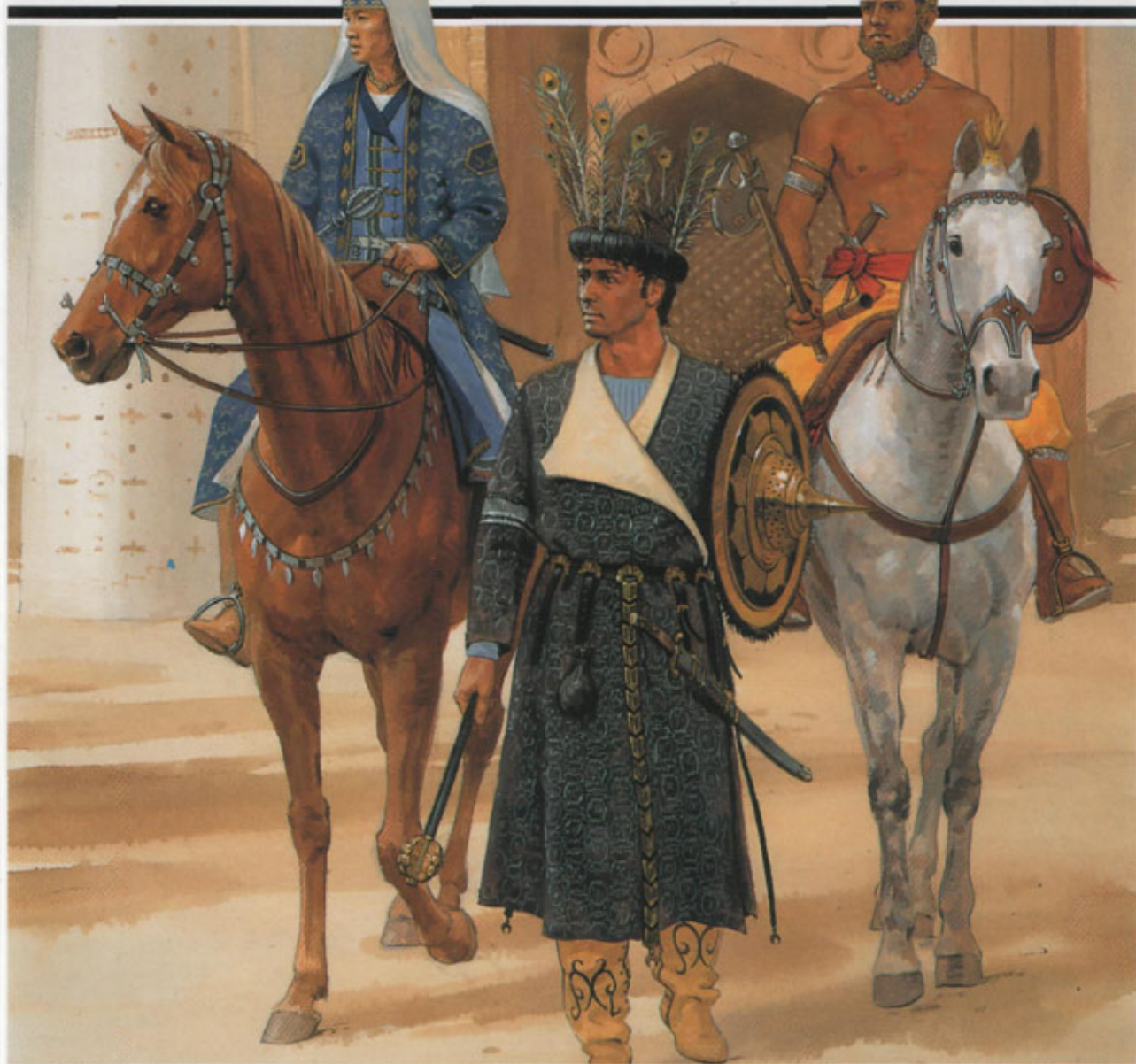


# ARMIES OF THE CALIPHATES 862-1098



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## INTRODUCTION

Some historians divide history into periods dominated by one civilisation. Greece, Rome, India, China, Western Europe and North America have all had their moment in the sun, but from the 8th to 11th centuries the Islamic world led the way. Nevertheless Islamic military power peaked in the 9th century, after which political fragmentation meant that Islam's technological and organisational superiority could not be fully effective.

At the start of this Islamic golden age the Sunni Muslim 'Abbāsid Caliphate, with its capital at Baghdad, ruled virtually the entire Islamic world. By the end of it, the spiritual authority of the 'Abbāsid Caliphs was still accepted by most Muslims, yet they had little political and virtually no military power. The 'Abbāsid collapse was, however, the result of economic bankruptcy rather than military defeat. A sequence of military dictators followed, while distant provinces of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate continued to fall away.

This pattern of history means that medieval Islamic history is best studied on the basis of ruling dynasties rather than on geographical states. Another characteristic feature was the 'Iranianisation' of most armies and a more limited 'Turkification' of their cavalry élites. Nevertheless, many traditional Arab military values were retained by non-bedu armies, such as physical toughness, wily warfare and an avoidance of casualties. Arab ideals of manhood had also been inherited, above all the

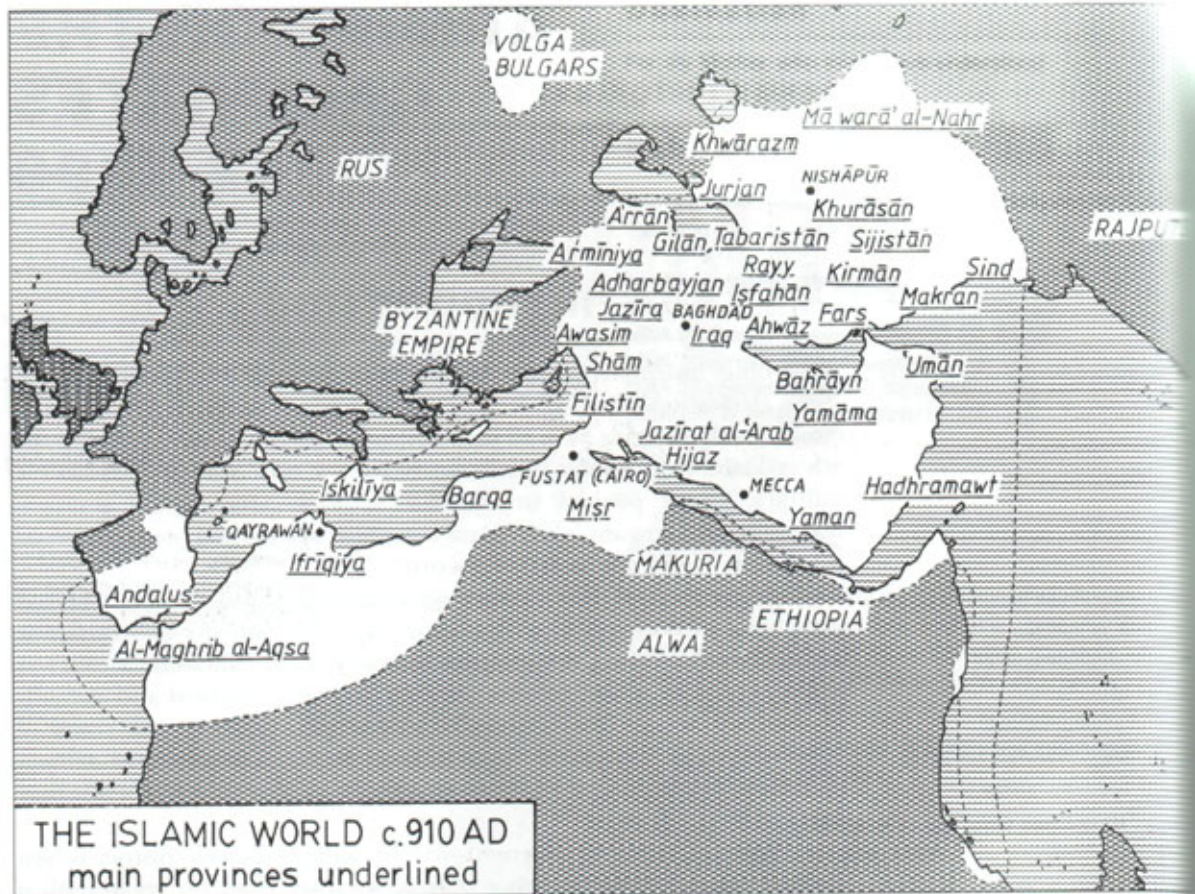
idea that men should do something to promote what they believed in, rather than accept insult or injustice passively. Similarly, family origins counted for relatively little, and greater respect was given to individual achievements. The Muslim faith remained central to the motivation of soldiers, whether professionals or part-time volunteers. Religious scholars also played an increasingly important role in most armies, for both legal and morale-boosting reasons. As authority fragmented, armies became smaller and more professional, while part-timers were relegated to urban militias and the frontiers.

A fully developed 'theory of warfare' also appeared, with books written on all aspects. Arabic translations of Aelian's Greek *Tactika* had been known since the 8th century, and other Byzantine and Greek military or naval manuals were similarly translated. Treatises were also taken

Medallion of the 'Abbāsid Caliph Muqtadir B'illah, Iraq, 10th century. (National Museum, Baghdad)







from Persian, Indian and possibly other languages, in each case being updated to deal with current conditions. Meanwhile, the smaller successor states of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate tried to continue existing military systems with limited resources and under differing local conditions. Weaker political foundations among such successor states also meant that waging *jihād* in defence of Islam became more important as a way of conferring legitimacy to a regime.

### HEARTLANDS AND FRONTIERS

The decline of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate coincided with unrest in many regions and a shift in trade patterns. One result was the decline of Iraq's wealth and potential, and an increase in that of Egypt. A virtual collapse of central authority in 10th century Syria and the Jazīra (Upper Mesopotamia) led to a revival in the power of Arab bedouin tribes who established several small though cultured states close to the Byzantine frontier. In Egypt, as in Syria, Christians still formed the majority of the population, but here civilians took almost no part in warfare. In fact Egypt, Libya and Syria together formed the culturally brilliant, though militarily weak Fātimid Caliphate. Its armies were almost entirely non-Egyptian and increasingly mercenary. Furthermore, they were split between Sunni Muslim Turks, Armenian Christians, Africans (who

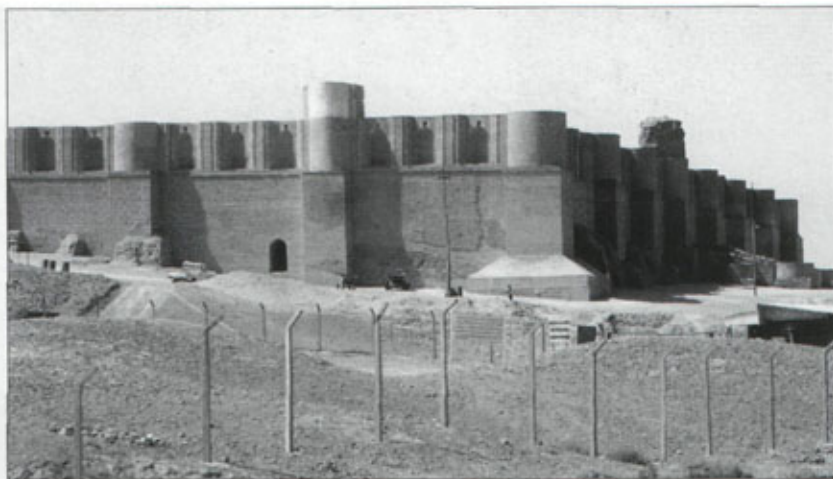


political loyalty to the Caliph was personal rather than religious), and several mutually antagonistic groups. Arabia, the cradle of Islam, was, in some ways, now considered a 'frontier' zone. Mecca, Medina and the Red Sea coast were usually under Egyptian authority, while those who ruled Iraq ruled most of the Gulf coast. The centre of the Arabian peninsula was dominated by local tribes and followers of the puritanical and revolutionary Qarmāṭī movement.

The frontier between the 'Abbāsid Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire was a largely depopulated no-man's land which both sides wanted to keep as an ideological frontier. Even so this 'emptiness' has probably been exaggerated, with local political alliances and even marriages across the frontier being common. It is, in fact, interesting to see how many Arab names and originally Islamic military titles are found in the lead seals of the 10th-11th century Byzantine aristocracy. Several small states emerged on the Islamic side of the frontier, including the Kurdish Marwānids founded by a leader of frontier volunteers. Christian Armenian kingdoms also re-emerged in the 10th century under the nominal suzerainty of the Caliph. In what is now Georgia, the capital Tbilisi was largely Muslim, with Christians living in the mountains, while to the east in what is now Azerbaijan, the Iranian population had intermarried with the Arab conquerors.

Islam also penetrated Central Asia across the Transoxanian frontier, with the Volga Bulgars becoming an island of Islamic civilisation surrounded by non-Muslim peoples. Along the Islamic world's southern frontiers, Hindu and Buddhist communities remained in place long after their areas fell to Islamic conquerors such as Maḥmūd of Ghazna. In the Sind area of southern Pakistan, which had fallen to the Arabs centuries earlier, local Buddhists co-operated more closely with their Muslim governors than did the Hindus. Islam's African frontiers are less well documented. Here the East African seaports fell from 'Abbāsid control when Oman (in Arabia itself) seceded from the Caliphate in the 9th century.

Things were far more volatile in the Mediterranean. The Aghlabid dynasty which ruled Ifrīqiya (Tunisia and neighbouring provinces) turned to the sea to confront a Byzantine maritime threat and to provide an outlet for turbulent religious warriors. The resulting period of Islamic rule in Sicily was culturally and artistically brilliant, but Muslims remained a minority until the Norman Christian reconquest in the 11th century. North African Islam then suffered a serious blow in the 11th century with the westward migration of the Banu Hilāl and Banu Sulaym nomadic tribes who had been expelled from Fāṭimid Egypt, their arrival disrupting local agriculture and trade.



Qaṣr al-Ashīq on the west bank of the Tigris, built by Caliph al-Mu'tamid in the late 9th century. (Author's photograph)

## RECRUITMENT

Men were recruited to most Islamic armies on the basis of ethnic origin, whether they arrived as free men or slaves. Professional soldiers tended to come from the geographical margins of Islamic society. Their supposed simplicity and courage was admired by the sophisticated élites of Islam's urban civilisation, where the bulk of Islamic society did not provide professional recruits. Instead, they provided the civilian élites. The lure of wealth and promotion even led men from beyond Islam's frontiers to volunteer as *ghulāms* or *mamlūks* – soldiers of slave origin. There were even cases of voluntary castration since a eunuch's prospects were brighter – at least in career terms.

Again, the local situation varied. In Iran and Transoxania the Ṣaffārids (867-903) may have been unusual in relying on volunteers drawn from *ghāzī* religious enthusiasts, old soldiers, runaway peasants or free men looking for advancement. They were stiffened by a small number of *ghulāms*, mostly non-Muslim prisoners-of-war who had converted to Islam. The rival Sāmānid dynasty (874-999) preferred to recruit Persian-speaking Iranians, though they too began recruiting *ghulāms* of Turkish origin. The subsequent Ghaznavid dynasty built upon these existing systems to develop a notably successful military structure with which they conquered much of northern India.

The collapse of 'Abbāsīd authority in Syria and the Jazīra resulted in an assortment of petty dynasties: the 'Uqaylids of Mosul (996-1096) who largely relied on Arab tribal followers, whereas their Marwānids of Diyarbakir relied on Kurdish tribesmen. Most of these small dynasties also enlisted foreign professionals and, when they could afford it, a tiny élite of slave-recruited *ghulāms*.

In Egypt, as in most other parts of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate, resident Arab militias had been removed from the *dīwān*, the military lists of regularly paid professionals, in the early 9th century. Thereafter, most professional soldiers were of Berber, Turkish, Persian Daylami, bedouin Arab, Greek, Balkan Slav, Mediterranean or African background. Egypt was rich, but rivalry with other Islamic states often hampered the flow of Turks, the preferred recruits. As a result men of local Egyptian origin, such as those known as *maxwālīs*, occasionally played a leading military role. The Fāṭimid dynasty of Shia Caliphs seized Egypt in 969, their first powerbase being in North Africa. Hence the original Fāṭimid army was of Berber North African origin, but the Fāṭimids' loss of North Africa and the relative military backwardness of these Berbers meant that they largely disappeared from the Egyptian army by the late 11th century. In North Africa itself, the Aghlabids (800-909) had their power base in Tunisia and never seem to have been short of good soldiers and marines. The Sāmānids, though they were supporters of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphs, creamed off the best Turkish slaves and reduced the flow of *ghulāms* to Iraq to a trickle. The Zīrids of Tunisia (972-1148) also limited the number of Berbers seeking employment in Fāṭimid Egypt.



A



B



C

Carved ivory chesspieces:  
A – Cavalry fighting around a war-elephant with a seated prince and his guards, probably from Sind 9th century (Bib. Nat. Cabinet des Médailles, inv. 311, Paris); B and C – Chess-knights from Iran, 10th-11th centuries (Met. Museum of Art, inv. 07.228.70 and 1974.207, New York).