CHAPTER 3

# The Formation of a Society

## THE END OF POLITICAL UNITY

Even when the 'Abbasid caliph's power was at its height, his effective rule was limited. It existed mainly in the cities and the productive areas around them; there were distant regions of mountain and steppe which were virtually unsubdued. As time went on, his authority was caught in the contradictions of centralized, bureaucratic systems of government. In order to rule his far-flung provinces, the caliph had to give his governors the power to collect taxes and use part of the proceeds to maintain local forces. He tried to keep control of them by a system of intelligence, but could not prevent some of the governors building up their own positions to the point where they were able to hand power on to their own families, while remaining – at least in principle – loyal to the major interests of their suzerain. In this way local dynasties grew up, such as those of the Saffarids in eastern Iran (867–*c.* 1495), the Samanids in Khurasan (819–1005), the Tulunids in Egypt (868–905), and the Aghlabids in Tunisia (800–909); from Tunisia the Aghlabids conquered Sicily, which continued to be ruled by Arab dynasties until taken by the Normans in the second half of the eleventh century. As this happened, less revenue flowed to Baghdad, at a time when there was a certain decline in the system of irrigation and agricultural production in lower Iraq itself. In order to strengthen his position in the central provinces, the caliph had to rely more upon his professional army, whose leaders in their turn acquired greater power over him. In 945 one family of military leaders, the Buyids, who came from the fringe of the Caspian Sea, having seized control of some of the provinces, took power in Baghdad itself.

The Buyids assumed various titles, including the ancient Iranian title of *shahanshah* ('King of Kings'), but not that of caliph. The 'Abbasids were to remain for three more centuries, but a new phase began in their history.





From now on, effective power in the central regions of the empire lay in the hands of other dynasties supported by military groups, but they continued to recognize the caliphate of the 'Abbasids, who at times could reassert a residual authority. That authority was exercised over a more limited area than before, however, and there were some parts of the former empire where the local rulers not only had power but did not accept even the formal authority of the 'Abbasids.

In certain regions there were movements of opposition and separation in the name of some dissident form of Islam. Such movements resulted in the creation of separate political units, but at the same time they helped the spread of Islam by giving it a form which did not disturb the social order.

Some of these were movements in the name of Kharijism, or at least of one of its offshoots, that of the Ibadis. The belief that the office of head of the community or *imam* should be held by the person most worthy, who if he showed himself unworthy should be removed, was well suited to the needs of loose collections of tribal groups living in secluded places, who might need a leader or arbitrator from time to time but did not want him to have a permanent and organized power. Thus an Ibadi *imamate* emerged in Oman ('Uman) in south-eastern Arabia from the middle of the eighth until the end of the ninth century, when it was suppressed by the 'Abbasids. In parts of the Maghrib, some of the Berber population resisted the coming of Islamic rule, and when they did become Muslims Khariji ideas spread among them. For a time there was a powerful dynasty of Ibadi *imams*, that of the Rustamids, with their capital at Tahart in western Algeria (777–909); their claims were also recognized by the Ibadis in 'Uman.

More widespread were movements of support for the claims of the descendants of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib to the *imamate*. The main body of Shi'is, in and around Iraq, accepted 'Abbasid rule, or at least acquiesced in it. The *imams* whom they recognized lived quietly under the 'Abbasids, although at times they were under confinement in the capital. The Buyids were Shi'is in some vague sense, but did not challenge the suzerainty of the caliphs; this was also true of the local dynasty of the Hamdanids in northern Syria (905–1004).

There were other Shi'i movements, however, which ended in the creation of separate dynasties. The Zaydis held that the *imam* should be the worthiest member of the Prophet's family who was willing to oppose illegitimate rulers. They did not recognize Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 731), who was acknowledged by the main body of Shi'is as the fifth *imam*, but his brother Zayd instead (hence their name). They created an *imamate* in

Yemen in the ninth century, and there was also a Zaydi *imamate* in the region of the Caspian Sea.

A more direct challenge to the 'Abbasids came from movements linked with another branch of Shi'ism, the Isma'ilis. Their origins are not clear, but they seem to have begun as a secret movement with its centre first in Iraq and Khuzistan in south-western Iran, and then in Syria. It supported the claim to the *imamate* of Isma'il, the eldest son of Ja'far al-Sadiq who is regarded by the main body of Shi'is as the sixth *imam*. Isma'il died in 760, five years before his father, and the majority of Shi'is eventually recognized his brother Musa al-Kazim (d. 799) as *imam*. The Isma'ilis, however, believed that Isma'il had been irrevocably appointed as successor to his father, and that his son Muhammad had become *imam* after him. They held that Muhammad would return sooner or later as the *mahdi*, sent to disclose the inner meaning of the Qur'anic revelation and to rule the world with justice.

The movement organized missionary activities on a large scale. One group of its adherents created a kind of republic in eastern Arabia, that of the Qaramita (Carmathians), and another established themselves in the Maghrib, enlisted Berber soldiers and occupied Qayrawan. In 910 there arrived in Tunisia 'Ubaydullah, claiming to be descended from 'Ali and Fatima. He proclaimed himself caliph, and in the next half-century his family created a stable dynasty which was given the name of Fatimids after the Prophet's daughter Fatima. Both for religious and for political reasons it moved eastwards towards the 'Abbasid lands, and in 969 occupied Egypt. From there it extended its rule into western Arabia and Syria, but it soon lost Tunisia.

The Fatimids used both the titles *imam* and caliph. As *imams* they claimed universal authority over Muslims, and their state became a centre from which missionaries were sent. Long after the Fatimid state ceased to exist, communities created by those who had connections with it continued: in Yemen, Syria, Iran and later in western India.

The Fatimids were not only *imams*, but rulers of a great state with its centre in the Nile valley. Cairo was their creation, an imperial city built to the north of Fustat, and the symbol of their power and independence. Their government followed the lines set by the caliphate in Baghdad. Power was concentrated in the hands of the caliph and expressed through magnificence and elaborate ceremonial. It was the practice of the Fatimid caliphs to show themselves to the people of Cairo in solemn processions. The great officers of state would enter the hall of the palace; the caliph





would come from behind a curtain, holding his sceptre in his hands; he would mount his horse and proceed to the palace gate, where all the trumpets would sound. Preceded and followed by his entourage and soldiers, he would ride through streets adorned by the merchants with brocades and fine linen. The processions expressed both aspects of Fatimid rule. Some of them were religious, while others showed the identification of the ruler with the life of the city and the river.

The basis of Fatimid power was the revenue from the fertile lands of the Nile delta and valley, the crafts of the cities, and trade in the Mediterranean basin as well as the Red Sea. This was sufficient to maintain an army drawn from outside Egypt: Berbers, blacks from the Sudan, and Turks. The caliph made no systematic attempt to impose the Isma'ili doctrines on Egyptian Muslims, who remained for the most part Sunnis, with large Christian and Jewish populations living on the whole in peaceful symbiosis with them.

The Fatimid claim to the caliphate was a direct challenge to the 'Abbasids; another challenge, both to 'Abbasids and Fatimids, came from the far west of the Muslim world. The regions, conquered by the Arabs, Morocco and most of Spain, were difficult to control from the eastern Mediterranean, and impossible from Iraq. The Arab soldiers and officials there soon acquired interests of their own, and could easily express them in terms which revived memories of the impulse which had taken them so far from Arabia. Towards the end of the eighth century, Idris, a great-grandson of 'Ali, went to Morocco, won support there and founded a dynasty which was important in the history of Morocco, for the Idrisids built Fez and began a tradition which has lasted until today, of independent dynasties ruling Morocco and justifying their rule by claims to descent from the Prophet.

More important for the history of the Muslim world as a whole was the separate path taken by Spain, or Andalus, to give it its Arabic name. The Arabs first landed in Spain in 710 and soon created there a province of the caliphate which extended as far as the north of the peninsula. The Arabs and Berbers of the first settlement were joined by a second wave of soldiers from Syria, who were to play an important part, for after the 'Abbasid revolution a member of the Umayyad family was able to take refuge in Spain and found supporters there. A new Umayyad dynasty was created and ruled for almost three hundred years, although it was not until the middle of the tenth century that the ruler took the title of caliph.

In their new kingdom the Umayyads were involved in the same process

of change as took place in the east. A society where Muslims ruled over a non-Muslim majority gradually changed into one where a considerable part of the population accepted the religion and language of the rulers, and a government which ruled at first in a decentralized way, by political manipulation, became a powerful centralized one ruling by bureaucratic control.

Once more a new capital was created: Cordoba, lying on the river Guadalquivir. The river provided the waterway to bring the bulk goods needed for food and industry; in the plains around it, the grain and other produce the city needed were grown on irrigated land. Cordoba was also a meeting place of roads and a market for the exchange of produce between regions. Once more, as the dynasty became more autocratic it withdrew from the life of the city. The ruler moved from Cordoba to a royal city, Madinat al-Zahra, some way outside the capital. There he reigned in state, surrounded by a ruling group which included Arab and arabized families – for the separation of rulers from society was not so great as in Baghdad – but which also had an element drawn from slaves imported from the Black Sea region, Italy and elsewhere. The army too had a core of mercenaries from abroad, although it also included Arabs and Berbers settled on the land in return for military service.

As in Syria, the Umayyads, townspeople from their origins in Hijaz, used their power to further the interests of the towns and settled countryside. The cities grew – first Cordoba and later Seville – supported by irrigated land, from which a surplus was produced by techniques imported from the Near East. In these areas Arabs were important as landowners and cultivators, although much of the indigenous population remained. Beyond the irrigated plains, in the highlands, Berber immigrants from the mountains of the Maghrib lived by small-scale agriculture and the pasturing of sheep.

The movement of Berbers from the Maghrib into Spain continued longer than Arab immigration from the east, and was probably larger. In time, too, part of the indigenous population was converted to Islam and by the end of the tenth century possibly a majority of the people of Andalus were Muslims; but side by side with them lived those who did not convert, Christians and a considerable Jewish population of craftsmen and traders. The different groups were held together by the tolerance of the Umayyads towards Jews and Christians, and also by the spread of the Arabic language, which had become that of the majority, Jews and Christians as well as Muslims, by the eleventh century. Toleration, a common language and a





long tradition of separate rule all helped to create a distinctive Andalusian consciousness and society. Its Islamic religious culture developed on rather different lines from those of the eastern countries, and its Jewish culture too became independent of that of Iraq, the main centre of Jewish religious life.

It was therefore not only the interests of the dynasty but also the separate identity of Andalus which was expressed by the assumption of the title of caliph by 'Abd al-Rahman III (912–61). His reign marks the height of the independent power of the Umayyads of Spain. Soon afterwards, in the eleventh century, their kingdom was to splinter into a number of smaller ones ruled by Arab or Berber dynasties (the 'party kings' or 'kings of factions', *muluk al-tawa'if*), by a process similar to that which was taking place in the 'Abbasid Empire.

## A UNIFIED SOCIETY: THE ECONOMIC BASES

The disappearance of a unitary structure of government, in east and west, was not a sign of social or cultural weakness. By now there had been created a Muslim world held together by many links, and with many centres of power and high culture.

The absorption of such a large area into a single empire had in due course created an economic unit important not only by its size but because it linked together two great sea basins of the civilized world, those of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The movement of armies, merchants, craftsmen, scholars and pilgrims between them became easier, and also that of ideas, styles and techniques. Within this vast sphere of interaction it was possible for there to grow up strong governments, large cities, international trade and a flourishing countryside, maintaining the conditions for each other's existence.

The creation of the Muslim Empire, and then of states within its former territories, led to the growth of large cities, where palaces, governments and urban populations needed foodstuffs, raw materials for manufacture, and luxuries to display wealth and power, and where the changes and complexities of city life led to a desire for novelty and for imitation of the fashions of the powerful or the stranger. Urban demand and the relative ease of communications gave new directions and methods of organization to the long-distance trade which had always existed. Very bulky goods could not profitably be carried a very long way, and for most of its food the city had to look to its immediate hinterland; but on some goods the

return was such as to justify their being carried over long distances. Pepper and other spices, precious stones, fine cloth and porcelain came from India and China, furs from the northern countries; coral, ivory and textiles were sent in return. The Middle Eastern cities were not only consumers but producers of manufactured goods for export as well as their own use. Some of the production was on a large scale – armaments of war produced in state arsenals, fine textiles for the palace, sugar refineries and paper mills – but most took place in small workshops for textiles or metalwork.

Before the coming of the railway and then the motor-car in modern times, transport by water was cheaper, quicker and safer than by land. To feed its inhabitants it was almost essential for a large city to lie near a sea or a navigable river, and the main routes of long-distance trade too were sea-routes, in this period particularly those of the Indian Ocean. Under the 'Abbasids the main organizing centres for trade on these routes were Basra in lower Iraq and Siraf on the Iranian coast of the Gulf, both of them lying within 'Abbasid control and in a position to meet the demands of the capital. By the tenth century there was a certain shift of trade from the Gulf to the Red Sea, because of the rise of Cairo as a centre of trade and power and a growing demand from the trading cities of Italy, but this was only a beginning.

From Basra and Siraf, trade with the east was mainly carried on by Iranian, Arab or Jewish merchants, on Arab ships sailing to the ports of western India or even beyond; at one time they went as far as China, but after the tenth century they did not go further than ports of south-east Asia. They went southwards also, to southern and western Arabia and east Africa. From Basra goods could be carried by river to Baghdad, and then onwards by the Syrian desert routes to Syria and Egypt, or through Anatolia to Constantinople and Trebizond, or by the great route which went from Baghdad to Nishapur in north-eastern Iran and thence to central Asia and China. Over long distances goods were carried on camel-back in large, well-organized caravans, over shorter distances by mule or donkey. In the greater part of the Near East wheeled transport disappeared after the rise of the Muslim Empire, not to come back until the nineteenth century, and various reasons have been suggested for this: the Roman roads decayed, the new Arab ruling groups had an interest in the rearing of camels, and transport on camel-back was more economical than by cart.

Trade in the Mediterranean was at first more precarious and limited. Western Europe had not yet reached the point of recovery where it produced much for export or could absorb much, and the Byzantine Empire





tried for a time to restrict Arab naval power and seaborne commerce. The most important trade was that which went along the southern coast, linking Spain and the Maghrib with Egypt and Syria, with Tunisia as the entrepôt. Along this route merchants, many of them Jews, organized trade in Spanish silk, gold brought from west Africa, metals and olive oil. Later, in the tenth century, trade with Venice and Amalfi began to be important.

Strong governments and large cities could not live without a productive countryside, but the countryside in its turn could not flourish unless there were a strong government and cities to invest in production. In the countries conquered by the Arabs, and particularly those where there was a large Arab immigration, a new land-holding class grew up. Land which had been taken from previous owners and formally belonged to the ruler was granted to Arabs with the obligation of paying taxes; later, in the tenth century, an arrangement began to grow up by which the collection of taxes on pieces of land was given to officials or army commanders, who by this means became virtual owners and had an interest in maintaining production. To a great extent the cultivators who had been there before continued to look after work on the land, although in some places peasants and herdsmen migrated. Such evidence as exists indicates that the relations between land-holders and cultivators were those of sharecropping, in one form or another: after payment of tax, the produce was divided in agreed proportions between those who contributed the land, seed, animals and labour. There were more complicated arrangements for irrigated land, or that on which trees were to be planted.

Land-holders who accumulated money in trade or other ways could use it for agricultural production, and with the help of their capital new techniques were brought in. There is evidence that the expansion of the Muslim Empire brought new crops, or at least led to the extension of those already known. In general the movement was westwards, from China or India by way of Iran into the Mediterranean basin: rice, sugar-cane, cotton, watermelons, aubergines, oranges and lemons were cultivated over a wide area. Some of these crops needed large investment in irrigation and the improvement of land. Old irrigation works were restored, for example those in southern Iraq, and new ones made. The westward movement can be seen in Spain, which acquired the water-wheel (*na'ura*, *noria*) from Syria and the underground canal (*qanat*) from Iran; new methods of crop-rotation also came into Spain.

By such improvements the agricultural surplus was enlarged and this, together with the growth of manufacture and trade, increased the import-

ance of money in the economy of the Near East and the Mediterranean basin. An internationally recognized monetary system grew up. The flow of precious metals, and particularly of African gold, into the lands of the caliphate made possible an expansion of the coinage; the 'Abbasid gold dinar remained an instrument of exchange for centuries, and Islamic silver coins have been found in Scandinavia and in Wychwood Forest north of Oxford. Connected with the development of coinage was that of a system of credit. Large merchants would take deposits and make loans; money-lenders and tax-collectors also would use their accumulated cash for loans. Merchants who had correspondents or clients in other places would draw bills upon them or issue letters of credit.

A complex and farflung economy could not have existed without a system of shared expectations between those who had to deal with one another without personal contact or knowledge. Family ties could provide these in some instances, for example among the Jewish merchants who travelled over the Mediterranean world and beyond, crossing the frontiers between Muslim and Christian countries. If such ties did not exist, there was a need for laws or norms of social morality generally recognized. In the same way, land-holders and cultivators needed clear and accepted rules about property, the division of produce, taxation, and rights over water, trees and minerals beneath the ground.

Economic relations thus demanded a common system of behaviour, and this became possible as more and more of the population of lands ruled by Muslims became Muslims themselves, and as the implications for social life of the revelation given to Muhammad were drawn out.

## UNITY OF FAITH AND LANGUAGE

It is not easy to discover much about the stages by which the subject peoples became Muslims, but a study based on the evidence of adoption of specifically Muslim names has suggested orders of magnitude which seem plausible.[1] According to this estimate, by the end of the Umayyad period (that is to say, in the middle years of the second Islamic and eighth Christian century) less than 10 per cent of the population of Iran and Iraq, Syria and Egypt, Tunisia and Spain was Muslim, although the proportion must have been much greater in the Arabian peninsula. Apart from the Arab tribes who had already been in Iraq and Syria before the Muslim conquest, most converts may have come either from the lower ranks of society – for example, soldiers captured in battle – or from officials of the Sasanian





government who took service with the new rulers; there was no pressure or positive incentive for others to convert. The converts lived for the most part in or near the main urban centres of Arab population and power, where there were the beginnings of specifically Islamic institutions – the mosque, the law court – and it was these cities, those of Iraq and Iran, Qayrawan in Africa and Cordoba in Spain, which served as centres for the radiation of Islam.

By the end of the fourth Islamic century (the tenth century AD), the picture had changed. A large part of the population had become Muslim. Not only the townspeople but a considerable number of the rural people must have been converted. One reason for this may have been that Islam had become more clearly defined, and the line between Muslims and non-Muslims more sharply drawn. Muslims now lived within an elaborated system of ritual, doctrine and law clearly different from those of non-Muslims; they were more conscious of themselves as Muslims. The status of Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians was more precisely defined, and in some ways it was inferior. They were regarded as 'People of the Book', those who possessed a revealed scripture, or 'People of the Covenant', with whom compacts of protection had been made (the so-called Pact of 'Umar). In general they were not forced to convert, but they suffered from restrictions. They paid a special tax; they were not supposed to wear certain colours; they could not marry Muslim women; their evidence was not accepted against that of Muslims in the law courts; their houses or places of worship should not be ostentatious; they were excluded from positions of power (although in various places Jews and Christians worked as secretaries or financial officials for Muslim rulers). How seriously such rules were applied depended on local conditions, but even in the best circumstances the position of a minority is uneasy, and the inducement to convert existed.

The process of conversion was not complete, however. Jews had been excluded from the greater part of the Arabian peninsula in the early days of Islam, but they continued to be present in the great cities of other Muslim countries as merchants and craftsmen, and also as small traders in some country districts: northern Iraq, Yemen, Morocco. That they survived and flourished was due not only to the strength of their communal organization but to their being able to occupy certain economic positions in the interstices of a complex society, and also to their not being identified with any of the states with which Muslim rulers were at war from time to time.

The situation of Christians was not the same. Some had religious links

with the Byzantine Empire, and may have incurred suspicion in times of war. They did not have the same close-knit communal organization as the Jews; in parts of the countryside they may not have been deeply Christian. In some places Christianity died out completely, although not for a long time; in others it remained as the faith of a minority. In Spain a large part of the population continued to belong to the Roman Catholic Church; elsewhere, those who survived tended to belong to dissident churches which had broken off from the main body because of the great controversies in the first centuries about the nature of the Christ: Nestorians, Monophysites, Monotheletes. Christians lived not only in the cities, but in parts of the countryside, especially upper Egypt, the Lebanese mountains and northern Iraq.

The Arabic language spread together with Islam, or even before it in some places. In inner Syria and western Iraq much of the population already spoke Arabic at the time of the Muslim conquest. The new cities, with their immigrant populations and their governments dominated by Arabs, served as centres for a wider radiation of the language. It spread both as a spoken language, in various local dialects influenced by the previous vernacular languages, and as a written one in a form of which the unity and continuity were preserved by the Qur'an, the book sent down in the Arabic language.

So far as the language of speech was concerned, Arabic came up against a frontier in Iran, where use of the Persian language continued. As a written language, however, Arabic found no frontier within the world of Islam. The religion carried the language with it. Converts of non-Arab origin, and particularly Iranians, read the Qur'an in Arabic and played a large part in articulating the system of thought and law which grew out of it. Those who were not converted continued to use their own languages for religious and literary purposes: the liturgies of some of the eastern Churches still retained Syriac and Coptic; Hebrew and Aramaic were the languages of Jewish worship and religious learning; the Zoroastrian scriptures received their final shape in Pahlavi, the form of Persian used before the conquest, after the coming of Islam. Even here, however, a change took place: Arabic became a language of worship and religious literature in some of the eastern Churches; Jews in Spain came to use Arabic for philosophy, science and poetry. The first serious check to the spread of Arabic took place in the ninth century, when Persian began to emerge in an islamized form as a literary language; but in Iran too Arabic continued to be the main language of religious and legal learning.





Thus in the writing of this period words like 'Arab' and 'Arabic' take on broader meanings which overshadowed the older ones. They may refer to those whose origin lay in the Arabian peninsula, and in particular those who could claim to belong to the nomadic tribes with a military tradition; or they may be used in connection with all those, from Morocco and Spain to the frontier of Iran, who had adopted Arabic as their vernacular language; or in a sense they may extend even further, to those for whom Arabic had become the principal medium of expression of a high literary culture.

Under the Umayyads the tradition of poetic composition continued to flourish, and the most famous poets of the early period were still of Arab beduin origin: Akhtal, Farazdaq, Jarir. There was a difference, however: the patronage of courts – that of the Umayyads themselves in Damascus, but also those of powerful tribal leaders – extended the geographical range of poetry and also tended to change its nature. Panegyrics of rulers and powerful men became more prominent, and at the same time the poetry of love, the *ghazal*, acquired a more personal note.

In the later Umayyad period, and in the early period of 'Abbasid rule, a more fundamental change took place. The coming of Islam altered the way in which people looked at the Arabic language. The Qur'an was the first book to be written in Arabic, and Muslims believed it was the language in which it had been revealed. It was expressed in the high language in which the poetry of earlier times had been composed, but which was now used for a different purpose. It was essential for those who accepted the Qur'an as the Word of God to understand its language; for them, the ancient poetry was not only the *diwan* of the Arabs, it was also the norm of correct language.

Arabic was now becoming the medium of expression not only for those who came into the various regions of the empire from the Arabian peninsula, but for those of other origins who accepted the religion of Islam, or who needed at least to use the language for purposes of work or life, and in particular for the Persian and other officials who served the new rulers. The centre of literary activity moved from the oasis towns and tribal encampments to the new cities: Basra and Kufa at first, and then the new imperial capital, Baghdad. The literary milieu changed and expanded, to include the caliphs and their courts, the high officials, and the new urban élite of mixed origins. Although the practice of oral composition and recitation of poetry may well have continued, literary works began to be written down, and from the beginning of the ninth century the circulation

of written works was aided by the introduction of paper. Previously papyrus and parchment had been used, but in the later part of the eighth century the technique of making paper was brought from China. Manufactured at first in Khurasan, it spread to other parts of the empire, and by the middle of the tenth century had more or less replaced papyrus.

It was a natural effect of the spread of the Arabic language that some of those who used it should wish to understand it. The sciences of language were largely created by those for whom Arabic was an acquired tongue and who therefore had to think about it: lexicography, the collection and classification of words, was developed by scholars frequenting the market places where beduin came; grammar, the explanation of the way in which Arabic worked, was first systematically expounded by a man of non-Arab origin, Sibawayh (d. 793), from whose writings all later works were derived. The same impulse led scholars to collect and study the ancient poetry of Arabia. In the process of editing the poems they must have changed them, and at the same time formal principles of poetic composition were elaborated, and these were to have much influence upon later poets. The first important literary theorist, Ibn Qutayba (828–89), produced a description of the typical *qasida* which later poets were to take into account: the *qasida*, he suggested, should begin with the evocation of lost dwelling places and lost love, continue with the description of a journey, and culminate in the real subject, panegyric, elegy or satire.

The writings of theorists were perhaps of less importance in the development of poetry than the practice of poets of new kinds. Their poetry was more individual than that of the authors of the pre-Islamic *qasidas*. Some were of non-Arab origin, living in cities, aware of the poetic tradition which they inherited but using it with a self-conscious literary artistry. A new style grew up, the *badi'*, marked by the use of elaborate language and rhetorical figures: a rare vocabulary was used, words were set in antithesis to each other, and all was expressed within the rigid framework of metres and rhymes which had marked the earlier poetry.

The subjects of poetry were more varied than before. Poets wrote of erotic love, not simply formalized regret for the lost or forbidden beloved. Some of them took part in the religious and ethical controversies of the early Islamic centuries: a Syrian poet, Abu'l-'Ala al-Ma'arri (973–1057), wrote poems and an elaborate prose-work in which doubt was cast on generally accepted ideas about revelation and life after death.

It was natural that a special emphasis should be placed upon panegyric, the praise not so much of the poet's tribe as of the ruler or patron. In the





panegyric, the first part of what Ibn Qutayba had regarded as the typical *qasida* shrank and became simply an introduction to the main subject; the ruler or patron would be praised in elaborate and formal language, through which there might sometimes appear the personality of the poet and his feelings.

Al-Mutanabbi (915–68) was acknowledged by later literary critics as the supreme master of this kind of poetry. Born in Kufa, of Arab origin, he spent some of his early years among the Arab tribe of Banu Qalb. He passed part of his youth in political activity, and his later years as court-poet to a succession of rulers, in Aleppo, Cairo, Baghdad and Shiraz. Perhaps his most fruitful years were those during which he was poet to the Hamdanid ruler of Aleppo and northern Syria, Sayf al-Dawla. The ruler is praised in terms of hyperbole. On his recovery from illness, his poet declared:

> Glory and honour were healed when you were healed, and pain passed from you to your enemies . . . Light, which had left the sun, as if its loss were a sickness in the body, returned to it . . . The Arabs are unique in the world in being of his race but foreigners share with Arabs in his beneficence . . . It is not you alone I congratulate on your recovery; when you are well all men are well.[2]

Mingled with this, however, there is a strain of self-praise, as in a poem written when, as he thought, Sayf al-Dawla had transferred his favour to another:

> O most just of men, except in your treatment of me, my quarrel is with you, and you are both my adversary and my judge . . . I am he of whom even the blind can see what he has written, and who has caused even the deaf to listen to his words. I sleep with my eyelids closed to the words which wander abroad, while other men are sleepless because of them, and compete with each other . . . with what language do the riff-raff, neither Arabs nor Persians, proclaim their poetry before you? This is a reproach to you, but it is done with love; it is inlaid with pearls, but they are my words.[3]

The poets were continuing an old tradition, but the writing of Arabic prose was something new. the Qur'an was the first prose work composed in the high Arabic language (or at least the first which has survived), and the production of others was in a sense a natural consequence of it. Stories about the Prophet and the victories of the Arabs were collected and written down, and popular preachers created a rhetoric of Islamic themes. Rather later, a new kind of artistic prose emerged, exploring themes taken from other cultures; one of the earliest and most famous examples of this was

*Kalila wa Dimna*, a collection of moralistic fables of animal life, derived ultimately from Sanskrit by way of Pahlavi and put into Arabic prose by an ʿAbbasid official of Iranian origin, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (*c.* 720–56).

He was an example of the arabized and islamized secretaries who were bringing into Arabic ideas and literary genres derived from their own inherited tradition, but side by side with them was another group of writers who drew their inspiration from the vast world which had been brought into existence by the spread of Islam and its empire: the multiplicity of peoples and countries, the new variety of human characters, the new problems of morality and behaviour. They tried to see these in the light of the norms of the new Islamic faith, and to express them in an agreeable literary form. Among the practitioners of this new kind of literature or *adab*, al-Jahiz (776/7–868/9) stands out as a writer of exceptional range and vividness of response, expressed in an exemplary language. His roots lay in one of the African families, of slave origin, who were attached to Arab tribes but had long been completely arabized. He was brought up in Basra, but later had the patronage of the Caliph al-Ma'mun. His intellectual curiosity was far-reaching, and his works are collections of rare and interesting knowledge concerning the human and natural world: countries, animals, the oddness of human beings. Beneath it there runs a vein of moral commentary: on friendship and love, envy and pride, avarice, falsity and sincerity:

A man who is noble does not pretend to be noble, any more than an eloquent man feigns eloquence. When a man exaggerates his qualities it is because of something lacking in himself; the bully gives himself airs because he is conscious of his weakness. Pride is ugly in all men . . . it is worse than cruelty, which is the worst of sins, and humility is better than clemency, which is the best of good deeds.[4]

The *adab* which developed in the early ʿAbbasid period was intended to edify and to entertain. A *qadi* of Baghdad, al-Tanukhi (940–94), wrote three volumes of tales which are both a literary entertainment and a series of social documents about the world of ministers, judges and lesser dignitaries who surrounded the ʿAbbasid court. In the next century Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (d. 1023) wrote essays and treatises on a wide range of topics which were fashionable among the scholars and writers of his age; composed in an attractive literary style, they reveal wide knowledge and a distinguished mind. Entertainment was the main purpose of the *maqamat*: a sequence of narratives written in rhymed prose (*sajʿ*), in which a narrator tells stories of a trickster or vagabond encountered in a variety of situations.





Brought to a high peak of development by al-Hamadhani (968–1110) and al-Hariri (1054–1122), this genre was to remain popular in Arab literary circles until the twentieth century.

The record of what has happened in the past is important in all human societies, but it has a special significance in communities founded on the belief that unique events occurred at certain times and in certain places. Before the rise of Islam, Arab tribes had their own oral records of the deeds of their ancestors, and to some extent these are embodied in the poems which have come down to us from that period. In the early centuries of Islam, history acquired a new kind of importance and began to be recorded in writing. Two different kinds of historical writings developed, closely connected with each other. On the one hand, philologists and genealogists collected and wrote down the oral history of Arab tribesmen; these were not only important for the study of the Arabic language, but might also provide important evidence relevant to practical questions about the distribution of booty from the conquests or of lands in the new settlements. On the other hand, it was even more important to record the events of the Prophet's life, the early caliphs, the first conquests and the public affairs of the Muslim community. Transmitted by responsible scholars, sometimes changed or even invented in the course of political and theological controversies, embroidered by storytellers, a mass of narratives was gradually formed, and out of this several kinds of literature emerged: collections of *hadiths*; biographies of the Prophet; collections of lives of transmitters of *hadiths*; and finally works of narrative history, recording the *gesta Dei*, God's providence for His community – these contained an element of exemplary narrative, but a solid core of truth. The invention of the Islamic calendar, providing a chronology dating from the *hijra*, gave a framework within which events could be recorded.

The tradition of history-writing came to its maturity in the ninth century, with the appearance of histories of broader scope and greater power of understanding: those of al-Baladhuri (d. 892), al-Tabari (839–923), and al-Masʿudi (d. 928). Such writers took the whole of Islamic history as their subject, and sometimes the whole of what they considered to be significant human history. Thus Masʿudi deals with the annals of the seven ancient peoples whom he regards as having had a real history: the Persians, Chaldaeans, Greeks, Egyptians, Turks, Indians and Chinese. The mass of information had to be ordered: in the case of Islamic history by years, in others by such criteria as the reigns of kings. It also had to be judged by critical standards. The most obvious criterion was that provided by the

*isnad*: what was the chain of witnesses to a certain event, and how far could their testimony be trusted? There were other criteria, however: a transmitted record could be regarded as plausible or not in the light of a general understanding of how rulers acted and how human societies changed.

Another writer, al-Biruni (973–*c.* 1050), is unique in the range of his interests and understanding. His famous *Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind* (*History of India*) is perhaps the greatest sustained attempt by a Muslim writer to go beyond the world of Islam and appropriate what was of value in another cultural tradition. His work is not a polemic, as he himself makes clear in his foreword:

> This is not a book of controversy and debate, putting forward the arguments of an opponent and distinguishing what is false in them from what is true. It is a straightforward account, giving the statements of Hindus and adding to them what the Greeks have said on similar subjects, so as to make a comparison between them.[5]

Indian religious and philosophical thought is depicted at its best:

> Since we are describing what there is in India, we mention their superstitions, but we should point out that these are matters for the common people only. Those who follow the way of salvation or the path of reason and argument, and who want the truth, would avoid worshipping anyone except God alone, or any graven image of him.[6]

Ultimately, he points out, the beliefs of Hindus are similar to those of Greeks; among them too the common people worshipped idols, in the days of religious ignorance before the coming of Christianity, but the educated had views similar to those of Hindus. In one way, however, even the Hindu élite differed from Muslims:

> The Indians in our time make numerous distinctions among human beings. We differ from them in this, for we regard all men as equal except in piety. This is the greatest barrier between them and Islam.[7]

## THE ISLAMIC WORLD

By the third and fourth Islamic centuries (the ninth or tenth century AD) something which was recognizably an 'Islamic world' had emerged. A traveller around the world would have been able to tell, by what he saw and heard, whether a land was ruled and peopled by Muslims. These





external forms had been carried by movements of peoples: by dynasties and their armies, merchants moving through the worlds of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, and craftsmen attracted from one city to another by the patronage of rulers or the rich. They were carried also by imported and exported objects expressing a certain style: books, metalwork, ceramics and particularly perhaps textiles, the staple of long-distance trade.

The great buildings above all were the external symbols of this 'world of Islam'. At a later period regional styles of mosque building would appear, but in the early centuries there were some common features to be found from Cordoba to Iraq and beyond. In addition to the great mosques were smaller ones for bazaars, quarters or villages, where prayer was offered but the Friday sermon was not preached; these were likely to be built of local materials and reflect local tastes and traditions.

The mosque by now could lie at the centre of a whole system of religious buildings, the house where the *qadi* gave justice, hostels for wayfarers or pilgrims, and hospitals for the sick; to found and maintain these were works of charity enjoined by the Qur'an. There was another kind of building which played a special part in binding together the Muslim community beyond the bounds of a single city or region. This was the shrine. Certain shrines marked places of pilgrimage and prayer taken over from earlier religious traditions and given an Islamic meaning: the Ka'ba in Mecca, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the tomb of Abraham at Hebron. Side by side with them there grew up new points of attraction, the tombs of those associated with the early history of Islam. Although Muslims regarded Muhammad as a man like others, the idea became accepted that he would intercede for his people on the Day of Judgement, and Muslims would visit his tomb in Madina during the pilgrimage to Mecca. The Shi'i *imams*, particularly those who had suffered, attracted pilgrims from an early time; the tomb of 'Ali at Najaf has elements dating from the ninth century. Gradually the tombs of those who were regarded as being 'friends of God' and having powers of intercession with Him multiplied throughout the Muslim world; no doubt some of them grew up in places regarded as holy by earlier religions or by the immemorial tradition of the countryside.

A second type of building was that which expressed the power of the ruler. Among them were great works of public utility, caravanserais on the trade-routes, and aqueducts or other waterworks; in the parched countries of the Middle East and the Maghrib, to bring water to the inhabitants of the cities was an act of sound policy, and irrigation of the land was a practice

which spread with the expansion of the Arabs in the Mediterranean. It was the palaces, however, which best expressed imperial greatness: pleasure pavilions set amidst gardens and running water, emblems of a secluded paradise, and official palaces, centres of government and justice as well as of princely life. Something is known of the 'Abbasid palaces from descriptions by writers and the ruins which remain at Samarra. They were approached across open spaces for parades or games of horsemanship; within high walls, paths running through gardens led to a succession of inner gates, until at the centre there was seen the residence and offices of the caliph, and the domed hall where he held court. These buildings, signifying power, magnificence and enjoyment, and separation from the world outside, were imitated throughout the Muslim world and created an international style which endured for centuries.

In a sense, there was nothing particularly 'Islamic' about the palaces. Once more, the inclusion of so much of the world in a single empire brought together elements of different origin into a new unity. Rulers were in contact with one another beyond the world of Islam; presents were exchanged, embassies brought home marvellous stories, and ruling élites are particularly open to the desire for novelty. The decoration of the palaces expressed traditional themes of the life of princes everywhere, the battle and the hunt, wine and dancing.

These themes were used for wall-paintings, in which the figures of animals and human beings were prominent. In buildings with a religious purpose, however, figures of living creatures were avoided; although the depiction of living forms was not explicitly forbidden by the Qur'an, most jurists, basing themselves on Hadith, held that this was an infringement of the sole power of God to create life. In the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, the mosaics, made at an early period, portray the natural world and houses in a fairly realistic way, and one reminiscent of Roman wall-painting, but show them without living creatures. The walls of mosques and other public buildings were by no means plain, however. Surfaces were covered with decoration: forms of plants and flowers, tending to become highly stylized, and patterns of lines and circles intricately connected and endlessly repeated, and above all calligraphy. The art of fine writing may have been created largely by officials in the chanceries of rulers, but it had a special significance for Muslims, who believed that God has communicated Himself to many by His Word, in the Arabic language; the writing of that language was developed by calligraphers in ways which were suitable for architectural decoration. Words in endlessly varied forms, repeated or in





sentences, were blended with vegetal or geometric forms. Thus calligraphy became one of the most important of Islamic arts, and Arabic writing adorned not only buildings, but coins, objects of brass or pottery, and textiles, particularly those woven in royal workshops and given as presents. The writing was used to proclaim the glory and eternity of God, as in the inscriptions round the Dome of the Rock, or the generosity and splendour of a benefactor, or the skill of an architect.

The houses built in this period by the Muslim population of the cities have disappeared, but enough has remained of the artefacts used in them to show that some of them contained works of art similar to those in the palaces. Books were transcribed and illustrated for merchants and scholars; glass, metalwork and pottery were made for them; textiles were especially important – floors were covered with carpets, low settee-frames had textile coverings, walls were hung with carpets or cloths. All these show, on the whole, the same kind of decoration as that of religious buildings, formalized plants and flowers, geometrical designs and Arabic words. There is a lack of specifically royal themes, but the human figure is not absent, or at least not for long; ceramics made in Egypt show human figures, and manuscripts use animals and human beings to illustrate fables or depict scenes from everyday life.

By the tenth century, then, men and women in the Near East and the Maghrib lived in a universe which was defined in terms of Islam. The world was divided into the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War, and places holy to Muslims or connected with their early history gave the Abode of Islam its distinctive feature. Time was marked by the five daily prayers, the weekly sermon in the mosque, the annual fast in the month of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the Muslim calendar.

Islam also gave men an identity by which to define themselves in regard to others. Like all men, Muslims lived at different levels. They did not think of Judgement and Heaven all the time. Beyond their individual existence, they defined themselves for most daily purposes in terms of the family or broader kinship group, the herding unit or tribe, the village or rural district, the quarter or city. Beyond these, however, they were aware of belonging to something broader: the community of believers (the *umma*). The ritual acts which they performed in common, the acceptance of a shared view of man's destiny in this world and the next, linked them with each other and separated them from those of other faiths, whether living among them in the Abode of Islam or beyond its frontiers.

Within this 'world of Islam', at an intermediate level between it and the

small cohesive units of everyday life, there were identities of a kind which did not, on the whole, create such strong and lasting loyalties. Service or obedience to a dynasty, particularly if it was long-lasting, could create such a loyalty. Sharing a language too must have created a sense of ease in communication, and a kind of pride. In the eleventh century, the identification of the Arabs with Islam was still strong enough for al-Biruni, himself of Iranian origin, to say:

> Our religion and our empire are Arab and twins, the one protected by the power of God, the other by the Lord of Heaven. How often have the tribes of subjects congregated together in order to impart a non-Arab character to the State! But they could not succeed in their aim.[8]

The concept of modern ethnic nationalism, that those who share a common language should live together in an exclusive political society, did not of course exist, nor did that of the territorial nation, living in a piece of land clearly marked off from others by natural frontiers. There was, however, some consciousness of the special features of a city and its hinterland, which could express itself in Islamic terms. A study of Egypt has shown how the consciousness of its special nature persisted: its natural gifts and fertility, its place in Islamic history, its heroes, martyrs and saints. Behind this there still lived some memory of a past reaching back beyond Islam: the wonders left from the ancient world, the Pyramids and Sphinx, and the ancient shrines, rituals and beliefs of the countryside, to which men and women could still look for protection.[9]



CHAPTER 4

# The Articulation of Islam

## THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

The spread of the Arabic language to other peoples changed the nature of what was written in it, and this was shown not only in secular writing, but even more strikingly in a new kind of literature in which the meaning and implications of the revelation given to Muhammad were articulated. Those who accepted Islam found themselves faced with inescapable questions about it: questions which arose not only from intellectual curiosity but from criticisms made by Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, and still more perhaps from the need to draw out the implications of the faith for life in society. They naturally tried to answer such questions in the light of their existing stock of knowledge and their own methods of thought: that which they brought with them into their new community, or found among those who were not converted, for in the early centuries Judaism, Christianity and Islam remained more open to each other than they were later to be. Naturally too the process took place most fruitfully in those places where traditions of thought and bodies of knowledge were strongest. The change of scale and transfer of the centre of gravity which took place in the body politic of Islam had its parallel in the realm of thought. Madina and Mecca did not cease to be important, but Syria was more so, and Iraq most important of all, with its rich cultural soil of Judaism, Nestorian Christianity and the religions of Iran.

The articulation of Islam into a body of religious sciences and practice took place largely in Iraq in the 'Abbasid period, and in a sense it was a continuation of movements of thought which had begun long before the appearance of Islam, although to say this is not to imply that Islam did not give new directions to it.

The materials on which scholars and thinkers could work were of more than one kind. There was, first of all, the Qur'an. Whenever it took its final