The Mediterranean was known to the Hebrews as “the Great Sea,” “the Western Sea,” or simply “the Sea,” and to the Greeks as “the Sea of the Middle of the Earth.” The Romans adopted this name as “Mediterranean,” when they did not refer to it as “Our Sea” (Mare Nostrum)—an association Arab geographers acknowledged when they came to call it “the Sea of the Romans.” As historians we are used to thinking of seas as dividing people, but from the time of even the remotest prehistory, the Mediterranean brought people together, through trade, travel, conquest, colonization, and migration. By the late Neolithic, systems of specialized production, distribution, and the storage of surplus had developed here, and as navigation improved, the shores and islands were linked both by regular long-distance and incremental local and regional trade. Under the Romans the sea would become the center of a complex commercial system in which high volumes of staples, natural resources, and luxury goods—not to mention people—circulated. In late antiquity this system—particularly the high-value and luxury trades—began to decline as a consequence of the general contraction of the Roman economy, but it would recover and expand under the Pax Islamica established from the ninth century in the wake of the Muslim conquests.

In the period covered by this book, the Mediterranean was not a region defined by linguistic unity, cultural homogeneity, or a common institutional framework, yet it was bound by overlapping networks of production, distribution, and commerce within a money economy, by a cosmopolitan urban culture, a common Abrahamic religious framework, a common Perso-Hellenic intellectual orientation, and a common set of literary languages, including Arabic, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, that were used by the cultural elite across the region. Most importantly, the inhabitants of the Mediterranean shared a generally similar set of expectations as regards social and political interactions, and their acts were informed by the same general set of assumptions and presuppositions. It was a region characterized by religious difference, but also by integration: significant religious minority communities lived as legitimate subjects in the various principalities across the Mediterranean. It was a region that was profoundly integrated, even in the face of its political and confessional divisions—no less so, in its own way, than regions that we are accustomed to accepting as frameworks for historical inquiry, such as “Medieval Europe.”

The Physical Environment

The Mediterranean was formed a little over five million years ago in the most spectacular flood in our planet’s history. Previous to that it had been a low-lying dry depression (almost two miles deep at points) marking the boundary zone of the African, Eurasian, and Arabian tectonic plates, and cut off from the Atlantic by a mountainous ridge in what is now Morocco and Spain. When that ridge began to suddenly give way, water poured into the Mediterranean basin at a breathtaking rate; the entire sea—all four million cubic kilometers of water—cascaded in within a period of two years, and perhaps as little as two months. What was left was a salty, almost tideless sea, 2,700 miles from east to west at its longest point, and 1,100 miles from north to south at its widest, divided into a western and an eastern basin. Elongated and serpentine, its surface was pierced by the rocky peaks of pre-
The Mediterranean is a region that was once home to historic mountain ranges, now islands. Much of the sea is quite shallow, and its sprawling shape and crenellated shoreline give it a high proportion of coast to area, and means that there are few points in the sea from where land cannot be sighted—a fact that facilitated navigation here and served to integrate the region since prehistoric times.

With the exception of the Nile, it is not fed significantly by rivers, but by a continuous inflow from the Atlantic and a smaller one from the Black Sea. The surface currents are predominantly westerly, with significant eddies, while the airstream is subject to dramatic shifts due to strong seasonal winds sweeping in from Europe, Africa, and Asia. The landscape is characterized by rapid changes in altitude and significant zones of volcanism and seismic activity. Generally, the climate is mildly subtropical, characterized by hot, dry summers and wet winters, and vegetation includes scrubby trees, including pines, oak, cypress, sycamore and fruit trees, shrubs, and grasses. Soil is generally thin and poor. Islands are home only to small game, while the continental hinterlands support larger herbivorous and predatory mammals. The chief exception to this panorama is the wetlands: most importantly, the Nile Delta, but also the mouths of the Ebro, Rhone, and Po, as well as other river outlets and marshlands on the coasts of Ifriqiya, Anatolia, and the Balkan Peninsula. Major bird migration routes cross the region, and in premodern times there was abundant marine life, including a rich variety of fish and crustaceans, and large species such as tuna, sea turtles, sharks, and even whales. As a whole it comprised a dense and highly fragmented physical environment consisting predominantly of an array of tiny microregions, each with marked variations of climate and vegetation, surrounded by continental hinterlands (Africa, Europe, and West Asia), each with distinct climate conditions and
FIGURE 0.1 The physical Mediterranean, seen from space. Photo: NASA, modified by Eric Gaba, provided by Wikimedia Commons under Creative Commons License.

FIGURE 0.2 Exotic animals being transported for a hunt. Detail of a mid-fourth-century CE floor mosaic, Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina, Italy. Photo: Le Musée absolu, Phaidon, 10–2012, provided by Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons License.

INTRODUCTION
abundant and varied natural resources. This, together with the ease of navigation around the sea, meant that from the Neolithic, the various microregions of the Mediterranean were able to develop specialized economies that were integrated through trade, which in turn stimulated the development of strategies and institutions for the storage and redistribution of surpluses, and enabled the region to support a population far greater than would have been the case had these micro-regions remained isolated. From the earliest times, the Mediterranean was a region profoundly integrated by trade, migration, acculturation, and exchange.

The Mediterranean in 650

The Sea in the Middle looked much different halfway through the seventh century than it had, say, two hundred and fifty years earlier in 400 CE. In that year, the centuries-old Roman Empire still ruled over all the lands surrounding the Mediterranean, but also territories at a great distance from it, such as England. It is true that by this point, the empire had long since been divided into two parts—a Latin-dominated western half, extending from the Balkans, Italy, and the middle of what is now Libya to the Atlantic Ocean, and a Greek-dominated eastern half that included Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, and the Greek heartlands—ruled over by two co-emperors. It is true too that there were real threats to the empire, not least from Germanic and Central Asian peoples who threatened Rome from the north. Indeed, already in the last years of the fourth century, Germanic Visigoths had begun a circuitous migration through the empire beginning in northern Greece, continuing through the Balkans, and, in the years after 400 eventually all the way through Italy across what is now southern France and into Spain. But the Mediterranean was still an entirely Roman sea, and Latin and Greek still dominated it as languages of daily speech, governmental administration, and learned discourse, just as they had for hundreds of years.

The coming two and half centuries changed this picture dramatically, as we will see if we take a tour around the Sea in the Middle in the year 650, beginning in the East, where the changes had been most dramatic and enduring. Foremost was the creation and rapid expansion of an Arab-dominated realm inspired by a religion that did not even exist in 400: Islam—a word meaning “submission (to God).” The Arabs had been a known quantity to the Romans—some had been long-time allies of Rome, while others were allies of Rome’s great enemy to the east, Persia. But they had never seemed a real threat to Rome (or to Persia). Then, suddenly, the Prophet Muhammad (570–632) united the unruly Arab tribes under Islam and the Qur’an, which declared that God was absolutely one, and all must submit to Him. Soon after Muhammad’s death in 632, a formidable Arab army, inspired by this new religion, and under the authority of his successors, called caliphs, struck out from Arabia. By 650 they had managed to conquer not only the Syrian and Egyptian territories that had long been under Roman control, but also almost all of the Persian Empire—both empires having been severely weakened by internal tensions and decades of warfare between themselves in the early decades of the century. However, the occupying Arab armies of this new empire, which is often referred to as the caliphate, constituted only a tiny percentage of the populations they ruled over. With the exception of some pagan groups, the followers of Islam, or Muslims (meaning “those who have submitted to God”), did not force those they conquered to convert to their faith, but allowed those they called the Peoples of the Book—Christians, Jews, and other monotheistic peoples—to continue to practice their religions as before, and to raise their children as Christians and Jews, as long as they recognized the political authority of Islam, and paid a special tax called the jizya.

This meant that while the new Muslim caliphate dominated much of the eastern and southern seaboard of the Mediterranean, the great majority of the population in these regions remained Christian and Jewish, and would remain so for centuries. However, neither of these groups was united. Over the course of the fourth and fifth centuries a series of theological disagreements erupted between Christian bishops and abbots regarding both the exact nature of Jesus as at once a divine and a human being, and the nature of the Trinity—all Christians believed that God was somehow at one and the same time both One and Three, in the form of the Father, the Son (that is, Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. While the Trinitarian disagreements had largely been settled, the nature of Jesus has divided the Christians in the Middle
MAP 0.2 The Roman Empire. Original source unknown.

FIGURE 0.3 The Prophet Muhammad with the Black Stone of the Ka’aba. Miniature from a manuscript (1314 CE) of The Compendium of Chronicles of Rashid al-Din (d. 1318). The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo.
East ever since. There were, in fact, three major groups of Christians who disagreed among themselves about this issue, each with its own institutional identity and hierarchy of bishops and priests.

Likewise, the Jews living under Islam were divided between the Rabbanite Jews and the Samaritans. Rabbanite Jews were the ancestors of modern Judaism, whose learned leaders had finished compiling the Talmud, the vast supplement to the Bible that would shape the practice and theology of Jews all the way down to the present. The Samaritans, by contrast, adhered only to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible—their “Samaritan Pentateuch” has a number of small textual differences from the Rabbanite version—and maintained more of the ancient Hebrew religious hierarchy than Rabbanites did.

Moreover, while Greek had been the dominant learned language of the region for nearly a thousand years, other local languages had lived on as well. Most important were Coptic in Christian Egypt, alongside Syriac in what is now Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, Georgian in the Persian-occupied Caucasus, and Armenian in the Christian kingdom of Armenia, which would fall under Muslim control just a few years after 650. By the middle of the seventh century, all these languages had developed into thriving languages of Christian theology and worship, though Greek continued to be in use, as we will see, among one Christian sect in the early medieval Islamic world.

In conquering Egypt in particular, the Muslims had wrested away from Rome one of its wealthiest provinces. But that did not mean that the Roman Empire had ceased to exist, as we will see if we continue our tour north and west. Indeed, Rome survived, in a drastically changed form for centuries after the catastrophic loss of its southeastern territories. What endured was the descendant of the old Eastern Roman Empire, the Western Roman Empire having ceased to exist in the aftermath of a series of migrations of outside peoples over the course of the fifth century in the aftermath of the Visigothic meanderings from north of the Danube to Spain. The wealthier, more urban eastern empire managed to keep those migrating German and Central Asian peoples who had crossed the northern border of the empire out of its ter-
ritories for the most part. Moreover, under the ambitious emperor Justinian (527–565), the Eastern Roman Empire had launched a vastly expensive and time-consuming attempt to regain the western Roman Empire from the Germanic kingdoms that had replaced it, with significant but partial success. At Justinian’s death Rome once more included extensive parts of western North Africa and of Spain, as well as all of Italy. By the third decade of the seventh century, though, much of Italy had been lost to the incursions of the Lombards, another migrating Germanic people, and Spain had thrown off Roman control entirely. Furthermore, Slavic peoples, the ancestors of the modern Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, and Macedonians, had migrated from north of the Danube down into the Balkans and western Greece, snatching those regions from eastern Roman control as well. Nevertheless in 650 the eastern Romans still possessed key coastal regions in the western Aegean, as well as all of Anatolia (what is now Turkey), Crete, a substantial part of the coast of North Africa, as well as several key islands in the western Mediterranean, including Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica.

While the rest of North Africa would soon be lost to the expanding Arab-Muslim empire, the core lands of Greece and Anatolia, as well as Crete, Sicily, Sardinia, and parts of Italy would remain part of the Eastern Roman Empire well after 650. Though its emperors and people continued to consider themselves as Romans down until the empire’s final demise in 1453, the eastern empire was now thoroughly Greek in speech, culture, and administration. While its church was still united with the Latin-speaking church of the lands of the former Western Roman Empire, the Latin and Greek branches had already begun growing apart in certain ritual practices, and these differences would grow over the centuries to come. The capital city, Constantinople, was one of the largest cities in the Mediterranean, and one of the most important trading hubs in the land- and seaborne trade that had been thriving in the region for millennia, and would continue to be so in the centuries to come. While this Greek-speaking empire was regarded for the rest of its history as the Roman Empire (in the face of an upstart Latin Holy Roman Empire), scholars refer to the medieval version of it by convention as Byzantium, or the Byzantine Empire. Byzantium was the original name of the city of Constantinople, which had been chosen centuries earlier as capital of the eastern empire, by Constantine I (306–337), who renamed it in his own honor.

Continuing our tour to the west, we come to the wedge of Slavic-controlled territory in parts of what had been Greece and the Balkans. This pagan, Slavic territory now separated Greek-Christian Byzantium from the territories of the old Western Roman Empire, where the Latin-speaking church of Rome held sway. Over the coming generations both Greek and Latin prelates and missionaries would seek to convert these pagan Slavs to their particular form of Christianity. Most eventually swore allegiance to the patriarch of Constantinople, the senior bishop of the Greek Church, rather than to the pope in Rome, the senior bishop of the Latin Church. While the
western part of this Slavic wedge occupied land that had been part of the old western empire, much of its destiny over the coming centuries would be bound up with Byzantium as a result of its confessional orientation.

Across the Adriatic Sea from these now Slavic territories lies the Italian Peninsula, which had been reconquered by Justinian I when he retook it from the German Ostrogoths, who had ruled it for more than a century. By the late sixth century, however, it was becoming ever more difficult for the Byzantine emperors to effectively intervene militarily here. Indeed, the Lombards, the last of the Germanic peoples to move into the old western empire, took advantage of this weakness and invaded Byzantine Italy in the last decades of the sixth century. They conquered all of the north, a region still called Lombardy to this day, and Tuscany, which together formed the Kingdom of the Lombards. Separate Lombard forces conquered much of Italy to the south of Rome, establishing the two independent Lombard duchies Spoleto and Benevento. The far south of Italy and all of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica remained, as we have seen, Byzantine territory.

Continuing our journey west, the enormous barrier of the Alps formed the boundary between the Lombard kingdom and the Frankish kingdoms. The Germanic Franks had moved into the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century and, under the rule of Clovis (ca. 466–511), who converted from paganism to Roman Christianity in 496, subjugated a large swath of territory that included large portions of modern France and Germany. His sons had continued his aggressive military campaigns, so that by the mid-sixth century theirs were the most dominant of the Germanic successor kingdoms that ruled over former western Roman lands, and remained so in 650. The Merovingians (the royal dynasty of Clovis and his descendants) followed Germanic custom in dividing their realms among their sons on their deaths, so that Frankish realms were often divided among several kings. In 650, however, only two Frankish kings—of Neustria and Austrasia, respectively—held sway in the Frankish realms. A subject Duchy of Bavaria (the Bavarians were another Germanic people who had settled in western Roman territories in the fifth century) recognized their overlordship, as did the Duchy of Aquitaine in what is now western France.