



INTRODUCTION

THERE IS KNOWN history and forgotten history, history that supports our sense of present and history that suggests other pathways. Here is the known: in A.D. 632, the Prophet Muhammad died in Mecca. He left a vibrant set of teachings, nine wives, a number of children, and several thousand Arab followers who called themselves Muslims. Less than two decades after his death, the adherents of this new faith had destroyed one empire and crippled another: the Persian shah was hunted down and killed on the banks of the Oxus River after a thousand-mile chase; Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor, who had only a few years before retaken Jerusalem, saw his realm cut in half as the heirs of Muhammad occupied Damascus, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem. The emperor collapsed and died when he learned that the city of Christ had fallen, even though the Muslims had spared the inhabitants the depredations normally inflicted by conquering armies.

With the Persians annihilated and the Byzantines crippled, the victorious Muslim armies were limited only by numbers and their own internal divisions. Had they stayed united, they might have continued on to India in the east and Europe in the west. As it was, they paused to fight two civil wars. Then the conquests began again, and Arab navies reached the walls of Constantinople before they were halted by a mysterious substance called Greek fire that set ships ablaze. Thousands of miles to the west, the general Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed from North Africa into the Iberian Peninsula and advanced to the Pyrenees. His armies might have continued all the way to the English Channel had he not been recalled by the caliph. He returned across the strait that now bears his name—

