
Introduction

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- This book discusses the main cultural trends that have greatly influenced Arab thought and culture for a considerable time span that extended from the appearance of Islam down to our present day.
- These trends have in fact shaped Arab concept of time and place, of the world and the hereafter.

Part I: The Making of a World: An Arab Islamic World

Chapter I: A New Power in an Old World

I.1 Introduction

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- In the early seventh century a religious movement appeared on the margins of the great empires, those of the Byzantines and Sassanians (Sassanids) .
- In Mecca, a town in western Arabia, Muhammad began to call men and women to moral reform and submission to the will of God as expressed in what has been accepted as divine messages revealed to him and later embodied in a book, the Qur'an.

I.1 Introduction

- In the name of the new religion, Islam, armies drawn from inhabitants of Arabia conquered the surrounding countries and founded a new empire, the caliphate, which included much of the territory of the Byzantine Empire and all that of the Sasanian (Sassanid), and extended from central Asia to Spain.
- The center of power moved from Arabia to Damascus in Syria under the Umayyad caliphs, and then to Baghdad in Iraq under the Abbasids.

I.1 Introduction

- By the tenth century the caliphate was breaking up, and rival caliphates appeared in Egypt and Spain, but the social and cultural unity, which had developed within it, continued.
- A large part of the population had become Muslims although Jewish, Christian and other communities remained.
- The Arabic language had spread and became the medium of a culture which incorporated elements from the traditions of peoples absorbed into the Muslim world, and expressed itself in literature and in systems of law, theology, and spirituality.

I.1 Introduction

- Within different physical environments, Muslim societies developed distinctive institutions and forms.
- The links established between countries in the Mediterranean basin and in that of the Indian Ocean created a single trading system and brought about changes in agriculture and crafts, providing the basis for the growth of great cities with an urban civilization expressed in buildings of a distinctive Islamic style.

I.2 The World into Which the Arabs Came

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- For many centuries the countries of the Mediterranean basin had been part of the Roman Empire.
- A settled countryside produced grain, fruits, wine and oil, and trade was carried along peaceful sea-routes.
- From the fourth century of the Christian era, the center of imperial power had moved eastwards.
- Constantinople replaced Rome as the capital city.

I.2 The World into Which the Arabs Came

- In Germany, England, France; Spain and northern Italy, barbarian kings ruled, although the sense of belonging to the Roman Empire still existed.
- Southern Italy, Sicily, the north African coast, Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, and Greece remained under direct imperial rule from Constantinople.

I.2 The World into Which the Arabs Came

- The emperor ruled through Greek-speaking civil servants; the great cities of the eastern Mediterranean, Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt were centers of Greek culture.
- The empire had become Christian, not just by formal decree of the ruler but by conversion at different levels.
- The majority of the population was Christian, although pagan philosophers taught in the school of Athens until the sixth century, Jewish communities lived in the cities, and memories of the pagan gods still haunted the temples turned into churches.

I.2 The World into Which the Arabs Came

- Christianity gave a new dimension to the loyalty felt towards the emperor and a new framework of unity for the local cultures of those he ruled.
- The self-governing institutions of the Greek cities had disappeared with the expansion of the imperial bureaucracy, but bishops could provide local leadership.
- Beside the official Orthodox Church, there grew up others which differed from it in doctrine and practice.

I.2 The World into Which the Arabs Came

- To the east of the Byzantine Empire, across the Euphrates river, lay another great empire, that of the Sassanians (or Sassanids), whose rule extended over what are now Iran and Iraq, and stretched into central Asia.
- The land now called Iran or Persia contained a number of regions of high culture and ancient cities inhabited by different ethnic groups.
- After Alexander the Great conquered Iran in 34-33 BC and drew it into closer ties with the eastern Mediterranean world, ideas from the Greek world moved eastwards.

I.2 The World into Which the Arabs Came

- Under the Sasanians, the teaching associated with Zoroaster was revived in a philosophical form.
- For this religion, the universe was a battle-ground, beneath the Supreme God, between good and evil spirits; the good would win, but men and women of virtue and ritual purity could hasten the victory.
- Besides Zoroastrians, Iraq had Christians.

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- Various forms of the Persian language were widespread; the written form used at the time is known as Pahlavi.
- Widespread too was Aramaic, one of its forms is known as Syriac.
- The two empires included the main regions of settled life and high culture in the western half of the world, but further south, on either side of the Red Sea, lay two other societies with traditions of organized power and culture maintained by agriculture and by trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.

I.2 The World into Which the Arabs Came

- One was Ethiopia and the other was Yemen.
- ~~The greater part of the Arabian peninsula was desert, with isolated oases having enough water for regular cultivation.~~
- The inhabitants spoke various dialects of Arabic and followed different ways of life.
- Some of them were nomads who pastured camels, sheep or goats by using the scanty water resources of the desert; these have traditionally been known as `bedouins`.

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- Some were settled cultivators tending their grain or palm trees in the oases, or traders and craftsmen in small market towns.
- It was the camel-nomads who, together with merchant groups in the town, dominated the cultivators and craftsmen.
- Their ethos of courage, hospitality, loyalty to family, and pride of ancestry were also dominant.

I.2 The World into Which the Arabs Came

- The religion of pastoralists and cultivators seems to have had no clear shape. Local gods, identified with objects in the sky, were thought to be embodied in stones, trees and other natural things; good and evil spirits were believed to roam the world in the shape of animals.
- Throughout this near Eastern world much was changing in the sixth and early seventh centuries.
- The Byzantine and Sassanian Empires were engaged in long wars.

I.3 The Language of Poetry in Arab Culture

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- A sense of cultural identity also seems to have been growing among the pastoral tribesmen, shown in the emergence of a common poetic language out of the dialects of Arabic.
- This was a formal language, with refinements of grammar and vocabulary.
- The poetic conventions which emerged from this tradition were elaborate. The poetic form most highly valued was the ode or qasida, a poem up to 100 lines, written in one of a number of accepted meters and with single rhyme running through it.

I. 3 The Language of Poetry in Arab Culture

- Poems were not written down. They were composed to be recited in public, either by the poet himself or by a raw (reciter).
- This can explain why there is no single authentic version of a poem.
- The earliest Arabic inscription, Aramaic script, can be dated to the fourth century.
- Supreme poems came to be called the muallaqat or 'suspended poems', a name of which the origin and meaning are obscure.

Chapter II: Prophet Muhammad and the Appearance of Islam

II.1 Introduction

Introduction

- By the early seventh century, a new political order was created which included the whole of the Arabian peninsula, the whole of the Sasanian (Sassanid) lands, and the Syrian and Egyptian provinces of the Byzantine Empire; old frontiers were erased and new ones created.
- In this new world order, the ruling group was formed not by the peoples of the empires but by Arabs from western Arabia and, to a great extent, from Mecca.

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- ~~Before the end of the seventh century, Arab ruling group~~ identifying its new order with a revelation given by God to Muhammad, a citizen of Mecca, in the form of a holy book, the Qur'an.
- A revelation which completed those given to earlier prophets or messengers of God and created a new religion, Islam, separate from Judaism and Christianity.

II.2 First Signs of Prophecy

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- Biographers say that he was born in Mecca, a town in Arabia, perhaps in or near the year 570.
- His family belonged to the tribe of Quraysh, although not to its most powerful part.
- Members of the tribe were traders.
- Muhammad married Khadija, a widow engaged in trade, and looked after her business for her.

II.2 First Signs of Prophecy

- Perhaps when he was about forty years old, something happened: some contact with the supernatural, known to later generations as the Night of Power or Destiny (laylatel Qadre).
- In one version, an angel, seen in the form of a man on the horizon, called to him to become the messenger of God; in another, he heard the angel's voice summoning him to recite.