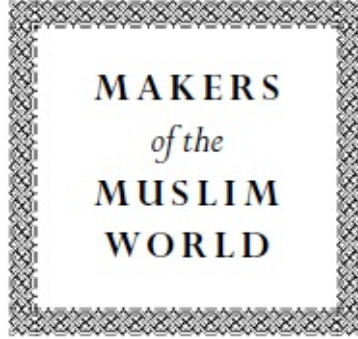


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*Chase F. Robinson*



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# ‘Abd al-Malik

CHASE F. ROBINSON



ONEWORLD

'ABD AL-MALIK

Oneworld Publications  
10 Bloomsbury Street  
London WC1B 3SR  
England

First published by Oneworld Publications, 2005  
This ebook edition first published in 2012

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A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-85168-361-1  
ebook ISBN: 978 1-78074-186-4

Typeset by Jayvee, India

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TO KAZUO

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## PREFACE

Biographers have the habit of inflating the significance of their subjects, but this biographer is certain that if any Muslim ruler deserves a book, it is 'Abd al-Malik (d. 705), to whom history owes the first Islamic state. A strong case could be made for others, but I think only the Prophet Muhammad himself exerted more influence upon the course of early Islamic history.

Whether he deserves *this* book is another matter. It assumes no familiarity with Islamic history and is written in a style that is intended to provoke the reader's curiosity. It is also short, and so I fear that those expecting a thorough survey of the life and times of its subject will be disappointed (even more so those expecting scimitars and dancing slave girls). The book is short in part because that is what this series mandates, and also in part because I have only very inadequate evidence to work with; being unsure of so much, I have opted to say relatively little. Considering how grave this problem is, I make less of it than I might have, but I still think that most readers will be struck by how frequently I am forced to wrestle with my evidence. I should also add that my interests lie not so much in politics, sectarianism and warfare, which are the principal interests of our inadequate sources, as much as they do in broader questions of state formation and empire building, about which our sources say considerably less. But in these processes 'Abd al-Malik had a crucial role. While everything I write will be new to the beginner, some of what I argue, especially concerning Ibn al-Zubayr and the construction of 'Abd al-Malik's state, will be unfamiliar to most everyone else. I have suppressed all notes, but I indicate the sources of passages quoted directly; I have also included a brief bibliography and a guide to further reading.

In theory, the history made by Muslims in the seventh and eighth centuries should be as explicable and comprehensible to non-Muslim Westerners as that made by anyone else at any other time. In practice this is not the case, since they made their history as Muslims in Arabic. Because both Islam and the Arabic language are poorly understood in the West. I have included some aids for the

uninitiated: a few illustrations, maps and charts, in addition to a chronology and glossary of names and terms. I encourage the reader to dog-ear the last of these. Although I have tried hard to minimize the number of these names and terms, I have not always succeeded.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Patricia Crone, Amikam Elad, Matthew Gordon, Andrew Marsham, John Robinson, Adam Silverstein and Lesley Smith for commenting and criticizing all or parts of what follows, to Christopher Melchert for exchanging and improving ideas, to Victoria Roddam for exercising patience and answering production queries, and to the Board of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Oxford for defraying some costs.

Pictures: [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) courtesy of the Creswell Archive, Oxford; [here](#) courtesy of J. Johns; [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) courtesy of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; [here](#) © Peter Sanders Photography Ltd; [here](#) courtesy of Amikam Elad.

## GLOSSARY

- ‘Abd al-‘Aziz** Brother of ‘Abd al-Malik; governor of Egypt.
- Abu Bakr** First caliph (r. 632–634).
- ‘Abi** Cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad; fourth caliph (r. 656–661).
- ‘Abi b. Sa‘id** Rival of ‘Abd al-Malik’s.
- Ansār** ‘Helpers’ – those who lived in Medina and supported Muhammad there.
- ‘Abi b. Marwan** ‘Abd al-Malik’s brother; governor of Iraq from 692–4.
- Companion** Contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad.
- ‘Abi Razdaq** Poet (d. c. 730).
- Fitna** Civil war.
- ‘Abi Hadith** Prophetic sayings and traditions.
- ‘Abi Hajjaj b. Yusuf** Governor in Iraq and then the East for ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Walid from 693.
- ‘Abi Jaz** The part of western Arabia where Mecca and Medina are located.
- ‘Abi al-Ash‘ath** Commander and rebel.
- ‘Abi al-Zubayr** Companion of the Prophet and caliph (r. 683–692).
- ‘Abi Imam** Leader endowed with religious authority.
- ‘Abi Jihad** fighting on behalf of God; holy war.
- ‘Abi Kharijites** Sectarian rebels against Umayyad rule.
- ‘Abi al-‘Arwan** ‘Abd al-Malik’s father and eponym of Marwanids.
- ‘Abi al-‘Arwanids** Family of the clan of Umayyads named after ‘Abd al-Malik’s father.
- ‘Abi Muhammad** The Prophet (b. c. 570; d. 632).
- ‘Abi Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya** Son of ‘Ali.
- ‘Abi Muhammad b. Marwan** ‘Abd al-Malik’s brother; governor of northern provinces.
- ‘Abi al-‘Awiya** Governor in Syria for ‘Uthman and then caliph (r. 661–680).
- ‘Abi al-Hajirun** ‘Emigrants’ – those who emigrated with Muhammad from Mecca to Medina.
- ‘Abi al-Tukhtar** Rebel during the Second Civil War.
- ‘Abi al-‘Ab b. al-Zubayr** Brother of Ibn al-Zubayr; governor of Iraq.
- ‘Abi al-‘Abib b. Yazid** Kharijite rebel in Iraq.

**Umayyads** Family of the clan of Umayyads who ruled before the Marwanids.

**Abd al-Malik** Second caliph (r. 634–644).

**Abd al-Malik** Third caliph and first Umayyad to rule (r. 644–656).

**Abd al-Malik** 'Abd al-Malik's son and successor as caliph (r. 705–715).

**Abd al-Malik** Mu'awiya's son and successor as caliph (r. 680–683).

## CHRONOLOGY

- 645 Birth of 'Abd al-Malik
- 661 Accession of the caliph Mu'awiya in Syria
- 680 Death of Mu'awiya; succession of his son, Yazid; death of 'Ali's son, al-Husayn
- 683 Civil war begins; Battle of Harra; death of Yazid
- 684 Acclamation of Marwan as caliph in Jabiya
- 685 Acclamation of 'Abd al-Malik as caliph; al-Mukhtar rebels in Iraq against Ibn al-Zubayr
- 689 Defeat and execution of 'Amr b. Sa'id in Syria
- 692 Siege of Mecca; defeat and death of Ibn al-Zubayr; civil war ends; 'Abd al-Malik's reign begins
- 693 al-Hajjaj appointed governor of Iraq
- 695 Rebellion by the Kharijite, Shabib b. Yazid, in Iraq; 'Abd al-Malik campaigns against the Byzantines
- 699 Rebellion of Ibn al-Ash'ath in the east
- 703 Construction of city of Wasit

**705** Death of 'Abd al-Malik and succession of his son, al-Walid

**714** Death of al-Hajjaj

**715** Death of al-Walid and succession of his brother, Sulayman



# INTRODUCTION

## *Jerusalem in 692*

Sitting atop the Temple Mount in East Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock is an octagonal building that features two ambulatories (walkways), which circle a sacred stone. Covered in marble mosaics and topped by a radiant, gilded dome, it is arguably the most beautiful example of religious architecture in the Middle East or Mediterranean world, and unarguably one of a small handful of buildings of special importance to virtually all Muslims of all periods.

Why this is so relates in some way to the stone around which it was built. Exactly what this stone meant to early Muslims is very hard to know, but by later periods it had clearly become associated with a verse in the Qur'an, which describes some kind of miraculous, single-night journey that God had the Prophet Muhammad take from his home in Mecca to Jerusalem. As Qur'an 17:1 puts it, "Glory be to Him Who transported His servant by night from the 'Masjid al-Haram' (identified by tradition as the religious sanctuary in Mecca) to the 'Masjid al-Aqsa' (identified as the sanctuary in Jerusalem), which we have surrounded with blessing, in order to show him one of Our signs." Jerusalem accordingly became immensely important. As one twelfth-century historian put it, "The most holy spot on earth is Syria; the most holy spot in Syria is Palestine; the most holy spot in Palestine is Jerusalem; the most holy spot in Jerusalem is the Mountain (the Temple Mount); the most holy spot on the Mountain is the place of worship; and the most holy spot on the place of worship is the Dome" (van Ess, 89). As a native of Damascus, this particular historian may have been partial to Syria and Palestine, but we should have no doubt that along with Mecca and Medina, the Dome of the Rock occupies a specially privileged place in the sacred geography of Islam.

Unlike Muhammad's mosque in Medina or the Ka'ba in Mecca (the square building at the centre of the sanctuary), which are the two other crucial coordinates in this geography, the Dome of the Rock tells the story of its

construction. The very brief story is given in an inscription written in a mosaic band encircling the outer face of the building's octagonal arcade, about ten meters from eye level. Provided that visitors are equipped with binoculars and good Arabic, they can decipher this 240-meter long inscription for themselves. The crucial section reads: "al-Ma'mun, commander of the believers, built this dome, may God accept [it] from him and be pleased with him, in the year 72." This being an Islamic building, "year 72" means the 72nd year after Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina, which took place in 622 of the Common Era; according to our calendar, the year began in early June of 691 and ended in late May of 692. By this time, Muhammad had been dead for sixty years, the polity he left behind having been led first by four close Companions (contemporaries of his) and then by the short-lived Sufyanid branch of the Umayyad dynasty, which ruled from 661 to 683.

But there is something awry in the inscription. Al-Ma'mun was indeed a "commander of the believers" – that is, a caliph, the political and religious leader of the Islamic polity – and one who is well known to have patronized building projects. Still, he was a member of the Abbasid dynasty of caliphs that had made Iraq their capital, and he ruled from 813–33 – some 125 years after the foundation date of 72/691–2. Either the caliph or the date must therefore be wrong.

The evidence casts doubt on the former. All the literary and historical evidence credits the building to the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, who is conventionally said to have ruled from 65–86/685–705. We shall see in chapter 2 that this dating convention is misleading, but here it is enough to know that the dates nicely overlap with the "year 72" of our inscription. In fact, over eighty years ago a scholar managed to show that the name "al-Ma'mun" was not original to the mosaic, but had been added by a later hand. The original inscription must have read: "'Abd al-Malik, commander of the believers, built this dome, may God accept [it] from him and be pleased with him, in the year 72." So although al-Ma'mun had a hand in restoring the Dome of the Rock, it was 'Abd al-Malik who actually built it, producing what would turn out to be the earliest Islamic building that survives to our day in something close to its original, seventh-century form (the original forms of both the Ka'ba and the Prophet's house in Medina have been lost to serial reconstruction). There being relatively little evidence that is contemporary or near contemporary to the reign of 'Abd al-Malik or even the seventh century, this very beautiful building is of extraordinary value to students of early Islamic politics, art, architecture, epigraphy, belief and scripture. It will accordingly loom large in this small book.

## WHEN AND WHY THE DOME?

Our inscription allows us to say that the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik “built” the Dome of the Rock in 72, but what does this mean? The question of *when* the Dome of the Rock was built is closely related to *why* it was built and thus how it was intended to be used.

Foundation inscriptions usually record the date of a given building’s completion, but they occasionally memorialize the moment when construction began: nowadays, such an event is marked by bigwigs wielding ceremonial shovels. This has been argued in the case of the Dome of the Rock, against the conventional wisdom that 72 marks construction’s end. (It has even been argued that the building was put up by an earlier caliph, Mu‘awiya, but virtually no one follows this dating.) Much turns on the events of 72/691–2. To see how, we must back up to the early 680s.

‘Abd al-Malik was acclaimed as caliph by some Syrians in 685, but this was in the midst of a civil war that had been sparked in large part by the failure of the Umayyad dynasty to produce a worthy heir to Mu‘awiya, who had reigned from 661 to 680. Umayyad authority faltered during the reign of his son Yazid (r. 680–3): in early 683, the Umayyads’ hold on the Hijaz was tenuous, and in 685 it was difficult for them to assert any real control even within Syria, which had long been their base of power. By this time, many Muslims had abandoned the Umayyads and had settled upon a caliph named Ibn al-Zubayr, who ruled from Arabia. Before mounting an effective attack upon the caliph in Arabia, ‘Abd al-Malik first had to address problems in his home region. Suffice it to say here (and we shall say more in chapters 1 and 2), the campaigns outside of it that followed were hard and long, and it was only in November of 692 that ‘Abd al-Malik’s trusted commander, al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf, defeated the caliph, ‘Abd Allah Ibn al-Zubayr. The civil war had come to an end, and year 72 would come to be called the “Year of the community,” signalling the polity’s return to unity. Conventional histories present this event as marking the re-unification of the state; I shall argue that it marks the effective beginning of the state.



[Dome of the Rock, \(a\) general view](#)



[Dome of the Rock, \(b\) inscription band](#)

One explanation for the Dome, which holds that 72/691–2 marks its completion, anchors its construction in the events of this still-raging civil war. According to this interpretation, which finds support in a number of relatively early histories, the war between the Marwanids (the clan of Umayyads that took its name from ‘Abd al-Malik’s father) and the Zubavrids (that is. Ibn al-Zubayr

and his brothers) had made it either impossible or undesirable for Syrians to carry out the ritual obligation of the Hajj – the Pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina in Arabia. According to this reading, ‘Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock as an alternative pilgrimage site. One guess holds that the building works took about three years to complete, and, as it happens, the resulting date of 69 (where one arrives by subtracting three years from the inscription date of 72) is actually mentioned by one of the accounts that supports this interpretation, in this case a thirteenth-century historian, here citing late eighth- and early ninth-century authors: “We have already said that ‘Abd al-Malik began to build it in the year 69. According to al-Waqidi (an historian who died in 823), the reason for its construction was that Ibn al-Zubayr had then taken control of Mecca and, during the Pilgrimage season, he used to catalogue the vices of the Marwanid family, and to summon (the people) to pay homage to him (as caliph). He was eloquent, and so the people inclined towards him. ‘Abd al-Malik, therefore, prevented the people from performing the Pilgrimage” (Elad, ‘Dome’, 34, slightly modified). According to this interpretation, the Dome of the Rock thus reflects intra-Muslim politics.

There are alternative interpretations, however. These explain the Dome of the Rock by adducing not intra-Muslim politics, but inter-monotheistic polemics. Whatever one makes of the precise timing of the Dome of the Rock’s construction and how it relates to Ibn al-Zubayr’s control of the Meccan sanctuary, one must account for the fact that ‘Abd al-Malik chose to site his building not merely at the heart of the Holy Land, but upon the Temple Mount – that is, Judaism’s most sacred spot. Why build there, in Jerusalem, instead of in Damascus, where Mu‘awiya had ruled and most accounts have ‘Abd al-Malik spending much of his time? Might it be that he was deliberately emulating the Temple building of the prophet Solomon, who is mentioned more than a dozen times in the Qur’an, and after whom he would name a son? That may be farfetched, but one need not go so far as those who suggest that ‘Abd al-Malik’s intention was to rebuild Solomon’s Temple to see in this project an attempt to appropriate the Holy Land symbolically. Damascus may have been an effective political capital, but ruling the Holy Land required making Jerusalem visually Islamic.

After two generations of Islamic rule (the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem is usually dated to 638), during which time Christians and Jews had little reason to think that Arab-Muslim rule was anything more than a temporary reversal of fortune, Muslims were now laying permanent claims to the land. These designs can be discerned not only in the building’s location on the Temple Mount. Its elaborate iconography (crown designs in the mosaic decoration can be taken to

symbolize rulers defeated by Muslim armies) and the lengthy inscription (which is frequently fiercely anti-Christian in tone) may be part of the same pattern. “O People of the Book,” one section of the inscription reads, “do not exaggerate in your religion and say only the truth about God. The messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and His word which He committed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and do not say ‘three’; refrain, it is better for you” (Hoyland, 698). Trinitarian Christianity had been eclipsed by strictly monotheist Islam, and the Byzantine emperors’ rule of Syria by the caliphs.

The Dome of the Rock lends itself to a variety of other readings too, some more plausible than others. What should become clear during the course of this book is that ‘Abd al-Malik’s ambitions as ruler were as grand and radical as the design and execution of the Dome of the Rock. As we shall see, the 680s and 690s saw innovations in the office of the caliphate, in the army and the bureaucracy, which not only transformed a conquest polity into an empire, but also introduced and disseminated the idea of the “Islamic state” itself. It would be the vision of ‘Abd al-Malik and his court – particularly a vision of sacral kingship and of an empire, which, founded upon monotheism and bureaucracy, drew upon late antique traditions – that would condition and in some respects determine the conduct of politics for the subsequent two hundred years.

It is true that not all is change. Just as the mosaic work on the Dome of the Rock recalls Byzantine and Sasanian themes, so, too, were there continuities in state- and empire building: ‘Abd al-Malik was not the first Muslim to build upon the Temple Mount, and some of his ideas about the caliphate may have been anticipated by Mu‘awiya and Ibn al-Zubayr, ‘Abd al-Malik’s great rival during a civil war. All manner of local traditions continued, virtually unaffected by the fact that Muslim rather than Byzantine or Sasanian tax agents collected taxes or tribute. Some 1300 years after the events in question, it must also be conceded that we cannot know how much of the change effected during ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign began with him or with his ruling elite, however widely or narrowly we may wish to define it. We cannot capture ‘Abd al-Malik’s thinking. Here, as in many other respects, our evidence fails us.

All of this said, innovations on this scale could hardly have taken place over ‘Abd al-Malik’s objections, and there can be little doubt that the change was in fact radical in character. By the time of his death in 705, the caliphate had been changed almost beyond recognition. Arabic, long the language of barbarians and only recently revealed as the language of God, was becoming the language of empire; and Islam, born in Arabia only two generations earlier, had become the religion of empire, which, though based in Syria, was expanding further east and

west. 'Abd al-Malik, once rebel, then restorer of Umayyad power and father of four caliphs to follow, had ruled at the centre of this empire, God's agent and architect of the first Islamic state.

## ‘ABD AL-MALIK AND THE MARWANIDS

Muhammad b. ‘Abd Allah was born in the western Arabian town of Mecca in about 570, and there, perhaps first in 610, he began to receive revelations from God, who was telling him to preach monotheism to the pagan Arabs. In the end, the message did not go down well in Mecca, and within a decade the town’s polytheist establishment had forced him to flee to the neighbouring town of Yathrib, where he had much more success. Indeed, history was on his side. From there – the “Prophet’s city” or “Medina,” as it came to be known – he carried out a series of raids and battles that expanded his authority over much of the Arabian Peninsula, including the conquest of Mecca in 629 or 630. In 632 he died suddenly in Medina, which he had made the capital of his small polity.

In his time Muhammad was charismatic, persuasive, pragmatic and principled; he commanded respect and inspired followers. And after his death he continued to exert enormous authority over how Muslims saw the world and themselves – so much so, that by the ninth century his conduct had come to function paradigmatically for the law. For Muslims of that and subsequent periods, the law consisted of what God had said in the text assembled out of His revelations to Muhammad (the Qur’an) and what Muhammad had said and done as recorded in collections of Traditions (the *hadith*) – tens of thousands of them. How does one effect a marriage contract? How much does a daughter inherit? Who is subject to taxation? How does one pray? Answers could be found in Prophetic Traditions. Now there is little clear evidence that the first generations of Muslims thought that the law had to be based on Prophetic Traditions or that these Traditions existed in any number, but it is impossible to imagine a variety



of Islamic belief in any period that was not informed in one way or another by a memory of who Muhammad was and what he had done.

This was certainly the case for seventh- and eighth-century Muslims – and not just because the memory of the Prophet was still fresh for them. It was also because seventh-century history was so contentious and the stakes so high. For Muhammad had made some steep demands on behalf of God, and he succeeded only in the face of some very fierce opposition, first within Mecca and, after his emigration to Medina, outside of it too. In later centuries, conquest generally led only indirectly to conversion, with the result that most Islamic states through the tenth and eleventh centuries governed large (and frequently majority) non-Muslim populations. But the demands were greater early on, when Muhammad was preaching amongst the pagan Arabs of the Peninsula. Muhammad may frequently have been diplomatic, but his message of radical monotheism was uncompromising: he insisted on nothing less than obedience to God, and what this meant in practice was declaring God's oneness, acknowledging his prophecy, and signalling this acknowledgment by paying a tribute of one kind or another to him or one of his representatives. (This distinction between the fate of the pagan Arabs of the Peninsula, for whom conversion was required, and that of non-Arabs outside of it, for whom it was not, came to be expressed in a Prophetic Tradition that "No two religions shall meet in the Arabian Peninsula" – a good example of the Prophet being made to articulate the law.)

Conversion to Islam was thus an expression of belief and an act of politics. Some tribesmen had the very good sense to ally themselves with Muhammad and his movement early on; others did not. But whatever the individual circumstances – and these could vary greatly, with some individuals coming into fantastic wealth, others into ignominious disgrace – the decision had lasting consequences. For the speed and enthusiasm with which one converted to Islam, in addition to one's subsequent conduct alongside and after Muhammad, went a long way towards determining the social status one's descendants would enjoy in early Islamic society. Simply put, the earlier and more committed the conversion, and the more one's forebears distinguished themselves in the cause of Islam, the better. Those who had converted in Mecca and joined Muhammad in Medina were called the "Emigrants" (*muhajirun*), and those who converted in Medina, the "Helpers" (*ansar*); the words are capitalized because they are technical terms that denoted high-status Muslims, this status being inheritable. Military service, which meant hazarding all on behalf of Islam, was similarly influenced by this idea of "precedence:" those who joined conquest armies early on were paid at higher rates than those who joined later, and their descendants would continue to claim the privilege. Little social status now attaches to

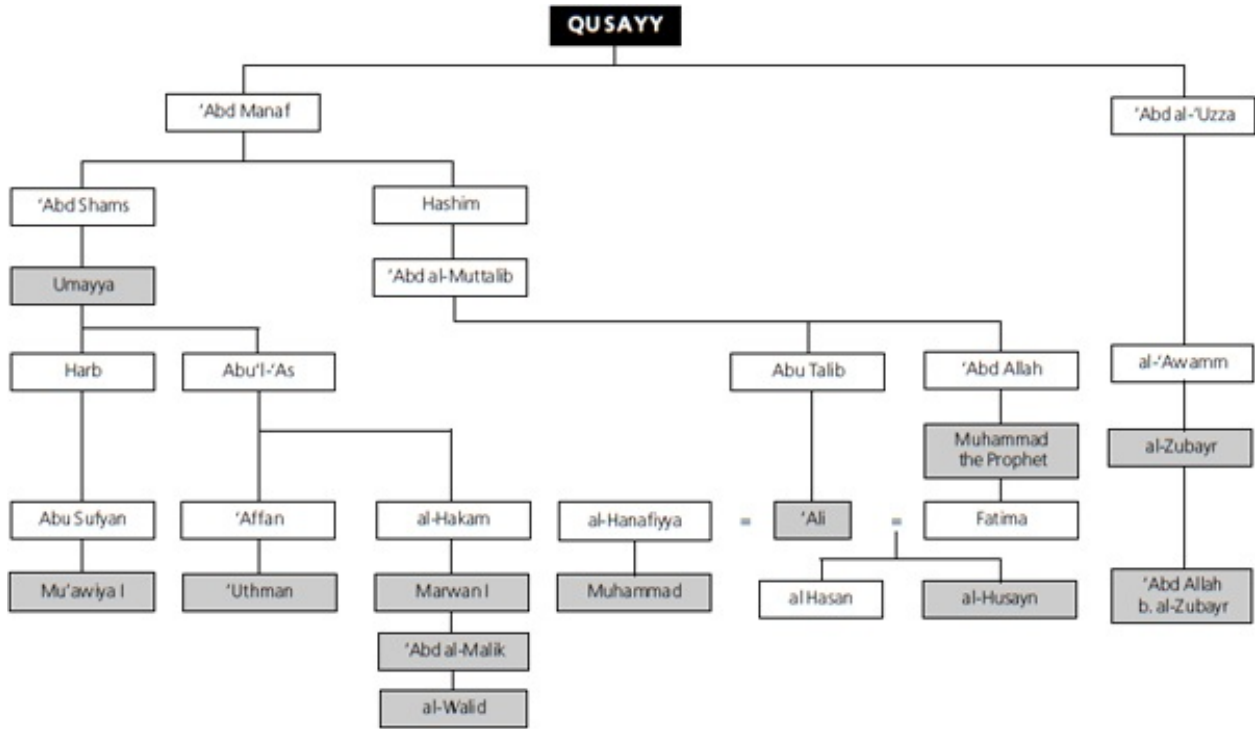
membership in the “Daughters of the American Revolution,” at least outside of 200,000 women who claim direct descent from those who aided or served in the American Revolution; much more attached to early Muslims who could claim to descend from distinguished participants in Islam’s founding moments.

An apposite example of a high-status Muslim of the seventh century is a figure named Ibn al-Zubayr, about whom much more will be said in the next chapter. Like ‘Abd al-Malik and Muhammad himself, Ibn al-Zubayr was a member of the Quraysh, the leading tribe of seventh-century Mecca, and the tribe from which all caliphs were to be drawn. Because tribes were large, effective kinship groups were actually smaller sub-lineages, which can be called clans; whereas Muhammad belonged to the clan of the Hashim and ‘Abd al-Malik to the Umayyad clan, Ibn al-Zubayr belonged to the ‘Abd al-‘Uzza clan. As a member of the Quraysh, Ibn al-Zubayr thus enjoyed a very advantageous tribal affiliation.

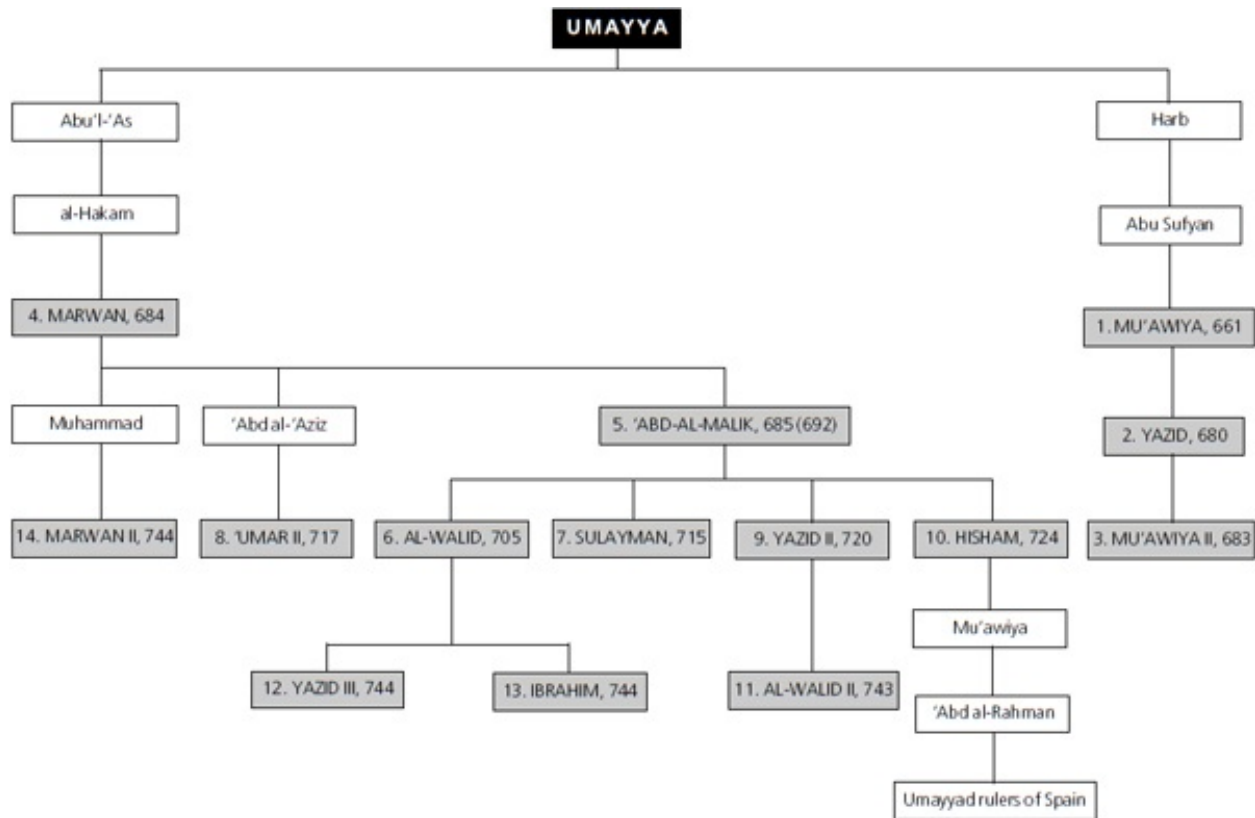
Even so, there were lots of Qurashis, and what made Ibn al-Zubayr special were his flawless credentials as an early and committed Muslim. Ibn al-Zubayr had had the great fortune to have been born in about 624, some eight years before Muhammad’s death. The timing was doubly significant. First, he could be counted amongst those old enough to remember Muhammad’s words and deeds. He was thus a Companion of the Prophet, and although we cannot be sure if this term was in operation in this sense in the seventh century, we can still be sure that having direct memory of Muhammad meant a great deal. Just as there were lots of Qurashis, so were there lots of Companions, however, and this takes us to the second respect in which the timing of Ibn al-Zubayr’s birth was significant. Just as the first caliph Abu Bakr (r. 632–4) was reckoned by many to have been the first male to convert to Islam, so was Ibn al-Zubayr often considered to have been the first child born to the Emigrants. In other words, he enjoyed pride of place in that first generation of Muslims who were born under the new dispensation. As a young man, he is also said to have campaigned in Syria, participating in the early and pivotal battle at Yarmuk (636), where a Byzantine army was routed.

Ibn al-Zubayr thus had timing going for him. He had something more. He had been born to al-Zubayr, who was one of the Prophet’s closest Companions, and to Asma’, who was a daughter of none other than the caliph-to-be Abu Bakr, and a sister of ‘A’isha, one of Muhammad’s leading wives. The connection between Ibn al-Zubayr’s family and ‘A’isha was political as well as familial. Al-Zubayr had joined ‘A’isha in leading a rebellion against ‘Uthman, the third (and first unpopular) caliph. In fact, Ibn al-Zubayr himself participated in that rebellion, which, though unsuccessful in the end, enjoyed wide support. He later returned

to Medina, where he spent the next twenty-odd years in disdainful opposition to the rule of Mu‘awiya (‘Uthman’s successor), before making a claim to the caliphate during the Second Civil War. In sum, propitious timing and favorable circumstances of birth, followed up by political acuity, made for an imposing combination: Ibn al-Zubayr was a paragon of early Islamic belief and action.



[The Quraysh \(principal figures are shaded\).](#)



[The Umayyads \(caliphs shaded\).](#)

Comparing ‘Abd al-Malik’s background with that of Ibn al-Zubayr is instructive because the latter, though highly credentialed in Islamic terms, was in the end a political dead end. Both were members of the Quraysh, but ‘Abd al-Malik came from the Umayyad clan, which was very powerful on the eve of Islam. Indeed, it was precisely their prestige and power that explained the Umayyads’ initial resistance to Muhammad and his ideas. (Above I wrote that precedence went “a long way” towards determining social status in early Islam; it did not go all the way because pre-Islamic ideas of kinship – belonging to higher or lower prestige tribal lineages – also continued to matter a great deal in early Islam.) And compared to Ibn al-Zubayr’s, ‘Abd al-Malik’s credentials as a Muslim were weak.

Whereas Ibn al-Zubayr’s father embraced Islam, ‘Abd al-Malik’s forefathers opposed it. His maternal grandfather, Mu‘awiya b. Mughira, was apparently executed for his opposition to Muhammad, while others were sent into exile; such was the case of al-Hakam, his paternal grandfather, who only converted when Mecca fell to Muhammad, and perhaps also Marwan, ‘Abd al-Malik’s father, who would be known as “exiled son of an exile.” Whereas Ibn al-Zubayr was a Companion of the Prophet, ‘Abd al-Malik himself was born in Medina twenty-five or twenty-six years after the Hijra (there are conflicting reports) and

twenty-five or twenty-six years after the Hijra (there are conflicting reports), and he could claim none of the status that came with having known the Prophet or having participated in the early and glorious conquests. As a fifteenth-century historian puts it, "If one holds the opinion that precedence of conversion to Islam is the sole factor conferring a right to the caliphate, then the Banu Umayya (the Umayyads) have no recorded ancient claim of conversion and no participation in any celebrated battle of early Islam to their credit" (al-Maqrizi, 43). Finally, whereas Ibn al-Zubayr was associated from an early age with pious opposition against what came to be regarded as iniquitous Sufyanid rule, 'Abd al-Malik was complicit in it. We read that at the age of ten, 'Abd al-Malik was by the side of the first Sufyanid caliph, 'Uthman, when he was murdered by rebels.

That 'Abd al-Malik overcame these disadvantages says something about his and his family's determination and resourcefulness. What follows tries to explain both.

## **THE MARWANID BACKGROUND**

Early Islamic politics and institutions were conditioned by kinship ties – ties through blood, marriage and adoption – that made individuals into members of families, clans and tribes; they were especially so in the first century, when tribalism remained potent amongst the conquering Arabs. To convert to Islam initially required joining an Arab tribe; which conquest army one joined and where in a garrison city one settled depended to a large degree on one's tribe; the office of the caliphate itself was held only by members of the Quraysh tribe. In general, the smaller the lineage unit, the stronger the ties, so the bonds of families were stronger than those of clans, and those of clans stronger than tribes. (Disputes amongst the tribe of the Quraysh were the rule of early Islamic politics; but these were altogether less frequent within its Sufyanid and Marwanid clans, these being altogether smaller.) Tribesmen could lose contact with each other through settlement and migration, the result being the erosion or complete loss of that sense of belonging; but members of the same family, even if a large one, had a stronger sense of belonging. Knowing each other much better, they usually worked much harder on each other's behalf.

Little wonder then that although the Prophet's first successors were chosen by acclamation and election, it took no more than four caliphs for the principle of hereditary succession to establish itself, with Mu'awiya's appointment of his son Yazid. Fathers were almost always followed to the throne by sons, but there were occasional exceptions. Mu'awiya would be succeeded as caliph by a son and grandson 'Abd al-Malik would succeed his father Marwan as caliph but

and grandson. 'Abd al-Malik would succeed his father, Marwan, as caliph, but we shall see that there was some controversy about this (it seems that Marwan himself had stipulated that a second son, 'Abd al-'Aziz, should succeed 'Abd al-Malik, but since 'Abd al-'Aziz predeceased 'Abd al-Malik, the way was cleared for the latter to appoint his own son, al-Walid). 'Abd al-Malik would be succeeded by no fewer than four sons.

So kinship was important. So, too, were large families. In the pre-modern Middle East, large families functioned as signs of status and wealth, as hedges against the perils of life, and as currency for political exchange through intermarriage. The larger the family, the better. 'Abd al-Malik's was big, but not exceptionally so by the standards of the day. By one reckoning, his grandfather al-Hakam fathered twenty-one sons and eight girls, and his father, Marwan, had some ten sons and two daughters. Children were produced not only by wives, who, during the course of a man's life, often exceeded four in number (the maximum allowed at any one time by Islamic law), but also by concubines, whose children enjoyed full legal rights. (Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya, an important figure of the Second Civil War, was a son of a concubine of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law.) 'Abd al-Malik was the issue of his father's marriage with 'A'isha b. Mu'awiya b. al-Mughira, who was an Umayyad, but his father also forged marriage alliances with other tribes, such as the Kalb, who were especially important in the Umayyads' home in Syria, as well as with descendants of 'Ali. Of all of 'Abd al-Malik's siblings, it seems that he only had one full brother and sister of any note. According to our earliest biography, the caliph would himself father eighteen children by six wives and an unspecified number of concubines. (He is given to have had views on the respective virtues of different kinds of concubines: "He who wishes to take a slave girl for pleasure, let him take a Berber; he who wishes to take one to produce a child, let him take a Persian; and he who wishes to take one as a domestic servant, let him take a Byzantine"; al-Suyuti, 251). All of his marriages were in one way or another political, the most striking perhaps being his union with a daughter of 'Ali, whose family would produce a long string of figures actively or passively opposed to Umayyad rule.

Of the circumstances of 'Abd al-Malik's birth and early childhood we know disappointingly little. The paucity of solid information has a double explanation. First, our sources reflect social attitudes that, unlike ours, did not hold childhood to be a formative influence upon the adult personality: this means that the early and private life of a caliph-to-be was neither remembered accurately nor transmitted carefully. Second, insofar as the Umayyads attracted any attention in the first half-century of Islam, it was the Sufyanid branch, which produced Mu'awiyah and his sons, that did so. During the reigns of Abu Bakr and 'Umar,

the Marwanids seem to have kept their heads low (here it must be recalled that theirs had been an inglorious reception of the Prophet's message). The family's fortunes changed when their kinsman 'Uthman, who was to become notorious for his nepotism, became caliph in 644. It was 'Uthman who seems to have rehabilitated his cousin Marwan, who had been disgraced by his late and opportunistic conversion, giving him a gift of some 100,000 silver coins; this nepotism extended to other members of the Marwanid house (including the father, al-Hakam). During 'Uthman's reign, Marwan campaigned in North Africa, where he took what must have been a large share of plunder. Later, during the reign of his kinsman Mu'awiya, he would have the opportunity for further enrichment when he was appointed to provincial posts in Iran and Arabia, before serving as governor of Medina twice, first in the 660s and again in the mid 670s. At some point in this period the caliph granted him an estate of palm-groves in Fadak, a town that lay a two- or three-day journey from Medina. The spoils of war, the graft and gift that came with governorships, and land thus formed the basis of early Marwanid wealth.

Just as nepotism brought the Marwanids into service for the Sufyanids – and all the wealth that such service produced – so, too, did it bring 'Abd al-Malik his first appointment. We read that already during the reign of 'Uthman he had worked as a secretary (a term used here in the elevated sense of “secretary of state”) in his hometown of Medina, and his father would appoint him governor of the Arabian town of Hajar. At this point he was apparently still a teenager, an age that was precocious by modern western standards rather than medieval Islamic ones, since the age of majority was reached when a male could wield a sword in battle – usually about twelve or thirteen. Precisely this 'Abd al-Malik did, leading an army of Medinese against the Byzantines at about the age of sixteen. (When a rebel took 'Uthman to task for appointing “young men as governors,” he had appointments such as 'Abd al-Malik's in mind.) Little is known about 'Abd al-Malik's early adulthood, aside from the fact that he kept Medina as his base, frequenting, we are told, the learned men of the Prophet's city. It is nearly universally asserted by our sources that he remained there until the Second Civil War, when the Medinese expelled the Umayyads from the city in 683. It is tempting to think that this experience embittered him; certainly his deputy al-Hajjaj would go out of his way to humiliate many Medinese after taking control of the city ten years later. At this point, with the confusing events of civil war now unfolding in Syria, Iraq and the Hijaz, 'Abd al-Malik's movements draw more attention and are thus better preserved by our sources, even if the events of the civil war remain somewhat confused.

## THE END OF THE SUFYANIDS AND THE BEGINNING OF THE MARWANIDS

Much of the confusion about the Second Civil War concerns chronology. Some has been settled elsewhere; here a simple outline of the events will suffice.

We may begin by excerpting from an account written by an eighth-century bishop, which survives in much later sources (Hoyland, 647). It is not accurate in all the details, but because it was written by an outsider who could not be bothered with matters of detail, it has the virtue of clarity.

Yazid b. Mu'awiya died. Mukhtar the deceiver had already appeared at Kufa, claiming he was a prophet. Since Yazid had no adult son to succeed him, the Arabs were in turmoil. Those in Medina and the East proclaimed 'Abd Allah b. al-Zubayr; those in Damascus and Palestine remained loyal to the family of Mu'awiya; in Syria and Phoenicia they followed Dahhak b. Qays, who came to Damascus and pretended to be fighting for 'Abd Allah b. al-Zubayr. Each country chose someone. In the midst of all this arose Marwan b. al-Hakam, who proposed drawing lots for the caliphate. His name came up; Dahhak was not content with this, but was defeated by Marwan at Marj Rahit. Marwan ruled for 9 months, then was succeeded by his son 'Abd al-Malik.

The civil war was thus the result of political instability, which began with the death of Mu'awiya in April of 680, and then a crisis of succession, which was triggered by the death of Yazid in November of 683, and the short rule of Yazid's incompetent and sickly son, Mu'awiya II, very soon thereafter (our bishop ignores the last of these because he ruled only for a matter of months, dying at the turn of 684). The events marked the end of the Sufyanid line.

The Sufyanids lacked more than a creditable heir; they also lacked credentials. The clearest illustration of their impiety and incompetence was the slaughter of the rebel, al-Husayn, the favored grandson of the Prophet, which took place in the southern Iraqi city of Karbala in October of 680. The event galvanised anti-Umayyad sentiment in the short term and became a symbol of the oppression of the Shi'ites in the long term. No doubt there was also resistance to the principle of dynastic succession itself: Ibn al-Zubayr was one amongst many who took umbrage at Mu'awiya's appointment of his son as heir-apparent, holding that selection of the caliph should result from consultation amongst the elite instead. What ensued thereafter was a catastrophic collapse of the Sufyanids' power: by the summer of 684, they had lost control of the Hijaz, parts of southern Iraq and western Iran. Mecca had fallen into the hands of Ibn al-Zubayr; meanwhile Medina, the city of the Prophet, Marwan and his son 'Abd al-Malik, had been sacked by the Sufyanid army after the Battle of the Harra (August, 683), and its townsmen would always bear an anti-Umayyad grudge for it. It was an ignominious end for such a proud lineage, with Sufyanid governors being run



ignominious end for such a proud lineage, with Sufyanid governors being run out of towns by the tribal chiefs upon whom they had earlier relied, and uprisings breaking out even in Syria, whose tribesmen had formed the basis of their power from the time of 'Uthman. No contemporary could have predicted it.

That the collapse was so catastrophic suggests that succession was not the only problem. Strong states survive the transfer of power; weak polities frequently do not. What were the weaknesses in the Sufyanid polity?

By every reasonable standard, Mu'awiya's near twenty-year reign had been a nearly unqualified success: not only is he grudgingly praised by Islamic sources, but he enjoys quite exceptional praise among Christian sources, who sometimes speak of his reign as a time of peace and prosperity, "when justice flourished...and there was great peace in the regions under his control," as one seventh-century Christian writing in northern Iraq put it (Robinson, 47). The secret of his success seems to have been *laissez-faire* patrimonialism rather than robust state building: he may have thrown up a palace or two, and he may even have dabbled a bit in striking some coins. But instead of forging powerful instruments of rule (such as a salaried army and robust tax administration), he relied upon his own wits, the counsel and pull of tribal chiefs, and the remnants of Byzantine and Sasanian fiscal systems. "The Arabs had entered a world more civilized than their own," one scholar has written, "and since they came not to destroy but to exploit, it was more reasonable to use a machinery already well adapted to that purpose than to try and replace it at once by something else" (Grierson, 242). Nor did Mu'awiya vigorously project Islam as a legitimizing ideology of rule. He may not have been a reconstructed pre-Islamic sheikh, but his was a politics of persuasion, and he was at his most persuasive when speaking in the sheikhly idiom that he had learned in pre-Islamic Mecca. (As we shall see, it is to 'Abd al-Malik, who seems to have understood the weaknesses of the Sufyanid system, that we must credit formidable instruments of rule and the embrace of public Islam.) Lacking both the good luck and sound judgment of their father, Mu'awiya's two sons had virtually no resources to fall back upon when their father died. The small polity was not robust enough to save the dynasty occupying it. When Mu'awiya died, his polity died with him.

The collapse of Mu'awiya's polity left the field open for nearly all comers. Syria ceased to be ruled as a single entity, and power now devolved to tribal chiefs, two of whom were especially crucial in the politics of this unsettled period, each coming to represent factional interests that would dominate the Marwanid caliphate. (More will be said about these factions later on; here it is enough to say that they confusingly took tribal names.) The first tribal chief, who is mentioned by our bishop, was al-Dahhak b. Qays al-Fihri, an accomplished commander and governor of Mu'awiva's. who represented the

Qaysi faction and controlled Damascus; the second, whom our bishop ignores, was Hassan b. Malik b. Bahdal al-Kalbi, a cousin of Yazid's, and a commander and governor in his own right, who represented the Yamani faction. Both had views on who should succeed Mu'awiya, the fickle al-Dahhak throwing his support behind Ibn al-Zubayr, while Ibn Bahdal initially argued for brothers of Mu'awiya II. Neither got his way, but it was under the aegis of a meeting of tribal chiefs convened by Ibn Bahdal that Marwan emerged as the surprise choice and was acclaimed as caliph in late June or early July of 684. The acclamation took place in Jabiya, which lay about 80 km (fifty miles) south of Damascus. The event's significance grew over time. It is unreasonable to assume that many outside of Syria acknowledged Marwan's claim to the caliphate.

As an Umayyad, Marwan was a kinsman of the Sufyanids, but the choice was surprising: he was relatively old (probably in his late sixties at the time) and a relative foreigner to Syrian politics. In fact, it is not going too far to suggest that Marwan and the Marwanids owe at least some of their great success to serendipity: the "caliph"-to-be had only just recently arrived in Syria, having been expelled from Medina. In any event, Marwan quickly proved that he was the right man in the right place. As our account tells us, he led an army that defeated al-Dahhak and his supporters in Marj Rahit, a plain near Damascus. His power now secure, Marwan marched south, entered Damascus, and received the oath of allegiance there. He then set about consolidating Umayyad power in Syria and conquered Egypt, which had been part of Ibn al-Zubayr's caliphate.

If Marwan was the right man in the right place, he would not be the right man for long: by the middle of April of 685, he had died. According to tradition, he was immediately succeeded by 'Abd al-Malik, who was now about forty years old. Most accounts have 'Abd al-Malik take the oath of allegiance in Damascus, but the odd one puts it in Jerusalem, which, if true, anticipates the attention he would eventually pay to the city. Although history would make 'Abd al-Malik's succession seem virtually inevitable (Mu'awiya is said to have recognized his future: "That'll be the father of kings," we read; al-Baladhuri, 161), the terms of Marwan's succession are actually far from clear. On the one hand, we read of responsibilities that would have clearly marked 'Abd al-Malik off as the favored son and heir-apparent, such as being appointed *locum tenens* while Marwan was away from Damascus and leading the prayers at his funeral. On the other hand, some reports have Marwan designating as heir-apparent 'Amr b. Sa'id, an Umayyad who had served as governor of Medina for Yazid, and had been an especially valued commander for the caliph himself. Who was the choice?

There certainly can be no doubt that 'Amr b. Sa'id was a serious rival of 'Abd al-Malik's. Later, capitalizing on 'Abd al-Malik's absence from Syria in the

summer of 689, ‘Amr would go into open rebellion in Damascus, but he came to a very sticky end at the hands of none other than ‘Abd al-Malik himself.

Although pre-modern and modern readers are usually accustomed to some measure of cynicism and brutality on the part of their kings and caliphs, it is a rare thing in Arabic literature to read of a caliph publicly humiliating and then murdering a kinsman by his own hand. And this is what some of them tell us: accounts have ‘Abd al-Malik attaching a silver collar around ‘Amr’s neck, leading him around like an animal, then straddling his chest, butchering him, tossing his head out to ‘Amr’s supporters gathered outside, and finally (and shakily) taking himself off to bed.

Whatever the truth of ‘Amr b. Sa‘id’s claims, it seems reasonable that Marwan would have wished to have two sons succeed him: first, ‘Abd al-Malik, and then ‘Abd al-‘Aziz b. Marwan. In the end his wishes could not be fulfilled. Although ‘Abd al-‘Aziz would serve his brother as loyal governor in Egypt for twenty years, he pre-deceased the caliph, who in any event seems to have had altered the succession in favor of his son al-Walid, after whom he would be called “Abu al-Walid,” “al-Walid’s Dad.” We are fortunate to have a piece of inscription dated to 81/700 that describes al-Walid as the son of the commander of the faithful, ‘Abd al-Malik (see over). This must come from a time when he had been designated heir.



[Fragment of inscription from Qasr Burqu'](#)

If they are accepted as more or less accurate, accounts of the betrayal and

brutal murder of ‘Amr b. Sa‘id by ‘Abd al-Malik suggest a fierce rivalry between the two; they also say something about long-term grudges (‘Abd al-Malik is given to adduce tribal slights from the pre-Islamic period to explain himself to ‘Amr b. Sa‘id’s orphaned sons). Moreover, they say something about ‘Abd al-Malik’s relatively weak position – and this some five years after having received the oath of allegiance in Syria. ‘Amr had had his opening in 689 because ‘Abd al-Malik had left Syria to campaign against the Zubayrids in Iraq, and in retrospect, these campaigns seem to have been premature: Syria remained insecure enough for ‘Amr to risk rebellion at its capital, and there were other rebellions within Syria too. The borders were not secure either, and concern that he would be unable to defend Syria against a Byzantine attack explains why ‘Abd al-Malik entered into what must have been a humiliating treaty, which called for him to pay tribute to the Byzantines. From the perspective of the glorious conquests, when Christians, Jews and other non-Muslims entered into treaties that called for *them* to pay tribute, this was an ignominious reversal of fortune.

This treaty was renegotiated in late 689 or early 690, by which time ‘Abd al-Malik’s fortunes had begun to improve considerably. To see just how much they would improve, we need to return to his rival, Ibn al-Zubayr.

## THE CALIPHATE OF IBN AL-ZUBAYR

As we have seen, ‘Abd al-Malik received the oath of allegiance in April of 685, and it is for this reason that his caliphate is conventionally said to have begun in that year. Yet we have also seen that his grip on power was initially very weak, and this even in Syria and even as late as 689. Now an age of impotent caliphs would come in the tenth century, but with ‘Abd al-Malik we remain in the seventh, when caliphs were supposed to enjoy real, effective power. How much sense does it make to call him a caliph if he had difficulty maintaining his authority even in the Umayyad capital?

‘Abd al-Malik must certainly have *claimed* to be the caliph in the 680s, but the claim is hardly sufficient on its own: rebels and revolutionaries made the same claim throughout early Islam, and we do not call them caliphs. We do not concede those claims for the simple reason that these rebels and revolutionaries were flashes in the pan: self-view is one thing, but effective and enduring power is another. We do concede ‘Abd al-Malik’s, however, and this is because he came to be so spectacularly successful in defeating his rivals to the caliphate and, thereafter, in representing his and his descendants’ reigns as the continuation of a (nearly unbroken) Umayyad tradition of rule that stretched back to Mu‘awiya and ‘Uthman. What is striking is not that ‘Abd al-Malik and his descendants should see things so, branding Ibn al-Zubayr as a heretic; we should expect him and them to have done something along those lines. What is striking is that so much modern scholarship has seen him in much the same way. The Second Civil War is thus conventionally represented as an interregnum in the Umayyad caliphate, which is seen as originating in Mu‘awiya’s reign and

ending in the death of Marwan II (d. 750), 'Abd al-Malik's great nephew. Ibn al-Zubayr is thus reduced to a "counter-" or "anti-caliph," and the re-imposition of Umayyad control appears as much as inexorable.

It being an axiom of good history that we first judge events as they were understood while they were happening, rather than as they subsequently came to be understood, we must resist this reading of history. A better reading begins with the knowledge that it was the nature of seventh- and eighth-century politics that one person's caliph was another's pretender or rebel. A case in point is 'Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, whom Shi'ites and Sunnis now consider to have been the fourth of the "Rightly-guided caliphs," following Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman. The Shi'ites always held him to have been the rightful heir of the Prophet, but the Sunnis conceded only that his rule from 656–61 was legitimate – and this concession only came in the ninth century. We know that things had been different in the seventh and eighth centuries. For example, the authors of two eighth-century lists of caliphs, which are based upon Arabic originals or Muslim informants from Syria, omit 'Ali entirely, jumping straight from 'Uthman to the Marwanids. They omit 'Ali because the originals (or informants) from which they were working had rejected 'Ali's claim to the caliphate (the Syrians held him accountable for the murder of 'Uthman, the third of the "Rightly-guided caliphs"). Another example is 'Uthman himself, whose claim to be caliph was routinely rejected by early Shi'ites. In neither case can we hold seventh- and eighth-century Muslims accountable for doctrinal developments of the ninth, when the idea of "four Rightly-guided caliphs" finally emerged, thereby accommodating both Sunni and Shi'ite attitudes towards the caliphate. The Syrians who rejected 'Ali, and the Shi'ites who rejected 'Uthman were not being unfair or unreasonable; they were guilty only of being naïve of events that had not yet taken place. An original "golden age" of unity was constructed by later Muslims rather more than it was experienced by early Muslims.

So we should expect that some contentiousness and controversy might surround claims made by 'Abd al-Malik and his rivals to the caliphate, and that 'Abd al-Malik's legitimacy might have been challenged. Indeed, we know this to be the case: the Marwanid caliphs who followed 'Abd al-Malik would never command anything like the unanimous allegiance of those whom they ruled. The Marwanids' claim to legitimacy would grow with time because all of these subsequent Marwanids could at least stand upon the foundations that 'Abd al-Malik had set, relying upon the lengthening dynasty's accumulated claims to legitimacy and the state's increasingly powerful instruments of coercion and persuasion. Meanwhile, none of them faced a rival with anything like the

credentials that Ibn al-Zubayr possessed – at least until the Abbasid Revolution in 749. Nor would ‘Abd al-Malik face a rival the likes of Ibn al-Zubayr after 692. Rebels and revolutionaries may have styled themselves “commanders of the believers,” and some did gather followings of real size. Still, only Ibn al-Zubayr combined effective control over Mecca and Medina, an exemplary pedigree (we have already seen that the Marwanids had their belated conversion held against them) and broad support (even such respected Syrian and Umayyad figures as al-Dahhak and Marwan himself are said to have thrown their initial support behind him).

These reasons explain why many Muslim historians of the pre-modern period so frequently tell a very different story from that told by modern textbooks, which, as we have seen, give little or no hint about the controversy surrounding ‘Abd al-Malik’s claims. Unlike these textbooks, our sources often reckon the beginning of his caliphate from his defeat of Ibn al-Zubayr in 692, rather than from the moment when he received the Syrians’ oath of allegiance seven years earlier. They freely concede Ibn al-Zubayr’s claims earlier on. As one fifteenth-century Sunni historian put it, Ibn al-Zubayr “...was the first to be born a Muslim in Medina from amongst the Emigrants. He assumed the caliphate for 9 years until he was killed in Dhu al-Hijja of the year 73” (Ibn Hajar, i, 415). It was almost certainly Ibn al-Zubayr’s status as a Companion that recommended Ibn al-Zubayr to this Sunni historian. Non-Sunnis found other reasons to grant Ibn al-Zubayr the caliphate. As one ninth-century historian said of the competing claims between ‘Abd al-Malik and Ibn al-Zubayr, “he who controls the two sanctuaries in Mecca and Medina and leads the pilgrimage thus merits the caliphate”: choosing between the two, he accordingly plumped for the latter (al-Ya‘qubi, ii, 321). Had we a Zubayrid historiography, it would represent Ibn al-Zubayr as a legitimate caliph who was overthrown by a rebel. No such historiography ever existed, but it is a striking feature of the histories that we do have that so many count Ibn al-Zubayr as the caliph until his death.

We should as well. There is little reason to think that many outside of a relatively small circle of Umayyads and Syrians recognised ‘Abd al-Malik’s claim to the caliphate before he defeated Ibn al-Zubayr in October of 692, and even after this, it is fair to assume – and assume we must, since we have so little contemporaneous evidence to hand – that throughout his rule of thirteen and one-half (rather than twenty) years, many Muslims outside of Syria never regarded ‘Abd al-Malik as anything other than a usurper and tyrant. This brief chapter accordingly discusses the caliphate of Ibn al-Zubayr and the rebellion of ‘Abd al-Malik.

## THE CASE FOR IBN AL-ZUBAYR

The origins of Ibn al-Zubayr's caliphate lay in a protest movement against the appointment of Yazid as Mu'awiya's successor, an appointment that had generated opposition in many quarters, especially in Medina and Mecca. Ibn al-Zubayr was in one of these quarters, and was forced to flee the Umayyads as a result, taking refuge (and thus the corresponding sobriquet, "the fugitive in the sanctuary" [lit. "house"]) in Mecca. It was apparently only upon Yazid's death that he claimed the office of the caliphate for himself; the earliest coins on which his name appears with the locution "commander of the faithful" (in Persian) are dated to 64/683–4. Thereupon he conducted himself as earlier caliphs had conducted themselves: he called himself the "commander of the believers" (the term *khalifa* is used of him in poetry); he raised and paid armies that suppressed rebellions and kept some measure of order; he favored close kinsmen in the most important posts, his brother, Mus'ab b. al-Zubayr, serving as governor of Iraq, and another brother, 'Amr, campaigning alongside him. He also legislated, appointed governors and administrators, collected taxes, and minted coins (as did his governors). In this and other respects, the numismatic record is extremely revealing: the story of the silver coinage of the late 680s until 692 is dominated by Zubayrid issues, while Marwanid examples are relatively few and far between. If one knew only the contemporaneous coins and none of the later histories, one would conclude that Ibn al-Zubayr was the ruler and 'Abd al-Malik the rebel.

What Ibn al-Zubayr did, then, was rule, and the historical record, in addition to the mint names that appear on his coins, allow us to sketch out the expanse of his caliphate. At its largest it included (only very briefly) Egypt in the west, Arabia, much of Iraq and Iran, and at least part of Afghanistan in the east. Disaffected tribesmen in areas never under his control (such as Palestine and Syria) were also disposed to support his claim to the caliphate. It is certainly true that Ibn al-Zubayr's authority in the provinces was effected indirectly; it is often said that Mus'ab b. al-Zubayr, his brother, exercised what amounted to independent rule in Iraq. The same thing could be said for any number of Umayyad governors, however. It is also true that Zubayrid rule was under near-constant challenge, not so much from the Umayyads, who were disorganized and facing challenges of their own, as from two opposition movements that would later undermine Marwanid power.

The first was a Shi'ite rebellion in Kufa led by a mysterious figure named al-Mukhtar, which began in late 685 and ended in April of 687. Al-Mukhtar inherited the remnants of an earlier Shi'ite movement, and championed the right



to the caliphate of Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya, a son of ‘Ali whom we met in chapter 1. His support was fairly wide (although not necessarily deep), and included not only Arab Muslims, but relatively large numbers of slaves and freedmen. He enjoyed considerable success as a result, appointing governors over regions in northern Iraq and Iran that had been administered from Kufa; in 686 a commander of his led a signal victory against an Umayyad army in northern Iraq. The second source of opposition to Ibn al-Zubayr came from the Kharijites, another sectarian grouping that would cause no end of trouble for the Umayyads. Kharijites such as Nafi‘ b. al-Azraq and Najda b. ‘Amir led small but fearless bands of warriors against the Zubayrids, chiefly in southern Iraq. All of this said, neither the Shi‘ites nor the Kharijites imperilled Zubayrid rule, and both would challenge Marwanid power as vigorously as they had Zubayrid power. (In fact, a Shi‘ite movement would eventually overthrow the Marwanids in the Abbasid Revolution of 749–50.) In short, Ibn al-Zubayr had his problems, but they were a caliph’s problems.

What, besides the weakness of the Umayyad house in the 680s, explains the success of Ibn al-Zubayr? It was not just that he could pay his soldiers more than the Umayyads could pay theirs, although pay and stipend mattered a great deal. His program also had appeal, and at the heart of his claim to the caliphate apparently lay his control of Mecca and Medina. As we have already seen, in some quarters his control of the two sanctuaries was held to qualify him (and disqualify ‘Abd al-Malik) for the caliphate. It certainly must have been why the Umayyads would go to such pains to root him out, why, despite a heavy siege, he remained there rather than flee to safety, and, finally, why the Marwanids would have their poets crow over their recovery of Mecca. As the poet al-Farazdaq would put it after 692, the Marwanids now had the virtue of possessing the holy sites of both Syria *and* Arabia (Kister, ‘Early Tradition’, 182, slightly modified):

(To us belong) two Houses: the House of God (the Ka‘ba), of which we are the rulers and the revered House in the upper [part of] Iliya’ (Jerusalem).

In addition to the sanctuaries, Ibn al-Zubayr had nostalgia on his side. From a later perspective, Ibn al-Zubayr might appear as something of a reactionary, since the future lay in dynastic rule and an increasingly powerful state apparatus centered in the conquered land rather than Arabia; at the time, however, he could wear the mantle of a true conservative. So while the Umayyads were innovators in the eyes of their critics, Ibn al-Zubayr, Companion that he was at a time when Companions were growing long in the tooth, possessed a commodity that was growing ever more scarce: direct knowledge and participation in the making of a

growing ever more scarce. direct knowledge and participation in the making of a glorious past. While the Umayyads had instituted dynastic rule and moved the capital to Damascus, he had refused to acknowledge Yazid's appointment and had remained faithful to the Prophet's adopted city and capital. While Mu'awiya had confiscated lands and revenues, he could appeal to the Hijazi home-rulers (of whom there were plenty), who resented Umayyad policies that they regarded as predatory and confiscatory.

In other respects, however, Ibn al-Zubayr was something of an innovator, and one who anticipated the Marwanids and Marwanid styles of rule. An example is the significance he attached to the Ka'ba, which is reflected in both the Islamic and Christian tradition; whereas the first caliphs seem to have paid relatively little attention to the buildings of the sanctuary (such as they were), both the Zubayrids and the Marwanids oversaw major building projects to the Meccan sanctuary. This is not to say that the Ka'ba hardly mattered to very early Muslims; it clearly did. As we shall see in chapter 5, it is rather to say that the particular combination of sacred geography, architecture and rites that come together in producing the Pilgrimage may have only crystallized as a result of Zubayrid and early Marwanid building projects. In other words, the institution of the Pilgrimage owes as much to eighth-century history as it does to the Prophet.

Another innovation came in his coinage. It is upon Zubayrid coins from the mid-680s that we first see a version of the Muslim profession of faith ("In the name of God, Muhammad is the messenger of God"), which would become a standard feature of Umayyad and Abbasid coinage. Again, the degree of change must be measured accurately. The inscriptions on the coins should not necessarily be taken to suggest that belief in Muhammad's prophecy had ever been anything other than an integral part of very early Islamic belief, although precisely that has been said elsewhere. Indeed, it is hard to understand the first decades of Islam without assuming that Muhammad had made claims to prophethood and that these claims were, in at least some sense, accepted by those who followed him. This said, it is tempting to suggest that in striking coins with the profession of faith, the Marwanids seem to have learned a Zubayrid lesson – that, however closely held by the individual, principal articles of belief should be proclaimed and disseminated publicly. If so, this was a lesson that they quickly realized could be applied much more broadly in a variety of other media. In chapter 6 we shall turn to 'Abd al-Malik's establishment of an Islamic state and the role these media play in it.

Before he could establish such an Islamic state, however, 'Abd al-Malik had to secure his own power in Syria and then overthrow the ruling caliph. 'Abd al-Malik's career as caliph thus began in rebellion.

## THE REBELLION OF ‘ABD AL-MALIK

‘Abd al-Malik began where his father, who had expelled a Zubayrid governor from Egypt and repelled a Zubayrid attack on Palestine, had left off, but his progress was slow, occasionally reversed, and it was not until 690 that he managed to make headway into northern Iraq. It was only in late 691 that his armies defeated Mus‘ab b. al-Zubayr, opening the way for a final assault on Mecca. And it was only thereafter that his claim to the caliphate would have been taken seriously outside of Syria and Palestine.

To look a bit closer at these events, we may usefully return to our eighth-century bishop, who provides an exceptionally succinct summary of events during Ibn al-Zubayr’s caliphate and ‘Abd al-Malik’s rebellion. The account telescopes a decade’s worth of history into about 225 words, but what it leaves out we may reasonably leave out. I have numbered the paragraphs for the sake of clarity (Hoyland, 647 ff.):

1. Embattled on all fronts, ‘Abd al-Malik sought peace with Byzantium. Constantine agreed to a ten-year truce on the condition that the caliph would pay 1000 gold pieces, a horse and a slave daily to the emperor. The tribute of Cyprus, Armenia and Iberia was to be shared by both sides, and the emperor was to recall the Mardaites from Lebanon...
2. ‘Abd al-Malik sent Mu‘awiya’s brother Ziyad against Mukhtar, but Ziyad was killed. Hearing of this, ‘Abd al-Malik went to Mesopotamia, but when he reached Resh‘aina he learned that ‘Amr b. Sa‘id had rebelled against him and taken Damascus. The caliph returned, retook the city and killed ‘Amr.
3. There was a famine in Syria and many sought relief in Byzantine territory.
4. ‘Abd Allah b. al-Zubayr sent his brother Mus‘ab against Mukhtar, who was defeated and fled to Syria. Mus‘ab overtook him and slew him. ‘Abd al-Malik attacked and overcame Mus‘ab, and so all of Persia was subject to him. ‘Abd al-Malik sent Hajjaj to Mecca in pursuit of Ibn al-Zubayr. The latter was defeated and sought refuge in their house of worship. Hajjaj used catapults to demolish the enclosing wall and killed Ibn al-Zubayr in the sanctuary, which he subsequently rebuilt. Hajjaj was appointed over Persia, Iraq and the Hijaz, and Muhammad b. Marwan over Mesopotamia and Armenia. ‘Abd al-Malik was now free from all opposition.

Who are these people and what are these events about? We can answer the question by taking each paragraph in turn.

1. ‘Abd al-Malik’s position for much of the 680s was precarious. For one thing, he had to address a Byzantine threat. This took two forms. The first was active campaigning along the northern frontier: parts of northern Syria, which had been under Muslim control since the conquests of the 640s, were briefly occupied by Byzantine armies. The second was Byzantine support for their proxies, the Mardaites (border inhabitants), who were sent by the emperor Justinian II against ‘Abd al-Malik in 688–9, reaching as far south as parts of modern-day Lebanon. The result was a treaty between ‘Abd al-Malik and the

Byzantine emperor, and although the precise date and terms of this treaty are difficult to pin down (our bishop gives one of several available versions), there is little question that they were ignominious for 'Abd al-Malik. As we saw earlier, according to the tradition established by 'Umar in the 630s, caliphs and commanders were supposed to oversee the spread of the political dominion of God's community, which was symbolized in treaties that humbled Byzantine emperors. At least for the moment, 'Abd al-Malik had little choice but to buy the Emperor off, thereby reversing the pattern of some fifty years of Islamic expansion. (The Byzantine emperor, whose lands lay adjacent to Syria, would have joined the Syrians in recognizing 'Abd al-Malik's claim to the caliphate in the late 680s.) The contrast between Mu'awiya's assertiveness and 'Abd al-Malik's defensiveness could hardly have been starker: Mu'awiya had recently led successful campaigns in the Mediterranean (Rhodes, Crete and Sicily), culminating in a blockade of Constantinople. This is in large measure because Mu'awiya exercised at least some indirect control over Iraq and the east, while 'Abd al-Malik did not; short on manpower and cut off from revenues that the eastern provinces generated, he seems to have lacked the resources to continue the *jihad*.

2. With the end of Sufyanid rule came the end of Umayyad influence outside of Syria until the 690s. Our bishop had a brother (Ziyad) leading a campaign in Iraq, whereas it was actually a son of this brother ('Ubayd Allah b. Ziyad), who led a force of Syrians. But the result is the same: spectacular defeat in the middle of 686 at the hands of a shadowy figure named al-Mukhtar, whose control over Kufa ended about a year later, when he was defeated by an army sent by the caliph's brother, Mus'ab b. al-Zubayr. From this point until well into 691, Iraq, the East and Arabia remained outside of 'Abd al-Malik's control. From the perspective of the caliph in Mecca, al-Mukhtar's movement was far more threatening than were the Umayyads of Syria.

3. Little that is precise can be said about famine during the Second Civil War beyond the fact that it was almost certainly precipitated or exacerbated by a plague pandemic and the campaigning of the period. At least one historian, who was native to northern Mesopotamia, describes in explicitly apocalyptic tones the effect of unprecedented misery. The "Ishmaelites" are a tool of God's wrath, and the events of the Second Civil War bring "a people against a people, and a kingdom against a kingdom; here are famines, earthquakes and plagues. Only one thing is missing for us: the advent of the Deceiver" (Hoyland, 199). Much later an Armenian historian would call 'Abd al-Malik "... a cruel and fierce warrior. In the second year of his reign, a terrible confusion and war broke out among the *Tachiks* (Arabs) resulting in endless bloodshed among themselves.

This terrible civil war lasted three years and claimed innumerable lives, thereby fulfilling David's prophecy, saying: 'Their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken'..." (Lewond, 54). One might be tempted to connect this – the circulation of apocalyptic ideas amongst Christians at the end of the seventh century – with the iconography of 'Abd al-Malik's Dome of the Rock; I would resist this temptation. That the events of the Civil War were perceived by non-Muslims and Muslims alike as events of universal significance is clear, however.

4. The defeat by the Zubayrids (here represented by Ibn al-Zubayr's brother, Mus'ab) of al-Mukhtar, and the defeat of the Zubayrids by the Marwanids (represented by al-Hajjaj, 'Abd al-Malik's deputy) are severely telescoped (by Persia, we should understand "the East," that is, all the provinces east of Iraq) and the sequence is a bit confused. We may telescope as well, focusing upon the Marwanids' victory. The victory itself does not require a grand explanation. 'Abd al-Malik was determined and politic; his commanders were canny; his Syrian soldiers were motivated. Ibn al-Zubayr, by contrast, had little of 'Abd al-Malik's determination and aggression ("taking refuge" in the Ka'ba was hardly a prescription for war), and he seems to have left much of the strategic thinking to his brother. Once this brother died in battle against 'Abd al-Malik in central Iraq in early to mid-691, the Zubayrids' fate was probably sealed.

Al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf, known to history as a former school teacher, was barely thirty years old when he was given the task of leading an army of about two thousand men from Kufa, where a Marwanid army had been garrisoned after defeating Mus'ab b. al-Zubayr. The choice may be explained in two ways: not only had al-Hajjaj recently distinguished himself in battle, but his hometown was the Hijazi city of Ta'if, which made an effective base for operations against Mecca. In any case, he set off for Mecca in October of 691, when the weather would have started to cool, stopped off at Ta'if (where he met no resistance), and set siege to Ibn al-Zubayr in March of the following year. For over six months the Syrians blockaded and bombarded the city, the mangonels causing enormous damage to the Ka'ba and its environs. It was the second Umayyad siege of the city, and fear and hunger led many to desert the Zubayrid cause. Ibn al-Zubayr himself fought until the end, although some accounts have him consider surrender; his mother, by his side to the end, counseled against it. He was about seventy years old when he was finally struck down.

The Civil War had been long and the final siege of Mecca bitter. The Marwanid victory was accordingly celebrated in poetry. Al-Farazdaq describes how "the religion of God was made victorious through the Marwanids," and how 'Abd al-Malik was God's instrument, through whom His flock is led and "blind

civil war” is removed (al-Farazdaq, 175).

Elsewhere (Jamil, 32, slightly modified), the poet develops things further:

Through them (the Marwanids), the mill of Islam was, perforce, made stable  
And through a smiting with fine Indian swords ‘male’ iron.

The Banu Marwan inherited it through him (Marwan) and ‘Uthman after a period of great internal weakness and strife.

While poets celebrated the Marwanid victory, ‘Abd al-Malik was making fast his rule in the Hijaz. Amongst other things, this meant establishing clear links between caliphate and pilgrimage by leading the Hajj (the honour was initially left to the caliph’s lieutenant, al-Hajjaj, ‘Abd al-Malik only doing so two or three years later, when we read that he stayed in his father’s house in Medina) and undertaking a radical rebuilding of the sanctuary complex (we shall turn to this rebuilding in chapter 5).

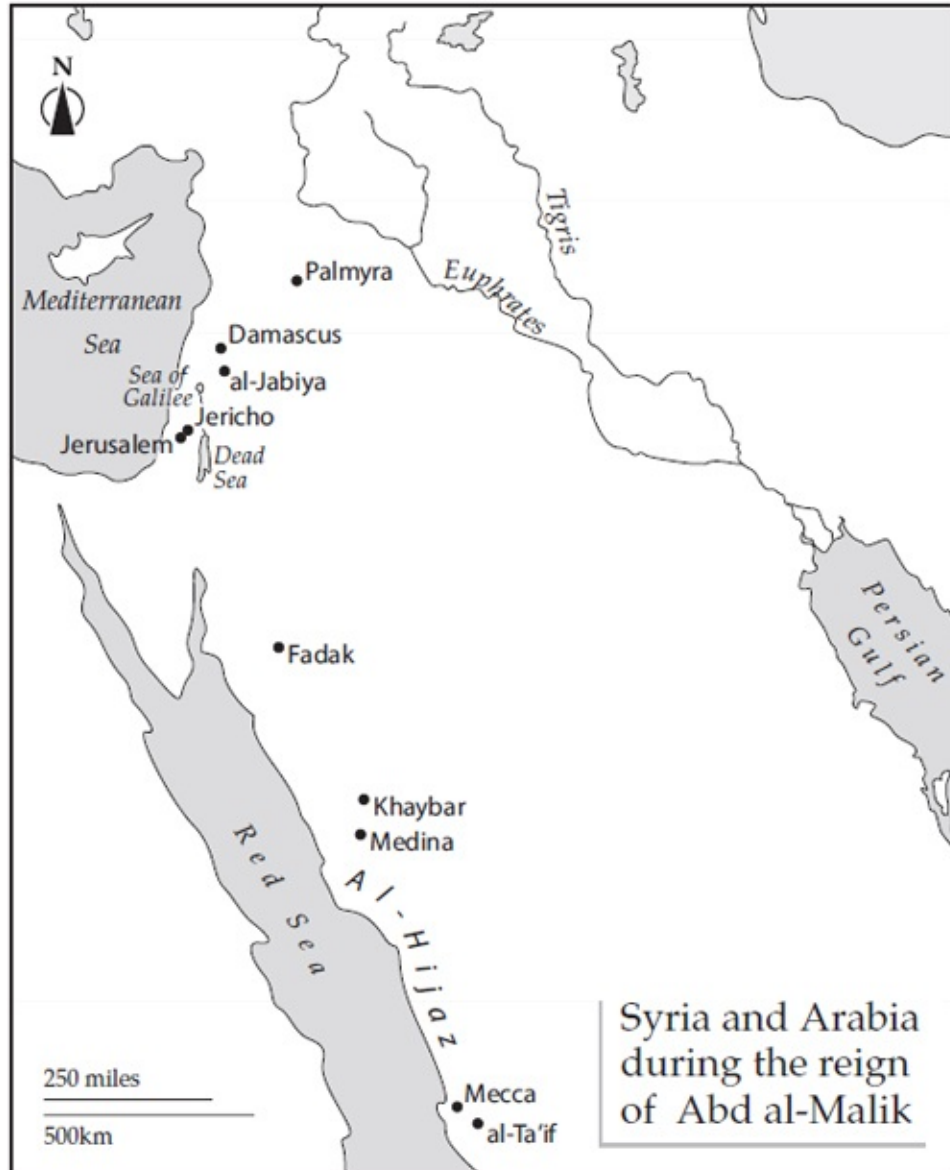
Making his rule secure there and elsewhere also meant appointing reliable governors. In this respect, ‘Abd al-Malik was initially conservative. From the first Umayyad (‘Uthman) to rule, there had been a tradition of appointing kinsmen to crucial posts, and ‘Abd al-Malik followed this precedent enthusiastically, appointing four brothers to the principal governorships of his empire: Muhammad was granted the governorship of a large cluster of northern provinces (present-day northern Syria and Iraq, parts of Turkey), ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, over Egypt, Aban over Palestine, and Bishr over Iraq. (Coins minted in Iraq in this period show a figure with upraised arms, apparently in prayer. There is good reason to think that this figure is Bishr.) Sons, such as ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Abd al-Malik and Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik, would also find greater or lesser fame as commanders and governors.

There was geographic continuity too, and whereas ‘Abd al-Malik would later move away from close reliance upon immediate relatives in administering his empire, he seems to have remained wedded to residential patterns set by his predecessors. We read that he was the first caliph to insist on silence in his court, but his court would remain small (relative to later standards) and tied to Syria because it was there that his military power was concentrated and the Umayyad legacy lay. (It was not until the middle of the eighth century that dynastic change would result in a geographic shift of the caliphate from post-Byzantine Syria to post-Sasanian Iraq. This geographic shift would considerably accelerate the pace of change.) Moreover, nowhere in Syria outside of Jerusalem did ‘Abd al-Malik build ambitiously, and although some building did take place outside of Syria, such as in southern Iraq, this does not seem to have been intimately connected with ideas of rulership or a vision of empire.

with ideas of rulership or a vision of empire.



['Orans' coin.](#)



Map by [MAPgrafix](#)

It appears that the caliph would divide his time between staying in Mu'awiya's palace-complex in Damascus, which he had purchased from a son of Mu'awiya's, and staying in palatial compounds in and at the edges of the Syrian desert, in what is present-day Palestine/Israel, Jordan and Syria. Mu'awiya's palace does not survive, although literary accounts describe it as a multi-functional complex, not completely unlike the Palazzo Ducale in Venice; it apparently had not only residential and receiving rooms, but a barracks, stables, a mint and a prison. Some desert complexes do survive from this period, and several may date from 'Abd al-Malik's reign. Qasr Burqu' and Jabal Seis, which lie in present-day Jordan, northwest of Amman, are two of these; both



have been associated with al-Walid during the latter part of his father's caliphate.

Another is called Khirbat al-Karak, the ancient Sinnabris, known in the caliph's time in Arabic as Sinnabra; it lies on the southern shore of the Lake of Galilee in present-day Palestine/Israel. Like the Damascus palace, Sinnabra is associated with Mu'awiya and 'Abd al-Malik, both of whom are said to have wintered there. The site is in poor condition and is difficult to interpret, but it seems to consist of three principal buildings, which include a palace (with dimensions of about 70m x 80m) and an attached bath. Like other "desert palaces," which were occupied by 'Abd al-Malik's sons, Sinnabra thus shares features with pre-Islamic building traditions, particularly those associated with Arab chieftains during the Byzantine period. Indeed, the resemblances are so great in some cases that distinguishing pre-Islamic from Islamic is very difficult (the sites of both Qasr Burqu' and Jabal Seis were occupied in the pre-Islamic period). 'Abd al-Malik may have been looking to the future in building his empire, but he seems to have looked to the past in building his houses.

## THE IMAGES OF ‘ABD AL-MALIK

Having overthrown Ibn al-Zubayr, ‘Abd al-Malik would immediately throw himself into building a state and empire the likes of which the Arabs had never known. This project of state- and empire-building will occupy us for much of chapters 4, 5 and 6, and since the focus of these chapters will be on the institutions and ideas that we credit to ‘Abd al-Malik and his court, rather than on the man himself, we may usefully pause before throwing ourselves into a description of that project. This brief chapter is accordingly devoted to saying what little we can say about the man. (Other biographical details – such as they are – can also be found in chapters 1 and 5; there are not many.)

Let us begin with a question: how did ‘Abd al-Malik wish to present himself? Whereas the answer can only be guessed at for other seventh-century Muslims, for ‘Abd al-Malik we are fortunate to have the evidence to give a partial answer. This is because we have his portrait. In fact, it is the first portrait of any Muslim that exists, and one of the very few to survive from this period since during the course of the eighth and ninth centuries the Islamic tradition developed an antipathy towards figural representation in general and portraiture in particular.

The portrait comes not on canvas or in glass or stone mosaic, but as imprinted on metal – on one side (the “obverse”) of coins that were struck from about 693 to 697, in gold, copper and even the occasional silver, in mints located in present-day Palestine/Israel, Jordan, Syria, and southeast Turkey. (Numismatists have come to call these “Standing Caliph” coins, and although some differences distinguish one issue from the next, in the following I treat them all as a unity.) Struck in at least eighteen mints in large numbers, they were apparently intended for a broad audience – perhaps everyone from Arab governors and soldiers (who

for a broad audience – perhaps everyone from Arab governors and soldiers (who would have been paid in precious metals) to Aramaean peasants (who would have paid for things in the market with copper pieces). Since the same image – of a standing caliph – also appears on a glass jug, there is some reason to think that it was in broad circulation beyond the coins. By the standards of all his predecessors and most caliphs who would follow him, ‘Abd al-Malik – or at least the ‘Abd al-Malik of this image – was almost ubiquitous.



['Standing Caliph' coin.](#)

The image on the obverse presents us with a bearded and long-haired figure who is standing. This figure must be the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik. We would assume this because the conventions of Byzantine and Sasanian minting, which Muslims had closely followed, only allowed for sovereigns to appear on coinage. We know it because the Arabic words that circle the figure along the edges of the coin read “for the servant of God, ‘Abd al-Malik, commander of the believers” and “Caliph of God, commander of the believers” or “Caliph of God, commander for God”. ‘Abd al-Malik’s hair is shoulder length and sports a slight curl; he may be wearing some kind of headdress or headcloth. Since literary and art historical evidence suggests that the Umayyads often wore crowns and turbans to signify kingship, the headcloth seems conspicuous in its modesty; it is somehow unfitting for a caliph, “God’s deputy” on earth (as we shall see in chapter 5).

In fact, the treatment of the caliph’s head is congruent with surrounding legend, which speaks of God’s “commander,” and also with the portrait’s other

elements. Taken together, these eschew a regal or religious image for one that emphasizes ferocity. Our caliph is menacing: ‘Abd al-Malik wears a brocaded and long robe, and he stares bug-eyed, his right hand grasping the pommel of a sword, which remains sheathed in its decorated scabbard, his left hand steadying this scabbard. The grim expression and bend in the elbow suggest that the sword may be on its way out of the scabbard, but there is no way to know for sure: he may be sheathing it. From the right hand hangs down what has lamentably been called a “girdle band;” it is almost certainly a whip. In terms of the portrait’s composition, the combined effect of sword and whip, the two hanging at angles, is balance. Its intended effect upon its target audience, however, must have been to put it off balance – to strike fear and respect. Later caliphs might patronize learning and arts, but this caliph’s tools were sword and whip. Considering the date, which is unambiguously stated in the gold versions, one is inclined to relate this image of ‘Abd al-Malik as menacing warrior to his victory over Ibn al-Zubayr and the imposition of Umayyad authority over the empire’s provinces, especially since some poems make such a connection explicit.

So we have a partial answer to the question of how ‘Abd al-Malik wished to present himself: to judge from this evidence, the image that ‘Abd al-Malik wished to have projected in the years following the Second Civil War was a warrior-caliph. The alert reader will have noticed that I have not asked a related, but still very different, question: what ‘Abd al-Malik *looked* like. Claims about his appearance can certainly be made. According to one fourteenth-century biographer and historian who draws upon earlier sources, ‘Abd al-Malik was of medium build; he had long hair and big eyes; over those big eyes his eyebrows had grown together, and beneath them he had a protruding nose and a cleft lip. He is said to have had gold bridge work in his mouth. We also read that he had remarkably bad breath and was accordingly called the “fly-killer” (lit.; “father of flies”) because flies would drop dead when they passed near his mouth. On at least one occasion, his formidable halitosis apparently cost him a bride, who, refusing him, then added insult to injury by marrying his brother.

What is one to make of this? We have moved from contemporaneous, material evidence (coins and poems) to very late, literary evidence. I have little doubt that some of what this literary evidence tells us is accurate, but it is hard to know what it is or what significance we should attach to it.

So much for the exterior. What was inside the man? What did he think and feel? Here, where matters are altogether more important, problems of interpretation are even worse.

Biographers of early modern and modern figures, so often equipped with voluminous diaries and correspondence, can answer that question. We are not so

lucky. There is no such private documentation for ‘Abd al-Malik, the earliest example in Arabic literature coming in a secretary’s personal letters, which were written about a generation later. Nor is there much in the historical tradition. The earliest biographical treatment of ‘Abd al-Malik that survives to this day was written by a traditionist and jurist named Ibn Sa‘d, who died in 845. It takes the form of a 7-page entry in an 8-volume compilation of about 4200 early Muslims. Ibn Sa‘d’s entry is not only early: at roughly 4500 words, it is also one of the longest that survive. (A near contemporary who had very different tastes, a polymath named Ibn Qutayba, also wrote a compilation, which, intended as a primer rather than reference work, finds no more than about 500 words for the caliph.) But few of Ibn Sa‘d’s 4500 words tell us much about the interior life of ‘Abd al-Malik or how he came to be the man he was; ‘Abd al-Malik kept no diaries, and although copies of many of his letters were recorded and integrated into prose narratives, these offer precious little insight into his thinking.

It is true that very occasionally a personal detail presents itself in the historical tradition (such as that detail about his oral hygiene), as does the rare domestic scene. But anecdotes such as these are relatively few and far between, and whatever their understanding of the private life of their subject, our authors generally expressed it by reconstructing the events that constituted his public life. Unfortunately, this does not mean that we can resort to representations of the public in order to infer the private. For here we arrive at what is a very difficult problem of interpretation, which we shall have to revisit in subsequent chapters, especially chapter 5: questions of authenticity and perspective. Ibn Sa‘d was a bookish traditionist, and although his is the earliest biographical treatment of ‘Abd al-Malik that survives, it is hardly early: he died some 150 years after the caliph. Relying upon Ibn Sa‘d for understanding ‘Abd al-Malik is a bit like relying upon a cold-war historian for an understanding of George Washington – but much worse, of course, since George Washington *did* leave voluminous documentation.

Let us take an example or two. When we read that ‘Abd al-Malik instructed his children’s tutor to teach them how to swim, we might fairly conclude that he valued physical exercise, water safety or some combination of both. We might very well be wrong, however. For the report may actually function to have ‘Abd al-Malik prescribe a long-standing Near Eastern ideal that counted swimming as an important part of education. If so, it tells us little or nothing about the caliph’s views on swimming and only something about the author’s (or his sources’) views about what was important to learn. The account may not be legend, at least in the sense that George Washington’s felling of a cherry tree is a legend; but like legend, it says much more about what people want to believe than it

does about what had actually happened. Much the same thing can be said about accounts of ‘Abd al-Malik’s education; as we shall see in chapter 5, they are anachronistic, and say more about the historians’ views on learning than they do about the caliph’s education.

Another example is appealing in its intimacy, and comes on the authority of a well-placed source, Rawh b. Zinba’, a leading courtier in ‘Abd al-Malik’s retinue. It suggests a theme familiar to all of us: anxious fathers and wayward sons.

One day I came into the presence of ‘Abd al-Malik and found him looking worried. He told me that he had been considering whom to appoint as heir apparent, but had been unable to settle on anyone. So I asked him: ‘Where’s your thinking about al-Walid?’, and he said: ‘He’s not good enough at (Arabic) grammar’. Now al-Walid heard this and instantly got up, gathered together all the specialists on grammar, and set about studying with them in his rooms for six months. But when he emerged, he was even worse than before! To this ‘Abd al-Malik remarked: ‘He’s always got excuses!’ (al-Suyuti, 253).

Have we arrived at ‘Abd al-Malik’s home life? Can we judge his parenting skills or his attitude to his son? No. Much as one might like to think that ‘Abd al-Malik held that command of Arabic grammar was necessary for holding caliphal office, all we can say with any certainty is that the anecdote functions to illustrate his *reputation* for holding high linguistic standards, which in the event he failed to uphold since al-Walid did succeed him. And since the authors writing these accounts were to a man *littérateurs* and philologists, what we actually have is not a description of how a particular caliph thought, but a general prescription of how caliphs in general should think.

So we are unable to understand in any detail ‘Abd al-Malik’s thinking or indeed his domestic life. As we have seen, he was the husband of several wives and the father to lots of children. To some of these wives and children we can attach names and histories of their own. Thus a daughter was married off to his nephew ‘Umar II, who would reign from 717–20, and a son was named after al-Hajjaj, his great commander and governor. In both cases, one can safely infer that the relationships were in some measure political: relations amongst different branches of the Marwanid family occasionally needed strengthening, just as relations between the Marwanids and the Alids might need strengthening; marriage was commonly used to shore things up.

Beyond this, it is hard to say much about ‘Abd al-Malik the man. What we are left with is what we began with: images. The ‘Abd al-Malik who is portrayed in most of the histories written in the pre-modern Islamic world is someone who commanded respect as a caliph (we frequently read that Mu‘awiya may have been the most manly of caliphs, but ‘Abd al-Malik was the most decisive and resolute); who, though personally stingy, ruled with relative equanimity and

resolute), who, though personally stingy, ruled with relative equanimity and justice (thus he is given to reprove subordinates for unnecessary violence and corruption – even if he was himself given to acts of betrayal and violence); who makes gestures of clemency and mercy, such as releasing prisoners who show signs of piety or remorse; who can be pragmatic, such as when offering a provincial appointment to a dangerous rebel; and, finally, who had gotten a good start at learning, but had been taken away from learning by politics: “He was a seeker of knowledge before [taking] the caliphate, then was distracted by it, so his condition changed,” as we read in more than one source. Outside of the Sunni tradition, which produced the great bulk of the histories that survive, his image is not dissimilar. Those otherwise bitterly hostile to the Umayyads, such as the Shi‘ites, spare him their worst, often reporting how he received descendants of ‘Ali with respect, and that he restored an inheritance that had been stolen from them.

Such images held until relatively recently. It is only with the twentieth-century emergence of a distinctly modern historiography that was influenced by Arab nationalism that we come to an ‘Abd al-Malik who would be unfamiliar to pre-modern readers. Here he is a proto-nationalist, the “unifier of the Arab state” (al-Rayyis). The portrayal of ‘Abd al-Malik in this historiography predictably tends toward the apologetic, much is made of his command of Arabic and Arabicizing policies, and little is made of the caliph as a caliph – that is, holder of what was a religious office.

That ‘Abd al-Malik was in some sense a unifier is correct. To see in what sense it is correct, we need to turn to ‘Abd al-Malik’s empire building.



## **‘ABD AL-MALIK’S EMPIRE**

History has known many different kinds of empire, whose shapes and styles have been determined by factors such as geography, topography, technology and political ambition. Before we turn to ‘Abd al-Malik’s empire, we might usefully say a few words about empire in general.

The tradition of empire building in the Middle East has its origins in the conquests and rule of Sargon of Akkad (r. c. 2334–79 BCE), whose empire encompassed southern Iraq, western Iran and parts of Syria and Anatolia (present-day Turkey). It was an unprecedented and spectacular achievement. Although conquerors as glorious as Sargon were not usually given to humility, success on this scale required some explanation beyond the martial feats of a commander or his army. Only gods would do, and Sargon duly gave credit to the gods, as previous rulers had done; in this case to a goddess named Ishtar. Subsequent imperialists did the same, giving credit to the gods for success on the battlefield, and it was not until the fourth century CE that this brilliant idea was improved upon, when monotheism, in this instance the relatively loose Christian variety, was married to empire.

The person who did most to effect this marriage was the Roman emperor Constantine, who is said to have had a vision of the cross shortly before his crucial battle with his rival Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge (near Rome) in 312. With his publication of the Edict of Milan, which officially recognized Christianity, his subsequent conversion, and, finally, the dedication of the new imperial capital of Constantinople in 330, the marriage between empire and belief in a single (if inscrutably compound) God was consummated. Subject Christians, who had previously been either ignored or persecuted, and who now



Christians, who had previously been either ignored or persecuted, and who now came to enjoy official sanction, were obvious beneficiaries of this policy. So, too, were ruling emperors, who could now claim to conquer on behalf of a single, universal God: the Emperor being an agent of God's will and design, belief in God meant obeying the Emperor. "The defining characteristic of late antiquity" as one scholar put it, "...was its conviction that knowledge of the One God both justifies the exercise of imperial power and makes it more effective" (Fowden, 3).

Doing God's will meant more than conquering the world on His behalf. It also meant ruling it on His behalf. Sargon and subsequent rulers had understood this, and had accordingly invested in armies, administrators and bureaucrats (especially scribes and accountants) to extract, measure and re-distribute its wealth, which came principally from conquest booty, trade and agriculture (especially grains). The law code of one of Sargon's successors, Hammurabi (r. c. 1800–1750 BCE), holds landowners responsible for maintaining the dykes of their irrigated fields; it also warns merchants against charging interest rates beyond those that he himself had set. Byzantine emperors and Sasanian *shahanshahs* ("king of kings," i.e. emperors) would follow this lead, putting in place imperial administrations that attempted, with varying rates of success, to exploit their subjects' labor and their lands' produce as systematically as was possible and affordable.

The Byzantine emperor Heraclius (r. 610–41), whose campaigns against the Persians would have been familiar to Muhammad (there is an allusion to them in the Qur'an), followed in this tradition. The last of Heraclius' campaigns, which began at Easter of 622 and was launched in order to restore the Cross to Jerusalem (it had been plundered by the Sasanians, who made off with it to Iraq), was hardly less a holy war than the *jihad* that Muhammad himself had inaugurated in Medina at about the same time. (An idea as powerful and compelling as this is not simply transmitted or borrowed; carried by breezes across the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world, the idea of militant monotheism was in the air that both Heraclius and Muhammad were breathing.) Violence, belief and rule were intertwined. But Heraclius' campaigns in the Near East would end in defeat at Muslim hands, because Muhammad's *jihad* had set the early Muslim tribesmen off on campaigns of their own, defeating the Sasanians, pushing the Byzantines out of the Fertile Crescent and later North Africa, and eventually producing riches that no Meccan or Medinan could reasonably have imagined. The effect of these fabulous riches on the tribesmen is impossible to measure, but the fantastic success was clear proof that Muslims were fighting on God's side and enjoyed His favor: Muslim caliphs had

succeeded Christian emperors as God's instruments, and Muslims were "the best of communities," according to God in the Qur'an. Muslims, too, credited God with their success on the battlefield.

So the late antique tradition of empire building that 'Abd al-Malik inherited, and which would survive in many important respects until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was increasingly monotheist in its politics (Muhammad's monotheism was certainly much less convoluted than Trinitarian Christianity), more or less pluralist in its religion, and extractive in economics. In other words, rulers claimed to rule on behalf of God, tolerated (for the most part) other religious traditions on the part of their subjects, and extracted wealth by imposing taxes upon land, people and activities (such as tolls). Some of the revenues resulting from this extraction went into the emperors' (or caliphs') hands to consume as they wished (on entertainment, gifts and building, especially), and some were embezzled or otherwise skimmed: pre-modern empires were as a rule very inefficient. But most of the wealth went to pay the administrators and bureaucrats required to manage the revenue system itself, and the soldiers and commanders who provided the coercive force that systematic exploitation required. As much as the dynasts who occupied the office of the caliphate, the "men of the pen" (the administrators and bureaucrats) and "men of the sword" (the soldiers) had a stake in empire. Empire was a way of ordering society. Save tribesmen pastoralists, most everyone believed in it.

When the caliph Yazid III (d. 744) announced that he was the son of Persian, Byzantine, Turkish and Muslim-Arab kings, he owed much of the idea to his grandfather, 'Abd al-Malik. Let us see how this grandfather ruled.

## **SUFYANID ARRANGEMENTS**

The conquests inspired by Muhammad and executed by Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman were spectacularly successful, but the conquest polity itself quickly ran into problems. Access to conquest resources was one: how were salaries and stipends to be determined, and land distributed? Access to political power was another: what were the qualifications necessary to rule? The two problems combined in the events of the First Civil War, which broke out at the death of 'Uthman in 656, and came to an end with the accession of his kinsman Mu'awiya in 661. This was very much an intra-elite affair, however (it was a contest amongst Arab Muslims over leadership and conquest resources), and answering the really difficult question – how were Muslims to rule the huge expanse of lands and millions of people that God had delivered into their hands?

– was not yet pressing. This was because continuity was the rule.

In chapter 1 I characterized Sufyanid rule as *laissez-faire* patrimonialism. In other words, the Sufyanids ruled minimally and indirectly. By minimal, I mean that administration – in both its size and functions – was modest. Post-conquest lands were chopped into four very large chunks, the caliph governing one of these (greater Syria, which extended into present-day northern Iraq and southern Turkey, Palestine/Israel, Jordan and Lebanon), the rest being ruled by governor-commanders, who enjoyed very wide-ranging authority. Arab-Muslims were a relatively closed religious and military elite, who, living principally off the spoils and lands that conquest had earned them, settled and lived apart from the non-Muslim, non-Arab populations who formed the overwhelming demographic majorities. Rulers being tiny in number relative to subject population and uninterested in the dirty work of administering, the task of ruling was delegated to intermediaries, and these generally exercised authority not by virtue of the office they held, but through the status they enjoyed, typically through wealth, learning, piety or kinship.

Authority over non-Muslim subject populations was accordingly enjoyed by local authorities who were drawn from those populations and who possessed the knowledge required to rule them. Christian bishops and landowners (the categories frequently overlapped) exercised authority over their communities, and so too would the notables of other monotheist groups (Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian). In return for yielding some kind of tribute, these communities were granted virtual autonomy. Accounting for that tribute was done according to the prevailing traditions: in formerly Byzantine lands, Greek-speaking bureaucrats continued to keep the tax accounts in Byzantine Greek, and in formerly Sasanian lands, Persian-speaking bureaucrats kept them in Persian. Meanwhile, authority over Arab-Muslims was similarly indirect, and in this case it was mediated by Arab chieftains, who exercised authority over fellow tribesmen. This usually boiled down to mustering them to fight. With conquering tribesmen still living in close quarters in garrisons, which were set apart from the cities and towns inhabited by non-Arab, non-Muslims, kinship patterns remained relatively conservative, if not entirely unchanged. Mu‘awiya conducted himself more as loyal patron than absolute ruler, bestowing gifts and favors, intermarrying with other tribes, cajoling and inspiring. His court was small, and its style relatively simple.

In the hands of someone as capable as Mu‘awiya, the arrangements were effective enough, not least of all because they made use of pre-existing patterns of authority. But with Mu‘awiya’s death and the succession crisis of the early 680s, the chieftains’ fickleness showed just how fragile these arrangements

were: many sided not with the Sufyanids, but with their own tribes' interests as they saw them represented by rival claimants to the caliphate.

That the arrangements collapsed in the 680s does not mean that they had failed to make good sense in the 650s and 660s. Mu'awiya may have seen himself as a caliph, but his vision was rooted in the seventh century; he was a creature of his time and place. His father had been a very prominent Qurashi in Mecca and a firm opponent of Muhammad's, one who seems to have converted only when Muhammad took control of the town. Mu'awiya himself was perhaps as old as thirteen when Muhammad first began preaching openly (c. 610), and it seems that he, too, converted only upon the conquest of Mecca. He is then said to have served as one of the Prophet's advisers, and later participated in the conquest of Syria, which he came to govern. By this time (the mid-640s), he was middle-aged, and he may have been as old as about sixty when he became caliph in 661. He was, then, very much the product of the same world that produced Muhammad himself: a Qurashi schooled in the ways of tribal politics of Mecca, he would practice those skills amongst the Arabs of Syria. Of state and empire building, he would have known relatively little – and this only relatively late. Faced with the difficult task of managing a small Muslim élite riven by divisions and disagreements resulting from the conquests, he fell back upon that which he knew best.

Sufyanid arrangements were thus conservative. And they made good sense not only because they suited Mu'awiya. The Arab-Muslim élite was as familiar with tribute taking as they were unfamiliar with imperial bureaucracy, the Hijaz having lain outside of firm political – and thus fiscal – control of both the Byzantine and Sasanian states. There was in any case little point in building a state during the 640s, 650s, 660s and 670s, what with all the conquest booty still circulating: the conquests had been effected by relatively small bands of Arab-Muslim warriors who did relatively little damage (there is virtually no archaeological evidence for conquest-era violence) and then usually settled outside of pre-existing towns and cities. We hear very little of conversion and assimilation in this period. In fact, given all the eschatological passages of the Qur'an, one may reasonably wonder if the earliest Muslims thought that God had any long term plans at all for them to rule on earth. Why do the hard work of state and empire building when God seemed to be saying that the End was nigh? (Many sixth- and seventh-century Muslims, Christians and Jews were filled with thoughts – anxieties and hopes – about the End.) There is nothing inevitable about empire building.

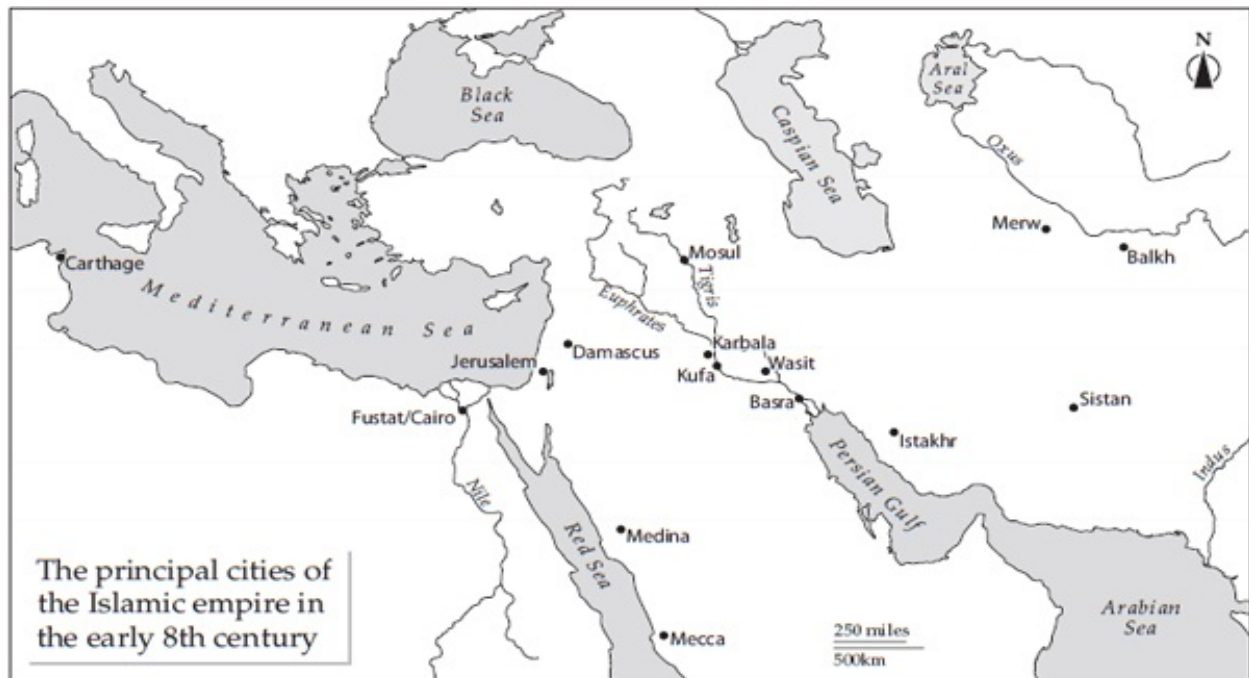
## INNOVATIONS

The hard work of state and empire building would come when people and times had changed. Whereas Mu'awiya was born in pre-Islamic Mecca, we saw earlier that 'Abd al-Malik was born in c. 645. This means that he had no direct experience of Muhammad's time, nor even the conquest period of 'Umar. His formative experience was rather the murder of 'Uthman (which he is said to have witnessed first-hand), the First Civil War, and the reign of Mu'awiya. *Precisely* how this formative experience influenced his policies is a matter of speculation, but it is speculation of a reasonable sort. 'Abd al-Malik, we can fairly surmise, was liberated from the burden of any real memory of a glorious and exemplary past; and at the same time he must have been deeply struck by the fragility of Sufyanid rule. Surrounded as he was by second-generation Muslims (some of whom were non-Arab converts), 'Abd al-Malik was accordingly the first caliph to draw liberally upon the imperial tradition that Muslim rulers had inherited, but had not yet appropriated and transformed.

To measure the extent of early Marwanid change, let us take the ruler and the ruled in turn; since ruling meant having an army, we can start there.

### *The Army*

Soldiers are paid to wage war, suppress rebellions, and provide the coercion necessary to extract taxes and tribute. The Sufyanids had relied upon chieftains to muster armies of tribesmen, but one of the lessons of the Second Civil War must have been that caliphs should not rely upon fickle chieftains to do their fighting. Under 'Abd al-Malik and subsequent Marwanids, the army was thus progressively professionalized, chieftains being replaced by commanders, and tribesmen by soldiers, who were registered in what the sources call the *diwan*. In return for pay and stipends, commanders and soldiers would be expected to remain loyal to the state.



Map by [MAPgrafix](#)

The evidence for a full description of the early Marwanid army eludes us, but a few things are relatively clear. Registry on the *diwan* entitled one to annual pay, which was conventionally reckoned in gold or silver coins; Arabs were generally paid more than non-Arab converts (non-Muslims being excluded, aside from very exceptional cases); early joiners were apparently paid more than those who joined up later; soldiers also received monthly stipends. Some accounts describe ‘Abd al-Malik’s direct participation in setting military pay for exceptional figures, while others have al-Hajjaj doing so; both ideas seem plausible enough, insofar as caliph and governor alike were expected to play roles as patrons. It seems that responsibility for equipment (including horses) fell to the soldiers rather than to their commanders. Size is especially difficult to measure, and can only be estimated on the basis of patchy and late literary evidence; one scholar has recently suggested that in the year 700 the army numbered some 250,000 to 300,000 soldiers registered on the Marwanid *diwan*. This would be a notional figure, rather than the number of those actually equipped and ready to fight, especially since once on the *diwan*, names were removed only with some difficulty. On the grounds that our sources frequently inflate numbers, I would incline to a much lower figure.

Details aside, there can be no doubt that the professionalization of the army under ‘Abd al-Malik marks a crucial step in state building – the start of the transition from a society ruled by a relatively undifferentiated elite of Arab-Muslim tribesmen/soldiers to one ruled by increasingly differentiated civil and

Muslim tribesmen/soldiers to be ruled by increasingly differentiated civil and military cadres. It also addressed one of the weaknesses of the Sufyanid polity. Nor can there be any doubt that the caliph was very keen to campaign. Just as the speed at which he effected his fiscal and administrative reforms is striking, so, too, is the speed at which he set upon a course of campaigns against the Byzantines impressive. Circumstances had forced him to make a humiliating peace, but now, with control of Iraq and the Hijaz, things had changed. Almost immediately he made a show of force south of the Black Sea (in 692). He then paused until 695, when he embarked on a 4-year series of campaigns on the Byzantine frontier further west, before turning his attention to Byzantine Armenia in around 700. There he imposed a measure of Islamic rule for the first time. A letter written to 'Abd al-Malik by Elia, the Armenian Catholicos – that is, the head of the Armenian Church – is addressed to “the world conqueror of the universe.” The caliph did not live long enough to see all of his territorial ambitions satisfied, but the momentum he developed would take his son's armies into other areas that had lain outside of Islamic rule, such as North Africa and Spain in the Islamic west, and parts of Afghanistan and northern India in the east.

If professionalizing the army solved some problems, it caused others. For one thing, 'Abd al-Malik's armies were dominated by Syrians, and once garrisoned outside of Syria (the first such garrison in Iraq seems to date from around 697, and the garrison city of Wasit was built in 702 or 703), it engendered all manner of opposition and resentment. For Muslims who lived in Iraq and further east in particular, these Syrian garrisons, which provided the muscle for Umayyad governors and tax collectors, amounted to armies of occupation, and their presence contributed to the provincials' resentment that eventually led to the Abbasid Revolution of 749–50. For another thing, the higher expectations that came with a professional army were not always met: no matter how well paid (and salaries could fall into arrears), soldiers resented the hardships caused by the hard and long campaigns they had to undertake, frequently far from home. An army dispatched to a remote frontier might become rebellious and march against the Umayyads who had dispatched them. The most spectacular such rebellion was led by a Kufan commander named Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath, whose army had been sent to campaign in present-day Afghanistan in 699. Although he enjoyed fairly broad support in Kufa (he came from a very proud lineage), his movement was brutally crushed in 703.

Of all the problems caused by the professionalization of the army, the most salient in all the sources is what modern historians have come to call factionalization – the emergence of two factions, sometimes called “northerner”/“southerner” or “Oavs”/“Yaman.” which would dominate politics

for the remainder of the Umayyad period. The terminology was tribal (“northerner” and “southerner” and “Qays” and “Yaman” marking tribal groupings from northern and southern Arabia), but the reality was political. This is because whereas in the Sufyanid period kinship was the principal determinant of military service, in the Marwanid period the more or less purely tribal way of doing business died out. As tribesmen settled and took up various occupations (including the military), tribal loyalties ceased to make much sense (tribesmen now being distributed all over the empire), and other loyalties (especially geographic and sectarian) began to take over. In the army, this means that commanders (and their soldiers) began to identify with each other not on the basis of actual kinship ties, but rather along factional lines, and the state, from the time of ‘Abd al-Malik, who was brought to power by the Qaysi faction, relied on a politics of factions: sometimes one, sometimes the other, sometimes both. This factionalism contributed to the downfall of the Umayyad state.

### ***Fiscal Policies***

Changes in the army mirrored changes in the administration: just as ‘Abd al-Malik imposed a measure of direct control over the army by replacing tribal chieftains with salaried commanders, so too did he impose a measure of direct control over taxation. What we seem to have is not just an example of how levying taxes and maintaining armies are closely related, with changes in one effecting changes in the other. Rather, we seem to have an example of an altogether new model of rule being imposed. And since clear evidence for this new model appears well before ‘Abd al-Malik had taken control of Iraq, we can assume that he came to power in Syria with – and perhaps even because of – this model.

We can see this because of the serendipitous survival of a small collection of Greek papyri from a small town in historical Palestine (in the modern-day Israeli Negev), called Nessana, which date from the mid- to late seventh century. There we can chart three things. The first is that continuity of administrative traditions that I hinted at earlier: the Nessana papyri are in Greek, as they are in parallel documents found in Egypt (where we also have bilingual papyri in Greek and Arabic). The second is irregular tribute-taking, which is familiar to us from other regions, such as northern Mesopotamia; there too, it very clearly featured through the 680s. The third is a series of unprecedented fiscal measures, including a survey of properties and census of people; one papyrus also describes how the “commander of the faithful,” ‘Abd al-Malik, authorized



payments to Arab (and thus presumably Muslim) soldiers. The date of these measures belongs to the mid-680s; and the “daybook” that records ‘Abd al-Malik’s authority may even have been written as early as 685 – the year when ‘Abd al-Malik rose to power in Syria. Even if the inferential dating of 685 is in error, there can be no doubt that ‘Abd al-Malik set about effecting a fiscal revolution even before he had successfully completed his rebellion against Ibn al-Zubayr.

Taking control of a region thus meant making it a province of his empire by imposing new, more-or-less uniform fiscal policies: the evidence tells us that what happened in Syria in the mid- to late 680s would happen in Egypt and northern Mesopotamia in the early to mid-690s, and we can fairly assume that it did elsewhere, even if we lack the evidence to show it. The results naturally varied from region to region, but where we can see them at all clearly, they were the extension and increase of tax liability (in some places a poll-tax is introduced; monks first become liable), an increase in coercion and/or efficiency (peasants begin to flee to avoid taxation; tokens are first used to signal tax liabilities); and the Arabicization and Islamicization of the fisc: not only do the Greek and Greek-Arabic bilingual papyri give way to exclusively Arabic papyri, but positions that had been held by non-Muslims were now increasingly (if never fully) filled by Muslims. This is the case at the center of the state, where chief responsibility for taxation moves from Melkite Christian and Zoroastrian figures to convert Muslim ones, and in the provinces, where urban administration begins to move out of the hands of subject populations.

Alongside these fiscal and administrative changes should be set some related reforms, including those of weights and measures. Of these the most significant and revealing is the introduction of new styles of coinage. Obscurities envelop virtually every question we might wish to ask about early Islamic minting, not least of all because there was a great deal of regional variation, as Byzantine and Sasanian models were very closely followed. But it is precisely this – regional variation, fidelity to pre-Islamic traditions and the absence of centralized control that these imply – that changes so dramatically and quickly upon ‘Abd al-Malik’s defeat of Ibn al-Zubayr. Starting perhaps as early as 691, certainly no later than 692 (in both cases before al-Hajjaj’s appointment over Iraq in 693/4), we can chart the co-ordinated issuing of increasingly Islamic styles of coinage.

These come in two phases. The first, which lasted about 5 years, was evolutionary. It saw the continuation of figurative imagery, but the introduction of designs and motifs that are clearly Islamic in inspiration: a caliph holding a sword (as we have seen); a spear in a prayer niche; a governor (apparently Bishr) in the act of prayer. The second, which started in about 696, was revolutionary:

it saw the introduction of a purely non-figural, epigraphic tradition and the exclusive use of Arabic. It is hard to exaggerate the scale of change: in abandoning the Byzantine *solidus* (gold coin), 'Abd al-Malik was abandoning the dollar standard of the day. There was nothing in the pre-Marwanid tradition that anticipated this new design, nor was there any reason to predict that it would prove so spectacularly successful: for hundreds of years, Islamic gold coins – and even some non-Islamic, copy-cat coins – would be struck according to this pattern and weight.



[Pre-reform coin.](#)

Why did 'Abd al-Malik reform the coinage? Different scholars have answered the question in different ways. The reform – imposing uniform weights, styles and thus values – may well be related to the professionalization of the armies: the state may have needed a uniform currency to pay its soldiers. In favor of this view (or at least some version of it), one can point to the silver coinage that was struck in the empire's northern provinces, where minting seems closely related to campaigning. Reform would also have facilitated economic exchange, and this at a time when the Umayyads seemed to have been building and expanding markets in Syria and Palestine: archaeology in present-day Palestine/Israel, Jordan and Syria has uncovered several commercial buildings and complexes that date from the early or mid-eighth century. The most spectacular example is in Tadmor (in the Syrian steppe north-east of Damascus), where a huge market – some 200m long, housing at least fifty shops – has been identified.



[Reform coin.](#)

Finally, there is much to be said for interpreting the coinage as symbols and bearers of propaganda, especially since so much care was taken to remove symbols of Christianity and Byzantine rule from the Byzantine-style coins. Certainly the Christians understood the religious and political significance of coinage: as one Byzantine chronicler writing in Greek put it, “the Arabs could not suffer the Roman imprint on their own currency” (Theophanes, 509); and as an apocalyptically minded native of Egypt put it in Syriac, “...that nation will destroy the gold on which there is the image of the cross of the Lord our God in order to make all the countries under its rule mint their own gold with the name of the beast written on it, the number whose name is 666” (Hoyland, 283). By striking emblematically Islamic coins, ‘Abd al-Malik was diffusing compelling ideas about rulership and Islam, which, as we shall see in chapter 6, were reflected in other media.

### ***Non-Muslims and Non-Arabs***

Above we saw that in ‘Abd al-Malik’s fiscal policies there is a transition from a system of more-or-less irregular tribute-taking to more-or-less systematic taxing of subject populations. Those who had been exempted (either deliberately or not, such as monks, priests and bishops) were now made increasingly liable, collection was made more regular, and rates were raised. More than capturing

booty or collecting occasional tribute, levying regular taxes plugged the state into a steady stream of revenue. How much revenue the state claimed is impossible to know with any precision, since we have virtually no documentary data from the period. How much of it the central treasuries actually received is a different question, though equally difficult to answer, although we can be sure it would have been much less, what with so much being retained in the provinces and lost to inefficiency or corruption. Even so, we must certainly reckon things in the tens of millions of gold coins. We read that the construction of the garrison-city of Wasit consumed five years of Iraq's revenues from the land tax. We read elsewhere that 'Abd al-Malik's construction of the "Jerusalem mosque" (presumably the Aqsa) consumed seven years of Egypt's revenues.

The effects of 'Abd al-Malik's fiscal policies were not merely financial, however. This is because taxing in this period also functioned to assign and reflect social status. It being the prerogative of the rulers to tax, the Arabs naturally chose to tax their subjects much more than they taxed themselves: a system that stipulated that Muslims pay substantial taxes came only later. "Subject populations" knew they were "subject" in part *because* they were taxed. Since the rulers were Arab-Muslims who generally held that being Muslim meant being Arab (although being Arab did not necessarily mean being Muslim), this meant that non-Muslims (chiefly Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians) bore the great bulk of the tax burden and that non-Arab converts to Islam were not necessarily relieved of the taxes non-Muslims paid.

It also meant that tax-payers, faced with unprecedented levels of taxation and altogether more robust methods of collection, responded in religious terms. Many were shocked and frightened by the tax changes introduced by 'Abd al-Malik – so much so that they wrote apocalypses in which tax agents are signs of the End of Time, when "Ishmael" (that is, Islamic rule)

...shall lead captive a great captivity among all the people of the earth...and his hand shall be over all, and also those that are under his hand he shall oppress with much tribute; and he shall oppress and kill and destroy the rulers of the ends (of the earth). And he shall impose tribute on (the earth) such as was never heard of; until a man shall come out from his house and shall find four collectors who collect tribute, and men shall sell their sons and daughters because of their need (Robinson, 49).

Taxes thus reflected and generated attitudes towards religion, ethnicity and identity, and because they were changing, we might suspect that other things were changing too. In fact, they were. With 'Abd al-Malik's imperialism came not only more assertive campaigns against the Byzantines on the empire's borders, but also harsher and more restrictive policies towards non-Muslims within its borders. And given the evidence for the caliph's patronage of an emerging public Islam, which we shall review in chapter 6, it seems reasonable

emerging public Islam, which we shall review in chapter 6, it seems reasonable to conclude that as ideas of empire and Islam crystallized, attitudes toward and relations with non-Muslims inevitably changed too.

Let us turn once again to the Dome of the Rock because it highlights the article of belief that separated Muslim from Christian. The Dome of the Rock's inscriptions fall into two groups, each on opposite sides of its octagonal arcade. On the outside, one reads of Islamic monotheism: proclamations of God's unity (including the pointed insistence that God "has not begotten") and of Muhammad's prophecy. On the inside, what was implicit becomes explicit. Here we find a rejection of Christianity's principal dogma: that Jesus partakes of the divinity.

The messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and His word which He committed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and do not say 'three'; refrain, it is better for you. God is one god; he is too exalted to have a son. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and in the earth. God suffices for a guardian. The Messiah will not disdain to be God's servant; nor will the favored angels. Whoever disdains to serve him and is proud, He will gather them all to Him, all of them. O God, incline unto your messenger and servant, Jesus son of Mary. Peace be upon him the day he was born, the day he dies, and the day he is raised up alive. That is Jesus son of Mary, in word of truth, about which they are doubting. It is not for God to take a son, glory be to Him (Hoyland, 698f., slightly modified).

We do not know how many or how often Christians entered the Dome of the Rock. Still, there can be no doubt that 'Abd al-Malik wished the anti-Christian campaign to be public. What better way than to target the public display of crosses? Muslims seem to have taken umbrage at the public display of crosses from an early period, but it is with 'Abd al-Malik that we get the first signs of a systematic policy.



[Cross-on-steps coin.](#)

The evidence of ‘Abd al-Malik’s coinage, which was progressively brought under stricter state control during the 690s, could hardly make this clearer: coins minted upon Byzantine prototypes that featured a cross erected upon steps (see p. 78) were replaced by issues of coins that altered the cross by eliminating the cross bar; subsequent issues transform (and thus neuter) the cross by placing an orb upon it. Here we are reminded once again of the enormous contrast with Mu‘awiya’s reign. Whereas Mu‘awiya seems to have been forced to withdraw coins because they lacked crosses, ‘Abd al-Malik could set upon a policy of systematically removing crosses from the coinage and suppressing their public display in general. At least some of these were minted in Damascus, but in the provinces we also have evidence for a strong iconoclasm. For example, we read in a Christian source that ‘Abd al-‘Aziz b. Marwan, ‘Abd al-Malik’s brother and governor of Egypt for some twenty years, “commanded to destroy all the crosses which were in the land of Egypt, even the crosses of gold and silver” (Griffith, 1985: 63). Other anti-Christian measures targeted monks, Christian Arabs and others.



[Modified cross-on-steps coin.](#)

Sometimes there even seems to have been some real violence: we read that in Armenia the caliph's brother, Muhammad b. Marwan, put the torch to some churches, killing scores of Christians. This seems to have been exceptional, however. If there was some persecution, there was also a fair amount of just plain interference. Whereas early caliphs were as a rule indifferent to church matters, 'Abd al-Malik took a direct interest in the appointment of figures to the highest levels of the church hierarchies. An Armenian source preserves the correspondence between Elia, the head of the Armenian church, and 'Abd al-Malik, in which the former asks the latter to unseat a rival to his leadership. The caliph also involved himself in controversies over the leadership of the Nestorian church in Iraq. Here and elsewhere 'Abd al-Malik functioned as a patron to *all* his subjects, Muslim and non-Muslim. He had taken his place as a world emperor.

## **‘ABD AL-MALIK AS IMAM**

We saw earlier that the Dome of the Rock was almost certainly completed in the 72nd year of the Hijra, which corresponds to 691–2, and that the context for its building was, at least in part, the civil war between ‘Abd al-Malik and Ibn al-Zubayr. In chapter 4, we said something about the aftermath of this victory, particularly how ‘Abd al-Malik began the process whereby an Arab conquest polity was transformed into a state. Chapters 1, 2 and 4 were thus much about power – how ‘Abd al-Malik himself assumed it, and how he endowed the state with instruments to wield it by initiating a series of administrative, fiscal and military reforms. In this and the subsequent chapter we turn from the exercise of power to the authority that lay behind it – what might be called the second of the two hands of coercion and persuasion. How did ‘Abd al-Malik conceive of himself as imam (religious leader) and how did he wish others to conceive of him? What was the constitution of the state that he was building? How did this state diffuse its ambitious claims to its subjects? In what senses was this state Islamic?

### **THE PROBLEM OF EVIDENCE**

Having danced around the problem of our evidence in the first four chapters, I should now face it directly. We may begin in an unlikely place: with some poetry.

Arabic poetry was an immensely important medium of communication in the



sixth and seventh centuries: poets used words in rhyme and meter to rally tribesmen, memorialize the past, lampoon an adversary and praise a loved one (typically a woman) or a patron, who in the early Islamic period was usually a caliph, governor or prince. Al-Akhtal (b. c. 640) was an especially fine poet – so fine, in fact, that he enjoyed the patronage of Umayyad caliphs and governors from the reign of Mu‘awiya until his death in about 710. These included ‘Abd al-Malik, to whom fulsome praise seems to have been especially important, and for whom al-Akhtal seems to have played the role of *poet laureate*. Such an exalted position carried high expectations, and upon ‘Abd al-Malik’s defeat of Ibn al-Zubayr in 692, al-Akhtal was up to the task, delivering a particularly fine 84-line ode in honour of the caliph. From beginning to end it is a fascinating and revealing poem, but lines 18 to 50 are especially worth citing, if only in part (Stetkevych, 90 ff.):

- 18 To a man whose gifts do not elude us,  
whom God has made victorious  
So let him in his victory  
long delight!
- 19 He who wades into the deep of battle,  
auspicious his augury  
The Caliph of God  
through whom men pray for rain.
- 20 When his soul whispers its intention to him  
he resolutely sends it forth,  
His courage and his caution  
like two keen blades...
- 29 Like a crouching lion, poised to pounce  
his chest low to the ground,  
For a battle in which there is  
prey for him.
- 30 [The caliph] advances with an army  
two hundred thousand strong,  
The likes of which no man or jinn  
has ever seen...
- 34 Single-handed, he assumed the burdens  
of the people of Iraq,  
Among whom he once had bestowed  
A store of grace and favor.
- 35 In the mighty nab‘-tree of Quraysh  
round which they gather,  
No other tree can top  
its lofty crown.
- 36 It overtops the high hills,  
and they dwell in its roots and stem;  
They are the people of bounty,  
and, when they boast, of glory,

37 Rallying behind the truth, recoiling from foul speech,  
 disdainful,  
 If adversity befalls them,  
 they bear it patiently.

38 If a darkening cloud casts its pall  
 over the horizons,  
 They have a refuge from it  
 and a haven...

45 O Banu Umayya, your munificence  
 is like a widespread rain;  
 It is perfect,  
 unsullied by reproach.

Two themes can be discerned in al-Akhtal's lines.

The first theme concerns the caliph's kinsmen, the "Banu Umayya" of line 45 (here symbolically linked to the rain-giving caliph by the image of life-producing water), who are "people of bounty" and "munificent." We have already seen that the caliph appointed close kinsmen to important governorships; in other words, his power was initially – and concretely – effected through the Umayyad family. Here we can see how 'Abd al-Malik's poets drew upon his Umayyad and Marwanid lineage as part of a legitimizing programme. "Umayyad panegyric labors on the divinely guided endeavours of Al Marwan [the Marwanid family] to quell internal schism and dissent, and to defeat the sway of Christendom, underscoring, in the process, their pretensions to religious legitimacy" (Jamil, 31).

The second theme presents 'Abd al-Malik as a fierce and courageous warrior (lines 19–20; 29–30). Here too the program is legitimizing. We should expect this to be the case in the conquest society in which he was operating, and the poetry and coins make it clear enough. Making coins distinctively Islamic, for example, meant replacing a Sasanian crown with a sword; in the panegyric poetry of the time, the Umayyads strike with the hero's sword, which "cleaves the skull of the infidel, that sends rebellious heads flying, extinguishes the blaze of fitna (civil war) and quells the fears in people's hearts" (Jamil, 31).

It is to a variation of the second theme, which appears in lines 18–19 of al-Akhtal's poem, that I should like to draw special attention, however.

18 To a man whose gifts do not elude us,  
 whom God has made victorious  
 So let him in his victory  
 long delight!

19 He who wades into the deep of battle,  
 auspicious his augury  
 The Caliph of God  
 through whom man never flourishes

through whom men pray for rain.

These are pretty – or, in any case, vivid – words. And they are hardly unique to al-Akhtal because other poets said much the same. In what sense are they true, however? Can the historian of the seventh century use them? And why should we bother reading obscure and difficult poetry when we have so many other (and easier) sources to read? Since I have already had occasion to use poetry, the reader deserves to understand why.

We shall come to an answer to the first of these questions; to the second and third, the answer is a qualified “yes”. On the one hand, it bears emphasizing that what we have here is panegyric poetry, which is generally produced according to a simple rule: in exchange for producing hyperbolic flattery, the poet enjoys the hospitality and wealth of his patron. ‘Abd al-Malik himself is said to have put off one sycophant-to-be with the words: “Don’t flatter me; I know myself better than you!” (al-Mubarrad, 45). There is no doubt that the caliph led prayers – we have both literary and apparent numismatic evidence for that – but nothing in the historical tradition would lead us to believe that ‘Abd al-Malik exhibited any special valor on the battlefield or that his soldiers numbered anything like 200,000; these are stereotypes and conceits peddled by the poets. The fact of the matter is that after the Second Civil War ‘Abd al-Malik spent very little time on the battlefield, relying on commanders to lead his campaigns. Similar things can be said about the media that condition the way we understand public figures nowadays. When we see an American president wearing a bomber jacket while delivering a victory speech, we hardly conclude that he actually piloted a bomber in the war he has just led. We conclude only that war-making is part of an ideological program that this president wishes to broadcast.

And we can be certain that, no less than American presidents, ‘Abd al-Malik wished to project an ideological program. One does not experiment with coinage designs as enthusiastically as ‘Abd al-Malik’s mints experimented without good reason: the coin image of the figure who menacingly holds his sword was produced by the same atelier of ideas and attitudes that produced the poetic image of the caliph who “wades into the deep of battle.” Moreover, since public images are most effectively projected when they accentuate rather than grossly misrepresent, there is every reason to assume that the flattery is grounded in self- and communal understanding: George Bush can get away with wearing a bomber jacket and landing on an aircraft carrier because he served as a pilot in the National Guard; the gesture is a reach – but it is imaginable. Similarly ‘Abd al-Malik. Indeed, this reflexivity between subject and description reflects the logic of patronage: court-poets such as al-Akhtal described their patrons in accordance with what they knew or imagined their wishes to be. (As a lifelong

accordance with what they knew or imagined their wishes to be. (As a mocking Christian, al-Akhtal presumably did not believe his own words.) Insofar as the poets intended their poetry to circulate within wider elite circles more generally (the “public” itself having no voice in the state, it was ignored), they wrote within the imaginative range of that elite.

In short, the poets exaggerated, but they did not lie. Umayyad poetry can thus shed light on the Umayyads and their polity. But much else can do that too, especially narrative history, which was produced in huge quantities. Why go to the bother of reading poetry then?

The reason is that unlike virtually all of our narrative accounts, poetry gives us a *contemporaneous* witness to Umayyad history in general and the Umayyads’ conception of rule, authority and empire in particular. Indeed, it is in poetry that we have some of the clearest signs of how the conquest state was being transformed into empire, “...the process of transition from the literary vehicle that encoded the ethos of the pre-Islamic tribal warrior aristocracy to one that encodes an ideology of Arabo-Islamic hegemony, an ideology of empire” (Stetkevych, 109). For my purposes, the poetry is especially useful because it allows us a glimpse at a constitutional vision of the Islamic state (signalled by the phrase “The Caliph of God”), which, first fully articulated under ‘Abd al-Malik and the Marwanids, came to prevail until the middle of the ninth century. Without understanding this constitutional vision, one cannot understand ‘Abd al-Malik’s rule.

The vision is this: authority over all things and in all matters, be they religious (e.g. defining dogma), political (appointing tax collectors), legal (setting punishments for criminals) or military (leading campaigns), lay principally in the hands of “God’s caliph.” Far from being separated, as they are in our political systems, powers were to be concentrated in a single office, which was the heart of a theocratic polity that had been founded by a prophet-statesman. Put another way, the prime mover of history was God, who had sent a succession of prophets to teach humankind how to act in accordance with His will. Muhammad was the last of these prophets, and he was succeeded by a series of caliphs, who were delegated by God to preserve and direct the theocracy that Muhammad had established in Medina. Prophecy was thus succeeded by caliphate or, as it is expressed in Tradition, “the caliphs are the heirs of the prophets.”

The witness of poetry and other, early sources is vitally important because this vision had a very poor survival rate in other literary traditions. For the great majority of our sources for seventh-century history date from the ninth and tenth, by which time this conception of unified caliphal authority had been replaced by a constitutional vision that held the caliph responsible for maintaining order and symbolizing the unity of the Islamic community – but little more. Of the

administrative and military reforms effected by ‘Abd al-Malik, our literary sources have relatively much to say not simply because he had made history worth preserving, but also because in these respects he conformed to their ninth- and tenth-century expectations of how a caliph should operate. But of the religious authority ‘Abd al-Malik possessed they say relatively little because in this respect he did not. From the late ninth century on, it was only the occasional caliph who asserted much religious authority, which now lay chiefly in the hands of the religious scholars, the ulema, i.e. the men (and occasionally women) who had been trained in the religious tradition and who worked independently of the state. What we have to wrestle with for the most part, then, is what may reasonably be called ulema history: sources that, through indifference, confusion and hostility, project later constitutional visions back into early Islam, thus robbing Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphs of the authority that they claimed to possess – and others granted them. As we shall see, there is the occasional discordant note in prose too, which, precisely because it is off-key, has a special claim to the historian’s interest; but most of what we have in prose was written to a tune penned by composers who had no ear for real history.

An example of what our sources can and cannot do for us may be drawn from reports that concern ‘Abd al-Malik’s youth. According to several accounts, ‘Abd al-Malik had spent much of it frequenting the learned men of Medina, transmitting traditions from celebrated figures such as Abu Hurayra and Ibn ‘Umar; in turn he would transmit traditions to learned men of the following generation, including al-Zuhri. Described as “pious and ascetic,” he is sometimes called one of the “jurists of Medina,” being in a circle composed of the seven great jurists of the city (al-Baladhuri, 65). Now accounts such as these must contain a particle of truth. The caliph-to-be would surely have taken an interest in religious affairs, perhaps especially since one source describes his father, Marwan, as “among the most accomplished reciters of the Qur’an.” ‘Abd al-Malik himself, who is quoted as claiming that he finished memorizing the Qur’an during the month of Ramadan, is called in several sources “the mosque dove because of his continuous recitation of the Qur’an.” It may also be that he was given to ascetic practices of one sort or another.

But the reports are doubly anachronistic. First, they cast ‘Abd al-Malik as a collector of Prophetic Traditions (and often a poor one at that) before Prophetic Traditions had become the currency in which knowledge was transacted: the disciplined practice of transmitting and collecting *hadith* dates from the first third of the eighth century at the very earliest, which is some two generations after ‘Abd al-Malik was purportedly frequenting Medina’s learned men. Second,

the accounts reflect the antipathy that jurists would later feel towards the state and state power: ‘Abd al-Malik, we read, *had been* ascetic before he turned to politics and its corrupting influence. What anachronisms such as these reveal is not the training our seventh-century caliph would have received, but later discomfort with early caliphs’ religious authority that history had not entirely effaced. In other words, they do not record episodes of authentic biography, but they do transmute the religious authority that he possessed in the seventh century into ninth-century categories.

Given this historiographical problem, one must proceed gingerly, privileging contemporary (or at least relatively early) sources at the expense of later ones, in addition to those accounts that appear discordant with the consensus that would later emerge. In practice, this means reading poetry, such early narrative as can be recovered from the literary traditions, and the material evidence. These different categories of evidence throw light on different aspects of the state and society. We can begin at the core of the state – ‘Abd al-Malik himself – and then move outwards towards the empire that he founded.

## THE CALIPH

What did it mean to be God’s caliph, “through whom men pray for rain,” as al-Akhtal put it? What role did ‘Abd al-Malik play in matters of law, ritual and belief? A good person to ask would have been his lieutenant al-Hajjaj, who knew the caliph better than most. As it happens, al-Hajjaj is given credit for a striking pronouncement that sheds direct light on our question: according to him, people who circumambulate the Prophet’s tomb in Medina should circumambulate ‘Abd al-Malik’s palace instead.

It is difficult to know what to make of this report. The sociology of religion shows that one typically circles a thing, such as a stone, a prayer wheel, a table, a fire, even an entire city, because one considers it holy and believes that it puts one closer to God and can deliver a variety of services, such as making one safe, healthy, pregnant or saved from Hellfire. In the Near East, stones and rocks were especially venerated and circumambulated, the best examples being in Jerusalem (the Rock) and Mecca (the Black Stone); there are others in Arabia. This said, one may also circle holy people, be they alive (such as revered teachers in the Hindu tradition) or dead (as in the case of the Prophet’s tomb, a practise which has many parallels in late antiquity and beyond it). It follows, then, that claims may have been made that ‘Abd al-Malik was some kind of holy man.

Was this the case? Al-Hajjaj’s pronouncement is striking because most

Muslims from the ninth and tenth centuries would come to reject circumambulation around all buildings except the Ka‘ba (and explicitly proscribe it around the Prophet’s grave), just as they would reject circumambulation of individuals. It is true that the report may have been put into circulation by an opponent of the Marwanids, with a view to attaching opprobrium to both governor and caliph. Of opponents they certainly had plenty. According to a history written by a North African sectarian, ‘Abd al-Malik is a tyrant and al-Hajjaj accursed, and a fifteenth-century historian from Egypt catalogues the manifold vices of the Umayyads, including al-Hajjaj’s view, expounded from none other than a mosque pulpit, that ‘Abd al-Malik was superior to the Prophet. Both also take the Marwanids to task for changing the time of prayer. It is unlikely, however, that our circumambulation account can be dismissed on the grounds of such hostility, for a polemicist would have had al-Hajjaj dissuade the faithful from discharging a widely accepted and revered practice – circling the Ka‘ba – rather than an aberrant one, such as circling the Prophet’s house. We should accordingly follow the principle introduced above, according to which discordant reports have a special claim on our trust, especially if they fit a broader pattern. And this one does fit a broader pattern. According to a letter written to ‘Abd al-Malik and credited to al-Hajjaj, God held the caliph in higher regard than He did the Prophet Muhammad himself.

It is through the rains summoned by the caliph that the community is nurtured, as it is in the shade he throws that it finds shelter. When ‘Abd al-Malik makes his case against Ibn al-Zubayr, he makes a case for himself as “God’s shadow on earth” (al-Baladhuri, 33). And it is by one’s imam that believers knew correct belief and praxis. As the poet, al-Farazdaq, put it, “You are to this religion like the direction of prayer, by which people are guided from going astray” (Kister, ‘Social and religious concepts’, 106). We have already seen that Farazdaq describes the caliph as God’s instrument who guides His flock.

What ‘Abd al-Malik and other Umayyad caliphs promised to deliver to those who recognized and embraced them as imams (religious leaders) was nothing less than salvation. “He who dies having no religious leader will die the death of a pre-Islamic pagan,” as an early tradition puts it (such a death lands one in Hell). It is precisely because the stakes were so high that the controversies and battles of the Second Civil War were so fierce. “What do you witness for Ibn Zubayr?”, a commander asked of the people of the province of Jordan: “We bear witness that Ibn al-Zubayr is a hypocrite [a term used for those who deny Islam] and those of the people of Harrah (the site of a battle) who were killed are in Hell.” The commander himself held that “if the religion of Yazid b. Mu‘awiya was truth while he was alive at that time, it is still so today and his party [*shi‘a*,

thus the term Shi‘ite] are in the right” (al-Tabari, following Hawting, 50). Partisans fought to the death because their fate in the next world depended on the choice of leader in this one; religious belief and political loyalty being indivisible, one routinely branded one’s political opponent as a heretic.

And vice versa. We saw earlier that Ibn al-Ash‘ath’s rebellion in 699 was rooted in his troops’ complaints about their long campaigning. But if rebellion in early Islam was very frequently conditioned by tribal divisions (whether real or invented), it was always framed in religious terms: Ibn al-Ash‘ath commanded respect because he was a Kindi tribesman with a very high lineage and glorious forebears, and he had his poets accuse al-Hajjaj of abandoning Islam and oppressing Muslims. The Marwanids had plenty of opponents, but virtually everyone with any political choices or views – pro- or anti-Umayyad, quietist or activist – shared the vision of theocracy that they embraced. The most spectacular rebellion of ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign was led by a Kharijite named Shabib b. Yazid, who went into revolt in northern Iraq in 695. As in Ibn al-Ash‘ath’s rebellion, tribalism and military policies combine (Shabib drew upon tribesmen from the Shayban, and he had apparently been on the *diwan*). Here, too, the threat to ‘Abd al-Malik’s state was serious: army after army was sent out against Shabib and his men during their two-year rebellion, which moved from the north to central and southern Iraq before its inglorious end in southern Iran in late 697. Most important, here, too, political opposition was framed in religious terms: Shabib followed other Kharijites in holding that the Marwanids were “oppressive leaders of error” against whom *jihad* was required. Being tyrannical and impious, ‘Abd al-Malik and the Marwanids had to go. But there was nothing wrong with the institution of the caliphate itself.

### ***Law, Theology and Ritual***

To be the religious leader – the imam – meant providing to the believer guidance as to what and how he should believe. ‘Abd al-Malik accordingly had a hand in determining matters of faith and theology.

In early Islam the religious epistle was the main vehicle for theological expression, and it thus happens that ‘Abd al-Malik appears frequently in such correspondence: “The epistle to ‘Abd al-Malik is almost a sub-genre in itself,” as one scholar has put it (Cook, 60). The authenticity of these letters is the topic of a long and lengthening scholarly debate; I would incline towards the view that at least some of what they contain is very likely authentic. But authentic or inauthentic, they certainly reflect a time when his authority in religious matters



was widely acknowledged. Why risk diminishing the stature of a religious authority – say, a jurist widely revered for his piety and religious knowledge – by having him correspond with someone who was not? One set of correspondence begins with ‘Abd al-Malik writing to al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), one of the leading ascetics and religious authorities of his day. The purpose of the letter is to demand that al-Hasan account for his views on the problem of predestination, which would remain a thorny question in Islamic theology for centuries. The caliph would have al-Hasan anchor his beliefs in the authority of an account transmitted by a Companion, “the opinion that you hold authoritatively” or the view of someone who is truthful about the Qur’an (Ritter, 67). The correspondence has the flavor of respectful debate and exchange. In a letter written to ‘Abd al-Malik, which is credited to a shadowy Kharijite named Ibn Ibad, the tone is not dissimilar. Other letters, many of which are of very dubious authenticity, also have the Caliph weighing in on matters of belief and allegiance to the state (the latter was related to the question of predestination).

In addition to matters of dogma, ‘Abd al-Malik was an authority on the law. Like other Umayyad caliphs, he adjudicated disputes and settled legal questions. In other words, he did the kinds of things that judges did and would do thereafter. Poetry and some prose portray him as a judge, and we even have the occasional glimpse of some of the ceremony that attended his law giving: he would have someone recite poetry before he addressed the disputants to a case. What were the issues on which he expressed an authoritative view? He is credited with judgments governing the laws of slander, slavery, marriage and divorce, and finance. Charges that he changed the prayer times and was the first to “raise his hands while on the pulpit” reflect his authority in ritual and related matters; according to one account, ‘Abd al-Malik “was the first to extend the [time in which] prayer [was valid] from the afternoon ’til evening prayer times” (al-Baladhuri, 253).

Meccan ritual figures especially prominently. Little wonder, perhaps, since the imam-caliph led the prayers and the believers in pilgrimage (unless he wished to delegate those rights to subordinates). When Sulayman b. ‘Abd al-Malik asked some learned men about pilgrimage rites, they gave contradictory instructions. “I will act as he [‘Abd al-Malik] acted and take no notice of your disagreements,” was his response (Hawting, 36). This was not simple filial piety; Sulayman was adducing a religious authority. Among the views expressed was whether this or that oral formula was to be recited. “I saw ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan uttering *labbayka* (‘I am here!’) after he entered the sanctuary until he began to circumambulate the house, when he broke it off; then he started up again until he departed for the *mawqif* (the place where, now on the ninth day of the

pilgrimage, one ‘stands’, facing Mecca)...I mentioned this to Ibn ‘Umar, who said: ‘All that – I’ve seen it too, but we say the *takbir* (God is great!)’” (Ibn Sa‘d, v, 170f.). ‘Abd al-Malik’s authority is implicitly acknowledged. Over other rites connected to the circumambulation ‘Abd al-Malik also appears to have had some authority.

## ***Jerusalem and Mecca***

It is in the light of this material that we should understand ‘Abd al-Malik’s building projects. Earlier we saw that the caliph’s residential tastes were conservative and that his ambitions as a builder were modest. As a rule, Near Eastern rulers were and remain fond of founding or expanding cities; ‘Abd al-Malik was not.

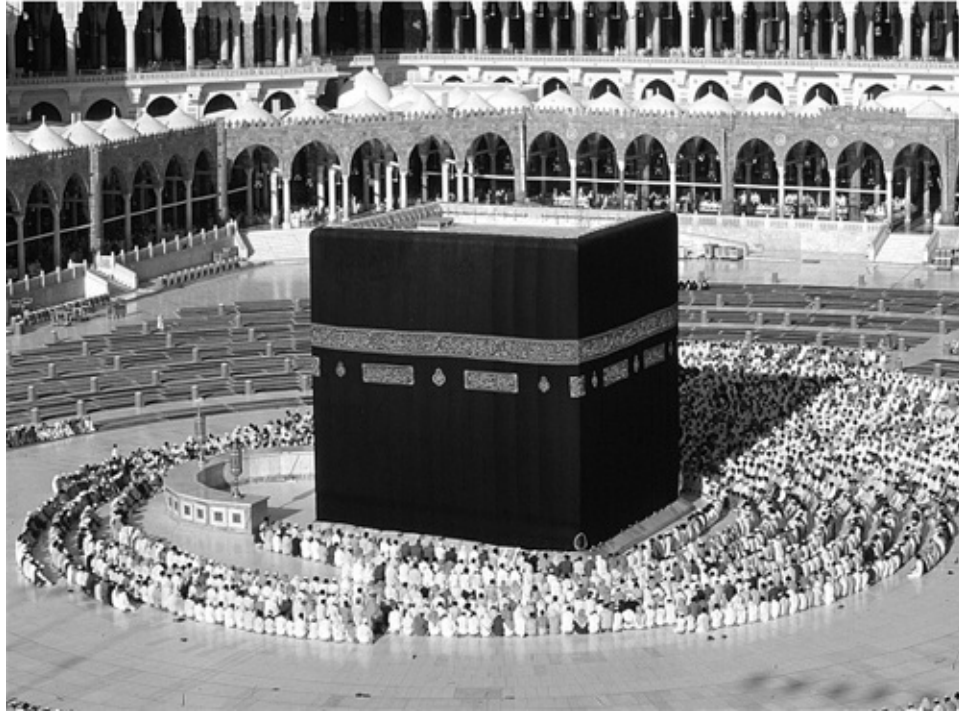
The notable exceptions are Mecca and Jerusalem, two cities, which, having virtually no administrative or military significance to speak of, were immensely potent in religious terms. Now, just as the early history of the office of the caliph is best understood if we set aside presumptions based on relatively late sources, so, too, is the early history of these sanctuaries best understood if we set aside presumptions that prescribe fixed pilgrimage rites to a centre (Mecca), which enjoyed pride of place over all others (we saw that there was controversy about how to perform some of the pilgrimage rites, and that ‘Abd al-Malik was adduced in these controversies). In other words, just as we must leave room for ‘Abd al-Malik’s position as imam-caliph in the seventh century, so, too, must we leave time for Mecca to eclipse Jerusalem as the focus of pilgrimage, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca eventually becoming one of the “Five Pillars” of Islam.

This process took some time. As far as Mecca is concerned, it must be emphasized that there is no clear evidence that pilgrimage to the Ka‘ba and/or the environs of Mecca had become a fixed feature of Muslim belief and practice at the end of the seventh century. Certainly the Qur’an is not explicit about it (it speaks only of making pilgrimage to the “House” without describing what that entails), and in any case we should not assume that early Muslims acted in accordance to a text that itself had not become fixed or authoritative (as we shall presently see). What is more, when the tradition is read carefully, one finds a number of early controversies regarding precisely how, where and when rites in and around Mecca were to take place. It seems, for example, that the Ka‘ba’s centrality in Meccan ritual may have been secondary, the earlier focus of pilgrimage having been outside the Ka‘ba precinct. Visiting Mecca was an important part of early Islamic belief, but there seems to have been no clear

consensus of precisely how it was to be carried out.

Pilgrimage rites being unsettled, so too were the physical layout and architecture of the pilgrimage centre. ‘Abd al-Malik’s building projects in Mecca form but one instalment in a protracted process of building and rebuilding, in which the city’s sacred topography and associated rites (including the pilgrimage) evolved hand-in-hand throughout the seventh century – and perhaps beyond it. Thus tradition tells us that modifications were made to the Ka‘ba shortly before Muhammad’s time, that the Prophet himself participated as a young man in its complete rebuilding, that upon his conquest of Mecca its interior was emptied of idols, that Ibn al-Zubayr first razed and then rebuilt it as a result of damage caused during the Civil War (the city was bombarded twice, and sometimes tradition tells us that ‘Abd al-Malik was at best ambivalent about bombarding it); and, finally, that the caliph and his governor did large-scale building of their own. According to some sources, this rebuilding was on the scale of Ibn al-Zubayr’s: “He [‘Abd al-Malik] destroyed the sacred house of God,” as one opponent put it bitterly (Elad, ‘Dome’, 50).

What was the nature of the rebuilding of the Ka‘ba? We are occasionally told that Ibn al-Zubayr rebuilt it according to plans mooted but unrealized by the Prophet Muhammad himself; we are also told that ‘Abd al-Malik “restored” it to its pre-Zubayrid form. It is probably impossible to describe the modifications in any detail, but the status of the Hijr (a sacred area adjacent and sometimes part of the Ka‘ba) and the number and placement of the doors were certainly contentious, the general issue perhaps being how freely pilgrims were to be able to enter the Ka‘ba. One cannot settle things here. Instead, it is enough to stress that it was as a religious authority, rather than as a despotic, heterodox or impious tyrant, that ‘Abd al-Malik undertook the renovation of the Meccan sanctuary. How can one say what is orthodox or pious when the rules of orthodoxy and piety had not yet been written?

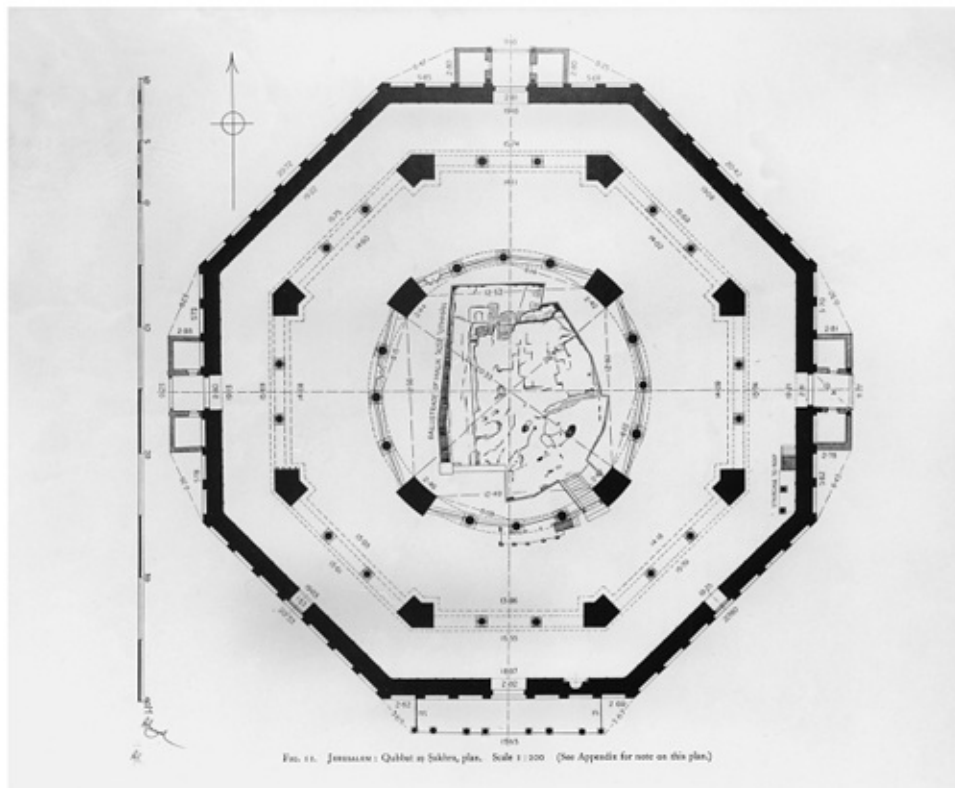


[The Ka'ba.](#)

It was in that capacity that he also built the Dome of the Rock. The significance of Jerusalem for early Muslims is signaled in a variety of ways, especially in reports that have Muhammad pray in its direction or towards *both* the Ka'ba and Jerusalem at the same time. Both 'Umar and Mu'awiya seem to have put up buildings on the Temple Mount. 'Abd al-Malik's construction was certainly radical – not only did he build the Dome, but he also greatly developed the whole area of the Haram al-Sharif, expanding pre-existing buildings (such as the Aqsa mosque), building new ones, working on walls and gates, and aligning elements of this platform with the city below – but it clearly belongs to a nearly continuous tradition of caliphal building in Jerusalem. Little wonder that even upon the most conservative reading, the traditional Islamic sources dating from the ninth and tenth centuries preserve claims that Jerusalem's status was comparable to that of Medina and Mecca, sometimes even going so far as to claim that it was superior to one or the other; to paraphrase one tradition, a prayer in the mosque of Mecca is equal to 100,000 prayers, that in Medina 1,000 and that in Jerusalem, 20,000. The Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775–85) is said to have admitted that the Umayyads surpassed the Abbasids in four respects, one of which was the construction of the Dome of the Rock. Little wonder, then, that his descendant, al-Ma'mun, thought of replacing 'Abd al-Malik's name on the inscription band with his own.

That the Dome of the Rock enjoyed such status amongst early Muslims may

sound strange to those familiar only with later doctrines, but it is less so when one considers all the ways in which it was comparable to the Ka'ba: both are organized for circumambulation around a sacred rock; both functioned as the focal point of prayer and pilgrimage (in the case of the Dome of the Rock, this did not end with the Second Civil War); both were associated with pre-Islamic prophets and the Prophet himself (the "Night Journey" is said to have taken him to Jerusalem); and – to push the evidence further than I have done so far – both shared what appears to have been some similar iconography, such as angels and trees (one also occasionally reads of incense burning in the Ka'ba), and building materials (the stones of the Ka'ba are sometimes said to have come from Syria or Palestine). Given this and other evidence, it makes good sense to set the construction of the Dome of the Rock not merely in the context of the Second Civil War and the Islamic conquest of Palestine, but, alongside Mecca, in the evolving process whereby Muslim pilgrimage rituals were articulated and became distinct from Near Eastern religious traditions, monotheist and pagan alike.



[The Dome of the Rock, plan.](#)

Both Jerusalem and Mecca were pilgrimage sites under construction because Islamic pilgrimage practices were still under construction in the seventh century,

and because the caliph had a hand in their design. In the event, Jerusalem lost out to Mecca, which would become the single focal point recognized by the high tradition (in practice, Muslims would venerate a number of holy sites). Why Mecca won probably says as much about the later eighth century, when the capital of the caliphate moved from Syria to Iraq (it was not until much later that Palestine would regain the serious attention of Muslim leaders) as it does the Umayyad period itself.

## ***The Qur'an***

How the Qur'an fits into all of this remains an unresolved question, but one that is worth asking.

What was the state of the text in 'Abd al-Malik's time? The Islamic tradition is not entirely consistent, but it generally holds that Muhammad's revelations were first recorded individually on a variety of materials (including bones and stones), that after the Prophet's death the first caliph, Abu Bakr, ordered that these be collected and transcribed onto sheets, and that these sheets formed the basis for an authoritative and official version, which was commissioned and distributed by the third caliph, 'Uthman, remaining variants now being limited to vowels (short and some long vowels are inadequately represented in early Arabic script). According to the tradition, then, the text was fixed and closed long before 'Abd al-Malik came to rule – perhaps around 650, and certainly no later than 656, which marks the end of 'Uthman's reign. If we accept this chronology and reconstruction, the Qur'an should not figure in this book: 'Abd al-Malik may have possessed religious authority, but the hard and controversial work of sorting out God's words had already been done before he had reached the age of ten. And, assuming that the text was not only definitively closed but that it exercised definitive authority on religious matters, we would presumably also have to make 'Abd al-Malik's authority subject to it.

We should hesitate before we accept the tradition's chronology, however. This is not merely because we lack clinching evidence, although the absence of a full text that is datable to the seventh century is not without some significance. (And none of the incomplete Qur'anic manuscripts that survive from early Islam can be securely dated to the seventh century.) For the purposes of dating, all we have are very fragmentary inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock and bits elsewhere, all of which add up to a small fraction of the received text. This said, the problem is not so much that we lack contemporaneous evidence as it is that there may be grounds for doubting the traditional view: contradictory evidence and

contradictory models for the emergence of scripture.

If we leave aside for the moment some contradictory evidence, how are we to make sense of a reconstruction that turns on the state-sponsored distribution of a single and official version as early as 650? The complicated and protracted processes that generated monotheist scriptures in antiquity and late antiquity are generally measured in centuries or at least several decades; the tradition would have us believe that in the case of Islam they were telescoped into about twenty years. Are we really to think that within a single generation God's word moved from individual lines and chapters scribbled on camel shoulder-blades and rocks to complete, single, fixed and authoritative text on papyrus or vellum? It would be virtually unprecedented. It is furthermore unlikely in the light of what we know of early Arabic: the nature of early Arabic script, which only imperfectly described vowels and consonants, and conventions of memorizing and reading, which often privileged memory over written text, would militate against the very rapid production of the fixed and authoritative text that the tradition describes. Things become even less likely when we reflect upon the individuals and institutions concerned. 'Uthman was deeply unpopular in many quarters; his reign was short and contentious. His successor's was longer, and one can imagine that the task of enforcing an 'Uthmanic version would have fallen in practice to Mu'awiya. But in a polity that lacked many rudimentary instruments of coercion and made no systematic attempt to project images of its own transcendent authority – no coins, little public building or inscriptions – the very idea of "official" is problematic. There are other difficulties too.

To these objections to the traditional account one can add some contradictory evidence. Some of it is internal to the Islamic tradition, such as early Qur'anic manuscripts that depart from the "official" version in a number of respects, citations of Qur'anic language in early datable texts, such as Hasan al-Basri's letter, and the material evidence, chiefly the inscription of the Dome of the Rock. Scholars committed to the idea that the Qur'an was fixed and closed at a very early date minimize the myriad ways in which these texts differ from the received version – the inscription on the Dome, for example, manifests "juxtaposition of disparate passages, conflation, shift of person, and occasional omission of brief phrases" (Whelan, 6). They accordingly adduce all manner of reasons, some less plausible than others, to account for them. Scholars committed to the idea that the history made by Muslims is comparable to that made by non-Muslims can recognize that, *taken as whole*, the reliable evidence suggests that Qur'anic texts must have remained at least partially fluid through the late seventh and early eighth century.

There remains room, then, for 'Abd al-Malik to play a role in influencing the

snape or what became the authoritative Qur'an. And this, in fact, is exactly what some sources tell us happened. According to one late ninth-century Christian, the caliph had al-Hajjaj undertake a revision of a text, which included a number of deletions; the new text was then sent out to the provinces, and earlier versions were suppressed. In his letter to 'Abd al-Malik, al-Hasan al-Basri pointedly tells the caliph: "O Commander of the faithful: place the book of God in its proper places; don't modify it or misconstrue it" (Ritter, 69). The Christian account is strikingly similar to those that credit 'Uthman with the definitive redaction, but here the events make some real sense. For 'Abd al-Malik had a clear interest: as we shall see, his imperial program was in very large measure executed by broadcasting ideas of order and obedience in a distinctly Islamic idiom. What is more, unlike previous caliphs, 'Abd al-Malik had the resources to attempt such a redaction and to impose the resulting text, which, alone amongst all its competitors, we inherit. The contrast with Mu'awiya is once again instructive: whereas Mu'awiya apparently had to withdraw relatively conservative coinage because of its unpopularity amongst Christians, 'Abd al-Malik could impose his revolutionary epigraphic coinage – and this, even over the objections of at least some pious Muslims who took offense at coins that bore God's name on them.

The task of producing, distributing and enforcing a uniform Qur'anic text fits as neatly into 'Abd al-Malik's reign as it fits awkwardly into 'Uthman's or Mu'awiya's. The scope of 'Abd al-Malik's Qur'anic project is impossible to measure, but we must envision it as one of editing and revising, rather than composing. In sum, instead of speaking of an 'Uthmanic text, we should probably speak of a Marwanid one.





## **‘ABD AL-MALIK AND THE ISLAMIC STATE**

Most of the readers of this book live in democracies – that is, states that claim to effect the will of their citizens, and that derive their legitimacy in large part from this claim. As we have seen, ‘Abd al-Malik’s state was a theocracy – a state that claimed to effect God’s will. At the heart of the theocratic state was a religious office, the caliphate, and occupying this office was ‘Abd al-Malik, who, succeeding earlier divinely-guided rulers (including Adam), represented God on earth and exercised wide-ranging authority as a result. It would be incorrect to say that we owe these ideas to ‘Abd al-Malik, since Mu‘awiya seems to have anticipated at least some of them; but it would be correct to say that they only crystallized late in the seventh century, and that it is to ‘Abd al-Malik that we owe a related and revolutionary insight.

This insight was that claims about rulership and belief should be broadcast widely – that is, not only according to conventional means, such as the sermon, letter and story, but through public writing in a variety of media (especially portable ones) that reached broad and heterogeneous audiences, such as coins, passports and tax documents. In other words, ‘Abd al-Malik’s court may have remained small and tied to Syria, but its ideas would circulate throughout the empire, to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. We shall see that this public writing functioned as dynastic propaganda, “advertising” the Marwanid case in general and ‘Abd al-Malik in particular. But what I wish to emphasize is not its role in diffusing ideas about the Marwanids and ‘Abd al-Malik, but rather its role in projecting several interlocking and larger ideas: ideas about state, dynasty, rule, order and God. What I wish to suggest is that what resulted from ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign was not merely the more efficient and wide-ranging transmission

Malik's reign was not merely the more efficient and wide-ranging transmission of the Marwanids' claims to be God's rulers, but in some real sense the notion of "official" and thus of the Islamic "state" itself – that "amorphous complex of agencies with ill-defined boundaries, performing a great variety of not very distinctive functions" (Schnitter in Mitchell, 77). From this perspective, 'Abd al-Malik's project was to rule by capturing the imaginations of his subjects.

## SERMONS AND LETTERS

States nowadays rely upon official and unofficial media to broadcast their views, especially television, radio, newspaper and the Internet. The Marwanids obviously had more modest technologies at their disposal. Still, they sent their broadcasts out over what may usefully be understood as several different frequencies, and we may begin with the conventional varieties – those that formed part of a pre- and early Islamic culture of politics broadly conceived.

One such frequency was the sermon, which was delivered personally by the caliph or by a proxy, such as his governor. It formed part of the Friday prayers, and could reach hundreds and sometimes even thousands of believers. "I won't be the kind of caliph who'll be reckoned weak, who'll be duped or lied to," 'Abd al-Malik told one audience, "... the only way I'll cure this community is with the sword, so that you raise your spears on my behalf..." (al-Safadi, xix, 210). If we are to believe the historical tradition, sermons gave 'Abd al-Malik the opportunity to put in practice the eloquence that he so highly valued; he accordingly composed in both prose and poetry. Many of his prose orations have passages of striking imagery, some of which recall the panegyric poetry that we read in the previous chapter. Shortly before appointing al-Hajjaj as governor over Basra and Kufa, the caliph mounted the pulpit to speak: "O people!", he began, "the waters of Iraq have grown turbid, its barrenness has been uncovered, its sweetness has gone brackish, its kindling has appeared, its blazing intensified, its fire has grown large..." (Ibn A'tham, vii, 1). The style may seem bombastic to us, but it moved seventh-century Muslims (and the translation also does a disservice to the Arabic nouns, all of which end with pronominal suffix *ha*, "its").

There were limitations to this kind of broadcast. The caliph or governor could only be in one mosque at a time. And while most of those in attendance presumably listened attentively, only some would have recounted the caliph's or governor's words to others, and fewer still recorded them in writing for distribution and posterity; sermons did not always travel well. This said, some sermons obviously do survive from this period, although most were undated or

sermons obviously do survive from this period, although most were updated or otherwise transformed during the course of their transmission from late seventh-century event to (typically) ninth-century text as recorded in thirteenth- or fourteenth-century manuscript. One of the best recorded speeches in all of Arabic letters was delivered by al-Hajjaj in 694 or early 695; it was occasioned by the fickle and cowardly Basrans, who hesitated to join an army led by a commander named al-Muhallab b. Abi Sufra. The speech was transmitted for two reasons: first, because it illustrated al-Hajjaj's sanguinary approach to politics; and second, because of its striking style, some of which survives in an excellent translation (al-Tabari after Rowson, 13 ff.).

Standing upon a platform in the city's congregational mosque, and shrouded ominously by his turban (he had just arrived in the city and was unknown to many), al-Hajjaj begins with some poetry:

I am the son of splendor, who scales the heights;  
when I remove the turban, you will know me.

He then turns to prose:

By God! I take full accounting of wickedness, match it in return, and pay it back in kind! I see heads ripe and ready for harvest, and blood ready to flow between turbans and beards!

After returning to poetry, al-Hajjaj then delivers his speech in prose. The imagery of 'Abd al-Malik as an archer is worth noting because he usually appears as a swordsman.

By God, O people of Iraq, I cannot be squeezed like a fig, or abashed by having old waterskins rattled at me. I have been proven to be at the height of my vigor and have run the longest races. The Commander of the Believers, 'Abd al-Malik, has emptied out his quiver and tested the wood of his arrows; he found me the strongest and least likely to break, and thus aimed me at you. Long have you pursued a course of faction and followed the path of waywardness; but now, by God, I will bark you as one does a tree, hack you as one does a mimosa, and beat you as one does a camel not of the herd at the watering-hole. By God, I do not make promises without fulfilling them, and I do not measure without cutting. I will see no more of these gatherings, with 'it was said' and 'he said' and 'what does he say?' – what does all this have to do with you? By God, you will stay on the straight paths of the right, or else I will leave every man of you preoccupied with the state of his body. If I find any man from al-Muhallab's expedition still here after three days, I will spill his blood and seize his property.

A few pages later we read that al-Hajjaj did precisely that, thus making good, as he promised, on his threat. The drama in another version turns as much on the silence that al-Hajjaj holds as it does the force of his words; there was much theater in this public oratory.

Another frequency for sending messages, which was closely related to the

sermon both in form and execution, was the official letter. It could be written by the caliph or one of his deputies (usually by dictation to a scribe), and was typically read out to an assembled throng (often by another scribe). An entirely unremarkable example is the following, which was written by one of ‘Abd al-Malik’s commanders and governors, Khalid b. ‘Abd Allah, in 693 or 694. Al-Hajjaj’s speech was addressed to those who refused to campaign, while Khalid’s letter was addressed to those who had deserted a campaign: raising and maintaining armies were chronic difficulties. I include the letter here (in very pruned form) because it overlaps with the brief lines of ‘Abd al-Malik’s sermon quoted above, and reflects how belief and obedience to the caliph intertwine (al-Tabari after Rowson, 6).

In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. From Khalid b. ‘Abd Allah to those Muslims and believers whom this letter of mine reaches. Greetings. To you I offer praise of God; there is no God but He...O Muslims! Know who it is whom you have so boldly defied! It is ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, the Commander of the Believers, a man with no weaknesses, from whom rebels can expect no indulgence! On the one who defies him falls his whip...Servants of God! Return to your assigned places and to the obedience of your caliph...Peace and God’s mercy upon you.

The overlap between poetry and coinage – ‘Abd al-Malik chastises with a whip – is again worth noting.

Words such as these could be intended to impress, frighten, threaten or reassure; but they were always intended to command respect. Indeed, at least one account suggests that a caliph’s letter was supposed to command the same respect that the caliph commanded in person. The following describes the circumstances surrounding another letter written by ‘Abd al-Malik (Ibn A‘tham, vii, 10):

He (al-Hajjaj) said: ‘O boy, read the letter out to them!’ So he read out to them the letter from the Commander of the Believers to the people of Iraq: ‘In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate. [This is] from ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, the Commander of the Believers to those believers and Muslims from amongst the people of Iraq. Greetings of peace to you!’ But no one said a thing, so al-Hajjaj said: ‘O you people who are given to civil wars! The Commander of the Believers bids you greetings of peace and you don’t return them? By God and His power, I’ll teach you not to do that in the future! O boy, read again!’ So when he reached his words ‘Greetings of peace to you!’, every single person present in the mosque said: ‘And peace upon the Commander of the Believers, God’s mercy and blessings be upon him, and upon his [‘Abd al-Malik’s] commander [i.e. al-Hajjaj] too!’.

Because letters could be distributed in multiple copies, which were to be read out all over the caliph’s domains, they could reach large numbers simultaneously.

In addition to speeches and composing letters, there were other ways for the Marwanids to spread their messages. Poets and storytellers, the latter often plying their trade in and around mosques, could be pressed into service; we have

already had occasion several times in this book to draw upon the lines of two poets, al-Farazdaq and al-Akhtal. If poets spent most of their time composing their verse for the court and its courtesans, they could also accompany the caliph on pilgrimage, forming part of a travelling retinue of publicity agents. Meanwhile, storytellers and preachers (some paid by the state, others not) would become increasingly prominent features of eighth-century Islamic cities. For example, one report has the preacher and ascetic, al-Hasan al-Basri, whom we met in chapter 5, as ‘Abd al-Malik’s correspondent in theological matters, speaking to “his circle in the governor’s mosque” in Basra (al-Tabari, ii, 455). Whether al-Hasan was critical, favorable or indifferent about the Marwanids is a point much discussed by scholars; the fact that he is placed in the “governor’s mosque” in this report scarcely suggests that he would have been a critic, at least at this point in his career.

So ‘Abd al-Malik, as caliphs before and after him, could communicate over several different frequencies, some more effective than others. What conclusions can we draw from this material?

One should be clear enough: the Marwanids ruled in part by promising reward and threatening violence. In practice this violence could be either systematic and capricious, but in theory – and this is the second conclusion – it was firmly rooted in religious ideas (God’s “promise and threat” are very prominent themes in the Qur’an) and thus the constitutional vision that they held: God could deliver rain and blessings, but He could also deliver chastisement through the agency of a caliph or his governor. Here it must be noted that although the language may not appear very “religious,” it is strikingly so (and distinctly Islamic) at nearly every turn: thus the oaths that begin the sermons are taken before God; sermons and letters alike begin as a rule with the *basmala*, “In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate” and also with praise of God; Muhammad is called the “commander of the Believers,” and he writes to “believers and Muslims” and receives God’s “mercy and blessings;” his subjects are “servants of God.” These formulae may seem incidental to the subject matter of the sermons and letters, but in evoking God and his Prophet, they mattered a great deal. This is why changes or omissions could cause controversy. We read that Ibn al-Zubayr was criticized for dropping the Prophet’s name from the formula that began his sermons. The charge was undoubtedly intended to discredit Ibn al-Zubayr; even so, it suggests how powerful these conventions were.

Here it bears emphasizing that there was nothing new in the frequency of these broadcasts. Cultural conservatism and an elite that was both small in size and homogeneously Arab meant that throughout the seventh century the idiom

of politics remained for the most part an Arabian idiom – that is, an oral and aural one. Moreover, poems, sermons, speeches and letters would remain immensely powerful media for transmitting the state’s messages. Just as history transmits hundreds of speeches and letters purportedly delivered and written by Muhammad and his immediate successors, so, too, does it transmit hundreds from later Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs. For example, a very rough count would put the number of letters ascribed to ‘Abd al-Malik’s nephew, ‘Umar II (r. 717–20), whom posterity would make a prolific letter writer, at nearly 100. (How many of his and other caliphs’ letters are authentic is very hard to know.) Just as the early caliphs had poets, so too would later dynasts.

Orality and aurality were thus the prestige forms of political expression for nearly all of the seventh century, although they did not enjoy a complete monopoly: we also have the occasional inscription, tombstone, tax papyrus, graffito or coin that dates from the 640s, 650s, 660s and 670s. With the exception of the tax papyri from Egypt, which reflect the continuation of Byzantine fiscal administration, these are very few in number and inconsistently rendered in style, however. It is only with ‘Abd al-Malik and the early Marwanids that we come to a new pattern: from the 690s we have an emergent tradition of public writing that is altogether more plentiful and consistent, and that reached far larger numbers than pre-Marwanid varieties. Much has been made of the religious content of this material as evidence for the evolution of Islamic dogma and identity; it has been suggested, for example, that the advent of a distinctly religious language in this period signals the crystallization of Islam as a distinct religious tradition (I shall not make this claim). Less has been said about this material as a legitimizing language for the dynasty. Meanwhile, virtually nothing has been said about how this material conditioned how rulership was conceptualized – or, to put the idea into the jargon of some contemporary history – “imagined.” It is to this question – how the appearance of these media marks a new language of politics – that the rest of this chapter is devoted.

## **PUBLIC ISLAM AND THE MARWANID STATE**

### ***The Evidence***

In 1902 a slab of limestone, less than a metre square and long neglected, was discovered next to the Church of Abu Ghosh, a town that lies just west of Jerusalem (the “Iliya” of the inscription). Because the script is archaic, worn and



the (month) of Munarram or the year three (and seventy).

Seven years later, two more stones were found in the Golan; both are basalt and quite similar. One reads as follows (Elad, 'Southern Golan', 35, modified):

In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate. There is no god but God alone. He has no partner. (Muhammad) is the messenger of God. ('Abd) al-Malik, the Commander of the Believers, has ordered the manufacture of these (milestones). The work was carried out by Musawir, the client of the Commander of (the Believers) in (the month) of Sha'ban in the year five and eighty. (From Damascus to) this (stone) two (and fifty miles).

These very mundane stones deserve some scrutiny in their own right, but I shall examine them alongside a variety of comparable signs and tokens, such as coins, tax sealings, glass stamps, and papyrus passports, which also survive from this period. What these media have in common is in part just that – that they *do* survive from the late seventh and early eighth centuries. This is because, unlike papyrus, vellum and paper, basalt stone, lead, copper, glass and papyrus are relatively durable in wet or humid climates. They accordingly provide a corrective or supplement to our late literary sources. What they equally have in common is that they were relatively public, and this either because they circulated fairly widely (thus especially coins, sealings and passports) or because they were otherwise prominent in one way or another (thus milestones and other inscriptions, chiefly the Dome of the Rock).

Now each of these media had its own practical function. Milestones improved communications and trade in general, and more securely connected Palestine to Syria (and vice versa) in particular; gold, silver and copper coins were a medium of economic exchange; tax sealings, which were attached to containers and also sometimes worn as a kind of pendant around the necks of non-Muslims, marked tax payments or liabilities; stamps functioned as counter weights (for weighing items on a balance); and a papyrus passport allowed its owner to pass from one region to the next without incurring new tax liabilities. These practicalities can reasonably be said to have been their primary function; as a numismatist once put it, the value of a delivery truck is determined principally by what it is carrying, rather than the sign that is painted on its side. All of this said, what I wish to emphasize here *is* their secondary function as bearers of dynastic ideology and a model of society – as signs upon which the Umayyad and bureaucratic elite advertised not only their claims to legitimacy, but prescriptive models about how one was to believe, rule and be ruled. 'Abd al-Malik's state building was immensely successful not simply because he transformed and greatly strengthened the polity's instruments of coercion, but because he



recognized that in the public embrace and articulation of belief he possessed a compelling language of persuasion.

Four features of these media are worth highlighting. The first is their *sudden emergence in large numbers*. Although the historical tradition occasionally speaks of milestones from an earlier period, none survives from before ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign, when no fewer than six suddenly appear. The profile of the coinage is similar: the historical tradition speaks of caliphal minting as early as ‘Umar (r. 634–44), but it is not until ‘Abd al-Malik that we have our first, unequivocal evidence for caliphally minted coins. (Numismatists have yet to agree on whether the Sufyanids sponsored minting of any significance in Syria; that some pre-Marwanid minting took place is very probable, but that is another matter.) Similarly, the tradition tells us that tax sealing took place already in the conquest period, but the earliest (and a slightly problematic example) comes from 94/713–14, and thereafter we have a fair number of specimens; meanwhile, eighth-century sources written in Syriac make it clear that the practice is a feature of Marwanid rule. How many of these media were originally produced during the caliph’s reign is impossible to say, but the surviving coins number in the thousands. This pattern – the unconfirmed or problematically confirmed ascription of an institution or practice to the very early Islamic period, which lacks any corroboration by the surviving contemporaneous evidence, followed by their sudden and relatively abundant appearance under the Marwanids – cuts across too many media to be explained as an accident of survival. It must reflect a new program of rule.

The second feature is relative *uniformity*. Notwithstanding minor differences amongst the milestones (such as their dimensions) and the special case of the stone that commemorates ‘Abd al-Malik’s “leveling,” the stones are quite consistent in language and content. They may have been chiseled by different hands, but those hands were guided by a craftsman working to a set of expectations about what he was to inscribe, a set that was common to other craftsmen. Indeed, milestones are milestones *because* they say much the same thing, just as coins are coins (instead of sealings, stamps or tokens of one kind or another in metal) because they say the same thing. So the stones may have been erected in different places and different times, but they would have been familiar as a common set. This relative uniformity characterizes all of the media (and one should count consistent weight and content of coins here), as it does the architectural form of the rectangular mosque, which is only clearly attested from the foundation of Wasit in 84/703. Uniformity is a particularly salient feature of the coinage that was struck from 75/694–5, especially that struck from 77/696–7 onwards, when reforms replaced all earlier designs with the purely epigraphic

standard; earlier issues were either withdrawn or overstruck. Whereas pre-reform minting was as a general rule eclectic, regional specific and experimental, the reform coins of 696–7 usher in a period of remarkable stability: coins minted for centuries follow the pattern set in 695, the chief features of which were inscriptions around the edges and across the center.

The relative uniformity of content holds within a single medium and, as we have seen, naturally differs from one to the next. A *formulaic language* that transcends media also clearly emerges; it is the third feature worth noting. Much of this is religious: the milestone begins with the *basmala* (“In the name of God...”), as do the passports and the occasional stamp, and this is followed by a version of the monotheist creed (“Muhammad is the messenger of God”), a formula (*basmala* + monotheist creed) that makes its first appearance on the coins in 66/684–5 and on the southern face of the Dome of the Rock inscription, too. (The *basmala* is attested as early as the early 640s; the monotheist creed only now.) Not all of the formulaic language is religious. The execution of a given milestone, like that of many sealings, stamps and coins, is expressed by the formula “carried out by so-and-so;” other formulae of execution (e.g. “so-and-so ordered”), titles (“commander of the Believers;” “commander”) and dating by the Hijri era are also fairly consistent across media.

A fourth feature common to all media is that they always announce *authority* and frequently announce *hierarchy*. For example, in the third milestone cited above the authorities are God – Muhammad – ‘Abd al-Malik – Musawir; in the coins, they are often God and Muhammad, or God, Prophet and caliph or governor; in the glass stamps they are usually just finance director, and rarely God and finance director or caliph and finance director; in the passports they are typically God, administrator, finance director and scribe. Authority and hierarchy are less prominent on the sealings, which only rarely mention *amirs*.

## ***Conclusion***

We can conclude by posing a question: When did the early Islamic polity become a state?

Some have argued that the line was crossed already in the time of Muhammad, “Prophet and Statesman,” as one especially popular biography is titled (Watt). Others have put it a bit later, such as in the time of Mu‘awiya or ‘Abd al-Malik. Depending on their views on the soundness of our sources, some have argued on the basis of the historical tradition, others on the basis of the lean documentary evidence. All, however, have seen the existence of a handful of key

institutions as crucial: states need administrators, judges, tax-agents and soldiers, it is thought; find evidence for these administrators, judges, tax-agents and soldiers, and you have found a state. Setting aside the problematic historical tradition, we can be sure that ‘Abd al-Malik’s polity was indeed a state by this standard because the surviving documentary and material evidence reflect in number and character the existence of those institutions. As we have seen, Marwanid media appear suddenly and in relatively large numbers. Not only that: the historical tradition makes mention of a centralizing state with increasing powers of coercion.

By that standard – the presence of institutions and delivery of services – we have a state by the early eighth century. But that standard is low. It is low because the presence of institutions and the delivery of services do not necessarily signal a state, as the definition of the “state” with which this chapter begins makes clear (an “amorphous complex of agencies with ill-defined boundaries, performing a great variety of not very distinctive functions”); non-state agencies (everything from corporations to crime syndicates) can deliver many or all of the services that state institutions have conventionally been supposed to deliver. The milestones, coins, tax sealings, glass stamps, and papyrus passports of the early Marwanid period can raise our standard.

Above, I proposed that the relative uniformity of the milestones would have made them familiar as a common set, and, furthermore, that this set shared a number of formulae with other sets. Now uniformity is not a product of modernity: a skilled potter can produce pots of a standard size and design, just as a minter can strike coins of more-or-less uniform size, weight and design. But potters and minters do not rub shoulders and follow similar patterns unless they are directed to do so. And in late antiquity the coordinated imposition across several media of formulae can only be achieved by single agencies that we usefully call states – that is, agencies that have the capital and powers of cooperation and coercion to generate that which we call “official.” The Byzantine and Sasanian states had done this fairly well; under ‘Abd al-Malik, Muslims began to do the same.

In fact, Muslims did it rather better than their predecessors. As we have seen, by striking coins and the like, the Marwanids were amplifying claims to legitimacy that they were otherwise making through sermons, speeches, letters and poetry, which, for all their effectiveness, were restricted in audience. In this sense, they were saturating their domains with claims that had previously been restricted to the Arab-Muslim elite. This shift from sermon, speech and poem to sermon, speech and poem *and* coin, passport and inscription reflects the altogether more ambitious claims that ‘Abd al-Malik was making as God’s

caliph. Making legitimizing claims more widely diffused amongst Arab, non-Arab, Muslim and non-Muslim meant incorporating into a framework of rule those who had earlier been ignored. Not only were peasants being taxed for the first time; they were subjects of an Islamic state for the first time.

So the Marwanids were doing much more than merely amplifying claims. By patronizing all these uniform media, imposing upon them formulae that invariably expressed ideas (either directly or indirectly) about order, hierarchy and power, and, finally, identifying themselves or their proxies by name or office, they were reifying God's natural order in their dynasty's rule. Marwanid rule thus aimed to be not merely ubiquitous – that is, visible in the market place, army barracks, and countryside – but as “natural” as God's rule itself. Aiming to capture the imaginations of their subjects, the Marwanids were state building on a grand scale.

In the end, the dynasty itself only survived for another two generations: it would be overthrown in 750; almost to the man, Marwanids were brutally executed by the revolutionaries; even the remains of all but one Umayyad caliph were dis-interred and spoiled. The pattern they had set would survive them, however. The Abbasid revolutionaries who succeeded them would quickly assimilate to the Near Eastern model that 'Abd al-Malik had inherited and accommodated to the Arabian origins and Syrian context of seventh-century Islam.

## CONCLUSION

### *The Legacy of ‘Abd al-Malik*

In October of 705 ‘Abd al-Malik died. He left behind a succession arrangement that identified his eldest son al-Walid as heir, and al-Walid duly officiated at his father’s funeral in Damascus. He was buried outside the Jabiya gate, which led south from the city. The resting place was appropriate because it had been in al-Jabiya that his father Marwan had been acclaimed caliph by the Syrians some twenty years earlier.

Whereas Marwan’s succession wishes were unclear, ‘Abd al-Malik’s were clear and widely respected. In time, the caliph would be succeeded by no fewer than four sons, three grandsons and two nephews (I leave aside here the Umayyad dynasty of Spain, which also descended from ‘Abd al-Malik through his son Hisham). The succession suggests how deeply respected the father’s will was, since his will trumped the wishes of each successive caliph, who naturally wished to be succeeded by his own son. Such was still the case as late as 724, almost twenty years after his death, when the fourth son, Hisham, became caliph. No other caliph would exert that kind of authority from the grave. The dynasty would be called Marwanid, and we have poetry that calls ‘Abd al-Malik “Ibn Marwan” (“the son of Marwan;” al-Farazdaq, 556), but this convention overstates the father’s influence at the expense of the son. For all but three years, either ‘Abd al-Malik or one of his sons could claim the caliphate from 685 to 743. Mu‘awiya may have introduced the principle of dynastic succession into the ruling tradition of early Islam, but ‘Abd al-Malik made it work.

Succession arrangements, combined with the continued influence of al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf, who served al-Walid (r. 705–15) until his death in 714, meant that ‘Abd al-Malik’s vision – of an administratively centralizing theocracy ruled by God’s caliph – could survive his death. In fact, it would dominate the politics of Islamic rule throughout the eighth century and well into the ninth, transcending the dynastic change from the Umayyads to the Abbasids, which would take

place in the middle of the eighth. We might usefully conclude by reflecting upon two processes that were integral to this vision: Arabicization and Islamicization. For a very great deal changed in relatively little time, and no one could have predicted it. In 600, Islam had not yet been born, and Arabic had barely developed written forms, it being the speech of peoples who remained marginal to the cosmopolitan centers of the Near East. By 800, Arabic was well on its way towards dominating both learning and everyday speech, Islam had come to monopolize political expression, and conversion was also under way. (A sixth-century observer would have guessed that the Near East would continue to go where it clearly was heading: towards a region dominated by Aramaic-speaking Christians.)

By Arabicization, I mean two kinds of linguistic change: how Arabic became the lingua franca of North Africa, Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, replacing and/or complementing a number of languages, most importantly Aramaic, and also how it imprinted itself upon other languages, especially Persian, by exporting the Arabic alphabet and much of its vocabulary. The process began in the pre-Islamic period, when Arabs drifted or were pulled north out of Arabia, creating a “dense fringe” of Arabic-speaking populations in southern Iraq and parts of Syria; it accelerated as a result of the conquests, which not only pulled more Arab-speakers into the Fertile Crescent, but put (and usually settled) them in garrison-cities, the last of which was al-Hajjaj’s Wasit. Although these garrisons were intended to insulate Arabs from non-Arabs (al-Hajjaj is said to have posted guards at the gate of his city), they developed an economic dynamism that inevitably and irresistibly attracted non-Arabs, who adopted Arabic. Conquest armies also captured and enslaved thousands of non-Arabs, who were relocated in and around these garrisons, and they, too, took up Arabic. Many of the most accomplished Arabic philologists, historians and littérateurs of early Islam descended from conquest refugees and especially slaves brought to or born in Basra, Kufa and Wasit.

If social and economic forces were promoting Arabic from the 640s onwards, it was only in ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign that the political elite resolved to transform the language of God into the language of empire. Official sanction came when the idea of “official” crystallized alongside that of the “state.” In retrospect, the shift seems so inevitable and natural that it is hard to imagine things otherwise. In fact, the decision was radical. Christians and Jews alike had gotten along fine as linguistic schizophrenics, reading, writing and speaking a variety of languages and scripts, translating (as it suited them) scripture from one language to the next. Muslims were altogether more ambitious; they were hardly the first linguistic imperialists, but they were the first to insist that the language spoken by God and those delegated by Him (caliphs, governors, commanders, etc.)

by God and those delegated by Him (caliphs, governors, commanders, etc.) should be the language of the mundane job of ruling – the language of receipts, bills, orders, contracts, coins, weights, measures, passports, sealings and the like. Language therefore functioned both as a powerful tool of political integration and as a token of cultural and religious superiority. Anyone could learn to speak or write Arabic, and thereby acquire the ability to communicate with Arab and non-Arab alike for the purposes of trade or commerce; one could even gain employment in the state. And everyone was reminded that God had chosen to speak to the world in Arabic, and that the Arabs spoke it best.

It is in large part because the Marwanids were linguistic imperialists that Arabic became the lingua franca of the Middle East, the speed of this change depending much on geography. The closer to the center, the faster and more profound the change. The task of translating tax documents from Greek into Arabic may have begun as early as the late seventh century in Syria, and we know that Christians there began to abandon Greek for Arabic already during the eighth century; but the task remained very much unfinished in eastern Iran two generations later, and there, Arabic transformed Persian, but did not replace it.

By Islamicization I also mean two things: how Islam came to dominate the political language of rule, and how Islam spread amongst non-Arabs.

We have seen how ‘Abd al-Malik, liberated by time and geography from a commitment to follow in the footsteps of his forebears, and emboldened by the experience of Ibn al-Zubayr and the crisis of civil war, experimented; and if not all of his experiments proved successful (the Dome of the Rock is a case in point), the imperial vision that he promoted was hugely successful. It was only during his reign that the idea of God’s caliphate, which is implicit in the Qur’an and the early experience of the polity, became fully explicit. There was nothing new in the marriage of monotheism to empire, but there had now been a new dispensation, and the caliph being the instrument of God, the empire he ruled was densely signposted with symbols of God’s, Muhammad’s, and the caliph’s authority.

That rulers were to make manifest God’s will on earth by organizing an emphatically Islamic state did not mean that Muslim subjects were to follow a single, uniform code of Islamic law, as many Islamists currently would have it. Early Islamic law remained far too dynamic for that, early Muslim lawyers being as a rule remarkably resourceful, tolerant and eclectic. Only much later would states derive their legitimacy by claiming to safeguard such codes, and only later still would Muslims hold constitutional theories that insisted that states enforce them. Nor did it mean that non-Muslims could not be accommodated within this state. Early Muslim rulers were too pragmatic and wedded to tribal and ethnic

attitudes for that. The state was to make universal claims for its legitimacy, and in theory, the caliphs were responsible for conducting a *jihad* that would eventually establish Islamic rule everywhere. But if acknowledging God's sovereignty as delegated to the caliph was one thing, conversion was something else.

So although Marwanid-sponsored policies of Arabicization and Islamicization set into motion processes that had the result of encouraging conversion in the long term, the Marwanids can scarcely be called proselytizers. Christians at the turn of the eighth century occasionally complain bitterly of conversion, but nowhere do they speak of Muslims actively encouraging it. Opportunistic and talented newcomers might be assimilated (the system was to some degree meritocratic). The figure who is credited with having begun the task of translating the tax documents from Persian into Arabic for al-Hajjaj was a gifted Persian named Salih b. 'Abd al-Rahman. And for his brilliance and achievement, he would be rewarded very handsomely, being promoted to the highest financial position in the empire. But the vast majority of the subject population remained non-Muslim throughout the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, usually unaffected by Islamic rule and as a result uninterested in Islam, in the short term even actively discouraged from conversion. In both of these respects – in insisting that the political order must reflect God's new dispensation while tolerating the presence and traditions of non-Muslim monotheists – 'Abd al-Malik demonstrated that ideas mooted by the Prophet in one corner of seventh-century Arabia could form the basis for empires and states that would rule much of the Mediterranean and western Asia until the modern age.



## FURTHER READING

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