

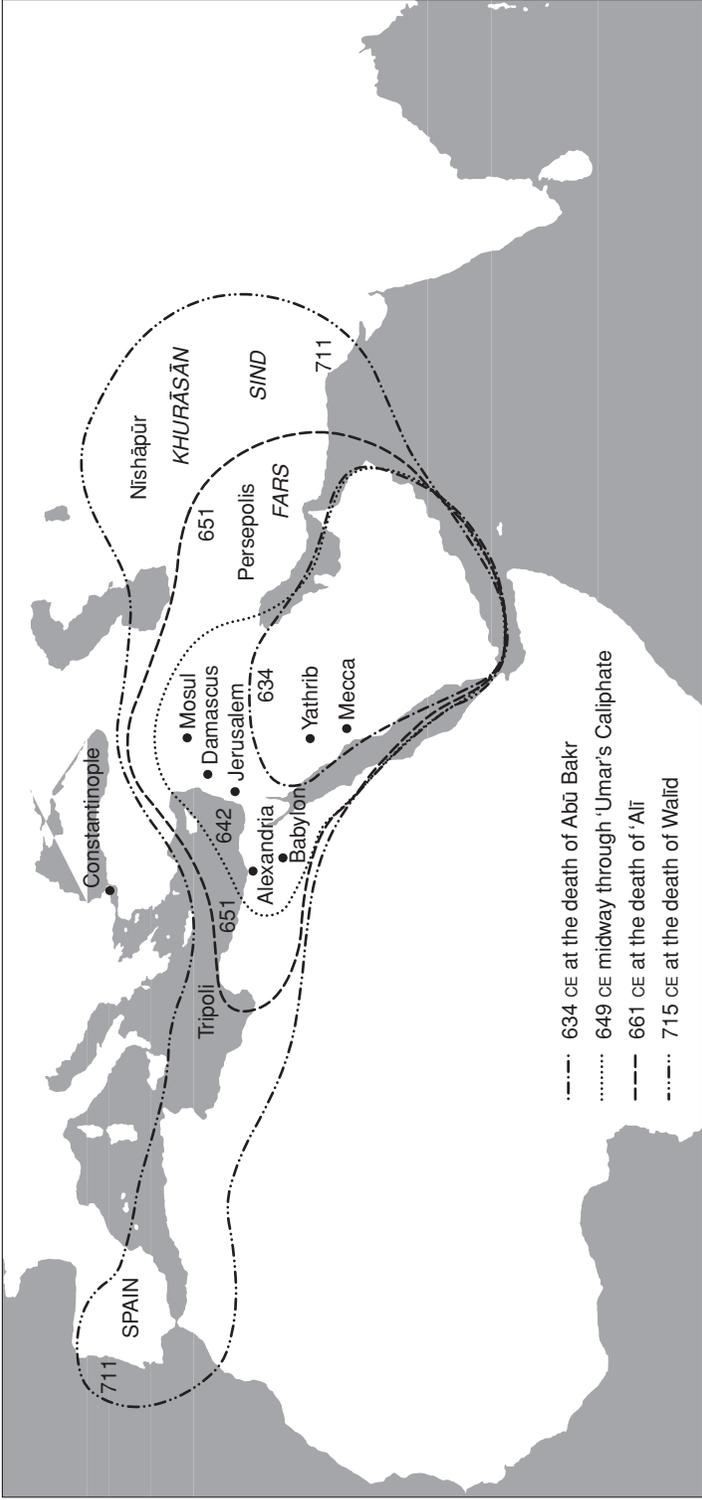
Part I
Islamic Origins

1

The Conquests

It took the Arabs only thirty years to conquer the Near Eastern world, and to those they conquered it must have seemed that they came from nowhere. In 636 CE an Arab army decisively defeated Byzantine forces at the battle of Yarmūk, near the Jordan River, signaling the end of nearly seven centuries of Roman rule in Syria. The contest at Yarmūk was a concerted effort by the Roman army in Syria to counter the Arab threat, which had begun three years earlier when the first Arab forces arrived. The Byzantine Emperor Heraclius sent his top generals, Vahan and Theodore Trithurios, to oppose the Arabs with a sizable army (anywhere from 15,000 to 30,000 men). The Byzantine army was routed, and both generals were allegedly killed along with the emperor's brother. In the aftermath of the battle, the victors systematically laid siege to and occupied all of the major cities of Syria: Damascus in the same year, Jerusalem in 638 CE, and the final holdout, Caesarea, in 640. With all of Syria and Palestine taken, the road to Roman-ruled Egypt was open. A permanent Arab garrison was established at Fuṣṭāṭ, site of present-day Cairo, in 641. Alexandria was taken in 645, briefly lost, then permanently occupied in 646.

Within three years of the victory at Yarmūk another Arab army destroyed the Sāsānian Imperial army at the battle of al-Qādisiyya in southern Iraq. Incursions into Persian-ruled Iraq had begun under the command of the Arab military genius, Khālīd ibn Walīd, in 633. In this initial phase of expansion the Arabs occupied several towns along the Euphrates, most importantly al-Hīra, but after Khālīd's departure for Syria Persian forces decisively defeated an Arab army at the Battle of the Bridge. Another Arab force was dispatched, and met with a large Persian army not far from al-Hīra. The result was a decisive victory for the Arabs, which dealt a fatal blow to the Sāsānian



Map 1 The approximate boundaries of Islamic rule, seventh and early eighth centuries

empire. For all its significance, there is uncertainty about the details of the battle of al-Qādisiyya – later chroniclers disagreed over whether the contest took place in 635, 636, or 637 – but the outcome was clear enough. By the early 640s all of Iraq was under Arab control and Persian imperial power was destroyed. Within another twenty years, by 661, the Arab conquerors ruled from the borders of Central Asia to North Africa and from Yemen to Northern Syria. By 750 the political reach of the Islamic empire stretched from Spain to India, and from Sub-Saharan Africa to Central Asia.

Chronology of the Arab conquests

- 630 Traditional date of Muḥammad's conquest of Mecca.
- 633 Incursions into Iraq begin. City of al-Hīra taken.
- 634 Arabs defeat small Byzantine force in southern Syria.
- 636 Byzantine army decisively defeated by Arab forces at the battle of Yarmūk in Syria. Damascus occupied.
- 637 Sāsānian imperial army routed at al-Qādisiyya. Sāsānian capital, Ctesiphon, taken.
- 638 Jerusalem surrenders.
- 640 Caesarea taken.
- 642 Alexandria taken. It would later be lost, then retaken for good in 646.
- 647 First Arab raids in North Africa.
- 649–50 Persepolis, ancient Persian capital, taken.
- 651 Most of Iran conquered.
- 655 Byzantine navy destroyed by Muslim fleet.
- 657 Battle of Şiffin and the period of internal strife that follows distracts from further conquests.
- 673–8 Arabs besiege Constantinople.
- 705–15 Arab general Qutayba captures Bukhārā and Samarqand and establishes Muslim supremacy in Central Asia.
- 710 Completion of conquest of North Africa.
- 711 Arab army of 6,000 under Muḥammad b. Qāsim takes Sindh, extending Arab rule to the Indian subcontinent. Invasion of Spain.
- 732 Battle of Tours; Franks halt Arab advance.
- 751 Battle on the Talas; Arabs defeat Chinese army in Central Asia.
- 827 Arabs begin conquest of Sicily.
- 831 Capture of Palermo; raid in Southern Italy.

Psychological Impact

The speed of the Arab expansion is staggering, and it is not surprising that the descendants of victors and vanquished alike portray the conquests as cataclysmic. Later chroniclers saw the Arab defeat of the Byzantine and Sāsānian empires as a complete upheaval of the political, social, and religious culture of the Near East – a realignment that left the world changed forever.

From the perspective of the defeated Byzantines, the conquests were disastrous, crippling the empire and wrenching away centers of Greek culture – Damascus, Alexandria, and Carthage – the religious treasures of Jerusalem, and the breadbasket of the empire, the Nile Valley. Only apocalyptic language would do to depict such a nightmare, as the following excerpts, taken from Walter Kaegi’s translations, show. Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem at the time of the conquests, described how the Arabs had “risen up unexpectedly against us because of our sins and ravaged everything with violent and beastly impulse and with impious and ungodly boldness” (Kaegi 1992: 210–11). The anonymous writer of the *Doctrina Iacobi* (ca. 634) describes the empire as “humiliated,” “diminished and torn asunder,” and “fallen down and plundered” (Kaegi 1992: 211). The late seventh-century Armenian historian Sebeos turned to the Old Testament prophecies of Daniel to make sense of what had happened:

But who would be able to tell the horror of the invasion of the Ishmaelites, which embraced land and sea? The fortunate Daniel foresaw and prophesied evils similar to those which were to take place on earth. By four beasts he symbolized the four kingdoms which must arise on the earth . . . “And the fourth beast, terrible, dreadful, his teeth of iron, his claws of bronze; he ate and crunched and trampled the rest underfoot” . . . This fourth kingdom, which rises from the south, is the kingdom of Ishmael. As the archangel explained it, “The beast of the fourth kingdom will arise, will be more powerful than all the kingdoms and will eat the whole world. His ten horns are the ten kings who will arise, and after them will arise another who will surpass in evil all of the preceding ones.” (Kaegi 1992: 213–14)

For centuries European chroniclers continued to describe the conquests in similar tone. The psychological impact was felt far away from the conquered lands. To the Venerable Bede (673–735 CE) the Arabs were “a terrible plague” which “ravaged Gaul with cruel bloodshed” (Bede 1969: 557; Rodinson 1991: 4).

Christian historians were at least around to record their side of the story. The Sāsānians left no heirs to represent them. Sāsānian political power was entirely supplanted by the Arabs, and Sāsānian political, religious, and social structures were absorbed into the new regime and took on an Islamic cast.

Muslim chroniclers of the ninth and tenth centuries also portrayed the conquests as a complete break with the past. The historian al-Ṭabarī portrays the conquests as no less than a reshaping of civilization – the Arabs’ gift to the world. In negotiations with Rustam, the Persian general, al-Ṭabarī reports that the Arab commander offered the following challenge:

God has sent us and has brought us here so that we may extricate those who so desire from servitude to the people [here on earth] and make them servants of God; that we may transform their poverty in this world into affluence, and that we may free them from the inequity of the religions and bestow on them the justice of Islam. He has sent us to bring His religion to His creatures and to call them to Islam. Whoever accepts it from us, we shall be content. We shall leave

him on his land to rule it with us; but whoever refuses, we shall fight him, until we fulfill the promise of God. (Ṭabarī 1992, 12: 67)

Seen through later Muslim eyes the Arab victories were the victory and vindication of a new faith, the inevitable triumph of true religion, which could only be explained as an act of God. Ṭabarī repeatedly emphasizes the enormous odds against the Muslims. At al-Qādisiyya, for instance, he alleges that the Muslims numbered 12,000 and defeated a Persian army ten times that large (Ṭabarī 1992, 12: 56, 60).

Muslim and Byzantine chroniclers agree that the Arab conquests marked a decisive historical watershed that in the space of thirty years left the political, social, cultural, and religious landscape of the world permanently altered. It is easy to sympathize with their viewpoint. A lightning-quick series of military conquests; the replacement of a ruling elite; the birth of a new religion – together these factors seem to mark the conquests as a radical turning point in history.

Archeological Data: The “Invisible” Conquests

Archeological data tell a somewhat different tale. If we look for evidence of the burning, looting, or destruction described by Bishop Sophronius in 635, we find none. No systematic sacking of cities took place, and no destruction of agricultural land occurred. The conquests brought little immediate change to the patterns of religious and communal life. There were no mass or forced conversions. Christian, Jewish, or Zoroastrian communities in Syria and Iraq may have felt threatened, but they continued to thrive. New synagogues, churches, and monasteries were still being built into the eighth century, and churches or synagogues were not converted to mosques on any noticeable scale. The first urban mosques were not built until after 690, and the urban landscape of the Near East remained largely unaffected by the conquests (Pentz 1992). There was certainly change, but in the same directions and at the same pace as before the conquests (Morony 1984: 507–26). Two key measures offer telling evidence that the conquests brought little immediate disruption to the patterns of religious and social life in Syria and Iraq: production of wine (forbidden in Islamic law) continued unchanged, and pigs (considered unclean by Muslims) continued to be raised and slaughtered in increasing numbers (Pentz 1992).

Neither do we find evidence of dramatic change in the law or political institutions of the conquered territories in the years immediately following the conquests. What did change was the ruling class. The new rulers spoke Arabic, represented a different ethnicity, and kept aloof from their conquered subjects. But for all the differences change came slowly even at the highest levels of political affairs. The new rulers continued to use Greek and Persian in administrative documents. They continued to mint Byzantine-style coins complete with the image of the emperor holding a cross, and Sāsānian-style

coins bearing Zoroastrian symbols and Sāsānian dates (Morony 1984: 38–51). They were dependent on the old Persian and Greek bureaucrats and institutions. Major reform of the language of administration or of coinage did not take place until 695 – sixty years into Arab rule. Earlier attempts at reform reportedly failed in the face of stiff popular resistance. The Arab rulers also continued the same patterns of taxation. The conquests replaced the top rung of Byzantine and Sāsānian ruling classes with Arabs, but they did not immediately or violently alter the administrative, religious, economic, or cultural landscape of the Near East.

While the conquests did increase Arab migration and settlement in Syria and Iraq, even this was the continuation and acceleration of a pattern already underway. Inscriptions show that substantial populations of Arabs lived in Syria, that settled Arabs had become well integrated in Syrian–Byzantine society, and that the Arab population and influence in some towns grew rapidly in the century preceding the conquests. We see something similar in Iraq. Since Arabs were already well integrated into the societies of Iraq and Southern Syria well before the conquest, a good many of the “conquered” peoples were culturally and linguistically more akin to their new rulers than they had been to their old (Pentz 1992). This did not necessarily mean that Iraqi or Syrian Arabs welcomed the conquerors. Many did not, and much of the fiercest resistance in both Iraq and Syria came from Arabs. Arab forces allied with the Byzantines played a significant role in the battle of Yarmūk. What it did mean was that the Arab conquerors were not dealing with a culturally or linguistically alien population and that they were by no means the initiators of the Arabization of the Near East. Rather, they were part of a process that had begun long before and would continue long after. (For a much more detailed treatment of this process, see Morony 1984: 507–26.)

Even for many non-Arab populations of the Near East, the conquests were a welcome change. The majority population of Iraq was Aramaic-speaking peasants, and patterns of life for such Aramean or Egyptian peasants continued much as before. Christians continued to be Christians and Jews continued to be Jews. The old Persian or Byzantine ruling classes were displaced, and the destination of tax revenues changed, but for most there was little reason to prefer the old rulers of Constantinople to the new ones in Medina or Damascus. Monophysite Christians in Egypt, for instance, were less liable to harassment by Arabs, who cared little about their Christological peculiarities, than by the Byzantine establishment that had branded them heretics. It is easy to believe the reports that Egyptian Christians and Jews aided the Arab armies by rising in revolt against their erstwhile rulers.

So which will it be? Were the conquests a decisive turning point, or more of the same? Historical watershed or just the culmination of forces long at work? The best answer is both. The conquests brought decisive and enduring change because they put Arabs in the position of rulers. They became rulers, moreover, who stayed on and who retained their Arab identity and language. But the societies they ruled over were not immediately transformed. Rather,

thrust into the role of world rulers, the Arabs interacted with the environment into which they came and forged a completely new cultural synthesis – Arab roots and Arab language melded with Near Eastern patterns of civilization and religious life. The conquests are significant because they enabled this fusion by putting the ingredients together in the same crucible. How Arab identity combined with Near Eastern patterns of religious life to form something completely new is one of the fascinating riddles of early Islamic history and the focus of the next three chapters.

Resources for Further Study

Fred Donner provides an excellent introduction to the topic of the conquests as a whole in *The Early Islamic Conquests* (1981). While Donner is primarily concerned with the Arab side of the story, more specialized studies by Michael Morony (1984) and Walter Kaegi (1992) help us to see the conquests and their effects from the vantage point of the conquered territories of Byzantine Syria and Sāsānid Iraq. One of our most important historical sources, not just for the conquests but the whole sweep of early Islamic history, is *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, now available in a 39-volume translation; accounts of the conquests themselves are concentrated in volumes 11 and 12. Irfan Shahīd's multi-volume *Byzantium and the Arabs* (1984, 1989, 1995) is the definitive work on pre-Islamic Arab populations outside of the Arabian Peninsula. For a useful survey of the archeological data bearing on the conquests see Peter Pentz, *The Invisible Conquests* (1992).