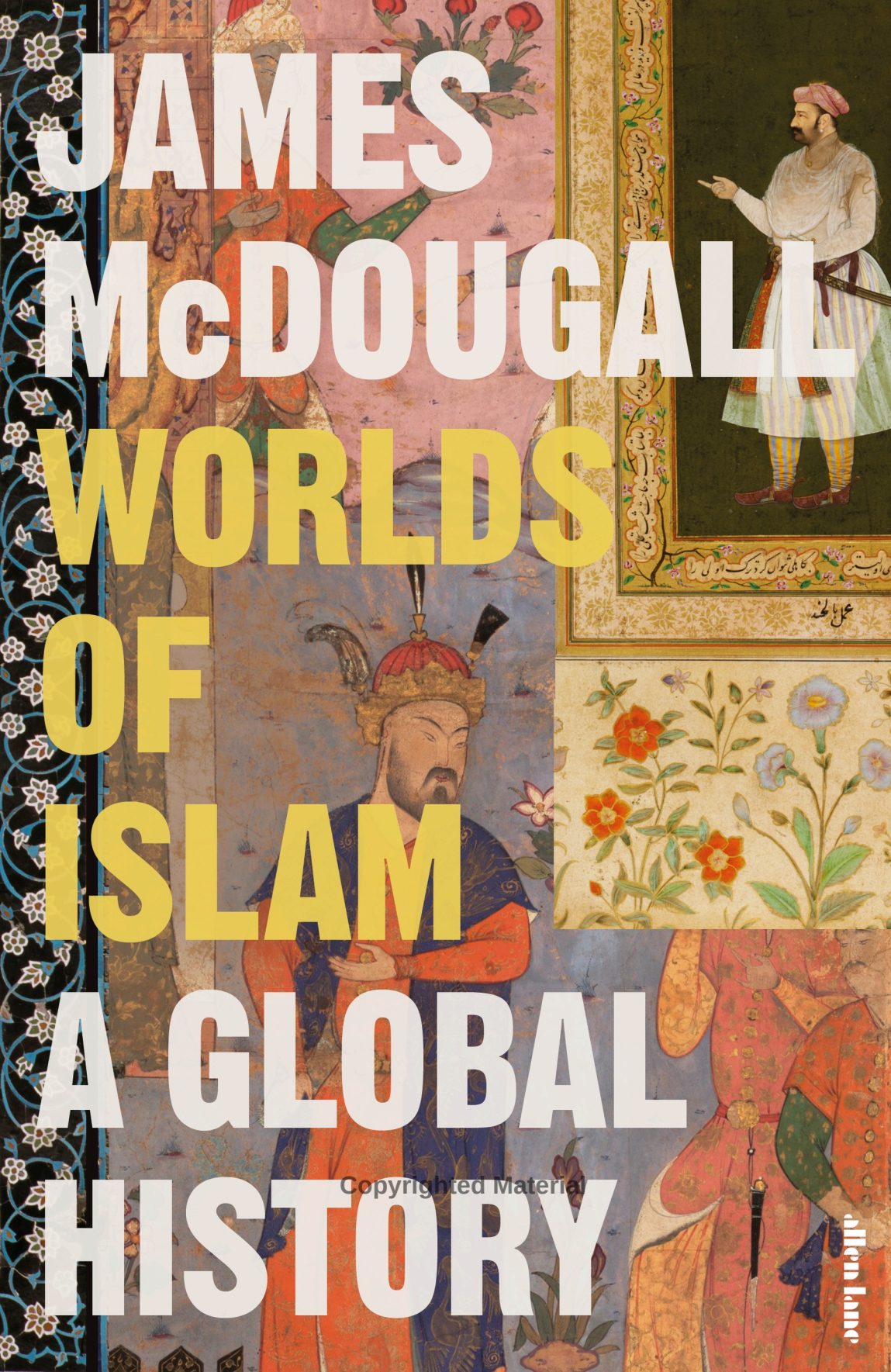




JAMES McDOUGALL WORLDS OF ISLAM A GLOBAL HISTORY

Copyrighted Material

allen lane

Worlds of Islam

Worlds of Islam

A Global History

JAMES McDOUGALL



ALLEN LANE

an imprint of
Copyrighted Material
PENGUIN BOOKS

ALLEN LANE

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Allen Lane is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the United States of America by Basic Books 2026
First published in Great Britain by Allen Lane 2026

001

Copyright © James McDougall, 2026

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom
of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing
an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property
laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any
means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling
Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-52848-8

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from
Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

For my students at Princeton, SOAS,
and Oxford, who've taught me a lot

CONTENTS

Note on Arabic Names IX

List of Color Illustrations XI

Maps XV

Introduction 1

Part 1 Islam in the World, 600-1200 CE

- 1 A World among Others, a World in Itself 15
- 2 Belonging and Believing 37
- 3 The Book, the Law, and the Spirit 63
- 4 One God, Many Peoples 97

Part 2 Islam's New Worlds, 1200-1800 CE

- 5 Heirs of the World-Conquerors 135
- 6 Shadows of God 161
- 7 Shores of the Desert, Islands in the Sea 197
- 8 Voices of Renewal 233

Part 3 Disordered Worlds, 1800-1950 CE

- 9 The Counsel of the Saints 265
- 10 The Empire of Misrule 299
- 11 The Science of the Age 329
- 12 The Community of Faith 359

CONTENTS

Part 4 Muslims' Modern Worlds, 1950-2020 CE

13 The Wretched of the Earth 395

14 The Homes of Islam 431

15 The War Process 461

16 The Myth of Civilisations 493

Acknowledgments 523

Notes 525

Index 559

Copyrighted Material

NOTE ON ARABIC NAMES

Most Muslims are not Arabs, or Arabic speakers, and many Arabs are not (and never have been) Muslims. But because of the particular status of Arabic as the language of Islamic revelation, and the centrality of Arabic-speaking peoples to Islam's early history, reading the history of Islam means coming across many Arabic names. This is not confined to the early and classical periods in which Islamic history is known to us mostly from sources originally written in Arabic, or to those parts of Muslim history that concern the modern Arab Middle East; it is common for converts to Islam today to adopt an Arabic name as a sign of their new Muslim identity.

Rather than consisting of just a forename and a surname, traditional Arabic personal names often have several elements. While a man's personal name could be one word, such as Muhammad, Ali, Hasan or Husayn, it too could often be made up of several separate words, including the Arabic word for God, Allah, or one of the names of God (such as al-Karim, the kind, al-Rahman, the compassionate, al-Qadir, the powerful) or the word al-Din (religion), and a word relating to this, such as Abd (slave), or (less modestly) Sayf (sword), Jalal (glory) or Zayn (beauty, adornment): Abd al-Karim, Abd-Allah, Sayf al-Din, Jalal al-Din. So "Abd al-Qadir," for example, is one name: "Abdul" and "Qadir" are not separate names, although in Britain (Abdul) or France (Kader) today they are often used as standalone forenames. This name would often be followed by a patronymic, Ibn (sometimes written Ben or Bin) or Bint, meaning *son* or *daughter of*, and finally another name indicating a profession, an ancient clan affiliation, a

place name suggesting family origin, or a place where someone had been educated or lived part of their life. Many of these names, like Haddad (blacksmith) and Nahhas (coppersmith), Baghdadi (from Baghdad) and Masri (Egyptian), Huwaytat and Harb (ancient Arabian tribal names), survive today as family names.

Women's personal names did not completely follow this model of men's names: an Abd al-Qadir would always be male, though some, especially elite, women, particularly in the Persianate and Indian Ocean worlds, might have names made of several elements on the Arabic model, like Khair un-Nisa (best among women) or Safiyyat ud-Din (purity of the faith). Personal names were more often drawn instead from notable women of Islamic history or poetry, like Asma, Fatima, Zayneb, Aisha, or Layla, or words with conventional connotations of femininity: Farida (pearl), Anissa (kind), Jamila (beautiful). Their other names, though, worked the same way as men's names, for example, Fatima Bint Muhammad al-Fihri (Fatima, daughter of Muhammad, of the Fihri family—an ancient clan from Mecca). On becoming parents, both men and women might acquire familiar names combining the word Abu (father) or Umm (mother) with the name of a first-born child, as in Abu Ammar (Ammar's father) or Umm Kulthum (Kulthum's mother). Abu might also be combined with a characteristic to make a nickname, as in Abu Nuzzara (the man with spectacles).

COLOR ILLUSTRATIONS

1. The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem. © RooM the Agency/Alamy Stock Photo.
2. The Dome of the Rock, interior, Jerusalem. © Erich Lessing/ Bridgeman Images.
3. The caliph Abd al-Malik depicted on a gold dinar struck in Damascus, 697 CE. © Ashmolean Museum/Bridgeman Images.
4. Folio from a Qur'an Manuscript [29.160.23]. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, ca. 1180. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Collection, New York.
5. The investiture of Ali Ibn Abi Talib at Ghadir Khumm, according to Shi'i tradition. (Il-Khanid manuscript illustration, fourteenth cent., Special Collections, Edinburgh University Library, Arab. MS 161).
6. *The Prophet Muhammad Ascends to the Heavens* (detail). 17th century. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. Yale University Open Community Collections: Visual Resources of the Middle East.
7. Photograph showing a view of Mecca with al-Masjid al-Haram, the holiest site in Islam, and the Ka'ba in the foreground. 1899. Abd al-Ghaffar, al-Sayyid, Physician of Mecca. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.
8. The al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, built ca. 10th/11th century. © hemro/Shutterstock.
9. Interior of the great mosque (*mezquita*), Cordoba. Alvaraujo, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Copyrighted Material

10. Monumental gate of the 15th century madrasa of Ulugh Bey, Samarqand. Arian Zwegers, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.
11. The Suleymaniyye Mosque, Istanbul. Hunanuk, licensed under Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.
12. Venetian portrait of Sultan Sulayman I “the Magnificent” as a young man, ca. 1520. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
13. Hurrem Sultan, known as “Roxelana,” consort and wife of Sulayman I, 16th century. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
14. Alexander the Great conversing with the philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Detail from illustration from a Persian book of poetry, 18th century. Acquired by Henry Walters, Walters Art Museum, Maryland, 1931, by bequest.
15. *The Angel Surush Rescues Khusrau Parviz from a Cul-de-sac*, detail from folio 708v from the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp. Painting attributed to Muzaffar ‘Ali, 1530–35. Gift of Arthur A. Houghton Jr., 1970. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
16. A gold coin depicting the Mughal Emperor Jahangir, seated on a throne and holding a goblet, 1614. © Ashmolean Museum/Bridgeman Images.
17. Illuminated letter from the sultan of Aceh, Iskandar Muda, to King James I of England, 1615. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. MS Laud Or. Rolls B1.
18. “Timbuktu, from the terrace of the traveller’s house.” Frontispiece to *Travels and discoveries in North and Central Africa: being a journal of an expedition undertaken under the auspices of H.B.M.’s Government, in the years 1849–1855* (Volume 4), by Heinrich Barth. Smithsonian Institution Libraries. The Russell E. Train Africana Collection.
19. *Sheikh Amadou Bamba Praying on the Waters*. Reverse-glass painting by Mor Gueye, 1998. 99x13x13. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photography by Don Cole.

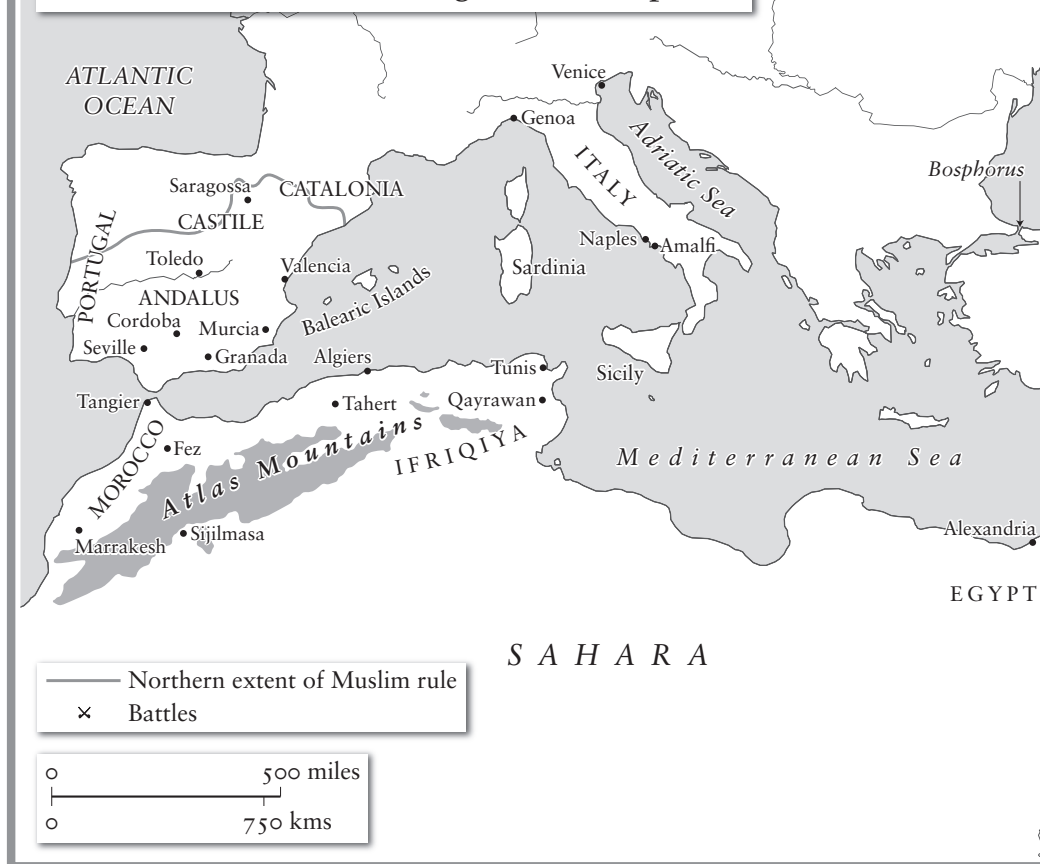
20. Imam Shamil, leader of resistance to Russia in Chechnya and the Caucasus, 1850s. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
21. Prince Dipanagara, a Javanese prince who opposed Dutch colonial rule. 1835 lithograph, after an original pencil drawing by A.J. Bik, 1830. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
22. Emir Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri photographed in Cairo between 1860 and 1883. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA.
23. Sultan Abdülhamid II, photographed ca. 1890. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA.
24. Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Date unknown. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
25. Muhammad Abduh, ca. 1906. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
26. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 1907. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
27. Ali Abd al-Raziq. Date unknown. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
28. Egyptian women at a nationalist demonstration, May 1919. *The Madison Journal*, June 28, 1919, Image 1. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
29. Prince Faisal Ibn Husayn and his advisors at the Versailles Conference, 1919. From the Marist Lowell Thomas Papers Collection with ID LTP.1580.06.09. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
30. Algerian political leader Ferhat Abbas, ca. 1950. Photo by © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis via Getty Images.
31. Shakib Arslan. Date unknown. Public Domain.
32. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder and first governor-general of Pakistan, ca. 1945. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
33. Muhammad Rashid Rida, ca. 1934. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
34. Hassan al-Banna, date unknown. Alamy Stock Photo.
35. Abu'l-A'la Maududi, leader of the Jamaat-i Islami Party, at London Airport, 1968. © UKIM.

36. President of the Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal, 1928. Alamy Stock Photo.
37. The marriage of Mohammed Reza Shah, future Shah of Iran, to Princess Fawzia, Cairo, 1939. © Everett Collection Historical/Alamy Stock Photo.
38. A sailor checks the fit of a life belt on a Senegalese rifleman during an exercise aboard the liner transporting troops to France. Photograph by Jean Manzon, 1940. © Jean Manzon/ECPAD/Défense.
39. President Franklin D. Roosevelt meets with Ibn Saud, King of Saudi Arabia, on board USS *Quincy*, 1945. Photograph from the Army Signal Corps Collection in the U.S. National Archives.
40. Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, Tehran, 1951. Photo by © ullstein bild via Getty Images.
41. Soldiers of the Algerian National Liberation Army, ca. 1961. © Mohamed Kouaci via Kharbine-Tapabor agency/Shutterstock.
42. Malcolm X at Temple 7, a halal restaurant in Harlem, New York, 1963. © Richard Saunders/Getty Images.
43. Palestinian refugees flee across the Allenby Bridge to Jordan, 1967. © 1967 UNRWA Archive, photographer unknown.
44. Refugees arriving from the Jessore region, crossing over from what was then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. 1971. © Raghu Rai/Magnum Photos.
45. Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran, 1979. © Associated Press/Alamy Stock Photo.
46. Afghanistan, 1996. © David Turnley/Corbis, Getty Images.
47. Raqqa, Syria, October 2017. © Bulent Kilic/AFP/Getty Images.
48. Muslim women demonstrate against the French proposal to bar them from wearing headscarves in state schools, 2004, Paris. © Pascal Le Segretain/Getty Images.
49. Mecca, the Great Mosque and the Abraj al-Bait clock tower, 2022. © SAMAREEN/Shutterstock.
50. An Iraqi child in Mosul at the beginning of Ramadan, 2025. © Ismael Adnan Yacoob/Anadolu/Getty Images.

Copyrighted Material

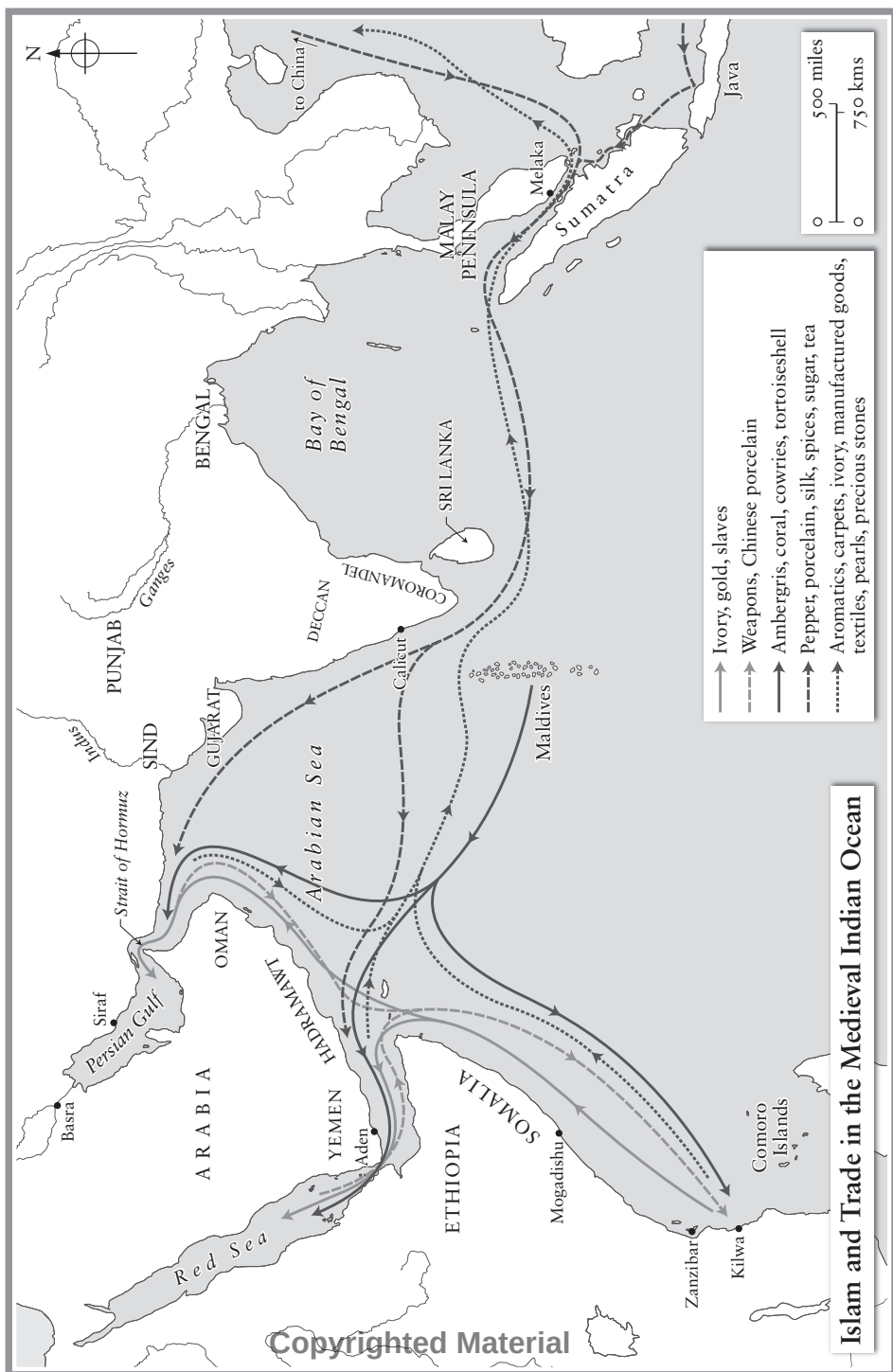


The Lands of Islam in the Age of the Caliphates

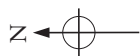




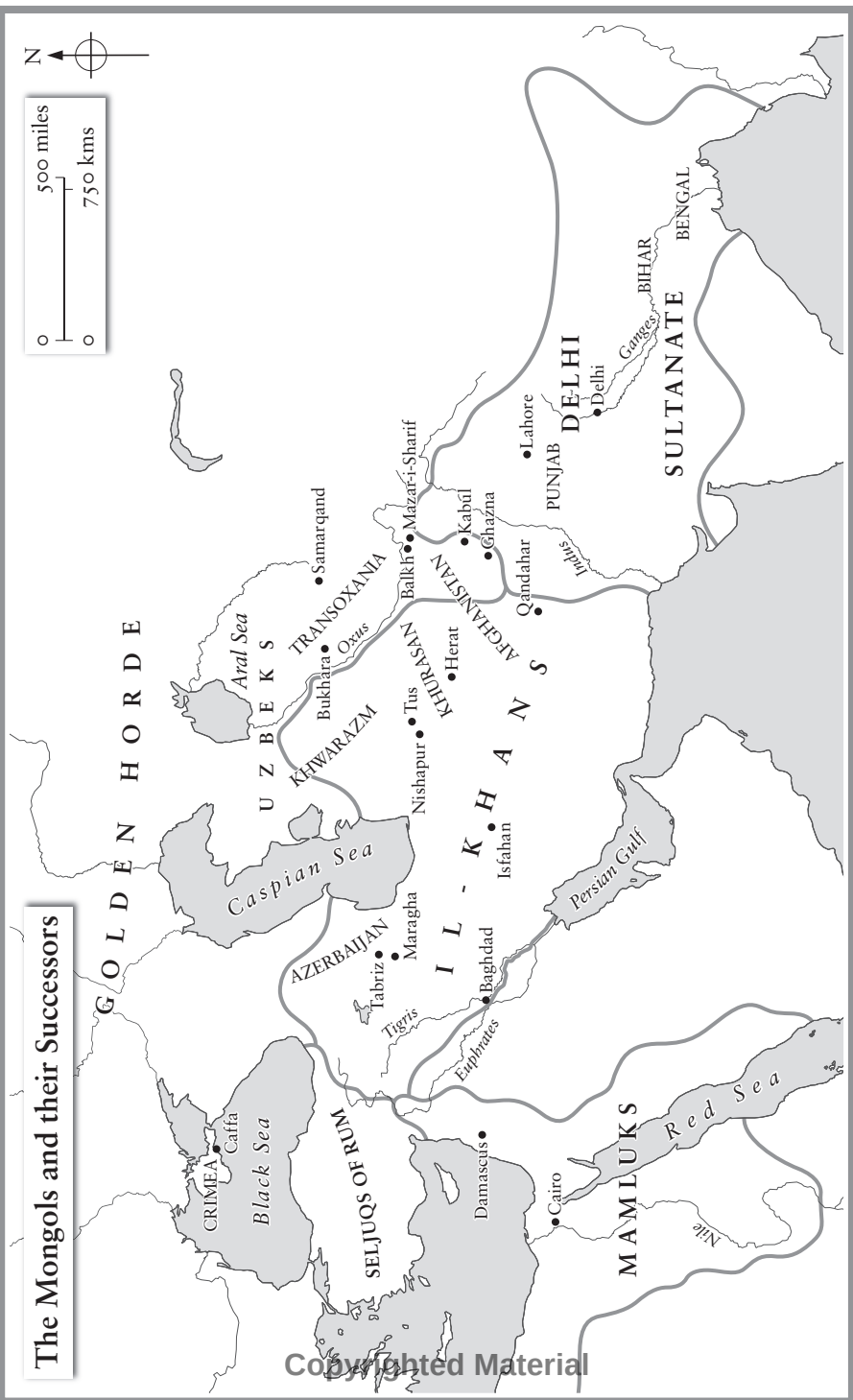
Copyrighted Material

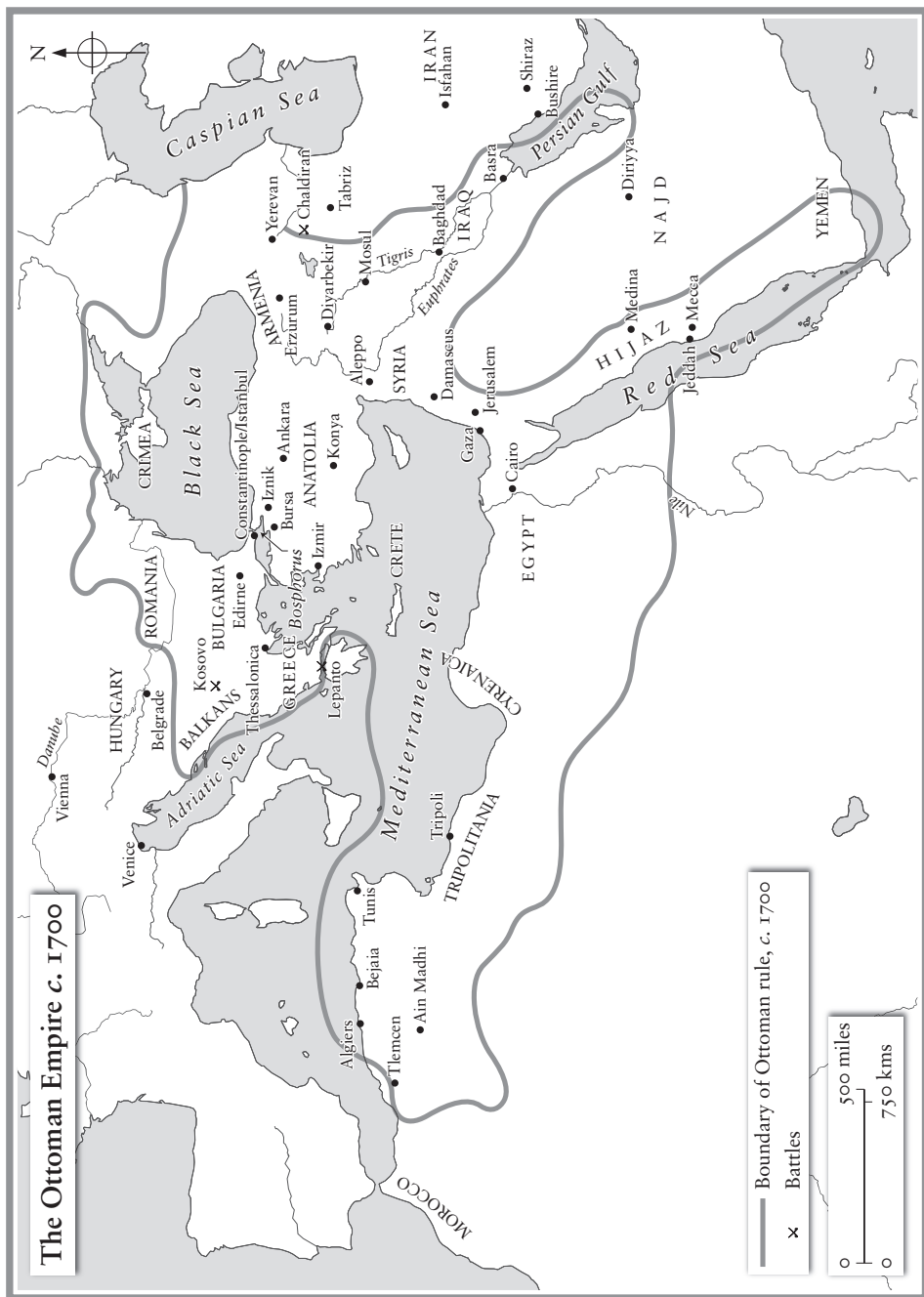


The Mongols and their Successors

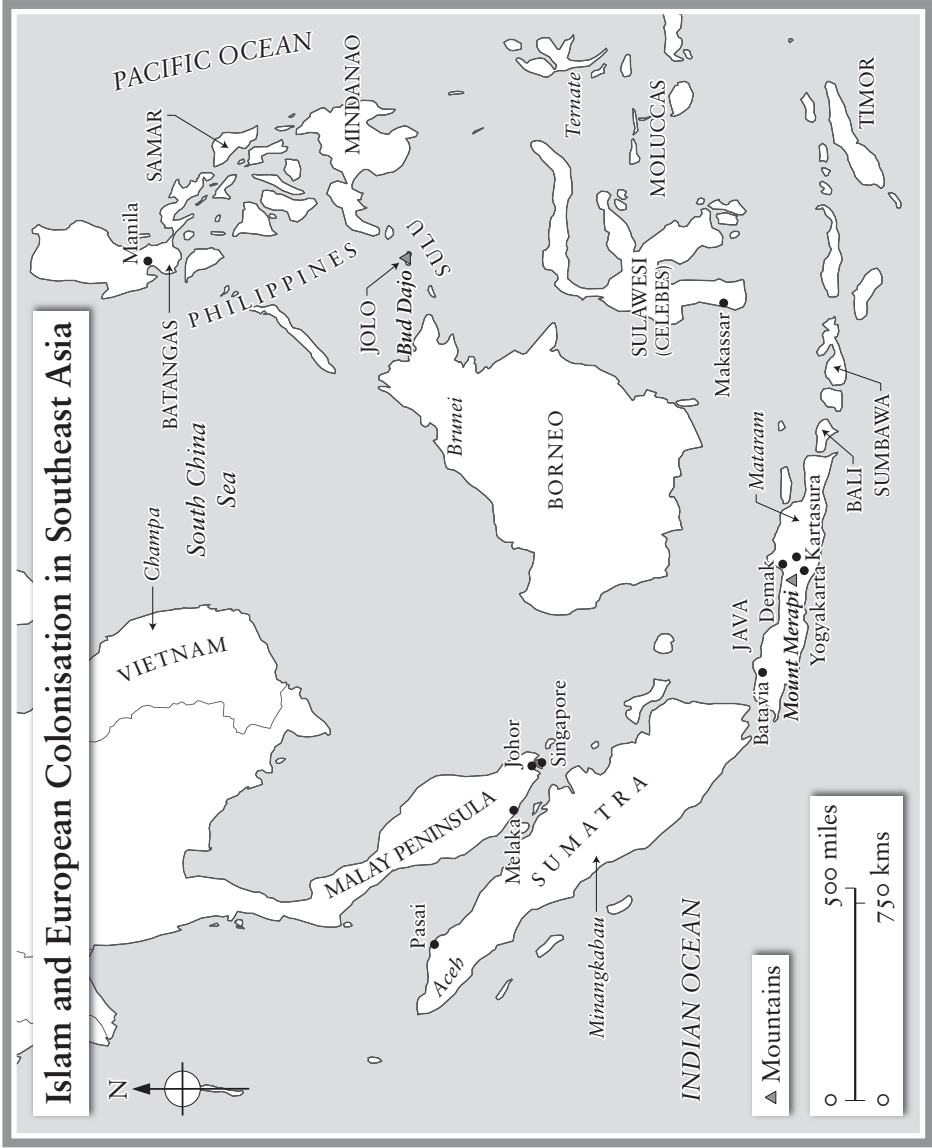


500 miles
750 kms

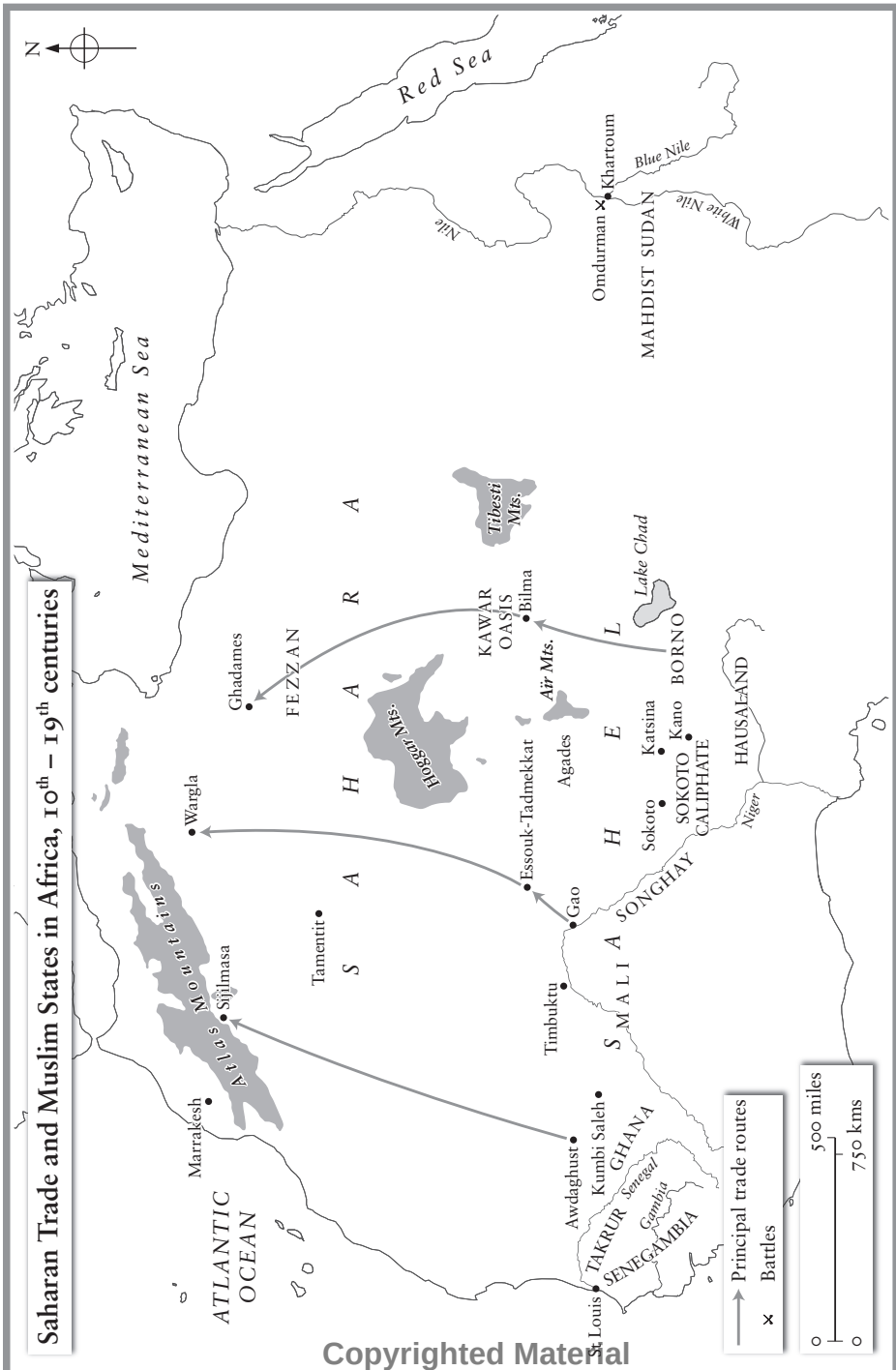








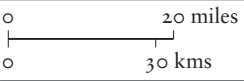
Saharan Trade and Muslim States in Africa, 10th – 19th centuries





Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, c. 2003

- Israeli settlements*
- Areas under Israeli jurisdiction
- Armistice line (1949/1950 ceasefire line)
- West Bank separation wall



Copyrighted Material

* Gaza Strip settlements dismantled 2005

European Colonial Rule in Asia and Africa, c. 1920





Copyrighted Material

**Nation States of Northern Africa, Middle East,
Central and South Asia, 2020**





Copyrighted Material

INTRODUCTION

When Uqba Ibn Nafi reached the Atlantic Ocean, it's said that he galloped straight into the sea. Uqba had been born only a few years before the death of the Prophet Muhammad, fifty years earlier. Now, in 681 CE, he led an Arab Muslim army that had set out from southern Tunisia and skirmished with Byzantine forces as far as Tangier. Facing the ocean and its distant horizon, we're told, he rode his horse into the surf, raised his hands to the sky, and called out that he had carried Islam as far as there was land: if the sea had not prevented him, he would have ridden on to the ends of the earth, defending God's religion and fighting against unbelief.

This is just one of many stories built up around Uqba's adventures, which medieval Muslim writers compared to the exploits of Alexander the Great, but it carries particular significance. For the historian Ibn al-Idhari, who recounted the story in Morocco six hundred years later, it was important to point out both the universality of Islam, its validity as a message from the one God to all the world, and the particular importance of his own country, *al-maghrib al-aqsa*—the farthest west—in the world that Islam had made. This, the land where the sun set, was as far as it was imaginable to go. The story of Sidi ("my lord") Uqba neatly illustrated both Islam's location and its limitlessness.

At the same time, the story also shows us that while Islam had its own history, to be told in its own terms and from the perspective of

its believers, it was part of other histories too. Sidi Uqba rode into the Atlantic, not because it was as close as he could get to the ends of the earth, but because, having advanced as far as Tangier, he had decided against risking the crossing north into the Iberian Peninsula, where he would have overextended his supply lines and perhaps faced stronger opposition. In comparing him to Alexander the Great, Muslim writers were drawing on their own knowledge of earlier histories of legendary conquest and universal empire. The Greek and late Roman worlds into which Uqba rode embodied an ancient cultural inheritance that his chroniclers could also claim as their own. There are legendary traditions about his enemies too, especially the prophetess-queen Kahina and her son, Qusayla, leaders of the Amazigh (Berber-speaking) peoples whom Uqba encountered in North Africa. Qusayla and Kahina both anchor the early history of Islam in a broader, multireligious context. Qusayla is said to have converted from Christianity to Islam before turning against Uqba. His mother, Kahina (“the Seer”), is variously identified as Christian or Jewish: North African traditions portray her as a hero-queen who stubbornly resisted the Arab invaders but also foresaw their inevitable victory. Islam made its own world; but it was part of other worlds too. It was distinct, but it was connected.¹

In the years after it emerged from the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century CE, Islam became a global historical force in two ways. First, it had a geographically world-spanning reach. It arose in an ancient and interconnected world at the junction of Asia, Africa, and Europe, between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. It would have a profound, transformative impact on that world, shaping it in new ways for over a thousand years to come. It would reach out from that world, across the lands and seas beyond, to all the corners of the earth. Second, culturally, it held a message believed by its adherents to be of universal significance. The preaching and leadership of the Prophet Muhammad, his followers believed, completed the revelation of the one true God (*Allah* is simply the Arabic word for God, used by Arabic-speaking Christians as well as Muslims). Their religion was the “religion of Abraham” that God had previously revealed in part to

Jews and Christians: they, Muslims thought, had misunderstood or falsified it. The community of Muhammad's followers, the Muslims—in Arabic, *muslimun*, “those who have submitted”—were those who truly submitted to the one God. They believed that Muhammad was the last of the prophets, completing a line of messengers from the Almighty that had begun with Adam and extended through Abraham and Moses to Jesus, “the Son of Mary.” Like these earlier prophets, Muslims believed, Muhammad had been sent by God to warn people of His coming judgment and bring them to His mercy. They believed that the way of life preached by Muhammad was simply the one true religion: right guidance in life and hope after death for all humanity.

Sidi Uqba's story illustrates these two sides of Islam's global history. It presents Islam, like Christianity, as a missionary religion: as a revelation from beyond time, true for all time, whose believers' vocation is to bring its message to all the world. But it also shows Islam as existing in time and space: in particular places and in human history, in the Arabs' incursions into the late Roman, or Byzantine, Empire, at a meeting point of cultures and geographies, between the people who already inhabited the late ancient Mediterranean world and the incomers making their place in it, and writing themselves into its history. In 683, two years after he reached the Atlantic, Sidi Uqba was killed at the southern edge of the Aurès Mountains, in what is now eastern Algeria. He and his companions were buried nearby, and three years later a mosque was built on the site of his tomb. The mosque is one of the oldest in the world, its original structure a simple, elegant building with a beautiful, tapering white minaret and heavy cedar-wood doors, its columns made of palm trunks encased in mortar. Sidi Uqba became part of the landscape. The small town that grew around the mosque is still known by his name.



For most of Islam's history, most Muslims have lived in places like Sidi Uqba, where life and the landscape were shaped by the coming and the consolidation of Islam. They lived under rulers who claimed

to be Muslims, in states that could be called Islamic, and in societies where practices and norms understood to be Muslim were central to social life. There was a basic minimum of these on which all Muslims agreed. Five essential practices became known as the “pillars of the faith,” or of proper worship: the profession of belief, or bearing witness (*shahada*), that “there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God”; the duty, for whoever had the means to accomplish it, of making the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca and engaging there in ritual devotions on the model established by the Prophet; performing the five daily prayers; fasting during daylight hours in the holy month (as reckoned by the lunar calendar) of Ramadan; and giving alms (*zakat*, levied in the early Muslim state as a tax on income above a certain level) to the community for the support of the poor. In principle, all Muslims would accept that anyone observing these duties, and believing in the oneness of God, the Prophethood of Muhammad, and the judgment to come on the Last Day, was a fellow believer.

Beyond these essential practices of worship lay a more detailed body of ethical and legal norms. These included some basic duties that were owed both to God and to people (fair treatment of wives, widows and orphans; dietary rules, similar to those in Jewish law, like avoiding pork or meat with blood still in it; the practice of circumcision for males) and more complex rules about how to manage social life (inheritance, marriage and divorce, commercial transactions, crime and punishment, rules of warfare, and so on). Together, all of these were held to constitute the *shari‘a*, the “way” laid down by God for humanity to follow.

Sharia provided Muslim states with a rule of law, and Muslim rulers with the ability to claim they ruled legitimately. Wherever these Muslim practices and norms were upheld, there was *dar al-islam*, the “house” or “the home of Islam.” Islamic lawyers and ethicists often taught that Muslims could only live well in such a Muslim space, under Muslim sovereignty. Geographically, this world of Muslims came to stretch continuously from the Atlantic coasts of West Africa and Morocco through the Middle East to central Asia and India, then

across the Indian Ocean to the islands of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. It touched the edges of Europe in Spain and the Balkans, and the coasts and the far western provinces of China. In all these very different places, it shaped individuals, families, cultures, societies and states, and created a Muslim ecumene—a world of great diversity that was united by Islam.

But this Muslim space—what we usually think of as the Muslim world—was neither exclusive nor all-encompassing. Many Muslims lived in places such as the southeast European provinces of the Ottoman Empire, or in the Mughal Empire in South Asia, where Muslims were not the only, nor the largest, religious community. Even in Islam's historic heartlands in the Middle East, Muslims remained a minority for hundreds of years after the Arab conquests. Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Hindus and Buddhists—people of other religions and of none—lived in predominantly Muslim societies and under Muslim rulers. Among Muslims themselves, law, custom, and religious beliefs and practices were all richly varied. And perhaps above all, many other factors—ecology, economics, and politics; culture, language, and livelihood—shaped their lives, and their Islam, as much as their religion itself did. Islam—whether understood as a religion, a cultural system, a model of political order, or all of these combined—was never the single defining feature of Muslims' societies, any more than Christianity was ever the only thing that defined life in what used to be called "Christendom." Although Muslim writers on law and ethics (and, later, non-Muslim social scientists) often tried to prescribe one, there was never a single model of an Islamic state, or of a Muslim society.

On the contrary, beyond the faith's shared essentials, a variety of religious beliefs and practices, local histories and group identities were all understood as Muslim by those who held to them—although others might consider them heretical or un-Islamic. Many different rulers' claims about their right to rule, the way they should rule, and their wars against each other were made in the belief that they were the true Muslims, and that God was on their side. Even essentials such

as prayer (the words used, the postures assumed) might vary in details between different communities. How to determine the prescriptions of sharia was a much more complex, and contentious, question, one on which Muslim scholars would continually disagree. As for the *dar al-islam*, it might be a mighty empire, or it might be a small community of pious believers, living apart from others and seeing themselves (whatever anyone else said) as the only true Muslims in a sea of unbelief. There was never complete agreement between Muslims about where Islam's boundaries lay; there was never a single, homogenous Muslim world.

Fourteen hundred years after it first came into the world, Islam today is a global force in other ways, and Muslims' worlds have grown and diversified even further. In 2010, the world's Muslim population stood at 1.6 billion, or just under a quarter of its people. It was projected to grow to 2.8 billion by 2050: almost 30 per cent of the global population. In 2010, more than 60 per cent of the world's Muslims lived in Asia. Indonesia was the most populous Muslim country, and the three major countries of the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) between them accounted for almost a third of all the world's Muslims. Only one-fifth of all Muslims lived in the faith's historic "central lands" in the Middle East and North Africa. About the same number, another fifth of all Muslims or some three hundred million people, lived in countries where Islam was not the majority religion. By 2050, the most significant proportional growth in Muslim populations is expected to be in Africa (which could become home to a quarter of the world's Muslims), Europe (where European Muslims may become 10 per cent of the population), and North America (where Muslim Americans might make up 2 per cent of the entire population). By the twenty-first century, the worlds of Islam—in the simple sense of places where Muslims live, and the ways they live their lives—encompassed Jakarta, Indonesia, and Toledo, Ohio; Cape Town, South Africa, and Stockholm, Sweden. They connected the corners of the globe, from Australia to Canada, from Argentina to China. Along with the movement of people, ideas, goods, money, communications,

and technology, they have grown to encompass almost the entire geographical globe.²

This book is about these many worlds that Muslims have inhabited: the cultures and communities, the states and societies, in which their lives were lived, and their place in a wider, shared and connected, global history. Understanding Islam in global history means exploring what being Muslim has meant in these different times and places, and how those meanings have changed. This book tells that story. It explores how Islam came into being, and how being Muslim became modern.



There is an old and well-known argument about Muslims and modern history, an argument often referred to as “Orientalism.” Nineteenth-century European thinkers, and twentieth-century writers after them, divided the world and its peoples into discrete units, civilisations defined by religious or racial belonging—and often folded religious affiliation, or culture, into what was then imagined as inherent racial identity. In the nineteenth-century age of European imperialism, this reordering of humanity into racial categories, and the narration of history as a tale of the rise and fall of their associated civilisations, became enormously popular. Like many ideas manufactured in the nineteenth century, it continues to shape many people’s thinking about the world today.

This view of things assumed that there was a single, monolithic Muslim world, historically distinct from the rest of the world and, especially, separate from an equally monolithic Euro-American West. In this view, modernity—the modern world, modern values, and modern life—belonged exclusively to the West, and to its separate history and civilisation (meaning, essentially, that they were European, North American, and, implicitly, “white”). Islam and modernity, in contrast, did not seem to fit: if modernity was seen as a Western property, it was also a Western “challenge,” one that Muslims, allegedly, failed to meet. This idea of “the Muslim world,” and the concomitant idea

of a “single, pure” West, became ideologically powerful, dominating understandings of world history and Islam for much of the twentieth century.³

But despite its public prominence, it was largely discredited, at least among historians of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, by newer scholarship that emerged between the 1970s and 1990s. It could, by then, be seen as just one aspect of a nineteenth-century version of history that Europeans in the age of empire had told to explain their world, and their control of it, both to themselves and to everyone else. (Importantly, it also obscured earlier, much more complex and often sympathetic, European understandings of Asia that had flourished in the eighteenth century.) By the early 2000s, such versions of the West’s own history as a self-contained and superior civilisation were not taken seriously by most historians of Europe and the Americas either. Historians came to see modernity not as a simple set of wholly owned ideas and institutions, created in isolation by Western genius and exported to the rest of the world, but as a complex and contradictory global condition, emerging over a much longer timescale in the entangled webs of Europe’s relations with the rest of the world, and setting the terms by which the world would be obliged to live.⁴

The “Orientalist” account of Islamic history seemed polemical and contrarian in the 1990s, when it was reasserted by more conservative scholars reviving the older vision of world history as civilisational competition and conflict. In the aftermath of the Cold War, it was Islam above all that replaced communism as the nightmare enemy of their imagined, “single, pure” West. Meanwhile, some conservative Muslims, and especially Islamists—adherents of Islam not only as a religious faith but as a political ideology—had embraced the flipside of this vision. They also believed in a world divided into opposing civilisations; they imagined their version of a separate, self-contained, “authentic” Islam as the solution to all the modern world’s problems.⁵

After the terror attacks of 9/11, this belief in inevitable antagonism between Islam and the West gained a much wider public. In the years that followed, it became even more insistent and more mainstream.

To neoconservative commentators, it is a bluntly realistic view, an honest way of “looking the world in the eye.” Some make a virtue of proclaiming it, believing themselves to be courageous warriors for free speech by doing so, and seeing themselves as defenders of an embattled Western civilisation under attack from both Islamic aggression and liberal self-criticism. This may be more self-promoting paranoid fantasy than historically informed, judicious realism, but that has not prevented it from selling well. The volume of talk and writing in the news, politics, and punditry pushing myths and stereotypes about Islam is immense. Much of it must practically write itself, so easy has it become for what the historian Mahmood Mamdani calls “culture talk” about Islam—the belief that the West creatively and diversely makes culture, but that Muslims are trapped in and defined by Islam as a single, unchanging culture—to replicate itself.⁶

Orientalism has thus become part of the conflict that it claims to explain: the more people believe its claims, the more it makes its own predictions come true. Rather than a statement of hard facts, it has in fact become one of the modern world’s most tenacious myths. Like other myths, it is a fiction that has real effects. It has been able to make its own predictions come true, in part, by demonising already vulnerable minorities and contributing to a climate of violence across the world, influencing disaffected young Muslims, opportunistic politicians, and a wide range of opinion in the United States and Europe, from secularist leftists through mainstream conservatives to the extremes of the alt-right. It also finds echoes in similar anti-Muslim rhetoric in other parts of the world, notably in communist China and Hindu-nationalist India. We will have to return to it, and to its effects on Muslim lives from border control in the United States to “re-education” camps in Xinjiang and street violence in Delhi, at the end of our story.

This book makes a different argument. Modernity, as a shared and profoundly unequal condition, was made in a shifting pattern of relationships in the world economy and global politics, linking the Atlantic world, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Muslims did not stand outside

this process. On the contrary, Islam's place in the world has been part of how the world—with all its frictions and inequalities, its struggles and aspirations—became modern. And correspondingly, Islam as it exists today—and all the different things it can mean—is a product of that modern world, a product of the uneven, connected global history of states and societies, trade and empire, war and capitalism, technology and mobility, that made the world modern. This book, then, is about how Islam, as a set of ideas, practices and laws, a vision of history and of the future, a way of living one's life and of defining one's place in the world, has been bound up with the other great world-historical forces with which it has interacted, shaping them and being reshaped by them, over the whole of its history.



From the perspective of its believers Islam is a timeless truth. Historical understanding, though, looks to what changes over time. Islam has always existed in particular times and places, and in the minds and actions of particular people. As the Islamic scholar Shahab Ahmed has written, Muslims have always, both at any one time and across time, “made Islam, thought Islam, and lived Islam in quite contrary ways.” Indeed, as he puts it, Islam has been “a human and historical phenomenon characterized and constituted, not merely by immense variety and diversity, but by the prodigious presence of outright contradiction.” The fact that some Muslims, and some interpretations of what Islam means, have created al-Qa’ida or Daesh (Islamic State), while others resolutely oppose them, does not mean that any of their actions and beliefs show what Islam really is. What they do show is what Islam, for particular people in particular circumstances in the modern world, has come to mean. What we need to understand is how that has happened.⁷

Being Muslim became modern not only in diverse but in contradictory ways. From its emergence in the seventh century to its consolidation across Eurasia in the twelfth century, Islam made its own world, but it was always part of other worlds too. It became a new religion,

Copyrighted Material

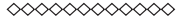
but it claimed to be the only true religion there had ever been. Muslims absorbed scientific and philosophical learning, economic and social institutions (like enslaved labour and veiled women) and cultural and political values (like the enjoyment of wine and the near-divinity of an emperor) from Greek, Latin, and Persian antiquity; and they created their own, new ways of learning and living, sometimes claiming that nothing was legitimate besides the exact way of life followed by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions in seventh-century Arabia. They began as a persecuted community bound together for mutual defence; they built powerful, conservatively monarchical states whose rulers claimed to be God's shadow on earth; they believed in the end of tyranny and the coming of justice and they repeatedly became revolutionaries.

From the thirteenth century to the eighteenth, Islam reached out across oceans and deserts to create its own new worlds—much more peacefully, on the whole, than how Europeans created theirs—and while the world of Islam thus expanded, it also fragmented. Through trade routes, navigation, migration, and cultural exchange, it created a network of early modern globalisation across Eurasia; and it broke apart into warring empires even before Europeans entered that network and began to capture it. While Islam was still expanding geographically, across West Africa and Southeast Asia, in the eighteenth century, many of its thinkers began to worry that Muslims had lost their way, and needed radical reform if they and their societies were to be saved. Just as more people in more places than ever before were becoming Muslim, some reformers and revivalists began to claim that most Muslims were not really Muslim at all.

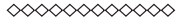
In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Muslims' worlds became disordered and reordered as never before. Europe's comparative advantages in accumulating wealth, science, and organised violence radically unbalanced older, less uneven relations across the world, and those on the wrong side of the new, global imbalance of power found themselves subject to European guns and money—and excised from Europe's own narrative of itself as the sole agent of modern history.

Capitalism and the global market, the modern state and mechanised war, imperialism and colonial rule, nationalism and revolution, scientific knowledge and religious revival, commodities and consumerism, communication and migration all interacted with Islam through the ways Muslims experienced and participated in them, sometimes embracing their promises and possibilities, sometimes suffering their effects of dispossession, displacement, and destruction.

Islam, and its interaction with these other world-historical forces, has shaped what being modern looks like for many people across the globe, from Bangladesh and Afghanistan to Britain and America. In telling this story, this book aims to bridge the very wide gap—which in recent years has become wider—between the rich and detailed specialist scholarship on Islam and global history, and the white noise of public debate, news and commentary about Islam and what it means in the world. As the faith or the cultural identity, the heritage of the past or the guide to the future, of a quarter of humanity, Islam matters in crucial ways to all of us, Muslim or non-Muslim, today. This book explores worlds that have been part of making the wider world in which we all live, and the troubled present in which we are all, together, concerned.



Part 1



ISLAM IN THE WORLD

600–1200 CE

A WORLD AMONG OTHERS, A WORLD IN ITSELF

Outside the city of Mecca, in what today is Saudi Arabia, at the very top of the bare, rounded rock of Mount Hira, also called Jabal al-Nour, the “Mountain of Light,” there is a narrow cave a few metres deep. Here, Muslim tradition tells us, the archangel Gabriel revealed the first words of the Qur’an (the “Recitation”), a message direct from God, to a man named Muhammad. A merchant from Mecca, about forty years old, Muhammad (whose name means “the praised one”) had taken to seeking solitude and reflection in the mountains around his hometown. It was here that angelic messengers began to speak to him. The first revelation was an alarming injunction to “recite,” which at first Muhammad himself did not understand:

*Recite! In the name of your Lord who created
Created humankind from a clot of blood
Recite! For your Lord is the Most Bountiful
Who taught by the pen
Taught humankind what it did not know.¹*

Such short, fragmentary, and poetic revelations would multiply. They were joined by exhortations to social justice and fair dealing,

scathing criticism of the abuse of power by the strong over the weak, reminders of God's grace and compassion, evocations of God's blessings and the paradise that awaited believers, and warnings to Muhammad's people, the polytheist Arabs of Mecca and its surroundings, that they should abandon their idols and worship only the one true God, or else face a terrible doom on the coming Day of Judgment. Soon, Muhammad's preaching of this message would gain followers, first among his own family and then in the wider community of Mecca. Muhammad would become the Prophet of Islam.

In Islamic accounts of universal history, the beginning of God's revelation to Muhammad was a moment in which divine truth touched the world, in a small place from which God's great message went out to humanity. If we see it as an event in human history, rather than as an act of divine intervention, though, Islam—the religion that would grow from Muhammad's message and that would define his followers as Muslims—did not come into the world fully formed. Nor did it arise in an empty space. It was shaped by dramatic, world-shaking events, by conquest and conversion, by poets and princes and the stories they wanted told, as well as by the original message of the Prophet. It emerged in the world of late antiquity: in Southwest Asia and the eastern Mediterranean, between the third and the eighth centuries CE. This was a world shaped by religious and political plurality and competition, but where the competition was played out through claims to universal sovereignty and beliefs in one supreme creator God. It was dominated by the Roman and Persian Empires, competing claimants to rule over what they both thought of as all the known world.

Mecca was a place out on the edge of this world, far from its capital cities and distant from its concerns—but what happened there, in the early decades of the seventh century, would transform it. And if we want to understand how Islam came into the world, we need to begin with the world into which it came.²

The late Roman, or Byzantine, Empire had been ruled since the fourth century from the great city of Constantinople, modern Istanbul. Founded on the Bosphorus by the Emperor Constantine, whose toleration of Christianity allowed the church to expand, Constantinople was the capital of an eastern Roman Empire that flourished while the western empire fell apart. Its rulers and inhabitants thought of their state and society as continuous with that of classical Rome, albeit redeemed from what they now considered to have been classical Rome's pagan polytheism. For all that they now mostly spoke and wrote in Greek, Aramaic, or Syriac rather than in Latin, they still had an emperor and a senate, and they still saw themselves as Romans. In Athens, at least until the sixth century, and in Alexandria for longer, they still discussed the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, while at Nicaea (now Iznik, in Turkey) and Chalcedon (now, as Kadiköy, part of urban Istanbul) they debated the nature of Christ and the relationship between God the Father and the Son.

Long before the Great Schism that would split Christianity into separate eastern (later called Orthodox) and western (Roman Catholic) churches in the eleventh century, the faith was already divided by deep theological rifts. Confessional conflict became politically sensitive, and the imperial government began to do something Roman emperors had never done before: endorse one true, or orthodox (literally, "correctly believing"), religion, and declare that deviations from it were heresies, forbidden and punishable. Among ordinary believers, most of whom could not read the Bible, let alone doctrinal disputations, everyday religion was more about community and locality than ideology and authority. But bishops and patriarchs competed to have their own doctrines endorsed by the state and recognised among the people. The growing, centralised strength of the empire, indeed, meant that religious power was more important than ever to the emperor. Since the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty in the first century CE, Rome's caesars had usually needed to be actively campaigning generals. But by the 400s, the eastern empire was more secure. The emperor could rule from his palace in Constantinople and, as one historian vividly

put it, “proclaim his status by presiding over Christian ceremonies, like a glorious spider at the centre of a web.” The Roman Empire was now an empire of faith.³

To the Romans’ east lay the Persian Empire, stretching from the Euphrates and the Caucasus to the Oxus and the Indian Ocean. Its capital was Ctesiphon on the River Tigris, part of a network of cities on either side of the river, south of where Arab Muslims would later build Baghdad. Here, in the “black land” between the Tigris and the Euphrates, was the empire’s wealthiest area, made rich by the productivity of the rivers’ fertile alluvial soils. Since the early third century CE, Persia had been ruled by the Sasanian dynasty, a family claiming the inheritance of Iran’s ancient rulers and the authority of divine kingship. Its mission was to reunite the peoples of Iran who had been divided between rival claimants to the throne and defeated by invading Romans, whose armies had twice sacked Ctesiphon at the end of the second century.

Once, under the Achaemenid dynasty at the end of the sixth century BCE, the Persian Empire had controlled all of the territory westward from the Iranian plateau to the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, and Anatolia. While the Sasanians could not equal such ambitions, like the inheritors of Rome they nonetheless had their own ideas of universal empire. The Sasanian rulers took the title *shahanshah*, “king of kings,” even styling themselves rulers “of Iran and non-Iran.” Iran, in the ideology of its rulers and priests, was the bastion of settled civilisation, against “Turan,” the nomadic world beyond. In the dynasty’s religion, Zoroastrianism, the principle of order always had to struggle against the opposing principle of chaos: the sacred fire had to be kept alight to keep at bay the darkness beyond. Zoroastrianism might also, in this period, have been developing a tendency towards monotheism, with the priesthood presenting the creator god, Ahura Mazda, as supreme over lesser deities that were being reimagined as angels, intermediary beings between God and men.

Unlike Byzantine Christianity, Zoroastrianism was never made the official state religion. The Sasanian Empire was religiously plural: Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and polytheists were all to be found

among its inhabitants. Sasanian shahs were commemorated for defending “good religion” and stamping out heresy, but persecutions, when they occurred, were more likely to be politically than religiously motivated: Christians were attacked when there was war with Rome. But although there was no official religion, religion was tremendously important for politics. Under the Sasanians, Zoroastrianism was closely associated with the ruling dynasty, legitimating the shahs’ kingship and benefiting from their protection. Each new king’s accession was marked by the kindling of a sacred fire, which would be kept alight throughout his reign. Sasanian coins illustrated the close ties between eternal and worldly power by displaying the throne of the shahs alongside the fire of the Zoroastrian priesthood.⁴

These two great cultures and states—the “world’s two eyes,” in the words of the Persian Emperor Khusraw II to his Byzantine counterpart, the Emperor Maurice, whose daughter he would marry—divided between them the lands of ancient, settled civilisation that stretched from the Mediterranean east across the Fertile Crescent to the Iranian plateau and beyond towards northwest India. North of both, across the Danube, the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, was another world of unsettled, roving nomads, a world that played by its own rules and that was always seen from the settled cities, by their kings and their scribes, as a threat. South was the great desert, the Sahara, and the Indian Ocean. And between the two empires, tucked in the peninsula between the Red Sea with its Roman shipping, and the Persian Gulf with its communities of Christians, was Arabia, where sometime in the late sixth century the man who would become the Prophet Muhammad was born.⁵



Arabia lay south of the Fertile Crescent, which arced between the wealthy cities of Roman Syria and Palestine to the west, and the heart of the Sasanian domains to the east. Mountains ringed this area in a semi-circle to the north—from the eastern Mediterranean coastline up through the Taurus and Caucasus to the Zagros in the east. More mountains

and rocky coastline divided it from the Indian Ocean to the south, from Yemen, facing Africa, in the southwest through to Oman, facing India, in the southeast. The peninsula's people spoke and wrote inscriptions mostly in Arabic, and their language had a rich and poetic oral literature. Material life, though, was hard. Thinly inhabited, and mostly mountainous, rocky steppe and desert terrain, the region had fertile pockets where higher mountain rainfall, especially in Yemen, or oasis cultivation made farming and settled life possible. But within its circle of mountain and sea, the interior of Arabia was beyond the control of any state. Social and political order here was kept by the relative equality and reciprocal respect observed between tribes, and between their leaders, who held their positions by a combination of recognised merit, election, force of personality and, to a lesser extent, birth.

The tribe was an agglomeration of extended families or clans who identified themselves and their interests with each other, claiming descent from a common male ancestor, whether real or (perhaps more usually) imagined. A tribe might be quite stable over a long period of time, but clan groups might also join or disappear from tribes, or confederations of tribes, at different times. By necessity, if they followed a mostly nomadic lifestyle, they usually lived in much smaller groups. But the language and symbolism of common ancestry allowed people to claim rights and responsibilities towards each other, and to organise their relations of marriage, inheritance, and solidarity. Alliances were essential for survival. An offence against one of the group would be an insult to all, and might be avenged accordingly—tribal life was not lawless, but ruled by customary law. When violence led to death, retaliation was required unless blood money was accepted as redress. Organised violence in the form of retribution or raiding between tribal groups redistributed resources, including people who could be enslaved, and schooled men in the practices of warfare and the codes of masculinity.

The tribe's public life and culture was predominantly male and patriarchal. Healthy male children who could grow up to be herdsmen and fighters were prized; baby girls were sometimes killed. Female infanticide may not have been common, but it seems—because the

Qur'an specifically condemns it—that it occurred. Freeborn women might own property in their own right: the Muslim tradition would record that Khadija, Muhammad's wife at the time of the first revelations, had been a wealthy widow whose commercial interests Muhammad managed before he became her husband. A family's virtue and propriety rested on the protection and relative seclusion of freeborn women, and the warrior virtues of free men. Women may have been present on the battlefield, encouraging their men with drums and poetry, but it was especially when their brothers or husbands fell in battle that women gained a public voice, in elegies of ritual mourning and exhortation to blood vengeance.⁶

Arabia was named after the *arab*, the nomadic, Arabic-speaking Bedouin: one such nomadic group, the Tayyi or Banu Tayy, would give Christian writers further north the Syriac word *tayyaye*, which could mean “nomad,” and by which they named both Arabic-speaking Christians and the Muslim Arab conquerors who would sweep out of the peninsula in the mid-seventh century. But most of Arabia's inhabitants were probably settled in towns and oases, at least for part of the year. Perhaps only a small proportion of the region's people were actually nomadic or semi-nomadic herders, and they lived in close connection with the sedentary population. Raising camels or, especially in the north near Syria and Palestine, sheep and goats, and moving with their flocks and herds following seasonal patterns of pasture and trade, they exchanged what they could raise or grow themselves with what they could obtain at markets from artisans, agriculturalists, and merchants settled in towns.⁷

Such markets often depended for their security on religious norms that forbade violence in the vicinity of a shrine, or within the perimeter of a sacred enclave called a *haram*. The absence of any governing authority meant that shared respect for such norms—sometimes upheld by a local religious family connected to a particular holy site and recognised as its guardians—was especially important. Mecca, in the Hijaz, or “curtain,” the western edge of Arabia along the line of mountains that separates the interior desert from the Red Sea, was one such

place. A market and a sanctuary, it was a town whose significance was both commercial and religious. As a trading town, its own economy seems to have included both bulk export trade in animals and animal products, especially leather that may have supplied the Byzantine army in Syria, and the mining and export of precious metals. It had come to be dominated by the Quraysh, an Arab tribe whose different clans would become key players in the developing history of Islam. It was to one of these clans, the Hashim, that in or around the year 570 CE, Muhammad was born. The Quraysh had established themselves, perhaps a few generations before Muhammad's time, as the guardians of the Ka'ba, the shrine at the centre of Mecca's holy sanctuary. It was probably thanks to the regional importance of the Ka'ba that Mecca had grown into a significant market town.⁸

The heart of one of Arabia's most sacred enclaves, the Ka'ba itself—a simple, cubic, stone-built structure—was an ancient holy place. In Muslim tradition it is associated with the biblical patriarch, Abraham, who with his son Ishmael is said to have built it as “the House of God.” The idea of a single, supreme creator God clearly existed already in polytheistic Mecca: Muhammad would call on his hearers to return to the one God they already recognised, and not falsely to associate partners in divinity with Him. Before Muhammad's time, Abraham was identified in Arabia both as the progenitor of the Arabs, through his son Ishmael, and as the original monotheist. It was to Abraham that God had first revealed the true religion. It was Abraham who instituted the ritual worship of God through pilgrimage to the Ka'ba. The Qur'an, the recitation of God's revelations to Muhammad, would repeatedly refer to Abraham as “the *hanif*,” meaning “one who turns.” *Hanif* came to connote one who shuns evil: one who is upright, sound in faith. When Muhammad began preaching, what he preached was, he said, “the faith of Abraham, the upright (*hanif*), who was not one of the polytheists.”⁹

But the Ka'ba had come to be sacred to several deities worshipped by the people of Arabia. Some of these were represented by idols kept in the sanctuary itself: in preaching a return to Abraham's religion,

Muhammad would take particular exception to the presence of these idols in God's House. The first Muslims would pray towards Jerusalem, the Holy City to the north that was already sacred to Jews and Christians, but while Muhammad was still alive the Muslims' direction of prayer, the *qibla*, would be changed to face Mecca and the Ka'ba, marking the centrality of the ancient sanctuary to the emerging faith.

The regional importance of pilgrimage to the Ka'ba, and the safety that its sanctity guaranteed, made Mecca a profitable marketplace. But the town itself had few other advantages. Set in a rocky, arid valley, its people depended on wells for their water and on trade for their food. One place food came from was the large oasis town of Yathrib to the northeast, a very ancient settlement that dated back, perhaps, to the seventh century BCE. Set among irrigated fields and date palm groves, Yathrib was inhabited by a mixed community of Jewish and polytheist families. It was from Yathrib, when Muhammad's preaching in Mecca had begun to gain him a reputation as a holy man, that a delegation came to ask him to arbitrate in a local dispute.

In Mecca, at the same time, Muhammad's message had begun to arouse hostility among his own tribe, the Quraysh, and their allies. The Ka'ba and its associated markets were important business interests, and Muhammad's preaching against the deities revered there was unwelcome. Nor did the Meccans appreciate his dire warnings of judgment from God, laced with social criticism:

*You show no kindness to the orphan
And do not urge one another to feed the poor
Greedy you eat up the inheritance of others
You love wealth fervently.
But when the earth is crushed to dust upon dust
And your Lord comes with the angels, rank upon rank
And when on that day Hell is brought forth, then will human-kind remember
But what good will it do to remember?*²⁰

Copyrighted Material

Fearing persecution, some of Muhammad's earliest followers had already fled from Mecca across the Red Sea, hoping to find sympathy and shelter with their fellow monotheists, the Christians of Axum in Ethiopia. In 622 CE, facing threats to his own safety, Muhammad departed for Yathrib, accompanied only by his father-in-law Abu Bakr, who had been one of his first followers and companions. This was the event that would become known as the *hijra*, Muhammad's "emigration" from a place of unbelief to a space that would be safe for true believers. There he joined other believers who had fled from Mecca, and who would be known in Yathrib as the *muhajirun*, the "emigrants." Along with the Prophet's supporters, or "helpers" (*ansar*) among the people of the town, they would become the first Muslim community.

Over the following years, Muhammad's leadership of this community, its growing strength and significance, and his death there ten years after the *hijra* would transform the town to which they had come. One of Muhammad's first documented acts was to declare part of Yathrib a *haram*, a sacred enclave like that of Mecca, asserting the importance of the town, and both its and Muhammad's independence from the Meccans. Soon, the town would cease to be called Yathrib. It became known instead as *madinat al-nabi*, "the Prophet's city," or simply "the city," *al-madina*: Medina.¹¹



Over the centuries that followed, both Mecca and Medina would come to be revered as holy places to Muslims; their historical importance would come to equal that of Constantinople or Ctesiphon. In the seventh century, though, Mecca and Medina were still on the fringe of the late ancient imperial world. Arabia was ruled by none of its neighbours; nonetheless, it by no means existed in isolation. Both the Byzantines and the Sasanians had clients among the Arab populations on the fringes of their territories: the Ghassanids, or Jafnids, in the northwest (the area that today is the kingdom of Jordan) being allied with the Byzantines, and the Lakhmids, or Nasrids (in what is

Copyrighted Material

now southwest Iraq), with the Persians. These groups created buffer zones between the two empires, and between each of them and the Arabian interior, but imperial ambitions sometimes intruded more directly. The Romans had sent an expedition through western Arabia to Yemen and maintained a garrison on the Farasan Islands in the Red Sea. The Persians, correspondingly, found support among Jewish and polytheist communities as far away as Yemen. The Byzantines considered the Christian kingdom of Axum in Ethiopia as an ally against Persia, but the Ethiopian kings had their own designs on southern Arabia. The rulers of Yemen, ancient Himyar, where some Arab tribes had converted to Judaism in the fourth century, launched a persecution of local Christians in 523 CE, and two years later an Ethiopian Christian army invaded across the Red Sea in response. The Ethiopian general, Abraha, set up his own kingdom in Yemen, built a great church at Sanaa, and marched northward, seeking to extend Ethiopian rule into Arabia. But under his sons, his kingdom fell apart. By 560 CE, Ethiopian rule was replaced in Yemen by Sasanian influence.

Muhammad's Arabia was thus a frontier zone between contending world empires. Trade routes between the Indian Ocean and the eastern Mediterranean skirted it and passed through it; imperial armies had never conquered it but were not unknown there. Jewish, Christian, and polytheist religions and their political associations both surrounded and inhabited it. Jewish groups, perhaps originally refugees from the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in the first century, had settled in the Hijaz. To both north and south there were Arab converts to Christianity and Judaism, apparently well integrated into Arabian tribal society alongside the predominant polytheists in the desert and its towns. The gods of Arab polytheism sometimes echoed, at least in their representation as statues, the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece and Rome: in the Syrian city of Palmyra, the Arabian goddess Allat was portrayed as Greek Athena. South of the Hijaz, the ancient Arabs' belief in many gods may have been giving way, from the fourth century—at the same time as some Arabs in Yemen became Jewish, and Ethiopians in Axum

Copyrighted Material

became Christian—to devotion to one supreme God, named in inscriptions as “al-Rahman,” the compassionate. This would be one of the “beautiful names” of the one God proclaimed by Muhammad.¹²

In this wider world beyond Arabia, the era in which Muhammad lived was dramatic. Indeed, there seemed to be nothing less than a world crisis raging across the sixth and seventh centuries, against the backdrop of which an imminent end of time and the advent of a Day of Judgment were all too vividly imaginable. Such images were part of Muhammad’s own preaching:

*When the sky is torn asunder
And when the stars are scattered
And when the seas burst forth
And when the graves spill out
Then will each soul know what it has done and left undone.*¹³

They appear in Christian visions too. Monks and chroniclers of the seventh century saw world events as reflecting divine judgment on sinful humanity, and when a destructive superpower war was followed within a few years by the Arab conquests, and then the turmoil of civil wars between the new rulers, it seemed to them too that the end was at hand. “The end of the ages has arrived for us. . . . Here are famines, earthquakes and plagues,” wrote the Syriac chronicler John Bar Penkaye in 687 or 688. According to an apocalyptic text that survives from a few years later:

God shall send forth a mighty wind, the southern one, and there shall come forth from it a people. . . . And there shall rise up from among them a warrior and one whom they call a prophet, and they shall be brought into his hands. . . . And the South shall prosper, and by the hooves of the horses of its armies it shall trample down and subdue Persia and devastate Rome.¹⁴

Historians with more secular sensibilities, too, have often described this period in cataclysmic terms: as the fall of civilisation, the

beginning of dark ages. When we look at this crisis of the late ancient world in the longer term, what is surprising is perhaps not just the degree of change that came out of it but the extent to which much also remained largely as before. Sudden changes on the surface—who ruled, and in whose name—overlaid much slower and more gradual currents of transition and adaptation in the social and religious lives of ordinary people. It is clear, nonetheless, that these were times of tribulation.

The first factor in the crisis was plague. The sixth and seventh centuries saw the world's first recorded plague pandemic. (The Black Death that began in the fourteenth century and lingered in the Mediterranean until the nineteenth was the second; the third, centred in South and Southeast Asia, occurred in the first half of the twentieth century.) It is often referred to as the "Justinianic" plague, after the Roman Emperor Justinian during whose reign, in 541, the outbreak was recorded. (The emperor himself contracted, and survived, the disease.) Cataclysmic though it might sound, the sixth-century plague was probably in fact much less destabilising overall than has sometimes been thought. Some estimates have claimed that between a third and two-thirds of the affected population, which would have stretched from the eastern Mediterranean through to southern France and Germany—anything from fifteen to one hundred million people—may have died, but these assessments seem highly exaggerated. If there was a sudden, severe mid-sixth-century death toll in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, cities and their populations in Anatolia, Syria and Palestine seem to have recovered, and indeed grown rapidly, shortly afterwards. Without underestimating the suffering the plague must have caused, arguments that it had a catastrophic and long-term impact seem to have overstated the extent of the pandemic, and underestimated states' and societies' capacity to adapt to it.

Other environmental factors, especially a cooling climate following a series of volcanic eruptions, again in the 530s and 540s CE, may have impacted agricultural production and the societies that depended on it (evidence in tree rings from the Alps to northern central Asia

suggests that summers here became colder). It is unlikely, though, that the changing climate had a uniformly negative impact across the whole of the eastern Roman Empire. Regional microclimates across the eastern Mediterranean and southwest Asia were much too variable to have been affected in the same way by a “little Ice Age,” the severity of which is in any case unclear. But after centuries of agricultural expansion and increasing prosperity in the late Roman world, between the mid-500s and the late 600s, plague and the changing climate do seem to have made life somewhat harder and livelihoods more precarious.¹⁵

The second, and certainly greater, crisis was a superpower war, a confrontation that pitted Persia against Rome and lasted twenty-five years. The Roman-Persian conflict from 603 to 628 was the ancient world’s “last great war,” the culmination of centuries of frontier warfare between the two empires. Sporadic conflict had moved back and forth from Armenia in the north to Arabia in the south, without one of the combatants ever seriously threatening the other’s survival. This time was different. The war broke out in 603, a few years before the first angelic messages came to Muhammad in Mecca, when a coup d’état in Constantinople overthrew the Emperor Maurice, and the Shah Khusraw II seized the opportunity, declaring that he would reinstate a legitimate ruler over Byzantium. His troops overran the richest Roman provinces in Syria and Egypt, occupied Jerusalem, carried off the relics of the True Cross, and threatened the heart of the empire in Anatolia. By 626 Constantinople was under siege by the Persians and their allies, and it seemed as though the seven-hundred-year-old Roman Empire might be near death.¹⁶

To the Byzantines, Persia’s offensive threatened not only the inheritance of Rome but the empire of Christ on earth. For the first time, they declared a holy war in defence of the true faith, promising the martyr’s crown and direct entry into paradise for all those who fell in the struggle. Under their new emperor, Heraclius, a Roman army allied with Turkish-speaking nomads from the northeast staged a spectacular counterattack. Outflanking the Persians via the Black Sea, Heraclius’s troops crossed the Caucasus Mountains and marched

directly on Ctesiphon. In 628, with the enemy almost at his gates, Khusraw II was overthrown by a palace coup, and his successors negotiated peace with the Byzantines, giving up all the territory the Persians had conquered over the previous two decades. The fragments of the True Cross were returned in triumph to Jerusalem.

News of the war and of the Persians' early victories in Syria had travelled south into Arabia, and was echoed in the revelations being recounted in Mecca by Muhammad:

*The Romans have been defeated
In a land close by
But after their defeat, they will triumph
Within a few years. Before and afterward, the matter rests with
God. And on that day, the believers will rejoice
At victory from God. He makes victorious whomever He wills.
He is the Almighty, the Merciful.*¹⁷

God was with the Romans, for now. But a new community of believers was coming into being, and they would come to see themselves as the inheritors of Rome, of Jerusalem, and of Persia too.



The agreements made by Muhammad, his followers, and the people of Medina for the regulation of their life together survive in some of the very earliest pieces of documentary evidence in Islamic history. Yathrib and the other nearby oasis settlements had probably been under some degree of Sasanian authority in the mid-sixth century. But when Muhammad arrived, there was no longer any external authority, and Yathrib's different factions seem to have been feuding with one another from their fortified tower houses. While he may have been called upon initially to act in the customary role of an arbiter of tribal disputes, Muhammad soon went much further, instituting a political order in the town that both built on existing custom and created something dramatically new, even revolutionary.

What would become the community of Islam began as a set of alliances for mutual defence, drawn up in the recognised terms of Arabian social norms. These have become known as the "Constitution of Medina." The Qurayshi emigrants from Mecca and the inhabitants of Yathrib were to "keep to their own tribal organisation and leadership," each with their existing responsibilities to pay blood money, divided equitably between them, in case of feud, and to ransom prisoners according to custom. They were to fight together to defend themselves and each other against outside attack. This recognised the existing rights, duties, and leadership of the different groups who would now be living together in Medina.

But the Medinan agreements did something more. Muhammad also declared that the parties to the agreement, "the believers and the Muslims from the Quraysh and Yathrib, and those who follow them as clients, join them, reside with them, and strive along with them," would from now on be "a single community, apart from other people." This community's cohesion, and loyalty to it, would take precedence for its members over family or tribal affiliation. They would act together against anyone who rebelled, or who acted corruptly, unjustly, or treacherously against the community, "even if he is the son of one of them." Blood relatives from outside the community could not be avenged against anyone within it. Conversely, anyone who joined the community and left their old tribal ties behind would benefit instead from the community's protection. This was more than just the solidarity of a new kind of tribe; it was "the protection of God," guaranteed by the leadership of God's Prophet, Muhammad. And the community existed both for its own self-defence against hostile outsiders, especially the unbelieving Quraysh of Mecca, and for the purpose of offensively "fighting in the path of God." Their blood that might be shed, and that might henceforward need to be avenged, would not be the blood of kin spilled in mere tribal feuds, but blood sacrifice to a much higher purpose, one the Romans, in their holy war with Persia, would readily have recognised: "blood shed in the path of God."¹⁸

Copyrighted Material