

---

# ARABIC CIVILIZATION

*Louis J. Scerri*

---

**T**HE brilliant civilization that blossomed in the wake of the all-conquering Arab armies left an indelible mark on countries stretching from Spain to India. Through the medium of the Arabic language, Muslim, Jew, and Christian were united in a common culture, which appears all the more remarkable when it is compared to the general darkness that had eclipsed most of Europe following the division of the Roman Empire.

The rapid Muslim advance all along the southern shores of the Mediterranean and up into Spain and southern France shattered that unity that had been the mark of the Middle Sea under the Romans. From being the centre of the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean, with its trade shrunken beyond recognition, would find itself relegated to the fringe of what was essentially a land-based Empire. The Mediterranean would remain a divided sea for the rest of its history!

It is indeed no easy matter even to give this outstanding civilization a suitable descriptive name. Calling it an *Arab* civilization would ignore the fact that it was people of other races who were responsible in a large part for its development and achievements. Similarly, describing it as *Muslim* or *Islamic* would imply a narrow religious definition, once again glossing over the far from negligible contribution that Christians, Jews, and members of other religions gave to its fulfilment. Perhaps the best definition is to call it *Arabic* as this would acknowledge that the characteristic unity of this civilization derived from the common use of the Arabic language.

For the Muslim, Arabic was 'the language of God' – the language in which the Koran had been dictated and from which it should never be translated for the true believer. Conquered peoples soon realized the value of learning this new language which became the *lingua franca* of all the lands won over by the Muslim armies. Arabic would make possible and facilitate that exchange of ideas which is the hallmark of a progressing civilization.

The most remarkable fact about Arabic civilization is that its origin can be traced to a single man who changed the whole course of a people and history itself. It was Muhammad who woke the Arabs from their centuries-old slumber on the fringe of great empires.

Born in about AD 570 into the powerful tribe of the Qurayshi and orphaned at a young age, Muhammad was forced to earn his living in the camel caravans, until he became a wealthy merchant himself following his wedding to a rich widow.

About the age of forty, Muhammad started having visions in which the angel Gabriel taught him the ways of God, teachings which he was enjoined to pass

on to his fellow man. Posthumously written down, Muhammad's teachings formed the Koran, one of mankind's great formative works. The Koran was the fundamental book of the new religion which became known as Islam (submission), and which demanded exclusive service to the one true God. For the Muslim, therefore, the Koran contains both a body of doctrine and a code of law at one and the same time.

Unlike the Jewish and the Christian God, Allah makes no demand for sacrificial offerings or the atonement of sins; neither does he have a role for any formal intermediary, such as rabbi or priest, between him and man.

Islam is essentially a simple religion that requires no abstruse philosophical reasoning or theological niceties to accept. The five duties, or Pillars, of Islam are:

- a) the *shahada*, the declaration that there is no God but Allah, of whom Muhammad is the last prophet,
- b) the *salat*, the regular prayers a true Muslim is expected to turn to Allah five times a day,
- c) the *zakat*, the donation of alms to the poor,
- d) the *sawm*, the fasting during the month of Ramadan, and
- e) the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Muhammad's revolutionary doctrine, inspired in good part by his encounters with Jews and Nestorian Christians, were not well-received by the idol-worshipping elders of his native Mecca. In AD 622 Muhammad fled to Medina, an event which Muslims refer to as the *Hegira*, and which marks the beginning of the Muslim era.

By the time of his death in AD 632, Muhammad had managed to overcome all opposition by argument or by the sword in almost all of Arabia. But, Islam being meant for all of mankind, the Arabs were set to start on a tremendous surge of conquests that, within a hundred years of the death of the Prophet, would give them an 'empire' one-and-a-half times the size of the Roman Empire.

The Arab invasions were followed by a noteworthy rise of the culture of the countries involved. The reasons for this are many.

By sweeping away a number of political frontiers, the 'Arab' armies created one of the first requirements of civilization: an extensive political unity. Early in their advance, the Arabs were fortunate to acquire, mostly with little bloodshed and negligible destruction, the river valleys of the Euphrates – Tigris and the Nile both of which had supported millenniums-old urban civilizations. In Syria they found a favourable native population which had drunk deep of Greek science and philosophy; the conquerors were most favourably impressed and the reaction resulted in the actual birth of Arabic civilization.

Following their military successes, there was no significant external threat to

Arabic civilization until the Turkish invasions of the eleventh century and the Mongol waves of the thirteenth. This stability fostered and encouraged the development of civilization.

The abolition of political frontiers resulted in the creation of an economic unit of vast territorial expanse that reached up to Northern Europe, the African lands south of the Sahara, and the faraway empire of China. Commerce brought about the expansion of cities and towns, the creation of fortunes, and a sophisticated society ready to extend its patronage to artists, philosophers, scholars, teachers, physicians, and artisans.

The spread of Arabic culture was not only hastened by the common Arabic language but it was greatly assisted by the new availability of paper made from hemp, rags, and tree bark, instead of the more costly parchment or vellum. Moreover Arabic numerals and the adoption of the symbol for nought would tremendously simplify calculation – a great boon to an empire founded on commerce. Certainly the considerable wealth of scientific literature that marks Arabic civilization would have been different without either.

The Arab advances were greatly facilitated by religious schisms that had alienated Syria and Egypt from their religious overlords in Constantinople. Muslim tolerance often made persecuted heretical Christians look upon the invading armies as liberators who were only really resisted by small garrisons. Ironically the Muslim advance would militate in favour of the emergence of Rome as the primary Christian power. With the Muslims taking over three of the original patriarchates of the Christian Church (Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem) and with the Patriarch of Constantinople becoming a mere functionary of the Byzantine emperor, the way was left open for Rome to claim pre-eminence over the whole Church.

Though Muhammad's new religion provided the initial zeal, it is a complete misconception to equate Arabic civilization with Islam. Islam would only provide Arabic grammar, law, and theology, but Arabic civilization would draw heavily on non-Muslim sources for the rest of its necessities.

Arabic civilization was to a large extent shaped by Greek science and philosophy, even though they were obtained indirectly through the Byzantine Greeks and their pupils in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. For some two centuries, from AD 800 onwards, a notable activity of translating Greek works from Syriac into Arabic took place that was to have significant effects on the future development of Arabic knowledge. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, contacts between Muslims and Christians in Spain would lead to a wave of translations from Arabic to Latin that would serve to re-introduce the words of the Greek philosophers to the Christian West.

In addition to its Greek sources, Arabic civilization also greatly benefited from Sanskrit lore which was obtained through the Persians at roughly the same time.

Greece and India were to provide a simultaneous stimulus: Greece with its science and philosophy, India with its Sanskrit medical lore and Hindu mathematical achievement.

For a long time Baghdad was the centre of Arabic intellectual activity – a capital of a world civilization with an amazing mixture of beliefs and languages all in one province. At Basra and Kafa, the study of Arabic philology and Islamic law were born. Baghdad became the home of Arabic scholarship until its calamitous destruction by the Mongol hordes in 1258.

It was the Persians, however, who were to contribute most to Arabic civilization. A non-Semitic people, had a civilization going back a thousand years before the birth of Islam, which lapped up its enormous cultural wealth. The Persian scholars, scientists, and poets who contributed to the greatness of Arabic civilization included the physicians Rhazes (Razi) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina), the historians Tabari and Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah, the mathematician and poet Omar Khayyam, and the astronomer Nasir al-Din al-Tusi.

Still the most notable feature of Arabic civilization in its prime was its multi-racial nature. In addition to Arabs and Persians, Syrians, Turks, Egyptians, Spaniards, and Berbers all contributed significantly to it. Its philosophers include al-Kindi, an Arab; al-Farabi, a Turk from Transoxiana; Avicenna (Ibn Sina) a Persian; and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) a Spanish Moor from Cordoba. Indeed much of Arabic philosophical literature was written by Jews who made full use of the tolerance of the Muslims who did not persecute them.

The most original contribution of Arabic civilization was in medicine. In Islamic society the doctor was held in high respect, unlike Greece and Rome where the medical profession was the province of freed slaves. Important discoveries were made in opthalmology, a direct result of the common occurrence of eye-diseases in the desert. The study of medicine served to introduce the study of natural sciences among the Arabs who, in the long run, were to add substantially to Greek and Indian medical knowledge.

Like all civilizations, Arabic civilization was selective in what it borrowed. So, from Greece it borrowed logic and metaphysics that served to give a sounder and rational form to their desert doctrine to make it more acceptable to a sophisticated society. Islam, however, was not really interested in and therefore ignored the enormous Greek contribution in drama, poetry, art, and historiography. Hindu philosophy was on the other hand disregarded but Hindu medicine and mathematics played a determining role. Byzantine and Persian architecture proved most worthy sources of inspiration. Drawing from and building upon what it borrowed from other civilizations, Islam was able to mark new heights of human achievement. Until the thirteenth century, when it began to fade, Islam led the world in the sciences until the nations of western Europe emerged from

their obscurity.

Arabian civilization started to decline following the end of that period of peace that had made possible its flowering. The nomadic invasions on its North African and western Asian borders were followed by the devastating Mongol waves in the thirteenth century, culminating in the fall of Baghdad that prefigured the epoch-making fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Turks. Indeed with the fierce Turks becoming the leading exponents of Islam there would not be much striving for artistic excellence. Fired with the typical fanaticism of recent converts, the Turks would find the scimitar a more congenial weapon.

This period of general unsettlement brought about the decline of city life and economic prosperity – a particularly catastrophic future considering that Arabic civilization was essentially urban and commercial in nature. The attacks on the caravan routes diminished and curtailed that exchange of goods which is the basis of commercial wealth – a lacuna that could not be filled with technological substitutes for which there was no great need owing to the plentiful supply of slaves.

The growth of self-governing institutions, or at least the banding together of the cities for the purpose of defence, developments that could have served to delay the inevitable, failed to take place because citizens often felt that their primary loyalty lay to their respective religions. Ironically Muslim tolerance allowed the Jewish and Christian communities to retain their separate identities with negative results on the general unity. The declining city meant a decline in intellectual output.

The fragmentation of the 'empire' entailed the loss of that linguistic and cultural unity that made possible the wide cross-fertilization of ideas. Persian revived and experienced a literary renaissance, while Arabic was retained mostly for works of theology and law. It was Persian culture the Turks first encountered on their migration westwards and it was Persian culture they carried with them to the doors of Europe. Their language, Turkish, eclipsed Arabic in importance; the Muslim world was split along linguistic lines as Medieval Europe would lose its linguistic unity owing to the development of vernacular languages.

But what contributed in an outstanding manner to the decline of Arabic civilization was that it was so heavily influenced by the religious nature of Islam. Before Muhammad there lay no secular tradition that could be 're-discovered': there could never be an Arabic renaissance, for example, as happened in the Christian West and that was based on the re-discovery of Greek science and rationalism.

The search for knowledge in Islam was inextricably tied up with the search for a better understanding of God – indeed secular learning for its own sake was frowned upon. Implicit in Islam from its earliest times, this anti-secularist

attitude became even stronger later under the Seljuk Turks, mainly as a means of protecting orthodoxy in the face of a possible infiltration of Greek philosophic ideas. *Madrasas* were founded where the *only* intensive study was restricted to religious instruction. With the *Sharia* (Islamic law) dominating Muslim life, no borrowings from outside were possible. In Spain, Averroes was exposed to the change of propagating Atheism for defending the teaching of secular science.

The zenith, or the nadir, was reached with the great Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun dismissing as useless all secular knowledge for truth, he said, only came from divine revelation. Secular sciences, the basis of that urge to find out more, were shunned and put aside, creating the right conditions for that cultural stagnation that invariably precedes decline.