A Brief History of Islam in Europe

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CHAPTER ONE

Uncivilized Europe

(700–1000 CE)
I. Setting the Stage

Europe encountered Islam shortly after this new religion was established in the Arab Peninsula. The death of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, in 632 CE caused only a brief period of internal strife among Muslims before the prophet’s successors (caliphs) sent small but determined armies northwards, aimed at conquest. Their timing was perfect, although not intentionally so, because the two empires that they met on their way, the Byzantines in the Middle East and North Africa and the Sassanids in Iraq and Iran had by then worn each other out in centuries of military strife. Within years, the Muslim armies had vanquished these two empires and conquered vast territories. When the Islamic caliphate moved its capital from Medina to Damascus in 661 CE, its empire reached from present day Libya to Iran.

The sudden expansion of this new power hardly affected the inhabitants of Europe, however, because the Muslim conquests took place mainly outside the continent, with three exceptions: the (failed) attacks on the Byzantine capital of Constantinople which lies on the European side of the Bosporus, the quick conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 CE and the laborious occupation of Sicily a century later. Villages on the European coastlines of the Mediterranean had to fear pirates, some of them Muslims operating from Tunisia or from one of the many Mediterranean islands. Beyond these regions, Europeans were aware of Muslims and Islam, but only in very vague terms and by means of crude images. The vast majority of Europeans could not care less: they were too busy surviving one of the most insecure and chaotic periods in Europe’s history.

1. Europe at the Dawn of the Muslim Conquests

To explain the background to this period we must go back in time, to the fifth century. The collapse of the western part of the Roman Empire with its capital in Rome, in combination with vast migration waves of tribes and peoples from eastern to western Europe, had caused enormous chaos in all aspects of the word. With the disappearance of political, social and economic structures, any sense of coherent life that we might call civilization had broken down. The network of long stretches of brick roads built by the Romans throughout Europe was left in disarray, and a similar fate befell the walls, schools, public baths and sewage systems of the cities. Reading and writing became an obsolete skill, and those who persevered in it had to make
use of hides, since papyrus was no longer available. Worse, all knowledge that had once brought about the technical prowess of the Romans had gradually vanished, together with their statecraft, arts, literature and science.

The chapter of what once was the Roman Empire was closed for the peoples of western Europe who were now going through the lengthy and painful process of reinventing and re-establishing themselves. Hence the name Middle Ages, as the period between the Roman and Renaissance eras is called. Only the south-eastern part of the European continent was rescued from this collapse; here, the Byzantine Empire had succeeded the eastern Roman Empire. The Byzantines continued to build and expand a prosperous empire that comprised what is now called the Balkans, Turkey, the Middle East, North Africa and southern Italy.

An issue of debate is the extent to which the Muslim conquests in the late seventh and early eighth centuries were to be blamed for the Western European decline. Some historians have argued that the Muslims’ occupation of the lands south of the Mediterranean and their ensuing maritime blockade of the entire Mediterranean deprived Europe of the chance to import vital goods and consequently cut off the main artery of the European economy. This thesis has been contested, however, mainly because Europe’s decline had already set in at a much earlier date than the Muslim conquests in the seventh century. Several historians even take the contrary position, arguing that the Muslim conquests had actually contributed to the later social, economic and technological revival of Western Europe rather than having caused its earlier decline.

If any factor played a role in the European economic deterioration, then it was not Islam but Christianity. The Church strongly disapproved of wealth, preaching a return to poverty and ascetic life as the ultimate virtue. At a time when abbeys, churches and monasteries were perhaps the last institutions with capital to spend, the Catholic Church had forbidden all clergy from lending money at interest or trading as professional merchants as early as 325 CE (Council of Nicae). The Church put a ban on usury, which was decreed a crime by worldly leaders like Charlemagne in the late eight century. Consequently, Western Europe for several centuries “was deprived of its financiers, bankers, great merchants, and contractors; in other words, specialists in production and exchange”. The strict enforcement of Christian rules regarding usury, capital and wealth was a reason for the continuation, if not the cause, of an early medieval European economy that was in a complete shambles: the use of money had become nearly obsolete and was largely replaced by a barter economy, investment was almost nil due to the strict enforcement of the usury ban; and consequently the development of a financial and economic infrastructure was
non-existent. This situation was to change only around 1000 CE, as we will see in the next chapter.

In this early era, two European powers played a key role in the interactions with the new Muslim neighbour. The first was the Byzantine Empire, the eastern part of the former Roman Empire that had started a new life while the western part slumped and collapsed. The Byzantine Empire grew powerful in terms of territory as well as politics, military might and culture. It even managed to retain its power and civilization after the Arab Muslims had usurped most of its territories in the Middle East and North Africa.

The second empire that played an important role in this epoch was that of the Carolingian Franks, with their power base in France. This empire arose from the European debris of the Western Roman Empire, and was of an entirely different nature from the Byzantine Empire because it was, in the words of one historian, “religiously intolerant, intellectually impoverished, socially calcified, and economically primitive”. Its pinnacle of success and power was the reign of Charlemagne who ruled from 768 until 814, and who had pledged his allegiance to the Roman papacy as champion of Christianity. He unified large parts of Europe under the Frankish-Christian banner, but his military campaigns were fought with increasing religious fanaticism, aimed at the conversion of the conquered tribes by force of the sword and exercising vengeful ferocity against those who resisted or who reverted to their heathen ways. Even nations that were already Christian fell under the Frankish sword with the allegation that they were not true Christians. All this was done with the blessing of the Pope and with the help of missionary priests who accompanied the Frankish armies.

The Carolingians and Byzantines did not see eye to eye, and there was serious rivalry and even hostility between the two powers. The most conspicuous difference between them was their interpretation of Christianity: the Carolingians in the west followed the Christianity that was Latin in language and rite, with its papal seat in Rome, while the Byzantines in the east followed the Christianity of Constantinople that was Greek in language and rite. Both sides therefore claimed superiority over all Christendom and made a point of not recognizing the supreme leaders of the rival church. Given the close relationship between clerical and worldly power, the claim to power over the Christian flock was not a mere theological issue, but a matter of power and therefore a continual bone of contention. This antagonism was aggravated by considerations of a more material nature. The richness and opulence of the Byzantine Empire, and in particular its capital Constantinople, was a thorn
in the side of the impoverished and primitive Western European. The Byzantines also did not miss an opportunity to express their contempt for the intellectual and technological backwardness of the Europeans. This streak of enmity that divided Europe must be kept in mind when we take a closer look at the interactions with the new adversary: Islam.

2. The Islamic Empire

In the period when Europe was still in decline, the Muslims, by contrast, established a thriving empire which they had built with dazzling speed, not only in territorial terms, but also culturally, economically and politically. The relative security within their vast empire brought about a Pax Islamica that stimulated an ever-increasing cultural and economic prosperity, culminating in what became known as the golden age that lasted until the end of the tenth century CE. After the brief reign of the so-called ‘Rightly guided caliphs’, the Islamic empire was ruled from 661 to 750 by the Umayyad dynasty from its capital Damascus, which was then replaced by the Abbasid dynasty that moved the capital eastwards, to Baghdad. By then, the empire stretched from Morocco and the Iberian Peninsula to present-day Afghanistan and Central Asia. With the moving of the capital eastward to Baghdad in 762 CE, the focus of the empire gravitated towards Asia, with China and India as the main sources of commerce and knowledge. The Mediterranean basin remained of only marginal importance, being located on the western outskirts of the empire.

Commerce in particular benefited from the security of the Pax Islamica across the vastness of the empire. Trade could now be conducted along routes that stretched from East Asia to West Africa and were dotted with caravanserais, the walled edifices that combined hostel and trade centre. These same routes facilitated the flow of knowledge and technology across the empire. This was particularly important for agriculture, one of the backbones of the prosperity of the inhabitants of the Islamic Empire. Crops that did well in semi-arid areas of India and Mesopotamia were transplanted to other regions in the empire with similar climates and, in combination with new agricultural techniques, allowing for an increase in harvests.

One of the main features of this golden age was the patronage of arts and sciences by the caliphate court. At the heart of this patronage was the collection of scholarly and scientific tracts from all over the empire for study by scholars in Baghdad. A multitude of Greek, Persian and Sanskrit scholarly manuscripts was collected and
translated into Arabic, becoming an immense source of knowledge on a range of sciences. The Arab Muslim scholars assigned to study these tracts in turn furthered the theories and sciences they became acquainted with. This scholarly enterprise, which had already started in the eight century when the new Abbasid caliphate had moved its seat to Baghdad, soon became institutionalized in the famous and prestigious ‘House of Wisdom’, an academic research centre avant la lettre.

With the exception of the Iberian Peninsula, the Islamic empire did not seem to care much about Europe at that time: Europe had very little to offer, and in terms of commerce and knowledge the Muslims mostly turned eastwards, toward India and China. The little trade that existed between Europe and the Islamic Empire was mostly a one-way affair based on European demand for goods from the Islamic Empire, and hardly the other way round. Moreover, the Muslims did not venture out to trade across the Mediterranean; they would take their caravans as far as the Byzantine Empire while Constantinople dominated trade further into the Mediterranean basin. Knowledge was not yet in demand by the Europeans – that became a commodity only after the tenth century, as we will see in the next chapter.
II. Physical Islam

1. The Realm of Interaction

Now that we have outlined the division of powers and territories in the period between 700 and 1000, we come to the main question: how did the people of the two sides interact, and what was the role of religion in this interaction? As we have already seen, virtual interaction was very limited: Europeans had no interest in Islam as a religion or civilization, or in its technologies or knowledge. What little we know of the images that Europeans held of Muslims and Islam will be discussed at the end of this chapter. Interaction was mostly of a physical nature, which was of course dominated by battles and raids, but also by diplomacy, trade and, most importantly, by the coexistence of these peoples in three territories: Constantinople, the Iberian Peninsula and Sicily. The situations of these three regions were quite different, and therefore merit separate introductions before we will take a closer look at their inhabitants.

Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire

When the Arab Muslim warriors rode out into the Middle East for the first time in 634 CE, the Byzantine Empire’s territories encompassed present-day Sicily, southern Italy, the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa, and as such had been spared most of the wars and migrations of the European peoples that had ravaged and disrupted the European mainland in the previous centuries. Before the Muslims, the only real threat had come from the east, from the Huns in Central Asia and the rival empire of the Sassanids in Persia, but the Byzantines were able to repel them. However, by the time the Arab Muslim armies emerged in the seventh century the Byzantine Empire was too weakened to put up sufficient military resistance. The Arab Muslim armies swiftly took the larger Byzantine cities in the Middle East, like Jerusalem in 637 CE. The Muslims’ victories were aided not only by the Byzantine inability to defend its territories, but also by the little resistance put up by the Byzantine subjects themselves. In several cases, they even welcomed the new Muslim conquerors, because their promise of religious freedom was a much better alternative than the persecution they endured from Constantinople that vehemently opposed their sectarian views of Christianity.
The Muslim conquest of Byzantine territory took place in several stages, spread out over a period of seventy years. The Byzantine Empire lost most of its dominions in the Middle East and North Africa, and was left with its territories on the European continent and with the region what nowadays is Turkey. The Arab Muslim armies even laid siege to the city of Constantinople in 674 CE, and again in 717 CE. The last siege of the city ended in a devastating defeat for the Muslim armies. From that moment onwards, the two powers maintained their territorial positions with continuous skirmishes and raids in the border areas.

The Byzantine loss of most of its territories to the Arab Muslims plunged the remnant of the Byzantine Empire on the European continent into what some historians have called a ‘dark age’. Trade between the remainder of the Byzantine Empire and the former Byzantine lands that were now part of the Islamic empire diminished dramatically. The centuries-old economic infrastructure was utterly disrupted now that large portions of the empire were lost. Being cut off from the granaries of Egypt and North Africa was only one of the many problems that Byzantium faced. The despair also showed culturally: “fewer authors wrote, fewer teachers taught, fewer artists and artisans created, and fewer builders built.” The demoralization was further reflected in arguments on God’s displeasure with the Byzantines, resulting in disputes about religious doctrine.

Al-Andalus: The Emirate and Caliphate of Cordoba

The Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula seems to have been driven by chance rather than by strategy. The peninsula was invaded in 711 CE, less than a century after the Muslim conquests had started, and almost at the same time as, on the other side of the Mediterranean, the Muslims were being repulsed from their siege of Constantinople. The army of twenty thousand warriors was led by general Tariq, who left his name to the mountainous outcropping at the most southern point of the peninsula (Gibraltar, from Gabal Tari’, ‘mountain of Tariq’). The peninsula at the time was ruled by the Visigoths, one of the Germanic tribes that had moved from eastern Europe during the migration period, and who had converted to Christianity. Several scholars have questioned whether the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula can be called a Muslim conquest, given that the bulk of the invaders were ethnically Berbers who were brought under Arab dominion only several years earlier and whose recent conversion to Islam was probably symbolic at best, but also because the local population did not conceive of the invaders from Morocco in religious terms as a threat to their own Christianity.
The Arab-Berber presence in Spain – which was known in Arabic as Andalus (derived from ‘(V)andals’, the predecessors of the Visigoths) – gained momentum when a prince of the Umayyad caliphate fled from Damascus after the establishment of the new caliphate of the Abbasids in 750 CE, and made it all the way to the Iberian Peninsula where he was put on the throne as a ruler. The prince had a land to rule, Andalus had its legitimate ruler, and together as the emirate (princedom) of Cordoba they embarked on an adventure that turned out to be of historical proportions. Although geographically and politically disconnected from the Islamic Empire with its capital in far-away Baghdad, the emirate was an indissoluble part of Islamic civilization.

The presence of Arab-Islamic rule in Andalus was to continue for almost eight centuries, from 711 to 1492 CE. The presence of a Muslim population was to last longer, as we will see in the third chapter. Already in the ninth century its economic and agricultural progress made Andalus “at least four centuries more advanced than Western Christendom.”19 The tenth century witnessed a true golden age, spurred on and influenced by the economic, cultural, scientific and social achievements that took place in the entire Islamic Empire. The emirate became a caliphate from 929 to 1031 CE, and the capital of Cordoba was by then the largest city of the European continent, with approximately 100,000 inhabitants, to be matched only by Constantinople in the east.20 In addition to all this prosperity, the caliphate also initiated what became known as a green revolution by introducing new irrigation techniques and new crops such as rice, sugar-cane, cotton, oranges, lemons, bananas, spinach, artichokes and aubergines.21

The emirate – later caliphate – and its Frankish neighbours on the other side of the Pyrenees made regular raids and incursions into each other’s territories. Another small neighbour within the Iberian Peninsula, however, was to prove the proverbial nail in the coffin of the Muslim reign in the peninsula. The Arab-Muslim conquest had not covered the entire peninsula, and in the north several small Christian kingdoms remained. The seat of power of the Muslim realm was way down in the south, first in Cordoba and later in Granada, and its rulers had little interest in the north. Just as in the case of Byzantium and the Islamic Empire, the frontier between the Christian north and Muslim south was a fluid affair, a zone for mutual raids and
trade rather than a fixed and impregnable line. This more or less stable situation would continue for several centuries, but changed dramatically to the disadvantage of the emirate in the eleventh century, as we will see in the next chapter.

Sicily

The other part of geographical Europe where Muslims were to live together with Christians was Sicily. This island in the middle of the Mediterranean had been occupied or colonized by the main powers that had dominated the Mediterranean in the past: the Phoenicians from the Levant, Carthaginians from North Africa, Romans from Italy and the Byzantines from Asia Minor.

At the time of the Arab-Muslim conquests, Sicily was under Byzantine rule, with a population that was predominantly Christian and mostly Greek- or Latin-speaking. Due to the maritime dominance at the time of the Byzantines, Sicily remained untouched by the early Arab aggression that went over land. Only when the Arabs had firmly established themselves in Tunisia (called Ifriqiya or ‘Africa’ in Arabic) did they cast hungry eyes at the island that on clear days could be seen on the horizon. From the Tunisian coasts the Arab Muslims engaged in pirate raids across the sea into Sicily and beyond, to the coastal areas of southern France and western Italy.

Starting in 827 CE, more than a century after the Arab-Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and almost two centuries after the first Arab-Muslim conquests from Mecca had started, Tunisian piracy turned to conquest: in the following years cities in Sicily were taken and, after initial plundering, Arab-Berber Muslim colonists from North Africa moved in to settle there. In the following century, Muslim domination never encompassed the entire island, because of recurrent uprisings from the native (Christian) population. It is therefore impossible to suggest a date from when one can speak of ‘Islamic Sicily’.22

The political heart of Muslim power was located in the city of Palermo, which became a thriving centre of Arab-Islamic culture and gave Arab Sicily the name ‘the little sister of al-Andalus’. The many religious jurists and scholars, grammarians, scientists and poets of great repute quickly earned Sicily intellectual and academic fame.23 Like Andalus, Sicily also benefited from the agricultural innovations imported from North Africa, creating a second green revolution. Muslim domination of Sicily remained for over a century and a half, until it was ended in the late tenth century by the Normans.
2. Living with the Unbeliever

Both Islam and Christianity are monotheistic religions with a claim to universality. However, the urgency of spreading the word has manifested itself quite differently in the early Muslim and European worlds: European Christian conquerors, and especially Charlemagne, waged an aggressive policy of forced conversions, while Muslim conquerors did not. Also, given the chronological emergence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there was quite a difference between the two religions in their recognition of the other two religions: Islam recognizes Judaism and Christianity as its precursors, but Christianity recognizes neither (not Judaism because its adherents had betrayed Jesus, and not Islam because it was unknown at the time of emerging Christianity). Apart from these theological viewpoints, it is important to note that the worlds encountered by Islam and Christianity in their early days were very different: Christianity manifested itself in early medieval Europe, while Islam encountered the highly sophisticated civilizations of the Byzantines and Sassanides. All these differences had their effect on the coexistence of Muslims and Christians. In the period under discussion here, this coexistence at first took place predominantly under Islamic rule, and only later – especially since the late tenth century – also under Christian rule.

The Issue of Conversion

As has already been mentioned, conversion – whether voluntary or forced – took place in quite different ways under Christianity and Islam. In the European setting, early Christianity had spread gradually and sporadically, mostly by the efforts of missionaries. Conversion was not a personal choice for a new faith but rather the adoption of a new set of forms of worship, and therefore often a communal rather than an individual affair. The conversion of a king would usually imply the conversion of his entire people. Later, under the Carolingian kings, in particular Charlemagne, conquests were accompanied by forced conversion. This coercion to convert, whether by missionary or forced means, was not exerted, however, on the Jews nor, later, on the Muslims who lived in Europe (except in Spain in the late fifteenth century, as we will discuss at length in the third chapter).

The situation in the Islamic realm was quite different from that of Christianity. Whereas Christianity first spread gradually through missionary activities and then was established by conquest, the Islamic situation was the reverse: first an empire was established by conquest and then, gradually, Islam spread within that empire.
Another distinct difference between the Christian and Islamic realms was that the peoples subdued by the Muslim armies were not pagan tribal peoples, as was the case in Europe, but established religious communities and civilizations – mainly Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians – that were much more advanced than the tribal Arab-Muslims who subdued them. But the most striking feature of Muslim conquest was that the conquering Muslim armies as a general rule did not impose on their non-Muslim subjects a compulsory conversion to Islam, nor was there any Muslim missionary activity among the non-believers.

Why did the conquering Muslim armies not convert all subjected peoples to Islam? Various reasons have been advanced by historians to explain this curious – from a Christian perspective, that is – position. First there is a theological answer: Islam does not allow forced conversion, as it is explicitly prohibited by the Quran. Also, the Quran specifically mentions Jews and Christians as people to be recognized as predecessors to Islam and who need to be respected in their faiths. The second answer is of a military and political nature: the small bands of Arab-Muslim warriors would not have been able to impose and maintain the forced conversion of the entire population of such a vast conquered area. The third answer is related to ethnic superiority: although Islam claims universality, the Muslims of the Arab Peninsula who rode out to conquer the world were Arabs, and this first generation of Muslims considered Islam to be exclusively meant for Arabs, and for a long time non-Arabs could adopt Islam only if they were sponsored by an Arab. It took a revolt by converted Persians to alter this ethnic exclusivity. The fourth answer that explains the lack of conversion zeal among the Muslim conquerors is financial, and according to most historians was probably the decisive reason not to convert the conquered peoples to Islam: the non-Muslims of the Islamic empire had to pay a poll tax that was not obligatory for Muslims. Conversion meant that the poll tax was no longer obligatory, and massive conversion would therefore lead to a lack of income for the Muslim conquerors who very much needed these taxes to build the empire and finance new campaigns.

The Muslim reticence in converting the conquered unbelievers created the paradoxical situation of an Islamic empire being ruled by a Muslim minority. This was also the situation at first in Spain and Sicily. To call these powers and civilizations ‘Islamic’ is therefore, correctly speaking, in reference to the religion and culture of those in power, and does not refer to the majority population. Nevertheless, conversion to Islam by the native population, and the consequential change of an increasing Muslim population in the Islamic empire, eventually did take place, but was a gradual process. The speed of this process differed according to region, but it definitely took
a long time, sometimes centuries, before Muslims became a majority in the various parts of the Islamic Empire.\textsuperscript{28}

The reasons for conversion to Islam are generally assumed to be material, namely to get rid of the special poll tax for non-Muslims and to gain access to positions of authority and power, which were reserved for Muslims only. Another and perhaps even more compelling reason to convert to Islam was that in societies where religion was more a communal identity than an individual faith, converting to the religion of the ruler was the means to express one’s acceptance of the dominant order. In the case of Al-Andalus, it has been argued that conversion by native Christians to Islam was mainly prompted by their wish or need to fully participate in the culture and society of al-Andalus which was, at least theoretically, restricted to Muslims.\textsuperscript{29} We will see later, with the progress of the Islamic-Christian history in Europe, that this was a recurring phenomenon among Christians under Muslim rule. Interestingly, the reverse was hardly the case: very few Muslims under Christian rule would convert to Christianity. But this situation – i.e., of Muslims living under Christian rule – would only take place much later, and we will leave that to the next chapter. In the period under discussion here, that is between 700 and 1000 CE, very few Muslims in Europe were subjects under Christian rule.

**Religious Rule**

We must start with a remark on terminology that is to be borne in mind when reading this and the following chapters. When we speak of ‘rule’ this is not to be understood as the rule of a majority over minorities. As we have just seen, such majority rule was not always the case: in many instances the Muslim rulers constituted the minority in the society where they lived. ‘Islam’ ruled, but the Muslims for a long time constituted a minority in their own empire. This was to repeat itself under Islamic rule in Spain and in the European domains of the Ottoman Empire. The correct manner of describing the power arrangement within a realm is therefore more often to speak of ruler and subject instead of majority and minority.

Christian and Islamic rulers all claimed to have established God’s rule and to uphold God’s law. But what did this say about the treatment of non-believers? Should they be converted, or subjected to God’s rule as upheld by the rulers, or be left to their own religious law? Here also we see another distinct difference between Christianity and Islam. Let us start with Christianity. From a theological point of view, Christianity in the period between the seventh and eleventh centuries considered all non-Christians to be pagans who had to be converted to Christian-
ity, by force if need be. However, Christian rulers made an exception for Jews and later, when Muslims became subject to Christian rule, also for them. This exception should not be construed as recognition, but was merely the result of circumstances. Given the very few non-Christians in early medieval Europe, at least in those parts of Europe that were under Christian rule, no formal position was developed as regards such communities. The freedom of the Jews to practise their religion was limited to what the Christians believed to be the correct interpretation of the Old Testament, the Pope being the ultimate judge of what constituted correct Jewish doctrine. \(^\text{30}\) This marginal toleration of the Jews, often combined with forms of social discrimination (they were excluded from several occupations, for example, and from membership of guilds), would turn quite ugly after the eleventh century.

The only Christian realm in Europe where Muslim subjects lived under Christian rule during the period between 700 and 1000 CE was the Byzantine capital Constantinople. These Muslims were an amalgamation of different backgrounds and origins. Most Muslims in Constantinople lived there on a temporary basis: merchants and prisoners of war waiting to be ransomed. They probably inhabited the Muslim quarter of Constantinople. Here also resided the ‘permanent’ Muslim residents: the Arabs, Persians and Kurds who had voluntarily offered their military services – an Arab chronicler in 943 CE mentioned 1,200 Arab cavalrymen in the Byzantine army. \(^\text{31}\) This was not a typical Arab phenomenon: the opposite also happened, with Christians crossing the Arab-Byzantine frontier and seeking refuge in or offering their services to Arab rulers. Other Muslim permanent residents in Constantinople were prisoners of war who had accepted the offer of their Byzantine capturers to merge into Byzantine society by settling on plots of land. \(^\text{32}\)

In addition to the presence of Muslim sojourners and residents in Constantinople, Arab chronicles speak of a mosque in Constantinople as early as the eighth century. It is said that it was built by, or at the request of, general Maslama, after whom the mosque was named. He had led the legendary expedition against Byzantium in 717 CE, and the mosque as well as the prison built for the Muslim prisoners of war was possibly part of his conditions for lifting the siege. The exact location of the Maslama mosque, as it became known, has never been found, however: it was destroyed around 1200 and, according to Arab chroniclers, rebuilt by the Byzantines in 1263, although this reconstruction could have been confused with the alleged construction of another mosque at the time by the Byzantine emperor to please the Mamluks who then ruled the Levant and who were in the process of mopping up the last remnants of the Crusaders’ presence. \(^\text{33}\)
The situation as regards non-believers was quite different in the Muslim realm, in terms both of Islamic law and the practice of Islamic rule. Islamic religious doctrine formally recognizes the so-called religions ‘of the book’, that is Judaism and Christianity, and this recognition was extended to Zoroastrianism and in practice also to Hinduism, creating in the Muslim realm multi-religious societies with Islam as dominating religion. Islamic law developed a legal status for these non-Muslim communities as ‘protected people’ (dhimmi), which formally meant that they enjoyed full religious freedom and legal autonomy in religious affairs within their religious community in exchange for a poll tax and recognition of the Muslims’ sovereignty.

Of course theory and practice were not always in concordance. Legally, the status of the dhimmis provided both advantages and disadvantages.\(^{34}\) An important advantage was that non-Muslims were allowed religious freedom and autonomy in religious affairs, including religious family law, which they were allowed to apply within their community. Religious freedom meant that these non-Muslims were exempted from several rules of Islamic law that were considered applicable only to Muslims. These exemptions were the rules of marriage and divorce (some Muslim scholars included inheritance and custody law as well), the consumption of and trade in pork and alcohol and, according to a majority of Muslim scholars, the rules of Islamic penal law as specifically determined by the Quran. These rules would officially not apply to non-Muslims.

The disadvantage of Islamic law, on the other hand, was that it granted non-Muslims a second-class status: non-Muslims were not allowed to take on a position of authority (for that would grant a non-Muslim authority over a Muslim), had to pay a separate poll tax, and were subjected to all kinds of rules devaluing the legal status of a non-Muslim to half of that of a Muslim, and discriminatory rules intended to emphasize the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims, like the prohibition on wearing certain types of cloth or riding certain animals.

As said, legal theory was not always the same as social practice. The situation of non-Muslim subjects could be better but also worse than their legal status. First and foremost, dhimmi status was usually granted only to cities that surrendered: resistance often led to pillaging the town and its inhabitants being sold into slavery (this was not typical of Muslim conquests but the general code of war at that time, as we will see later). But even when the pact of dhimmitude had been established with non-Muslim communities, practice could differ from the letter of the law. For instance, Jews and Christians held high positions at the Islamic courts of Baghdad, Palermo and Cordoba in the tenth century, a status which was formally not allowed by Islamic law. In other instances, non-Muslims were worse off than their official status, for
instance when, contrary to Islamic law, they were subjected to discriminatory rules or even incidental persecution.

**Tolerance and Social Tensions**

The rules and practices of Islam as regards non-Muslim minorities as described above are largely reflected in the two European territories where Muslim rule was established in the early middle ages: the Iberian Peninsula and Sicily. When the splendour of military glory and the excitement of booty had worn off, the two realms were seen by the Muslim conquerors as dominions where they would settle and rule. There was no agenda of conversion: the native inhabitants were allowed to continue their ways as long as they recognized the new rulers and paid the special poll tax.

This situation has prompted observers to describe it in terms of tolerance.\(^{35}\) Some nuance is required here, however. Insofar as historians can gain insight into the everyday life of those times, it has been shown that these Muslims and non-Muslims lived separate lives, perhaps only meeting in the market place or, in the case of conflict, in law courts.\(^{36}\) Toleration in this respect does not mean a pluralistic community, but a pragmatic live and let live, based mainly on indifference and segregation. This could be different at the palace courts, the centres of power where enlightened rulers would allow non-Muslim intellectuals and artists to participate in government, science, arts and intellectual debates. These people would produce the writings that are preserved in history, and therefore these episodes are best known, while outside the palaces the treatment of commoners could be much worse.

For instance, during the period of Muslim rule in Sicily, the initial treatment of the native Christian population – including shipping them off into slavery to North Africa – apparently was such that they had little reason to welcome the new rulers, and there are various accounts of native Christians rising in revolt or migrating to Italy.\(^{37}\) With many Christian communities, however, the Muslims concluded the so-called *dhimmi* pacts that granted them religious freedom and a certain degree of autonomy in exchange for their allegiance and payment of a poll tax. But the combination of depopulation by migrating Christians, repopulation by Muslim settlers from North Africa, and the remaining Christians’ gradual conversion to Islam caused the Sicilian population to become a Muslim majority.\(^{38}\)

While the conquest of Sicily was part of, or the result of plunder raids that had been taking place for decades, the conquerors of the Iberian Peninsula were much more indulgent with the native population. Muslim rule as established in Andalus in the centuries to come even gained a reputation for its religious tolerance. Given
the circumstances of the time and the comparison with Europe of that time, this admiration is definitely justified. But one must keep in mind that Islam, however tolerant of other religions, remained the authoritative code of morality and behaviour. Islam was to be recognized as the dominating religion, and to be respected as such. Blasphemy and insults to Islam were not acceptable, nor apostasy from Islam. The reverse, on the other hand, was not considered an affront to public order: although apostasy from Christianity or Judaism was also forbidden by these religions, it was allowed by Islam as it meant conversion to Islam. And since Islam had supremacy, that was to be the rule.

This situation was challenged in the ninth century by the so-called martyrs of Cordoba. In the period between 851 and 859 CE, a succession of, in total, forty-eight Christians were decapitated for publicly denouncing the prophet Muhammad and disparaging Islam. Most of these ‘martyrs’ – that is the title that Christian posterity gave them – were ascetic monks, but among them were also descendants from mixed Christian-Muslim marriages. The latter case proved particular serious, because even though these people considered themselves Christian, according to Islamic law they were Muslim since they were the offspring of a marriage between a Muslim man and a Christian woman, and their children consequently follow the religion of the father. In these particular cases, however, the children persisted publicly in the religion of their mother and were therefore, from the Islamic point of view, Muslims guilty of the capital crime of apostasy from Islam. For these people there was little mercy. The monks, on the other hand, who publicly denounced Mohammed as a false prophet were treated leniently at first, being arrested and then sent away with a warning or a beating. Only when they persisted in returning to the public squares declaring the vileness of Islam and its prophet did the Muslim rulers apply the capital punishment.

Several reasons have been advanced for this curious trend of deliberately seeking martyrdom: was it the defiance of Muslim rule, a reaction to provocation by Muslims or, in the case of Christians with Muslim fathers, the challenge of parental authority? Any of these reasons seem plausible, but none of them explain why these events took place in this particular moment. A compelling reason is that this period of time witnessed the shifting balance in society in favour of Arab Muslim culture, which created unrest among the Christian population and led to the public denunciation

* That is also the reason that the opposite – a marriage between a Muslim woman and a Jewish or Christian man – is not allowed under Islamic law because that would make the children follow their father’s Judaism or Christianity.
of that culture. In particular native Christians who were adopting various aspects of the increasingly dominating culture of the Arab-Berber Muslim rulers, were a source of discontent among their fellow native Christians. While the Muslims in Andalus were initially a tiny minority among a Christian majority, their number is estimated to have risen to 20–30 per cent by 850 CE, the period of the martyrs of Cordoba. This percentage was to rise to 50 per cent in the next century, indicating a steady increase in conversions as well as influx of settlers from North Africa. This development had two consequences. On the one hand, there are recorded incidents of Muslims who abused their status of dominance by publicly defying Christians. On the other hand, it brought many Christians under Muslim rule to accommodate to Muslim dominance, among others by switching to speaking Arabic (hence their name *mozarabs*, which means ‘those who are Arabized’). These developments incited some Christians to defend their religion, culture and way of life from being appropriated by the dominating Muslim culture.

The resulting stand-off by the martyrs of Cordoba can therefore be interpreted as a criticism not only of Muslims but also of fellow-Christians who were accused of giving up their Christian identity. The Muslim authorities responded with increasing severity towards the martyrs, but also towards the Christian community in general by enforcing a separate dress code and closing palace functions to Christians – rules that were already part of Islamic law but apparently had not been strictly applied before. The Christian community also responded with criticism of these acts of martyrdom, probably because they feared that their social and legal position in Andalus was put at risk.

This argument – avoiding criticism of Islam or Islamic rule in order not to jeopardize the delicate social position of the Christian community under Islamic rule – recurred a century later, with the visit of a delegation from King Otto I to the court in Cordoba in 954 CE. At that time, caliph Abd ar-Rahman III of Andalus (ruled 912–961 CE) and King Otto, the first Holy Roman Emperor (ruled 936–973 CE) were the two most mighty rulers in Europe, and on several occasions they had exchanged delegates to negotiate certain issues. During Abd ar-Rahman’s rule Andalus enjoyed the golden age for which it is renown. The martyrs of Cordoba were an incident of the past and non-Muslims were restored to favour, for they were again allowed to hold high positions at court. This was shown by the delegation of King Otto being received first by the caliph’s personal physician, who was a Jew, and then by the bishop of Cordoba. The bishop, however, was sneered at by the head of Otto’s delegation, abbot John of Gorze, for being too submissive to the rule of a religion inferior to Christianity. The abbot’s disdain for the bishop only increased with the bishop’s
rising panic about the abbot’s resolve publicly to denounce Islam once the caliph had received his delegation. This never came to pass, however, probably because the bishop made sure the delegation was sent back home without meeting the caliph.

3. Other Relations and Contacts

The general picture of relations between European Christians and Arab Muslims in the period between the eighth and eleventh centuries is that both sides mostly kept to themselves and met only on the battlefield. Indeed, the political, economic and cultural developments within the two realms took place in relative isolation from each other. However, the image of two isolated warring blocks that are predominantly characterized by their religious identity does not do justice to the complexity of everyday life, for there existed an intricate interaction of warfare and raids alternating with diplomacy and trade.

An important aspect we must keep in mind when viewing this period is that these two realms were not stable and singular unities: borders were fluid and under constant threat, and even within each of the realms there was the continuous peril of disintegration into political and warring factions, with warlords on both sides of the Mediterranean carving out their private fiefdoms. To preserve their power, lords on both sides would occasionally turn to each other for military assistance against a common foe. In the meantime, hostilities did not hinder commerce between the two sides, albeit on a very limited scale. Here we will pay closer attention to the nature of the belligerency, trade and diplomacy between the two realms in this period.

Wars and Raids

The armed conflicts that characterized relations between European Christians and Arab Muslims in this period were of two kinds: wars of conquest and raids. In the wars of conquest the Arab Muslims had the upper hand. Granted, the Carolingians in Europe also undertook wars of conquest, but these were directed northwards and eastwards rather than southwards, and therefore did not lead to military confrontations with Arab Muslims. So if we are to look at wars of conquest wherein Arabs and Europeans met on the battlefield, the Arabs were in almost all instances the aggressor, and we see hardly any organized European campaigns to fight the Muslim invaders or, once the Muslims had settled in European territory, to evict them. Europe simply lacked the centralized power to initiate such organized defence. The only
exception was the Byzantine Empire, but its defence was futile against the agile and fast-moving Arab Muslim warrior bands. The other European power, the Carolingians, was established after the Muslim conquests were more or less complete, and even then it undertook hardly any action against the Saracens, despite what the Song of Roland or other European legends may have us believe.

Apart from the Arab-Muslim and Carolingian wars waged for the purpose of conquest, most wars in these times were actually raids aimed primarily at raising slaves, booty and tribute from border areas that served as “hunting grounds”. The purpose of these military confrontations was the maintenance of the border areas, resulting in the re-taking of the strips of land usurped by the opponent and the plunder of his lands. This feature of armed conflict was omnipresent, including in the frontier areas that divided the Muslim and Christian realms. Every year, Baghdad and Constantinople would dispatch an army to the frontier they shared, not as forces of conquest but to plunder the lands of the other and to defend their own land against the raiding enemy. In Baghdad the raids on the Muslim-Byzantine border took on almost ritualistic forms as they were scheduled bi-annually by court officials. These raids took place in the frontier zone in present-day Turkey, but were extended to Byzantine dominions in Greece and Italy once the Muslims learned to build ships and sail them, extending the conflict zone into the Mediterranean with repeated acts of piracy against the European coasts. Sicily was one of the Mediterranean islands that fell victim to these raids before it was turned from ‘hunting ground’ into Muslim territory.

The raiders and pirates did not always pick the infidel as victim: the Muslims in Crete became notorious for piracy against Muslims and Christians alike, just as the Christian Slavs who raided up and down the Adriatic and the Venetians were not too scrupulous in their religious selection of an occasional prey to piracy. When the raiding of one side became too regular, it prompted counter measures from the other side, and sometimes such punitive actions resulted in conquest. For instance, it has been suggested that the Arab occupation of Italian ports was brought about by Italian piracy against Arab shipping.

The other Muslim-Christian zone of confrontation was between the Western Europeans – the Carolingians, but also Frankish, German and Italian rulers and warlords residing along the western Mediterranean coastline – and the ‘Saracens’ and ‘Moors’ in Andalus and North Africa. According to European collective memory, the advance of the Muslims across the Pyrenees was stopped at Poitiers in southern France, as we will discuss in more detail below. But for centuries, the Pyrenees and the French Mediterranean coast were the zone of mutual raiding between Arabs
and Europeans. Attacks in this zone were initiated not only by the craving for spoils, but also upon request of local rulers who used the enemy to fight another adversary. An illustrative example is the three Moorish governors of Barcelona, Zaragoza and Huesca who in 777–778 CE sent a delegation across the Pyrenees to France, offering Charlemagne parts of northern Spain in exchange for a guarantee of autonomy for their respective small governorates. The reason for this overture was that the three governors felt their autonomous rule threatened by the growing power of their overlord, the caliphate in Cordoba. Charlemagne was most willing to be of assistance, not only for strategic reasons but also because it fitted into his worldview of spreading Christianity by conquest. His army marched into Spain that same year but the campaign ended in a humiliating failure because no Muslim cities were conquered. Moreover, upon his retreat to France in 778 CE, Charlemagne’s baggage train was attacked by Basques when crossing the Pyrenees. The military embarrassment seemed complete but was glossed over in the chronicles of that time, and three centuries later even transformed into a victory of mythical proportions in the Song of Roland. In this song the (Christian) Basques are replaced by the Saracens, and count Roland represents the archetype of the gallant Christian knight suffering martyrdom while fighting the overwhelming forces of Islam. The Song can be considered the European *ur*-text for embedding the Islamic threat “deep in the memory banks of the West.”

Another example of combined raiding, conquest and military alliances is provided by the Arab presence in the late ninth and early tenth centuries along what is nowadays called the Cote d’Azur, the French and Italian coasts of the Mediterranean. Already this area had suffered from Arab piracy, mostly initiated from the North African coast, with the sacking of Rome in 846 CE being only one of the many raids. But around 890 CE the Arabs established a land base in southern France by building a fortress near what is now Saint-Tropez. For a period of eighty years they raided from this stronghold the western Mediterranean seas but also the hinterland as far as south-eastern France and southern Switzerland. There, in the high Alps, the Arab raiders assaulted the many pilgrims on their way to Rome. Finally, the regional lord Hugo mounted a full-scale expedition against the Arab fortress with the help of the Byzantine fleet. Hugo was quite successful, but just when he was about to deliver the final blow, he unexpectedly entered into an accord with the Arabs in 941 CE, granting them the Alpine passes as well as the territories already occupied by them. The reason for this sudden change of heart is speculative but most probably dictated by pragmatism: the Arabs in the Alps could act as a buffer against Hugo’s French and German adversaries further north who felt threatened by Hugo’s successes. And, in addition, Hugo did not want to jeopardize the good relations he had just estab-
lished with the caliph of Cordoba by entering into a peace accord that also allowed for free commerce with Andalus. The raids by the Arabs in southern France therefore continued, this time legitimized by their accord with Hugo. Their forces were regularly supplied with Christian deserters from the surrounding lords – a phenomenon that was to remain quite common well into the eighteenth century, with Christian sailors and pirates joining the ranks of the Muslim Barbary corsairs (of whom we will come to speak in more detail in chapter three). The Arab presence on the French coast was ended in 973 CE by King Otto (the same who had sent the abovementioned embassy to the court of the Cordoban caliphate), who was eager to re-establish free passage across the Alps for pilgrims on their way to Rome, and in exchange receive papal blessing as a true Christian king.

Religious War?

Were the conquests and wars conducted by Arabs and Berbers (or Saracens and Moors, as Europeans called them) in this early stage of Muslim-Christian history religious in nature? In other words, are we to speak of conquerors who happened to be adherents to Islam, or can we point at Islam as the instigator for Muslims to undertake their conquests? This question is not easy to answer. First there is the problem of the notion of war itself. Are we to consider centuries of raids, skirmishes and wars of conquest as separate acts of belligerency conducted for different motives by different people, or are they all to be amassed in a single-purposed and continuous endeavour by Islamic military forces to conquer as much as they could whenever they could? The latter is implied by maps one can find nowadays on the Internet with all Muslim conquests and incursions shown in images set consecutively so that one sees centuries of warfare passing by within seconds. On the other hand, Muslims and Christians were not very different in their belligerency and their lust for spoils and conquest: it was an integral part of the life of any warlord, prince, caliph or emperor; his reason for existing and the means to prolong that existence. Admittedly, however, the Muslims did a much better job of this than the Europeans during the last three centuries of the first millennium.

We must also take into consideration that, as a general rule, wars were not to be conducted within one’s own realm, against one’s brothers; wars were to be waged against others. This Otherness could be based on ethnicity, tribal affiliations, political allegiances or, as was increasingly the case in the era we are discussing here, religious affiliation. One was not to fight one’s co-religionist, and therefore war was allowed only against the non-believer, not necessarily because the enemy was an
unbeliever, but because his unbelief justified the hostilities against him. This kind of reasoning and rhetoric was shared by Muslims and Christians alike.

Such justification of war has also been suggested as an explanation for the swift and ever-expanding conquests of the Muslims in the seventh century. According to this argument, the root of Muslim belligerency must be sought in the culture of Arabs in the Arab Peninsula of conducting tribal feuds and organized plunder (ghazas) of each other’s encampments and caravans. However, Islam prohibited fighting and plundering among Muslims, so that the pent-up energy of the warriors was directed outwards, into lands where there was no Islam and where, in consequence, conquest and plunder were allowed. This would also explain the continuous warfare of the Muslims, because with every territory they added to the Islamic empire they forfeited the right to continue fighting within that new territory and had to venture further for war and spoils.

If we follow this line of reasoning, then Islamic scripture did not provide Muslims with their marching orders, but rather provided them with a powerful new identity that gave them strength and an enormous self-confidence, prompting them to go to the end of the world (indeed, it is told that the Muslim general who spurred his warriors westward across North Africa, when reaching the Atlantic drove his horse into the sea and then is said to have called: “O Lord, if the sea did not stop me, I would go through the lands like Alexander the Great”).

We will never know the exact motivations of these early Muslim warriors, however, because the history of early Muslim conquests was not recorded by the victors themselves but by Arab chroniclers decades or even centuries later. It is very possible that these chroniclers would retrospectively imbue the conquests with a religious purpose and justification. But this lack of precise information has fuelled speculation among modern historians. Some of them see mostly plunder and conquest in the early Arab Muslim wars, and very little religion or holy fervour (which would justify calling them ‘Arab’ wars). Other historians, however, stress religious zeal as the most important motivator for Arab Muslim belligerency. Some take this argument further by invoking unsubstantiated images of fearless Muslim warriors craving for death in order to reach paradise, making them “the most terrifying of enemies, eager for death, like the kamikaze pilots during World War II”. Some of these historians find the evidence for such religiously motivated wars in Islamic holy scripture, an approach that has become very popular since 9/11, yielding dozens of books and articles on Islam’s alleged call for religious (holy) war. Other modern scholars argue that the notion of jihad is not to be understood as incessant warfare to expand the abode of Islam, nor as a duty on Muslims to engage in perpetual war against the
infidel; they point out that, after the initial Muslim conquests, jihad was defined by most canonical sources as a defensive war to be undertaken when the world of Islam was under threat.59

Rather than trying to read the early Muslim mind by means of scripture or chronicles, it may perhaps be more telling to see what the early Muslim conquerors did. For instance, while the wars of conquest may have been waged in the name of Islam, conversion of the conquered peoples was not the aim, as we have seen above. The non-Muslim enemy was given the choice whether to fight or to surrender under two conditions: to pay a poll tax and to be subjugated to Muslim rule. This might serve as an argument that the Muslim wars were ordinary conquests rather than religious wars. Indeed, the Arab sources widely cite not conversion to Islam as a reason for fighting, but pride in being Arab and a tribesman.60 On the other hand, while the Muslims did not spread Islam by means of forced conversion, they did force Islamic rules on their non-Muslim subjects. This is not typical of Islam, however: in the era we are discussing (and long afterwards, as we will see), Christian rulers also forced religiously inspired laws onto their subjects. But was this in itself the purpose of the wars of conquest conducted by Muslims and Christians in these times? The Arab and Carolingian wars seem to confirm that to be the case, although it is very possible that this aim came second to the primary goal of martial prowess, conquest and plunder. If there was indeed something like a religious war, it is not typical for Islam or Muslims, but a typical phenomenon of that time: religion determined who belonged to Us and Them, and was the prime inspiration and explanation for everything in life, including war.

The Battle of Poitiers

We need to pay attention to one specific battle that is very much present in European collective memory because, according to many European historians, it was decisive in terms of the Muslim presence in Europe. In 732 CE, twenty years after the Muslims had conquered the Iberian Peninsula, they suffered a defeat at the battle near the French town of Poitiers. This battle has gained mythical fame in Europe as the moment that the Muslim advance into Europe was finally halted and, according to some historians, was decisive for Europe’s history:61 “[i]t decided that Christians, and not Moslems, should be the ruling power in Europe.”62 The famous eighteenth century historian Edward Gibbon paints a futuristic picture if events had turned out differently at Poitiers: “[a] victorious line of march had been prolonged above a thousand miles from the rock of Gibraltar to the banks of the Loire; the repetition
of an equal space would have carried the Saracens to the confines of Poland and the Highlands of Scotland; the Rhine is not more impassable than the Nile or Euphrates, and the Arabian fleet might have sailed without a naval combat into the mouth of the Thames. Perhaps the interpretation of the Quran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet.”

Modern historians differ on the impact of this battle, however. Since historical evidence is hard to come by, it is difficult to establish the true intentions of the Muslims at the time. But one thing is clear: the Moorish raid into France was not a continuation of the invasion and conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, which had already taken place twenty years earlier. We do know that since then both the Muslims south of the Pyrenees and the Franks north of this mountain range had conducted raids into each other’s territory. These raids were not aimed at conquest, but spoils and plunder. Was this then a Muslim raid that went wrong and ended in disaster? The military historian Hugh Kennedy, however, argues that one should not dismiss the notion of a Muslim invasion of Europe on the ground that it was ‘only’ a raiding party: “as the people of Central Asia were finding out at exactly the same time, Arab raids could be a prelude to more lasting conquest.” This battle could therefore indeed be considered a turning point, says Kennedy, not because a Muslim invasion army was stopped, but because it ended the routine of Muslim plunder raids into France. Kennedy’s argument is not entirely correct, however, because the Moorish plunder raids from Spain did continue for another sixty years, although mainly confined to the area around Narbonne, east of the Pyrenees, the last one taking place in 793 CE. In addition, as we have seen above, Poitiers did not end the Arab presence in the French region, because less than a century later the Arabs established a stronghold near Saint Tropez from where they dominated a large area for another eighty years.

Another approach to the battle of Poitiers is that it may not in fact have been of decisive importance but was deliberately given this mythical status by the rulers of that time, the Carolingian Franks, for the benefit of their own public image as saviours of Europe. The victorious Frankish king Charles Martel, the founder of the Carolingian dynasty that was to conquer and rule large parts of Europe, created a mystique of himself as “leader of a special tribe, [that] had saved Christian civilization, which could mean nothing less than that he and they must be vessels through which God worked His wonders.” The mythologization of the Franks’ victory in this battle would explain why another battle several years earlier has not received a similar prominent place in Europe’s collective memory. The one-year-long siege of
Constantinople in 717 CE was a true battle, with a huge Muslim army amassed to conquer the city and thereby gain access to the European hinterland. If it had succeeded, the large Muslim army that – unlike the raiding party at Poitiers – was equipped and sent for the explicit purpose of conquest would definitely have continued its way into Europe. The scant attention paid by Arab chroniclers to the battle of Poitiers as opposed to their avid attention to the Muslim defeat at Constantinople a few years earlier would argue in favour of this interpretation of Muslim intentions. But from the Frankish point of view, this threat against Constantinople was primarily aimed at the Byzantines, their arch-enemy, and therefore not relevant to receiving attention (centuries later we will see a similar French indifference towards the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683). To establish their credentials as the defenders of Europe, the Carolingians embarked on a successful ‘spin avant-la-lettre of the battle at Poitiers.

We will probably never know the true intentions of the eighth-century Muslims with regard to an accidental or deliberate conquest of Europe. It is noticeable, however, that ‘Poitiers’ is engrained in the European collective memory, and has shown itself again as a throbbing nerve with the arrival of Muslim migrants in twentieth century Europe. We will discuss this in more detail in the final chapter. But the question that remains unanswered is: if the Muslims had conquered large parts of Europe, what would that have meant for Europeans and European civilization? The image depicted by Gibbon is one confined to religion, assuming that the majority of Europeans would have converted to Islam. We have seen that, just like other areas of Muslim conquest, such conversion would not be forced but be the choice of the Europeans themselves. Another, rather provocative image is that Europe could have shared the golden age of the Islamic empire there and then, rather than having to wait for several centuries: “[w]e [Europeans] would have gained 267 years ... We might have been spared the wars of religion.” In a similar vein, economic historian Gene Heck argues that Poitiers may have saved Europe from “Islamic political subjugation”, but by consequence condemned Western Europe to its “economic subjugation in the Dark Ages”.

Diplomacy and Trade

In the previous paragraphs we saw several examples of Muslim Arabs and Christian European rulers exchanging delegates. These ‘embassies’ were of a temporary nature, sent with a specific task of negotiating a military or commercial alliance, although often they would stay at the court of the other party for longer periods of time, sometimes even years.
Extensive communications by exchange of letters took place between the Byzantine Emperor and the Caliphs in Bagdad, Cairo and Cordoba, and Emirs in the Middle East, and these letters were mostly delivered by embassies. On both sides, the ambassadors received full diplomatic immunity. Arab delegates to Constantinople were also allowed to make trips into the area surrounding the capital. The difference in status between Western European Christians and Arab Muslims was reflected in the court etiquette that granted Muslim ‘friends’ a seat at the imperial table that was higher than that of ‘Frankish friends’. The same etiquette made sure that care was taken not to serve the ‘Muslim friends’ food prohibited by Islam. The preference for Muslim rulers and delegates added to the Frankish antipathy towards the Byzantines, whose lifestyle – which was very close to that of the Arabs! – was already a source of Frankish mockery and disgust: they envied the Byzantine opulence and lavish lifestyle, they frowned on the use of the fork and eating habits like garlic and leek cooked in olive oil, and considered the dress code of robes instead of pants effeminate, just like the wearing of silk instead of wool and the use of eunuchs in court protocol.

Arab-Byzantine communications concerned a number of issues, such as the ceasefire for the annual and sometimes bi-annual skirmishes at the border between the two realms and payment for, and the release of prisoners of war on both sides. Sometimes the letters discussed issues of art and culture, and the caliph in Baghdad would occasionally engage in religious polemics in order to convince the Emperor of the primacy of Islam. Commerce was also a source of intense negotiation and the signing of treaties, since the Byzantine Empire was an important supplier of slaves and an important trading partner at the far western end of the silk route that ran through Islamic territory. Muslim merchants would not venture into Europe, but they would easily and in great numbers enter Constantinople. Trade was usually not direct, however, but operated through a chain of intermediaries in frontier areas, where the inhabitants themselves were mostly bilingual and of mixed Arab-Greek origin. From the Levantine coastal ports – mostly in the hands of the Islamic Empire, except for a brief period in the second half of the tenth century when the Byzantine Empire ruled these areas – goods were shipped to Europe by merchants from Genoa, Venice and Pisa.

In the eighth and ninth centuries, the Byzantine and Islamic Empires were in an almost permanent state of war, but commerce between the two realms flourished as well. By the tenth century, almost three centuries after the Byzantine Empire had lost vast parts of its realm to the Arab Muslim armies, the Byzantines had re-established themselves within their confined empire as a commercial and mil-
itary power in the region, thanks also to a collapsing power structure within the Islamic empire. This shift in the power balance may explain the magnanimity of Byzantine court protocol with its cordial reception formulas for ambassadors from Baghdad and Cairo. These two cities were by the tenth century the capitals of two rival Islamic realms: the old, but ever crumbling Islamic Empire under the caliph in Baghdad, and the newly arisen Fatimid Empire in the Middle East and North Africa. The Byzantine court cunningly played into the rivalry between these two Muslim empires that competed for supremacy over the Muslim community. Asylum was granted to Muslim notables seeking refuge in the Byzantine Empire to escape legal or political persecution in their own lands, and sometimes asylum was granted to an entire tribe that put itself under Byzantine command and suzerainty.\(^79\) The extensive and often cordial relations between the Byzantine and Arab-Muslim rulers did not mean that there was mutual understanding or friendship. On the contrary, the abundant literature of those times shows that there was an overriding mutual disdain, even hate, “an instinctive hate and a profound contempt”.\(^80\)

Similarly to the Byzantine situation in eastern Europe, the Carolingians in France maintained a relationship with Cordoba that combined trade and war. While there were regular skirmishes and raids in the frontier areas, trade did indeed take place between the two realms, although on a limited scale and with Carolingian exports limited to weaponry, timber and, most prominently, slaves, who were exported through the Iberian peninsula and then further eastwards into the Islamic empire.\(^81\)

Slavery was perhaps the main trading commodity between Europe and the Muslim world.\(^82\) It was an established practice throughout the Mediterranean basin, and slaves were the main form of booty in raids, whether by Christian or Muslim pirates on the Mediterranean coasts, by the Moors in France, the Franks in northern Europe, or the Byzantines in the Black Sea region.\(^83\) Since the Muslim side of the Mediterranean was prospering economically, as opposed to the European side, the Muslims had a much higher demand for slaves, and the slave trade undertaken by Franks, Venetians, Jews and Byzantines was mostly directed towards North Africa.\(^84\) The role of Jewish slave traders operating from the Rhone region gave rise to accusations of Jews stealing Christian children and selling them off into slavery, one of the stories that, together with the story of Jews eating Christian children, would soon lead to the violent reactions against Jews in Western Europe during the First Crusade.\(^85\)

Enslaving people is typically something that was done in enemy territory, and as a result slavery was conducive to forced migration of people.\(^86\) For instance, in the
ninth century during the Golden Age of Andalus, the caliphate of Cordoba imported nearly 14,000 white slaves from the Balkans whom they called Saqaliba (‘Slavs’), who were to occupy sensitive positions in the army and government. They adopted the religion, language and customs of their masters and upheld the caliphal culture as intermediaries between the rulers and their subjects.\textsuperscript{87} This situation was quite exceptional, however. Most slaves worked as domestic servants in households or as labourers on farms, while the less fortunate were confined to hard labour in mines.\textsuperscript{88}

The slave trade from Frankish to Muslim lands was not as voluminous as that of the Byzantines. Nor did Carolingians have regular diplomatic contacts with their Moorish neighbours like the Byzantines had with their Arab neighbours in the Middle East. Diplomatic envoys were exchanged on an incidental basis with Cordoba, but on several occasions also extended as far as Baghdad. King Pepin ‘the Short’ reportedly sent a sizeable delegation to the court of the Abbasid caliph Mansour in Baghdad in 765 CE, while an Abbasid delegation visited France three years later.\textsuperscript{89} The exchange of delegations in the period 797–801 CE between Charlemagne and caliph Haroun al-Rashid is well known.\textsuperscript{90} These encounters-by-proxy between the two mythical leaders of the great empires of the time have triggered the imagination of many, but nothing is known of what was discussed or agreed, nor seem there to have been any practical outcomes.\textsuperscript{91}

In the case of the Franks, their choice to make overtures to Baghdad was aimed not only at material gains, but probably more to establish strategic alliances against mutual enemies honouring the motto ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend.’\textsuperscript{92} To the Franks their main enemy was not the far-away Islamic Empire, but the nearby Byzantine Empire. The Byzantines, in turn, had maintained a belligerent peace with Baghdad for over a century. But the hostile atmosphere between the Carolingian and Byzantine empires was of a more religious nature, with Constantinople vying with Rome for supremacy over Christianity. In the case of Frankish diplomatic overtures to the Cordoban emirate, the situation was similar but reversed: here Baghdad’s bone of contention with Cordoba was its unwillingness to recognize the Baghdadi caliphate, while the Carolingians were engaged in a semi-permanent state of belligerent peace with Cordoba. The Franks and the Arabs therefore had their own reasons for reaching out to each other. Although the endeavour to establish alliances came to nought, it does illustrate that the religious divide between Christian and Islamic dominions was not strictly adhered to.
III. Virtual Islam

In addition to the physical contacts and interactions between Muslim Arabs and Christian Europeans, such as war, trade, diplomacy and coexistence, there were also what we have called the virtual encounters, that is the encounters of Europeans with Muslims or Islam in an intellectual, cultural, mythological or otherwise non-physical sense. In the period between the eighth and the eleventh centuries, however, Europeans had little, if any, religious or intellectual interest in Muslims or their religion, and maintained crude forms of imagery about them.

Myths, Legends and Ignorance

This imagery must be considered in the light of the events of that time. Europe in the late seventh and early eighth centuries was confronted with Islam, a religion that no one had ever heard of, but that was militarily successful and expanding with alarming speed. This confrontation was primarily felt and experienced in the Byzantine Empire and the Iberian Peninsula, but news and images of it also found their way to the European mainland. The European reaction was mostly one of reconciliation, sometimes refutation and hardly any resistance.

To start with the last: as we have seen, actual resistance against the Muslims was scant and mostly defensive. Charlemagne, the descendent of the victor of the battle of Poitiers, had donned the mantle of the great defender and champion of Christendom and is remembered by posterity for his battles against the Saracens in Spain through the Song of Roland (which dates from more than two centuries later). We have seen, however, that these fights were mostly raids into Arab lands or the repelling of raids by Arabs, and that Charlemagne did not mind an alliance with some Saracen Arabs against others. But with the feverish excitement of the First Crusade more than

* In the Islamic empire under the Abbasids, on the other hand, it was not uncommon for courts to organize theological debates between representatives of various religions (obviously with the aim of proving the superiority of Islam): see, e.g., Mun‘im A. Sirry, ‘Early Muslim–Christian dialogue: a closer look at major themes of the theological encounter,’ Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, 2005 (Vol. 16, No. 4), pp. 361–376; Jacques Waardenburg, Muslims and Others. Relations in Context, Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003, p. 110 ff.
two centuries later, Charlemagne would feature in popular imagination as having risen from the dead to lead this crusade against the infidel Saracens once again.\(^94\) Part of this legend was that Charlemagne’s army into Moorish Spain in 777–778 CE – retroactively proclaimed the first crusade against the Muslim infidel – had marched victoriously behind the oriflamme, the three-pointed red banner with golden flames that according to legend was brought by Charlemagne to the Holy Land to wait for the knight who would wield it in the final victory against the Saracen.

But this eleventh and twelfth century European mythology was ante-dated. At the time of the Muslim conquests, the medieval European Christian interpreted the Islamic victories mostly in religious terms, as a tribulation brought by God upon His faithful or, worse, as the coming of the Antichrist that was going to deliver the last blow to Christendom.\(^95\) The Arab-Muslim conquests were not interpreted as military failures on the European side, but as a lack of faith that was to be punished by infidel victories – implying that infidel barbarians could never win on their own accord, but their victory was merely an instrument of God to punish Christians for neglecting their faith. The Other was used not in its own right, but as a function in the existence and self-image of the European. Later, long after the Muslim conquests had taken place, the image and the concept of the ‘Saracen Other’ were used to justify and glorify the violence of the European warrior class, reinforcing the ideology of Christian knighthood.\(^96\) Yet another view of these events was that the new victorious religion of Islam was apparently better than Christianity, and since Christianity was on the losing side, Islam had to be reconciled with or even converted to. This last and radical conclusion, however, was not drawn by early medieval Christians within Europe, but only by Christians under Muslim rule.\(^97\)

Whatever reaction medieval European Christians had to Islam, they had no urge or curiosity whatsoever to understand this new religion. According to Norman Daniel, who has written one of the authoritative studies on medieval imagery and studies of Islam, this was only natural in the circumstances where the Christian Church exerted pressure on its flock not to engage in any interaction or communication, whether commercial or otherwise, with Muslims. “The way was nowhere open to an ordinary Christian to know Islam better”\(^98\) – assuming, of course, that these ordinary Christians in early medieval Europe wanted to know anything about Islam.

For lack of knowledge, medieval Europe gave Islam “a place in the three traditions of European thought and sentiment, those of Biblical history, apocalyptic vision, and popular imagination.”\(^99\) The net result was negative, combining feelings of fear, mistrust and downright hatred.\(^100\) Saracens were considered pagan idolaters who
worshipped combinations of several deities, mostly listed as Apollo, Jupiter, Lucifer (also known as Mahound, a convenient wordplay on Mohammed or Mahomet as he was known in medieval Europe), and an unknown deity called Tervagent. The European study of the Islamic sources would have to wait for another four hundred (!) years after the Byzantines first faced the Muslim armies.