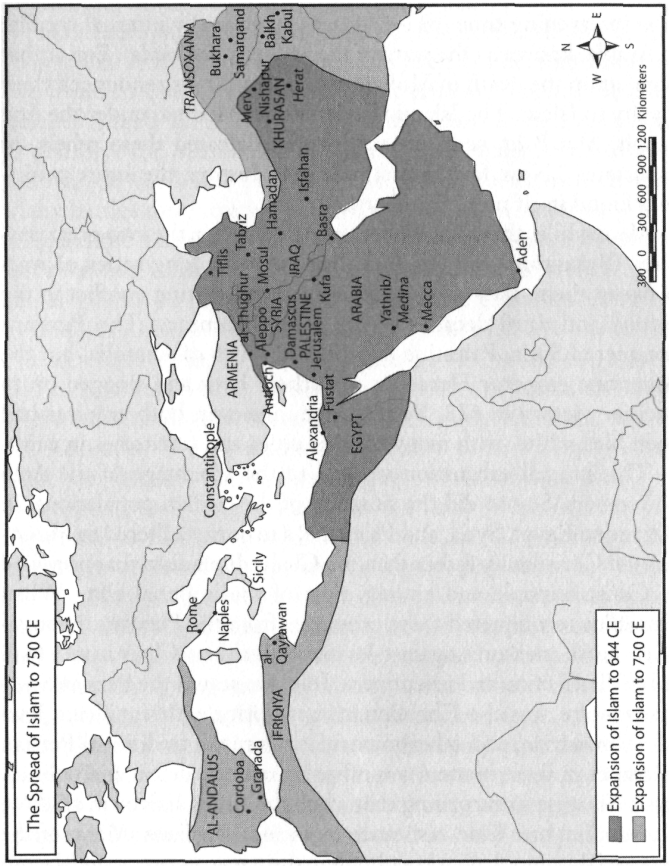
CHAPTER FOUR

The Great Conquests

The early Islamic conquests are a transforming event in history. They are also difficult to explain. How could a people who had lived for so long on the margins of the civilized world rise suddenly to defeat the two superpowers of the day, the Byzantine (East Roman) and Sasanian (Persian) empires? Where did they find the manpower to invade and overrun so many lands? And, most surprising of all, how did they then keep control over these lands and ultimately transform them? For even in defeat, the empires had reason to believe that the alien conquerers would eventually ask for nothing better than inclusion in the conquered empire for themselves, just as the Germanic intruders in the west had once settled on Roman lands, adapted Roman law to their own use, and eventually taken Romance dialects and Latin as their speech and Catholicism as their religion. Yet not only did the Arabs continue to speak Arabic, but many of the conquered countries also became Arabic-speaking after two or three centuries, while the religion of Islam came to extend over a majority of the population. This does not mean that the new Islamic civilization was not the result of cultural and ethnic mixing. It was this indeed, just like its Christian, western European counterpart. However, its pattern is different, and calls for explanation. Much of the controversy over all this has revolved around the jihad.



The Course of Conquest

Military operations against the Byzantines and Sasanians did not begin in earnest until 634, two years after Muhammad's death. The intervening time (632–634) was taken up by internal conflict in Arabia, known as the wars of the apostasy (*al-ridda*). For at that time, upon the death of Muhammad, many Arabs renounced their loyalty to Islam. The Islamic leadership in Medina, under the first caliph, Abu Bakr, sent out armies that defeated these rebels, or "apostates." Now, for the first time in its history, the entire peninsula found itself unified and armed.

Meanwhile, things had been going badly for the two great empires (Byzantium and Sasanian Iran). After a long series of wars between them, they engaged in a final, devastating conflict in the second and third decades of the seventh century. The Persians conquered Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and much of Anatolia, but the Byzantine emperor Heraclius won these back and slogged on to decisive victory in 628. By this time, however, both empires had been bled white, with many of their cities and territories in ruins.

This mutual exhaustion worked to the advantage of the Arab newcomers. So too did the situation of the civilian populations. In Byzantine Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, a majority adhered to Monophysite Christianity rather than the Chalcedonianism that prevailed in Constantinople and among most of the imperial elite. When Heraclius reconquered these provinces from the Persians, he instituted harsh measures against Jews and dissident Christians, which led to disaffection and resentment. Iraq, the seat of the Persian Sasanian empire, was also Christian in its majority, with significant Jewish, Zoroastrian, and other minorities. Here the traditional Persian tolerance in these matters was offset by military defeat and political crisis. So it is not surprising that when the Arabs arrived in all these places, they met little resistance from local civilians. Many of the provincials must have thought that the newcomers would be no worse, and possibly better, than the previous governors, who had been squeezing them dry for the sake of their fruitless wars.

All this makes the Muslim Arabs' initial success easier to understand. As the *ridda* subsided, their movement of conquest got under way. It may have begun locally, as raiding expeditions met with unexpected success, followed up quickly by larger armies

under unified command. Fighting broke out more or less simultaneously in Byzantine Syria and Palestine and Sasanian Iraq. However, the evidence points to Syria and Palestine as the original goal.[1] The Arabs fought in tribal units, with different groups predominating in the conquest of different areas.

The leadership in Medina passed in 634 to the second caliph, ʿUmar ibn al-Khattab, who found himself conducting a war on two fronts, or rather, two wars. At one critical moment, the commander Khalid ibn al-Walid crossed the desert from Iraq to Syria to reinforce the Muslim forces there. For the most part, however, the war on each side proceeded according to its own rhythm. Many battles were fought, most of them Muslim victories. These included the Yarmuk, in or around 636, where a large Byzantine force was badly mauled, forcing Heraclius to withdraw from Syria; and al-Qadisiyya, probably in 637, where the main Sasanian army in Iraq was likewise smashed to pieces. ʿUmar left Medina to visit Palestine and Syria, by most accounts in 638; while there, he is said to have received in person the surrender of Jerusalem. Soon afterward a small Arab force set off for Egypt, accepting, in 641, the surrender of a Byzantine post, oddly named Babylon, near what later became Cairo. The conquest of Alexandria, the Egyptian capital, took longer, but soon the Arab Muslims controled Egypt and its fabulous wealth. Meanwhile, in 642 a victory at Nihavand, in western Iran, opened the Iranian plateau to the Muslim armies. Here in the ethnic heart of the Sasanian empire, aggravated by difficult terrain, resistance proved tough. Around fifteen years were required to complete the conquest of Iran. The Muslims then kept going, more gradually, eastward into Central Asia, westward into North Africa, and in other directions.

By the end of this initial phase of the conquests, the Sasanian empire had ceased to exist altogether. However, despite repeated raids by land and by sea and occasional large-scale expeditions, a truncated Byzantine empire continued to hold out and resist, a fact of great importance for the doctrine and practice of jihad as these developed over the coming years.

Within a very few years, the Arab Muslims had conquered vast territories, including fertile lands and wealthy cities. Now they faced the question of what to do with them. As in all conquests,

[1] Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, 96f.

the options included expropriating and expelling the natives, exploiting their labor from a distance, settling on the land as a new aristocracy, or merely concentrating on trade. The Quran and the young community's earlier experience in Arabia provided some guidance, but the disagreement seems to have been considerable. The caliph ʿUmar (ruled 634–644) is credited with the solution that prevailed. He decided that the Arabs should not settle in the countryside but should gather in towns, making themselves available for military service whenever required, while receiving stipends from the communal treasury. This treasury, in turn, would be constantly replenished by the native populations who would remain on their lands, paying taxes as before. New urban centers sprouted in Iraq (Basra, Kufa) and Egypt (Fustat), while older cities prevailed in Syria and Iran. In this way, for over a century the Arabs remained, ideally and also to a large extent in reality, a privileged, urban-dwelling warrior group. Chapter 6 will consider the fiscal regime that resulted, together with the treatment of non-Muslims.

Explanations

Most of the explanations that have been made for the great conquests fall into a few broad categories.[2] The single most important point of difference among them involves the role of religion and jihad. Put simply, were these conquests "Islamic" or "Arab"?

Islamic Explanations

In the centuries following the great conquests, extensive and detailed narratives of them were written in the Arabic language. Most of these sources present the events from an Islamic point of view that corresponds to the view of believing Muslims over the centuries, right down to the present day. While these medieval Arabic authors do not neglect the poverty of the Arabs before Islam and their love of fighting, they have no doubt regarding the events' true cause: the Arab Muslims fight and conquer because God has commanded them to do so, and has given them both

[2] In addition to the following summary, see Décobert, "Les méchanismes de la conquête arabe."

motivation and opportunity. Has not the Quran announced that God will cause the believers to inherit the lands, houses, and property of the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) in "a land where you had not set foot before"?[3] Enemy commanders are shocked to learn that the Muslims are "fighters by day and monks by night." While the Muslims take plunder and distribute it among themselves, they are not motivated by greed. Nor are they motivated by fear: the Arabic sources contrast their willingness to sacrifice themselves with the behavior of the opposing armies, frightened and unenthusiastic, even (in some stories) chained together in line of battle. Furthermore, these Arabic sources generally portray the campaigns of conquests as orderly and planned. Commanders take advantage of local opportunities, but the caliph in Medina dictates strategic movements and goals. Within the armies, though organization may be rough, discipline and morale remain high, maintained through prayer and sermons.

Anti-Islamic Explanations

In his monastery on the coast of Northumbria in the eighth century, the Venerable Bede learns that the Saracens have conquered much of Asia and Africa. Perplexed, Bede turns to biblical etymology to explain the relationship of Sarah and Isaac to Hagar and Ishmael, and the existence of a people known as Saracens, Ishmaelites, or Hagarenes. Here we have the beginning, in western Europe, of a thematics of misunderstanding that has survived to our own day. Much of this goes back to writings produced by Byzantines and by Christians living inside the early Islamic world. Here the conquests are a catastrophe calling out for explanation. Why has God taken dominion from the Christians and handed it over to these newcomers? An early and much-reiterated response was that the Saracens are the scourge of God, sent to punish the Christians for their sins. An apocalyptic literature described them as a sign of the end of time, and the invasions as a "testing furnace." Some writers inscribed Islam within the already-long list of Christian heresies. Others went on to claim that Muhammad was not really a prophet, because he could not foresee the future and because he pursued power, sensual pleasure, and other worldly goals. These and other themes then became enlarged and embroidered

[3] Quran 33:27 (*Ahzab*).

over the centuries. Generally speaking, these medieval Christian writings explain the early conquests through the will of a vengeful God, and focus upon the life of Muhammad, whom they vilify endlessly. They seldom ask what motivated the Saracens or Arabs, but rather dwell on the Saracens' love of violence—which, again, they often attribute to Muhammad himself.[4]

Modern Arab Explanations

Much (though not all) of modern orientalist scholarship on the early Islamic conquests, at least up until the Second World War, played down the idea of religion (and jihad) as a motivating force. Instead it explained these events through the history of Arabia and the Arabs, a history in which scarcity and poverty held sway. In this view, by the seventh century, long-term desiccation and desertification had reduced many of Arabia's centers of civilization to ruins. As the Arabs lost their habitations, their love of fighting and plunder only increased. Meanwhile, they had the good fortune of being less exposed to infectious disease than their neighbors in the plague-ridden Fertile Crescent. However, if Arabia was healthy, it was also poor, with its resources under increasing strain. The result was a Malthusian crisis of overpopulation, for which only the constant, murderous feuds and tribal wars provided any relief. Inevitably, the Arabs felt pressure to migrate into the rich lands under the control of the empires. And migrate they did: in the 630s the conquerors encountered many of their fellow Arabs in the borderlands, some of them allies and some of them fighting on the other side.

Many of these Arab explanations emphasize the Arabs' skill in fighting, which was real enough and certainly helped them against the imperial armies when the moment came. The northward migration of Arabs is also historical, part of a process of migration (in many directions) as old or older than the history of the Near East itself. However, desertification should make us suspicious. Ruins loom large in the imagination of the time, providing the best-known image in the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and also appearing in the Quran.[5] Yet the abandonment of settlements in western and southern Arabia was more a result of political turmoil, than of a spontaneous decline of the natural environment. The Arabs suffered from scarcity and want, but so too have other peoples who have not then undertaken the conquest of the world. The same might be said of the love of plunder, which was hardly unique to the bedouin. At any rate, the tendency of these Arab explanations is to view the conquests not as the product of the new teaching of Islam, but as the result of other, more material factors. Some even portrayed the early conquests as a mass migration, a *Völkerwanderung*; in this view, the Islamic view of the early conquests, and indeed Islam itself, was a later development, which historical tradition subsequently invented and retrojected to the early, formative period.

[4] Tolan, *Saracens*.

[5] See the treatment of this theme in Bamyeh, *The Social Origins of Islam*.

State Formation

Some recent treatments have emphasized the political aspect of the conquests. In particular, F. M. Donner has identified the fledgling Muslim state in Medina as the main protagonist in the story. This state and its leadership first showed their mettle by subduing the Arabian rebels of the *ridda* (war of apostasy) in 632–634. Then, as groups of Arab fighters achieved success, somewhat unexpectedly, against Byzantine and Persian garrisons and armies along the frontiers, the Medinan leadership intervened to maintain control and to make sure of the loyalty of the Arab tribesmen. The conquests thus resulted in a successful central state, against all the Arabs' historical precedent. In this view, the religion of Islam provided the new state with a secure ideological foundation.[6] Other contributions of recent decades have analyzed the internal situation among the Arabs before and immediately following the first wave of conquest, including the tensions between the Arab tribesmen who fought the battles of the first conquest and others who arrived later and demanded an equal share of the benefits.

Here we have a reconciliation of the "Islamic" and "Arab" views of the conquests. After all, why should the tribesmen not have been motivated *at the same time* by religious fervor and by hunger, want, and even—at least in some cases—greed? Likewise, all can

[6] Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*; idem, "The Origins of the Islamic State"; idem, "Centralized Authority and Military Autonomy in the Early Islamic Conquests."

agree that the weakness of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires in the 630s, and the resentment that many of their subjects felt against them, were of great, even decisive importance. However, this approach still begs the question of to what extent this ideology—including the jihad—was already in place. The Arabs believed fervently and fought hard, but what exactly did they believe in? Did the nascent structures of their army and society coherently express these beliefs?

Approaches to the Islamic Sources

We have seen that most modern accounts of the early conquests, whether Arab or Islamic in tendency, rely on the large body of medieval Arabic historical writings that describe these events in detail from an explicitly Islamic point of view. Here, for the critical period between the death of Muhammad and the first civil war (632–656), the situation resembles what we have found for the earlier period (ca. 610–632). Archaeology, epigraphy, papyrology, and numismatics provide some aid, but in the end we have no choice but to work with the literary tradition of Arabic historical writing. Everything thus depends on how we approach that tradition.

Some books about the maghazi, the campaigns of the early community (see chapter 3), included narratives about the great conquests, as did some collections of hadith. For the most part, however, conquest narratives—often referred to as *futuh* (conquests, openings)—were transmitted and collected separately from the maghazi narratives before being integrated into larger histories of the caliphate, of Islam, and of the world.

One interesting question that arises is whether these two genres, maghazi and futuh, express different conceptions of warfare and jihad. Here we can only begin to attempt an answer. In the futuh narratives, we are dealing with much larger units of fighters, moving over greater distances and facing more fearsome enemies than was the case in the maghazi. Accordingly, in the futuh, we learn less about the individual fighters, with the exception of the high commanders, than we do in the maghazi, where we have, for instance, detailed lists of the Muslims who participated in particular battles and of those who were slain in them. There is also considerable variety within the futuh narratives themselves: some of these focus on the spoils of war and accumulation of wealth in the course of military operations, while others put more emphasis on the acquisition of religious merit, on the necessity of having the correct intention (*niyya*) when performing jihad, and so on. But perhaps the single greatest difference between maghazi and futuh narratives has to do with their relation to the holy text of the Quran. We have seen that the Quran is often closely intertwined with the maghazi and sira narratives. After all, the story of the early community's progress, especially in the ten years from its founding in Medina in AH 1/622 CE until the death of Muhammad, is the story of the revealing of God's will, both through human action and through the arrival on earth of the divine Revelation. In the futuh, of course, the Prophet is no longer there and the Revelation no longer arrives through him; God's design is realized entirely through the actions of commanders and armies. The Quranic message is still present, but less vivid on the whole. Likewise, in the maghazi narratives, the Prophet leads his community in war, constantly issuing orders and soliciting strategic advice from his companions; at the same time, however, it is rare for him to appear with weapons and armor actually taking part in the fight. The commanders in the futuh, on the other hand, are military figures through and through.

The futuh, or conquest, narratives had considerable popularity among medieval audiences, and not surprisingly, for they show enormous literary and rhetorical skill. Once again, however, as in the case of the maghazi narratives, we face a gap. These narrative accounts of the conquests have survived in books that rarely date from before 800 CE. Furthermore, these accounts often contradict one another in detail, and where they do not do this, they overlap and repeat one another. As with the sira and maghazi, it is possible to draw a broadly coherent picture of the conquests on the basis of these narratives, but on close examination things tend to bog down in detail. Moreover, although the authors of these books of *akhbar* used the authenticating device of the supporting chain of authorities (*isnad*; see chapter 3), they seem to have been rather nonchalant or even sloppy about it, at least when measured by the more rigorous standards that were applied to the hadith.

It was Julius Wellhausen who, just over a century ago, established the prevailing consensus of orientalist scholarship regarding

the Arabic narratives for the great conquests. Earlier in his career, when he specialized in biblical scholarship, Wellhausen had been the pioneer of the documentary hypothesis, according to which the Hebrew biblical narratives were actually the product of different authors (the Yahwist, the Elohist, the Priestly source), which a later redactor or redactors combined into the text of the Bible as we know it. Afterward, when Wellhausen turned his attention to the Arabic conquest narratives, he applied a similar technique and obtained broadly similar results.[7] He found that he could reduce the welter of conflicting and overlapping reports into bodies of work that he could ascribe to known authors of the early Islamic period. These authors, in turn, belonged to discrete, though informal schools of historical writing, located in Arabia (Medina), Iraq (Kufa and Basra), and Syria. Wellhausen then maintained that among these schools, the Medinans were to be preferred over the Iraqis, who, he claimed, were prone to exaggeration, regional bias, or even outright lies. (In Wellhausen's day almost all of the Syrian historiography was lost.) In this way, by privileging the Medinan narratives and scholarship to the detriment of the others, Wellhausen made the job of writing conquest history possible, if not easy. Other scholars refined this approach, with remarkably patient analysis of detail.[8]

The work of Goldziher and Schacht, mentioned in chapter 3, dealt with hadith and early Islamic law rather than with political and military history, and had rather different implications for students of Arabic historical writing. These, however, did not become clear until afterward.[9] Meanwhile, Wellhausen's theory of regional schools held considerable, though not universal, sway.[10] Then, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Albrecht Noth opposed this theory of regional schools and, in the opinion of many, demolished it.[11]

[7] Wellhausen, "Prolegomena zur ältesten Geschichte des Islams."

[8] Especially the monumental *Annali dell'Islam* by Leone Caetani.

[9] Beginning with the work of John Wansbrough, mentioned in chapters 2 and 3.

[10] Note that Wellhausen and Schacht both developed theories of "local schools" of historiographical and legal activity, respectively.

[11] Noth, "Isfahan-Nihawand. Eine quellenkritische Studie zur frühislamischen Historiographie"; idem, "Der Charakter der ersten großen Sammlungen von Nachrichten zur frühen Kalifenzeit"; and with Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study* (1994), which first appeared as *Quellenkritische*

Noth argued that the Medinan authors were just as prone to inconsistency and exaggeration as the Iraqis. More important, Noth claimed that the entire mass of narrative traditions (*akhbar*) relating to the conquests had many characteristics in common. They all emerged from an enormous process of telling, retelling, collecting and compiling, which we can trace back in time, but never to where the narrative traditions were first composed. Thus, how those traditions originated—and, so, whether or not they are literally true—is beyond our knowing. Noth further found that certain basic themes permeate the Arabic historical tradition as a whole, together with transferable, often-repeated elements of narrative content (literary topoi). Many of these involve religious motivation in fighting. Were these themes and topoi authentic—that is, do they extend all the way back to the 630s? For example, with regard to the summons to Islam (*da'wa*), did the Arabs, on the eve of battle, really call upon their opponents to assume Islam or else to face the consequences of battle and defeat—as the Arabic narratives say they did and as Islamic law would have required them to do? In general terms, Noth's approach leads to the conclusion that the *da'wa*, and other such themes, correspond to primary concerns in the tradition as whole: that is, *for as far back as we can see*, elements of the jihad were indeed present in the narratives.

The study of early Islamic historical writing has flourished in the last few decades. Now, however, we turn to another piece of the puzzle.

Approaches to the Non-Islamic Sources

We have seen that biased and fantastical views of the Islamic conquests, and of Islam itself, prevailed in the Christian West during the Middle Ages and afterward, and that these views owed much to earlier works written by Christians residing in the Byzantine empire and in the Islamic lands. This is one reason why modern historians of the early Islamic conquests have treated non-Islamic primary sources for the conquests gingerly and have often avoided

Studien zu Themen, Formen und Tendezen frühislamischer Geschichtsüberlieferung. I: Themen und Formen (Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität, 1973).

them altogether. Another reason for their caution in this matter has to do with the peculiarities of their own field of study. For, after the First World War, the formation of specialists in late antique and medieval oriental or Near Eastern studies increasingly meant a concentration in either the Islamic languages and cultures (principally Arabic, Persian, and Turkish) or else the non-Islamic ones (Hebrew, Aramaic-Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Greek, etc.). As a result, few scholars were competent to judge the validity of writings in languages other than Arabic for the study of the Islamic conquests, while not all students of Arabic were eager to hear about these "exotic" writings in any case.

Nonetheless, at least some of these sources seem to have much to offer. Unlike the Arabic literary sources, which were written (in the form in which we have them) two or more centuries after the events in question, some of the non-Arabic ones come quite close. We have an anti-Jewish tract written in Greek ostensibly in North Africa in 634, at the very time of the beginning of the conquest of Syria and Palestine. The author mentions a prophet who has emerged among the Saracens and their violent takeover of Palestine. The writings of Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem in the 630s, include a sermon describing the Christians of Jerusalem, cut off from Bethlehem on Christmas day by the invaders and their siege. A few fragments of writing in Syriac may be literally contemporary with the early conquests, describing the death and enslavement of tens of thousands. Several chronicles, including one written in Armenian in the later seventh century, also mention the rise of Islam.

In the mid-1970s, two young scholars in London, Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, proposed to set the Arabic historical tradition aside altogether and to rewrite the history of early Islam entirely from the non-Islamic sources. The result: a book called *Hagarism*,[12] based itself on texts and studies that had been largely ignored by scholars of Islam ever since the First World War. Its

[12] Cook and Crone, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*. The title refers both to the biblical Hagar, concubine of Abraham and mother of Ishmael, and to the Quranic and early Islamic *muhajirun* (emigrants, "those who perform *hijra*"). The ambiguity (or pun?) appears in seventh-century documents and literary sources, where the newcomers are called *mahgraye* in Syriac and *moagaritai* in Greek.

argument was complex. The earliest phase of Hagarism ("Islam" in its familiar sense does not appear until toward the end of the story) involved an alliance between the Jews of Palestine and the Arabs of northern Arabia, who appeared, armed, under the leadership of their Prophet. (Some of these Christian and Jewish sources describe Muhammad as a participant in the conquest of Palestine, whereas in the Islamic tradition he dies, like Moses, before this event takes place.) The alliance's initial goal was to take Jerusalem from the Byzantines and to restore the Temple there. (Mecca does not enter the story at all, at least at this point.) However, the alliance did not last. Early Hagarism also went through a messianic phase, where Muhammad figures as a kind of John the Baptist preparing the way for a Messiah. There are hints that this Messiah's identity is none other than 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, known to Islamic tradition as the second Caliph, and bearer of the Arabic epithet al-Faruq, rather like the Christian Syriac term *paroqa* which means "savior." Ensuing phases are set out in a discrete, though unaccustomed chronological order, before we arrive at a world that corresponds to what we can recognize as classical Islam.

The controversy over *Hagarism* was fierce. Some scholars accused its authors of rejecting the Islamic tradition outright, which was not quite fair: what they did was to point to its internal "dilemmas," as had already been discussed by Goldziher, Schacht, Wansbrough, and Noth.[13] Many objected that even if some of these non-Muslim sources fall closer in time than the Muslim ones to the era of the great conquests, their authors were blinded by polemical passion and could not possibly have had accurate knowledge of the Muslims and their affairs. Yet others maintained that the narrative motifs in these sources were all, in equal measure, polemical, and that a chronological reconstruction of the earliest Islam on the basis of these sources, whether Arabic, non-Arabic, or both, made little sense.[14]

More recently, the full range of these non-Islamic sources for the rise of Islam has become more accessible to nonspecialists, thanks especially to the work of Robert Hoyland and Alfred-Louis

[13] Ibid., 3.

[14] See Wansbrough's review of *Hagarism* in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*.

de Prémare.[15] Hoyland, in his long, careful study of these sources, seems to vindicate the overall picture of the early conquests that we have from the Arabic Islamic sources themselves, although he also supports several of the conclusions of *Hagarism*. A similar, cautious affirmation of the picture of the conquests that we have from the Arabic sources also emerges from the work of Albrecht Noth and some of those who have followed him. Again, this means that for as far back as we can see—which can never be back to the very event itself at the beginning—the events of the early conquests are inseparable from certain primary themes. Several of these themes, in turn, are inseparable from the jihad, as we are trying to understand it here. So, while a process of state formation is certainly at the heart of the rise and early expansion of Islam—as it will be in many more historical manifestations of the jihad (see chapter 8)—this process does not, by itself, explain the astonishing event of the early Islamic conquests.

This means that we must do full justice to the "Islamic" explanations for the conquests. Something new happened in early seventh-century Arabia, something greater than hunger and the desire for domination, something that brought about a transformation of social and spiritual life, in part through participation in combat. In chapter 2 we began to try to discern just what that transformation was all about through the study of our single most important source, the Quran.

Meanwhile, attention is increasingly paid to another, related argument, this one over the origins of Islam more generally. Here we may identify the opposing camps as "Arabian" and "Near Eastern." Did Islam emerge in the seventh-century Hijaz, a harsh, isolated environment where social life was dominated by tribal forms and, to a great extent, by violence? Or was it yet one more expression of the perennial civilization of the Fertile Crescent, the Mediterranean, and Iran? Questions of this sort turn our attention away from the astonishing military success of the early Islamic armies which can, after all, be explained through conjunctural elements such as battlefield tactics and the momentary (though fatal) internal weakness of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. Instead we find ourselves asking to what extent Islam brought a break with

[15] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*; de Prémare, *Les fondations de l'islam*.

the past; and whether we ought to view this past as primarily Arabian, Near Eastern, Mediterranean, or all of these.

Readings

One of the most vivid accounts of the early conquests is Carl Heinrich Becker's "Die Ausbreitung der Araber," *Islamstudien* vol. 1, 66–145 (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1967). This appeared in English as chapters 11 and 12 in volume 2 of the *Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. H. M. Gwatkin and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1913] 1967). Francesco Gabrieli's *Muhammad and the Conquests of Islam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968) is highly readable but now out of date. The close and careful analysis by Fred McGraw Donner in *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) carries considerable authority. There is now an English translation of the single most important source for the early conquests, *The History of al-Tabari* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993 [vol. 11, ed. K. Y. Blankinship]; 1992 [vol. 12, ed. Y. Friedmann]; 1989 [vol. 13, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll]; 1994 [vol. 14, ed. Rex Smith]). Modern approaches to the Arabic sources are outlined in this chapter and its footnotes. In addition to Albrecht Noth and Lawrence Conrad's *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994), the series in which it was published, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, includes several volumes of interest, especially Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998); and the book by Robert G. Hoyland, already mentioned, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997).