DESPITE THE RELATIVE ISOLATION of the Arabian peninsula, its inhabitants were from early times in contact with neighbouring civilizations. Arab tribes are mentioned in Assyrian texts and in the Hebrew Bible, while in the Hellenistic and Roman eras Arabia Felix was the name given to the south of the peninsula which produced frankincense and myrrh, the luxury goods of the region, and exported them to the Fertile Crescent. The southern Arab kingdoms, one of which was ruled by the near-legendary Queen of Sheba, had attained a high level of culture and its inhabitants were notable mariners and merchants who held the monopoly of trade between India and the Mediterranean until the 3rd century AD.

In northern and central Arabia, by contrast, Arab tribes led a nomadic life, with permanent settlements at oases such as Mecca, Yathrib (afterwards Medina) and further south at Najran, all caravan stations on the north-south trade route. Through accompanying the caravans as mule- and camel-drivers and traders, the northern Arab tribes made contact with the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean and some of them began to settle on the fringes of the great empires of the era. The celebrated caravan cities of Petra and Palmyra in the Jordanian and Syrian deserts were founded at key points on the trade routes and their buildings display the joint influences of the East and the West – of Iran and Rome. By the time of Muhammad’s birth the entire desert area was under the control of two Christian Arab kingdoms who were clients of the Byzantines and Sasanians respectively, and served as buffer states between the two mighty empires and the Arabs.

The social structure of the northern Arab tribes was tribal and their religion polytheistic, although the two great monotheistic religions had managed to infiltrate the Arabian peninsula and establish small communities, Judaism at Medina and Christianity at Najran. Yet the undisputed pan-Arab religious centre remained Mecca, where Arab tribes flocked to venerate the idolatrous shrine of the Ka’ba. According to tradition the shrine was founded by Abraham, the progenitor of the Arabs, and his son Isma’il. Little is known of the material culture of the northern Arab tribes, and the main heritage of pre-Islamic Arabia is its rich poetic tradition and the Arabic language which served as its vehicle.
Around 610, Muhammad, the merchant son of an influential family from Mecca, began to experience apocalyptic visions which inspired him to preach faith and submission (in Arabic Islam) to the one sole God. After his death these revelations and his prophetic teaching, which continued throughout his lifetime, were collected in the Qur'an, the holy book of the Muslims, which records the word of God as transmitted to the Prophet by the Archangel Gabriel.

Muhammad’s preaching found a response in the narrow circle of family and friends, but the majority of the citizens of Mecca, particularly those in charge of the polytheistic shrine of the Ka’ba, were hostile and the Prophet and his companions, the Muslims (from the Arabic word Islam) were forced to flee to Medina. The move from Mecca to Medina in 622, known as the hijra, represented the start of Islamic chronology, and also of the political existence of the Muslim community. The nature of Muhammad’s teaching was strikingly socio-political, and for this reason it succeeded in uniting the rival Arab tribes in acceptance of the new religion. The dissenting Jewish tribes of Medina were driven out and assaults by armies from Mecca were repulsed. The Prophet’s victorious return to Mecca in 630, two years before his death, resulted in the destruction of the idols in the shrine of the Ka’ba and its reconsecration as a place of worship dedicated to the One God (Arabic Allah).

The new monotheistic religion incorporated many features from Christianity and Judaism, but it had a distinct system of values. Its main principles were encapsulated in five canons of conduct, the so-called Five Pillars of Islam. The first is the confession of faith "There is no god but God (Allah) and Muhammad is his Prophet". The second requires believers, wherever they may be, to pray to Allah five times a day, towards Mecca (on Friday, the males of the community assemble to hear the message of their leader at the time of the noonday prayer). The third prescribes abstinence and fasting throughout the month of Ramadan, from sunrise to sunset, and the fourth counsels charity and the giving of alms. The fifth and last requires the faithful to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

The Prophet’s house in Medina was the first meeting-place of congregation and prayer, and it became the model for the earliest mosques. When Muhammad died, a recess known as the mihrab was built in the place where he used to plant his spear when leading prayers, and since then the mihrab of the mosque has served as a reminder of the place where the Prophet stood, while its location indicates the direction of Mecca (the qibla), to which be-

lievers turn in prayer. The Arabic word for prostration, and thereby prayer, is al-masjid, the derivation of the word mosque and its equivalent in other languages. The expression al-masjid al-jami’ refers to the place of prayer and congregation, in particular that of the Friday communal prayer (often known as ‘Friday mosque’).

After Muhammad’s death, in the reign of his first four successors, the Orthodox Caliphs (632-661), a stream of Arab victories resulted in their becoming masters of the eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire and overthrowing the mighty Sasanian empire. At this point the first schism took place at the heart of the Muslim community: after the murder of Ali, the fourth Orthodox Caliph and the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, a dispute arose as to whether succession to the caliphate should be hereditary. The Shi’ites believed that the descendants of Muhammad, and of 'Ali in particular, should lead the Islamic community and provide religious guidance for the faithful, but the rise to power of the Umayyad governor of Syria resulted in domination by the Sunnis, who followed the Prophet’s sunna—the patterns of conduct and morality which he established through his way of life.
THE ISLAMIC WORLD
FROM THE 7TH TO THE 12TH CENTURY

From the 7th to the 10th century the Arab caliphate was a powerful ecumenical empire extending from the Atlantic to Central Asia, with its capital successively at Damascus and at Baghdad. After Baghdad’s influence declined in the 10th century, autonomous or semi-autonomous local hegemonies emerged in Iran, Egypt and other regions. The fragmentation of the Empire allowed the strengthened Shi’ite movement to undermine the political and religious authority of the Sunni caliphate and for a time power lay with the Shi’ites under a puppet Sunni Caliph.
THE ISLAMIC WORLD CIRCA 1000
The Ecumenical Caliphate

Umayyads (661-750)

The founder of the Umayyad dynasty, Mu'awiya, who belonged to an aristocratic family from Mecca, moved the capital of the Islamic empire from the holy city of Medina to the Greco-Roman and Christian environment of Damascus. Arabic was introduced as the official language of administration and a steady Islamisation and Arabisation of the state took place. The resentment felt by non-Arab converts against the superior rights of the Arab Muslims eventually caused them to revolt, and this led to the dynasty's overthrow by the Abbasids. The sole surviving Umayyad, 'Abd al-Rahman, fled to Spain in 755, where he founded the Emirate of Cordoba. In the 10th century his descendants proclaimed themselves Caliphs.

The formulation of Islamic art in this early period involved the gradual assimilation and adaptation of elements from pre-Islamic culture: the first Islamic religious monuments, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Great Mosque in Damascus, inherited a variety of features from the Byzantine and Sassanian traditions. The crucial development at this time, however, was the adoption of aniconic and epigraphic ornamentation, which determined the whole future of Islamic art.

Abbasids (750-1258)

The political turmoil of the mid-8th century brought to power the Abbasids, who were descended from al-Abbas, the Prophet's uncle. The capital of the ecumenical Arab caliphate was transferred from Syria to Iraq after the foundation of the city of Baghdad (762), which followed the circular plan of Iranian palace cities. The move to the East brought Iranian traditions to the fore and led to the promotion of Muslims of Iranian origin to the higher offices of state. Baghdad, situated between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, became a major commercial centre, open to influences from as far afield as India and China. The first three centuries of the Abbasid dynasty were a golden age of Arab-Islamic culture, when literature, philosophy, astronomy and mathematics flourished against a background of translated works by authors of antiquity.
No traces of Abbasid Baghdad survive, but archaeology has brought to light sections of the early royal city of Samarra (836-883) which was founded to house the Caliph's Turkish mercenaries. Stucco wall decorations, ceramics and other portable artefacts from the buildings at Samarra all testify that the stylistic features of Islamic art were by now well on the way to crystallisation.

The authority of the Sunni Abbasid caliphate was severely tested by the emergence of rival Shi’ite powers, notably the anti-caliphate at Cairo. The capture of Baghdad by the Seljuk Turks (1055) restored Sunni Islam under the rule of the Caliph, but henceforth the Abbasids were a marginal power until their overthrow by the Mongols in 1258. The honorary office of Leader of the Faithful survived, with the Caliph now resident at the current seat of power, first Mamluk Cairo and then Ottoman Istanbul.

Egypt, Syria

Fatimids (909-1169)

The Shi’ite Fatimids claimed descent from Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, and denounced the Sunni Caliphs of Baghdad as usurpers of the office of Leader of the Faithful, which properly belonged to the Prophet’s descendants. In the early 10th century the Fatimids founded an independent caliphate in Tunisia which later extended to Sicily, Egypt, Syria and part of the Arabian peninsula –the Hijaz, which contained the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Their power depended largely on the militant, proselytising nature of the Shi’ite movement, which employed intensive ideological propaganda to subvert the Sunni power of Baghdad. In 969 the Fatimids occupied Egypt and founded the city of Cairo next to the former capital Fustat; it soon became a major cultural centre to rival Baghdad. Control of the trade routes linking the Mediterranean with India resulted in an economic efflorescence which was reflected in art. Fatimid art took its basic models from Baghdad, but it was also oriented towards the varied traditions of Egypt –Pharaonic, Greco-Roman and Christian. This, fundamentally Mediterranean aspect was fostered by political, commercial and artistic exchanges with Constantinople, Cordoba, Sicily and the Italian maritime cities.

At the end of the 11th century the Crusaders emerged on the political scene and founded states on Syrian and Palestinian territory. In 1169 their advance into Egypt caused the Fatimids to seek assistance from Muslim forces in Syria, led by the Ayyubid Saladin who appropriated power in Egypt.
Iran
Samanids (Khorasan, Transoxania, 819–1005)

The Samanids, who boasted of their descent from the Sasanian Great Kings, were provincial governors who succeeded in establishing a local Iranian dynasty after the decline of centralised power at Baghdad. In the semi-autonomous regions of eastern Iran a reconciliation was effected with Islam; this period witnessed the birth of modern Persian language and literature written in Arabic script, while the epic traditions of Iran were recorded in Ferdowsi’s Shahnama.