Islamic societies were built on the framework of already established and ancient Middle Eastern civilizations. From the pre-Islamic Middle East, Islamic societies inherited a pattern of institutions that would shape daily life until the modern age. These institutions included small communities based on family, lineage, clientage, and ethnic ties; agricultural and urban societies, market economies, monotheistic religions, and bureaucratic empires. Along with their political and social characteristics, Islamic societies also inherited many of the religious, literary, and artistic practices of the pre-Islamic past. The civilization of Islam, although initiated in Mecca, also had its precursors in Palestine, Babylon, and Persepolis.

Islamic societies developed in an environment that since the earliest history of mankind had exhibited two fundamental and enduring qualities. The first was the organization of human societies into small, often familial groups. The earliest hunting and gathering communities lived and moved in small bands. Since the advent of agriculture and the domestication of animals, the vast majority of Middle Eastern peoples have lived in agricultural villages or in the tent camps of nomadic pastoralists. Even town peoples were bound into small groups by ties of kinship and neighborhood, with all that implies of strong affections and hatreds. These groups raised the young, arranged marriages, arbitrated disputes, and formed a common front vis-à-vis the outside world.

The second was the creation of unities of culture, religion, and empire on an ever-larger scale. In pre-modern times, this tendency was manifested in the expansion of trade and the acceptance of common decorative styles and religious ideas, but its most important early manifestation was the emergence of the city-state in ancient Mesopotamia (3500 BCE–2400 BCE). The formation of cities in lower Iraq was a revolution in the history of humankind: it brought about the integration of diverse clans, villages, and other small groups into a single community. It led to
new cultural and artistic achievements such as the invention of writing, the creation of great works of myth and religion, the construction of architectural masterpieces, and the fashioning of sensuous sculpture.

The first cities developed from the integration of small village communities into temple communities built on shared commitment to the service of the gods. The Sumerians, the people of southern Iraq, believed that the lands they inhabited were the property of the gods and that their primary duty was the construction of a great temple to worship the forces of the universe. The priests who presided over the worship were also judges and “political” chiefs. Moreover, the temple-cities were necessarily communities of economic as well as religious interests. The construction of the great temples required masses of organized workers; their rituals required specialists in administrative, professional, and artisanal activities. The earliest cities were communities in which religious leaders and religious ideas governed the economic and political affairs of the temples’ adherents.

ANCIENT, ROMAN, AND PERSIAN EMPIRES

Beginning about 2400 BCE, the temple-cities of Mesopotamia were superseded by new unifying institutions – kingship and empires. Kingship in ancient Mesopotamia emanated from two sources: the warrior or warlord houses of the ancient Sumerian cities and the tribal peoples of northern Mesopotamia. Between 2700 and 2500 BCE, city kings established ephemeral states among their neighbors. About 2400 BCE, Sargon of Akkad, the chief of pastoral peoples in northern Mesopotamia, founded the first of the world’s empires. Sargon’s empire soon failed, and the temple-cities temporarily regained their independence. From Sargon to Hammurapi, the great lawgiver (d. 1750 BCE), Mesopotamian empires rose and fell, but each one, although relatively short lived, reinforced the institutions of kingship and of multicity regimes.

Kingship as it developed from Sargon to Hammurapi increasingly assumed a sacred aura. Kings usurped the authority of priests and became the chief servants of the gods. They took over the priestly functions of mediating between the gods and the people. Kingship was justified as the divine plan for the ordering of human societies. Sacralized political power, as well as religion, became a vehicle for the unification of disparate peoples.

The successive empires of this ancient period also established the institutions that would henceforth be the medium for imperial rule. At the center was the ruler’s household; the king was surrounded by his family, retainers, soldiers, servants, and palace administrators. Standing armies were founded; feudal grants of land were awarded to loyal retainers. Governors, administrators, and spies were assigned to control cities and provinces.

The superimposition of empires on smaller communities transformed local life and fostered the emergence of social individuality by providing the linguistic,
religious, and legal conditions that freed individuals from absorption into clans, temples, and royal households. Temples were reduced to cogs in the imperial machine, and priests lost their judicial and political authority. The empires also intervened in small communities by freeing individuals from their commitments to clans and temples. To defend, administer, and maintain communications across wide territories required some decentralization of authority and greater mobility and autonomy for individuals. Warriors and administrators were assigned land and became independent proprietors. Merchants became entrepreneurs working with their own capital. Craftsmen began to work for the market rather than for the temple or royal household. A market economy emerged to facilitate exchanges among independent producers and consumers and progressively supplanted the older forms of household redistributive economy. The spread of markets and the introduction, by the seventh or sixth century BCE, of money as the medium of exchange transformed the economic structures of the ancient world. For increasing numbers of people, the cash nexus replaced patrimonial authority as the mechanism that regulated the way they earned a living.

Furthermore, the language of the dominant elites became the language of the cosmopolitan elements of the society; the remote and powerful gods of the king and the empire – the gods of the cosmos, organized into a pantheon – superseded the intimate gods of individual localities. Imperial law regulated the distribution of property, economic exchange, and relations between the strong and the weak. Ancient empires, then, not only were political agencies but provided the cultural, religious, and legal bases of society.

For ancient peoples, the empires symbolized the realm of civilization. The function of empires was to defend the civilized world against outsiders, often called barbarians, and to assimilate them into the sphere of higher culture. For their part, the so-called barbarians, mostly nomadic peoples, wanted to conquer empires, share in their wealth and sophistication, and join the ranks of civilized peoples. Empires commanded allegiance because they were thought to represent civilized peoples. They commanded allegiance because kingship was perceived as a divine institution and the king a divinely selected agent, who – if not himself a god – shared in the aura, magnificence, sacredness, and mystery of the divine. The ruler was God’s agent, his priest, the channel between this world and the heavens, designated by the divine being to bring justice and right order to men so that they might in turn serve God. The king thus assured the prosperity and well being of his subjects. Magically, he upheld the order of the universe against chaos.

From these earliest empires to the eve of the Islamic era, the history of the Middle East may be summarized as the elaboration and expansion of the institutions formed in this early period. While parochial communities and local cultures were a continuing force in Middle Eastern society, empires grew progressively larger, each wave of expansion and contraction bringing new peoples into the sphere of imperial civilization. Empires came and went, but the legacy of interchange of
The beginnings of Islamic civilizations

populations – the movement of soldiers, administrators, merchants, priests, scholars, and workers – left a permanent imprint of cosmopolitan culture and a heritage of shared laws, languages, scripts, and social identity.

From Sargon to Hammurapi, Middle Eastern empires were restricted to Mesopotamia, but later Hittite, Kassite, and other “barbarian” empires brought Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Iran into a common network. The empire of Assyria (911–612 BCE) brought Iraq, western Iran, and, for a time, Egypt into a single state. The Achaemenid Empire (550–331 BCE) incorporated eastern Iran and formed the first universal Middle Eastern empire – the first to include all settled peoples from the Oxus River to the Nile and the Dardanelles.

The Roman empire

With the destruction of the Achaemenid Empire by Alexander the Great, the Middle East was divided into two empires. In the west, the successor states to the empire of Alexander became part of the Roman Empire. In the east, Iraq and Iran as far as the Oxus River became part of Persian empires – the Parthian Empire (226 BCE–234 CE) and its successor, the Sasanian Empire (234–634 CE).

The Roman Empire encompassed the whole of the Mediterranean basin from Spain in the west to Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt in the east. Rome was its capital, but in the fourth century a second capital was founded at Constantinople. With the fall of Rome to “barbarian” invaders, the remaining provinces, governed from Constantinople, constituted the late Roman or Byzantine Empire and continued to rule the Balkans, Anatolia, Syria, and some of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and North Africa. Its official language until the reign of Heraclius (610–41 CE) was Latin, although the ordinary language of Constantinople was Greek.

The emperor stood at the apex of government, in theory an absolute authority in all matters of state, law, and religion. Considered divine in the pre-Christian era, emperors after Constantine (306–37 CE) were thought to be representatives of God on earth. The ruler maintained the cosmic order and suppressed the evils that come from men.

In practice, emperors were not omnipotent. They were dependent on subordinates to carry out their decisions and were strongly influenced by their families and other aristocrats, advisers, and courtiers. The bureaucracies might not implement their wishes; their subjects might circumvent them. To help make their authority effective, emperors tried to rotate appointments and cultivate patronage networks and popular factions. To enhance their prestige, they sponsored court ceremonies and public festivals and placed their portraits on coins.

The Roman Empire ruled its diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious populations through a political machine centered on the emperor, supported by his armies and bureaucratic connections to the cities. Local notables, wealthy and educated landowners, administrators, and lawyers governed the cities. Cities controlled the land and the taxation of the countryside and supplied a portion of its revenues
to the center. A shared Greco-Roman culture linked the elites and provided the rationale for the legitimacy and authority of the empire.

In the sixth and seventh centuries, however, this system was transformed. Professional bureaucrats were replaced by imperial favorites who undermined the civic notables by acquiring large rural estates. Great landed estates and large rural villas were established in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Cilicia, Cyprus, and Asia Minor. The church and its bishops took on ever-larger administrative roles. The new social regime was linked by a Hellenistic Christian – rather than by a Hellenistic pagan – culture.

In Egypt, aristocratic landowning families directly managed some of their estates using peasant labor, leased some to tenants under contract, and used sharecroppers on still other portions of their holdings. As the power of the aristocratic landowners grew, the regional economies declined. Still, a rural bourgeoisie encompassing lower landed gentry, entrepreneurial farmers leasing land, peasant village collectives, and merchants and artisans continued to exist in Egypt and Syria. The peasants and the poor, however, were alienated from the empire and ever more closely attached to their churches. The center was losing power in the periphery.

The consequences of these political and social transformations were marked in the economies and even in the physical appearance of the cities. As town councils lost control over taxes and land, cities lost their classical form. The agoras were turned into churches; the street grid pattern was cluttered with shops; theaters and baths gave way to houses built with enclosed courtyards walled off from the outside world. Churches remained the only public facilities.

The Sasanian empire
The Sasanian dynasty was founded in 224 CE. The Sasanians grounded their authority in the symbols of ancient Iranian monarchy. Early emperors were considered divine, an echo of Hellenistic and Old Persian ideas of kingship. The themes of Assyrian palace reliefs – the ruler enthroned by the gods, the protector of the fertility of the realm, the heroic warrior – were repeated in Sasanian palaces. Everything from cylinder seals to gardens proclaimed the grandeur of the emperor.

The Sasanian Empire has been described either as a centralized state or as a feudal confederation. In fact, it was a hybrid regime. The power of the Sasanian dynasty was grounded in Iraq and southern Iran, where the state drew its revenues from cities, the taxation of agriculture, land reclamation, and the international Indian Ocean trade. Extraordinary Sasanian development projects – the Nahrawan canal and Diyala basin development, the canalizations of southern Iraq and Khuzistan, the development of Isfahan and the Helmand basin, the fortifications of Ctesiphon, the Darband and the Gurgan walls defending against nomadic invaders – are evidence of a strongly centralized state. Similarly, a hierarchical tax and civil administration, a justice system, an organized Zoroastrian priesthood, and a rigid class hierarchy imply a state with monetary revenues and centralized
direction. The power of this regime was manifest in great military victories over the Romans that indicate a large standing army as well as feudal levies.

In Iraq, the state drew its power from the *dibqans* (landowners), soldiers, and courtiers, who manned the Sasanian army and tax administration. They were united by a shared eclectic culture, combining Greek philosophy and medicine, Byzantine architecture, Indian tales, and sports and games such as chess, polo, and hunting. This hybrid culture would flourish again in the 'Abbasid age.

At the same time, the Sasanian Empire was a confederacy in which the Sasanians, as the Kings of Kings, ruled in conjunction with an aristocracy of Parthian clans. The great Parthian families were subordinate kings or feudal lords, rulers of vast provinces to the north and east of the Iranian plateau – from Azarbayjan to Gilan and Tabaristan to Khurasan – with royal and noble powers based on landownership. Whereas the Sasanians were Parsi speaking and Zoroastrian in religion, these families spoke Parthian languages and worshiped the god Mithra. The Sasanians relied on the military contributions of the Parthians and maintained their supremacy largely because of the rivalries among the Parthian dynasts. Conversely, Parthian revolts and collaboration with the Byzantines led in 628 to the defeat of the Sasanians in the great Roman-Persian wars and soon after to the extinction of the dynasty by the Arab conquests.

In sum, the Byzantine Empire was built on urban elites, bureaucracy, and a standing army. The Persian Empire was built on an alliance of a warrior, landed, horse-borne fighting aristocracy, with lower-ranking landowners (*dibqans*) as the base of the Sasanian army and tax administration.

### RELIGION AND SOCIETY BEFORE ISLAM

The development of more encompassing empires and empire-wide civilizations paralleled the transformation of religions. The earliest religions were based on nature and associated with small communities. The gods of Middle Eastern peoples were the gods of families, tribes, villages, and towns; but with the growing connections among peoples through empire and trade, universal gods came to be recognized. Polytheism evolved toward monotheism. The gods of empires, the gods of dominant peoples, and the gods of conquerors, travelers, merchants, and priests whose activities were not circumscribed by a single locality came to be worshiped over large areas. Mithraism, for example, was a pagan religion uniting soldiers and officials of all races across the Roman Empire, providing uniform places for the worship of a supreme god. Sacred places, such as Rome and Alexandria, allowed the worshiper to be in contact with all the gods at once. The tendency toward unification was expressed by the idea of a pantheon and hierarchy of gods, which allowed different peoples to share in the same universe while preserving local cults and forms of worship. Local gods came to be seen as the manifestations of a universal god.
The concept of the universality of the great gods evolved into a belief in one god, who was the god of the whole universe and of all mankind. The oneness of God was preached by the prophets of ancient Israel and, in the seventh century BCE, by the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. Christianity, and later Islam, would also teach the unity of God, the universality of his sway, and the obligation of all of mankind to acknowledge his glory.

Between the third and seventh centuries, the missionary force of the new ideas and doctrines, the widening net of contacts among Middle Eastern peoples, and especially the support of the great empires made Christianity and Zoroastrianism the dominant religions in the Roman-Byzantine and Sasanian empires. Empires promoted religious conformity to help overcome ethnic and provincial differences. The boundaries between paganism and monotheism disappeared as pagans adopted monotheistic ideas about God and as the confessional religions incorporated pagan practices. Each of these confessional religions was defined by faith in an absolute truth, the possession of a holy scripture, a learned or priestly authority, and communal organizations in the form of congregations, churches, and sects.

Although different in orientation, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity shared a common vision. All were transcendental. They held that beyond the world of this life there is a higher world, the realm of the divine, to be attained either through ethical action or through faith in God. Through sacrifice, prayer, and sacrament, they sought salvation from sin and death, and entrance for men into the eternal reality beyond the ephemeral appearances of this world. Furthermore, they were universal religions, believing that God created and governed the whole universe and all people. Believers are thus brothers in a common religious way of life and a common quest for salvation.

Jews believed that there was a single god of the universe who commanded his people (Israel) to fulfill his holy law and who would judge them in this world and the next. Judaism, however, was not a universal religion but was the religion of an ethnic group or nation. After the Romans destroyed the Jewish state in Palestine in the second century, Jewish communities were scattered throughout both the Roman and the Sasanian empires. Judaism had no political structure but was organized in numerous small communities that shared faith in the Torah (the holy scripture), a national history and law, and similar legal, educational, and charitable institutions. Jews did not have a hierarchical ecclesiastical organization but were linked by informal ties to and respect for the great academies of learning.

Under the Sasanians, Jews had their own law courts, schools, and synagogues. The exilarch was the civic chieftain officer of the Jewish community. He collected taxes and represented the Jews at the imperial court. Rabbis interpreted Jewish law and were employed by the exilarch as judges, market inspectors, and tax collectors.

Jews emphasized the observance of religious law and fulfillment of God’s commands in everyday life. There were also mystical, spiritual, and eschatological elements to Judaism. In the seventh century, perhaps in response to the
Sasanian-Roman wars, messianic and apocalyptic Jewish sects, including Rabbinites, Karaites, Samaritans, 'Isawiyya, and gnostics, proliferated. There were “hybrid” Jewish-Christian sects that accepted Jesus as a human prophet but maintained Jewish practices. In Iran and Inner Asia, a region with a long tradition as a refuge for deviant groups, there were numerous Jewish communities.

Christianity was in principle not the religion of a particular people but was universal, a religion for all mankind. The central Christian doctrine is faith in a triune God – God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Son is the Logos, the word of God, Christ incarnate, who was crucified so that believers might be saved. Christians developed a strong ethical strand, but their central aspiration was salvation through faith in Christ from the evil and suffering that is inherent in the material world and in man’s nature.

By the sixth century, however, Christians differed profoundly among themselves about the nature of Christ’s being. Was Christ human or divine, man or God, and how were the two aspects of his being related? Most Christians believed that Christ was both fully divine and fully human, but they disagreed over how to express this. The church Council of Nicaea ruled in 325 CE that Christ was not only human but also unbegotten and consubstantial with God, divine in his being. In 451 CE, the Council of Chalcedon explained that Christ had two natures, divine and human, expressed in one concrete instance (hypostasis) and in one person (prosopon); this was the position of the Orthodox Church. The Miaphysites held that Christ has one nature, one hypostasis, and one prosopon. The Nestorians held that he had two natures, two hypostases, and one prosopon. These arcane distinctions spelled out rivalries among clerics and jurisdictional and regional conflicts, as well as differences in spiritual vision.

These different religious beliefs were the foundation of the various Christian churches. Modeling themselves on the empires, the churches were territorially organized hierarchies in which the highest authority in both doctrinal and organizational matters belonged to popes and patriarchs who appointed the bishops, the heads of provinces called dioceses, who in turn appointed the local parish priests.

Parishes implemented church teachings at the local level in what we would now consider secular as well as religious matters. Bishops were sometimes the governors and administrators of the cities in which their dioceses were located. Formal ecclesiastical courts came into being in the fourth century and had jurisdiction in family, property, and commercial matters, and even in some matters of criminal law. They were also important educational institutions.

Furthermore, Christian affiliations were closely tied to political identifications. The Byzantine Empire enforced the Chalcedonian creed as its official doctrine. Miaphysitism was the religion of the Aramaic-speaking village populations of Syria and of the Coptic-speaking (the Egyptian language written in modified Greek script) peasants of Egypt. Minorities loyal to Chalcedon, known as Melkites or Eastern Orthodox Christians, however, were also found in Egypt and Syria.
Miaphysitism was also the religion of Georgia and Armenia. In the sixth century, Axum (Ethiopia) and Himyar in southern Arabia became Miaphysite. Miaphysites evangelized Nubia in the sixth century. Arabs on the edge of the Syrian desert patronized Miaphysite holy men and clerics. The Ghassanid princes on the Arabian borders of the Byzantine Empire were Miaphysites. (The Lakhmids, on the Arabian borders of Sasanian Iraq, were Nestorians.) Miaphysitism was an expression of provincial autonomy and resistance to Roman-Byzantine suzerainty.

Despite these doctrinal and organizational differences, Christianity created a common culture in multiple languages: Greek or Aramaic in Syria, Persian or Aramaic in Iraq, Greek or Coptic in Egypt. Christian Greek literature influenced and was influenced by Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Georgian, and Arabic literature, thereby generating a shared cultural heritage.

The spread of Christian culture, however, marginalized Greco-Roman culture. Notables and the people came to share a common Christian culture. In the fifth and sixth centuries, the clergy took over many of the functions of the declining town councils. This introduced a period of lavish church constructions and decoration in the village societies of Egypt and Syria.

While urban and rural clergy were implicated in the world of power, holy men, shrines, and monasteries became the popularly accepted intermediaries between humans and God. Holy men and ascetics popularized the spiritual purity of the desert. Pilgrimage to the column of St. Simeon Stylites became a form of mass worship. In the seventh century, veneration of icons and the cults of saints and the Virgin became alternatives to the authority of the emperor and the church. In Egypt, wealthier peasants and townspeople introduced the veneration of icons. Syrian merchants developed fine stone carvings; bands of Syrian monks were noted for their musical litanies. Music, holy relics, and Christian ceremonies became the means of cultural transmission. Personal access to God displaced imperial and church-defined religious ceremony. Throughout the old Roman Empire, east and west, culture and identity were recast in Christian terms.

In the Sasanian Empire, Zoroastrianism was the religion of the political and social elites. Zoroastrians believed in a supreme god, Ahura Mazda, the creator of the world, a god of light and truth. At the creation, however, there were two independent powers: Ohrmazd, the god of goodness and light, and Ahreman, the god of evil and darkness. There was also a third principle, a mediating figure, Mihr, and other gods of the pantheon.

In Zoroastrian eschatology, the destiny of the world was to be decided by God’s struggle with the forces of evil and darkness. Zoroastrian teachings included a cosmic struggle for redemption culminating in the coming of the messiah, the resurrection of the dead, and the last judgment. Human beings are part of this cosmic struggle. Both gods and demons reside in the human soul: the goal of human existence is to make the divine prevail over the demonic. Human beings must contribute to the victory of the Good and Light by their actions and beliefs.
and will be judged at the day of judgment. The fate of the wicked is either to be damned for eternity or to be purified by punishment and accepted into universal salvation at the end of the world. In the end, Ahura Mazda will prevail, evil will be eliminated, and human beings will be transformed into spiritualized bodies and souls. Zoroastrianism, like Judaism, emphasizes individual ethical responsibility.

Zoroastrian worship turned around the mobads (magi) or fire priests, who at some time in the third century acquired a chief mobad, and thus a hierarchy of clergy. The fire temples, tended by the magi, kept alive the flame of purity. In the fourth century, Zoroastrians collected their scriptures into the Avesta. The magian legal system helped diffuse a magian way of life, parallel to Judaism and Christianity.

Zoroastrianism, however, had no unified tradition and no identifiable orthodoxy, but many varieties of belief and practice. Elite religion involved spiritual programs of self-transcendence. Popular religion included demon worship and magical practices to propitiate the demons. Ritual religious practices included astrology and divination. Mazdakism was a reform movement within Zoroastrianism advocating communal property and marriages.

The Parthian nobility, however, were devotees of Mithra. Mithra was the god of contracts, alliances, pacts, and justice, fighting on the side of goodness and light. Mithraism was the religious heritage of northern and eastern Iran – Khurasan, Tabaristan, Gilan, and Azarbajjan – and of popular opposition to the Sasanians and the mobads.

The Sasanian Empire was also home to numerous other religions and cults, including Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeanism, Buddhism, and gnostic sects. In Mesopotamia there was no congruence of language or religion between government and the town populations. Parsi-speaking Zoroastrians ruled Iraq, but the local populations were Aramaic-speaking Nestorians and Jews. Jewish communities were also found in Armenia, Azarbajjan, and Isfahan. Christians were settled in Marw and Soghdia, where they spread their religion among the Turkic nomads. Transoxania also harbored a great diversity of religions, including Nestorianism, local Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and colonies of Jews and Hindus.

Under the Sasanian Empire, from the fourth century, religious communities were organized as legal corporations owning property; maintaining courts; regulating marriages, divorces, and inheritances; and through their chiefs, holding responsibility to the state for taxes and discipline. In 410 CE, Shah Yazadgard recognized the administrative autonomy of the Christians and the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as the head of the church. Bishops began to preside over legal cases. The Sasanians appointed a catholicos or patriarch and a metropolitan to preside over the bishops in parallel with the Sasanian administrative hierarchy. Magians had a hierarchy parallel to that of the state, a hierarchical judicial administration specifically for Zoroastrians, a cult, scriptures, religious laws, and distinctive customs. It was the religion of the elite and rulers.
In the fifth century, the Nestorian Church was reinforced by the migration of persecuted Christians from the Roman Empire. The emperors allowed the transfer of the theological school of Edessa to Nisibis, bringing Christian theology into the Sasanian domains, fortifying the Nestorian Church, and preparing the later amalgamation of Christian theology and philosophy with Arab-Islamic thought. Scholars from Edessa also established a medical school at Gundeshapur.

In the sixth century, Nestorians extended church government and canon law to deal with marriage, inheritance, and property. Unlike the Syriac Church, which referred to Roman codes for civil issues, the Nestorian Church did not distinguish between civil and religious law. Competing clerical and lay factions invoked royal support and brought the government into church decisions. Royal permission was required for the election of the head of the church, construction of buildings, burials, and even the establishment of monastic rules.

Alongside the monotheistic religions, numerous sects and cults continued to flourish. Manichaeanism, a universal dualist religion asserting separate cosmic forces for good and evil, was a heresy to both Christianity and Zoroastrianism and flourished in Iraq and Iran. Its founder, Mani (216–76 CE), preached the division of the universe between spirit and matter. Manichaeans believed that spirit was good, but that matter was derived from Satan and was evil. Manichaeanism was never attached to a particular ethnicity nor organized as a church. It spread to Iran, India, Central Asia, and North Africa; its texts were translated from Aramaic into Greek and Pahlavi.

In this religious environment, paganism also remained important. Pagans adopted monotheistic ideas about God, and monotheistic religions incorporated pagan practices. In Iraq, there were Marcionites who believed in three principles – good, evil, and the demiurge of justice. Pagan Hellenistic cults – Hermetics, Elka-saites, Mandeens, gnostics, Chaldeans, astrologers, occult scientists, and others – flourished. In Syria, Hellenism was a powerful influence: many towns still had cults of Apollo, Hermes, Ares, and other gods. Even Christians used Greek mythology to decorate homes and churches.

**RELIGIONS AND EMPIRES**

The relations between religious elites and imperial administrators were ambivalent. Each laid claim to an absolute truth and a universal authority. In principle, they were competitors in representing the highest values, but simultaneously they could be uneasy allies. Empires gained legitimacy and administrative help from cooperative religious elites; religions gained protection, material assistance, power, and glory from the support of empires. Each could either deliver or withhold popular support from the other.

The Roman Empire made Christianity a state religion. Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, enforced orthodoxy and attempted to
punish heretics. He thereby joined the emperor and the empire to Christianity, merging a universal religion with missionary goals and a strong scriptural authority to the political and military apparatus of the state. Empire and Christianity under the theme of one God and one empire were united in opposition to heresy and to provincial independence.

After Constantine, the Roman state considered itself the domain of the chosen people, and the emperor considered himself representative of God and defender of orthodoxy. Royal decrees regulated the organization of the church. Roman emperors called convocations of bishops, supplied them authority, and enforced their decisions. False belief was defiance of imperial authority. Emperor Justinian (r. 527–65 CE) persecuted pagans, heretics, homosexuals, and Jews. Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–41 CE) tried to force Chalcedonian doctrine on all Christians.

The Byzantine Empire, however, never succeeded in consolidating its religious domination. Local power holders, including archbishops and bishops, used doctrinal differences to contest the authority of the emperor. Miaphysitism articulated both a doctrinal opposition to the Chalcedonian doctrine and provincial resistance to imperial power. The struggle between competing doctrines and competing political powers resulted in the establishment of several forms of regional Christianity.

The Sasanian Empire sometimes promoted a centralized state collaborating with Zoroastrian clergy in imitation of Byzantine Caesaropapism. There were periods of religious repression – against Manichaeanism in the fourth century, Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries, Mazdakism in the late fifth century, and Judaism in the third and fifth centuries. In general, however, unlike the late Roman Empire, the Sasanian Empire accepted its diverse Zoroastrian, Nestorian, and Jewish communities as legitimate social bodies. The Sasanians surrounded themselves with the Nestorian catholicos and the Jewish exilarchs as well as Zoroastrian mobads. Nestorian and Zoroastrian communities had a bureaucracy and system of titles parallel to that of the state. Royal permission was required for the election of the heads of churches, for construction of buildings, for burials, and even for the issuing of monastic rules. Competing clerical and lay factions invoked royal support and brought the government into church decisions. The Sasanian state used the churches as intermediaries to regulate and tax the population. The long-term Sasanian policy was to accept and to utilize all religious communities as instruments of rule.

Thus, Byzantine and Sasanian religious policies differed. The late Roman Empire strove for religious uniformity as a basis for imperial rule. It was prepared to punish and persecute religious deviants. But the rising power of religion as the principle organizing forces in the lives of masses of peoples gave power to bishops, saints, holy men, and icons. The growing importance of religion limited the effective authority of the emperors. By contrast, the Sasanian Empire maintained a preferred cult and, despite episodes of persecution of Jews and Christians, tolerated and
utilized all the major religious communities as vehicles of state control. Churches and religious communities saw themselves as both potential collaborators and potential opponents of the empires.

WOMEN, FAMILY, AND SOCIETY (CO-AUTHOR, LENA SALAYMEH)

Empires and religions were the great overarching institutions, but the fundamental units of society were families living in small communities. Unfortunately, we know very little about the legal and social institutions or the patterns of daily life that regulated family behavior and the relations of men and women in late antiquity. Most of what we know comes from the records of royalty and aristocracy and from legal texts; little is known about the populace as a whole. Thus any account of families in antiquity is tentative and must be taken with great reserve.

Still, it appears that all the pre-Islamic Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies had, with variations, similar family institutions and norms for the relations of men and women. In ideology – and to a large degree in behavior – late antique societies made a sharp distinction between men’s and women’s roles. The middle- and upper-class ideal was the isolation of women from the marketplace, politics, and social life with men. Generally, in the upper classes, war, politics, and worship were men’s work, although the wives of kings, public officials, and warriors occasionally rose to unofficial prominence and substituted for men in moments of crisis. In the ancient Persian empires, women of royal and noble rank owned and administered landed estates. In the lower classes, men did craft work and trading, hard labor and heavy agricultural work, including plowing and irrigation. Women of the lower classes were engaged in household and domestic craft work, care of children, light agriculture, and stock herding.

In extended families and lineages, women were subject to the authority of fathers, brothers, husbands, and husbands’ male kin. It is probably fair to say that in the pre-Islamic Mediterranean and Middle East men looked on women as inferior in rational, moral, and physical capacities, and as requiring the support, supervision, and control of men. In ancient Greece, women were wards of their fathers and then of their husbands. In early Roman law, only men were considered citizens empowered to act in the political arena and as the heads of families. According to the Jewish scholar Flavius Josephus, “Woman, the Law says, is inferior to man in all things. Hence she must obey not force but authority, because God has given power to man.” Although women were subordinated to men, their social, economic, and marital functions were highly valued. Women were socially weak, but men were obliged to be considerate, protective, and solicitous of their women. In all the regional pre-Islamic societies, the authority of men and their social and economic advantages were institutionalized in the arrangements of marriage and divorce, sexual morality, property, and engagement in public life.
Marriage, divorce, and sexual morality
The authority of men was clearly expressed in the institutions of marriage. Ancient Iranian, Greek and Roman, and Jewish and Christian communities had similar concepts of marriage. Marriage was a mechanism for producing children who would carry on the family name and family fortunes. Betrothal and marriage agreements were entered into by families. Marriages were regulated in the interests of families and their property and were not an expression of the sentiments of the couple. Normally, a father negotiated a betrothal for a female child, possibly before the child had reached puberty. Ancient Roman women, for example, could not marry without the consent or representation of a guardian. According to Sasanian law, a woman had to give her consent before marriage, but her father had to represent her in drawing a marriage contract. However, she had the legal right to keep her wages after marriage. For a Jewish marriage, consent was required, but a woman's consent could be tacit. In general, a very young woman was expected to accept her parents' wishes – silence was considered consent. Women were expected to be faithful and loyal, to bear children, prepare food, and keep house. A bride would ordinarily move to the house of her husband and reside with his kin, but her male guardians were ultimately responsible for her welfare.

In later centuries, a more egalitarian ideal based on mutual affection emerged. By the early Roman Empire period, people above the age of puberty could declare a marriage by mutual consent without parental permission. Upper-class women owned property, were entitled to the return of their dowries if divorced, and attended social and public events without restriction. Women’s funeral steles were inscribed with loving sentiments by their husbands. This was the beginning of the ideal of marriage as a monogamous loving union. However, divorce was common, especially in the upper classes.

Throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East, men had privileges and powers regarding divorce that women did not. Mesopotamian, Sumerian, biblical-era, and pre-Islamic Arab practices indicate that men generally had unrestricted rights to divorce, although they had to announce it publicly. According to Sasanian law, divorce occurred either through mutual consent or the husband's repudiation of a wife for committing a sin (adultery, ignoring purity rules, etc.). Sasanian women of the lower classes could not divorce their husbands, whereas upper-class women could.

In early Roman law, only a husband could make a declaration of divorce, but by the time of Constantine (fourth century), either spouse could unilaterally end a marriage. Emperor Constantine at first tried to forbid divorce, but he was unsuccessful. He then ruled that wives or husbands could divorce in cases of grave misconduct. If the wife were responsible for the breakup of the marriage, the husband could retain money from her dowry and take custody of any children. If the husband were at fault, he would have to repay the dowry. In actuality, there was considerable leeway for individual cases.
In rabbinic law, a husband, but not a wife, could end a marriage at will, but he was required to return the dowry – unless the wife was judicially found to be at fault. The rabbis, however, differed on the legal rights of women to initiate divorce. The majority of Babylonian Talmudists gave a woman the right to divorce in the case of a major flaw in the husband, such as impotence or a serious disease. The Palestinian Talmud suggests that Jewish women had the right to sue for divorce. Rabbis acknowledged divorce by mutual consent. A widow or divorcee could remarry after a waiting period to ascertain that she was not pregnant by her previous husband.

The spread of Christianity modified perceptions of divorce. Christian values prohibited divorce except in cases of adultery and prohibited remarriage after divorce. By the eighth century, marriage was widely accepted as an indissoluble sacrament, although this did not enter canon law until 1563.

Late antique sexual morality was governed by a double standard. All late antique societies denounced adultery by women but in practice condoned nonmarried sexual opportunities for men. Roman law recognized concubinage as a long-term relationship between people whose social status precluded the legal arrangements of a marriage; the law permitted concubines in addition to a wife. Although adultery and premarital sex were condemned, the relations of married men with slaves, prostitutes, or other less than respectable women were not considered adultery. Roman society expected unmarried women to be chaste. The distinctions between wife, concubine, and mistress were ambiguous.

Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian traditions all required virginity in a bride. The Avesta (Zoroastrian scripture) encouraged chastity and forbade sex outside marriage. The Bible (Leviticus) orders that women who have had premarital sex should be stoned to death, and a Jewish bride found not to be a virgin was subject to punishment. In practice, however, Palestinian rabbis developed a process by which a woman could prove that she was still a virgin despite having a “damaged” hymen. Until the tenth century CE, if not later, Jews also practiced polygyny. Rabbinic law permitted multiple marriages if a man could fulfill his commitments to each of his wives. Still, there were hesitations among Palestinian rabbis who recommended that a man divorce his first wife before remarrying. Also some rabbis granted a first wife the right to divorce or to put a provision in the marriage contract to prevent her husband from marrying a second wife.

Early Christians also condemned premarital sex but pardoned the offense if the couple married. Although opposed in principle to extramarital relations, Christians in late antiquity did not in fact penalize a married man’s extramarital relations with women of low status. It was most severely reproved if a man tried to bequeath property to illegitimate children.

**Property and inheritance**

In late antique societies, women could own property and acquire it by gift, dowry, inheritance, or work. Commonly, however, fathers, husbands, and other guardians
The beginnings of Islamic civilizations were empowered to control their assets. In ancient Greek law, a woman retained legal ownership of her property, but her husband was the manager of his wife's dowry and received its income as long as the marriage lasted. He had to represent her in court cases and in drawing of contracts in much the same way as he was the guardian of his children. Roman law did not recognize women as legally independent. Their property came under the control of their patras familias – father, husband, or other guardian. A woman could own and bequeath property, but her choices had to be approved by her guardian and her heirs. Many Roman jurists believed that these restrictions were justified by women's weakness of mind. Despite such limitations, women in the Roman Empire often managed their own properties and entered into legal arrangements. Sasanian women had the right to own property, but – because they were not considered full legal persons – a male relative or spouse would administer the property. Jewish husbands acquired control over their wives' property, because the rabbis reasoned that a husband was entitled to the profits of some kinds of property because he was obligated to ransom her if she were taken captive.

In late antique law, with the possible exception of Roman law, women did not inherit equally with men. However, families commonly arranged to transfer property to wives and daughters by gifts or wills. Under Sasanian rules wives of full legal status could inherit the same portion as sons, but lower-status wives and their children could not inherit. Unmarried daughters received half of a son's share in an estate; married daughters could not inherit, because, presumably, they had received a dowry equivalent to their share. Under Sasanian law, however, wills and dowries were often used to alter inheritance shares. Biblical laws prevented widows (unless childless) from inheriting and allowed a daughter to inherit only if there was no male heir or if she married within the same clan. By late antiquity, however, it was common for Jewish fathers to give daughters bridal dowries to compensate for their omission from inheritance.

The limitations on women's control of property extended to their participation in the judicial system. The dominant pre-Islamic norm was to limit women's testimony or involvement in court proceedings. The Emperor Constantine disapproved of women being present in court. The Zoroastrian clergy did not allow women's testimony in a court of law. Rabbis considered women incompetent to testify in court, but they appear to have accepted women's testimony in matters considered under their purview (such as purity).

Seclusion and veiling
Although it is not possible to assess the extent of gender segregation across classes and communities in pre-Islamic Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies, the lives of women in the ruling classes were generally marked by seclusion and veiling. Textual evidence from the mid-Assyrian period (1132–1115 BCE) indicates that women lived in separate areas and were guarded by eunuchs. Elite Greek women were absent from public life. Jewish women in the time of Jesus were admonished
to stay within the household. Seclusion may have been related to ritual and social restrictions placed on women during menstruation. In the Zoroastrian tradition, menstruating women were considered polluted and could not perform temple rituals. Rabbinic law also restricted women from social activities during menstruation or after childbirth, even though marriage and sexuality were seen as positive.

The seclusion of women, however, was by no means absolute. Women appeared in public to work. Some Jewish women were educated. Christian and pagan women in Byzantium appear to have studied the classics, but they studied different texts than men and were expected to speak in a distinctive manner. Christian women also played an important role in the church, as patrons, as teachers for women who could not read the gospels, as assistants in the baptism of women, and as caregivers of the sick and the needy. Through their contacts with other women, Christian women could help promote conversions to Christianity or adherence to Christian social and moral norms.

Veiling was widely practiced throughout the pre-Islamic Mediterranean and Middle East. It is known that a style of clothing that covered women from head to toe existed in ancient Mesopotamia around 3000 BCE. The oldest statute regarding the veiling of women known today is in middle Assyrian law (c. 1300 BCE). The pre-Islamic inhabitants of the Iranian plateau practiced veiling of women. Elite Sasanian women (and Sasanian kings) were veiled. Jewish women were required to cover their heads and faces when in public. Some passages in the Talmud indicate that the rabbis associated a woman’s hair covering with piety and chastity.

Women in ancient Roman society wore a long cloth called a palla, which may have changed into veils of different sizes around the second century BCE. Later, early Christian churches requested women to cover their heads in the chapel, and Tertullian (a second-third-century Christian writer), in his essay “On the Veiling of Virgins,” declared that unmarried women must wear the veil.

There are many different interpretations of veiling. In late antiquity the veil, generally, represented high status. The veil distinguished respectable women from slaves and prostitutes. Numismatic and other evidence from the sixth century BCE to the seventh century CE suggest that veiling may also have been decorative or fashionable. In some contexts, it may have signified that a woman was the ward of her husband or father. Still, how widely veiling was practiced, in what circumstances, or how the veil was actually worn is not known.

The fragmentary evidence suggests that women in third-century Sasanian communities, or fourth-century Jewish societies, or sixth-century Byzantium lived in worlds of similar values and similar social and legal practices. These values and practices would be perpetuated in the Muslim era.

CONCLUSION

On the eve of the Islamic era, the Middle East was divided into two great realms of polity and culture (Byzantine and Sasanian) and two main spheres of religious
The beginnings of Islamic civilizations

Table 1. Islam in world history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early village farming communities</td>
<td>c. 7000 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cities</td>
<td>c. 3000 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empires</td>
<td>c. 2400 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axial-age and monotheistic religions</td>
<td>c. 800 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muhammad</td>
<td>c. 570–632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern Islamic societies</td>
<td>622–c. 1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worldwide diffusion of Islam</td>
<td>c. 650 to present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rise of European world empires</td>
<td>1200–1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern transformation of Islamic societies</td>
<td>1800 to present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

belief (Christian and Zoroastrian, with Jewish minorities). Religion and empire were intertwined. The empires sustained, patronized, endowed, and enforced organized worship. In turn, the religious communities legitimized the emperors’ reigns and helped govern the subjects in their name. Alternatively, Miaphysite churches embodied political as well as religious resistance to the state. Within each society, a myriad of small communities retained their social and cultural distinctiveness. Their headmen, chiefs, and elders mediated their integration into the overarching realms of common religion and empire.

These two political and religious regions – with their common institutional forms and overlapping popular cultures – would become part of a single Middle Eastern civilization. (See Table 1.) In the late sixth and early seventh centuries, the two empires fought exhausting wars for the control of Syria and Egypt, which paved the way for the Arab-Muslim conquests and the formation of an Arab-Islamic empire in the former domains of both. The new empire preserved the continuity of Middle Eastern institutions. The basic forms of state organization – including the emperorship, the bureaucratic administration and large-scale landownership, and the predominant style of religious life focusing on universal and transcendental beliefs and a parish-like community organization – were maintained.

Early Islamic societies adapted both the Roman model uniting imperial authority and religious identity and the Sasanian model of religious pluralism. As in the late Roman and Sasanian empires, culture and identity came to be defined in religious terms – Muslim identity would also be defined by religious affiliation. Both the hierarchical Christian churches and the decentralized Jewish communities would be precedents for the later organization of Muslim religious associations. Just as Christianity had created a translinguistic religious culture, Islam would be expressed in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and many other languages. The basic structures of empire, economy, religion, society, and family continued, but they were gradually redefined in terms of a new religion, new cultures, and new social identities.

Similarly, the regional ecology continued to be based on agrarian and urban communities, and the economy functioned on the basis of marketing and money exchanges. Ancient cultures – philosophy, literature, law, and art – continued to flourish and would be carried on in the Arab-Islamic era.
Family, lineage, clientele, and ethnic communities also continued to be the building blocks of society. Just as the institutions of empire and state and of religious-communal organization descended from the pre-Islamic era and continued to be the governing template for the Muslim era, so too were ancient patterns of family and gender relations – revised, modified, freshly detailed, and given a new religious and cultural context – carried over from the ancient to the Islamic era.

The progressive transformation of late antique societies into Islamic societies took place in three main phases: first, the creation of a new Islamic community in Arabia; second, the conquest of the Middle East by this new Arabian-Muslim community; and third, the generation in the period of the early caliphate (to 945 CE) of an Islamic empire and culture. In the post-imperial or sultanate period (945–c. 1200) the institutional and cultural prototypes of the caliphal era were transformed into new types of Islamic states and religious communities. In the first phase, we see the emergence of Islam in Arabian society. In the second, we consider Islam as it became the religion of an imperial state and urban elite. In the third phase, we see how Islamic values and elites transformed the lives of Middle Eastern peoples.