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The History of the

# Islamic

Calendar



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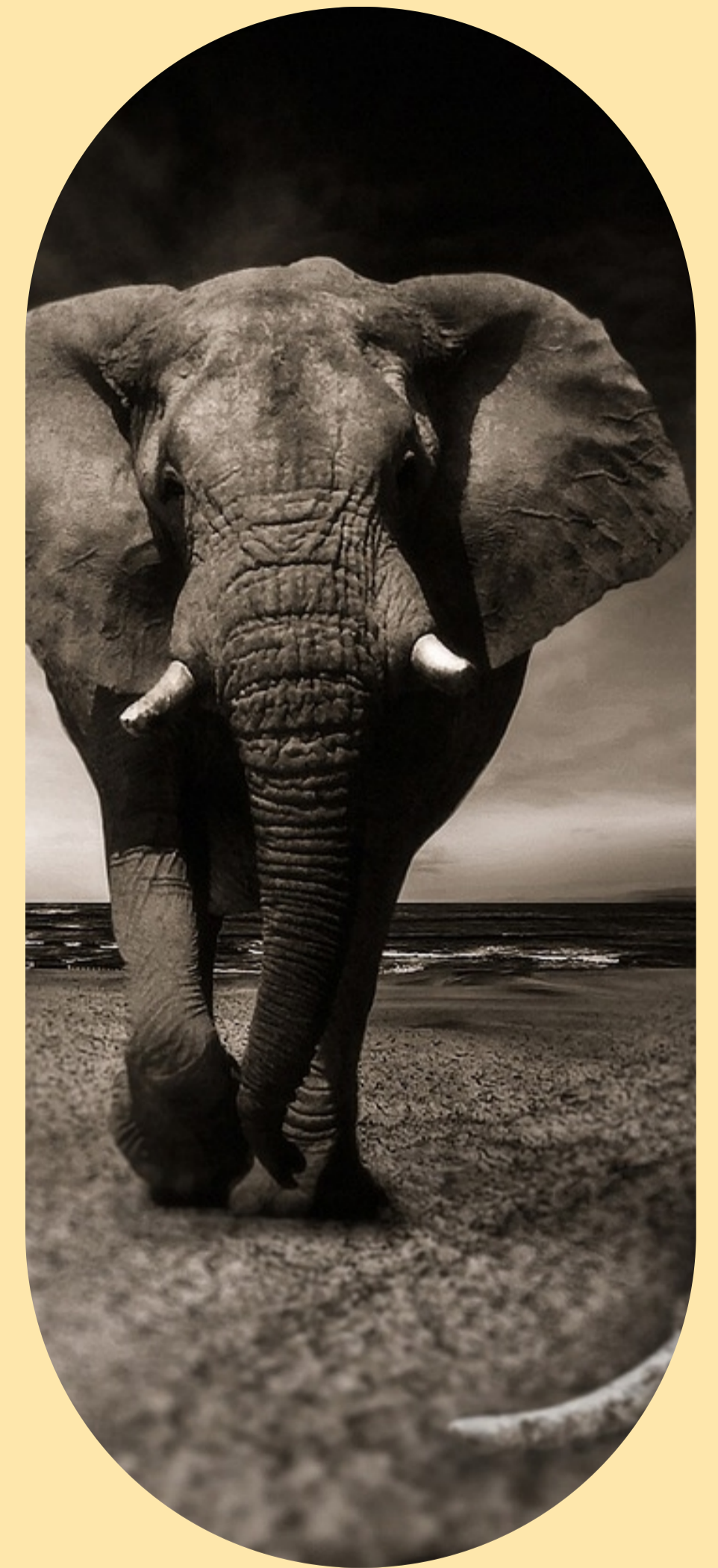
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The year 2022 corresponds to 1443 in the Islamic calendar. Many people are unaware that Muslims have our own calendar. Many of the significant events in the Islamic year are based on this calendar, from the month of fasting Ramadan to the month of pilgrimage. Before the time of the Messenger Muhammad, the Arabs did not really have a calendar as such. They had months which they were familiar with but no exact method of counting dates and years. The Arabs used the lunar method for the beginning and ending of their months, and the Islamic calendar continued this.



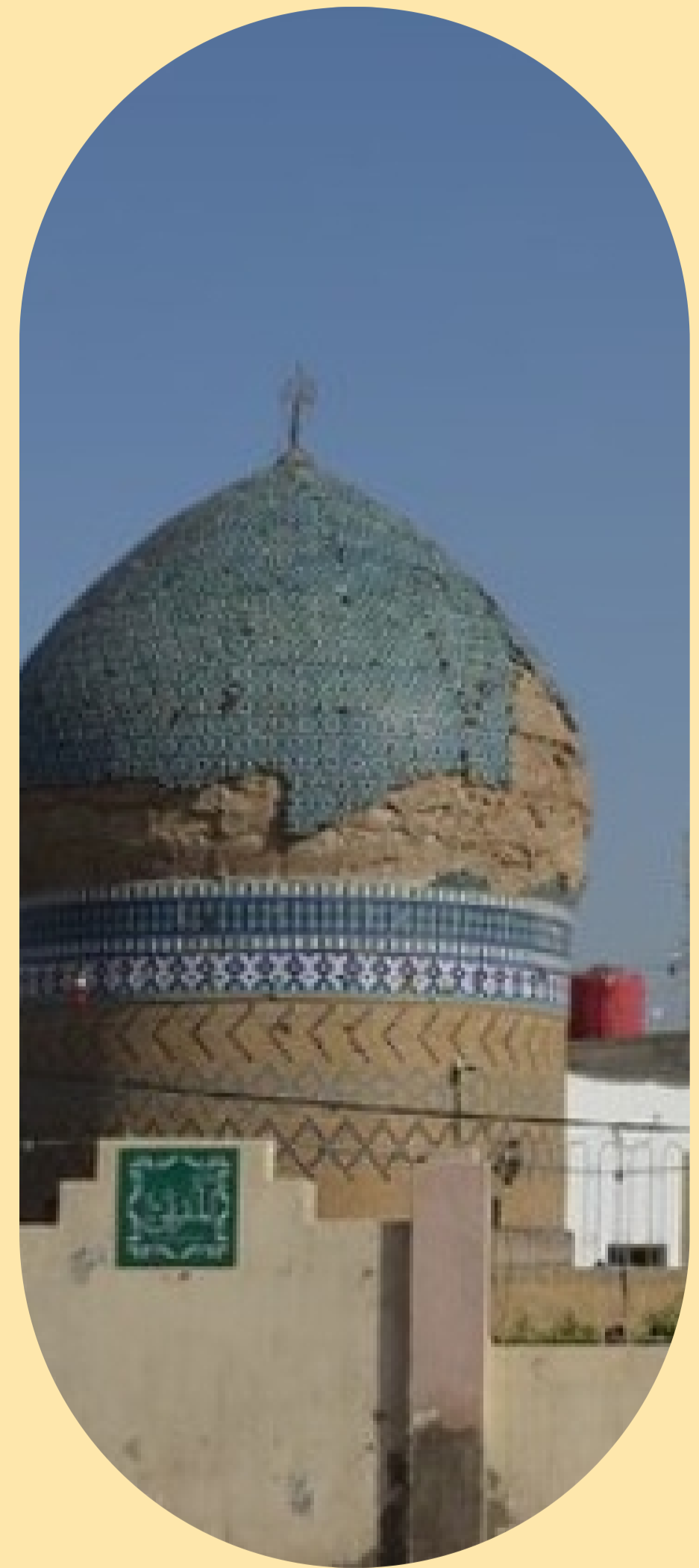
The norm of that time would be to link years to events. For example, the Year of the Elephant is generally considered to be the birth year of the Messenger Muhammad. It refers to an incident where an army consisting of some elephants tried to attack Mecca. Similarly, events after the start of the Messenger Muhammad's mission are counted from that event, such as the third year of his mission in Mecca and so on. Years of plague, famine, drought or wars would often be referred to by those events.



This method continued for the entirety of the lifetime of the Messenger Muhammad, and for some years after. It was during the reign of the Second Caliph Umar, that this then became problematic. As the Muslims expanded and their empire grew, the governors, leaders and generals of various provinces would often correspond with Umar, who was in Medina. While they could affix a day and month to correspondence, they could not designate a year.



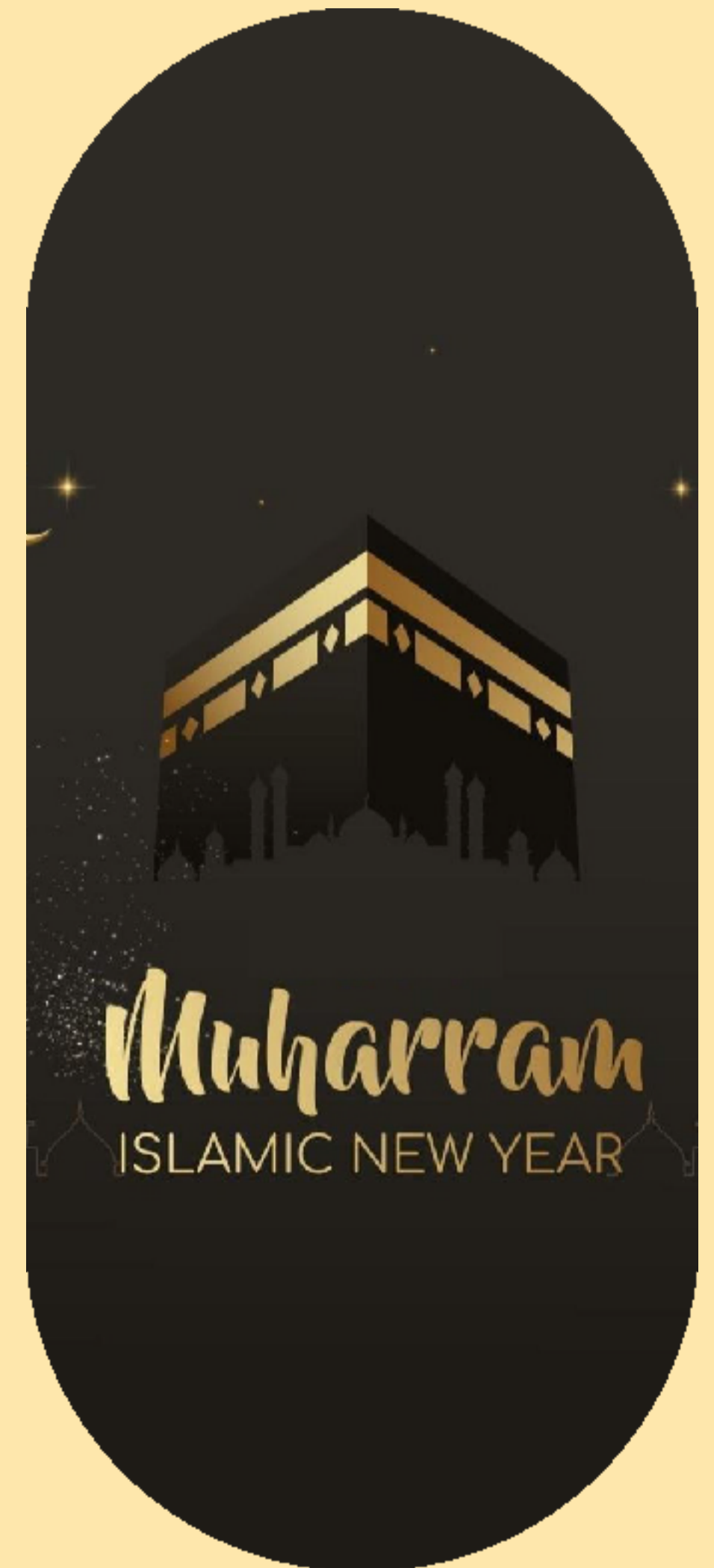
It is said that it was the Messenger Muhammad's disciple, Abu Musa, who brought up this issue with Umar. Abu Musa was the governor of Basra, and he realized that when referring to previous letters or instructions from Umar, it would not be known which exact letter was being referenced, as over the years multiple letters had been sent back and forth each month. He raised this concern with Umar.



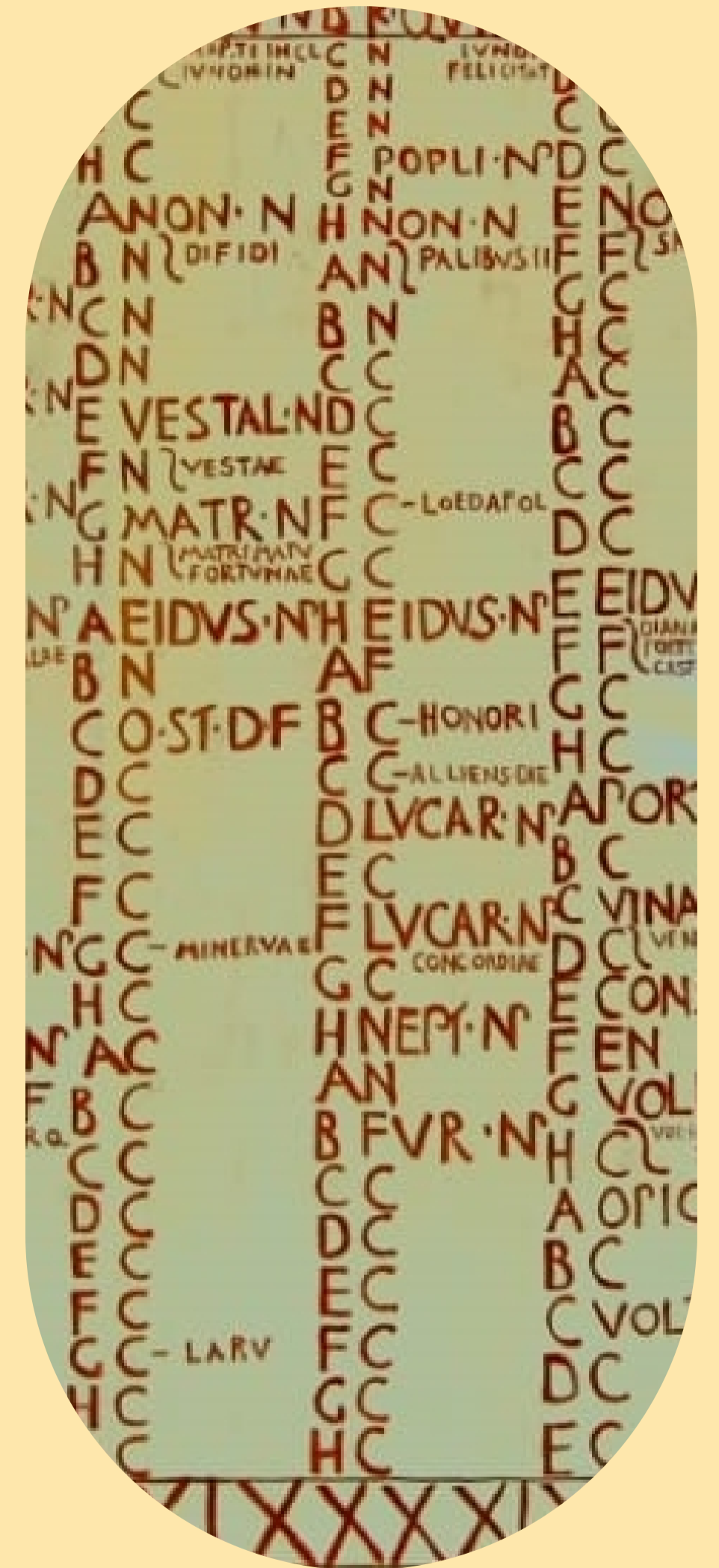
Other narrations say that a case was presented before Umar. One of the parties in the case stated that they would come and deal with it in Sha'ban [8th lunar month]. Umar realised that this was not sufficient. He stated that Sha'ban could refer to this year, last year or next year. He then gathered his senior advisors and consulted with them.



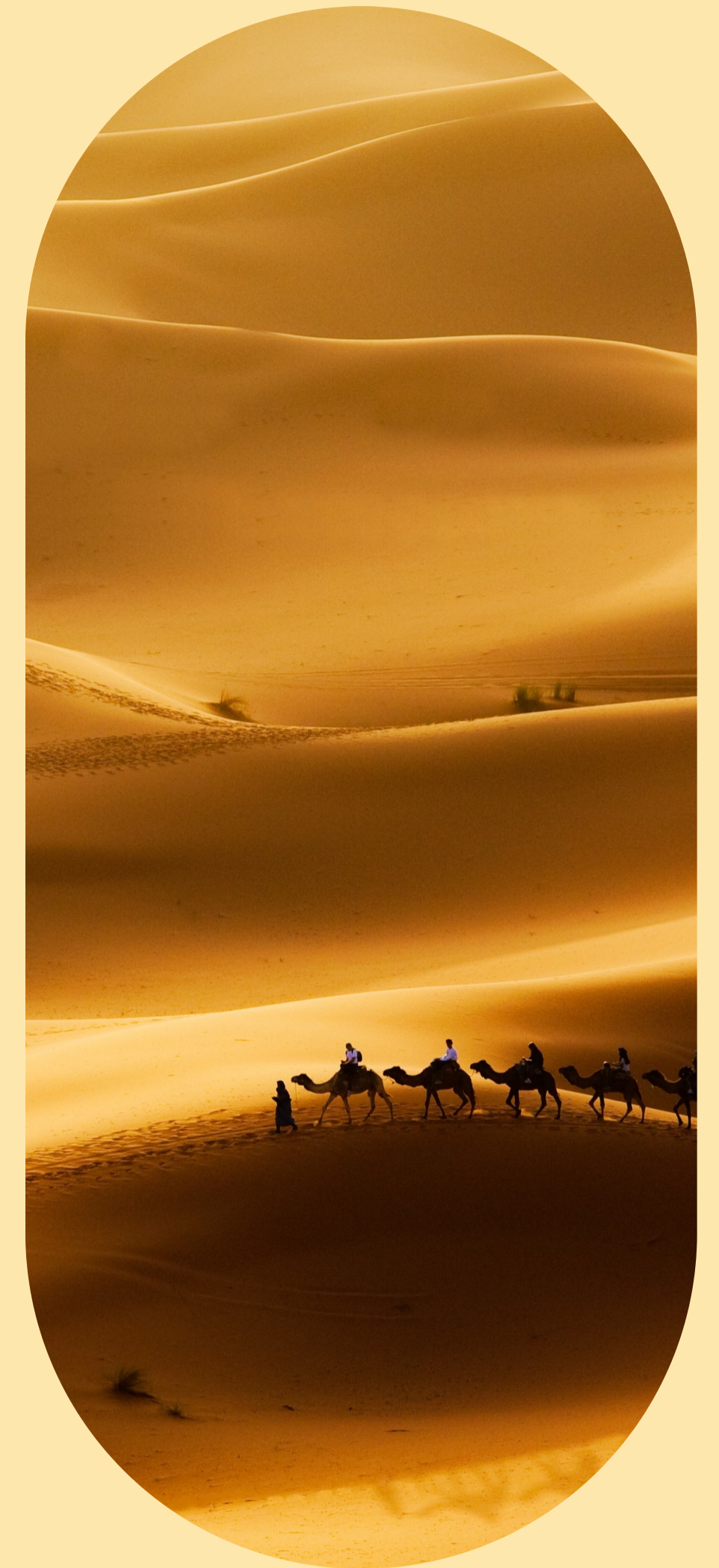
They all agreed on the need for a calendar. The question now was when it should start. They quickly settled on Muharram as the first month, as it was often referred to as the first month by the Arabs. Other historians said that Muharram was chosen because the Messenger Muhammad agreed to the allegiance of the Medinans in Thul-Hijjah, which was the month of the pilgrimage. As such, the next month was the month of Muharram.



However, they differed as to which year should be the first of the Islamic calendar. Some advisors suggested it be the birth of the Messenger Muhammad, others that it be the year when his mission began. Yet others suggested that the Muslims simply take on an existing calendar such as one used by the Romans or Persians.



The son-in-law of the Messenger Muhammad, Ali, suggested that the calendar should begin with the event of the Messenger Muhammad's migration to Medina. His reasoning for this was that this event marked the start of the Muslim nation and state. Thus, the year of migration became the beginning of the Islamic Calendar. The calendar is often referred to as "Hijri," which means "migrations," pointing to that event as Year 1. It is mentioned that the year this decision was taken in the reign of Umar was therefore 17AH.



This does not mean that the events of the previous 13 years in Mecca before the migration were unimportant. It was simply the administrative decision made by the Caliph Umar at that time, based on consultation and sound advice. Since that time, the Muslims have always used the Islamic Calendar.

