four: Political Communities Reordered (c. 900–c. 1050)

They preserved the Abbasid line, but they reduced the caliph’s political authority to nothing.

The new rulers represented groups that had long awaited power. The Buyids, for example, belonged to ancient warrior tribes from the mountains of Iran. Even in the tenth century, most were relatively new converts to Islam. Bolstered by long-festering local discontent, one of them became “commander of commanders” in 945. Thereafter, the Buyids, with help from their own Turkish mercenaries, dominated the region south of the Caspian Sea, including Baghdad (once again the home of the caliphs) itself. Yet already by the end of the tenth century, other local men were challenging Buyid rule in a political process—the progressive regionalization and fragmentation of power—echoed elsewhere in the Islamic world and in parts of Western Europe as well.

The most important of the new regional rulers were the Fatimids. They, like the Qaramita (and, increasingly in the course of time, the Buyids), were Shi’ites, taking their name from Muhammad’s daughter Fatimah, wife of Ali. The Fatimid leader claimed not only to be the true Imam, descendant of Ali, but also the Mahdi, the “divinely guided” messiah, come to bring justice on earth. Because of this, the Fatimids were proclaimed “caliphs” by their followers—the true “successors” of the Prophet. (See the list of Fatimid caliphs on p. 342.) Allying with the Berbers in North Africa, by 909 the Fatimids had