

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77056-9 - A History of Islamic Societies: Second Edition

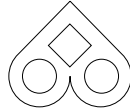
Ira M. Lapidus

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

*THE ORIGINS OF ISLAMIC
CIVILIZATION: THE MIDDLE EAST
FROM c. 600 TO c. 1200*



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77056-9 - A History of Islamic Societies: Second Edition

Ira M. Lapidus

Excerpt

[More information](#)



1 The Pilgrimage to the Ka'ba

Cambridge University Press

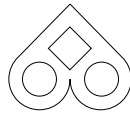
978-0-521-77056-9 - A History of Islamic Societies: Second Edition

Ira M. Lapidus

Excerpt

[More information](#)

*INTRODUCTION: MIDDLE EASTERN SOCIETIES
BEFORE THE ADVENT OF ISLAM*



Islamic societies were built upon the framework of an already established and ancient Middle Eastern civilization. From the pre-Islamic Middle East, Islamic societies inherited a pattern of institutions which would shape their destiny until the modern age. These institutions included small communities based upon family, lineage, clientage, and ethnic ties, agricultural and urban societies, market economies, monotheistic religions, and bureaucratic empires. The civilization of Islam, though born in Mecca, also had its progenitors in Palestine, Babylon, and Persepolis.

Islamic societies developed in an environment that since the earliest history of mankind had exhibited two fundamental, and persisting, qualities. The first was the organization of human societies into small, often familial, groups. The earliest hunting and gathering communities lived and moved in small bands. Since the advent of agriculture and the domestication of animals, the vast majority of Middle Eastern peoples have lived in agricultural villages or in the tent camps of nomadic pastoralists. Even town peoples were bound into small groups by ties of kinship and neighborhood with all that implies of strong affections and hatreds. These groups raised the young, arranged marriages, arbitrated disputes, and formed a common front vis-à-vis the outside world.

The second was an evolutionary tendency toward the creation of unities of culture, religion, and empire on an ever-larger scale. In prehistoric times this tendency was manifested in the expansion of trade and the acceptance of common decorative styles and religious ideas, but its most important early manifestation was the emergence of the city-state in ancient Mesopotamia (3500 BC–2400 BC). The formation of cities in lower Iraq was a revolution in the history of mankind: it brought about the integration of diverse clans, villages, and other small groups into a single society. It led to new cultural and artistic achievements such as the invention of writing, the creation of great works of myth and religion, the construction of architectural masterpieces, and the fashioning of sensuous sculpture.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77056-9 - A History of Islamic Societies: Second Edition

Ira M. Lapidus

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The first cities developed from the integration of small village communities into temple communities built upon shared commitment to the service of the gods. The Sumerians, the people of southern Iraq, believed that the lands they inhabited were the property of the gods, and that their primary duty was the construction of a great temple to worship the forces of the universe. The priests who presided over the worship were also judges and “political” chiefs. Moreover, the temple-cities were necessarily communities of economic as well as religious interests. The construction of the great temples required contributions of labor and the organization of masses of workers; their rituals required specialists in administrative, professional, and artisanal activities. The earliest cities were then communities in which religious leaders and religious ideas governed the economic and political affairs of the temples’ adherents.

ANCIENT EMPIRES

Beginning about 2400 BC, the temple-cities of Mesopotamia were superseded by new unifying institutions – kingship and empires. Kingship in ancient Mesopotamia emanated from two sources: the warrior or warlord houses of the ancient Sumerian cities and the tribal peoples of northern Mesopotamia. Between 2700 and 2500 BC, city kings established ephemeral states among their neighbors. About 2400 BC, Sargon of Akkad, the chief of pastoral peoples in northern Mesopotamia, founded the first of the world’s empires. Sargon’s empire soon failed, and the temple-cities temporarily regained their independence. From Sargon to Hammurapi, the great lawgiver (d. 1750 BC), Mesopotamian empires rose and fell, but each one, though relatively short lived, reinforced the institutions of kingship and of multi-city regimes.

Kingship as it developed from Sargon to Hammurapi increasingly assumed a sacred aura. Kings usurped the authority of priests and became the chief servants of the gods. They took over the priestly functions of mediating between the gods and the people. Ever after, in Middle Eastern conceptions, kingship was justified as the expression of the divine plan for the ordering of human societies. Sacralized political power, as well as religious community, became a vehicle for the unification of disparate peoples.

The successive empires of this ancient period also established the institutions that would henceforth be the medium for imperial rule. At the center was the ruler’s household, the king surrounded by his family, retainers, soldiers, servants, and palace administrators. Standing armies were founded; feudal grants of land were awarded to loyal retainers. Governors, administrators, and spies were assigned to control cities and provinces.

The superimposition of empires upon smaller communities transformed local life. Temples were reduced to cogs in the imperial machine, and priests lost their judicial and political authority. The empires also intervened in small communities by freeing individuals from their commitments to clans and temples. To defend, admin-

ister, and maintain communications across wide territories required some decentralization of authority and greater mobility and autonomy for individuals. Warriors and administrators were assigned land and became independent proprietors. Merchants became entrepreneurs working with their own capital. Craftsmen began to work for the market rather than for the temple or royal household. A market economy emerged to facilitate exchanges among independent producers and consumers and progressively supplanted the older forms of household redistributive economy. The spread of markets and the introduction, by the seventh or sixth century BC, of money as the medium of exchange transformed the economic structures of the ancient world. For increasing numbers of people the cash nexus replaced patrimonial authority as the mechanism that regulated the way they earned a living.

Empires also fostered the emergence of social individuality by providing the linguistic, religious, and legal conditions that freed individuals from absorption into clans, temples, and royal households, enabling them to function in a more open society. The language of the dominant elites became the language of the cosmopolitan elements of the society; the remote and powerful gods of the king and the empire – the gods of the cosmos, organized into a pantheon – superseded the intimate gods of individual localities. Imperial law regulated the distribution of property, economic exchange, and relations between the strong and the weak. Ancient empires, then, were not only political agencies, but provided the cultural, religious, and legal bases of society. Alongside religion they were a powerful force for the cultural integration of Middle Eastern civilization.

For ancient peoples, the empires symbolized the realm of civilization. The function of empires was to defend the civilized world against the barbarians and to assimilate them into the sphere of higher culture. For their part, the barbarians, mostly nomadic peoples, wanted to conquer empires, share in their wealth and sophistication, and win for themselves the status of civilized men. Empires commanded allegiance because they were a coalition of civilized peoples against the darkness without. They commanded allegiance because kingship was thought of as a divine institution and the king was a divinely selected agent, a person who, if not himself a god, shared in the aura, magnificence, sacredness, and mystery of the divine. The ruler was God's agent, his priest, the channel between this world and the heavens, designated by the divine being to bring justice and right order to men so that they might in turn serve God. The king thus assured the prosperity and well-being of his subjects. Magically he upheld the order of the universe against chaos.

From these earliest empires to the eve of the Islamic era, the history of the Middle East may be summarized as the elaboration and expansion of the institutions formed in this early period. While parochial communities and local cultures were a continuing force in Middle Eastern society, empires grew progressively larger, each wave of expansion and contraction bringing new peoples into the sphere of imperial civilization. Empires came and went, but the legacy of interchange of populations – the movement of soldiers, administrators, merchants, priests, scholars, and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77056-9 - A History of Islamic Societies: Second Edition

Ira M. Lapidus

Excerpt

[More information](#)

workers – left a permanent imprint of cosmopolitan culture and a heritage of shared laws, languages, scripts, and social identity.

From Sargon to Hammurapi, Middle Eastern empires were restricted to Mesopotamia, but later Hittite, Kassite, and other “barbarian” empires brought Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Iran into a common network. The empire of Assyria (911–612 BC) brought Iraq, western Iran, and, for a time, Egypt into a single state. The Achaemenid empire (550–331 BC) incorporated eastern Iran and formed the first universal Middle Eastern empire – the first to include all settled peoples from the Oxus River to the Nile and the Dardanelles.

With the destruction of the Achaemenid empire by Alexander the Great, the Middle East was divided into two empires. Iraq and Iran as far as the Oxus River belonged to the Persian or eastern empires – the Parthian empire (226 BC–AD 234) and its successor, the Sasanian empire (AD 234–634). In the west the successor states to the empire of Alexander became part of the Roman empire. The Late Roman empire, called the Byzantine empire, governed southern Europe, the Balkans, Anatolia, northern Syria, and parts of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and North Africa.

RELIGION AND SOCIETY BEFORE ISLAM

The development of more encompassing empires and empire-wide civilizations was paralleled by the transformation of religions. The earliest religions were religions of nature and place, associated with small communities. The gods of Middle Eastern peoples were, in ancient times, the gods of families, tribes, villages, and towns, but with the growing connections between peoples, universal gods came to be recognized. The gods of empires, the gods of dominant peoples, the gods of conquerors, travelers, merchants, and priests whose activities were not circumscribed by a single locality came to be worshiped over large areas. The tendency toward syncretism and unification was also expressed by the conception of a pantheon and hierarchy of gods, which allowed different peoples to share in the same universe while preserving local cults and forms of worship.

From the universal supremacy of the great gods it was but one step, an inspired leap, to the revelation that there was but one God, who was the God of the whole universe and of all mankind. The oneness of God was preached first by the prophets of ancient Israel and then, in the seventh century BC, by the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. Christianity, and later Islam, would also teach the unity of God, the universality of his sway, and the obligation of all of mankind to acknowledge his glory. The missionary force of the new ideas and doctrines, the widening net of contacts among Middle Eastern peoples, and the support of the great empires made Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity the religions of almost all peoples in the Roman–Byzantine and Sasanian empires. Some of Iraq and all of Iran adhered to the Zoroastrian religion, including its main heresies, Manichaeism and Mazdaism. Parts of Iraq and all the regions of the Byzantine empire to the west adhered

to one of the several forms of Christianity. The Coptic Church was the church of Egypt; the Jacobite was the church of Syria; the Nestorian Church prevailed in Iraq. The population of Armenia followed the Armenian Church, while the populations of Anatolia and the Balkans adhered in the main to the Greek Orthodox Church. Numerous Jewish communities and a few pagan enclaves were scattered throughout the area.

The monotheistic faiths held similar beliefs. Judaism taught that there was a single God of the universe who commanded his people, Israel, to fulfill his holy law, and who would judge them in this world and the next. Zoroastrianism held to a belief in a supreme God, Ahura Mazda, the creator of the world, a God of light and truth. The destiny of the world was thought to be decided by God's struggle with the forces of evil and darkness. Man was a part of this struggle: he had the obligation to contribute to the victory of the Good and Light by his actions and beliefs, and would be judged at the day of judgment. Zoroastrianism, like Judaism, was a religion of individual ethical responsibility. While Christianity held many similar beliefs, it was a religion of a different type. The central Christian doctrine is faith in a triune God – God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Son being the *logos*, Christ incarnate, who was crucified so that believers may be saved. Christianity has a strong ethical strand, but its central aspiration was salvation through faith in Christ from the evil and suffering that is inherent in man's nature.

Though different in orientation, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity had certain basic features in common. All were transcendental. They held that beyond the world of this life there is a higher world, the realm of the divine, to be attained either through ethical action or through faith in God. Through sacrifice, prayer, and sacrament, they sought salvation from sin and death, and entrance for men into the eternal reality beyond the ephemeral appearances of this world. Furthermore, they were universal religions, believing that God had created and continued to govern the whole universe and all men. Before God, believers are individually responsible for their faith and their ethical character. Believers are thus brothers in a common religious way of life and a common quest for salvation.

This sense of identity and the common ways of life were more than sentiments. Religious belief inspired the formation of religious associations of which the best examples were the Christian churches. A church was a spiritual and administrative hierarchy in which the highest authority in both doctrinal and organizational matters belonged to a supreme head, who communicated with the body of believers through a territorially organized hierarchy. Popes and patriarchs held supreme authority. They appointed the bishops who administered the districts called dioceses, and the bishops appointed the parish priests. The Zoroastrians had their *mobads* or fire priests, and at some time in the third century acquired a chief mobad, and thus a similar hierarchy of clergy. These hierarchies integrated different localities into a common body, and defined the doctrines and principles by which they lived.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77056-9 - A History of Islamic Societies: Second Edition

Ira M. Lapidus

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The parish implemented the church's principles at the local level. At this level Christian churches wielded considerable authority in the lives of their communicants in what we would now consider secular as well as religious matters. Church courts had jurisdiction in many areas of civil law such as family, property, commerce, and even in some matters of criminal law. The church was also an important educational institution. Bishops were sometimes the governors and administrators of the cities in which their dioceses were located. With bishops as its magistrates, a church was an organization for the management of communal life, a kind of civic corporation based on religion. The churches did not separate the secular from the religious, but religion provided the overarching concepts by which man could comprehend the social and natural universe that surrounded him, and was the institution through which the needs of worship, justice, education, and local administration could be served.

Jewish communities were also organized as the equivalent of local parishes. They also combined belief and worship with the civil administration of law, education, and charity. The heads of the Jewish communities represented them before the state authorities. Jews, however, did not have a hierarchical ecclesiastical organization, but were linked together by informal ties to and respect for the great academies of learning. Both the organized Christian churches and the decentralized Jewish communities were precedents for the later organization of Muslim religious associations.

On the eve of Islam, then, the Middle East was divided into two great realms of polity and culture, Byzantine and Sasanian, and two overlapping spheres of religious belief, Christian and Zoroastrian. Despite profound differences, the two realms of Middle Eastern civilization shared certain underlying similarities in the organization of empires, in religious beliefs, and in the structures of religious and communal life. Within each civilization, a myriad of small communities retained their social and cultural distinctiveness. Their headmen, chiefs, and elders mediated their integration into the overarching realms of common religion and empire. Religion and empire were also closely related. The empires sustained, patronized, endowed, and enforced the organized worship of the churches. The Sasanian empire, however, was by and large tolerant of the various religions under its jurisdiction while the Byzantine empire insisted on religious unity and persecuted schismatic churches. In turn the religious communities legitimized the emperors' reigns and helped govern the subjects in their name.

The two political and religious regions, with their common institutional forms, would soon be drawn into a single Middle Eastern civilization. The Arab conquests of the seventh century and the Islamic era that followed preserved the continuity of Middle Eastern institutions. Family, lineage, clientele, and ethnic communities continued, despite historical change, to be the building blocks of society. The regional ecology continued to be based upon agrarian and urban communities, and the economy functioned on the basis of marketing and money exchanges. The basic forms of state organization, including bureaucratic administration, and the predominant style of religious life, focusing upon universal and transcendental

Table 1. *Islam in world history*

Early village farming communities	c. 7000 BC
Cities	c. 3000 BC
Empires	c. 2400 BC
Axial-age and monotheistic religions	c. 800 BC
Muhammad	c. 570–632
Middle Eastern Islamic societies	622–c. 1200
Worldwide diffusion of Islam	c. 650 to present
Rise of European world empires	1200–1900
Modern transformation of Islamic societies	1800 to present

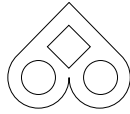
beliefs and a parish-like community organization, were also maintained. Islam, however, redefined the religious beliefs and the cultural and social identity of Middle Eastern peoples and reorganized the empires that ruled them.

This transformation took place in three main phases: first, the creation of a new Islamic community in Arabia as a result of the transformation of a peripheral region with a predominantly lineage society into a Middle Eastern type of monotheistic and politically centralized society. The second phase began with the conquest of the Middle East by this new Arabian-Muslim community, and led to the generation, in the period of the early Caliphate (to 945), of an Islamic empire and culture. Finally, in the post-imperial or Sultanate period (945–c. 1200) the institutional and cultural prototypes of the Caliphate era were transformed into new types of Islamic states and institutions. In this era Islam became the religion and the basis of communal organization of the mass of Middle Eastern peoples. In the first phase we see the emergence of Islam in a tribal society. In the second we consider Islam as it becomes the religion of an imperial state and urban elite. In the third phase we see how Islamic values and elites transformed the masses of Middle Eastern peoples.

THE PREACHING OF ISLAM

CHAPTER 1

ARABIA



On the eve of the Islamic era, Arabia stood on the periphery of the Middle Eastern imperial societies in a state of development equivalent to the ancient rather than the evolved condition of the rest of the region. Here the primary communities remained especially powerful, while urban, religious, and royal institutions, though not absent, were less developed. Whereas the imperial world was predominantly agricultural, Arabia was primarily pastoral. While the imperial world was citted, Arabia was the home of camps and oases. Whereas the imperial peoples were committed to the monotheistic religions, Arabia was largely pagan. While the imperial world was politically organized, Arabia was politically fragmented.

At the same time, Arabia was always in close contact with and strongly under the influence of the imperial regions. There were no physical boundaries between Arabia and the Middle East proper. No rigid ethnic or demographic frontier isolated Arabia from the rest of the region; nor did great walls or political boundaries. Arabian peoples migrated slowly into the Middle East and made up much of the population of the desert margins of Syria and Iraq. Arabs in the fertile crescent region shared political forms, religious beliefs, economic connections, and physical space with the societies around them. Arabia was further connected to the rest of the region by itinerant preachers, who introduced monotheism into the largely pagan peninsula; by merchants who brought textiles, jewelry, and foodstuffs such as grain and wine into Arabia and stimulated the taste for the good things of life; and by the agents of the imperial powers who intervened diplomatically and politically to extend their trading privileges, protect sympathetic religious populations, and advance their strategic interests. The Byzantines and the Sasanians disputed control of Yemen, and both were active in creating spheres of influence in North Arabia. They also exported military technique to the Arabs. From the Romans and the Persians the Arabs obtained new arms, and learned how to use armor. They learned new tactics, and the importance of discipline. This seepage of military technique came through the enrollment of Arabs as auxiliaries in the Roman or Persian