

# THE CENTRAL ISLAMIC LANDS

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AS we enter the twenty-first century, there are over 1 billion Muslims living in all parts of the world. They are citizens of different nations, speak different languages, and dress differently. The processes by which they became Muslims were varied, and so were the circumstances in which they went their separate ways. Yet, the Islamic community has its roots in a more unified past which unfolded roughly 1,400 years ago in the Arabian peninsula. In this chapter we are going to read about the rise of Islam and its expansion over a vast territory extending from Egypt to Afghanistan, the core area of Islamic civilisation from 600 to 1200. In these centuries, Islamic society exhibited multiple political and cultural patterns. The term Islamic is used here not only in its purely religious sense but also for the overall society and culture historically associated with Islam. In this society not everything that was happening originated directly from religion, but it took place in a society where Muslims and their faith were recognised as socially dominant. Non-Muslims always formed an integral, if subordinate, part of this society as did Jews in Christendom.

Our understanding of the history of the central Islamic lands between 600 and 1200 is based on chronicles or *tawarikh* (which narrate events in order of time) and semi-historical works, such as biographies (*sira*), records of the sayings and doings of the Prophet (*hadith*) and commentaries on the Quran (*tafsir*). The material from which these works were produced was a large collection of eyewitness reports (*akhbar*) transmitted over a period of time either orally or on paper. The authenticity of each report (*khbar*) was tested by a critical method which traced the chain of transmission (*isnad*) and established the reliability of the narrator. Although the method was not foolproof, medieval Muslim writers were more careful in selecting their information and understanding the motives of their informants than were their contemporaries in other parts of the world. On controversial issues, they reproduced different versions of the same event, as they found in their sources, leaving the task of judgement to their readers. Their description of events closer to their own times is more systematic and analytical and less of a collection of *akhbar*. Most of the chronicles and semi-historical works are

\*Aramaic is a language related to Hebrew and Arabic. It has also been used in Ashokan inscriptions.

in Arabic, the best being the *Tarikh* of Tabari (d. 923) which has been translated into English in 38 volumes. Persian chronicles are few but they are quite detailed in their treatment of Iran and Central Asia. Christian chronicles, written in Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic\*), are fewer but they throw interesting light on the history of early Islam. Besides chronicles, we have legal texts, geographies, travelogues and literary works, such as stories and poems.

Documentary evidence (fragmentary pieces of writing, such as official orders or private correspondence) is the most valuable for writing histories because it does not consciously refer to events and persons. It comes almost entirely from Greek and Arabic papyri (good for administrative history) and the Geniza records. Some evidence has emerged from archaeological (excavations done at desert palaces), numismatic (study of coins) and epigraphic (study of inscriptions) sources which is of great value for economic history, art history, and for establishing names and dates.

Proper histories of Islam began to be written in the nineteenth century by university professors in Germany and the Netherlands. Colonial interests in the Middle East and North Africa encouraged French and British researchers to study Islam as well. Christian priests too paid close attention to the history of Islam and produced some good work, although their interest was mainly to compare Islam with Christianity. These scholars, called Orientalists, are known for their knowledge of Arabic and Persian and critical analysis of original texts. Ignaz Goldziher was a Hungarian Jew who studied at the Islamic college (al-Azhar) in Cairo and produced path-breaking studies in German of Islamic law and theology. Twentieth-century historians of Islam have largely followed the interests and methods of Orientalists. They have widened the scope of Islamic history by including new topics, and by using allied disciplines, such as economics, anthropology and statistics, have refined many aspects of Orientalist studies. The historiography of Islam is a good example of how religion can be studied with modern historical methods by those who may not share the customs and beliefs of the people they are studying.

## **The Rise of Islam in Arabia: Faith, Community and Politics**

During 612-32, the Prophet Muhammad preached the worship of a single God, Allah, and the membership of a single community of believers (*umma*). This was the origin of Islam. Muhammad was an Arab by language and culture and a merchant by profession. Sixth-century Arab culture was largely confined to the Arabian peninsula and areas of southern Syria and Mesopotamia.

The Arabs were divided into tribes\* (*qabila*), each led by a chief who was chosen partly on the basis of his family connections but more for his personal courage, wisdom and generosity (*murawwa*). Each tribe had its own god or goddess, who was worshipped as an idol (*sanam*) in a shrine. Many Arab tribes were nomadic (Bedouins), moving from dry to green areas (oases) of the desert in search of food (mainly dates) and fodder for their camels. Some settled in cities and practised trade or agriculture. Muhammad's own tribe, Quraysh, lived in Mecca and controlled the main shrine there, a cube-like structure called Kaba, in which idols were placed. Even tribes outside Mecca considered the Kaba holy and installed their own idols at this shrine, making annual pilgrimages (*hajj*) to the shrine. Mecca was located on the crossroads of a trade route between Yemen and Syria which further enhanced the city's importance (see Map p. 82). The Meccan shrine was a sanctuary (*haram*) where violence was forbidden and protection given to all visitors. Pilgrimage and commerce gave the nomadic and settled tribes opportunities to communicate with one another and share their beliefs and customs. Although the polytheistic Arabs were vaguely familiar with the notion of a Supreme God, Allah (possibly under the influence of the Jewish and Christian tribes living in their midst), their attachment to idols and shrines was more immediate and stronger.

Around 612, Muhammad declared himself to be the messenger (*rasul*) of God who had been commanded to preach that Allah alone should be worshipped. The worship involved simple rituals, such as daily prayers (*salat*), and moral principles, such as distributing alms and abstaining from theft. Muhammad was to found a community of believers (*umma*) bound by a common set of religious beliefs. The community would bear witness (*shahada*) to the existence of the religion before God as well as before members of other religious communities. Muhammad's message particularly appealed to those Meccans who felt deprived of the gains from trade and religion and were looking for a new community identity. Those who accepted the doctrine were called Muslims. They were promised salvation on the Day of Judgement (*qiyama*) and a share of the resources of the community while on earth. The Muslims soon faced considerable opposition from affluent Meccans who took offence to the rejection of their deities and found the new religion a threat to the status and prosperity of Mecca. In 622, Muhammad was forced to migrate with his followers to Medina. Muhammad's journey from Mecca (*hijra*) was a turning point in the history of Islam, with the year of his arrival in Medina marking the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

\*Tribes are societies organised on the basis of blood relationships. The Arab tribes were made up of clans or combinations of large families. Unrelated clans also merged to make a tribe stronger. Non-Arab individuals (*mawali*) became members through the patronage of prominent tribesmen. Even after converting to Islam, the *mawali* were never treated as equals by the Arab Muslims and had to pray in separate mosques.

A thirteenth century painting from 'Ajaibul Makhluqat' depicting the artist's imagination of the Archangel Gabriel (Jibril) who brought messages to Muhammad. The first word he spoke was 'recite' (*iqra*) from which has come the word Quran. In Islamic cosmology, angels are one of the three intelligent forms of life in the Universe. The other two are humans and jinns.





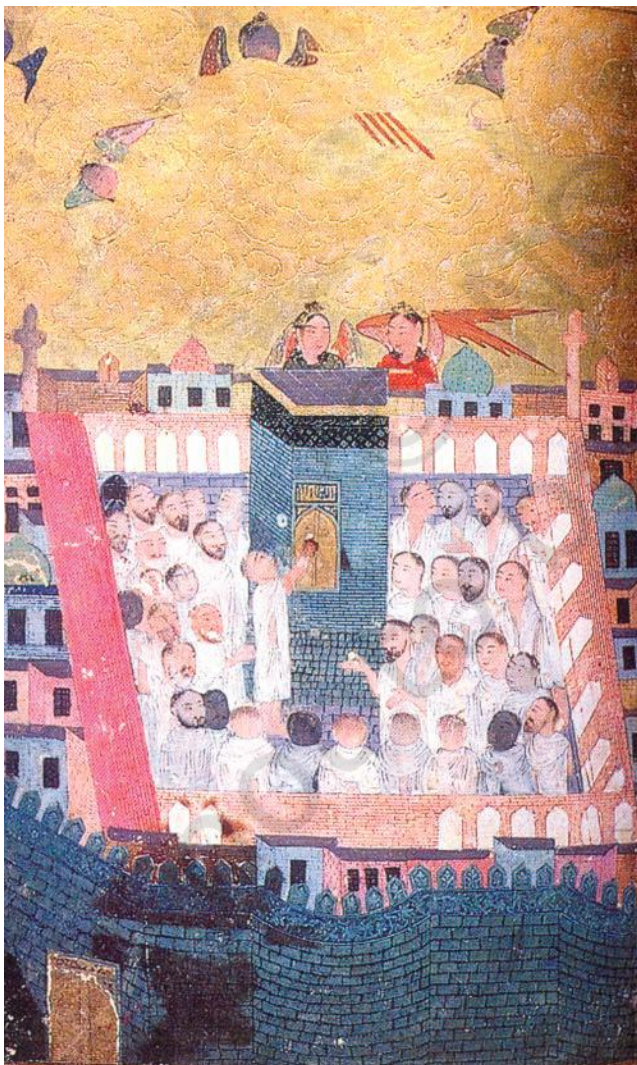
### Islamic Calendar

The Hijri era was established during the caliphate of Umar, with the first year falling in 622 CE. A date in the Hijri calendar is followed by the letters AH.

The Hijri year is a lunar year of 354 days, 12 months (Muharram to Dhul Hijja) of 29 or 30 days. Each day begins at sunset and each month with the sighting of the crescent moon. The Hijri year is about 11 days shorter than the solar year. Therefore, none of the Islamic religious festivals, including the Ramazan fast, Id and *haji*, corresponds in any way to seasons. There is no easy way to match the dates in the Hijri calendar with the dates in the Gregorian calendar (established by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 CE). One can calculate the rough equivalents between the Islamic (H) and Gregorian Christian (C) years with the following formulae:

$$(H \times 32 / 33) + 622 = C$$

$$(C - 622) \times 33 / 32 = H$$



The survival of a religion rests on the survival of the community of believers. The community has to be consolidated internally and protected from external dangers. Consolidation and protection require political institutions such as states and governments which are either inherited from the past, borrowed from outside or created from scratch. In Medina, Muhammad created a political order from all three sources which gave his followers the protection they needed as well as resolved the city's ongoing civil strife. The *umma* was converted into a wider community to include polytheists and the Jews of Medina under the political leadership of Muhammad. Muhammad consolidated the faith for his followers by adding and refining rituals (such as fasting) and ethical principles. The community survived on agriculture and trade, as well as an alms tax (*zakat*). In addition, the Muslims organised expeditionary raids on Meccan caravans and nearby oases. These raids provoked reactions from the Meccans and caused a breach with the Jews of Medina. After

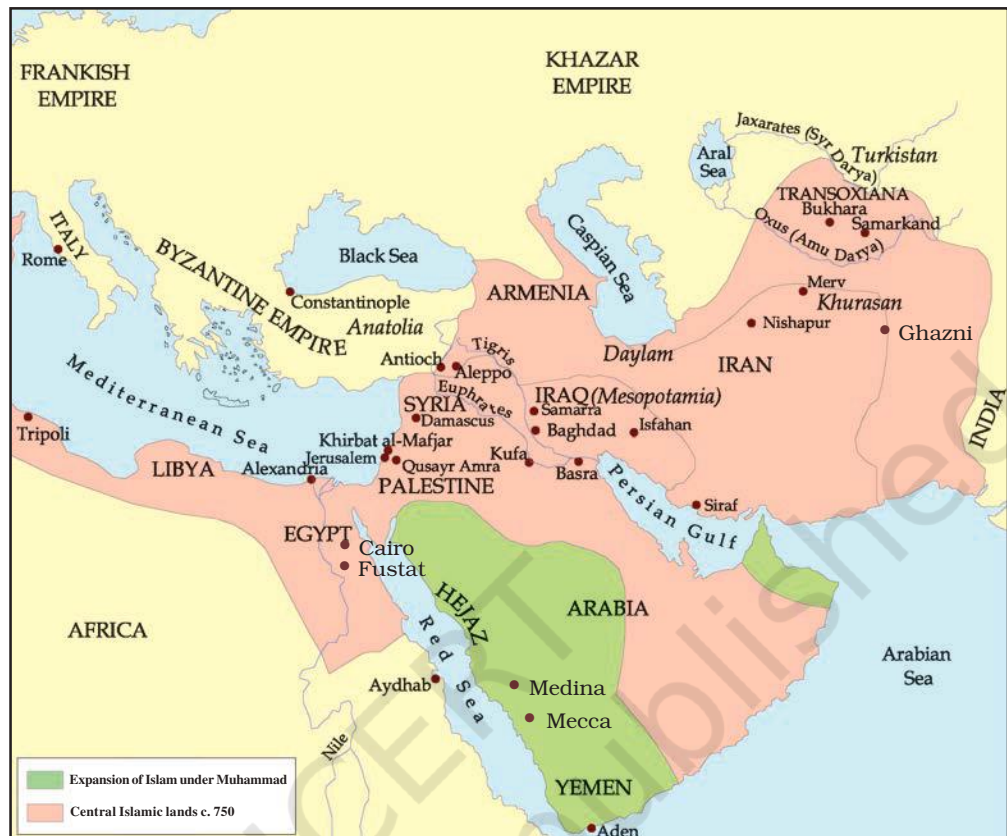
*Pilgrims at the Kaba, illustration from a fifteenth-century Persian manuscript.*

a series of battles, Mecca was conquered and Muhammad's reputation as a religious preacher and political leader spread far and wide. Muhammad now insisted on conversion as the sole criterion for membership of the community. In the harsh conditions of the desert, the Arabs attached great value to strength and solidarity. Impressed by Muhammad's achievements, many tribes, mostly Bedouins, joined the community by converting to Islam. Muhammad's alliances began to spread until they embraced the whole of Arabia. Medina became the administrative capital of the emerging Islamic state with Mecca as its religious centre. The Kaba was cleansed of idols as Muslims were required to face the shrine when offering prayers. In a short space of time, Muhammad was able to unite a large part of Arabia under a new faith, community and state. The early Islamic polity, however, remained a federation of Arab tribes and clans for a long time.

### The Caliphate: Expansion, Civil Wars and Sect Formation

After Muhammad's death in 632, no one could legitimately claim to be the next prophet of Islam. As a result, his political authority was transferred to the *umma* with no established principle of succession. This created opportunities for innovations but also caused deep divisions among the Muslims. The biggest innovation was the creation of the institution of caliphate, in which the leader of the community (*amir al-muminin*) became the deputy (*khalifa*) of the Prophet. The first four caliphs (632-61) justified their powers on the basis of their close association with the Prophet and continued his work under the general guidelines he had provided. The twin objectives of the caliphate were to retain control over the tribes constituting the *umma* and to raise resources for the state.

Following Muhammad's death, many tribes broke away from the Islamic state. Some even raised their own prophets to establish communities modelled on the *umma*. The first caliph, Abu Bakr, suppressed the revolts by a series of campaigns. The second caliph, Umar, shaped the *umma's* policy of expansion of power. The caliph knew that the *umma* could not be maintained out of the modest income derived from trade and taxes. Realising that rich booty (*ghanima*) could be obtained from expeditionary raids, the caliph and his military commanders mustered their tribal strength to conquer lands belonging to the Byzantine Empire in the west and the Sasanian empire in the east. At the height of their power, the Byzantine and Sasanian empires ruled vast territories and commanded huge resources to pursue their political and commercial interests in Arabia. The Byzantine Empire promoted Christianity and the Sasanian empire patronised Zoroastrianism, the ancient religion of Iran. On the eve of the Arab invasions, these two empires had declined in strength due to religious conflicts and revolts by the aristocracy. This made it



MAP 1: The Islamic Lands

easier for the Arabs to annex territories through wars and treaties. In three successful campaigns (637-642), the Arabs brought Syria, Iraq, Iran and Egypt under the control of Medina. Military strategy, religious fervour and the weakness of the opposition contributed to the success of the Arabs. Further campaigns were launched by the third caliph, Uthman, to extend the control to Central Asia. Within a decade of the death of Muhammad, the Arab-Islamic state controlled the vast territory between the Nile and the Oxus. These lands remain under Muslim rule to this day.

In all the conquered provinces, the caliphs imposed a new administrative structure headed by governors (*amirs*) and tribal chieftains (*ashraf*). The central treasury (*bait al-mal*) obtained its revenue from taxes paid by Muslims as well as its share of the booty from raids. The caliph's soldiers, mostly Bedouins, settled in camp cities at the edge of the desert, such as Kufa and Basra, to remain within reach of their natural habitat as well as the caliph's command. The ruling class and soldiers received shares of the booty and monthly payments (*ata*). The non-Muslim population retained their rights to property and religious practices on payment of taxes (*kharaj* and *jiziya*). Jews and Christians were declared protected subjects of the state (*dhimmis*) and given a large measure of autonomy in the conduct of their communal affairs.



Political expansion and unification did not come easily to the Arab tribesmen. With territorial expansion, the unity of the *umma* became threatened by conflicts over the distribution of resources and offices. The ruling class of the early Islamic state comprised almost entirely the Quraysh of Mecca. The third caliph, Uthman (644-56), also a Quraysh, packed his administration with his own men to secure greater control. This further intensified the Meccan character of the state and the conflict with the other tribesmen. Opposition in Iraq and Egypt, combined with opposition in Medina, led to the assassination of Uthman. With Uthman's death, Ali became the fourth caliph.

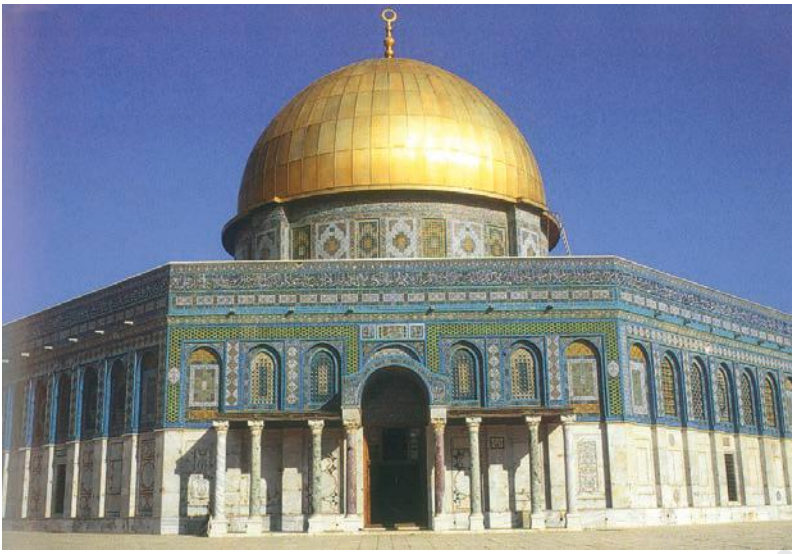
The rifts among the Muslims deepened after Ali (656-61) fought two wars against those who represented the Meccan aristocracy. Ali established himself at Kufa and defeated an army led by Muhammad's wife, Aisha, in the Battle of the Camel (657). He was, however, not able to suppress the faction led by Muawiya, a kinsman of Uthman and the governor of Syria. Ali's second battle, at Siffin (northern Mesopotamia), ended in a truce which split his followers into two groups: some remained loyal to him, while others left the camp and came to be known as Kharjis. Soon after, Ali was assassinated by a Kharji in a mosque at Kufa. After his death, his followers paid allegiance to his son, Hussain, and his descendants. Muawiya made himself the next caliph in 661, founding the Umayyad dynasty which lasted till 750.

After the civil wars, it appeared as if Arab domination would disintegrate. There were also signs that the tribal conquerors were adopting the sophisticated culture of their subjects. It was under the Umayyads, a prosperous clan of the Quraysh tribe, that a second round of consolidation took place.

## The Umayyads and the Centralisation of Polity

The conquest of large territories destroyed the caliphate based in Medina and replaced it with an increasingly authoritarian polity. The Umayyads implemented a series of political measures which consolidated their leadership within the *umma*. The first Umayyad caliph, Muawiya, moved his capital to Damascus and adopted the court ceremonies and administrative institutions of the Byzantine Empire. He also introduced hereditary succession and persuaded the leading Muslims to accept his son as his heir. These innovations were adopted by the caliphs who followed him, and allowed the Umayyads to retain power for 90 years and the Abbasids, for two centuries.

The Umayyad state was now an imperial power, no longer based directly on Islam but on statecraft and the loyalty of Syrian troops. There were Christian advisers in the administration, as well as Zoroastrian scribes and bureaucrats. However, Islam continued to provide legitimacy to their rule. The Umayyads always appealed for



*The Dome of the Rock, built over a rocky mound by Abd al-Malik, is the earliest major work of Islamic architecture. Created as a monument to the Muslim presence in the city of Jerusalem, it acquired a mystical association connected with the Night Journey of the Prophet to Heaven (miraj).*

were copies of Byzantine and Iranian coins (*denarius* and *drachm*), with symbols of crosses and fire altars and Greek and Pahlavi (the language of Iran) inscriptions. These symbols were removed and the coins now carried Arabic inscriptions. Abd al-Malik also made a highly visible contribution to the development of an Arab-Islamic identity, by building the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

### Abd al-Malik's Coinage Reform

The three coin specimens show the transition from Byzantine to Arab-Islamic coinage. On the second coin, the bearded and long-haired caliph is dressed in traditional Arab robes and is holding a sword. It is the first extant portrait of a Muslim. It is also unique because later there developed an antipathy towards the representation of living beings in art and craft. Abd al-Malik's reform of coinage was linked with his reorganisation of state finances. It proved so successful that for hundreds of years, coins were struck according to the pattern and weight of the third specimen.



*Byzantine gold solidus (denarius aureus) showing the emperor Heraclius and his two sons.*



*Portrait gold dinar struck by Abd al-Malik with his name and image.*



*The reformed dinar was purely epigraphic. It carries the kalima: 'There is no God but Allah and He has no partner (sharik)'*



## The Abbasid Revolution

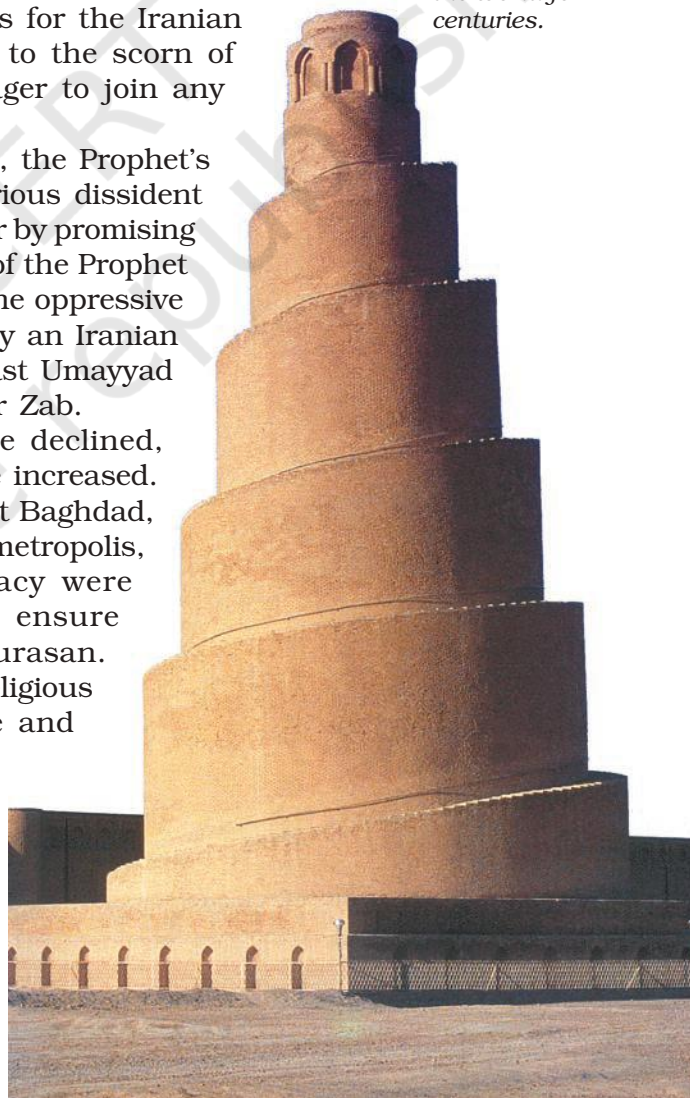
For their success in centralising the Muslim polity, the Umayyads paid a heavy price. A well-organised movement, called *dawa*, brought down the Umayyads and replaced them with another family of Meccan origin, the Abbasids, in 750. The Abbasids portrayed the Umayyad regime as evil and promised a restoration of the original Islam of the Prophet. The revolution led not only to a change of dynasty but changes in the political structure and culture of Islam.

The Abbasid uprising broke out in the distant region of Khurasan (eastern Iran), a 20-day journey from Damascus on a fast horse. Khurasan had a mixed Arab-Iranian population which could be mobilised for various reasons. The Arab soldiers here were mostly from Iraq and resented the dominance of the Syrians. The civilian Arabs of Khurasan disliked the Umayyad regime for having made promises of tax concessions and privileges which were never fulfilled. As for the Iranian Muslims (*mawali*), they were exposed to the scorn of the race-conscious Arabs and were eager to join any campaign to oust the Umayyads.

The Abbasids, descendants of Abbas, the Prophet's uncle, mustered the support of the various dissident groups and legitimised their bid for power by promising that a messiah (*mahdi*) from the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) would liberate them from the oppressive Umayyad regime. Their army was led by an Iranian slave, Abu Muslim, who defeated the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan, in a battle at the river Zab.

Under Abbasid rule, Arab influence declined, while the importance of Iranian culture increased. The Abbasids established their capital at Baghdad, near the ruins of the ancient Iranian metropolis, Ctesiphon. The army and bureaucracy were reorganised on a non-tribal basis to ensure greater participation by Iraq and Khurasan. The Abbasid rulers strengthened the religious status and functions of the caliphate and patronised Islamic institutions and scholars. But they were forced by the needs of government and empire to retain the centralised nature of the state. They maintained the magnificent imperial architecture and elaborate court ceremonials of the Umayyads. The regime which took pride in having brought down the monarchy found itself compelled to establish it again.

*The Great Mosque of al-Mutawwakil in Samarra (the second Abbasid capital) built in 850. The minar is 50 metres high, and is made of brick. Inspired by Mesopotamian architectural traditions, this was the largest mosque in the world for centuries.*



## ACTIVITY 1

Identify the changing locations of the caliphate's capital. Which would you say was most centrally situated?

## Break-up of the Caliphate and the Rise of Sultanates

The Abbasid state became weaker from the ninth century because Baghdad's control over the distant provinces declined, and because of conflict between pro-Arab and pro-Iranian factions in the army and bureaucracy. In 810, a civil war broke out between supporters of Amin and Mamun, sons of the caliph Harun al-Rashid, which deepened the factionalism and created a new power bloc of Turkish slave officers (*mamluk*). Shiism once again competed with Sunni orthodoxy for power. A number of minor dynasties arose, such as the Tahirids and Samanids in Khurasan and Transoxiana (Turan or lands beyond the Oxus), and the Tulunids in Egypt and Syria. Abbasid power was soon limited to central Iraq and western Iran. That too was lost in 945 when the Buyids, a Shiite clan from the Caspian region of Iran (Daylam), captured Baghdad. The Buyid rulers assumed various titles, including the ancient Iranian title *shahanshah* (king of kings), but not that of caliph. They kept the Abbasid caliph as the symbolic head of their Sunni subjects.

The decision not to abolish the caliphate was a shrewd one, because another Shiite dynasty, the Fatimids, had ambitions to rule the Islamic world. The Fatimids belonged to the Ismaili sub-sect of Shiism and claimed to be descended from the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, and hence, the sole rightful rulers of Islam. From their base in North Africa, they conquered Egypt in 969 and established the Fatimid caliphate. The old capital of Egypt, Fustat, was replaced by a new city, Qahira (Cairo), founded on the day of the rise of the planet Mars (*Mirrikh*, also called *al-Qahir*). The two rival dynasties patronised Shiite administrators, poets and scholars.

Between 950 and 1200, Islamic society was held together not by a single political order or a single language of culture (Arabic) but by common economic and cultural patterns. Unity in the face of political divisions was maintained by the separation between state and society, the development of Persian as a language of Islamic high culture, and the maturity of the dialogue between intellectual traditions. Scholars, artists and merchants moved freely within the central Islamic lands and assured the circulation of ideas and manners. Some of these also percolated down to the level of villages due to conversion. The Muslim population, less than 10 per cent in the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, increased enormously. The identity of Islam as a religion and a cultural system separate from other religions became much sharper, which made conversion possible and meaningful.

A third ethnic group was added to the Arabs and Iranians, with the rise of the Turkish sultanates in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The Turks were nomadic tribes from the Central Asian steppes (grasslands) of Turkistan (north-east of the Aral Sea up to the borders of China) who gradually converted to Islam (see Theme 5). They were skilled riders and warriors and entered the Abbasid, Samanid and Buyid

administrations as slaves and soldiers, rising to high positions on account of their loyalty and military abilities. The Ghaznavid sultanate was established by Alptegin (961) and consolidated by Mahmud of Ghazni (998-1030). Like the Buyids, the Ghaznavids were a military dynasty with a professional army of Turks and Indians (one of the generals of Mahmud was an Indian named Tilak). But their centre of power was in Khurasan and Afghanistan and for them, the Abbasid caliphs were not rivals but a source of legitimacy. Mahmud was conscious of being the son of a slave and was especially eager to receive the title of Sultan from the caliph. The caliph was willing to support the Sunni Ghaznavid as a counterweight to Shiite power.

The Saljuq Turks entered Turan as soldiers in the armies of the Samanids and Qarakhanids (non-Muslim Turks from further east). They later established themselves as a powerful group under the leadership of two brothers, Tughril and Chaghri Beg. Taking advantage of the chaos following the death of Mahmud of Ghazni, the Saljuqs conquered Khurasan in 1037 and made Nishapur\* their first capital. The Saljuqs next turned their attention to western Persia and Iraq (ruled by the Buyids) and in 1055, restored Baghdad to Sunni rule. The caliph, al-Qaim, conferred on Tughril Beg the title of Sultan in a move that marked the separation of religious and political authority. The two Saljuq brothers ruled together in accordance with the tribal notion of rule by the family as a whole. Tughril (d. 1064) was succeeded by his nephew, Alp Arslan. During Alp Arslan's reign, the Saljuq empire expanded to Anatolia (modern Turkey).

*\*An important Perso-Islamic centre of learning and the birthplace of Umar Khayyam.*

From the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, there was a series of conflicts between European Christians and the Arab states. This is discussed below. Then, at the start of the thirteenth century, the Muslim world found itself on the verge of a great disaster. This was the threat from the Mongols, the last but most decisive of all nomadic assaults on settled civilisations (see Theme 5).

## The Crusades

In medieval Islamic societies, Christians were regarded as the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*) since they had their own scripture (the New Testament or *Injil*). Christians were granted safe conduct (*aman*) while venturing into Muslim states as merchants, pilgrims, ambassadors and travellers. These territories also included those which were once held by the Byzantine Empire, notably the Holy Land of Palestine. Jerusalem was conquered by the Arabs in 638 but it was ever-present in the Christian imagination as the place of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. This was an important factor in the formation of the image of Muslims in Christian Europe.

Hostility towards the Muslim world became more pronounced in the eleventh century. Normans, Hungarians and some Slavs had



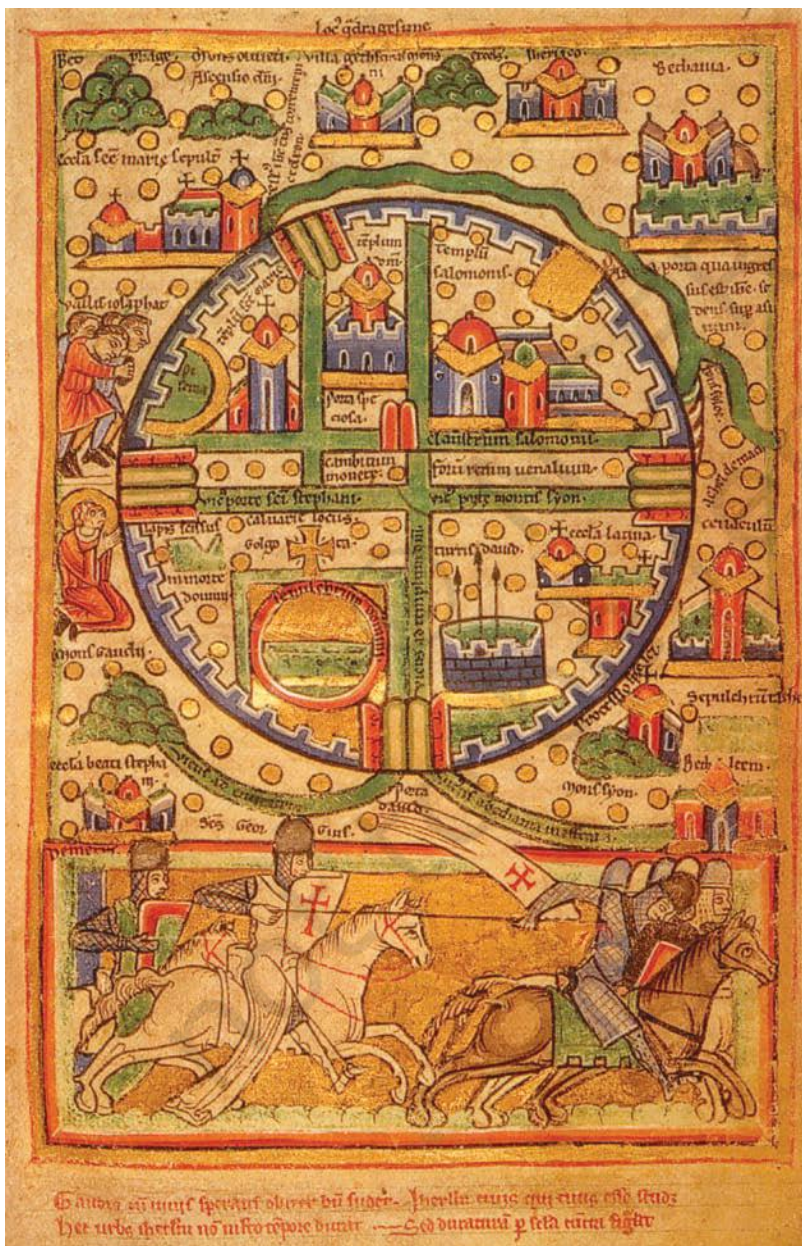
Aleppo, a Hittite, Assyrian and Hellenistic site, which was occupied by the Arabs in 636. It was fought over for the next 1,000 years; note the Crusaders seen in action.

–Nasuh al-Matraki's Itinerary, 1534–36.

been converted to Christianity, and the Muslims alone remained as the main enemy. There was also a change in the social and economic organisation of western Europe in the eleventh century which contributed to the hostility between Christendom and the Islamic world. The clergy and the warrior class (the first two orders – see Theme 6) were making efforts to ensure political stability as well as economic growth based on agriculture and trade. The possibilities of military confrontation between competing feudal principalities and a return to economic organisation based on plunder were contained by the Peace of God movement. All military violence was forbidden inside certain areas, near places

of worship, during certain periods considered sacred in the Church's calendar, and against certain vulnerable social groups, such as churchmen and the common people. The Peace of God deflected the aggressive tendencies of feudal society away from the Christian world and towards the 'enemies' of God. It built a climate in which fighting against the infidels (non-believers) became not only permissible but also commendable.

The death in 1092 of Malik Shah, the Saljuq sultan of Baghdad, was followed by the disintegration of his empire. This offered the Byzantine emperor, Alexius I, a chance to regain Asia Minor and northern Syria. For Pope Urban II, this was an opportunity to revive the spirit of Christianity. In 1095, the Pope joined the Byzantine emperor in calling for a war in the name of God to liberate the Holy Land. Between 1095 and 1291, western European Christians planned and fought



wars against Muslim cities on the coastal plains of the eastern Mediterranean (Levant). These wars were later designated as Crusades\*.

In the first crusade (1098-99), soldiers from France and Italy captured Antioch in Syria, and claimed Jerusalem. Their victory was accompanied by the slaughter of Muslims and Jews in the city, chronicled by both Christians and Muslims. Muslim writers referred to the arrival of the Christians (called *ifrinji* or *firangi*) as a Frankish invasion. The Franks quickly established four crusader states in the region of Syria-Palestine. Collectively, these territories were known as Outremer (the land overseas) and later crusades were directed at its defence and expansion.

The Outremer survived well for some time, but when the Turks captured Edessa in 1144, an appeal was made by the Pope for a second crusade (1145-49). A combined German and French army made an attempt to capture Damascus but they were defeated and forced to return home. After this, there was a gradual erosion of the strength of Outremer. Crusader zeal gave way to living in luxury and to battles over territory among the Christian rulers. Salah al-Din (Saladin) created an Egypt-Syrian empire and gave the call for *jihad* or holy war against the Christians, and defeated them in 1187. He regained Jerusalem, nearly a century after the first crusade. Records of the time indicate that Salah al-Din's treatment of the Christian population was humane, in marked contrast to the way in which Christians had earlier dealt with Muslims and Jews. Although he gave custody of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to the Christians, a number of churches were turned into mosques, and Jerusalem once again became a Muslim city.

The loss of the city prompted a third crusade in 1189, but the crusaders gained little except for some coastal towns in Palestine and free access to Jerusalem for Christian pilgrims. The Mamluks, the rulers of Egypt, finally drove the crusading Christians from all of Palestine in 1291. Europe gradually lost military interest in Islam and focused on its internal political and cultural development.

The Crusades left a lasting impact on two aspects of Christian-Muslim relations. One was the harsher attitude of the Muslim state towards its Christian subjects which resulted from the bitter memories of the conflict as well as the needs for security in areas of mixed populations. The other was the greater influence of Italian mercantile communities (from Pisa, Genoa and Venice) in the trade between the East and the West even after the restoration of Muslim power.

*\*The Pope ordered the ceremonial granting of crosses to those who had sworn to fight.*



## Franks in Syria

The treatment of the subjugated Muslim population differed among the various Frankish lords. The earliest of the crusaders, who settled down in Syria and Palestine, were generally more tolerant of the Muslim population than those who came later. In his memoirs, Usama ibn Munqidh, a twelfth-century Syrian Muslim, has something interesting to say about his new neighbours:

‘Among the Franks there are some who have settled down in this country and associated with Muslims. These are better than the newcomers, but they are exceptions to the rule, and no inference can be drawn from them.

Here is an example. Once I sent a man to Antioch on business. At that time,



*A crusader castle in Syria. Built during the crusades (1110), it was an important base to attack Arab-controlled areas. The towers and aqueducts were built by the Mamluk sultan, Baybars, when he captured it in 1271.*

Chief Theodore Sophianos [an eastern Christian] was there, and he and I were friends. He was then all powerful in Antioch. One day he said to my man, “One of my Frankish friends has invited me. Come with me and see how they live.” My man told me: “So I went with him, and we came to the house of one of the old knights, those who had come with the first Frankish expedition. He had already retired from state and military service, and had a property in Antioch from which he lived. He produced a fine table, with food both tasty and cleanly served. He saw that I was reluctant to eat, and said: “Eat to your

heart’s content, for I do not eat Frankish food. I have Egyptian women cooks and eat nothing but what they prepare, nor does swine flesh ever enter my house.” So I ate, but with some caution, and we took our leave.

Later I was walking through the market, when suddenly a Frankish woman caught hold of me and began jabbering in their language, and I could not understand what she was saying. A crowd of Franks collected against me, and I was sure that my end had come. Then, suddenly, that same knight appeared and saw me, and came up to that woman, and asked her: “What do you want of this Muslim?” She replied: “He killed my brother Hurso.” This Hurso was a knight of Afamiya who had been killed by someone from the army of Hama. Then the knight shouted at her and said, “This man is a *burjasi* [bourgeois, that is, a merchant]. He does not fight or go to war.” And he shouted at the crowd and they dispersed; then he took my hand and went away. So the effect of that meal that I had was to save me from death.’

– *Kitab al-Itibar*.



## Economy: Agriculture, Urbanisation and Commerce

Agriculture was the principal occupation of the settled populations in the newly conquered territories. The Islamic state made no changes in this. Land was owned by big and small peasants and, in some cases, by the state. In Iraq and Iran, land existed in fairly large units cultivated by peasants. The estate owners collected taxes on behalf of the state during the Sasanian as well as Islamic periods. In areas that had moved from a pastoral to a settled agricultural system, land was the common property of the village. Finally, big estates that were abandoned by their owners after the Islamic conquests were acquired by the state and handed over mainly to the Muslim elites of the empire, particularly members of the caliph's family.

The state had overall control of agricultural lands, deriving the bulk of its income from land revenue once the conquests were over. The lands conquered by the Arabs that remained in the hands of the owners were subject to a tax (*kharaj*), which varied from half to a fifth of the produce, according to the conditions of cultivation. On land held or cultivated by Muslims, the tax levied was one-tenth (*ushr*) of the produce. When non-Muslims started to convert to Islam to pay lower taxes, this reduced the income of the state. To address the shortfall, the caliphs first discouraged conversions and later adopted a uniform policy of taxation. From the tenth century onwards, the state authorised its officials to claim their salaries from agricultural revenues from territories, called *iqtas* (revenue assignments).

Agricultural prosperity went hand in hand with political stability. In many areas, especially in the Nile valley, the state supported irrigation systems, the construction of dams and canals, and the digging of wells (often equipped with waterwheels or *noria*), all of which were crucial for good harvests. Islamic law gave tax concessions to people who brought land under cultivation. Through peasant initiatives and state support, cultivable land expanded and productivity rose, even in the absence of major technological changes. Many new crops such as cotton, oranges, bananas, watermelons, spinach and brinjals (*badinjan*) were grown and even exported to Europe.



Grain harvesting; the labourers' lunch is being brought on a tray.

—Arabic version of the Pseudo-Galen's Book of Antidotes, 1199 (see the story of Doctor Galen, p. 63).

Islamic civilisation flourished as the number of cities grew phenomenally. Many new cities were founded, mainly to settle Arab soldiers (*jund*) who formed the backbone of the local administration. Among this class of garrison-cities, called *misr* (the Arabic name for Egypt), were Kufa and Basra in Iraq, and Fustat and Cairo in Egypt. Within half a century of its establishment as the capital of the Abbasid caliphate (800), the population of Baghdad had reached around 1 million. Alongside these cities were older towns such as Damascus, Isfahan and Samarkand, which received a new lease of life. Their size and population surged, supported by an expansion in the production of foodgrains and raw materials such as cotton and sugar for urban manufactures. A vast urban network developed, linking one town with another and forming a circuit.

At the heart of the city were two building complexes radiating cultural and economic power: the congregational mosque (*masjid al-jami*), big enough to be seen from a distance, and the central marketplace (*sug*), with shops in a row, merchants' lodgings (*fandug*) and the office of the money-changer. The cities were homes to administrators (*ayan* or eyes of the state), and scholars and merchants (*tujjar*) who lived close to the centre. Ordinary citizens and soldiers had their living quarters in the outer circle, each fitted with its own mosque, church or synagogue (Jewish temple), subsidiary market and public bath (*hammam*), an important meeting place. At the outskirts were the houses of the urban poor, a market for green vegetables and fruits brought from the countryside, caravan stations and 'unclean' shops, such as those dealing in tanning or butchering. Beyond the city walls were inns for people to rest when the city gates were shut and cemeteries. There were variations

on this typology depending on the nature of the landscape, political traditions and historical events.

Political unification and urban demand for foodstuffs and luxuries enlarged the circuit of exchange. Geography favoured the Muslim empire, which spread between the trading zones of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. For five centuries, Arab and Iranian traders monopolised the maritime trade between China, India and Europe. This trade passed through two major routes, namely, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. High-value goods suitable for long-distance trade, such as spices, textile, porcelain and gunpowder, were shipped from India and China to the Red Sea ports of Aden and Aydhab and the Gulf ports of Siraf and Basra.

A boat sailing to Basra. The crew are Indian and the passengers Arab. The transport of goods and passengers by water was cheaper, quicker and safer in pre-modern times. Illustration from the *Maqamat* written by Hariri (twelfth-century manuscript). The *Maqamat* (Assemblies) were a genre of popular Arabic literature in which a narrator tells stories of a trickster and his escapades.





From here, the merchandise was carried overland in camel caravans to the warehouses (*makhazin*, origin of the word magazine which has a similar collection of articles) of Baghdad, Damascus and Aleppo for local consumption or onward transmission. The caravans passing through Mecca got bigger whenever the *hajj* coincided with the sailing seasons (*mawasim*, origin of the word monsoon) in the Indian Ocean. At the Mediterranean end of these trade routes, exports to Europe from the port of Alexandria were handled by Jewish merchants, some of whom traded directly with India, as can be seen from their letters preserved in the Geniza collection. However, from the tenth century, the Red Sea route gained greater importance due to the rise of Cairo as a centre of commerce and power and growing demand for eastern goods from the trading cities of Italy.

### ACTIVITY 2

Describe a morning scene in Basra.

### Paper, Geniza Records and History

In the central Islamic lands, written works were widely circulated after the introduction of paper. Paper (made from linen) came from China, where the manufacturing process was a closely guarded secret. In 751, the Muslim governor of Samarqand took 20,000 Chinese invaders as prisoners, some of whom were good at making paper. For the next 100 years, Samarqand paper remained an important export item. Since Islam prohibited monopolies, paper began to be manufactured in the rest of the Islamic world. By the middle of the tenth century, it had more or less replaced papyrus, the writing material made from the inner stem of a plant that grew freely in the Nile valley. Demand for paper increased, and Abd al-Latif, a doctor from Baghdad (see his depiction of the ideal student on p. 98) and a resident of Egypt between 1193 and 1207, reported how Egyptian peasants robbed graves to obtain mummy wrappings made of linen to sell to paper factories.

Paper also facilitated the writing of commercial and personal documents of all kinds. In 1896, a huge collection of medieval Jewish documents was discovered in a sealed room (Geniza, pronounced *ghaniza*) of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat. The documents had been preserved thanks to the Jewish practice of not destroying any piece of writing that contained the name of God. The Geniza was found to contain over a quarter of a million manuscripts and fragments dating back as far as the mid-eighth century. Most of the material dated from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, that is, from the Fatimid, Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods. These included personal letters between merchants, family and friends, contracts, promises of dowry, sale documents, laundry lists, and other trivia. Most of the documents were written in Judaeo-Arabic, a version of Arabic written in Hebrew characters that was commonly used by Jewish communities throughout the medieval Mediterranean. The Geniza documents provide rich insights into personal and economic experiences as also into Mediterranean and Islamic culture. The documents also suggest that the business skills and commercial techniques of merchants of the medieval Islamic world were more advanced than those of their European counterparts. Goitein wrote a multi-volume history of the Mediterranean from Geniza records, and Amitav Ghosh was inspired by a Geniza letter to tell the story of an Indian slave in his book, *In an Antique Land*.



Towards the eastern end, caravans of Iranian merchants set out from Baghdad along the Silk Route to China, via the oasis cities of Bukhara and Samarkand (Transoxiana), to bring Central Asian and Chinese goods, including paper. Transoxiana also formed an important link in the commercial network which extended north to Russia and Scandinavia for the exchange of European goods, (mainly fur) and Slavic captives (hence the word, slave). Islamic coins, used for the payment of these goods, were found in hoards discovered along the Volga river and in the Baltic region. Male and female Turkish slaves (*ghulam*) too were purchased in these markets for the courts of the caliphs and sultans.

The fiscal system (income and expenditure of the state) and market exchange increased the importance of money in the central Islamic lands. Coins of gold, silver and copper (*fulus*) were minted and circulated, often in bags sealed by money-changers, to pay for goods and services. Gold came from Africa (Sudan) and silver from Central Asia (Zarafshan valley). Precious metals and coins also came from Europe, which used these to pay for its trade with the East. Rising demand for money forced people to release their accumulated reserves and idle wealth into circulation. Credit combined with currencies to oil the wheels of commerce. The greatest contribution of the Muslim world to medieval economic life was the development of superior methods of payment and business organisation. Letters of credit (*sakk*, origin of the word cheque) and bills of exchange (*suftaja*) were used by merchants and bankers to transfer money from one place or individual to another. The widespread use of commercial papers freed merchants from the need to carry cash everywhere and also made their journeys safer. The caliph too used the *sakk* to pay salaries or reward poets and minstrels.

Although it was customary for merchants to set up family businesses or employ slaves to run their affairs, formal business arrangements (*muzarba*) were also common in which sleeping partners entrusted capital to travelling merchants and shared profits and losses in an agreed proportion. Islam did not stop people from making money so long as certain prohibitions were respected. For instance, interest-bearing transactions (*riba*) were unlawful, although people circumvented usury in ingenious ways (*hiyal*), such as borrowing money in one type of coin and paying in another while disguising the interest as a commission on currency exchange (the origin of the bill of exchange).

Many tales from the *Thousand and One Nights* (*Alf Layla wa Layla*) give us a picture of medieval Islamic society, featuring characters such as sailors, slaves, merchants and money-changers.

## Learning and Culture

As the religious and social experiences of the Muslims deepened through contact with other people, the community was obliged to reflect on itself and confront issues pertaining to God and the world. What should be the ideal conduct of a Muslim in public and private? What is the object of Creation and how does one know what God wants from His creatures? How can one understand the mysteries of the universe? Answers to such questions came from learned Muslims who acquired and organised knowledge of different kinds to strengthen the social identity of the community as well as to satisfy their intellectual curiosity.

For religious scholars (*ulama*), knowledge (*ilm*) derived from the Quran and the model behaviour of the Prophet (*sunna*) was the only way to know the will of God and provide guidance in this world. The *ulama* in medieval times devoted themselves to writing *tafsir* and documenting Muhammad's authentic *hadith*. Some went on to prepare a body of laws or *sharia* (the straight path) to govern the relationship of Muslims with God through rituals (*ibadat*) and with the rest of the humanity through social affairs (*muamalat*). In framing Islamic law, jurists also made use of reasoning (*qiyas*) since not everything was apparent in the Quran or *hadith* and life had become increasingly complex with urbanisation. Differences in the interpretation of the sources and methods of jurisprudence led to the formation of four schools of law (*mazhab*) in the eight and ninth centuries. These were the Maliki, Hanafi, Shafii and Hanbali schools, each named after a leading jurist (*faqih*), the last being the most conservative. The *sharia* provided guidance on all possible legal issues within Sunni society, though it was more precise on questions of personal status (marriage, divorce and inheritance) than on commercial matters or penal and constitutional issues.

*Courtyard of Mustansiriya Madrasa of Baghdad, founded in 1233. The madrasa was a college of learning for students who had finished their schooling in maktab. Madrasas were attached to mosques but big madrasas had a mosque attached to them.*

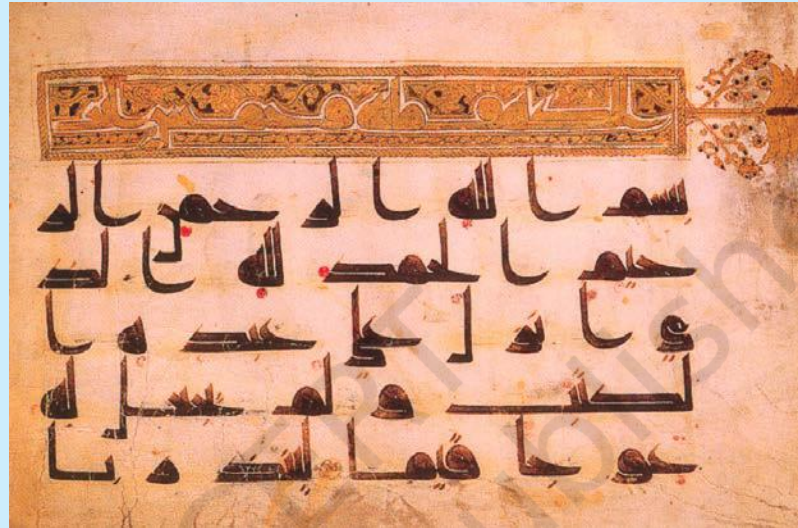


## The Quran

‘And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean were ink  
with seven oceans behind it to add to its supply,  
yet would not the words of Allah be exhausted in the writing.’

(Quran, chapter 31, verse 27)

*Page from a Quran written on vellum in the ninth century. It is the beginning of Sura 18, ‘al-Kahf’ (The Cave) which refers to Moses. The angular Kufi script has vowel signs in red for the correct pronunciation of the language.*



The Quran is a book in Arabic divided into 114 chapters (*suras*) and arranged in descending order of length, the shortest being the last. The only exception to this is the first *sura* which is a short prayer (*al-fatiha* or opening). According to Muslim tradition, the Quran is a collection of messages (revelations) which God sent to the Prophet Muhammad between 610 and 632, first in Mecca and then in Medina. The task of compiling these revelations was completed some time in 650. The oldest complete Quran we have today dates from the ninth century. There are many fragments which are older, the earliest being the verses engraved on the Dome of the Rock and on coins in the seventh century.

The use of the Quran as a source material for the history of early Islam has posed some problems. The first is that it is a scripture, a text vested with religious authority. Theologians generally believed that as the speech of God (*kalamallah*), it has to be understood literally, but rationalists among them gave wider interpretations to the Quran. In 833, the Abbasid caliph al-Mamun imposed the view (in a trial of faith or *mihna*) that the Quran is God's creation rather than His speech. The second problem is that the Quran very often speaks in metaphors and, unlike the Old Testament (*Tawrit*), it does not narrate events but only refers to them. Medieval Islamic scholars thus had to make sense of many verses with the help of *hadith*. Many *hadith* were written to help the reading of the Quran.



Before it took its final form, the *sharia* was adjusted to take into account the customary laws (*urf*) of the various regions as well as the laws of the state on political and social order (*siyasa sharia*). Customary laws, however, retained their strength in large parts of the countryside and continued to bypass the *sharia* in matters such as the inheritance of land by daughters. In most regimes, the ruler or his officials dealt routinely with matters of state security and sent only selected cases to the *qazi* (judge). The *qazi*, appointed by the state in each city or locality, often acted as an arbitrator in disputes, rather than as a strict enforcer of the *sharia*.

A group of religious-minded people in medieval Islam, known as Sufis, sought a deeper and more personal knowledge of God through asceticism (*rahbaniya*) and mysticism. The more society gave itself up to material pursuits and pleasures, the more the Sufis sought to renounce the world (*zuhd*) and rely on God alone (*tawakkul*). In the eighth and ninth centuries, ascetic inclinations were elevated to the higher stage of mysticism (*tasawwuf*) by the ideas of pantheism and love. Pantheism is the idea of oneness of God and His creation which implies that the human soul must be united with its Maker. Unity with God can be achieved through an intense love for God (*ishq*), which the woman-saint Rabi'a of Basra (d. 891) preached in her poems. Bayazid Bistami (d. 874), an Iranian Sufi, was the first to teach the importance of submerging the self (*fana*) in God. Sufis used musical concerts (*sama*) to induce ecstasy and stimulate emotions of love and passion.

Sufism is open to all regardless of religious affiliation, status and gender. Dhulnun Misri (d. 861), whose grave can still be seen near the Pyramids in Egypt, declared before the Abbasid caliph, al-Mutawakkil, that he 'learnt true Islam from an old woman, and true chivalry from a water carrier'. By making religion more personal and less institutional, Sufism gained popularity and posed a challenge to orthodox Islam.

An alternative vision of God and the universe was developed by Islamic philosophers and scientists under the influence of Greek philosophy and science. During the seventh century, remnants of late Greek culture could still

*Painting of whirling dervishes, Iranian manuscript, 1490. Of the four men dancing, only one is shown with his hands in the 'correct' position. Some have succumbed to vertigo and are being led away.*



be found in the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, although they were slowly dying. In the schools of Alexandria, Syria and Mesopotamia, once part of Alexander's empire, Greek philosophy, mathematics and medicine were taught along with other subjects. The Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs commissioned the translation of Greek and Syriac books into Arabic by Christian scholars. Translation became a well-organised activity under al-Mamun, who supported the Library cum Institute of Science (Bayt al-Hikma) in Baghdad where the scholars worked. The works of Aristotle, the *Elements* of Euclid and Ptolemy's *Almagest* were brought to the attention of Arabic-reading scholars. Indian works on astronomy, mathematics and medicine were also translated into Arabic during the same period. These works reached Europe and kindled interest in philosophy and science.

### ACTIVITY 3

Comment on this passage. Would it be relevant to a student today?

### The Ideal Student

Abd al-Latif, a twelfth-century legal and medical scholar of Baghdad, talks to his ideal student:

'I commend you not to learn your sciences from books unaided, even though you may trust your ability to understand. Resort to teachers for each science you seek to acquire; and should your teacher be limited in his knowledge take all that he can offer, until you find another more accomplished than he. You must venerate and respect him. When you read a book, make every effort to learn it by heart and master its meaning. Imagine the book to have disappeared and that you can dispense with it, unaffected by its loss. One should read histories, study biographies and the experiences of nations. By doing this, it will be as though, in his short life space, he lived contemporaneously with peoples of the past, was on intimate terms with them, and knew the good and bad among them. You should model your conduct on that of the early Muslims. Therefore, read the biography of the Prophet and follow in his footsteps. You should frequently distrust your nature, rather than have a good opinion of it, submitting your thoughts to men of learning and their works, proceeding with caution and avoiding haste. He who has not endured the stress of study will not taste the joy of knowledge. When you have finished your study and reflection, occupy your tongue with the mention of God's name, and sing His praises. Do not complain if the world turns its back on you. Know that learning leaves a trail and a scent proclaiming its possessor; a ray of light and brightness shining on him, pointing him out.'

– Ahmad ibn al Qasim ibn Abi Usaybia, *Uyun al Anba*.

The study of new subjects promoted critical inquiry and had a profound influence on Islamic intellectual life. Scholars with a theological bent of mind, such as the group known as Mutazila, used Greek logic and methods of reasoning (*kalam*) to defend Islamic beliefs. Philosophers (*falasifa*) posed wider questions and provided fresh answers. Ibn Sina (980-1037), a doctor by profession and a philosopher, did not believe in the resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgement. This was met with strong opposition from theologians. His medical writings were widely read. The most influential was *al-Qanun fil Tibb (Canon of Medicine)*, a million-word manuscript that lists 760 drugs sold by the pharmacists of his day and includes notes on his own experiments conducted in hospitals (*bimaristan*). The *Canon* points out the importance of dietetics (healing through dietary regulation), the influence of the climate and environment on health and the contagious nature of some diseases. The *Canon* was used as a textbook in Europe, where the author was known as Avicenna (see Theme 7). Just before his death, the scientist and poet Umar Khayyam was said to be reading the *Canon*. His gold toothpick was found between two pages of the chapter on metaphysics.

In medieval Islamic societies, fine language and a creative imagination were among the most appreciated qualities in a person. These qualities raised a person's communication to the level of *adab*, a term which implied literary and cultural refinement. *Adab* forms of expressions included poetry (*nazm* or orderly arrangement) and prose (*nathr* or scattered words) which were meant to be memorised and used when the occasion arose. The most popular poetic composition of pre-Islamic origin was the ode (*qasida*), developed by poets of the Abbasid period to glorify the achievements of their patrons. Poets of Persian origin revitalised and reinvented Arabic poetry and challenged the cultural hegemony of the Arabs. Abu Nuwas (d. 815), who was of Persian origin, broke new ground by composing classical poetry on new themes such as wine and male love with the intention of celebrating pleasures forbidden by Islam. After Abu Nuwas, the poets addressed the object of their passion in the masculine, even if the latter was a woman. Following the same tradition, the Sufis glorified the intoxication caused by the wine of mystical love.

By the time the Arabs conquered Iran, Pahlavi, the language of the sacred books of ancient Iran, was in decay. A version of Pahlavi, known as New Persian, with a huge Arabic vocabulary, soon developed. The formation of sultanates in Khurasan and Transoxiana took New Persian to great cultural heights. The Samanid court poet Rudaki (d. 940) was considered the father of New Persian poetry, which included new forms such as the short lyrical poem (*ghazal*) and the quatrain (*rubai*, plural *rubaiyyat*). The *rubai* is a four-line stanza in which the first two lines set the stage, the third is finely poised, and the fourth delivers the point. In contrast to its form, the subject matter of the *rubai* is unrestricted. It can be used to express the beauty of a beloved, praise



a patron, or express the thoughts of the philosopher. The *rubai* reached its zenith in the hands of Umar Khayyam (1048-1131), also an astronomer and mathematician, who lived at various times in Bukhara, Samarqand and Isfahan.



Dimna is talking to the lion (asad) in this miniature painting of a thirteenth-century Arabic manuscript.

At the beginning of the eleventh century, Ghazni became the centre of Persian literary life. Poets were naturally attracted by the brilliance of the imperial court. Rulers, too, realised the importance of patronising arts and learning for enhancing their prestige. Mahmud of Ghazni gathered around him a group of poets who composed anthologies (*diwans*) and epic poetry (*mathnavi*). The most outstanding was Firdausi (d. 1020), who took 30 years to complete the *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*), an epic of 50,000 couplets which has become a masterpiece of Islamic literature. The *Shahnama* is a collection of traditions and legends (the most popular being that of Rustam), which poetically depicts Iran from Creation up until the Arab conquest. It was in keeping with the Ghaznavid tradition that Persian later became the language of administration and culture in India.

The catalogue (*Kitab al-Fihrist*) of a Baghdad bookseller, Ibn Nadim (d. 895), describes a large number of works written in prose for the moral education and amusement of readers. The oldest of these is a collection of animal fables called *Kalila wa Dimna* (the names of the two jackals who were the leading characters) which is the Arabic translation of a Pahlavi version of the *Panchtantra*. The most widespread and lasting literary works are the stories of hero-adventurers such as Alexander (al-Iskandar) and Sindbad, or those of unhappy lovers such as Qays (known as Majnun or the Madman). These have developed over the centuries into oral and written traditions. The *Thousand and One Nights* is another collection of stories told by a single narrator, Shahrzad, to her husband night after night. The collection was originally in Indo-Persian and was translated into Arabic in Baghdad in the eighth century. More stories were later added in Cairo during the Mamluk period. These stories depict human beings of different types – the generous, the stupid, the gullible, the crafty – and were told to educate and entertain. In his *Kitab al-Bukhala* (*Book of Misers*), Jahiz of Basra (d. 868) collected amusing anecdotes about misers and also analysed greed.

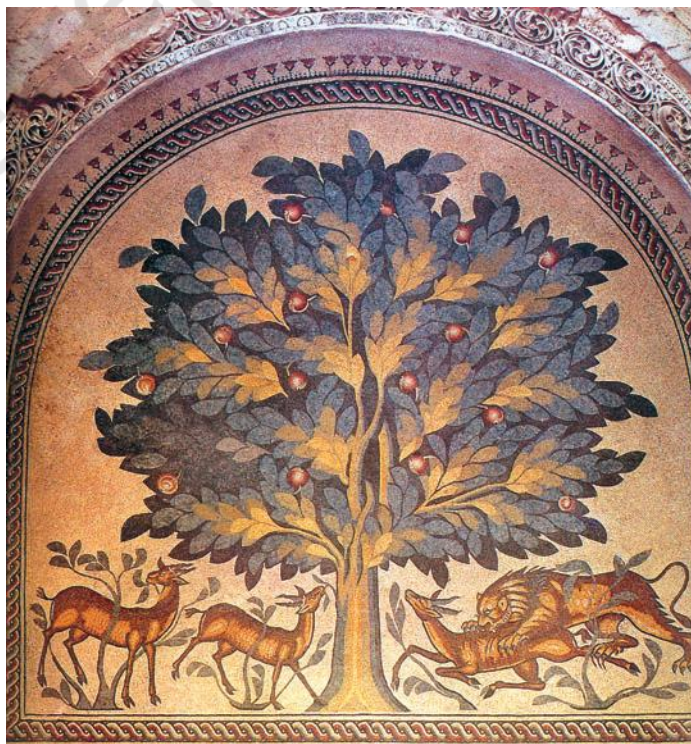
From the ninth century onwards, the scope of *adab* was expanded to include biographies, manuals of ethics (*akhlaq*), Mirrors for Princes (books on statecraft) and, above all, history (*tarikhi*) and geography.

The tradition of history writing was well established in literate Muslim societies. History books were read by scholars and students as well as by the broader literate public. For rulers and officials, history provided a good record of the glories and achievements of a dynasty as well as examples of the techniques of administration. In the two major historical works, *Ansab al-Ashraf* (*Genealogies of the Nobles*) of Baladhuri (d. 892) and *Tarikh al-Rusul wal Muluk* (*History of Prophets and Kings*) of Tabari, the whole of human history was treated with the Islamic period as the focal point. The tradition of local history writing developed with the break-up of the caliphate. Books were written in Persian about dynasties, cities or regions to explore the unity and variety of the world of Islam.

Geography and travel (*rihla*) constituted a special branch of *adab*. These combined knowledge from Greek, Iranian and Indian books with the observations of merchants and travellers. In mathematical geography, the inhabited world was divided into seven climes (*singular iqlim*) parallel with the Equator, corresponding to our three continents. The exact position of each city was determined astronomically. Muqaddasi's (d. 1000) descriptive geography, *Ahsan al-Ta'asim* (*The Best Divisions*) is a comparative study of the countries and peoples of the world and a treasure trove of exotic curiosities. Geography and general history were combined in *Muruj al-Dhahab* (*Golden Meadows*) of Masudi (written in 943) to illustrate the wide variety of worldly cultures. Alberuni's famous *Tahqiq ma lil-Hind* (*History of India*) was the greatest attempt by an eleventh-century Muslim writer to look beyond the world of Islam and observe what was of value in another cultural tradition.

By the tenth century, an Islamic world had emerged which was easily recognisable by travellers. Religious buildings were the greatest external symbols of this world. Mosques, shrines and tombs from Spain to Central Asia showed the same basic design – arches, domes, minarets and open courtyards – and expressed the spiritual and practical needs of Muslims. In the first Islamic century, the mosque acquired a distinct architectural form (roof supported by pillars) which transcended regional variations. The mosque had an open courtyard (*sahn*) where a fountain or pond was placed, leading to a vaulted hall which could accommodate long lines of worshippers and the prayer leader (*imam*). Two special features were located

Mosaic floor in the bath-house of the palace at Khirbat al-Majjar, Palestine, eighth century. Imagine the caliph enthroned on the tree; the scene below depicts peace and war.





The Islamic decorative genius found full expression in the art of metal objects that are among the best-preserved specimens. This mosque lamp from fourteenth-century Syria has the Light verse inscribed on it.

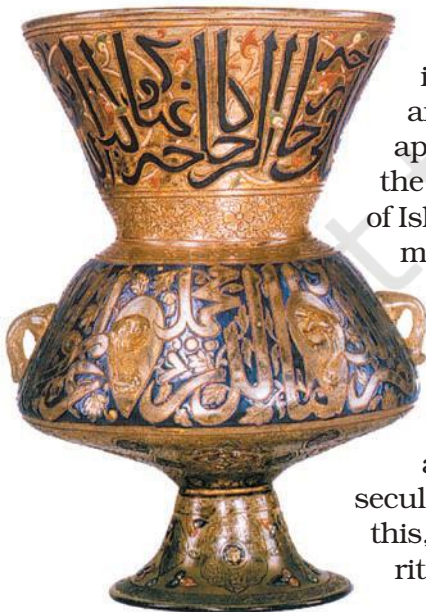
'God is the Light (nur) of the heavens and the earth

His light is like a niche (mishkat) with a lamp (misbah)

The lamp is in a glass which looks as if it were a glittering star Kindled from a blessed olive (zaitun) tree that is neither eastern nor western

Whose oil would always shine even if no fire (nar) touched it'

(Quran, chapter 24, verse 35).



inside the hall: a niche (*mihrab*) in the wall indicating the direction of Mecca (*qibla*), and a pulpit (*minbar*, pronounced *mimbar*) from where sermons were delivered during noon prayers on Friday. Attached to the building was the minaret, a tower used to call the faithful to prayer at the appointed times and to symbolise the presence of the new faith. Time was marked in cities and villages by the five daily prayers and weekly sermons.

The same pattern of construction – of buildings built around a central courtyard (*iwan*) – appeared not only in mosques and mausoleums but also in caravanserais, hospitals and palaces. The Umayyads built 'desert palaces' in oases, such as Khirbat al-Mafjar in Palestine and Qusayr Amra in Jordan, which served as luxurious residences and retreats for hunting and pleasure. The palaces, modelled on Roman and Sasanian architecture, were lavishly decorated with sculptures, mosaics and paintings of people. The Abbasids built a new imperial city in Samarra amidst gardens and running waters which is mentioned in the stories and legends revolving round Harun al-Rashid. The great palaces of the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad or the Fatimids in Cairo have disappeared, leaving only traces in literary texts.

The rejection of representing living beings in the religious art of Islam promoted two art forms: calligraphy (*khattati* or the art of beautiful writing) and arabesque (geometric and vegetal designs). Small and big inscriptions, usually of religious quotations, were used to decorate architecture. Calligraphic art has been best preserved in manuscripts of the Quran dating from the eighth and ninth centuries. Literary works, such as the *Kitab al-Aghani* (*Book of Songs*), *Kalila wa Dimna*, and *Maqamat* of Hariri, were illustrated with miniature paintings. In addition, a wide variety of illumination techniques were introduced to enhance the beauty of a book. Plant and floral designs, based on the idea of the garden, were used in buildings and book illustrations.

The history of the central Islamic lands brings together three important aspects of human civilisation: religion, community and politics. We can see them as three circles which merge and appear as one in the seventh century. In the next five centuries the circles separate. Towards the end of our period, the influence of Islam over state and government was minimal, and politics involved many things which had no sanction in religion (kingship, civil wars, etc.). The circles of religion and community overlapped. The Muslim community was united in its observance of the *sharia* in rituals and personal matters. It was no more governing itself (politics was a separate circle) but it was defining its religious identity. The only way the circles of religion and community could have separated was through the progressive secularisation of Muslim society. Philosophers and Sufis advocated this, suggesting that civil society should be made autonomous, and rituals be replaced by private spirituality.



## ACTIVITY 4

Which of the pictures in the chapter do you like best and why?

595	Muhammad marries Khadija, a wealthy Meccan trader who later supports Islam
610-12	Muhammad has first revelation; first public preaching of Islam (612)
621	First agreement at Aqaba with Medinan converts
622	Migration from Mecca to Medina. Arab tribes of Medina ( <i>ansar</i> ) shelter Meccan migrants ( <i>muhajir</i> )
632-61	Early caliphate; conquests of Syria, Iraq, Iran and Egypt; civil wars
661-750	Umayyad rule; Damascus becomes the capital
750-945	Abbasid rule; Baghdad becomes the capital
945	Buyids capture Baghdad; literary and cultural efflorescence
1063-92	Rule of Nizamul mulk, the powerful Saljuq <i>wazir</i> who established a string of <i>madrasas</i> called Nizamiyya; killed by Hashishayn (Assassins)
1095-1291	Crusades; contacts between Muslims and Christians
1111	Death of Ghazali, influential Iranian scholar who opposed rationalism
1258	Mongols capture Baghdad

## Exercises

## ANSWER IN BRIEF

1. What were the features of the lives of the Bedouins in the early seventh century?
2. What is meant by the term 'Abbasid revolution'?
3. Give examples of the cosmopolitan character of the states set up by Arabs, Iranians and Turks.
4. What were the effects of the Crusades on Europe and Asia?

## ANSWER IN A SHORT ESSAY

5. How were Islamic architectural forms different from those of the Roman Empire?
6. Describe a journey from Samarqand to Damascus, referring to the cities on the route.