Creation of a *Muslim* Empire

The Quraysh Civil War & the Marwanids
A Late Antiquity Perspective

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Sitting in Constantinople, in the early seventh century, the highly educated Alexandrian immigrant, Theophylact Simocatta, wrote what would become the last of the great secular classicizing histories of Late Antiquity. His *History* was a form of literature which reached back to Herodotus, Thucydides and Arrian in imitation[1]. Writing about events in about 590CE, Theophylact inserts a supposed letter from the exiled Sassanid Emperor Khosrow II asking the Byzantine[2] Emperor Maurice for assistance in restoring him to his throne. The letter apparently greatly moved the Emperor Maurice for he would go on to successfully assist Khosrow. More importantly though, the letter gives us an excellent insight into how the Byzantines and Sassanids viewed the world order at the end of the sixth and beginning of the seventh centuries. The letter begins:

> "Chosroes [Khosrow] king of Persians greets the most prudent king of the Romans, the beneficent, peaceful, masterful, lover of nobility and hater of tyranny, equitable, righteous, saviour of the injured, bountiful, forgiving. God effected that the whole world should be illumined from the very beginning by two eyes, namely by the most powerful kingdom of the Romans and by the most prudent sceptre of the Persian state. For by these greatest powers the disobedient and bellicose tribes are winnowed and man's course is continually regulated and guided[3]."

The "regulation and guidance" of mankind by these "two eyes" of the world however had been in a state of near constant conflict through most of the sixth century. Finishing his *History* around 620CE, Theophylact wrote in the midst of just the latest war between the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires after the assassination of the Emperor Maurice in 602CE. The aforementioned Khosrow II however, would take the opportunity to invade the Byzantine Empire, the same Empire which had so recently helped restore him to power[4]. The war would see the Sassanids overrun almost the entire Byzantine Empire in a matter of a few years before the Byzantine Emperor and usurper, Heraclius, rolled back these conquests. And yet Theophylact is not entirely disparaging of the role played by the Sassanid Persians in maintaining the stability of this bipolar world order. As one of the "eyes" which kept balance against the marauding forces of "bellicose tribes" living just beyond their respective borders, both empires had a divinely mandated prerogative to intervene in their affairs to maintain the civilized order. So malignant are these "abounding demons" as he called them, that even in the midst of a war which saw Theophylact's hometown conquered by the Persians, he exhorts that the "Roman state" had an obligation to save the Persians by helping to end the dynastic civil war which had plagued Khosrow II's reign. The alternative, Theophylact reminds us through the letter of Khosrow II, is that if they should fail:

> "…and that thereby the fierce, malevolent tribes may gain authority and power over the most meek kingdom of the Persians, and then subsequently thereby in the course of time gain irresistible might, which will not be without great injury to your [sic. Roman] tributary nations as well."[5]

Through these words Theophylact demonstrates the perceived fear that if one of these "two eyes" holding up the order of the civilized world should collapse, the other would be greatly endangered. A case perhaps of the enemy you already know is better than the one you don't. The fact that this whole world order would come crashing down in precisely this manner is something which perhaps fortunately neither Khosrow II, nor Theophylact would live to

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[1] Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, 1.
[2] The word 'Byzantine' will be used here to refer to the Empire and its Greek and Latin speaking peoples. However, it is important to note that the people of the Empire viewed themselves as a continuation of the Roman Empire and identified as Romans.
[3] Whitby, *Theophylact*, Book 4, 11.1-4.
[4] Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire,* 11.
[5] Whitby, *Theophylact*, Book 4, 11.5-8.

witness[6]. Within a couple decades of their deaths, the Sassanid Empire would cease to exist and the Byzantine Empire would be fighting for its own survival.

Setting the Stage

The 'usurpers of civilization' however would not come from fearsome northern steppe warriors, who make up the bulk of Theophylact's 'uncivilized' antagonists in his *History,* but rather from an unexpected direction, the South[7]. For in the mid-seventh century a rather peculiar series of events in world history began to take place. Completely unexpectedly, Arabic speaking armies led by minor merchants from the fringe market town of Mecca in the Hejaz made an appearance on the imperial stage between the domineering Byzantine Roman and Sassanian Persian Empires. These armies were led by the scions of a tribal group the Quraysh, founded by the eponymous Qusayy. Beginning in the early sixth century, the Quraysh were the latest of a series of tribal families to dominate the sacred *haram* in Mecca. His descendants would begin the commercialization and urbanization of this otherwise desolate location giving rise to Mecca as a minor hub between the great Indian Ocean and Mediterranean trading emporiums[8]. By about 630CE the Quraysh of Mecca had been defeated by one of their own, an exile who had taken command of the agricultural oasis of Yathrib. This outcast mandated that there would be reconciliation between the merchants of the Quraysh, the exiles followers, and their erstwhile helpers from Yathrib[9] (soon to be called Medina). Indeed the families of the Quraysh and their descendants would go on to lead a polity in some shape or form down to 1258, and beyond to the present day[10]. How these people called their new polity is highly unclear from our sources, but from contemporaneous papyri from the early seventh century, *qada' al-mu'minin*, shows up the most often, variously translated to as the 'jurisdiction' or 'era of the Believers'[11]. Who these Believers are, what this polity they formed was, and how it transformed itself in the late seventh century, are the questions addressed in this paper.

Whilst questions surrounding the exact nature of this new state have confounded modern historians for decades, it is undoubtable that they were urged by a new moralising message from a member of the Quraysh, the Prophet Muhammad, and that this emerging states' leadership would come solely from the Quraysh 'super-clan'. Adherence to the Prophet and membership in the Quraysh would become the key sources of legitimacy for would be rulers[12]. It is also important however to remind ourselves that these Arabic speaking peoples[13] were a tiny minority in their newly conquered lands, but also that they were not

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[6] Theophylact died in 630CE, and two years prior Khosrow II was executed by his son Kavad II, starting another dynastic civil war in the Sassanid Empire.

[7] In his *History,* Theophylact only seemingly mentions Saracens four times, usually as allies of the Byzantines (ie. the Ghassanid Arabs). Starting in Book 8 however his description of "Saracens" changes as they are described as having ravaged the land during Khosrow II's reign. See Whitby, Book 8, 1.1-2.

[8] Kennedy, *The Prophet,* 22.

[9] The Meccan exiles are called "emigrants" or *Muhajirun,* and the "helpers" of Medina, those who aided Muhammad are called the *ansar.*

[10] In 1258CE the last Abbasid Caliph was deposed by Mongol armies, and today the Banu Hashim, a subgroup of the Quraysh that the Prophet Muhammad belonged to, rule in Jordan.

[11] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers,* 176-177.

[12] Whilst this held true for the majority of the *ummah,* the minority group the Kharijites would reject this understanding.

[13] From here on out they will be called 'Arabs', even though it is unclear when this identity came to express holistically the Arabic speaking peoples. Robert Hoyland expresses an earlier start to this identity in *In God's Path,* whilst Fred Donner posits that an Arab identity cannot be expressed in a pre-nationalist state in *Muhammad and the Believers.*

entirely foreigners. For centuries they had interacted with the cities on the littoral of the Syrian and Arabian deserts, sometimes as immigrants, soldiers or even rulers[14]. The collapse of the Roman Empire in the West and the near collapse of its Eastern half in the seventh century, is no longer seen as the guillotine that killed 'classical civilization'. The transformation therefore from Antiquity to the Middle Ages was a drawn out process, and this process has come to be termed Late Antiquity[15]. Many historians in recent decades have since merged the study of Late Antiquity and the rise of Islam[16], including the originator of the term Peter Brown. Brown states: "…we no longer treat Islam and Christianity as if they were totally incommensurable – as if they were hermetically sealed entities, incapable of communicating with each other"[17]. Following this then, in studying the seventh century onwards, it does a disservice to our understanding of the period to create an Islamo-centric narrative of the region, when the vast majority of its people would continue to be Christian or Jewish and its literature written in Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, for many centuries to come[18]. The Church fathers, bureaucrats, pilgrims and many others who wrote these accounts give us the best picture of the emerging Medieval Middle East that was ruled by what would become an expressly *Muslim* polity by the early eighth century[19].

  It is also important not to fall into a prelapsarian understanding of the period. The fall of the Sassanid Empire and the complete end of Roman hegemony in the Eastern Mediterranean, was not the 'end of history' event some contemporary and modern historians have written it as. Rather, this new Arab led polity centred in Damascus, adopted all the regalia of the Byzantines and Sassanids, and espoused, a strongly monotheistic millenarian message which would have been familiar to anyone in the seventh century Near East. The popular Late Antiquity legend of the 'Seven Sleepers of Ephesus' provides a good literary example[20]. Seven young Christian men fleeing the persecution of the third century pagan Roman Emperor Decius find refuge in a cave where they fall asleep. When they awake, they find themselves transported by God hundreds of years to a time when Christianity became the state religion of the Empire. The Qur'an retells this same narrative with little differentiation[21] in the Meccan Surah *al-Khaf* (the Cave) 9-26. The sense of *History* itself speeding up to a promised 'end times' would have been very popular in an age when many believed the apocalypse to be imminent[22].

As of now we have skirted the question of what these Arabic speaking peoples actually believed in. This paper has shied away from the word 'Muslim', because it is clear from contemporary accounts that they did not initially refer to themselves as such[23]. The obvious place to start would be the Qur'an as revealed by the Prophet Muhammad over the course of several decades, normally divided into Meccan and Medinan surahs[24]. Whilst the word

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[14] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 21-27.

[15] The first major publication on this topic was: Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (New York, 1971).

[16] See for instance Christopher Wickham, *Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000* (Penguin Books, 2009) or Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). Wickham, and the original creator of the term Brown, include the 'rise of Islam' as an integral part of Late Antiquity.

[17] Brown, *Western Christendom,* xx.

[18] See especially Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East,* 1-3.

[19] Tannous, *Medieval Middle East,* xiii.

[20] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 1.

[21] Namely in the Qur'an the cave with the Sleepers is guarded by a faithful dog.

[22] Donner, *the Believers,* 15.

[23] Donner, *the Believers,* 71.

[24] Meccan surahs dealt mainly with his preaching of a strict monotheism and egalitarianism, and the latter dealing mainly with his time as the leader of the community, arbiter between the different tribes of Medina, and the answering questions on how to lead a pious life.

muslimun, "those who submit" is found in the Qur'an, it is dwarfed in usage by the term *mu'minun* found over a thousand times in the Qur'an. As the main audience of the scripture, the *mu'minun* has been translated as the "Believers"[25]. It is also clear the *muslimun* and *mu'minun* whilst sometimes addressed to the same people, are not synonymous. *Muslim* in the Qur'an is used as an adjective, meaning a committed monotheist, hence Abraham is called in the Qur'an 3:67: "*hanifan musliman*"[26]. Whereas *islam* refers to a form of submission to said monotheism[27]. Hence with these definitions in mind, *islam* and *muslim* both could have been used for Christians and Jews as well[28]. *Mu'minun* also has the added benefit of meaning someone who is a sincere believer. Hence the Qur'an 49:14 states: "The bedouins say: 'We Believe'. Say [to them]: 'You do not Believe; but rather say, 'we submit', for Belief has not yet entered your hearts."

If we can therefore establish that this group of Believers did not call themselves 'Muslim' in the early seventh century, what type of religion did they practice? From what we can gather from the Qur'an, the revelations of Muhammad while he was alive, the Believers were first and foremost enjoined to recognize the indivisible oneness of God. To not follow this primary rule was the essence of disbelief[29]. Other than that the Qur'an lists as being important, the preparing for the Last Day, belief in revealed scripture, observance of righteous behaviour, including frequent prayer, fasting, and a charitable and humble demeanour to others[30]. However according to Fred Donner, there doesn't seem to be any reason to believe that the Believers thought of themselves as being separate from other monotheistic religions. Muhammad made it clear that his message was the same as earlier apostles, and he was but the latest messenger. Indeed it would seem that any sufficiently pious Christians or Jews could join the Believer movement[31]. The Movement of Muhammad therefore cut through confessional divisions, including Christians, Jews and what Donner calls "Qur'anic monotheists". They should each follow their own laws, that of the Torah and Gospels for Jews and Christians, and the Qur'an for the new 'pagan' converts to monotheism[32]. Whilst Christians and Jews always had separate identities however, pagan converts (namely the bulk of the Quraysh clan from Mecca), could only resort to calling themselves *muslim*, people who followed Qur'anic law[33]. Nevertheless, this would have meant that in a world where the vast majority of Christians and Jews were 'simple believers' - literate or illiterate people who didn't concern themselves with theology - conversion to 'Islam' would have been something very easy to do theologically, since it required, specifically in the first century or so of Islam, no real change in what one understood as his or her beliefs[34]. Indeed well into the Umayyad period, there were cases of supposed Muslims who did not know how to conduct prayers, did not know they were supposed to pay alms, and even cases of Arabic poetry being recited in mosques, mistaking it for recitations of the Qur'an[35]! Whether this is a case of Islamic religious practice still being ill-defined as Donner would understand it, or just poor literacy, either case testifies to the fact that 'Islam' was not a fully understood or developed concept by the majority of its adherents in the first century of

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[25] Donner, *the Believers,* 57-58.
[26] Here *"hanif"* is a pre-Islamic noun most likely meaning "monotheist", being modified by the adjective *"muslim"* meaning 'one who obeys', see: Donner, *the Believers,* 71.
[27] See Q. 3:67.
[28] See Q. 3:52, 3:83 and 29:46.
[29] Donner, *the Believers,* 58.
[30] Donner, *the Believers,* 68-69.
[31] See Q. 3:199, Q. 3:113-116; taken from Donner, *the Believers,* 70.
[32] Donner, *the Believers,* 70-71.
[33] Donner, *the Believers,* 72.
[34] Tannous, *Medieval Middle East,* 496-497.
[35] Tannous, *Medieval Middle East*, 272.

its existence at the least. There are even reports early on of Muslims converting to Christianity, because similarly, for people who did not busy themselves with Trinitarian dilemmas, the required shift of belief was minimal[36]. Indeed the Qur'an doesn't even stipulate anything explicitly concerning 'Muslim' apostates. Whereas the death penalty was meted out for apostasy in the Sassanid and Byzantine Empires[37]. This again strongly suggests that the moral message of the Prophet was not exclusionary to other Monotheists. When death for apostasy does show up in Islam, it is in the form of a hadith, appearing after the death of the Prophet[38]. Ultimately then, one could 'convert' comfortably to Islam whilst maintaining Christian symbols and rituals[39].

Fred Donner is of course not without his critics, but his record as an esteemed scholar of the Qur'an makes his problematization of the words 'Muslim' and 'Islam' more palatable. It is telling then that one of his most stark critics, Robert Hoyland, who disagreed with Donner on a number of issues (see footnote 13) in his review of Donner's book *Muhammad and the Believers,* did not disagree with him on the fact that 'Islam' and 'Muslim' could have reflected different meanings in different periods as 'Islam' developed. Hoyland also notes that the idea of an 'indeterminate monotheism' also had earlier proponents such as Yehuda Nevo, an archaeologist of Kufic inscriptions in the Negev desert[40]. Indeed in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages our terminology for the modern religions of 'Judaism', 'Christianity' and other religions was often inchoate as Peter Biller reminds us in his essay on Modern and Medieval religious vocabularies. By comparison, in Medieval Europe, *Saracenia* for Islam and *Judaismus* for Judaism, didn't refer commonly to the actual religions but rather as to where Muslims and Jews lived in a geographic context. Instead, each religion was referred to as a law or sect, hence 'the law of Mahomet' or 'the law of the Jews'. In this same way Islam would develop its own nomenclature over time as circumstances changed, in much the same way that the Medieval European conceptualization of religious vocabulary changed after the Protestant Reformation[41].

To understand how this change of religious nomenclature occurred in Arabic, it behoves us to examine the period following the Quraysh civil wars that rocked the Near East in the late seventh century. In April 680CE the leader of the Faithful lay dead in Damascus. Mu'awiya had ruled for twenty years as governor of Syria[42] and another twenty years as leader of the Believers (r. 661-680)[43]. He had ruled unopposed since the assassination of Ali ibn Abi Talib by Kharijites[44] in 661CE, whose murder had come as a grave shock to the emerging Muslim *ummah.* Mu'awiya's reign had been stabilizing, but he made the grave decision however of selecting his son Yazid (r. 680-683) to succeed him, tainting the leadership position with connotations of *mulk* – hereditary 'kingship'[45]. This perceived lack of religious charisma in the leadership office of the Believers had not begun with the rise of the Umayyads, but

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[36] Tannous, *Medieval Middle East,* 338.
[37] Tannous, *Medieval Middle East,* 339.
[38] For prophetic hadith on apostasy, see: e.g., 'Abd al-Razzaq, al-Musannaf, vol. 10, p. 168 (no. 18706).
[39] Tannous, *Medieval Middle East,* 386.
[40] Hoyland, "Review", 574.
[41] Biller, *Mind the Gap,* 209-211.
[42] His family (attested from his father Abu Sufyan) had even owned land in Syria and Southern Palestine from pre-Islamic times. See: Donner, 96-97.
[43] Hoyland, 68.
[44] Kharijites (Arabic: *khawarij*), literally meaning: "those who go out", were a sect of Muslims who felt betrayed that Ali ibn Abi Talib had agreed to negotiate with Mu'awiya (a contender for the leadership) for who should be the leader of the Believers movement. They instead believed that it was only up to God to decide, rather than mere mortal negotiators. See Kennedy, *The Prophet,* 79.
[45] In contrast to how previous leaders had been chosen, by election. Chosen for their proximity to the Prophet and personal piety; all of whom however had been from the Quraysh 'super-clan'.

certainly Yazid's ascension to the throne deepened the rift, along with Mu'awiya's decision to rule from Damascus, rather than Medina, the seat of all previous successors to the Prophet Muhammad. Whilst Mu'awiya might have lacked religious credentials which many in the *ummah* craved, he was an able bodied administrator, military commander and consolidator of the nascent Empire[46]. With the Arab conquests of the Sassanid and Byzantine Empire having only been started a few decades before, nothing was seen as a permanent state of affairs, especially as claimants to the Sassanid throne still plotted at the Tang court in China, and the Byzantine Empire remained intact under the able leadership of Emperor Constans II[47]. One solution to staving off potential internal problems was Mu'awiya's policy, like that of his predecessors, of non-interference in his subjects everyday lives and in the overall running of the government from the previous Byzantine and Sassanid administrations[48]. This however was soon to change. His son and successor Yazid, as able bodied as he was, was unable to resolve the ongoing religious fault lines which undermined his, and his successors' claim of legitimacy. The elevation of Hussein, son of Ali ibn Abi Talib, to 'martyrdom' after his death at the hands of Yazid's army at the Battle of Karbala, is a critical example of this. Yazid would not reign for long, nor would his teenage son, Mu'awiya II (r. 683-684), leading to yet another civil war. One claimant to the throne was an outsider in the Umayya clan, Marwan ibn al-Hakam. Marwan (r. 684-685) and his son Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705) faced two revolts which would radically alter how the Umayyads would come to view themselves and their 'state', in the face of continued internal and external pressures.

The creation of this distinctly Muslim polity in the late seventh and early eighth centuries had its beginnings in the Second Civil War or *Fitna* (680-692) which began immediately after the death of Mu'awiya II, over the unresolved question of who would succeed him[49]. The Umayyad claimant Marwan, followed in short order by his son 'Abd al-Malik, was backed by the powerful Kalb tribe[50], themselves Christian Arabs from Syria. The Kalb tribe had thrown their support behind Mu'awiya, after his marriage to one of their progeny[51]. against other Quraysh pretenders, including 'Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr based in Medina and Mukhtar al-Thaqafi based in Kufa, Iraq. Mukhtar did not seek to rule himself, but instead campaigned on behalf of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah, the son of the late Ali ibn Abi Talib. Both would be decisively defeated by 'Abd al-Malik and the Umayyads, but the damage had been done to his legitimacy. Al-Zubayr had accused Ali of *mulk,* 'hereditary kingship', and Mukhtar had gone so far to proclaim ibn al-Hanafiyyah as the Mahdi, the redeemer who would be a catalyst for the apocalypse. It is important to remember here that the successors of the Prophet had only taken on the title of *Amir al-Mu'minin* or Commander of the Believers; a political title rather than a religious one. After the Second Civil War however, 'Abd Al-Malik would take the unprecedented step of calling himself *Khalifa* or Successor [to the Prophet][52]. The reason for this change in titles was because the test of legitimacy for all future leaders of the *ummah* would be their piety, for in succeeding centuries, there would be no shortage of would be claimants to the throne, all coming from men claiming descent from the Quraysh clan. All would be claimants promised to quench the lacking role of a religious leader, a gap left open after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

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[46] See Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 90-91, 98, 130, 133 amongst other examples.
[47] For the Chinese Tang dynasty who audaciously established the 'Persian area command' in Central Asia to support the claim of the Sassanids in the 650s CE, see: Hoyland, 87. For Constans II, see: Hoyland, 66.
[48] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 98-99.
[49] The following narrative of the Civil War is nicely summarised in: Kennedy, *The Prophet,* 90-97.
[50] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 130-131.
[51] The offspring of this marriage was Yazid. See Kennedy, *The Prophet,* 91.
[52] Donner, *the Believers,* 209.

The Rise of the Marwanids

How the later Marwanids, those descendent from Marwan ibn al-Hakam, would fill in this gap is important to expand upon. Because it is from here that we begin to understand how a unique Islamic polity, and indeed separate faith, was born out of the tumultuous years of civil war. It should not be surprising though that the ways in which this was done was through methods cultivated in Late Antiquity by the Byzantines and Sassanids. By the early seventh century, both Empires boasted emperors who claimed god-appointed mandates to rule, and whose job it was to bring proper order to the 'entire human cosmos'[53], as was seen through the language used by Theophylact Simocatta. It therefore behoved later Muslim rulers to take on the same ideological pretensions of universal supremacy, especially as they faced continued nativist revolts in Iran[54], and the ongoing existence of a humbled, but still serious ideological competitor in the Byzantine Empire. This claim to universal supremacy had largely been a creation of the fourth century, when Huns migrating West along the Pontic Steppe in modern Russia, assaulted and crushed the armies of both the Roman West and Sassanid East. The Huns, unlike previous 'barbarians', went toe-to-toe with the Romans and Sassanids ideologically. They cast themselves as Kings no less majestic than the Sassanids or Romans themselves. One Hun proclaimed he was "Lord Ularg, the king of the Huns, the great Kushan-shah, the Samarkandian, of the Afrigan family", a style of titles appropriated from Iranian imperial symbolism and titulature[55]. The Roman Empire, which had been accustomed to 'barbarian' outsiders wanting to join the Empire, were shocked by the pretensions of Attila the Hun (d. 453). Attila refused to allow his colleagues or himself to become part of the Roman aristocracy, or forge familial links with Roman aristocrats[56]. The idea that 'Barbaricum' – areas not controlled by Romans – would seek equal or greater status than the civilized Roman world was unheard of. To combat this the Romans, but especially the Sassanids redefined their political ideology and cosmology to view themselves as being bearers of the correct civilizational and religious order. The Sassanids achieved this by identifying the dynasty with Persian civilization itself, claiming to be descendants of the mythical Kayanian dynasty attested in Avestan texts[57]. Yazdgird I (r. 399-420) and Yazdgird II (r. 438-457) would take the titles of: "[bringer of] imperial peace" (*ramsahr*) and "Mazda-worshiping Kayanian Yazdgird" respectively [58]. It was during this same period of closer attachment to Avestan models of kingship, that Zoroastrian scholars in the Sassanid court would begin to record the mythical historical traditions of Iran that would eventually become known as the *Shahnameh.* The creation of even more presumptuous titles to supersede the Huns ideologically, would require the Arab conquerors of the seventh century to match and even assimilate these titles. It is therefore telling that centuries later, Muslim polemicists would continue to understand the development of Islam as stemming from the reigns of the Marwanids, through their ambitious reforms and building programs that stressed their role as pious, ever-triumphant and magnanimous rulers.

One way Abd al-Malik and his successors, notably his son al-Walid, achieved this was by pursuing a construction program of mosques across the emerging Empire. The most famous of which is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, as recorded by al-Ya'qubi[59] and al-

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[53] Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe,* 380.

[54] See especially Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism,* (Cambridge, 2012).

[55] Maas, *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila,* 285.

[56] Maas, *Age of Attila,* 123.

[57] The (semi) mythical Kayanian dynasty is mentioned in the Avesta, which is the primary religious texts of Zoroastrianism, the official patronised religion of the Sassanids.

[58] Maas, *Age of Atilla,* 288-289.

[59] Al-Ya'qubi, 159.

Maqaddasi[60]. They wrote a century apart from each other in the late ninth and late tenth centuries respectively. But they were both curious of the link between the role of religious architecture and the 'development of Islam'. Notably al-Ya'qubi stipulates that the Dome of the Rock came into being due to the al-Zubayr revolt previously mentioned. Abd al-Malik not wanting his people to journey to Zubayr controlled Mecca, told them to perambulate around the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem instead. Al-Maqaddasi offers a different explanation with an interesting opening question, in a conversation with his uncle:

> "Uncle, surely it was inappropriate for the caliph al-Walid to spend so much of the wealth of the Muslims on the mosque in Damascus! If he had spent the money on roads or caravanserais or in the restoration of fortresses, it would have been more fitting and more excellent of him."

His uncle's response is fitting, explaining that just as Abd al-Malik had built the Dome of the Rock to challenge Christian supremacy of Jerusalem, so did al-Walid, who realised that Syria, "occupied for a long time by the Christians" needed something for the 'Muslims' to feel proud of. Building mosques was not simply a vanity project, but also from the sincere Late Antiquity belief that construction of religious buildings was tantamount to a ruler's stamp of sovereignty on the land[61]. Hence the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, were, much like the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, examples of their rulers enduring piety and sovereignty.

This idea of religious building construction and sovereignty can be seen as well in al-Tha'labi's[62] account of Abraha's expedition to Yemen. The story was originally told in Muslim sources from ibn Ishaq, and takes place in the midst of a real war being fought by proxies of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires in the late sixth century[63]. Abraha was an Aksumite warlord, from modern Ethiopia who on behalf of the Christian ruler of Aksum, had invaded Sassanid influenced Yemen and then the Hejaz on behalf of the Byzantine Empire. Al-Tha'labi writing a 'universal history' in the early eleventh century did not preclude the events of pre-Islamic Arabia. It was accepted that to understand the formative years of Islam in the seventh century, one had to understand what had come before. In this story a representative of Abraha tells the Meccans:

> "The king [Abraha] has sent me to you to inform you that he has not come to fight you unless you attack him; rather, he has come in order to destroy this temple [Kaaba]. He will then leave you alone."

God protects the Kaaba from being destroyed by Abraha, which halted Abraha's attempts of absorbing Mecca into his Kingdom. The destruction of temples, or the erection of new ones, was seen as a legitimate way of establishing ones sovereignty in a new area[64]. Indeed in the Late Roman Empire, new Churches, often on the ruins of old pagan sites, were hailed as 'trophies' of Christian triumph. The destruction of pagan temples was often aided by the state, such as when Bishop Marcellus of Apamea in Syria destroyed the city's temple of Zeus in the 380s, with the aid of one thousand imperial soldiers. The destruction of pagan temples however only really began in earnest after the Emperor Theodosius' (r. 379-395) proscription against paganism in favour of Christianity[65]. Even after having secured the backing of the Emperor, Bishops could still face backlash from local pagans, where pragmatic monetary concerns would usually decide their fate. Such was the case with the pagans of Gaza, where

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[60] Al-Muqaddasi, 159.
[61] For a Christian and Muslim example see: Tannous, *Medieval Middle East,* 59, 432.
[62] Al-Tha'labi, 396-402.
[63] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 34.
[64] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 13.
[65] Maas, *Age of Attila,* 70-71.

Mark the Deacon wrote in 400: "Gaza cooperates by paying taxes and contributes much to the treasury, so if we use terror they will flee and we will lose revenues"[66]. Much the same thinking would be applied in the Marwanids calculations on how to promote Islam without alienating the Empire's vast majority of non-Arab Muslims[67]. That the construction of mosques nonetheless accelerated under the Marwanids is a testament to their new attitude towards Islam as being at the basis of their Empire, and not an accompaniment.

In a much larger break with the largely non-interventionist policy on their subjects under Mu'awiya, the nephew and successor of Abd al-Malik, 'Umar II (r. 717-720) imposed sumptuary differences between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is only with 'Umar II that we begin to have contemporary evidence for discriminatory policies in an effort to create different communities[68]. The creation of a 'legal' distinction[69] between Muslim and non-Muslim became starker under 'Umar II, as seen by his command of what Christians could not do, and what they had to do to differentiate themselves from 'Muslims'[70]. 'Umar II's 'Covenant' with the Christians and other non-Muslims became a common understanding of how to deal with the Christians by later Muslim rulers, that it became enshrined in later Shafi'i legal thought. The preamble to the list of restrictions and protections in the 'Covenant of 'Umar' begins thusly:

"You have asked me to establish peace with you and the Christian people of such- and-such land and to covenant with you and them as has been covenanted with the protected communities, setting out what shall be given to me, and to stipulate the conditions on both sides involving you and them. So I reply to you that I covenant with you and them that providing security is incumbent upon me and all Muslims, as long as you and they keep the conditions we impose upon you."

What 'Umar is providing through this document, is a template of how to deal with Christians and what he calls "protected communities" in any part of his Empire. It was a legal understanding of a growing problem of how to differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims. But that this was a problem at all, or that these communities existed at all is emblematic of the language used in the document, namely "you" and "them". It is clear by the reign of 'Umar II in the early eighth century, distinguishable communities had already begun to emerge, and the point of this document was therefore to solidify something that was probably already happening on its own, namely the separation of society into different spheres depending on which monotheistic faith you followed. This can be seen by the stipulations on Muslims and non-Muslims burying their dead separately, refusal of Christians to sell Muslims certain products (namely alcohol), and stipulations on how different kinds of non-Muslims should dress. It should however be remembered that all these rulings could never be enforced fully or adequately in a pre-modern society with limited enforcement mechanisms, and were suspended when necessary for pragmatic reasons. They should instead be viewed as an idealistic guide for a model Muslim society[71].

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[66] The quote is from *Life of Porphyry,* 41. Found in Maas, *Age of Attila,* 71.
[67] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 67.
[68] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 197-198.
[69] Although Islamic law was something which would not arrive until the Abbasid period, it drew on precedent from earlier periods, including pre-Islamic law stemming from Byzantine and Sassanid sources.
[70] Al-Shafi'i, 197-198.
[71] There are many examples of this, but see for instance: Tannous, *Medieval Middle East,* 280-281: 'Umar II's large troubles in preventing wine drinking; Tannous, 381: Muslim rulers patronizing and allowing construction of new churches and monasteries.

Abd al-Malik is also known for attempting to universalize the usage of Arabic across the bureaucracy of the Empire, a project which outlasted him[72]. Ibn 'Atiyya, writing in late 11th century Granada, Spain, gives a conservative recounting of how the Qur'an came to be compiled[73]. Whilst the credit for the creation of the Qur'an goes to the 'Rashidun' and Abbasid Caliphs, Abd-al Malik is the only Umayyad to be mentioned, along with the (in)famous Umayyad viceroy of the East, al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf (r. 694-714). They are credited with the "vowelling and diacritical markings of the codex", as seen here:

"As for the vowelling and diacritical markings of the codex, it is reported that Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan ordered this to be done, and worked on it. Al-Hajjaj was devoted to this task in Wasit where he was located….. Immediately after that, he wrote a book in Wasit about the variant readings of the Qur'an, gathering together the differences among the people in cases where the writing of the text was the same but the pronunciation varied."

More interestingly is what follows, with the stipulation that this was done to unify the Arabic language. The pronunciation of Arabic had varied immensely from place to place across Arabia in pre-Islamic times. This is shown here:

"It is reported that Uthman said to this group collecting the Qur'an that if they disagreed about something, they should write it in the dialect of the Quraysh. They differed about whether the word should be *al-tabuh* or *al-tabut*[74]. Zayd ibn Thabit read it with the *ha'* whereas those from the Quraysh read it with the *ta'* and so it was written that way."

Once again, we again see the primacy of the Quraysh family, and how the Umayyads, and specifically the later Marwanids, would come to shape the defining spiritual text of Islam, hence standardizing Arabic as it would be read by a slowly growing literate population.

What all of these textual examples amount to, is the fact that beginning with Abd al-Malik, and later extended by 'Umar II, Islam was promoted as nothing short of being the foundation of this 'Arab Empire', whereas previously the religions role in the Empire had been nebulous at best[75]. From historians writing centuries later in Abbasid - the *bête noire* of the Umayyads - Iraq or distant Granada, the Marwanids represented a clear break with the past. Something had clearly changed by the early eighth century which created a distinct Muslim faith and community from its Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian neighbours. Abd al-Malik had commenced a transformation of how an Umayyad Caliph or any succeeding Muslim dynasty would come to legitimize its position, drawing on clear examples from empires in Late Antiquity. These changes, ranging from changing how rulers were titled, to construction of religious buildings, and to the promulgation that Arabic, specifically Quraysh Arabic, was the de jure language of the Empire amongst others, would cement a new Muslim identity. These radical programs were done in an attempt to end the stigma to the Umayyad dynasty and their lack of religious legitimacy in the face of 'Alid pretenders[76]. The critiques against the Umayyads by ibn Zubayr and Mukhtar not only led to profound changes by the Umayyads, but to all would be future leaders of the *ummah.*

It is no surprise then that the Abbasid revolt (747-750), ultimately succeeding in displacing the Umayyad dynasty in 750CE, would legitimize itself in much the same way as the Marwanids did, but also with a messianic slant reminiscent of Mukhtar and ibn Zubayr. In

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[72] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 218.
[73] Jeffery, 273-275.
[74] See for reference: Qur'an 2/248, 20/39.
[75] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 199.
[76] An 'Alid was a descendent of Ali ibn Abi Talib, usually through the lineage of his sons Hasan and Hussein. Some of these descendants of Ali periodically claimed the mantle of leadership based on their supposed superior claim stemming from the unjust usurpation of power by the Umayyads beginning with Mu'awiya.

the creation of this specifically Muslim identity, it is therefore good to remember that identity is ultimately about mental and political structures, or as Peter Heather puts it: "Claims made by individuals and the willingness of groups to recognize those claims"[77]. Whilst Heather was here talking about fifth century 'Germanic' and 'Scythian' peoples[78] mixing and forming new identities on Rome's Danubian frontier, something similar can be said as to why this Islamic identity ended up enduring. Although this identity was given its *raison d'être* from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, it was ultimately given its 'mental and political' form[79] from the Marwanids in the late seventh century. Going back to the story about the Abbasid revolt, it should therefore come as no surprise that the followers of the Abbasids, simply called themselves: *ahl al-dawla,* or *'*people of the revolution'. Who these 'people' were, as a distinct community, had become obvious, the Believers had become Muslims[80].

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[77] Heather, *Empires and Barbarians,* 238.

[78] The late Roman Empire viewed its northern frontier to be split between Germania in the West and Scythia in the East, Scythia pertaining to Russia, and more specifically in this context the Steppe where the Huns, Alans and others arrived from.

[79] Although to be sure the development of Islam, like any practiced religion, is not something that can be said to be completed in any one timeframe. It would be more favorable to call this the end of the beginning.

[80] Hoyland, *In God's Path,* 258, n29.

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