukh (d. 1447). His interests inclined towards universal history, and so the

tradition of al-Tabari and Rashid al-Din, but within this framework he dedicated a separate work to the reigns of the two Timurid rulers, immodestly entitled (as such books nearly always were) *The Cream of Histories*.

Ibn Khaldun had the distinction of meeting Timur, and he tells us that Timur had a personal interest in history, holding al-Tabari in lower regard than did Ibn Khaldun himself.

This king Timur is one of the greatest and mightiest of kings. Some attribute to him knowledge, others attribute to him heresy because they note his preference for 'members of the House' [of 'Ali – that is, a Shi'ite]; still others attribute to him the employment of magic and sorcery, but in all this there is nothing; it is simply that he is highly intelligent and very perspicacious, addicted to debate and argumentation about what he knows and also about what he does not know.²⁰⁸

On the matter of al-Tabari, Timur's view was perhaps ill considered. Still, in regarding commissioned history as the first draft of posterity, he set a precedent that his descendants would follow. Because court writers were so valuable, they were paid handsomely, often in land. Such was the case for Yazdi. Years later a Timurid governor seeking to employ Yazdi's skills addressed his concerns about the long journey to this court by buying him off with 'a string of camels, a litter and cash'.²⁰⁹ He was worth the investment.

28 Ibn Khaldun, social theorist and historian (1406)

Timur met him, Marx and Engels read him, and he has been compared to Thucydides (d. c. 400 BCE), Machiavelli (d. 1527), Giambattista Vico (d. 1744), Adam Smith (d. 1790), Hegel (d. 1831), Comte (d. 1857), Emile Durkheim (d. 1917), Max Weber (d. 1920), Marc Bloch (d. 1944), Fernand Braudel (d. 1985) – and many more besides. All or parts of his *Muqaddima* or *Introduction (to History)* have been translated from the original Arabic into at least twenty languages, from Bulgarian to Urdu, inclusive of Catalan, Hebrew, Korean and Polish. Schools, universities, professorships and research centres are named in his honour. His stern profile appears on the currency of Tunisia, where he was born. And whereas many of the figures featuring in this book made their names by authoring ten or twenty books (and frequently more), Ibn Khaldun made his with one.

What explains the attention and renown? If, in the popular imagination, Saladin exemplifies the public virtues of the commander or statesman

– courage, determination, clemency – Ibn Khaldun captures the scholar's deep affection. In fact, serious scholarly attention to the *Introduction* is about as old as modern scholarly attention to Arabic and Islamic history: his work has been the subject of a more-or-less unbroken chain of Western study that reaches back to the first decade of the nineteenth century, when Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (d. 1838), the single most formative figure in French Orientalism, published fifteen pages of extracts. Although Orientalism is far more than an academic discourse of colonialism, it is absurd to deny their intertwining. The French were occupying North Africa by 1830, but extending their control was a process that came to something like an end only in 1847, after they met stiff resistance by the Berbers. In the midst of it all (in 1840), the French minister of war ordered a translation of passages from Ibn Khaldun's *History* that concerned North Africa.

What he was after was an understanding of the Berbers; and to this day Ibn Khaldun is still valued for his material on twelfth- and thirteenth-century tribes and dynasties of North Africa. It is true that the Ottomans took more of an interest in him than previously thought; already in the sixteenth century he was being read by Ottoman intellectuals, and a partial Turkish translation was made in the eighteenth century. But it is thanks to European Orientalists that his work circulated widely, and can now figure prominently in modernist Islamic thought. For while Ibn Khaldun had students, he left no real disciples, much less a school of thought.

The nineteenth-century 'rediscovery' of Ibn Khaldun lay the groundwork for his twentieth-century celebrity, which derives mainly from what has justifiably been called his 'preternaturally modern approach to the study of history and society'.²¹⁰ Not without some reason, he is formulaically nominated as one of the pre-industrial world's most original social theorists, even a great social scientist ahead of his time. Philosophers, historians, economists and sociologists claim him as one of their own, often seeing in his work insights into their own disciplines; his paternity for the field of sociology is regularly alleged. He has even crossed over into the public sphere. His attention to prices, wages, taxes and state budgets is sometimes construed as fiscal policy, and he is especially beloved by supply-side economists and tax-cutting politicians – including the likes of Ronald Reagan, who once claimed to see prophetic prescriptions for the fiscal ills of modern capitalism in a fourteenth-century work of Islamic history. This is merely the grossest case of the irrepressible temptation to see Ibn Khaldun as prophet of the future rather than product of his present.

Throughout his life, Ibn Khaldun's interests in power and society were divided between complementary impulses, one towards practical



The Zaytouna mosque, Tunis, a major centre of Islamic learning under the Hafsiids. Ibn Khaldun studied there.

application in the life of politics, and the other towards a disinterested reflection upon its deeper significance. 'As a young man', one especially acute scholar wrote, 'he seems to have hoped that in fact the philosopher did not have to live ever as an isolate in a society which was not his own: that he might expect, if he worked at it, to produce the philosopher king, who could do better things.'²¹¹ Ibn Khaldun worked at it, but he never found such success. Rashid al-Din came to a sticky end, as we saw earlier; still, he had had the good fortune to stand on the stage of a powerful Mongol state, upon which he could play the role of philosopher-statesman to great effect. The petty kings of North Africa, squabbling over statelets that scarcely compared to the Near Eastern and Central Asian behemoth that was the Mongol polity, allowed Ibn Khaldun no such role. 'I refused to expose myself again to the perils of power,' he would write to a disappointed patron in 1369, 'having renounced its false promises and suffered so long in neglecting the sciences.' He continued: 'I shall no longer involve myself in the affairs of kings, and direct my concentrated attention instead to studying and teaching.'²¹² Ibn Khaldun's renowned *Introduction* can be read as an attempt to identify the structural features of North African society that foiled his attempts to realize his political ambitions.

Life and work

Ibn Khaldun lived in a period of particular volatility, even calamity: his adulthood began with the catastrophe that was the plague, and it would end with the catastrophe that was Timur. But whereas a recluse or bookish scholar might have sheltered himself from that volatility and calamity, ambitions led Ibn Khaldun to navigate them both. And this he did, with only mixed success.

He was born in Tunis in 1332 to a family whose descendants can be traced to the eighth-century origins of Islamic rule in Spain, to Seville in particular, where it wielded considerable political power in the ninth century as one of the city's leading families. In the middle of the thirteenth century the family left Seville and relocated in Tunis, then ruled by the Hafsiids, a Berber dynasty that emerged as independent rulers in what is now Tunisia and eastern Algeria. The context was the disintegration of the Almohad empire that had bridged Spain and North Africa, especially under the pressure of the Christian 'reconquest' of the former. Ibn Khaldun's immediate ancestors served in the Hafsid state; he also married into the ruling dynasty, his wife being the daughter of a celebrated Hafsid commander; in time, he would have five daughters and two sons. His father, Ibn Khaldun himself tells us, 'abandoned the way of sword and service [to the state] for that of knowledge and [scholarly] retreat'.²¹³ His early education was typical in its focus upon the Qur'an, Arabic language (including poetry), Prophetic traditions and rudiments of Islamic law. Two brothers presumably had much the same education; one, named Yahya, would be a historian of some note.

If his education was typical, what followed was atypical – two jolts, which were delivered in close succession to the (presumably) impressionable young man. The first came in 1347, when the Merinids, another Berber dynasty that succeeded the Almohads, took temporary control of Tunis from the Hafsiids. This change of regime introduced Ibn Khaldun to the political vagaries of North Africa and Spain, a region pressured on the north by expanding Christian kingdoms, and in the south by Berber tribes; unlike the Islamic east, where states tended to aggregate into empires of vast agricultural domains, what obtained here was an unsettled and splintery system of relatively weak city-states.

Ibn Khaldun would spend much of the next thirty years navigating the political life of those city-states, moving from one fickle patron to the next, serving as high-ranking minister, secretary, administrator, ambassador or counsellor to rulers in Tunis, Fez, Béjaïa (Bougie), Tlemcen and Granada; because military power (and political stability more generally) so

Alhambra, Granada. In the 1360s Ibn Khaldun was in the employ of the Sultan of Granada, undertaking diplomatic missions on his behalf before falling out with the sultan's vizier and returning to North Africa.



frequently turned on relations with the Berber tribes, he acquired direct experience with nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes. He landed his first post in 1352, and by 1382, having been in and out of hot water for decades (he was often on the losing side of court intrigues, and was jailed twice), he left North Africa for the Pilgrimage to Mecca. He would never return to North Africa. The balance of his life was spent in Cairo, cycling in and out of positions as professor and chief judge for the Mamluk state. It was in the retinue of the very young Mamluk sultan al-Faraj b. Barquq (then fourteen) that he made his way to Damascus, where he would meet Timur in January 1401.

The young man's second jolt had come in 1348–49, when the plague, known as the Black Death in Europe, arrived in Tunis. Both his parents perished in the epidemic. In Tunis his education had come at the feet of his father and the city's large community of scholars, which had included a diaspora of Iberian scholars who had been exiled from the north as Christian kingdoms expanded towards the south. Many scholars died in the plague as well, and so Ibn Khaldun now had to turn to more advanced studies without the benefit of that network.

His early service to ruling patrons gave him access to the learning that came with their courts, but a particularly important figure in his training was a scholar named al-Abili (d. 1356). 'The shaykh's prestige was immense, and his authority in the rational sciences was universally acknowledged. An

entire generation of writers and jurists attended his classes and benefited from his brilliant teaching.'²¹⁴ By his own account, Ibn Khaldun attended his classes in Tunis when al-Abili made his teaching visits, studying 'the two fundamentals (that is, the principles that underlay jurisprudence and theology), logic, and all of the philosophical and mathematical arts',²¹⁵ as Ibn Khaldun himself recounts. He would have taken voluminous notes in many of his lessons, but there is little evidence that much or any of his writing was intended for circulation or publication before he released the first drafts of the *Introduction* in the 1370s. It happens, however, that his abridgement of a work of theology written by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) survives, written in Ibn Khaldun's own hand. It is dated to April of 1351, and it seems to have been an essay submitted by Ibn Khaldun to his teacher, al-Abili.²¹⁶ It was learning of this type that equipped Ibn Khaldun to organize into theory the observations that his career allowed him to make.

The Introduction

Ibn Khaldun was in his mid-forties when circumstances – he found himself on the wrong side of a patron – offered him a solitude in which he could assemble his thoughts. Long reading, reflection, conversation and, almost certainly, deep brooding, came to a head during a three-and-a-half year retreat in Qal'at Ibn Salama, a fortress in western Algeria. 'With words

and ideas pouring into my head like cream into a churn', Ibn Khaldun finished a draft of the *Introduction* in 1377;²¹⁷ he would make many revisions, additions and modifications during his tenure in Egypt. Although it would have a life of its own, this *Introduction* was originally conceived as the first part of a seven-volume universal *History*, which began with Creation and carried through (in volumes six and seven) to the Muslim west in his time; four years later (in 1381), that history was finished and dedicated to the Hafsid ruler Abu al-'Abbas (d. 1394). Another work, cited several times above, was an *Autobiography*, which is the conventional translation for a first-person work entitled in the third as *The Biography of Ibn Khaldun and His Travel in the West and in the East*. He originally conceived of it as an appendix to the *History*, but he came to see it as an independent work, and it has been treated as such since. This he completed in 1405, the year before his death.

For all his frustrations and disappointments, Ibn Khaldun's experience in state employment in North Africa and Granada was invaluable to his thinking. For beneath the surface changes of political life – not just (or mainly) the court machinations, but also the constantly shifting nature of interstate rivalry, which was fuelled by rulers' drive to increase, maintain or preserve their power – lay deeper patterns. Process and change – the heart of history – had been neglected by historians, he wrote, who 'presented historical information about dynasties and stories of events from the early period as mere forms without substance, blades without scabbards, as knowledge that must be conserved ignorance, because it is not known what of it is extraneous and what is genuine'.²¹⁸ Conventional questions of history were not without interest for Ibn Khaldun, who had tart things to say about the transmission of manifestly preposterous historical accounts, but what animated him was an interest in the 'deep knowledge of the how and why of events'.²¹⁹

The 'realm of history itself was to be conquered' for philosophy:²²⁰ nothing less than a 'science of culture' was to be established on the basis of fundamental patterns of the human, which are grounded in the biological and material. He thus begins with Aristotle's insight (as transmitted and interpreted by Muslim philosophers) that man is not self-sufficient, and since food, shelter and the like require cooperation – that is, social organization – man is necessarily a political animal. New ideas often require new words, and Ibn Khaldun, who integrated poetry into his work (some of it his own), had some literary interests and skills; he thus has his own style and coined some of his own vocabulary. What is produced by human interaction and cooperation he calls '*umran*, which is 'culture' in the sense

of social habits and institutions, embedded in, and constrained by, the environment (planetary and physical geography, and climate). 'Culture' is evolutionary and cyclical, connected by a dialectic between the two great poles of Ibn Khaldun's thinking: the countryside (inclusive of nomadic and peasant populations) and the city, which is understood by him not as a political unit, but instead as the socially differentiated locus of economic activity and state power.

The dynamic that links the two is a sense of solidarity that rural folk possess, which becomes militarily potent especially through tribal leadership. (Ibn Khaldun carves out early Islamic history as *sui generis* in its particulars, but as a general rule, the efficacy of religious messages, he argues, is contingent upon this solidarity.) The driving and cyclical force of history is this solidarity ('*asabiyya*'), which, channelled and led by a chieftain, endows countryfolk with superior military force, allowing them to conquer settled states, whose dynasts, softened by a city-based culture of luxury, have lost their own solidarity. Tamed by city life, man loses his ferocity, much like domestication tames the wild animal. Settled culture – especially the growth of crafts and what we would call high culture or 'civilization' – is organic to the life of the state; but it also constitutes the seeds of the state's destruction, because ruling dynasts, in Ibn Khaldun's economics, fail to distribute resources so as to maintain '*asabiyya*. The lifetime of each cycle, he proposes, is roughly three generations.

The foregoing does no justice to the subtlety of his thinking. Naturally, one can criticize many of his particulars – his grasp of rural production is rudimentary, and his distinction between country and city grossly dichotomous, for example – but one cannot doubt that it is broadly coherent. What it systematizes is his observations and understanding of the tidal forces that were moving political life: the decline of the Almohad empire, and the expansion and contraction of rival tribal Berber dynasties that drew their strength from the nomadic hinterlands, but were drawn, in turn, into the quixotic project of ruling from capital cities.

'Thucydides invented history, but Ibn Khaldun turned it into a science.'²²¹ It all depends on what one means by science. Nowadays we think principally of the natural and physical sciences, presumptively underpinned by the collection of data, the application of hypotheses, and demonstration by replication. No work concerned with the extraordinarily complex set of variables that condition human behaviour, either individual or collective, survives such a definition. On the other hand, as a work that discerns patterns in historical data, and generalizes those patterns into heuristics that can explain (and even predict) social behaviour broadly



Page from a Maghrebi manuscript of Ibn Khaldun's groundbreaking *Muqaddima* or *Introduction*, drafted in 1377.

understood, the *Introduction* not only qualifies as science, but has no precedent in historical thinking, Islamic or otherwise.

By contemporaneous standards – be they in Europe, South or East Asia – Islamic historical writing was an extraordinary achievement. But even at its most subtle and ambitious, none of it could escape the gravity of teleological, providential or deterministic thinking. Universal history writing was typically a project of illustrating God's providential direction, or legitimating a ruling dynasty, social order or sectarian commitment. Ibn Khaldun, who offered a system instead of a series of stories, saw that it could be much more.

29 Mehmed II, conqueror and renaissance man (1481)

In 1479, an envoy from the Ottoman sultan arrived at the senate in Venice. According to one account, he requested the services of 'a good painter who knows how to make portraits'.²²² The commission went to Gentile Bellini (d. 1507), a leading painter of the day, whose renown was now spreading, in no small part due to his portraits of the Venetian Doges. Venice was an obvious place to make such a request, not only because of its role as a focal point of Renaissance art, but also because the Ottoman state was being drawn into a coalescing system of European polities. The timing was certainly right for a gesture on the part of the Venetians. A treaty signed early in the same year put an end to some sixteen years of war between Venice and Istanbul: the Ottomans never succeeded in conquering Italy, but it had not been for want of trying.

Bellini spent some sixteen months in Istanbul, and the result of the commission – heavily repainted, it must be regretted – can now be enjoyed in the National Gallery in London: Mehmed poses in near profile, wearing a red caftan and a fur mantle, his expression grave and arch-browed. *Victor orbis* ('Conqueror of the World'), as the painting identifies him: the sultan was thus assimilated into a classicizing Renaissance idiom – in profile, under a carved arch – his white turban the unmistakable sign that he belonged to a different political tradition. Bellini's portrait is life sized, but little was left of the subject's life: he would die in early May of the following year, a few days' march outside of Istanbul, on the way to the last of his many campaigns.

Born in 1431 in Edirne, the Ottoman capital from the 1360s, Mehmed was the creature of two renaissances. One was the construction of a classical past and culture, which took place in Italian city states in the fifteenth



Gentile Bellini, *The Sultan Mehmed II*, 1480. The portrait was painted by Bellini during a sixteen-month stay at the sultan's court. Mehmed II died the following year.

and sixteenth centuries. The other was the rebirth of an Ottoman state that had been aborted by Timur's defeat of Ottoman armies in 1402.

An Alexander in the making?

Mehmed's upbringing was typical for a member of the ruling house. He was the fourth son of the sultan Murad II (d. 1451), and his mother was a slave, concubines having mothered princes for centuries. Because he was one node in a large network of biological, social and economic relations that constituted an Ottoman household, his upbringing was collective. As far as Ottoman princes were concerned, fathers were distant figures, brothers were potentially murderous rivals, and sisters were tokens of exchange for political marriage; princely formation was thus organized around mothers, wet-nurses and at least one *lala* (Mehmed had two), a guardian-tutor, who, appointed by the sultan, was responsible for the prince's political education. As strange as the practice may seem to those raised where the nuclear family is the norm, already in the early fifteenth century the *lala* was a venerable institution that, in a different form, had first appeared in Iran and Iraq, imported there by the Saljuqs.

This was not the only such institution that moved on the back of Turks from Central Asia into the Middle East. Starting in the late eleventh century, Islamic religious and political traditions, fused with Turkish steppe customs, and transmitted mainly in Persian, travelled into Anatolia via Saljuq and Mongol rule. Anatolia was then being opened up, through tribal migration and war, to Turkic nomads and pastoralists, a social-political

movement that was accelerated by the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century, which had the effect of dividing and dissolving Saljuq domains. (Rumi, as we have already seen, lived at a time in which an Islamic society was still in formation.) Under pressure, the frontiers of a weakening Byzantine state contracted to western Anatolia, and Constantinople even fell out of Byzantine hands altogether, when the Crusaders took the city in 1204, sacking it after a long siege. Byzantine rule was restored to the city in 1261, but the political and military tide had turned, and a treaty signed in 1373 formalized the emperor's vassalage to Anatolia's new masters, his authority reduced to a shrinking city.



A miniature showing the accession of Mehmed II in Edirne in 1451, from the *Hünarname* by Seyyid Lokman, second half of the 16th century.

These masters were Ottoman rulers, who claimed descent from an eponymous ancestor named Osman (d. 1324), who is conventionally said to have broken from Saljuq rule in 1299. Originally but one of a cluster of Turkic principalities that had competed for power in western Anatolia, the Ottomans took control of the Balkans during the fourteenth century, and Beyazid (d. 1402), a great grandson of Osman, completed the decades-long project of overrunning what remained of the rival principalities in Anatolia (including Rumi's Konya). But Beyazid would be the last ruler of this first Ottoman polity. For in leading armies into eastern Anatolia in 1402, he ran into the teeth of Timur's war-machine. The Ottoman armies dissolved; he was captured and died in captivity. After ten years of civil war, Mehmed I (d. 1421, Mehmed II's grandfather) gradually established his authority among rivals, and between 1413 and 1421 re-integrated Ottoman domains. Mehmed II's birth in 1431 thus coincided with a nascent Ottoman state.

When it came to his early education (in Arabic and Persian, the two great languages of high culture), accounts do not flatter Mehmed II's studiousness. But he was fortunate to live in a courtly culture in which theory quickly gave way to practice. For it was Ottoman custom in this period that the prince was raised by his mother until the age of ten or so, whereupon he was sent, accompanied by his mother and *lala*, to a province. There, nominally in the first instance, he would serve in a political capacity, learning by doing. Mehmed was sent to Amasya, a town in northern Anatolia near the Black Sea, which had been his father's birthplace. A half-brother was then serving as governor of the town, and when he died in 1437, the five-year-old Mehmed succeeded him as governor; needless to say, effective power lay with his *lala* and entourage. Two years later, he was sent to Edirne for his circumcision, an event accompanied by public celebrations and festivities. Within this sturdy framework of Ottoman formation and education, there matured a young man with interests that reflected a Renaissance-era Mediterranean sensibility. We are very fortunate to have a sketchbook from his youth, in which he tried his hand at human busts and animals, rendered in a style that betrays an unmistakably European influence.²²³ His mother died in around 1441, and her maternal role was fulfilled by his wet-nurse.²²⁴

His studies and tutelage were cut short in 1444 by a succession crisis, which put the adolescent squarely in the middle of Edirne's often-lethal political culture: he was declared sultan by his father, who abdicated in his favour. But this first sultanate was over two years later, a king-making vizier having returned the father to the throne. Thereupon followed the second phase of Mehmed's provincial education, this time in Manisa,

which lay east of Izmir. The still-impressionable youth was living in an area with close contacts to Genoa and the island of Chios. A political marriage was effected with an Ottoman ally. The wife, Sitti Khatun (d. 1467), was not a favourite of Mehmed, and it appears that she never relocated from Edirne, where she built a palace for herself. Shortly after the marriage, upon the death of his father in 1451, he acceded to the throne for a second time. Following Ottoman practice of fratricidal succession, he had his one rival executed, a half-brother who was still a child.

The fall of Constantinople and its aftermath

Mehmed would rule for thirty years, most of which he would spend on campaign, consolidating and expanding Ottoman domains in the Balkans and Anatolia; the areas that his armies conquered would later constitute the 'core' of the Ottoman empire.²²⁵ But his most spectacular achievement came barely two years after his second accession, in the late spring of 1453, when he was twenty-one.

Constantinople had once been among the world's largest cities, its symbolic significance as successor to Rome and inheritor of classical learning mirrored in its political power as the capital of the Byzantine empire. For early Muslims, it was the focus of seventh- and eighth-century military designs and a *leitmotif* of apocalyptic fantasy. By the fifteenth century, all this was in the deep past, however. Increasingly depopulated and dilapidated, Constantinople had become a loose aggregation of small, sometimes-walled villages, its security dependent upon Italians. For all that, it retained its symbolic valence for Christian and Muslim alike: it was a redoubt of Christian fortitude and faith amid an ever-rising tide of Turks; and it was both a burr under the Ottoman saddle, and a trophy that would confer enormous prestige upon the sultans.

The siege began on 1 April, and the city fell on 29 May. Several factors explain the Ottoman victory, not least of which were numbers, tactical advantage and concentration of force: three assaults overwhelmed a Greek defence weakened by a siege of forty-six days. The Ottomans deployed some old-fashioned techniques of warfare by undermining walls, erecting siege machines and the like, but they also had an edge in military technology. Cannons had been deployed against Constantinople decades earlier, but Mehmed could now bombard the city with state-of-the-art Hungarian artillery, his cannons lobbing thousand-pound stones that obliterated walls built a millennium earlier. The sack of the city lasted three days.

The Christians' catastrophe was the Muslims' glorious victory, but the adversaries agreed that God had effected a decisive turn in their intertwined

fates. (Much later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many historians would come to see the fall of the Greek state as the punctuation mark for the end of a medieval period.) Accounts of the dramatic events began to circulate almost immediately after the city changed hands, some genuine and well sourced (a diary written by a Venetian physician who was on-board a ship defending the harbour; a poem written by another Italian who witnessed both the fall and the sack of the city), others manifestly legendary. A revealing example of the latter belongs to Filippo da Rimini, who was writing in Corfu at the end of the year:

...the king of the Trojans (that is, the Sultan of the Turks), swollen with pride over his victory...dishonoured the most famous shrine of Wisdom (the Church of Hagia Sophia). There he deflowered a mild virgin, as if he were a savage beast, and glorified himself by avenging the fate of the Trojan virgin (Cassandra) who was deflowered in the temple of Pallas (Athena).²²⁶

Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, who would become Pope Pius II in 1458, was a humanist with a deep hatred of the Ottomans and a 'lifelong obsession with holy war'.²²⁷ Just short of two months after Constantinople fell (on 21 July) he wrote a missive intended to galvanize support for a Reconquista:

You are not ignorant of how Greece is related to the rest of Europe. You know the location of Thrace...But why do I pursue these matters at length? Is it not because unhappy, unfortunate, hard, horrid news has been announced to us? Constantinople has been stormed...

What, however, the madness of the Turks will do to the royal city I do not know; but it is easy to guess. The people who hate our religion will leave nothing there holy, nothing clean. Either they will destroy all the noble temples; or, certainly, they will profane them. Alas for the temple of Wisdom, most famous throughout the whole world, once served by ninety priests, a wondrous work built of precious materials! Either it already has suffered ruin, or it will be subjected to the filth of Mohammed. With the monks gone, the holy of holy will be turned over to prostitutes...

Xerxes and Darius, who once inflicted great slaughters upon Greece, waged war on men, not on letters. The Romans, although they subjugated Greece, not only did not reject Greek letters but, at last, embraced and venerated them to the point that no one was regarded

as most learned unless he seemed to be most eloquent in Greek speech. Now Greece will fare otherwise under the rule of the Turks, the most savage of men, foes of good morals and letters.²²⁸

For all of their dissimilarities, in assimilating the Ottoman Turks into a classicizing framework the two accounts are both unmistakably Renaissance in attitude. The Turks, descendants of the Trojans in the eyes of da Rimini and others, threaten not only Christendom, but Civilization itself.²²⁹

The facts are otherwise: Mehmed 'the Conqueror' would turn out to be not only an inveterate campaigner, but also an ambitious builder and patron. The strategic bridge between Asia and Europe would be rebuilt and redesigned, a Ponte Vecchio of Ottoman imperial and religious architecture. Ottoman rulers had long styled themselves 'sultans', but they had compared poorly to the sultans who ruled Egypt and Syria, the Mamluks, who controlled the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, claimed the mantle of the Abbasid caliphs, and ruled from the metropolis that was fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Cairo. The Ottomans now had their chance to better the Mamluks' claims. Mehmed was the 'Sultan of the two lands and great Khan of the two seas'.²³⁰

Steps were quickly taken to repopulate Constantinople: forced resettlement and deportation, and gifts of land and property seized as a result of conquest. Mehmed moved the court from Edirne to Istanbul, and this induced growth and encouraged military and civilian elites to build and invest. Closely related to the demographic and commercial rebirth was the Islamicization of the city's monumental architecture, the most spectacular example being the transformation of Hagia Sophia – seat of the patriarchs of Constantinople and symbol of Byzantine imperial power – into a royal mosque. According to accounts, it was Hagia Sophia that Mehmed had visited directly after the capitulation of the city, already resolved to realize the design of his great grandfather's, Beyazid, which had come to him in a dream. An 'imperial sponsored cult' would develop around a legend that connected Mehmed's conquest of the city and the transformation of cathedral into mosque with a Companion of Muhammad's who had died in a first, failed siege of Constantinople.²³¹ Around the mosque was built a *madrasa*, the kernel of what would become a cluster of Islamic institutions. In 1463, ground was broken for another mosque, 'The Conqueror's Mosque', a huge monument to victory that was built upon the site of the Church of the Apostles, which was in disrepair; it was lost in an earthquake in 1765. Just as the Emperor Justinian had built Hagia Sophia to symbolize the triumph of Christianity over paganism, and 'Abd al-Malik had built the



A Turkish miniature of the Topkapi Palace, 1581.

Dome of the Rock to monumentalize Islamic rule in Jerusalem, so Mehmed built a mosque that signified Islam's victory over Christianity.

The transformation of religious symbolism went hand-in-hand with the creation of a political centre, which endowed the Ottoman sultans with the standard of prestige that Cairo delivered to the rival sultans of Egypt, and Baghdad had once afforded the Abbasid caliphs. That political centre, located adjacent to Hagia Sophia, was 'the New Palace', a huge complex of public and private spaces – gates, courtyards, gardens, pavilions, reception halls, meeting rooms, offices, dormitories, offices, archives, libraries, storehouses, a mint, an armoury, and a set of residences for the sultan – all surrounded by high walls, and the whole occupying one of the highest points in the city. Construction of what is now known as the Topkapi Palace took place mainly in the 1460s.

It was within the walls of the New Palace that Mehmed showed off the fruits of his patronage and taste for art. There is suggestive evidence that Mehmed, precocious conquerer who united two continents, cultivated an image of himself as the Alexander of his age. A Greek biographer says precisely that, explaining that his achievements, being in no way inferior to those of Alexander's, should be recounted in Greek for Greek-readers. Indeed to Kritovoulos, this biographer, Mehmed is something of a Renaissance man, who, in addition to knowing the Islamic tradition, studied 'whatever works of the Greeks had been translated into the language of the Arabs and the Persians – I refer particularly to the works of the Peripatetics and the Stoics'.²³² The sketchbook from his youth preserves his exercises in copying out Arabic and Greek scripts. Accounts also state that he had tutors in Greek and Latin, and that as a young sultan he visited Troy and commissioned a copy of the *Iliad*. The manuscript evidence from the 1460s and later is unequivocal: Mehmed's collection included copies of Greek works that he commissioned, including one of Arrian's *Anabasis* (a history of Alexander the Great), which was copied by the very scribe who had copied Kritovoulos's biography.²³³

Mehmed was an Ottoman sultan with eclectic tastes, and these encompassed Renaissance visual arts. A portrait was not the only work that resulted from Bellini's visit. They also numbered other paintings and sketches (including a self-portrait, of Bellini's, a test apparently put to him by Mehmed himself), medals and, perhaps, the decoration for the walls of the Topkapi Palace.²³⁴ Nor was Bellini the only Italian who received Mehmed's patronage. A medal struck in the 1470s by another Italian artist, Costanzo de Ferrara (d. 1529) shows Mehmed in profile, his face altogether fleshier than in Bellini's rendering from a few years later. De Ferrara was

only one of many such artists, his portrait just one of the many pieces that Mehmed had commissioned. For all of Mehmed's passion, however, it was not widely shared after his death. 'And on accession,' wrote an Italian resident who served in Mehmed's court, 'his son Beyazid had them (Mehmed's paintings) all sold in the bazaar, where our merchants bought many of them. And this Beyazid said that his father was domineering and did not believe in Mohammed, and in fact this seems to be why everyone says that this Mehmed did not believe in any faith at all.'²³⁵

30 **Shah Isma'il, esoteric charismatic**

(1524)

One of the most densely forested regions of the Middle East is Gilan, a mountainous and crescent-shaped province of northwest Iran, which bends around the southern shore of the Caspian, leading into Azerbaijan and the Caucasus. Then, as now, mountains and forests served as homelands for natives and nativists, and refuges for rebels and revolutionaries. In the seventh and eighth centuries, the area had harboured holdouts against the Islamic conquests, which had swept across the open deserts to the south. In the ninth and tenth, it had incubated Buyid commanders, Zaydi Shi'ites who led their hardy foot soldiers out of the mountains and into the political arena. At the turn of the sixteenth century, another such episode took place. In 1499, Isma'il b. Haydar, orphaned ten years earlier and raised in hiding by a network of devoted followers, emerged from Gilan at the head of a force of 7,000 men. He was twelve years old. Within two years, his army had taken control of the city of Tabriz, and there he was crowned shah. By 1510, he had made good on the promise of his title by leading armies on a series of spectacular victories across much of the Iranian plateau. What we now recognize as Iran owes something to these events.

The nation states of the Levant are frequently described as the artificial products of European colonialism, their borders arbitrarily enclosing and dividing communities whose deep loyalties are ethnic, tribal or religious. The observation goes some way towards explaining the fragility and political instability of several such states, especially Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. The contrasting history of their neighbours, especially Egypt, Turkey and Iran, provides an instructive comparison. All feature much deeper histories of political community; and relative to Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, their politics have been less brittle.

Just how deep these histories are is a question that professional historians are fond of asking. They typically begin by rejecting claims for

perennial national identities: it is preposterous, for example, to find the roots of modern Iranian identity in the Achaemenids. And they typically end by positing processes that began in the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. In consolidating Ottoman control over Anatolia, Mehmed II can be said to have put in place one of the building blocks of an Ottoman empire that would be transmuted into the Anatolian nation state of Turkey. An even greater claim is made on behalf of Shah Isma'il, the founder of the Safavid state. During his reign two such processes – both formative for modern Iran – were triggered.

The first was the aggregation of disparate regions of the Iranian plateau within the framework of a single, albeit weak, state ruling from Tabriz, Qazvin and then, at the end of the sixteenth century, Isfahan. For centuries these regions had followed different paths, subject to military and political dynamics generated from elsewhere (typically Syria or Iraq in the west, and Inner or Central Asia in the east), such that any territorial concept of 'Iran' had ceased to make any sense. By the end of Safavid rule in 1722, it had begun to make some sense. The second process triggered by Shah Isma'il was the spread of Imami Shi'ism across the Iranian plateau. For centuries it had been subject to the pressures of Islamicization, and by the sixteenth century, the majority of its population was Muslim. But they were Sunni Muslims, the Shi'ite heartlands lying elsewhere – especially in parts of Iraq and Syria, but also along the Caspian and in south Arabia. (As we saw earlier, an Imami centre had established itself in Hilla.) By the end of the Safavid period, the confessional map of the plateau was aligning with the political map.

That both of these seminal processes began more or less at the same time – between 1501 and 1510 – is remarkable enough. That they had their origins in the charisma and military victories of a figure who fused esoteric Sufism and extreme Shi'ism is nothing short of extraordinary.

The power of charisma

A few years ago a tombstone was discovered in the town of Tabasaran, which is now located in the (Russian) Republic of Dagestan, in the northern Caucasus. The Arabic inscription reads as follows:

Almighty God said: Every soul will taste death. In the year 895 (1489–90) this burial vault was built [for] Shaykh Haydar, the son of Shaykh Junayd, the son of Shaykh Ibrahim, the son of Shaykh 'Ali, the son of Shaykh Sadr al-Din, the son of Shaykh Safi.²³⁶



Shah Isma'il on the *minbar* (pulpit) steps at the mosque in Tabriz on the Friday before his coronation in 1501. Miniature painting from a Persian manuscript giving a history of Shah Isma'il, c. 1650.

The inscription is more significant than it may appear. For one thing, it corroborates narrative sources in placing the death of Haydar, Isma'il's father, in 895 (of the Islamic calendar). For another thing, the inscription allows us a glimpse at Safavid legitimacy, which is here framed in genealogical and spiritual terms. Haydar is identified as both a *shaykh* – in this context, a Sufi leader – and the descendant of a long line of such *shaykhs*, which originates in Shaykh Safi al-Din (d. 1334), the eponym of the Safavid dynasty. Wives being numerous and politically determined, what the inscription does not mention is a pattern of intermarriage between the Safavids and the Aq Quyunlu, a confederation of semi-sedentary Turkmen (descendants of the Ghuzz) that emerged in the late fifteenth century as the dominant military and political force in northern Iraq, northwest Iran and eastern Anatolia. Junayd and Haydar each married an Aq Quyunlu daughter, building political alliance with a major rival.

As a descendant of Safi al-Din, Isma'il thus belonged to something like local Sufi royalty. For Safi al-Din was a celebrated and revered figure, his virtues and feats catalogued already in the middle of the fourteenth century, by which time Ilkhanid investments were making his shrine complex in Ardabil (which lies east of Tabriz in the extreme northwest of Iran) a focus of pilgrimage.

Changes to the Sufi landscape would impress themselves upon the Safavid order. The political turbulence of the post-Mongol period had unsettled institutional and psychological constants, and one result was the appearance of Sufi orders with revolutionary – even messianic – orientations, which espoused beliefs that mainstream Muslims, be they Sunni or Shi'ite, regarded as extreme. Some held that 'Ali was not merely superior to Muhammad, but divine, and, furthermore, that through modes of reincarnation and the transmigration of souls, Sufi leaders were imbued with 'Ali's divinity. None of these ideas can be ascribed to the founder of the Safavid dynasty, Safi al-Din; nor can one find hints of them in the cult of veneration that formed around him during the fourteenth century. But with Junayd (d. 1460), Isma'il's grandfather, the Safavid order moved in that radical direction, combining millenarian ideas with temporal ambitions: Junayd aspired to rule territory. Some of his followers even called him God. It is precisely because Junayd had such ambitions that he forged alliances with the rulers of the day through marriage, alliances that would eventually dissolve in favour of open warfare between the Safavids' Turkmen followers – known from Haydar's time as Qizilbash, 'redheads', a term coined in reference to the red headgear that they wore – and the Aq Quyunlu.

With Haydar's death in 1489, a son was to succeed him, and although the succession details are confusing, in the long term the successor would be Isma'il. It was in Ardabil that Isma'il was born in 1487. (According to a contemporary European visitor, he would grow to a moderate height and be left-handed; he would wear a moustache.) He had inherited the spiritual charisma institutionalized in his lineage – and so the expectations of his followers. His seclusion in Gilan was presumably occupied by intense studying and training; in the Sufi terminology with which his leadership was described, he was being primed to serve as *murshid* (spiritual director) for a community of devoted disciples (*murids*). Accounts mention that he was looked after by a small group of devoted Qizilbash, which included a *lala* (a guardian-tutor, such as Mehmed II had had), as well as a *khalifa*, a spiritual mentor. Upon Isma'il's military and political successes, this intimate coterie of protectors and guides would be given prime positions in the nascent Safavid state.

Isma'il did not disappoint. Measuring the magic of his charisma is difficult, but there can be no doubt about the extraordinary self-belief that he projected to the Qizilbash. His Sufism being esoteric, he expressed himself in the powerful register of verse, and his constituency being Turkish-speaking, he declaimed in a Turkish dialect. There one finds the inversion of Muhammad and 'Ali that is characteristic of extreme forms of Shi'ism: Muhammad is a mere prophet, but 'Ali is the 'Sea of True Reality', a 'Manifestation of God', 'His light' or simply 'God': 'He was God (literally: Truth) and came down from Heaven to Earth, to show himself to men.' Claiming descent from 'Ali, Isma'il is a divine incarnation: he is of the same essence of 'Ali, a newly clothed Adam, and the guiding Imam. As such, he demands obedience and prostration.

A single example of his poetry can suffice. (The *humay* is an augury of kingship, and Khata'i is Isma'il's byname.)

I am the one intoxicated with beauty who has come today.

I am always with God, but today I have come here.

*Beware, do not take me for a stranger. I am that very Ravisher
of hearts whom you know.*

*In this world, recognize me, o Ignormous, for I am that
Veracity and Purity of which you have heard.*

*Today I am the God-sent calamity to smite with a sword the
Soul of the hypocrite.*

*O people of the true religion, on behalf of the lover I sacrifice my
Soul.*

*The outsider considered me as non-Truth, but I am acquainted
with the King.*

*Know that I am constantly joined to Truth and separate from
Non-Truth.*

*From the highest point of the sky I have come as a humay,
for the mystics.*

I have come to suffer death in my soul on behalf of all souls.

I am Khata'i who offers his soul as a sacrifice.²³⁷

Organized into tribe-like groupings, the Qizilbash made for ferocious fighters. Fearless in their devotion to their incarnated divinity, they are said to have gone into battle 'unarmed, believing that Isma'il's miraculous powers would shield them'.²³⁸ For his part, Isma'il is portrayed not only as fearless on the battlefield, but as positively pitiless. The most remarkable – indeed, incredible – account relates the aftermath of his defeat and capture of Amir Husayn, a rival in northern Iraq. Amir Husayn had the good sense and fortune to end his own life before he was executed (or worse), but two of his commanders had less foresight (or luck): they were roasted on spits. Isma'il, we read, presented the meal as a test of his followers' faith: 'Whoever is a believer, let him eat a morsel of this kabob.'²³⁹ 'Shah Isma'il, with his extraordinary blend of messianic charisma and martial prowess, was certainly a figure worth telling stories about.'²⁴⁰ During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries his exploits inspired all manner of legends and tales, which were narrated orally; an Italian visitor in Tabriz in 1542 mentions storytellers recounting Isma'il's military feats. Some of these stories were set down in anonymous histories, sometimes even illustrated.²⁴¹

The problem with charisma

Between 1501 and 1510, the 'God-sent calamity' and his Qizilbash followers, though often outnumbered, defeated army after army, especially Aq Quyunlu and Ottomans (in the west), and Uzbeks (in the east). Safavid power extended from the Caucasus and Baghdad to the borders of Transoxiana. Each victory endorsed Isma'il's extraordinary claims and, at least for the Qizilbash, confirmed his status as divine guide. Isma'il had designs for further expansion, and had his adversaries been limited to Aq Quyunlu or Uzbeks, he might have realized them, and so preserved the momentum of his powerfully validating victories. Instead, his forces ran into Ottoman cannons.

The decisive battle took place in 1514 in Chaldiran (in far eastern Anatolia), where a huge Ottoman army – perhaps 100,000 men, more than



Shah Isma'il at the Battle of Chaldiran, 1514. Miniature painting from a Persian manuscript giving a history of Shah Isma'il, c. 1650.

double the size of Isma'il's force – routed the Safavids and proceeded to occupy Tabriz. A Venetian ambassador narrates an exchange between the victorious sultan, Selim (r. 1512–20), and a defeated Safavid commander, which nicely illustrates the clash of confessions, one Sunni, the other Shi'ite. Selim expresses outrage that he and his father, both representatives of the Prophet, should be defied; the commander responds defiantly that God, though apparently on the Ottoman side, will eventually kill Selim just as Selim is about to kill him. (And, indeed, that is what Selim did.)²⁴² Thousands of Qizilbash perished, and thousands were captured, including two of Isma'il's wives; one is said to have been his favourite. The battle of Chaldiran was decisive because it made permanent Ottoman claims upon eastern Anatolia and so established the limits of Safavid rule. It also shattered the myth, more than a decade in the making, of Isma'il's invincibility and so Safavid inevitability. Accounts have it that Isma'il himself went into mourning, wore black, and never again led an army on the battlefield.

The year 1514 thus marks a watershed in Isma'il's military career – and so, the political history of the nascent Safavid state – not least because success on the battlefield had fuelled his charisma. The flush of military expansion was over, and a protracted process of state building would begin. This inevitably meant engineering the role of religion in the state. Already in 1501, upon his coronation as shah in Tabriz, Isma'il had announced the beginning of a programme that would give Safavid endorsement to Imami Shi'ism. In the first instance, this meant directing his muezzins do public honour to 'Ali (and his descendants) by mentioning him in the Friday prayers. In the longer term, it meant fostering Imami ritual and learning, such as by inducing leading Imami scholars from Arab lands to immigrate, and installing a religio-political administration that gave him a measure of control over religious affairs.

Here it is worth noting that ingredients of Imami belief were not incompatible with Isma'il's own very dynamic and eclectic self-understanding. In some of his poetry he styles himself a successor of Muhammad, a slave of 'Ali, and a 'Husaynid' – that is, a descendant of Husayn, 'Ali's son. Still, Imamism was a far cry from the messianic Sufism that had been the Safavid hallmark since his grandfather's generation. Nor should one minimize the impact of the programme upon the population. For 400 years – and, in the Persian east, longer than that – elites and non-elites alike had become accustomed to what they regarded as a necessary and natural link between rulers and Sunnism. For them, Sunni rule was the rule.

What, then, explains why Isma'il severed that link and promoted Imami Shi'ism? Part of the answer lies with the Qizilbash: Isma'il was setting



Shrine and tomb of Shaykh Safi al-Din, Ardabil, Iran. The Safavid dynasty founded by Shah Isma'il took its name from Shaykh Safi al-Din, who died in 1334. Shah Isma'il is also buried there.

a religio-political course that led away from Qizilbash intoxication and towards establishment sobriety. Another part of the answer lies with the Ottomans, the emergent regional hegemon. The Ottomans were transforming Constantinople into the capital of the most powerfully centralized state that the Middle East had ever known; and from the 1480s they had been waging war on the Mamluks of Egypt, a war that they would win in 1516–17, thus delivering the status-enhancing prize of control over Mecca and Medina. They also had cannons – and the institutional infrastructure to support such modern warfare. And, finally, they were emphatic Sunnis. The Safavid state was weak and small compared to the Ottoman empire, its population numbering perhaps no more than 20 per cent of the sultan's 30 million subjects.²⁴³ For Isma'il, the present was full of perils. The fusion of extreme Shi'ism and Sufism had delivered Iran, but now it was too little and too risky.

Glossary

Abbasids

Dynasty of caliphs who overthrew the Umayyads (see below), and ruled, first effectively or then symbolically, from 750 to 1258.

Buyids

Dynasty that ruled Iraq and Iran in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Caliph/caliphate

The 'Prophet's successor', the effective or symbolic ruler of domains under Islamic governance (the caliphate).

Companions

Contemporaries of Muhammad, who transmitted *hadith*.

Hadith

A report or tradition that represents the words or actions of Muhammad; see *sunna*.

Ilkhanids

Mongol successor state that ruled the Islamic east in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Jihad

'Effort' or 'struggle', and in most political and religious thought, religiously sanctioned warfare against non-Muslims.

madrasa

Institution for teaching Islamic law, which became widespread in the eastern Islamic lands in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Qur'an

The written text of discrete revelations uttered by Muhammad, the Prophet, which was assembled in the decades after his death.

Samanids

Dynasty that ruled the eastern Islamic lands in the tenth century.

Shari'a

The set of divine commands, recorded in the Qur'an and *sunna*, that constitute Islamic law.

Shi'ite

The smaller of the two main branches of Islam, which originated in religio-political disputes over succession to the caliphate.

Sufism

A multifarious tradition of devout and, typically, mystical religiosity.

Sunna

Muhammad's normative conduct as recorded in the *hadith* and Qur'an.

Sunni

The largest of the two main branches of Islam, which crystallized in law and theology during the ninth and tenth centuries.

Vizier

(Chief) minister in state bureaucracy.

Umayyads

Dynasty of caliphs who ruled from 660 to 750.

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