

THE TORCHBEARERS.

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The Middle East can seem very strange and exotic. Outlandish clothes and customs. Languages that don't seem to have any relationship to our own and even when we do pick up a word or two of a Middle Eastern language, we still have trouble with the writing, which looks totally alien to us. Verbally and Visually we're lost.

The Middle East is another world and it doesn't seem to fit into our own historical landscape at all. When we think of the roots of our Western culture and civilisation, we may look back to the Middle East of the very earliest ancient times. To ancient Egypt or Babylon or Biblical Israel or the first Persian Empire but we still feel that our main heritage really starts with the Greeks and the Romans. Then we jump forward to the European Renaissance which eventually leads us to Modern times. But where are the Middle Easterners in all this? They don't seem to fit in to any of the progression of the Greeks to Romans to Renaissance to modern times, and yet if we look more carefully at this progression we see there is something missing;

Roman (250BC – 500AD)

Renaissance (1300AD)
Modern Times

The Roman Empire lasted from about 250 BC to roughly 500 AD. The Renaissance didn't get going until about 1300 AD. What happened in between? There's a 800 year gap in our history between the Fall of the "Roman Empire and the Renaissance and did nothing happen in all these centuries? After all we used to refer to this period of time as the "Dark Ages" and the very word Renaissance means "Rebirth" which implies that we died when Rome died and were only born again 800 years later! This idea that the world somehow ground to a halt after the fall of Rome is very deeply ingrained in our minds and this is the main reason why we have so very little knowledge of the Middle Easterner, why there's a blind spot in our vision of history. For the irony is, it was precisely during our so called "Dark Ages" that the Great Islamic Civilisation of the Middle Easterner reached its peak! In fact they were the people who bridged the gap, who wrote the missing chapter in our History! If it hadn't been for the Muslims, we might never have had a renaissance at all.

All this began in what we used to regard as one of the most backward regions in the world, the Arabian Peninsula.

In the town of Mecca, at the beginning of the 7th century of our era, when an Arab merchant by the name of Muhammad begins to have visions of the Archangel Gabriel asking him to recite the word of God. The Arabic word for recitation is "Qur'an" or Koran as we pronounce it in English, and this becomes the Holy Book of the newly revealed religion of Islam, which will spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula, the fertile Crescent, Iran Northern Africa and Spain and even beyond the Middle East to New India and right up to the frontier of China. This empire was the largest that the world had ever known.

In taking over such a vast territory the Arabs also took over a vast amount of learning and culture. The early Arab Muslims were themselves, simple Bedouins from the desert and yet they managed to absorb a great deal of the arts, science and philosophies of the ancient world, from the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, the Iranians, the Indians, the Chinese. The great achievement of the Muslims was to synthesise all this and transmute it into a new world culture. The most obvious symbols of which are visual. Islamic architecture, Domes and Minarets, Arches and Alcoves, Courtyards and Fountains and pools. The very stamp of this Civilisation is Islamic design. The elaborate interweaving of Calligraphy and abstract patterns, a geometrical dance that appears to go on forever. We often call these intricate Islamic Patterns "ARABESQUE" and this implies that they are purely an Arab invention. This isn't so. Like everything else in medieval Islam they were a product of many people. This was truly a Cosmopolitan Civilisation. One of the best symbols of this was the medieval collection of folk tales known as the Thousand and One Nights, many of which are set in 8th century Baghdad, in the days of the Great Caliph Haroun Al Rashid. The stories of Aladdin, Sinbad the Sailor, Ali Baba have also been called the Arabian Nights, but this is a misnomer as they actually came from many different places and feature not only Arab Caliphs but also Persian Bahirs, Jewish Physicians and Turkish Soldiers, but there is always a very important Arab dimension to this Islamic Civilisation. After all Islam itself started in Arabia and is based on the Qur'an which God chose to reveal to Mankind in the Arabic Language. This means that for all Muslims no matter whatever their ethnic background, Arabic has been considered a Sacred language, the only conceivable medium in which the Islamic Culture could be expressed. The sacredness of the Arabic language also extended to the Arabic script itself even though the languages of the Iranians and the Turks for instance were quite different from Arabic, once these two people chose to convert to Islam, they chose to write their language in Arabic script and Turkish continued to be expressed in Arabic characters right up to the 1920's and the Persian language is still written in Arabic letters even today. Of course people still went on speaking Persian or Turkish or Hebrew or Greek, but the official language of the Islamic Civilisation was Arabic and this gave an Arab flavour to everything.

This is why Islamic design came to be known as Arabesque and why many of the artistic and scientific achievements of the Muslims have left their mark on the world in the form of literally thousands of Arabic works. Whenever you see an English word begging with "AL" for instance, chances are that it came to us via Arabic, because "AL" is simply the Arabic for "THE"!

ALCOVE is from AL-QUBBAH

ALMANAC is from AL-MANAAKH (the calendar, the record of what's happening in the stars)

ALGEBRA is from AL-JABR (which means the reduction of arithmetic to a better form)

ALGORITHM derives from the name of the Muslim mathematician AL-KHWARAZMI

ALCHEMY stands for AL-KIMIYA (the chemistry)

And so on ...

These words reflect some of the areas in which Muslims excelled; Architecture, Astronomy, Mathematics, Chemistry. The Muslim alchemists were looking for the "ELIXIR" another Arabic word. A special chemical preparation for turning base metals into gold or to prolong life. They never found the elixir of life but in searching for

it they laid the foundation of modern chemistry. They also made great strides in saving life and in healing the sick. They invented many new medical instruments, and made important breakthroughs in Optics and surgery. All of this may look primitive by today's standards but we should remember that these are pictures from a thousand years ago! When Islamic Medicine was much more advanced than anything going on in Europe. One of the most famous Muslim physicians was a 9th century Iranian by the name of Gharazi, who was known in the works as Rhazes who wrote many influential works. Another great Islamic physician and philosopher was also an Iranian, Ibn Zannah or Avicenna as the Europeans called him. Avicenna completed a medical encyclopaedia at the beginning of the 10th century called the "Canon of Medicine", which is the most famous single book of medicine in history, of both East and West and which was used as the standard medical text throughout Europe until the 17th century.

The Muslims not only did pioneering work as physicians but along the way they also developed two institutions that had never been set up on any organised basis before, the Hospital and the Pharmacy and they built a network of these therapeutic establishment throughout the Islamic world so that where ever people travelled they could have access to healthcare and medication, but the Muslims also believed that what happened on the Earth was very much influenced by what happened in the Heavens. They were fascinated by astrology and astronomy. They perfected all sorts of elaborate instruments for measuring the movement of the stars and planets and they gave us such words as: Zenith, Nayda, Azimuth.

One of the most well known Muslim Astronomers of the medieval period was yet another Iranian. A man called Omar Khayyam, who also wrote a set of Poems called the Rubiyat, which later became very well known in the west through the translations of Edward Fitzgerald. A passage like this, could reflect Khayyam's interest in astronomy;

**"Awake for morning in the bowl of night,
has flung the stone that puts the stars in flight,
And Lo' the hunter of the east has caught
the Sultan's turret in a noose of light."**

So between the 7th and 12th centuries the inhabitants of the Islamic Empire made great progress in all areas of intellectual life. Particularly in the sciences, but to do science you need to do calculations and to do calculations you need numbers and this is where medieval Muslims made a contribution that each of us benefits from almost everyday, when they replaced the cumbersome Roman ones with a system they imported from India, which was based on positional numbering and the idea of nothingness or "Zero" which is another Arabic word. It's thanks to the Muslims that we no longer have to write the date for example like this:

**MCMLXXXIV
...and instead can write it like this:
1984**

In what came to be known as Arabic Numerals, although strictly speaking they're Indian Numerals, but if it hadn't been for the Arabic speaking mathematicians of the Islamic Empire they might never have reached the Western World. The same applies to the very paper upon which we write our Arabic numerals. We might not have that either if the Muslims hadn't imported paper making techniques from the Chinese.

Numbers from India, Paper from China, these are typical examples of the all important roles played by the medieval Muslims, not just in originating and inventing things from scratch but in rediscovering and interpreting and elaborating on things that originated elsewhere. They were the custodians of the learning of the ancient world much of which might have passed into oblivion if it hadn't been for the Muslims, and this brings us to our own Renaissance, which began essentially with the rediscovery by European scholars of the works of such ancient Greek philosophers and scientists like Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Hippocrates and Galen, but the Europeans didn't rediscover the work of these great thinkers by reading them in the original Greek. They read them in Arabic translations in centres of Islamic learning such as Baghdad, and Damascus, Cairo and Cordoba, where the Muslims sponsored massive translation projects of classical Greek masterpieces. In the 10th and 11th centuries, scholars flocked to these cities from all over Europe to study the Greek classics and Arabic and eventually to translate those Arabic versions into the Latin of the Western World, but since the educational activities that went on in the Great Islamic schools and mosques of the time drew not only from the learning of the Greeks, but also on the wisdom of the Chinese, the Indians, the Persians and the Jews. In a very real sense this was universal learning, so it's hardly surprising that this is where the idea of the University itself was born. The Mosque of Al Azhar in Cairo is in fact the world's oldest University. It was founded in 970AD and is still going strong today. Classes in Al Azhar continue to be conducted in medieval fashion, with all the students sitting at the feet of their professor, who is the only one to have a chair. This may well be where the idea of the "Chair of philosophy or history" in a university comes from. It's even argued that other traces of Islamic influence can be seen in the academic gowns that undergraduates still wear in the west, which bear a striking resemblance to the flowing robes of the Muslims.

All of this may help to explain some of the mixed feelings that many modern Middle Easterners have concerning our modern, western, high-tech civilisation. They regard it with a mixture of awe and condescension. On the one hand they're envious of all the scientific technological progress that we've made, on the other hand they can't help remembering who got us started on this path of progress in the first place. Those medieval Muslims who were the Torchbearers of culture and civilisation for more than 500 years, who lit up our "Dark Ages" and whose great empire once seemed poised to take over the entire world. In the year 732AD the Muslims even got as far as Poitiers in France, where they were defeated in a decisive battle by the Frankish ruler Charles Martell. Historians have often tried to imagine what might have happened had the Muslims won that battle of Poitiers. Would people be speaking Arabic in the streets of London today? But this is just idle speculation, because the Muslims lost...

Or did they???

In the preceding passages we can see that the Muslim Civilisation was very advanced but this also makes us ask WHAT HAPPENED? The answer is very simple; The Renaissance was the period when we started to decline and the west started to rise; it is also the time that the Islamic peoples started to forget their Islamic duties and to veer away from Islam. They created the division between Learning and Religion. They became separate entities. Are we going to make this mistake again? A quote that I heard once says it all: "The one thing man has learnt from History is that he didn't Learn from History!"