



7 December 632

The Death of Muhammad

The Birth of Islam

*'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.
Recite! Your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who by his pen
taught man what he did not know.'*

The Koran: Muhammad's first revelation

The mystic, prophet, and former cattle driver Muhammad, founder of the Islamic faith, was born in the Arabian town of Mecca and he returned there in the year of his death. Ten years earlier local reaction against his preaching had forced him to leave Mecca and establish himself in Yathrib some 200 miles to the north – an oasis settlement which would be renamed Medina. This flight (*hejira*) would be commemorated in Islamic worship and ritual. But since Mecca was where it had all started, and since the Prophet knew that his time had come, he set out on the 'Farewell Pilgrimage'. In the valley of Arafat he delivered the speech which would be his final statement and which became celebrated as the most concise summary of his doctrine. His followers should 'Know that every Muslim is a Muslim's brother, and that the Muslims are brethren.' They should not fight each other but they should fight all others if necessary in order to win universal acceptance of the truth that 'There is no god but Allah'. The poor should be clothed and helped. Muslims had rights with regard to their women but 'they also have rights with regard to you.' 'I have accomplished my mission, and I am leaving you a guide in the shape of the Lord's book and the example of his Messenger... You will not fail if you follow this guide.' When he returned to Medina he lay down in his chamber and said: 'Oh Death, execute your orders.' The community of the faithful that he left behind would be obliged to make its own journey (the *Hadjj*) to Mecca at least once in the lifetime of a believer.

The Arabia which was the springboard for the rapid spread of Islam might have been largely a desert but it was no backwater. It connected Africa with Asia and its various settlements had a lively political tradition of independence which was maintained against Egypt and Abyssinia to the west, India to the east, and Mesopotamia as well as Persia to the north. It had a substantial cultural tradition – especially in Arabic poetry. It was also fringed by the cultural influence of the Roman empire in Egypt and by that of the Sassanian empire in Persia. The decline of both these empires by the time of Muhammad's birth created a power vacuum in the region which would be conquered, and colonized, by the armies loyal to the Prophet's message. Commerce helped the transmission of ideas and influences across Arabia since the peninsula was home to the trade routes which linked the Mediterranean, India and East Africa. Mecca itself was one of the richest of the staging posts on those caravan routes. But the town was also of religious significance with its Kaaba shrine marking the spot where Adam arrived after he had been expelled from the garden of Eden. This then was a good place in which to start a religious, political and military revolution.

The message that Muhammad had preached ever since receiving his vision in c. 610 AD was simple: there was no god but Allah and Muhammad was his prophet. Whoever said those words before witnesses who testified to his sincerity became a Muslim. Allah would judge humanity and he commanded daily religious observance, prayer, and regular fasting. There would be three fundamentals to sustain the faith: the *Koran* (*Qur'an*) which was the revelation of God's word to Muhammad by an angel; the *Sunna* or sayings and traditions ascribed to the Prophet; and the *ijma* or the common accord of the faithful as they worshipped and prayed. This simplicity contributed to the success of message. The fact that this was a strikingly radical and egalitarian movement was also important. The equality of all Muslims meant that Muhammad was critical of the local Arabian ruling elites. By insisting on the duty

of charity that rulers owed their subjects, even on the equality between soldiers and generals, Islam gave a new power and self-confidence to the socially humble. This social dimension is seen in Muhammad's role as an arbiter called upon to solve the frequent inter-tribal disputes which were brought before him in Medina. His judgements are reflected in the Koran with its detailed prescriptions about how to regulate social life, guarantee property rights and protect inheritances.

Initially, Muhammad was received with mockery and suspicion. His was an austere and monotheistic faith unsparing in its rejection of the local religious practices as mere idolatry. This kind of iconoclasm was dangerous in Mecca, a city which had become a major, and very profitable, centre of pilgrimage. Gradually, however, Muhammad started to convert the various Arab tribes to his faith. In 624 he armed some 300 of his followers and routed an army which had been sent to suppress them. And in 628, at the head of some thousand followers, he rode into Mecca, struck down the idols in the Kaaba and turned it into a shrine which followed the doctrines of the new religion. There then followed a major war of expansion as the Arabian tribes, impelled by the drought that was afflicting their peninsula, pushed their way into the adjacent areas of the Middle East.

After Muhammad's death the next *caliph* (successor) was his own father-in-law Abu Bakr Omar, who succeeded as ruler of the faithful and went on to conquer Syria and Palestine: Damascus fell in 635, followed by Jerusalem in 638. The seizure of Ctesiphon in 637 led to the fall of Persia and the submission of Egypt followed when the Byzantines abandoned Alexandria in 642. In the west Cyrene and Tripoli were captured, and the Arabs now found themselves on the frontiers of Tunisia. A fleet was built to protect Alexandria and the Arabs became the leading Mediterranean naval power.

These had been the victories of a fast moving military force. The next challenge was how to turn nomads into administrators within one generation. Towns such as Baghdad and Fostat (later Cairo) were built and the infrastructure of settled government, of law and taxation, became part of the Islamic dispensation. Initially these missionaries did not enforce conversion on their new subject peoples. Their occupation was a military one and the native religions – including Christianity and Judaism – were respected. After all Muhammad had stressed his line of spiritual descent from Abraham as the founder of a common monotheistic faith and therefore the inspiration behind all three religions.

The personal nature of Arab and Islamic leadership had bound the newly united people together but would also make that leadership vulnerable to chance and challenge. In 644 the caliph Omar was assassinated and his cousin Othman, who succeeded him, lacked Islamic fervour. Islam now wavered. Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet, killed Othman in 656 and inaugurated a new wave of religious conquest. But the establishment of a dynasty was required if these Islamic conquests were to be consolidated as an imperial power. Muawiyah, cousin of the murdered Othman, had been governor of Damascus before becoming caliph and he took a crucial step when, in a break with Arab tradition, he named his son as his successor. The Umayyad dynasty that he founded turned Damascus into an imperial city and the dynasty started to mint coins, to employ Greek and Syrian officials, and to build at the heart

of their centre of government the mosque which, named after the family, remains the most beautiful of all the religious buildings of Islam. At the start of the eighth century the dynasty had conquered Transoxania, the Indus valley and Spain – a scale of achievement that rivalled that of Alexander the Great. Less than a century after the death of Muhammad his followers had become masters of the Mediterranean from the Bosphorus to Egypt and from Palestine to Spain.

The Islamic world now comprised a string of cities and towns sustained in each case by the distinctive institutions of the *souk* where goods were bought and sold, by the *madras* where scholars communicated their knowledge, and by the *mosque* where the faith was preached. Islam would also prove to be the crucial means of survival for classical learning since it was the translation of the Greek and Latin texts into Arabic by Islamic scholars which guaranteed their preservation for later generations. If Islam guaranteed religious unity and common social institutions, it was Arabic which gave this society its common language and translation of the Koran was prohibited. This was also a materially rich civilization since it was at the heart of the most advanced economy in the world which was enriched by the trade routes of the east as well as by the corn and gold, the ivory and silk transported along the caravan routes of the Sahara and Turkestan.

Divisions about who was the genuine successor to Mohammad would arise to plague Islam. The followers of Ali, murdered in 661, declared that he was the last legitimate caliph because he was in the blood line of the Prophet. They therefore refused to accept the authority of the new Islamic rulers. Infused by a strong vein of mysticism and an emphasis on hidden meanings within the Koran, this faith became the Shiite branch of Islam, while those who followed the established order of the caliphs became part of what is known as the Sunni tradition. The nature of the caliphate itself as an institution was changing. The Umayyad dynasty was succeeded by that of the Abbasid whose power base in Baghdad became the capital of Islam in 762. It was here that the court ceremonial of the caliphate became increasingly elaborate and influenced by Persian courtly traditions. By the tenth century the caliphate would be restricted to a purely spiritual role and the world of Islam now consisted of a number of independent states governed by their own rulers. The sense, however, of an united and coherent civilization survived these political changes. For Islamic culture remained loyal to the message which had come out of the desert in the early seventh century and to the memory of the Prophet who had lived out his truth.