

# Islamic Empires

## 1. Islamic Achievements

Our modern age is usually considered to be a period of rapid progress, of technology, inventions, and science. But very many of these developments have their roots in earlier times. Would you have thought that

- the digits we use for calculation, which we write and feed into our computers every day, were introduced to Europe in the 9th century by a scholar named Al-Khwarismi who used “Indian numerals,” including a ‘zero’ (which he called “sifr,” meaning ‘empty, naught’ in the Arabic language), to indicate the place value of numbers?
- by the year 1000, Arabian doctors worked in big hospitals with specialised wards, setting bones by using plasters and adhesive bandages? They did complicated brain and eye surgery, treated patients applying effective cancer therapy, and knew all about the transmission of diseases like tuberculosis, measles, and smallpox?
- the words for common things in our daily lives, the cotton our T-shirts are made of, the artichokes on our pizza, the mattresses we sleep on, and our morning coffee are practically the same as the ones used in the countries of their origin, the Islamic empires of the Middle Ages?

How did this impact of Arabian culture on our everyday life come about?

## 2. Origins and Expansion of Islam

At a time when medieval Europe was trying to recover from the fall of the Roman Empire and from the establishment of new Germanic states, when Christianity slowly took hold in their territories, when the ‘East Roman’ Byzantine emperors were still trying to win back the west, a new force had appeared: Islam and its armies. Muhammad, the founder and prophet of Islam, had died in 632; his followers elected a new leader to guide them in religious and political affairs. The ‘caliphs’\* (= successors) held political and spiritual power as the head of their community. Their armies poured out

from Arabia, bringing the lands from Persia to Spain under their control in a very short period of time. In 638, they took Jerusalem, a central place of Hebrew and Christian faith, and Egypt was conquered in 642. The Berbers\* in ‘Ifriqiya’, present-day Libya, Tunisia and Algeria, and the Maghreb\* (Arabic: ‘west’, today’s Morocco) became Muslims and were governed by Arabic ‘emirs’\* (= governors, princes). Fleets were constructed; in 711, a small group of soldiers under their general Tariq landed at the southernmost

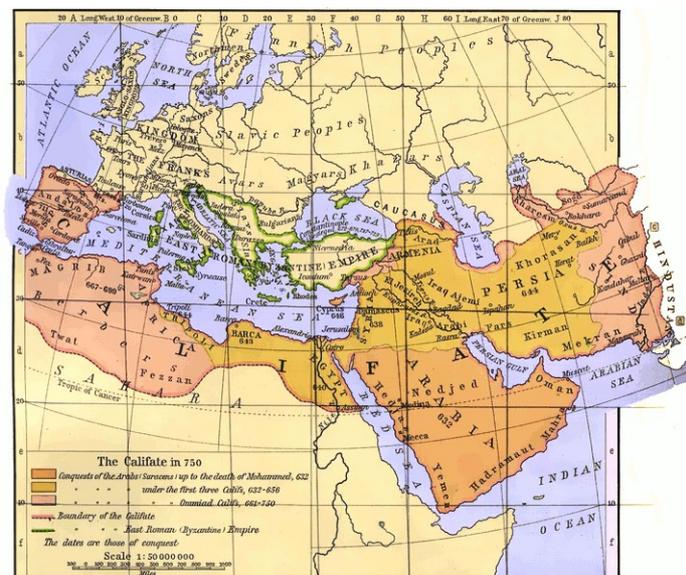


Image 1: The caliphate in 750, from *The Historical Atlas* by William R. Shepherd, 1926

mountain (‘jabal’ in Arabic) of the Spanish peninsula: Jabal al-Tariq has kept its name ‘Gibraltar’ until

today. Another fleet took Sicily from the Byzantines in a series of attempts from 740 to 902. In Asia, Muslim troops controlled territories in Afghanistan and India up to the Chinese border.

### **3. Christian Reactions**

Christian rulers and peoples were shocked: the waves of Arabic armies seemed endless and unstoppable, and the empires they established grew and prospered. In a big effort, the Byzantines managed to defeat an Arabic army besieging Constantinople in 718, thus stopping their advance in Asia Minor; in the west, it was a Frankish general, Charles Martel\*, who succeeded in preventing the further advance of the Arabs after they had crossed all Spain, the Pyrenees, and southern France in the battle of Tours in 732. But even though the Arab expansion in general came to a halt, the Islamic states continued to be a threat to medieval and early modern Europe: Italy suffered constant ‘Saracen’\* raids in the 9th and 10th centuries; important monasteries and cities in the heart of the country were set on fire, their possessions looted, and inhabitants sold into slavery. During the time of the Crusades (see Crusades), Christians felt threatened by the Islamic reconquest of the Holy Land. In Spain, the Christian kings of Northern Spain gradually pushed Muslim dominion back to the south, conquering the big Muslim cities one by one: in 1085 Toledo fell, in 1236 Cordoba. The ‘Reconquista’\* was completed in 1492 with the surrender of Granada.

In the east, however, Constantinople had been taken by the Turkish Ottoman\* sultan Mehmet II and his armies in 1453, and from then on southeastern Europe and the eastern part of the Mediterranean were under Turkish rule. The ‘Turkish danger’ presented a constant threat to the eastern borders of the Holy Roman Empire until the naval battle of Lepanto\* (1571) broke the dominance of the Turkish fleet. In 1683, the Turks, who for the second time were laying siege to Vienna and were about to enter the imperial capital, were finally driven from their trenches by a German-Polish army, thus marking the beginning of the end of Turkish domination in Eastern Europe. But the memory of these threats stayed very much alive in Christian Europe.

### **4. The Organisation of the Islamic Empires**

So far you have read conflicting views on these Muslim empires: on the one hand, that fierce Muslim armies were a threat to Christianity, and, on the other hand, that these empires were medieval high-tech and science centres, as well as the cradle of many European achievements, a shaping part of European history. You may ask yourself what relationship the Muslims had to the local population of these conquered territories who practiced other religions. You may also ask yourself how such an empire could become as large as that of the Romans. In order to find answers, let’s turn back to the beginnings of the Islamic states.

#### **4.1. Cooperation with the Local Populations**

The Arab conquerors were a rather small group of combat-tested and motivated soldiers under the leadership of their caliph who held military, religious, political, and judicial power. In the conquered lands, it was often easy for them to cooperate with the local population: they found people who were discontented with their preceding rulers. Moreover, these lands had already been weakened by previous attacks and wars. The new religion appealed to people: all believers were equal before Allah and

were given clear rules for their daily lives, though they were not forced to convert to Islam: if they kept to certain rules and paid the *jizya*\*, a minority tax, Jews and Christians were tolerated, according to the teaching of the Quran\*, “There shall be no compulsion in religion: the right way is now distinct from the wrong way. Anyone who denounces the devil and believes in GOD has grasped the strongest bond.” (Sura 2:256)

## 4.2 Government and Administration

Muhammad’s successor, the caliph of Damascus, appointed governors (emirs or sultans) to take care of the newly won territories. These rulers often had advisors or ministers, the viziers\*, an office adopted from the Persians, to control their state affairs. The vizier was the leader of the Divan\*, a council of important men in the state. Justice was administered according to the laws of the ‘Sharia’\* which was inspired by the teaching of the Quran and traditional customs, collected in Hadith\*. Like English common law, they were not written down, but taught and discussed in special law schools where the judges were trained. Today the Sharia, still in use in Islamic states, is sometimes criticized for a number of allegedly backward laws, but in the centuries after Arab expansion, it was admired and imitated for many of its enlightened principles.

Taxes were collected according to a very efficient system, and as Muslim rulers encouraged trade, skilled craftwork, and reforms in agriculture, their income from taxes, customs, and other dues was considerable. A common coinage was introduced, weights and measures were standardized, and as it was forbidden to translate Allah’s words in the Quran, every Muslim learnt Arabic. So Arabic became the common language for Christians, Jews, and Muslims in many spheres of life, at least in the urban centres of many of the new territories.

## 5. The First Caliphates in Damascus and Baghdad (661–1258)

Having conquered Syria (635), Palestine (642), and Egypt (642), Muhammad’s second successor Omar established the first Islamic empire with its ancient capital Damascus; when Omar’s family was toppled by the Abbasids\*, a new capital, Baghdad (in present-day Iraq), was built in 762. It had enormous double city walls made from bricks with four huge gates. In its centre, a big mosque and the Golden Gate palace, where the caliph and his family lived, were built. The city had a sophisticated irrigation system of aqueducts, dykes, and canals, fountains and cisterns which fed its many palaces, numerous public baths, and a big hospital. Baghdad was a crossroads for many trade routes: merchants arrived with their caravans, sold their wares at the big markets, and found staple and resting space in the caravanserai, the motel of the time. Goods also arrived at and parted from the port on the river Tigris. Baghdad had up to 2 million inhabitants. It was the largest city in the world, surpassed only by Cordoba in Al-Andalus after 930 – the population of London was about 18,000 by the early 12<sup>th</sup> century and that of Cologne about 30,000 in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries!

The Abbasids, descendants of Muhammad’s uncle, also considered themselves successors to the Persian kings and adopted Persian traditions and culture. The Royal Academy of Jundi-Shapur\*, a Persian centre of



Image 2: Ibn al-Bawwab (one of three great medieval masters of Islamic calligraphy), early example of a Quran copied in a vertical format on paper. 1000–1 A.D.

learning founded in 271 AD, comprised the world's oldest known teaching hospital, a university, and a library. Syriac Christians, Persians, Greeks, and Indian and Chinese scholars worked together to collect the most important works of their cultures, to translate them into Arabic, and to develop them further. A similar centre was founded in Baghdad, the so-called House of Wisdom (Bait al-Hikma). That is how the writings of many Greek classical writers like Pythagoras\*, Plato\*, Aristotle\*, Hippocrates\*, Euclid\*, Plotinus\*, and Galen\* have come down to us. The library of Cordoba contained about 500,000 books – the library of the House of Wisdom cannot have been much smaller. (Good libraries in Christian monasteries at that time counted 200 to 300 volumes!) Such an enormous number was made possible by a new material these books were made from – paper. Papermaking had been introduced from China around 750; there were stationery shops around the House of Wisdom where scholars could buy paper to write down their findings.

The city of Baghdad with all its libraries and public buildings was destroyed during the Mongol\* invasion in 1258. It was said that the waters of the Tigris ran black for six months with ink from all the books thrown into the river! The caliphate of Baghdad never really recovered from the blow.

## 6. The Emirate of Cordoba: Al-Andalus (756–1492)

In the meantime, another prosperous Islamic empire had risen in the west: Tariq with his Berber troops had managed to overthrow the Visigoth\* king; some of his nobles fled north, but others reached agreements with the new powers allowing them to keep their property and privileges. Arab, Berber, and Visigoth rebellions were eventually put down, and from 756 on, the emirate became an independent state. Its capital Cordoba soon rivalled the splendours of Baghdad. Under its caliph Abd al-Rahman III (912–961) and his successors, Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived together and were allowed to worship God in their different ways and to administer to the needs of their communities. This tolerance also helped to keep peace between the different Muslim ethnicities. It made cultural exchange easy and abundant. Poets, philosophers, and scientists wrote in Arabic, Latin, or Hebrew; the simple people spoke their Arabic dialect and early Spanish. Christian students from all over Europe flocked to Arabic universities in Cordoba, Sevilla, Toledo, and Zaragoza which were famous for their excellent teaching, their libraries, and translation centres. In this way, medieval Europe made acquaintance with classical Greek and Arabian writers in their Latin translations.

Cordoba's scholars were renowned for their rational, practical approach to the sciences: mathematicians laid the foundations of algebra, astronomers developed instruments for mapping stars (many of them still bear Arabic names, e. g. Sirius, Betelgeuse) and for establishing very accurate calendars; geographers described the different climate zones and the countries they had seen in their travels. Botanists classified plants and described methods for their cultivation and grafting. The most spectacular results, however, were achieved in the field of medicine: Cordoba possessed very many hospitals where nurses offered a 24-hour service and doctors in specialized wards performed complicated eye, brain, and dental surgery, using the most sophisticated surgical instruments. Autopsies were carried out to learn more about anatomy and causes of death. In their writings, doctors described the way diseases are transmitted, the possibility of vaccines, and the main principles of hygiene.

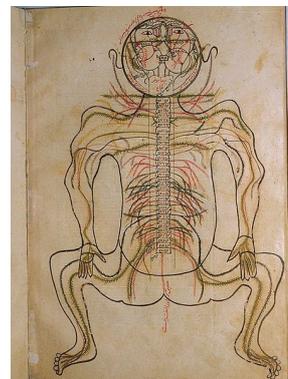


Image 3: Mansur ibn Ilyas, *Anatomy of the Human Body*, Iran, ca. 1450

Al-Andalus was also a centre of technological progress. Highly advanced irrigation methods were used to cultivate rich, sometimes exotic, crops. There were underground water canals to avoid evaporation, water wheels with a chain of pots driven by animals, wells and dams, and water clocks to indicate the time of irrigation. As paper was used in great quantities, you could find paper mills nearly everywhere; other goods were produced in large factories.

The products of Spain were traded to all parts of the known world; but Cordoba also served as a trading centre for amber and furs, for slaves from the Baltic Sea, Poland, and Russia, for ostrich feathers and gold from Africa, for silk and spices from China and India, and for all goods from the other Islamic empires bordering on the Eastern Mediterranean. Andalusians could look with equal contempt upon rude and primitive savages, black ones to the south and white ones to the north!

In the 11th century, Al-Andalus was weakened by internal strife and lack of unity; this made it easy for its Christian opponents in the north of Spain to 'reconquer' Muslim land: Cordoba fell in 1236, Sevilla in 1248, and with the conquest of Granada in 1492, the Christian 'Reconquista' was complete. With it, 700 years of coexistence of different cultures finished, and religious intolerance set in.

## 7. The Ottoman Empire (1299–1923)

When the last Muslim territory in Spain was taken by a Christian army, the balance of power between the two religious camps in another part of Europe had already been tipped in favour of Islam: for centuries, Turkish Muslim tribes had step by step captured parts of the weakened Byzantine empire. In 1453, however, its capital, Constantinople, was taken by the troops of the young Ottoman sultan, Mehmet II, after a long siege, a victory which marked the end of nearly 1,100 years of East Roman rule.

Greek scholars, church officials, printers, and politicians fled the city and migrated to Europe, in particular to Italy. They took their knowledge and documents of classical works with them, adding to the treasures from Baghdad and Al-Andalus and thus fueling the Renaissance\* of classical antiquity.

Mehmet II made the conquered city his capital and headquarters for further conquests in the Balkans and the Peloponnese. Although the cathedral of Hagia Sophia\* was converted into a mosque, the Greek

Orthodox Church\* remained intact, the Christian citizens were invited to stay, and their churches were protected by the sultan's troops. This tolerance towards non-Muslims was extended to Jews, Armenians, and Syrians: they had separate law courts, were allowed to administer their own communities, and collected and distributed their own taxes.



Image 4: Jean Chartier, *Siege of Constantinople*, 3rd quarter of the 15th century

Another feature for which the Ottoman Empire was feared, but also admired, in Europe was the efficiency of its civil servants and the soldiers of its standing army. Most of them were of Slavic and Balkan origin: every four years, the sultan's emissaries conscripted boys from Christian families at an average age of 14–18 to be converted to Islam,

5 trained, and then enrolled in the sultan's service. Some of them even rose to be Grand Viziers, the sultan's advisors and ministers; the majority became part of the sultan's army of 'Janissaries', well-paid, excellently trained soldiers who were able to master innovative weapons like muskets, guns, and cannons. The Janissaries were slaves, but they held an honoured position in the Ottoman Empire; up to the 19th century, when the Christian national groups started their fight for independence, the sultan could count on their  
15 loyalty.

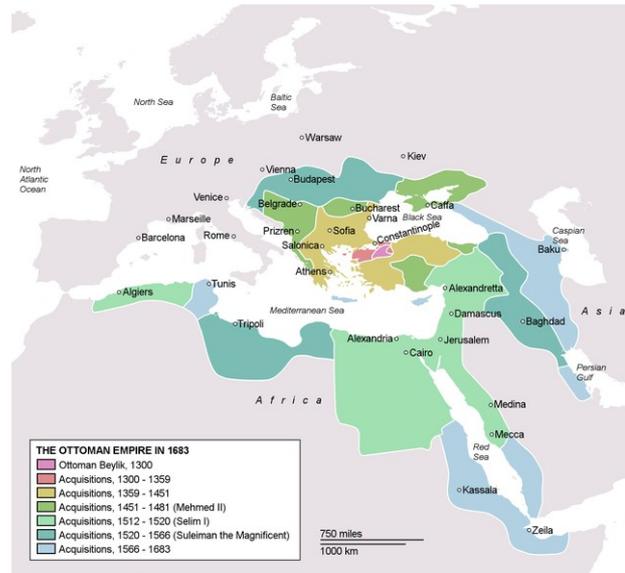


Image 5: Ottoman Empire at its greatest extent, in 1683, author: Atilim Gunes Baydin

The Ottoman Empire controlled the major overland trade routes from and to India, and its fleets protected the sea routes; this was one of the reasons why Christopher Columbus and others tried to discover a westward route to India. But in spite of its wealth and resources, the Ottoman Empire started lagging behind the western powers: military techniques started to change in Europe, a growing intellectual and religious conservatism prevented necessary educational and technological reforms, and in the 19th century the national fights for independence in the different regions (Greece 1829, Serbia 1875, Bulgaria 1908) and on the borders of the empire further destabilized the central power. After its defeat in World War I in which it had been the ally of Germany and Austria, the Ottoman Empire  
25 was abolished. Its central parts in Asia and southeastern Europe became the Republic of Turkey; Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Palestine became independent states. Some of today's problems can be traced back to these times, e. g. the war between Serbs, Bosnians, and Albanians in the 1990s, or the conflicts of ethnic and religious groups in Iraq and Palestine. Also, Turkey's human rights problems and its conflict with Greece and Cyprus – obstacles to Turkey becoming a full member of the EU – have their  
30 roots in the Ottoman Empire.

## 8. The Mughal Empire in India (1526–1857)

Arab troops had not only conquered the southern parts of the former Roman Empire, they had even advanced to the fertile Indus plain. In the centuries to come, their successors expanded their power, and several Muslim states emerged and were finally absorbed by the enormous Indian 'Mughal' (=Mongol) Empire. It had been founded by the descendants of Central Asian Mongols who had been converted to Islam. Its capital, Agra, became famous for the splendid buildings the Mughal emperors erected, among them the Taj-Mahal, the burial place of Emperor Sha Jahan's beloved wife Mumtaz  
35



Image 6: Taj Mahal, built in 1632–1653, photo: S. Stamnitz Dellacroce

Mahal. The Taj Mahal, one of the most beautiful buildings in the world, is testimony to the outstanding skills of Mughal architects, artisans, and water engineers; it documents the cultural links between Islamic empires from Morocco and Spain to India.

5 In its period of glory, the Mughal Empire was a model of efficient methods of keeping together and administrating a huge empire. The government was divided in several departments: the royal household, the Exchequer\* (responsible for tax collecting, coining money, and planning state expenditure), offices for law and order, for religious affairs, and even one for the postal system with its runners, horsemen, and road building services. Their heads as well as the military governors who were put in charge of large cities and provinces reported directly back to the emperor. All these officers  
10 were paid salaries; they did not own land and were not powerful as barons and noblemen in Europe were. The emperors established a severe, but fair system of taxation based on a percentage of crop value over ten years; no tax was paid if a harvest failed. When the Mughal Empire grew weak and British rule was firmly established, this efficient administration system greatly helped the new masters to rule the British colony\*.

15 The Mughal emperors left another legacy to modern India and Pakistan: Akbar the Great's reign (1562–1605) was a period of tolerance and acceptance of different religions. The native Hindus\* had access to high positions at court, and the extra-tax for non-Muslims was abolished. Akbar introduced a policy of intermarriage: one of his wives was a Hindu Rajput\* princess, another one may have been a Christian. In his palace, he held religious debates with Sikhs\*, Hindus, Buddhists\*, atheists\*, and Portuguese Catholic Jesuits\*. His successors were much less tolerant: Hindu temples were destroyed, and Sharia law was imposed on a non-Muslim country; rebellions broke out and weakened the huge empire. These traditions of tolerance and non-violence on the one hand, and of violent religious conflicts on the other, are still part of present-day Indian and Pakistani politics.

## **9. Muslim Heritage**

Some of the reasons why all of these powerful, highly civilized empires have come to an end, why  
25 present-day Islamic countries are no longer centres of progress, of economic and social prosperity, and of technical development, have already been stated. Scholars continue debating various issues: is it Islam itself which does not open up to the modern world, to critical questioning of traditional authorities and to the acknowledgement of individual rights? Is it the absence of an industrial revolution as Europe experienced? Were the empires simply too big, their populations too diverse? The answers  
30 might help us to better understand some of the conflicts of our time.

We started out with some common things from our daily lives and traced them back to their origin in Islamic cultures. People in Spain, Sicily, and Greece would recognize many more of their roots in Islamic traditions. Some countries in Europe still have large Muslim minorities (Russia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Cyprus); the populations of Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo are  
35 mainly Muslim. Young Turks study their Ottoman history at school, as the students of Indian and Pakistani origin in Great Britain study their Mughal history along with their British classmates. The history of the Islamic Empires is part of European history.