About the journal

Hadeeth ad-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the Cultural Season. Hadeeth ad-Dar was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 16 got underway in October 2010 and, as with previous years, is presenting scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is a government cultural organisation based on a Kuwaiti private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organisation created to manage the loan of the prestigious al-Sabah Collection of art from the Islamic world to the State of Kuwait to become an internationally recognised cultural organisation.

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LNS 320 HS
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carved from nephrite jade
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Height 20 mm; diameter 175mm
India, probably Deccan,
2nd - 3rd quarter 17th century AD

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The modernity of Jahiz and his *Kitab al-Hayawan*

Valentina Colombo
Presented in English
2 November 2009

“*A book is a vase full of knowledge, a container overflowing with refinement, a cup of seriousness and fun*”

Jahiz

Abu Ḩāmid ‘Alī ibn Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ẓarīṭī al-Ajrūrī (c. 781 – 868) is one of the most important intellectuals in Arab literature and culture. He holds a special place in my life since I owe to him, together with Naguib Mahfuz, my deep love for Arabic literature and culture.

Belonging to the mu’tazila school of thought, that is the first school of Islamic free thinkers, he wrote about a wide range of topics as can easily be seen from the titles of his main works: the *Book of Misers* (Kitāb al-Bukhalā), the *Epistle of Teachers* (Kitāb al-Tabī‘), the *Epistle of Singing Girls* (Kitāb al-tarbi‘ wa-al-tadwir), the *Book of Eloquence and Demonstration* (Kitāb al-bayan wa-al-tabyn), the *Book of Round and Square* (Kitāb al-tabī‘ wa-al-tabdi‘), the *Epistle of Concubines and Ephebes*, the *Epistle of Singing Girls*, the *Answer to Christians*, the *Epistle of Teachers* and many other essays. Many manuscripts of his works are held in the most important Oriental libraries, such as the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Ambrosiana Library in Milan, the Topkapi Library – where you can find one of the most beautiful copies of the *Kitab al-Hayawan*, and the National Library in Cairo.

In all his work – the French orientalist Charles Pellat in his *Essai d’inventaire de l’oeuvre jahizienne* counted 231 works – Jahiz showed a deep and peerless knowledge of human mind and human beings, of literature and history, of politics and theology, of sociology and psychology. I am firmly convinced that his masterpiece ever was the *Kitab al-Hayawan*, title usually translated into English as the *Book of Animals*.

The title

In my opinion a better translation, which is no doubt closer to its content, would be the *Book of Human Beings*. Even though in Arabic literature titles are usually very general and often have nothing to do with their contents, in this case the title is accurate, but requires a deeper analysis.

The term *hayawan* occurs in the Qur’anic text only once in sura XXIX, 64 with the meaning of “true life”: “It is the life to come that is the true life if they but knew it.”

In Edward William Lane’s Arabic-English Lexicon *hayawan* is defined as a singular noun meaning “*Any thing, or things, possessing animal life, whether rational or irrational*.”

Jahiz himself confirms our translation “Book of human beings” when he classifies them in animals and vegetals, and further divides them in three categories: 1. Animals walking, that is men (nas); not carnivorous quadrupeds (baha’im); carnivorous quadrupeds; 2. Birds that are carnivorous birds; not carnivorous birds, winged insects; 3. Not winged insects.

Another important distinction he made in *Kitab al-Hayawan* among human beings, which will be very important for our discussion, is the one based on language. He made a distinction between beings with articulated and intelligible language (*fasih*), that is human beings, and beings with unarticulated and unintelligible language (*a’jam*), that is any being making obscure sounds, which are meaningless except for beings of the same kind (*jins*). While drawing this distinction he underlined the superiority of Arab language and eloquence:

“*A man is a being speaking a articulated, clear, intelligible language, no matter if he speaks Persian, Hindu or Greek. An Arab cannot understand the mutterings of a Byzantine just like a Byzantine cannot understand the eloquence of [Arabic] (I, 31-33).*”

**Arabic language**

In what may be described as one of the earliest comparative linguistic attempts, Jahiz wrote that whereas languages and ideas of non-Arabs had followed a process of immense meditation and long exercise of the mind, and rested heavily on studying books, Arabic language and thought, he said were uniquely spontaneous and were almost inspired. Words were at the Arabs disposal once they wanted them, and were uttered in abundance without exerting any extraordinary effort. Arabs did not need to memorize the knowledge of others deliberately, nor had they to artificially model their speech in the form of those who preceded them. They transmitted what they naturally found palatable and close to their hearts and minds.

The Arabic expression, “al-bayan al-arabi”, Jahiz added, “has no equal, and Arabic language has no parallel in its richness and wealth.” This richness is attributed by Jahiz to an incomparable synonymic and derivative nature of Arabic. Jahiz wrote:

“The Arabs have been ‘more’ eloquent in their expression and they enjoyed a language which was ‘richer’ in vocabulary, ‘tenser’ and uniquely precise in word, the composition of its speech was ‘more varied’ and the application of proverbs which were in use therein were outstanding and more current”.

Another interesting point is Jahiz’s view of the relationship between Arabic and the Qur’an. Not only the Qur’an was divinely revealed, Arabic itself was also inspired. Adam is said to have been the first speaker of Arabic, the language that was exclusively endowed with a unique capacity to grow and increase in perfection and was enriched with unique incomparable features in order to allow it to demonstrate the miraculous difference between human and divine eloquences.

According to a Hashemite report, Jahiz said that outstanding Arabic was later initiated in the person of Isma’il who is said to have become an outstanding speaker of Arabic, not after proper instruction but because of a divine miracle that shifted his tongue and character to Arabic. That shift was a proof of the truth of his prophethood. So Isma’il stood in relation to his people in the same way Muhammad was to stand before Quraysh. In both instances the miracle was in
the sudden way both surpassed the native speakers of Arabic before them.

What happened between Isma'il's time and the pre-Qur'anic stage of Arabic maturity? Jahiz's answer is interesting, as it reflects a developmental outlook within the overall inspirational outlook to Arabic. In other words, Jahiz gives room for a human role in the journey undertaken by Arabic. According to Jahiz, Arabic was a bounty lent by God to the Arabs. It was God who provided the Arabs with the chance of exercising and experimenting with that bounty before the time came to reveal the difference between the human and Divine eloquences of Arabic.

Until Arabic reached its pre-Qur'anic stage, Jahiz's account of the journey made by Arabic may hypothetically be sketched as follows:

1- Adam: first Divine inspiration of Arabic with potential for excellence which was not given to other languages known to Adam.

2- The Arabs: offered God's bounty to experiment and enrich it in Arabia.

3- Isma'il's outstanding Arabic in relation to the Arabic of the people around him.

4- Pre Islamic Arabs: exercising with God's lent bounty until they produced an unprecedented literary output. Jahiz's rough estimation of the oldest poetry before Islam does not precede it by more than two hundred years. It is implied in Jahiz's attitude that Arabic had been undergoing a growing line of excellence which was proportional to its proximity to Islam.

5- Muhammad's outstanding Arabic in relation to the Arabic of his people; Muhammad's sudden excellence in Arabic, ranks after the Qur'an in the hierarchy of excellence.

6- Qur'an: The unsurpassable Qur'anic Arabic.

7- Post Islamic Arabic.

So what Jahiz believed to have occurred to Arabic in the meantime, is eventually evident in the superior literary status of its most notable clan, Quraysh. Jahiz's own description of the literary status of Quraysh and the Pre-Islamic Arabs sums up his view of Arabic mentioned above, that is of an inspired supervised Arabic.

Jahiz substantiates his original thesis of the divine origin of Arabic by making another comparative study among the Arabian tribes themselves. He wrote in Kitab al-Hayawan:

“While some Arabian tribes had shared the same fertile geographical setting, they however exhibited different poetical output. Thus, there was no relation between the geographical setting and poetical output. Poetry and power of expression, are due to "qisma"”

According to Jahiz the invisible caring hand of God was not confined to the Arabs alone, but was also responsible for the virtues of all other nations.
Owing to the superior feature of Arabic, the Arabs were elevated to a distinguished literary and socio-moral status among nations:

“Because of the eloquence of Arabic and the beauty of its expression, God sent His best Prophet amongst the Arabs, made his language Arabic and even revealed to him an Arabic Qur’an”.

What is significant in Jahiz’s view of Arabic is not just the linguistic aspects of Arabic but also the inseparable socio-moral dimensions. If the Arabs were to rise above the nations of the world, Arabic has been the mark and the cause of their excellence.

As the Qur’an was revealed in Arabic, the Arabs were raised to be God’s direct addressee, thanks to the (socio)-literary excellences He has provided. The Arabic language is superior to the languages of the world in the same way that the Qur’an is superior to the language of the Arabs.

Jahiz found the Qur’an to be magnificent in its amazing literary configuration, he said:

“The Qur’an differs from all the known rhymes of poetry and prose. It is a prose whose rhythm is not modelled on that of poetry or rhymed prose (sa‘) and whose configuration stands as a magnificent evidence and as a great Divine proof”.

The underlying secret of the Qur’an, says Jahiz, lies in the very special and unprecedented composition of the very Arabic letters and words used by the Arabs. As in any masterpiece of art, the attention follows the way it is composed and assembled from the same raw material known to all. In spite of Jahiz’s ma’tazilite position regarding man’s great capacity of free will, it is only in this place that we find his view of human ability in relation to literary output and the inability to surpass the Qur’an.

Could he not have served the notion of ‘az better without resorting to sarfa, that is while still recognizing man’s ability as continuously perfect and not turned away? The point was that while some maintained the notion of ‘az, in their full recognition of man’s undisputed free will in parallel with his inability to surpass the Qur’an, intellectuals like Jahiz thought that it would show more respect for man’s free will by assuming his established weakness vis-à-vis the Qur’an was not a malfunction of our superior faculties but the result of a superior will that stopped them from so doing.

If Jahiz’ resort to sarfa appears to be an early compromise between reason and revelation, it was in fact a diplomatic call. He could continuously marvel that man’s ‘aq could have produced something like the Qur’an, had he been able to do so. Jahiz’s view of sarfa is therefore twofolded in its implication. It is first implying a sarfa of capacity (divine intervention, man’s ability being divinely incapacitated), hence leading to sarfa of attention, will and desire.

In this respect he was following the position of his teacher, Ibrahim al-Nazzam.

But did Jahiz see the Qur’an as an obstacle to the future post Qur’anic literary capacities of the Arabs? The answer is no. If Arabic was destined to grow before the Qur’an, its post-Qur’anic development cannot be denied. Arabic was not meant to be frozen in the literary forms of pre-Islamic Arabs. Post Qur’anic eloquence of Arabic was still possible, and Jahiz himself noted that some Arabic tribes reacted differently to the coming of Islam: a tribe like Banu Badr remained poetless while Banu al-Harith b. Ka’b produced famous Islamic poets, when they were not famous poetically before the advent of Islam.

Jahiz’s views on Arabic should be fitted into their historical context as they initially reflect an intellectually curious search for the wisdom underlying the conditions that brought about the Qur’an in an Arabic dress. Hence, Jahiz may be credited for initiating such an analytical search into the distinctive features of pre-Islamic Arabic language and culture, and how they stand in comparison to the Qur’an and to all other languages and cultures, in the belief that there was no conflict between the “universality” of the Qur’an and its “particular” Arabic setting.

In his rational attempt to understand the harmonious relationship that existed between the Qur’an and the pre-Islamic language and culture, Jahiz at one point did say that Arabic enjoys a higher literary status than that of the other languages, simply because of the undeniable charismatic fact that the Qur’an was revealed in Arabic. This position needs not be necessarily implying a national prejudice by Jahiz towards the Arabs.

In my opinion, the notion of the superiority of Arabic to the other languages, outlined above, does not reflect the real and complete picture, because before Arabic happened to enjoy that status, it had to demonstrate its inferiority to the Qur’an. Similarly, had the Qur’an been revealed in Latin, all non-Latin languages would have been inferior to it, as Latin would be less superior to the revealed Latin. So before raising Arabic to an internationally comparative linguistic analysis, we have to remember the historical failure of the most eloquent Arabs to imitate the Qur’an stresses the permanent difference between human and Divine eloquences, between pre-Islamic Arabic and Qur’anic Arabic, which was left as a sign to attract the world via the Arabs to its content.

As far as Jahiz’s inspirational attitude to the origin of languages is concerned, one may raise the objection that if the Adam was equally the first speaker of languages, what was the special thing about Arabic? Because Arabic had been special since its inception in Adam, then this raises its status vis-à-vis other languages since its initiation. We may infer that out of all languages that had been revealed to Adam, Arabic was the only language exclusively chosen by God to enjoy those innately incomparable superior features. If the other languages were to be judged, it was not because of innate incomparable superior features in order to fulfill its destined Qur’anic role i.e., in order to demonstrate miraculous the obvious difference between human and Divine eloquences.

Of course, languages other than Arabic were used by God and His prophets before Muhammad, but by assigning the charismatically inspired features of

For example, the Greeks were also gifted with wisdom, the Persians with political management, the Turks with military strength, and so on.

The Arabs were endowed with the Arabic language and its corresponding socio-moral code, which Jahiz calls “the fortune of Arabic” (hazz al-‘arabiyya). Again he says in his Risala al-wukalà: “God’s Justice ordained that His bounties be even divided among His creations, by giving each generation and every nation its right share, that is conducive to the correct understanding of religion and leading to the perfection of the world’s welfare”.

And his notion of divine qisma does not mean that such virtues bestowed by God on nations should be apparent in every member of these nations. They have been available on a general basis, and are likely to be almost uniquely present in one but not in the other nation, Jahiz said: “It was not that every Arab was a poet and expert in tracking foot-steps or in the science of physiognomy, but these virtues and the like were more abundant, widespread, exclusively perfected and more apparent amongst them”.

...
Arabic to Adam's time, we may also say that not even one of the languages revealed to those Prophets was intended to demonstrate the dimension Arabic had to its (Mu'tazili) proportions, and unintentionally bridged in all aspects; a concern that sometimes grew out of a high skill in his translation. The translator has seen Jahiz’s explanation of the literary excellence in Arabic eloquence can only be sought from the reservoirs of God whereby no one can rival Him in this respect. This outlook reflects another Mu'tazili way of expressing their concern for monothems or Tawhid (here, uniqueness of power of speech of God) in all aspects; a concern that sometimes grew out of its (Mu'tazili) proportions, and unintentionally bridged the gap with the Hanbalite’s or “Jahriite’s” concept of God, especially when one prominent member like al-Jahiz held that although it appears that man had had a share in the linguistic development undertaken by Arabic, it was in fact, Jahiz says, God who was the hidden and real architect of events, sole supervisor and unique perfector of Arabic.

Theory of translation

This is the same reason why Jahiz stressed the impossibility of translating Arabic poetry into another language. To use a modern expression he denies the possibility of an interlingual translation or translation proper (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language). He also analyzed, in a very modern manner, the theory of translation. In Kitab al-Hayawan Jahiz wrote:

“The qualities of the eloquence (bayan) of the interpreter-translator have necessarily to be found in the translation itself, his knowledge has to correspond with a high skill in his translation. The translator has to know at the highest levels both the language of departure (tuga manqula) and the language of arrival (manqula ilyaha), his command of both languages must be perfect. Besides this, when the interpreter is bilingual (takallama bi-l-lisanayn) one of the two languages hurts the other; one attracts the other, it removes the other’s strength, it becomes an obstacle. […] the human being is naturally bestowed of a unique energy (quwwa), when he speaks more than one language, he discharges this energy in two directions. When he speaks more than two languages it is even worse”.

If in Jahiz’ opinion a good translation is almost impossible, when it comes to Arabic poetry it is impossible at all: “Some Indian works have been translated, some Greek aphorisms as well, some books about ethics and some Persian literature. Some have been improved by translation, some have remained the same. On the contrary if some wisdom (hikma) of Arabs were to be translated, that wonderful element that is rhythm (wazn) would disappear”.

Jahiz, one of the first Arab prose writers, pointed out that “poetry is young. The first ones to face it were Imlu al-Days, son of al-Hujr and Muahil, son of Rabi’a. […] Poetry is reserved only to Arabs and to the ones who speak Arabic language. It cannot be translated, it cannot be moved into another language. In another language, its order is lost, its rhythm is broken, its beauty disappears and aesthetic emotion dissolves” (Hayawan, I, 74).

Jahiz’ idea, even though it is strictly linked to the uniqueness of the Arabic language, is comparable to the modern theory of translation by the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson. Because complete equivalence (in the sense of synonym or sameness) cannot take place in any of his categories, Jakobson declares that all poetic art is therefore technically untranslatable: “Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting.”

What Jakobson is saying here is taken up again by Moulin, the French theorist, who perceives translation as a series of operations of which the starting point and the end product are significations and function within a given culture. So, for example, the English word pastrav, if translated into Italian without regard for its significance, will not be able to perform its function of meaning within a sentence, even though there may be a dictionary ‘equivalent’; for pastra has a completely different associative field. In this case the translator has to resort to a combination of units in order to find an approximate equivalent. Jakobson gives the example of the Russian word syr (a food made of fermented pressed curds) which translates roughly into English as cottage cheese. In this case, Jakobson claims, the translation is only an adequate interpretation of an alien code unit and equivalence is impossible.

Conclusions

In the 11th century, al-Khatib al-Baghdadi accused al-Jahiz of having plagiarised parts of his work from the Kitab al-Hayawan of Aristotle, but modern scholars have noted that there was only a limited Aristotelian influence in al-Jahiz’s work, and that al-Baghdadi may have been unacquainted with Aristotle’s work on the subject. In particular, there is no Aristotelian precedent for al-Jahiz’s ideas on topics such as natural selection, environmental determinism and food chains. Besides this we should never forget the importance and the uniqueness of Kitab al-Hayawan’s introduction.

ODE TO THE BOOK (Hayawan, I 38-42)

You blame the book itself! But what a wonderful treasure it is! What independence leaves you! What a friend! How many munitions it gives you! How much information and what a marvelous view! What a leisure and what a job! What a sweet and gentle familiar when you are lonely! What a friend when you are in exile! It is near but at the same time something else, minister and guest at the same time! A book is a vase full of knowledge, a container overflowing with refinement, a cup of seriousness and fun. […] If you want to, you laugh at its jokes, at its anecdotes, at its original proposals otherwise you can be astonished at its curiosities, and odd and strange facts it tells. If you like it, its good words will take your mind off the problems otherwise you will be moved by its exhortations and preaches. No preacher could be more amusing than the book, no ascetic more daring than the book, no dumb more “telling” […] Nothing like the book can be at the same time doctor and nomad, Byzantine and Hindu, Persian and Greek, eternal and engendered, mortal and immortal? What else could be, like the book, the alpha and omega, too much and not enough, the hidden and the visible, the witness and the absent, the eminent and the humble, the consistent and the inconsistent, the form and its contrary, the gender and its opposite?

But let us go further on, have you ever seen a garden which can be transported in a sleeve, an orchard on a stone-tablet, a being speaking on behalf of dead people and is an interpreter of living people, a member of your family who does not leave you fall asleep before you have fallen asleep, a being speaking only following your desires, who is silent as a tomb and keeps your secrets better than any unassuming secretary, who looks after your deposits better than any ambassador, who tells you where you should go better than your most dear friend […]?

Thanks to Professor Colombo for the illustrations used in this article.
The emergence of Arabic calligraphy was a key event in the history of Islamic civilisation. Until the Qur’anic revelation, the Arabs had had a predominantly oral culture, with poetry as its main artistic expression. Within decades of the rise of Islam, a new empire emerged which placed script at the heart of its identity, creating an art profoundly distinct from the age old iconographies of Byzantium and Sasanian Iran, yet able to stand on a par with them. The principles that guided the emergence of Arabic calligraphy – geometry and proportion – were an intellectual legacy of the classical era, but one which was assimilated and deeply transformed in the Umayyad period. Having been established in this period, the angular scripts commonly known as ‘Kufic’ flourished for about two centuries, until their demise by the modern styles of writing still in use today.

Before Islam, the cultural sphere of the Arabs extended far to the north of the Arabian Peninsula, into the desert areas between Syria and Iraq. In the peninsula itself, most of the population lived a nomadic life based on tribal allegiances, although there were also cities of modest size, such as Makkah and Yathrib (later known as Madinah). Poetry was highly valued as the foremost art form and the cement of Arab identity. Writing, on the other hand, was only occasionally used for votive or proclamatory inscriptions carved onto rocks in the desert, and also possibly for correspondence on such portable documents as papyri. When they did write in those early days, the Arabs did so in a variety of scripts associated with the local language of prestige: for example, South Arabian in some extant inscriptions at Qaryat al-Faw, between the Yemen and the Hijaz; Dadanitic in Dedan; and, at the northern frontier of the peninsula, Nabataean.

Nabataean is the written form of the Aramaic dialect of Petra. The oldest documented instance of this script being used to write Old Arabic, the ancestor of Qur’anic Arabic, occurs in an inscription written on a stone slab at Namara, in southern Syria, in 328 A.D. in the name of ‘Imru’ al-Qays, king of all the Arabs. By the 6th century, the strain of the Nabataean script had considerably developed and appears to have supplanted all scripts in the north of the Arabian Peninsula. This process gave rise to what we now call the ‘Arabic’ script – strictly speaking, a late offshoot of Nabataean. In the century that preceded Islam, the desert areas to the north of the Hijaz were controlled by two rival dynasties: in the West, the Ghassanids, who were allies of Byzantium; and in the East, the Lakhmids, who acted as proxies of the Sasanian Empire in its dealing with the Arabs. The letter shapes which had developed on the basis of the Nabataean script were given an unforeseen calligraphic character in this period under the influence of Syriac – a major liturgical language which, like Nabataean, was an Aramaic dialect, this time originating in Edessa (modern Urfa), in the north of Greater Syria (bilad al-sham) two major aspects of this transformation – the ligatures that join the letters at the base and the slant of the tall letters to the right – are attested in 6th century inscriptions. We can infer from context that a third feature, the use of diacritical marks to differentiate letters with the same shape, may well have sprung from the same source in the same period, although its earliest documented instances date to the early years of the Muslim Hijra.

The revelation of the Qur’an profoundly transformed the relationship of the Arabs to the written language. At first, according to Muslim tradition, the revelation was recited by the Prophet to his companions, who memorised it and transmitted it to others. But with the death of Muhammad and the gradual disappearance of the first generation of Muslims came the risk of losing parts of the sacred text and of eventually corrupting its content. This prompted the urgent task of collecting the Qur’an, which began under the impulse of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar, before ‘Uthman issued an official recension of the text which he sent to the amirs, the major capitals of the empire. The earliest documents that can be used to document this process are stone inscriptions and administrative texts written on papyri; the former often express a pious thought of the engraver, as in the pre-Islamic period, though several also have a historical content. The earliest dated papyri were written in Egypt in 22 A.H. / 643 A.D. (figure 1); the earliest inscription was recently discovered in the region of Hegra (Mada’in Salih) and dates to 24/645.

The oldest manuscripts of the Qur’an – called ‘Hijazi’ in modern scholarship, even though many of them were probably not made in the Hijaz – are key witnesses in the genesis of Arabic calligraphy. Their date has been a subject of controversy in modern scholarship, but thanks to the discovery of new documents from the first decades of Islam and to our better understanding of the transformation of Arabic script under the Umayyads, it is becoming increasingly clear that the vast majority of these Qur’ans were written in the first century of Islam. The study of these manuscripts reveals a process whereby scribes faced with the urgent challenge of creating books – a complex process involving several technical choices, from the treatment of parchment to the preparation of ink, ruling and quires – borrowed existing techniques from a variety of age-old manuscript traditions of the Middle East, such as Greek, Syriac and Coptic.

The Umayyad period marked a profound transformation of the Muslim polity. From a loose federation of tribes bound together by the charisma of its leaders, it moved towards a centralised state apparatus ruled by a strong administration which could directly control its territories and levy tax on a regular basis, rather than to receive ad-hoc tribute. This strengthening of the state was accompanied by the first major public statements of the new faith in the visual sphere. The earliest witness of this process is the Dome of the Rock, built in 72/692 on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Upon entering the building, the eye meets mosaic inscriptions from the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik (685-705) that reveal a dramatically altered type of Arabic script: a new sense of regularity and harmony is immediately apparent, all of the main letter shapes having been brought down to simple

Dr. Alain George joined the University of Edinburgh in 2007 as lecturer in Islamic art and is currently preparing a book dealing with the genesis of this art form and exploring its relationship with other scribal traditions. His primary research area is the early Islamic period, where he emergence of Arabic calligraphy was a key event in the history of Islamic civilisation. Until the Qur’anic revelation, the Arabs had had a predominantly oral culture, with poetry as its main artistic expression. Within decades of the rise of Islam, a new empire emerged which placed script at the heart of its identity, creating an art profoundly distinct from the age old iconographies of Byzantium and Sasanian Iran, yet able to stand on a par with them. The principles that guided the emergence of Arabic calligraphy – geometry and proportion – were an intellectual legacy of the classical era, but one which was assimilated and deeply transformed in the Umayyad period. Having been established in this period, the angular scripts commonly known as ‘Kufic’ flourished for about two centuries, until their demise by the modern styles of writing still in use today.

Before Islam, the cultural sphere of the Arabs extended far to the north of the Arabian Peninsula, into the desert areas between Syria and Iraq. In the peninsula itself, most of the population lived a nomadic life based on tribal allegiances, although there were also cities of modest size, such as Makkah and Yathrib (later known as Madinah). Poetry was highly valued as the foremost art form and the cement of Arab identity. Writing, on the other hand, was only occasionally used for votive or proclamatory inscriptions carved onto rocks in the desert, and also possibly for correspondence on such portable documents as papyri. When they did write in those early days, the Arabs did so in a variety of scripts associated with the local language of prestige: for example, South Arabian in some extant inscriptions at Qaryat al-Faw, between the Yemen and the Hijaz; Dadanitic in Dedan; and, at the northern frontier of the peninsula, Nabataean.

Nabataean is the written form of the Aramaic dialect of Petra. The oldest documented instance of this script being used to write Old Arabic, the ancestor of Qur’anic Arabic, occurs in an inscription written on a stone slab at Namara, in southern Syria, in 328 A.D. in the name of ‘Imru’ al-Qays, king of all the Arabs. By the 6th century, the strain of the Nabataean script had considerably developed and appears to have supplanted all scripts in the north of the Arabian Peninsula. This process gave rise to what we now call the ‘Arabic’ script – strictly speaking, a late offshoot of Nabataean. In the century that preceded Islam, the desert areas to the north of the Hijaz were controlled by two rival dynasties: in the West, the Ghassanids, who were allies of Byzantium; and in the East, the Lakhmids, who acted as proxies of the Sasanian Empire in its dealing with the Arabs. The letter shapes which had developed on the basis of the Nabataean script were given an unforeseen calligraphic character in this period under the influence of Syriac – a major liturgical language which, like Nabataean, was an Aramaic dialect, this time originating in Edessa (modern Urfa), in the north of Greater Syria (bilad al-sham) two major aspects of this transformation – the ligatures that join the letters at the base and the slant of the tall letters to the right – are attested in 6th century inscriptions. We can infer from context that a third feature, the use of diacritical marks to differentiate letters with the same shape, may well have sprung from the same source in the same period, although its earliest documented instances date to the early years of the Muslim Hijra.

The revelation of the Qur’an profoundly transformed the relationship of the Arabs to the written language. At first, according to Muslim tradition, the revelation was recited by the Prophet to his companions, who memorised it and transmitted it to others. But with the death of Muhammad and the gradual disappearance of the first generation of Muslims came the risk of losing parts of the sacred text and of eventually corrupting its content. This prompted the urgent task of collecting the Qur’an, which began under the impulse of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar, before ‘Uthman issued an official recension of the text which he sent to the amirs, the major capitals of the empire. The earliest documents that can be used to document this process are stone inscriptions and administrative texts written on papyri; the former often express a pious thought of the engraver, as in the pre-Islamic period, though several also have a historical content. The earliest dated papyri were written in Egypt in 22 A.H. / 643 A.D. (figure 1); the earliest inscription was recently discovered in the region of Hegra (Mada’in Salih) and dates to 24/645.

The oldest manuscripts of the Qur’an – called ‘Hijazi’ in modern scholarship, even though many of them were probably not made in the Hijaz – are key witnesses in the genesis of Arabic calligraphy. Their date has been a subject of controversy in modern scholarship, but thanks to the discovery of new documents from the first decades of Islam and to our better understanding of the transformation of Arabic script under the Umayyads, it is becoming increasingly clear that the vast majority of these Qur’ans were written in the first century of Islam. The study of these manuscripts reveals a process whereby scribes faced with the urgent challenge of creating books – a complex process involving several technical choices, from the treatment of parchment to the preparation of ink, ruling and quires – borrowed existing techniques from a variety of age-old manuscript traditions of the Middle East, such as Greek, Syriac and Coptic.

The Umayyad period marked a profound transformation of the Muslim polity. From a loose federation of tribes bound together by the charisma of its leaders, it moved towards a centralised state apparatus ruled by a strong administration which could directly control its territories and levy tax on a regular basis, rather than to receive ad-hoc tribute. This strengthening of the state was accompanied by the first major public statements of the new faith in the visual sphere. The earliest witness of this process is the Dome of the Rock, built in 72/692 on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Upon entering the building, the eye meets mosaic inscriptions from the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik (685-705) that reveal a dramatically altered type of Arabic script: a new sense of regularity and harmony is immediately apparent, all of the main letter shapes having been brought down to simple

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geometrical forms – primarily the straight line and circle – while the strokes are either strictly horizontal or vertical, rather than to slant (figure 2). This new aesthetic of the script seems to have emerged during the architectural programmes of the Umayyads, perhaps at the Dome of the Rock itself. It was the result of a close collaboration between calligraphers working in the ‘Hijazi’ tradition and mosaicists used to laying out preparatory grids into which their small mosaic cubes would be inserted.

The ethos which pervades this transformation may itself owe something to the world of architects and mosaicists. In early Qur’ans, as in late Antique mosaics and buildings, a geometrical grid was placed at the heart of page design. The script was codified and articulated upon this grid, using the thickness of the pen as a module – or standard unit – that brought the elements that made up the page into one coherent whole held together by geometrical shapes and proportional relations of length. This model was scrupulously upheld by Qur’anic scribes for a period of over two centuries. Its intellectual roots can be traced back to Ancient Greece. In Timaeus, his cosmological dialogue, Plato gives a metaphorical account of how God created the universe and imposed a harmonious order on the initial chaos of this creation. This, He did by making geometry and proportion the cornerstones of the universe. Geometry gave the celestial spheres, the earth, the human body and the atoms within us the most perfect shapes, while proportion served as the link that harmoniously bound these elements together. Plato, as a result, saw the universe as a ‘symphony of proportion.’ The underlying principles were essentially musical, being based on the intervals of the third (5:4), fourth (4:3), fifth (3:2) and octave (2:1) which are at the basis of consonance in sound.

In this perspective, the well-proportioned object will have a profound harmonising influence on the soul, in the same way that music is able to touch us through the sense of hearing. This view of the universe and of sense perception was deeply ingrained in Ancient thought and it came to represent one of the cornerstones of classical architecture, as notably attested in the Ten Books on Architecture by Vitruvius (1st century B.C.). The same principles were still at the basis of the craft in late Antiquity, when churches and basilicas came to replace temples and public baths as the main public buildings of cities. The Dome of the Rock was a direct heir to this late Antique architectural tradition; it seems, in turn, that the late 7th century witnessed an astonishing creative moment that led to the transposition of the same principles to the craft of the scribe working with pen and parchment. Soon, the discussions of these principles initiated in the Classical era found a continuation in the earliest Arabic scientific writings, starting towards the end of the 2nd century A.H. (8th century A.D.).

The reformed script was spread to a wide variety of media in a period which spans the reigns of ‘Abd al-Malik and his son al-Walid, the builder of the Great Mosque of Damascus. Coinage is a good example of this process. Although by their tiny size, coins stand in the sharpest possible contrast to inscriptions, they were a very effective way for a central administration to propagate public statements, as they could reach all strata of society and distant geographical confines. In the Byzantine and Sassanian realms, coins had been adorned with potent religious and imperial imagery for centuries before Islam. For a few years, ‘Abd al-Malik attempted to create a competing iconography along the same lines. But in 77/697, these experiments were abandoned; all figural imagery was removed and replaced by Qur’anic verses in Arabic script (as in the coin of figure 3, which belongs to The al-Sabah Collection). A few years later, the feared Umayyad governor of Iraq and the East, al-Hajjaj, perfected the script on the coins issued at his mint of Wasit according to the geometrical and proportional rules. The most significant witness of this new phase is the Qur’an completed in 1000 A.D. in Baghdad by Ibn al-Bawwab, perhaps the most famous calligrapher in the Islamic tradition (figure 5). Here, the principles resonate with Umayyad monuments (figure 4). The cornerstones of what later came to be known as the ‘Kufic’ tradition had been laid, in an integrated aesthetic whereby the inscriptions on the walls of mosques were reflected in the calligraphy of monumental Qur’ans and whereby the architectural decoration of buildings found a mirroring image in the illumination of manuscripts.

Having thus been established under Umayyad patronage, the ‘Kufic’ tradition continued to grow and diversify for a period of almost two centuries. Seventeen different styles of Kufic calligraphy have been identified by modern scholars; the extremely precise definition of each letter shape calls to mind the workings of a modern typeface. Hundreds of thousands of Qur’anic folios in this tradition survive, and these present fundamental witnesses of the classical period of Islamic civilisation, the Abbasid 8th and 9th centuries. In the 10th century, this angular aesthetic of the script started to converge with the more cursive scripts that had hitherto been separately used for secular handwriting. This process culminated with the rise of an accomplished form of cursive script based on a simplified set of geometrical and proportional rules. The most significant witness of this new phase is the Qur’an completed in 1000 A.D. in Baghdad by Ibn al-Bawwab, perhaps the most famous calligrapher in the Islamic tradition (figure 5). Here, the principles that had governed earlier calligraphy have been reformulated to allow a more natural flow of the hand, swifter writing and economy. A new epoch was dawning, but one with roots plunging deep into a past in which the Qur’anic page became a meaningful reflection of the harmonious order of the universe.
Ottoman Trade Routes from the Arabian Gulf to Central Europe in the 16-17th Centuries

János Hóvári
Given in English
22 February 2010

For more than half a millennium the Ottoman Empire had been a world power, determining the fate of many European, Asian and African regions. The western border of the Empire was, for quite a while, at the Danube in Eastern Central Europe and the Gulf Region was the Eastern frontier. Unfortunately, there are no studies comparing the common or different aspects of the frontiers. Of course, the experts on Ottoman history are familiar with the political and military complexity of the Ottoman world.

The Ottoman Empire was able to form an economic world, which was based not only on the laws and the directives of the Sultans, but on the shared interests of the different subjects. The importance of trade was beyond politics.

The countries of Eastern Central Europe were connected to the Mediterranean and Oriental world. This amalgamation lost a trade and economic competition with the emerging Atlantic world in the 16th - 17th centuries. This shift made Eastern Central Europe a periphery market and the Atlantic coasts the core, with its serious economic and social consequences.

Ottomans Trade International Connections in the Early 16th Century

Advisors of the Ottoman Sultans were aware of the importance of trade and the duties levied on various commodities. The Ottoman State took many measures to promote the commercial activity in all parts of the Empire. During the reign of Süleyman I the Magnificent (1520-1566), the Ottoman Empire emerged as a great power, pursuing its interest even in the economic field.

After the various campaigns of Sultan Selim I (1512-20) against the Safavids and the Mamluks, between 1514-1517, Ottomans started to control most of the commercial links between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean (figure 1). Important continental trade routes crossed the whole empire from the East to the West and from the South to the North.

The Ottomans were very often at war with the Habsburgs’ monarchy in central Europe and the Mediterranean and also with the Safavids in the Zagros Mountains. However, the periods of war were short (with some exceptions), and the periods of peace were long, based on various treaties and truces. When good relations prevailed, many merchants crossed the frontiers in order to take full advantage of the periods of peace. Analysts note that trade ruled over the hostility in most of the cases and that the business mind as a driving force of decision-making was stronger than the military-minded stances.

Traditionally, Eastern Central Europe, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Kingdom of Poland were connected commercially to the Black Sea region and Anatolia in order to get goods from India and the Far East. Trade in spices, textiles and various worthy eastern commodities was very successful for many merchants who could join the network on the long way from India to cities like Buda, Cracow, Transylvanian Saxon, and the south-eastern Polish towns (figure 2).

The above mentioned commodities were provided to the Austrians, Czechs and Moravians from Venice by its sophisticated networks. It was well known that the merchants of Venice had been plying the Oriental and Levant trade for many centuries. They were successful throughout Europe, but not in the eastern Balkans and in the Black Sea region. In this part of Europe, for various geographic and political reasons, an Oriental trade niche was given to Ottomans, Wallachian, Moldovian, Transylvanian and Polish tradesmen from the first half of the 15th century until the early 19th century. They had the opportunity to be involved in the commercial links between the Eastern Balkans and Western Anatolia, and the Black Sea region as well.

Anatolia is historically the hub of trading networks from Iran, Iraq and Syria towards the Mediterranean. Istanbul, the huge metropolis and strategic crossing point between Asia and Europe, used to lure merchants from all over the world. It was a gateway from East to West and from West to East. Anatolia absorbed the trade routes from Central Asia via Iran and from the Gulf and India via Iraq and Iran as well. The Balkans used to be considered the European hinterlands of Istanbul. Istanbul was also one of the most important ports of the Mediterranean Commonwealth, which could be fragmented politically but not economically.

The Arabian Gulf was connected commercially to India from ancient times (figure 3). Different products of India and the Far East were forwarded from the Gulf via Iraq to Syria and Anatolia, which caused various cities in the region to flourish. Muscat, Manama and Basra were traditionally towns that had outstanding roles in the functioning of this long-distance trade network (figure 4).

Abbasids shifted the centre of the Islamic world to Iraq, which meant that the state and economic life in the former peripheries started to be more organised and well structured. In the mid-13th century the Mongols partly damaged the trade network but not destroyed it. However, as the Ilhanids came to power, they renewed and adjusted the injured networks. Later on the Ak Koyunlu [White Sheep
Turkomans] and the Safavids became interested in maintaining the commercial ties as well. Many elements of these networks were incorporated into the Ottoman economic system after the military victories of Sultan Selim I in the early 16th century. However, this channel was only one of the competing East-West trade-routes.

The most important rival link between India and Europe crossed the Red Sea and the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula to the Egyptian Mediterranean ports. High value shipments were the main concern in these regions from the late Roman times and formed the city of Makkah into the centre of the Arab economic and political life in the 6th - 7th centuries.

In the centuries to come, the East-West trade remained important for the region. Mamluks, for example, in close co-operations with Venice, were able to strengthen the trade-structure from the Bab al-Mandab to the Mediterranean in the 13th century. The trade flourished and Venice was connected to India via Mamluk Egypt and the Sultanate’s commercial partners. It was obvious even to contemporary observers that Venice preferred her commercial interests over the goals of the Crusaders.

Ottoman-Portuguese Rivalry for the Indian Ocean

As Vasco da Gama reached the Malabar Coast of India in May 1498 and was able to return there again in 1501, a new Portuguese trade-system emerged linking East to West via the Indian and the Atlantic Oceans. The Mamluks and the Venetians were aware of all aspects of the unwanted competition. However, despite of the Venetian support, the Mamluk Sultans were not able to defeat the Portuguese fleet on the Indian Ocean.

As Sultan Selim I started to threaten the Mamluks, the leadership in Cairo had to turn to the defences of the Syrian provinces against the Turks. The Mamluks were defeated by the Ottomans, and Egypt became the province of the Sultans in 1517. Historians agree that the Ottoman conquest of Egypt provided the Portuguese enough time to strengthen their military and commercial structure in the Indian Ocean. The new Ottoman governors of Cairo knew all the details of the Portuguese penetration into the political and economic life of the Indian Ocean, the Arab Sea and the Arab Gulf as well.

A few months after Sultan Selim entered Cairo in 1517, the Portuguese fleet attacked Jeddah. Protecting the Muslim holy places, an Ottoman fleet was set up in Suez to expel the intruders from the Red Sea.

An outstanding school of cartographers connected to the developing Ottoman navy emerged in Istanbul at the turn of the 16th century. Piri Reis, the famous admiral and cartographer created the first version of his world map in 1513. He and his colleagues were aware of the fact that a huge struggle started on the Indian Ocean for Eastern trade. They tried to convince the Ottoman leadership that their navy should interfere. Their points were convinced Sultan Selim.

Change Of the Ottoman Foreign Policy

Sultan Selim (1512-1520) was at peace with his Eastern-Central European neighbours. According to most historians, it was only a tactical peace because he needed all of his troops to fight the Safavids and the Mamluks. His policy was successful and it made the Ottoman Empire a world power, giving it the chance to not only control huge regions but, being in pivotal position, to be a dominant power between the trade of India and Europe. The Ottomans were also able to defeat the Portuguese merchants and troops, which had started to build up their own network.

Sultan Süleyman I, the Magnificent met with Piri Reis and tried to explain trade on the Indian Ocean and the problem with the Portuguese. Piri Reis tried to convince the Sultan to start a campaign in the Gulf, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean against the Portuguese, and highlighted the importance of Hormuz. Reis said: “Know that Hormuz is an island (i.e. island of Qeshm). Many merchants visit it... But now, our friends the Portuguese have come there and built a stronghold on its cape. They control the place and collect the customs – you see into what condition that province has sunk. The Portuguese have vanquished the natives, and their own merchants crowd the warehouses there. Whatever the season, trading cannot now happen without the Portuguese.”

Sultan Süleyman I, the Magnificent did not rely on him and launched a campaign against Hungary in 1526 and was victorious over the Hungarian, Czech and Polish troops. Yet it took his army 20 years to be able to rule the central part of Hungary (figure 5). He turned his army against Eastern-Central Europe, against the Kingdom of Hungary. As he took the throne, he led his army against the Hungarian strategic stronghold, Belgrade, and took it. After a long while, he stopped caring about the Eastern provinces and started to involve the Ottoman Empire in the French-Habsburg rivalry. This put the future of the Hungarian Kingdom in danger, because the King of Hungary stopped the traditional balancing policy between France and the Holy Roman Empire and joined the Habsburg’s side. As a new alliance emerged between France and the Ottoman Empire at the end of 1525, the Hungarian Kingdom became the most important enemy.

In 1526, the new sultan, Süleyman I, the Magnificent, did not continue the foreign policy of his father (figure 5). He turned his army against Eastern-Central Europe, against the Kingdom of Hungary. As he took the throne, he led his army against the Hungarian strategic stronghold, Belgrade, and took it. After a long while, he stopped caring about the Eastern provinces and started to involve the Ottoman Empire in the French-Habsburg rivalry. This put the future of the Hungarian Kingdom in danger, because the King of Hungary stopped the traditional balancing policy between France and the Holy Roman Empire and joined the Habsburg’s side. As a new alliance emerged between France and the Ottoman Empire at the end of 1525, the Hungarian Kingdom became the most important enemy.

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as the great cartographer was sentenced to death for his failure.

His successor was Seyid Ali, who tried to capture Hormuz in 1553 but also failed. He lost his ships and returned on foot, visiting various countries. His memoir, Mirror of Countries, was completed in 1557.

After these failures, the Ottomans gave up their ambitions on the Indian Ocean. Instead they concentrated only on controlling Bab al-Mandab and Hormuz in 1553 but also failed. He lost his ships and it led to the decline of Venice.

The formation of the new Atlantic-Indian trade routes in the early 16th century was not favourable for the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf region and the Ottomans. The emerging Atlantic trade was a disaster for Venice and various Mediterranean cities and also for the Eastern-Central European merchants far beyond the Ottoman Empire. As a consequence of the shift in trade-routes, the decline of Levantine trade started. The cities on the Mediterranean coast, the Black Sea Region, the Balkans and Eastern-Central Europe soon lost their previous commercial importance and became marginalised in the emerging new economic world order.

The Decline Of Venice and Its Regional Impact

Until the famous book of Professor Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean world, La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen a l’époque de Philippe II – The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, was published, most historians thought that trade between the Mediterranean and India collapsed suddenly in the early 16th century, causing the fall of the Venetian-Mediterranean economic-system. The famous French scholar demonstrated that it was not a simple process. Many researchers overestimated the Portuguese, and later the Dutch, capabilities of monopolising Eastern trade. Historians did not take into account that there was a strong Muslim need to keep their traditional economic positions on the sea. Furthermore, the Muslim merchants were able to promote the continental caravan-trade to avoid the Portuguese and later the Dutch control-points and to provide better quality goods. Owing to these endeavours, the Mediterranean remained the market of Indian goods even in the 17th century. Therefore, French and English ships were able to visit the Eastern Mediterranean Ottoman ports in order to get Indian and Far Eastern goods.

The decline of Venice generated by the shift of the trade route from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic is part of history classes all around the world. Since the end of the 1970s, most students learned that the Ottomans took Constantinople and the different Eastern Mediterranean ports and cut the trade between East and West. Consequently, the Venetians could not pursue their trade and it led to the decline of Venice.

According to these views, Islam and the Ottomans caused the end of the Venetian heyday and Mediterranean dominance. Moreover, according to various books, the main reason for the major geographical discoveries at the end of the 15th century was a fact that the Islamic states, namely the Ottomans and the Mamluks, severed Europe from the East. Fortunately, many excellent historians in the last hundred years pointed out that these assumptions are baseless according to historic sources. On the contrary, the Eastern world was extremely interested in pursuing trade with Europe through the Eastern Mediterranean ports. Ottomans tried to continue the Levantine trade in order to gain immense state revenues from the levied duties. Many Christians could come to the Ottoman Empire during its whole history, pursuing trade and profiting.

The Ottomans and the Muslims of the Middle East and the Gulf region lost the struggle to preserve their commercial system to the Atlantic world. The defeat of Muslim merchants in the Indian Ocean in the 16th century triggered a longstanding domino effect. The dominos extended to Eastern-Central Europe and westward. The changes of the Indian Ocean in the commercial system reached that region around the 17th century and caused the decline of various flourishing cities in the Balkans and in the eastern parts of the Hungarian and Polish kingdoms.

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Dialectics of Arab Thinking: Drama and Arab intellect

Osama Abu Taleb

Given in Arabic

22 March 2010

Criticism directed towards Arab Islamic thinking has carried on since its encounter with European culture. The conflict began between the Occident and the orient, with the latter’s assimilation of Greek lore and its transformation into European heritage. Arab Islamic heritage came into focus as Arabs transmitted to Europe the sciences of philosophy, logic, medicine, chemistry, astronomy and sociology. Controversy began to take place between the two intellects, paralleling the conflict of wealth and of the control of navigation routes and strategic sites. This took place openly in colonial and religious forms as dictated by the interest of European countries acting individually or collectively to distribute war spoils either through occupation or mandatory regime.

Against that background began Western attempts to get acquainted with the Orient represented in the Arab Islamic World and to evaluate its civilisation and achievements. This was not purely objective, as it included a great deal of misunderstanding, baseless opinions and intentional distortion. This attitude covered different fields of life and intellectual activity: from the study of history, anthropology, ethnography, politics and economics to literary creativity in poetry. This also covered studies of performing and vocal arts, music, formative arts and architecture, and research on Sufism and Sufi masters.

In 1948, a Lebanese merchant named Maron Naqash, returned from a trip to Italy and France. Impressed by their theatre, at the time quite unfamiliar at home, he introduced Mollier’s L’Avare (The Miser) at the garden of his home, launching a new theatrical movement in Alexandria, simultaneously parallel to the work of the Syrian playwright Sheikh Abu Khalil Qubbani in Damascus. Only then, did the interest in drama begin in the Arab world.

This took place after a long period of the absence of any information on the art of the theatre (approximated seven centuries) due to a mistake by Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126-1198) in his translation of Aristotle’s De Poetica. Ibn Rushd’s error was in the translation of the word ‘tragedy’ as equivalent to praise, and ‘comedy’ as parallel to satire. He relied on Aristotle’s idea that “tragedy” imitates the actions of great persons, whereas “comedy” imitates the acts of mean people.

What is the relation between dialectics, as a method of thinking that belongs to philosophy and drama, as an art (treated mainly by literary criticism)? What is the role played by dialectics in the formation of the intellect of a specific nation, and to what extent does it affect its dramatic creativity? It was suggested by some biased Orientalists that Arab thinking lacks this asset, since the art of
The main reason for the ignorance of tragedy in Arab Islamic intellect contradicts dialectics since it derived from the Greek heritage without its assimilation. Islamic God is contradictory to the dialectic way of thinking. Can these arguments, summed up in a statement of Orientalist, repeats the idea in a variation on the same principal idea. On the contrary, he thinks that Western intellect has progressed quite well since medieval times as evidenced by the development of a series of complex literary forms. Polyphony took place of homophony, resulting in the idea that artistic creation consists of composite elements that can address both intelligence and emotions.

For Gustav von Grunebaum, an Orientalist biased against Islam as a religion and civilization, the concept of seeking refuge and complete reliance on God is contradictory to the dialectic way of thinking, promoting argumentation and dialogue, which is essential for drama. Hans Heinrich, a German Orientalist, repeats the idea in a variation on the same theme: “Arabs and Muslims are only transmitters of (Greek) heritage without its assimilation. Islamic philosophy is only a movement that developed on the traces of modern Hellenistic and Platonic ideas. The main reason for the ignorance of tragedy in Muslim culture lies in the unsociable nature of Arab intellect, with the result that lyrical poetry and direct moral teachings have prevailed in all their poems, whether Arabic, Persian or Asian. This has kept them far from artistic genres like epics and tragedy, which take interest in the analysis of human psyche in its different cases. On the other hand they are fascinated by using a rosy high pitched tone.”

In this point of view, Islamic Arab intellect is classified as analytical rather than constructional, which explains the lack of interest in writing for the theatre in general and for tragedy in particular. In its Greek form, tragedy presents the confrontation between Man and the Universe, or the Moirae [Greek; the three sisters of fate] as a controlling force. This implies the attempt of Man during to act as equal or even a “rival to God,” although he is quite lacking the power to do that, as his destiny is completely pre-decided (by God). All this eventually leads to a catastrophe that “destroys him completely.” Such confrontation is unacceptable in Islam, since God decides Man’s destiny. However Man has choice in certain matters. Also, Muslim’s believe that God is transcendental and should not be compared to anything else or even imagined. This was designed as the cause of the absence of freedom of thought, advocating a tendency to obey and seek refuge in God, the Creator.

The reply to these arguments begins at the word ‘dialectics’ which is derived from the Greek word ‘dialogum’ (to talk). It is the root of words referring to dialogue, the art of debate, finding proof for an argument and the refutation of opposite argument. It is agreed that dialectics represents a reasoned approach used to reveal truth or a rational position. This is described by Socrates as a philosophical approach, gradually proceeding from the part to the whole, and from the whole to the part from the concrete to the abstract and visa versa. This is the basis of induction as pointed out by Hegel.

Evidence of the presence of dialectics in Arab thought is included, in rich multiplicity, in the Holy Qur’an, the most representative book of Islamic Arab thought. This endows the word with variety, giving a chance for different shades of meaning and different levels of understanding and interpretation. It occurs sometimes to denote argumentation or insisting on one’s point of view in discussion; or it can refer to a quiet fruitful discussion leading to the adoption of a new attitude. It can also refer to attempts of mutual convincing. The word occurs explicitly in a variety of meanings. However, the word in its dialectic and constructive sense occurs in the Qur’an in the chapter on Al Imran, where we find an invitation for debate by the Prophet (peace be upon him), to the Jews, who refrain from holding the debate, since they were warned that a curse would fall on liars. In another citation (verse 251) from Sura Al Baqara, the vitality of discussion is quite obvious. All this indicates the familiarity of the word to Muslims with all its modern and historical connotations.

The question is why this knowledge of dialectics was not applied in drama or in creative play writing, as introduced by Ancient Greeks? Unlike what is suggested by some Orientalists and Arab scholars who followed them, the issue is not a matter of race. Each nation has its own special art, for example, poetry was typically the art of Arabs, who are Semites. Equally, it was the first art in Persia, an Aryan nation.

Pre-Islamic Arabs were unfamiliar with sophisticated forms of religion. They just identified God as the Creator of the Universe. This developed in taking idols as means of intercession, which later developed in the worship of idols and was practiced in simple abstract forms, without the erection of any temples. The Ka’ba was the only exception, which was recognized as a sacred building. [The Ka’ba is a pre-Islamic structure originally dedicated to various Arab tribal gods. It was re-dedicated as an Islamic house of worship in 630 AH/1232 CE, when the Prophet returned to Makkah.]

On the other hand, Persian religions (Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeism were quite simple. The conflict between good and evil is always available in its dialectic form. Formalities, as well as the temple, played their role in the practice of rites. In spite of this, Persians, belonging to Aryan race, knew nothing about theatre or writing for drama.

Like the Greeks, ancient Egyptians of Hemite race knew theatrical presentation and ritual drama in Pharaonic religious rites. However it was imprisoned within the worship function in the most sacred part of the temple, to be displayed only in the presence of the Pharaoh and the clergyman. It was never seen by the public or developed from a private religious rite into an art for public audience.

Drama as a literary genre was only practiced and developed by Greeks, excluding Arabs and other nations. As it was already pointed out, drama had been prematurely aborted in Ancient Egyptian religious practices, before it had been fully developed. With the translation of De Poetica by Averroes, Arab knowledge of drama was postponed, unlike the case of Greek philosophy. After the display of Moller “Avare” by Maron Naqqash, there was criticism of Averroes: or what called Averroes Dilemma. He could not find an equivalent to the words tragedy or comedy in Arabic. Therefore he considered Tragedy as parallel to the poetry of praise, relying on Aristotle definition that tragedy describes the actions of nobles, whereas comedy describes the actions of mean people, therefore it was designed as parallel to the poetry of satire.

Another justification could be that Averroes avoided to mention what was cited in De Poetica about Greek gods and pagan rites, avoiding to involve himself in more literary battles. Therefore he gave the two words the nearest transliteration in Arabic and classified them as the nearest poetic genre.

Another explanation for Averroes’ mistake was that he was incapable of visualizing such theatre, its development, display or the rites of its performance. He didn’t want to study whatever was beyond philosophy, the field of his interest. The two words remained ambiguous for seven centuries. However, tragedy, in the ancient Greek metaphysical sense remained detached from monotheistic religions, whether it was Islam or Christianity. Christian thought didn’t have a parallel to ancient Greek tragedy, since it admitted the idea of human free will as opposed to Greek tragedy’s predestination.

At some point, a modification of Aristotle’s theory took place with the production of works of drama that defend the word of God rather than challenge Him. This was evident in the tragedy of Christian martyrdom, as in T.S. Eliot’s A Murder in the Cathedral. There are two more examples from the world of Islam: Abdel Rahman Sharqawi’s Al Hussien As A Revolutionary Martyr and Salah Abdel Sabour’s Al Hallaj. In the 17th century, during the French Renaissance, Racine wrote Phaedre. It acquired its tragic character by his adoption of the doctrine of Jansenism: disbelieving in Man’s free will and supporting the idea of predestination. This is considered to be against Christianity and Catholicism.

Western Orientalism has suggested the absence of dramatic quality in the poetry, painting, sculpture and music in Arabic Islamic work; in spite of the great appreciation expressed by some great Western poets like the German Goethe.

What Hans Heinrich Schaedler considered extreme flowery language in Arabic poetry couldn’t be the absolute truth about it or about any other poetry. Poetry on the universal level has a variety of types. Among them is the Romantic European poetry, which can be described as sentimental
Turkey and Iran. There is a growing appreciation
Arabic poetry of wisdom and philosophy or narrative
Grace, Hassan Rashid and Gamal Abdel Rahim.
It also appeared in Lebanon, other Arab countries,
at the turn of last century when Verdi's
among the audience in these countries of classical
variety and dramatic conflict. However, this is not
generally described as relying extremely on melody,
can only apply to the common type of music, which
is available now.

Arab composers began to make attempts to
write classical music in its different forms such as
symphony, sonata and concerto. Since 1945, this
kind of music appeared in Egyptian works of Youssif
Grace, Hassan Rashid and Gamal Abdel Rahim.
It also appeared in Lebanon, other Arab countries,
Turkey and Iran. There is a growing appreciation
among the audience in these countries of classical
music, since the art of Opera was introduced in Egypt
at the turn of last century when Verdi’s Aida was
presented. This was followed by other imitations by
Some innovations were carried on in the work of
orchestra and music writing, which added drama and
expression to Arabic music. Sayed Darwish,
Abdel Wahab and the Rahabanis introduced this
new expression, bringing Arabic music far from
sentimentalism and more focused on melody.

Some works of plastic and visual arts in painting
and sculpture have a dramatic touch, like the
work of the Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar,
called “Nahdat Masr,” or the Kuwaiti sculptor Sami
Mohammed who produced the “Scream”, which is
no less dramatic than a painting under the same title
by Edvard Munch. It also echoes Salvador Dali’s
“The Burning Giraffe”, sending fire from whatever
angle it is viewed, which denies the static nature of
the picture.

When the wife of the famous romantic poet
Shelley was once asked why he never wrote works
of drama, she simply replied: “The bent of his mind
went the other way.” That was also true of T.S. Eliot,
the great English poet and critic.

Sultan and Emperor clashed not only on the
plains of Austria but also on the northern shore of
the Mediterranean. The rightful ruler of Tunis was
Mulay Hassan, nominally a vassal of Charles V, who
was also King of Sicily. In 1535, Mulay
Hassan was deposed by Khair ad-Din
(or Hayreddin) Barbarossa. Khair ad-
Din (figure 1) was born around 1474
on Lesbos, a Greek island then part of
the Ottoman Empire. His father was a
former Janissary, his mother the widow
of a Greek Orthodox priest. When
Khair ad-Din was 26, he left with his
brother Horuk for North Africa to make
his fortune. In 1518, he became ruler
of Algiers and in 1533, he was made
Fleet Admiral of the Ottoman navy,
paralysing Christian shipping and trade
in the western Mediterranean, attacking
and sinking countless ships and taking
thousands of slaves. It was to defeat him and thus
to thwart his great enemy, Suleiman, that Charles V
assembled a huge army in Barcelona in 1535.

It was Charles’ first personal
campaign (figure 2), and he probably
always intended to make use of it for
political propaganda, inviting artists to
accompany him to Tunis. One of them
was Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen (c. 1500-
1559), one of the foremost Dutch artists
at the time, who had entered the service
of the Habsburgs in 1525. Vermeyen
was commissioned to execute the detailed
cartoons – full-scale patterns – for the
set of huge tapestries commissioned
by the Emperor’s sister, Queen Mary
of Hungary, in 1546 to celebrate the
Campaign against Tunis. Vermeyen
took six years to finish the cartoons.
These 18th-century tapestries are now also in Madrid. However, the magnificent cartoons survived in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Their beauty and importance led another Habsburg emperor, Charles VI, to commission a second set to be woven from these cartoons about 150 years after the original series. They were executed by Jocundus de Vos 1712-21 in Brussels. These 18th-century tapestries are now also in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. The lecture looked at all three sets: the 16th-century cartoons, as well as the 16th-century and the 18th-century series of tapestries (figure 3 a-c).

Tapestries are figurative wet-faced textiles woven by hand. It is a costly art, time-consuming and hugely expensive. Warps are stretched on a loom, arranged in such a way that there is a small space between even and odd warps through which the weaver passes coloured weft threads attached to a handheld shuttle. His pattern is a detailed and full-size cartoon. He works on the back of the tapestry while looking at the cartoon placed beneath his loom, so the finished tapestry will be inverted when compared to the cartoon (figure 3 a-c). A good painter will take this into consideration when designing a cartoon for a tapestry. Price and quality of a tapestry are determined by the quality of the cartoon, the skill of the weaver, the fineness of the work, and the quality of the silks and wool used.

The original contracts and receipts for the cartoons and for both sets of tapestries survive: they show, for example, that Vermeyen promised to execute every detail with care, using only the best colours and paper; the weaver, Pannemaker, promised to use only the best wool from Grenada and the finest silk from Lyon, and to employ seven workers simultaneously on each tapestry. We also learn that a man was sent to Lyon for two years, seven months and twenty-five days to oversee the dyeing of the silk. According to the extant receipts, Pannemaker used nineteen different colours of silk, each subdivided into three to seven different hues. He also used gold and silver threads, for which he was paid separately.

It was a huge series, the most expensive ever commissioned, and when hung all together the original twelve tapestries covered 100m² of wall space. They were used for special occasions, such as the wedding of Philip II of Spain and Queen Mary of England celebrated in London on August 7, 1554, or to welcome Ferrante Gonzaga to Brussels in 1556. When Emperor Charles V abdicated and withdrew to a monastery in 1556, his son, Philip II, sent the tapestries to Spain, where they remain to this day.

Of the original twelve tapestries ten survive in Madrid. Of the original twelve cartoons, ten survive in Vienna. However, as different ones are missing from each set, we can recreate the whole series.

Tapestry One depicts a map with ships sailing across the Mediterranean towards Tunis. It served as an introduction to the whole series. Tapestry Two shows Charles V mustering his troops in Barcelona (figure 2). The emperor appears frequently in the tapestries, always, however, in a background scene. In this background scene, his bodyguard accompanies him and the imperial heralds, while a priest seated beneath an orange tree carefully records the regiments in a large book. The Emperor’s portrait is not the only one to be included in the composition: in the foreground, riding beautifully caparisoned horses, are the Duke of Alba and his five-year-old son, and the Marchese di Mondeljar, who was badly wounded in the subsequent campaign. Vermeyen’s realism and love of detail are striking. His designs need to work both from afar and close-up, so he usually combines several scenes in one composition, placing large, vividly-drawn figures in the foreground and filling middle- and background with sweeping views enlivened with many scenes (figure 4).

The imperial fleet was commanded by the celebrated admiral Andrea Doria from Genoa, whose portrait is also included: he is prominently depicted on his flagship in the foreground of Tapestry Three. On May 31, 1535, 300 ships left Barcelona and headed for Cagliari, where they met up with a small fleet manned by the Knights of Saint John, before setting sail for Tunis on June 14, 1535. The third tapestry depicts their arrival on the African coast, with ships dropping anchor, sailors drawing in billowing sails and ships being unloaded. Vermeyen includes many entertaining scenes: small boats used to ferry people, animals and provisions to the shore filled with everything from unwilling horses and goats, to soldiers, musicians, praying monks and even a nursing mother. On the shore in the distance we see the Emperor awaiting them on his charger and giving orders about setting up camp near the Roman ruins of Carthage, clearly visible in the distance.

The city of Tunis is located on the far side of a shallow lagoon fed by two channels. A fort called La Goletta was situated on one of them. The next four tapestries (i.e. Tapestries Four through Six) depict the siege of La Goletta. All feature battle scenes, with Vermeyen revelling in the depiction of the splendid armour worn by the Ottoman soldiers, their bravery and their celebrated riding and fighting skills (figure 5). But he also includes every-day scenes of life in
A camp: women doing the washing, soldiers talking, making music or sleeping, and even a criminal on his way to execution, tied by his feet to a dromedary shown dragging him to the wailing gallows.

The subject of Tapestry Seven is the capture of La Goletta. Vermeyen has composed a splendid naval and land battle (figure 4). In the foreground we see the Emperor and Mulay Hassan (figure 3) in a small boat, with the battle unfolding before them and us. It is, however, not a traditional naval battle but here for the first time the ships’ cannons are fired in support of the army shown storming La Goletta in the distance. The large ship at the centre of the composition is the Sant’Anna, the flagship of the Knights of St. John. Probably the biggest and most modern ship at the time, she featured six decks (two below and four above the waterline), fifty cannons on two decks, an arsenal for 500 soldiers, a chapel, a smithy with three blacksmiths, comfortable quarters and a large dining hall for the officers, as well as a garden at the stern with orange trees and flowers. She even had her own windmill and bakery where fresh bread was baked every day so that no one on the Sant’Anna was forced to eat zwieback. Her armoured hull made her invincible, but her upkeep proved too expensive and she was decommissioned in 1540.

After the capture of La Goletta most generals pleased with the Emperor to return to Spain, but he insisted on pressing on to reach Tunis. This proved difficult as the unfamiliar terrain, the unremitting July sun and a lack of water made life miserable for the Europeans. However, Khair ad-Din gave battle, and this is depicted in Tapestry Eight. Again, a wide panorama with a plethora of fighting scenes in the background is portrayed, and some large animated figures in the foreground fighting or advancing in or around a small lake is also included. It is the largest extant cartoon, measuring (although cut) almost 1 ½ metres in length. After loosing this battle, Khair ad-Din decided not to return to and defend Tunis but to withdraw to Algiers, preserving the remainder of his army.

Realising this, many of the Christian slaves in Tunis managed to arm themselves and, with the support of most of the population, opened the city’s gates to the imperial troops, who did not have to fire a shot. A city that opened its gates to an attacker was usually spared. Unfortunately for Tunis, the Emperor had already promised his army the right to sack the city. Nothing and no one was spared and many were killed or enslaved. Those who survived and had somehow managed to hide a few valuables from the marauders were later allowed to buy back family members. Not surprisingly, these scenes of carnage and pillage are glossed over in the descriptions incorporated into the borders of Tapestries Nine and Ten, but Vermeyen includes a few scenes of men, women and children being dragged off into slavery, or of a soldier staggering under the weight of his booty. The tapestry illustrates a detailed view of the medieval city of Tunis and a self-portrait (figure 6). On the far right, Mulay Hassan can be seen astride his charger being welcomed by his weary people.

A week later, the imperial army left Tunis and moved into a camp at Rada. This is depicted in Tapestry Eleven. The foreground features a splendid procession of soldiers, slaves and exotic animals. Among them vividly drawn emus and dromedaries, signifying Vermeyen’s love of realism and naturalism.

Tapestry Twelve returns to the beginning of the series and shows the imperial army dismantling their camp and provisioning and loading their ships for the return voyage to Europe. The fleet lies at anchor in the background, with the middle-ground enlivened by countless figures going about their business: soldiers singing and dancing, women doing the washing, priests saying Mass or burying the dead, soldiers collecting cannon balls and, on the right, the Emperor seated at a table about to sign a new treaty with Mulay Hassan. On the shore we see soldiers busily rebuilding the destroyed fort La Goletta, which will now be manned by a Spanish garrison.

One of the stated aims of this campaign was to rid the Mediterranean of the threat to shipping posed by Khair ad-Din. This, however, was not achieved. Khair ad-Din had cleverly withdrawn to Algiers, and while the Spaniards were busy plundering Tunis he assembled a new fleet and sailed off towards the Balearic Isles, attacking the city of Malò on Minorca and capturing 6,000 slaves and many cannons to replace the ones he lost at Tunis. In the autumn of 1535, Khair ad-Din was recalled to Lisbon to deal with the Venetian navy, and in May 1537, 100 new galleys under his command sailed out of the Golden Horn, attacking southern Italy, islands in the Aegean Sea, and defeating an imperial fleet commanded by Andrea Doria in the Battle of Preveza in 1538. It is due to Khair ad-Din that the Ottomans remained the foremost naval power in the sixteenth century. He was made a Pasha and in 1546 he died, highly respected in his palace on the Bosphorus, age about 80. The Ottomans retook Tunis itself in 1574.

All this, however, did not prevent Charles V from celebrating this short campaign as a major imperial and personal victory. He left Africa on August 17, 1535 and sailed to Trapani in Sicily, from where he proceeded to Monreale, Palermo and then Naples. At every stop he was hailed as a great victor and the “defender of Europe against Africa and Asia,” his entry into Naples staged like a triumphal march. It was probably for this occasion that his brother, Ferdinand I, sent him the magnificent helmet and shield made in Milan (figure 7). Full of allusions to classical antiquity, they celebrate the Emperor as the reincarnation of ancient heroes: the helmet is shaped like an open Roman helmet and decorated with the head of a lion. This is a reference to Hercules who had slain the Nemean lion, turning the Emperor into a new Hercules. Charles admired him more than any other classical hero, choosing as his personal emblem the columns of Hercules (at Gibraltar) with the motto “plus ultra” (more than this).

Hercules is not the only intrepid warrior alluded to here: the centre of the shield features the head of serpent-haired Medusa, who was slain by Perseus, another celebrated hero of Greek mythology. In addition, there are four medallions with the portraits of four Roman generals who conducted successful African campaigns: Scipio, Caesar, Augustus and Claudius. However, they also conquered parts of Europe: Spain, Gaul (France), Germany, Austria and parts of Britain, respectively. Charles V thus positions himself as the legitimate successor of the ancient Roman emperors, ruling them over an empire that comprised most of Europe, and vanquishing his enemies to bring peace and a new Golden Age. The imperial splendour displayed in the course of Charles’ triumphal procession after his return from the campaign against Tunis and the commissioning of these tapestries both work as, and were perceived by contemporaries as, splendid political propaganda, even if the campaign had actually achieved little in the way of permanent success.
Islamic Archaeology in the Gulf

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In this paper I will explore the archaeological history of the Gulf throughout the Islamic period. In recent years a lot of new archaeological information has come to light on the Islamic period in this part of the world, especially in Eastern Arabia. More recent excavations at sites such as Julfar, Kush, Bilad al-Qadim and Sir Bani Yas along with the publication of older excavations such as Siraf, Qalat al-Bahrain and Suqar has added enormously to our understanding of how the region has developed since the 7th century AD.

It is important at the start to emphasise the geopolitical and economic importance of the Gulf to both global and Islamic history. The Gulf is often dismissed as something of a cultural and historical backwater during the Islamic period. This is a deeply misconceived view, as can be demonstrated by examining some of the evidence relating to the important role the Gulf has played in world history over the past 1,500 years and more. This article will present Islamic archaeology of the region period-by-period, beginning with Hellenistic/Parthian times and ending shortly after the period when Hormuz dominated the region between the 14th and 16th centuries (the locations of sites mentioned in the text can be seen in figure 1).

The Hellenistic-Parthian period (300 BC to 230 AD)

The 600 years or so between the end of the Iron Age and about 200 AD was a period of flourishing prosperity across much of Eastern Arabia. This is reflected in the number of large sites such as Thaj (Saudi Arabia), Qal’a al-Bahrain, Failaka, Mileha (UAE) and ed-Dur (UAE) – some of which are developed enough to be called true towns. In addition, in many rural sites coins and burials have been found by archaeologists, all of which attest to high levels of population and activity.

The Sassanian period to the rise of Islam (230 – 630s AD)

However, things began to change in the 3rd century and by the 5th century AD it seems that most of the sites mentioned above had been abandoned. Evidence for occupation during the Sassanian period is extremely rare across much of Eastern Arabia.

In fact, the only archaeological sites where there is reliable evidence for occupation at this time are Kush and Khatt in Ras al-Khaimah (UAE), Jazirat al-Ghanem in the Musandam (Oman) and Qal’a at al-Bahrain. At Kush, which has the best-explored Sassanian levels, the impression is of a small site with a very parochial feel. A small mud brick tower, probably built in the 7th century, may have been the work of a small-time, local ruler whose power did not extend far (figure 2).

It is not known why there was so little settlement in Eastern Arabia at this time and why population levels had apparently declined since the Hellenistic/Parthian periods. The answer might be related to changing rainfall patterns but there is not yet enough evidence to be certain about this.

The later 7th and 8th century – Christians and Muslims

Until very recently the 8th century was problematic for archaeologists because the pottery types that were used at this time were not well known and it was therefore difficult to distinguish 8th century occupation. To some extent the stratigraphic excavations at Kush in the UAE have helped to resolve this question and an increasing amount of information is now coming to light.

Across Eastern Arabia there was a notable increase in settlement and activity. This is reflected in the appearance of new occupation at settlements such as Kadhima in Kuwait (figure 3), Hulaylah in the UAE and Suqar in Oman. Interestingly, we also have evidence of a number of Christian churches and monasteries from this time, such as Akkaz and al-Qusur in Kuwait, Thaj, Jubbail, Hinnah and Jabel Berri in Eastern Saudi Arabia and Sir Bani Yas in Abu Dhabi. Although it is known that the Nestorian church had had a presence in the Gulf since the 4th BC, most of these sites appear to be new foundations as they have not yielded any earlier archaeological material. This might indicate that a reorganisation of the church took place in the 8th century.

At the same time occupation continued at Kush in the UAE, although on quite a small scale. Occasional finds of 8th-century pottery wares from rural sites indicates that there was also some activity in the countryside at this time.

The 9th and 10th centuries – the Abbasid trade boom

This is the time of great Abbasid trading, when Indian Ocean trade boomed and the Gulf underwent some very marked changes. New settlements emerged all along the shores of Eastern Arabia, and two major trading emporia emerged in the region: Siraf in Iran and Suqar in Oman.

The 9th century is easy for archaeologists to recognise as it is marked by the introduction of a well-known, new style of glazed ceramics that was manufactured in southern Iraq but was traded widely over the whole of the Indian Ocean. These ceramics are known collectively as the ‘Samarra horizon’ because they came into use at around the same time as Samarra became the capital of Abbasid Iraq in the early 9th century. The new styles include lustre ware, splashed ware and cobalt-decorated white wares (figure 4). These ceramics were inspired by imported Chinese ceramics and reflect increasing contact with China at this time.

But it was not only the wealthy and urbanised populations that participated in this booming trade. Evidence from small coastal settlements indicates that seasonal, nomadic groups – bedouin – living in tents or wooden huts were also using large amounts of Samarra horizon pottery from Iraq. At the camp site of Hulaylah in the UAE, excavations have revealed high levels of such pottery in an occupation
The largest and most important site of this period in Eastern Arabia is Jumeirah, which is a site of over nine hectares now located in the southern suburbs of Dubai about 600 metres from the sea shore. Occupation at Jumeirah consisted of a number of very substantial stone buildings amongst which appear to be a fort or caravanserai and at least one palace. The nine or so excavated buildings are widely spaced with wide open areas between them. The function of Jumeirah is not clear, but its size and the high quality of the buildings suggest that it was a site of some social and political significance, perhaps the seat of a governor or local ruler or a wealthy trading station.

With the flourishing of Basra in Iraq, Siraf in Iran and Suwar in Oman as well as the numerous smaller sites that are known, this period clearly represents a very significant regional boom in trade, settlement and urbanisation.

The 11th to 13th centuries – a period of decline

The early 11th century represents a marked break from the 9th and 10th century patterns described above. The beginning of this period can be recognised archaeologically by a type of pottery known as ‘Hatched’ or ‘Style III’ sgraffito (figure 5), which appears to have been manufactured in Iran but was widely exported. During the excavations at Siraf, this ware was dubbed ‘the type fossil of decline’ and it is true that its introduction seems to mark the decline in the size of both Siraf and Suwar.

At the regional level, there is very little evidence for occupation at this time over the whole of Eastern Arabia. Only three sites are known from Bahrain; Qala’at al-Bahrain, Bilad al-Qadim and Barbar and the distinctive plain sgraffiato pottery of this period is otherwise almost unknown there. No evidence at all of activity has so far come to light from the al-Hasa oasis, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia or Kuwait.

The obvious decline of this time is generally attributed to a re-directing of Indian Ocean trade away from Iraq towards Egypt as Egypt became a dominant economic and political power in the medieval Islamic world. This would have meant that Indian Ocean trade heading towards the Near East and Mediterranean would have flowed through the Red Sea rather than the Gulf, which seems to have lost its position as a seaway of international importance. The decline in wealth that this would have brought about might help to explain the decline in settlement.

The 14th – 16th centuries – the rise of Hormuz

Next we turn to the period that saw the rise of Hormuz. Between the 14th and the 16th centuries Hormuz was one of the wealthiest trading emporia in the whole of the Indian Ocean and its presence in the Gulf brought great wealth to the region. The town was located on the small, barren island of Jarun, close to the entrance to the Gulf (figure 6). It became important as a link between the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean and the great cities of Persia such as Shiraz, Tabriz and Isfahan and its presence had a profound effect on the lives and economies of the communities that surrounded the Gulf.

The large and wealthy community of merchants who lived on Hormuz island needed food and other supplies that could not be provided by the island. They obtained these from the territories they controlled around the Gulf, which included parts of the UAE coastline, Bahrain and parts of Oman. Indeed, during the period of Hormuzi power, we can find archaeological evidence for intense agricultural activity and high populations in these areas. Pottery, scatters and settlements are to be found everywhere as are the remains of agricultural field systems.

Under Hormuzi control Julfar in the UAE rapidly grew into a town at this time. Julfar was partly involved in pearl diving but the town’s fertile hinterland in the modern territory of Ras al-Khaimah was intensively cultivated to provide food for the merchants of Hormuz.

Coins were minted on Jarun Island, and these are found in excavations of this period in different parts of the Gulf. Another interesting phenomenon related to Hormuz’s maritime trade is the large amount of imported Chinese pottery that is found on Hormuz Island and in the areas under its control. Longquan celadons (figure 7) and blue-and-white porcelains are the most common finds. They can be found in astonishing quantities, sometimes on the most humble of rural sites. This is a reflection, not only of Hormuz’s wealth and power, but also of the growing economic influence of China in the western Indian Ocean at this time.

This brief overview has shown that it is now possible to begin to reconstruct the history of Eastern Arabia throughout the Islamic period using archaeological evidence to supplement the rare historical sources. One point that emerges very clearly is the fact that settlement in the region has gone through numerous very marked periods of boom and periods of decline throughout time. Many of these dramatic changes appear to be related to the fortunes of Indian Ocean trade and this must demonstrate the importance that trade and commerce have always played in the history of the region.

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