4 The Papacy and the Foundation of the Holy Roman Empire
700–1000AD

It has been said that the two great ideas that the Age of Antiquity bequeathed were those of a world religion and a world monarchy; that the doctrine of the unity of God required the unity of the community of those faithful to him, a Holy Empire, one universal temporal state to control and promote that spiritual unity.\(^1\)

In the years following the collapse of the western Roman Empire, amid the economic disruption and the economic uncertainty, one remembered – and yearned for – the restoration of order, an order providing for spiritual and psychological as well as physical security.

But who could provide it? Certainly the Church could not provide it. It had no armies. Furthermore, the position of the Papacy itself was very weak and dangerous. Although the clergy might be widespread, the Pope himself merely lived in a large unruly city, nominally the capital of a duchy of the Byzantine Empire but controlled by its Senate and nobility. And he faced two formidable adversaries, Islam and the Lombards, at a time when his relations with his putative defender, the Emperor in distant Constantinople, were bad.

The prophet Mohammed was born in Mecca in 570. He was a wealthy businessman when he received the call to establish Islam. In Arabia the population was polytheist and for twelve years Mohammed preached monotheism to them in vain. In 622 he was forced to flee to the city of Medina, and it was from this flight that the Islamic calendar began. Rallying his supporters he eventually overthrew the opposition in Mecca, where he returned in 630 to organise the establishment and expansion of Islam.

The essentials of Islam were that there was but one God, and Mohammed was his prophet. There was no priesthood because there was no need for a mediator between a person and his or her God. There were no graven images. There was no distinction

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A. Alcock, *A Short History of Europe*  
between church and state – there was only one society. Moslems had duties of prayer (four times daily), charity, fasting, to go to Mecca at least once in their lifetime, and to know the Holy Book, the Koran. Moslems also believed in predestination – all that was needed was submission to the will of God who had marked out everyone’s destiny. To a Moslem Christ was not the Son of God but a mortal. He was, nevertheless, a recognised prophet. Islam recognised both Christians and Jews as ‘people of the book’, worshippers of the one God, although each religion had its own prophets.²

The Arabs were fuelled with fanatic enthusiasm for this new religion. Mohammed died in 632, but by 634 Islam had swept through Arabia, Palestine, Syria and Egypt; by 644 the Persian Empire had been overthrown; from 674–78 Islamic forces overran the main part of the Byzantine Empire, even besieging Constantinople before being forced to withdraw. By 695 Islam had taken over all North Africa. And then in 711 the Moslems crossed the Straits of Gibraltar into Europe. By 720 the Visigoth Kingdom had been destroyed and almost all Spain was theirs. The Pyrenees were then crossed and France penetrated as far north as Poitiers where, in 732, the Franks under Charles Martel defeated the Moslem army and the Islamic expansion into western Europe was halted. Territories under Islamic control were governed by leaders called caliphs, or ‘successors’ (to Mohammed), and caliphates were established, first in Damascus, and then Bagdad. The first European caliphate was that of Cordoba.

The triumphal progress of Islam had been made easy for two reasons. First, the Byzantine and Persian Empires were very weak, as a result of a long war between them from 606–28, in which the Byzantines had been victorious but both had been exhausted. Second, because of the persecution of the Monophysites as heretics, the Christians of Egypt, Palestine and Syria had little reason to be loyal to the Byzantine Empire. When the time came to choose between Islam and Constantinople, they opted for the former. Islam was tolerant of Christianity. As long as Christians paid their taxes and accepted an inferior status, their lives, property and freedom of worship were guaranteed. For the Pope, however, the Islamic control of the southern shores of the Mediterranean and Spain meant that attacks on Christian Italy and southern France were inevitable.³

The Lombards had arrived in Italy from Pannonia in 568 to find a political vacuum. The Ostrogoth kingdom had just been