

Arab Colonialism and the roots of the Golden Age of Islam.

Craig Wright, PhD L.L.M.

University of Southern Queensland

Abstract:

The spread of Arab colonial conquest in the 8th to 12th century developed the colonial integration of diverse cultures, including the Greek, Roman, Persian, and Indian, to interact and share information, allowing philosophers and scholars across these distinct regions to open a means to synthesise knowledge. Colonialism stands at the heart of all the beneficial changes throughout this period. By integrating disparate cultures and societies and incentivising and rewarding knowledge while simultaneously limiting the scope of discordant conflict between individuals with different ideas, the Arab conquest of vast ranges of territory and the integration of a standardised legal system and jurisdiction function led to the development of new ideas synthesised from the best aspects of the cultures that had been conquered.

Keywords: Arab Golden Age, Islamic Rationality, Ibn Rushd (Averroes).

Introduction

The Islamic conquest created an opportunity for diverse cultures, including the Greek, Roman, Persian, and Indian, to interact and share information, allowing philosophers and scholars across this diverse region to synthesise knowledge. While the majority of renowned scholars during this time were not Arab, the development of safe exchange routes, the societal incentives to find and disseminate knowledge and the translation and access to wide ranges of cultural information allowed for the collection and dissemination of ideas from across the world to be synthesised into a more detailed and effective scientific and artistic philosophy that protected many earlier ideas and disseminated these into the West at a later date to form the seed of the Renaissance.

For example, Averroes¹, a Spanish philosopher of the twelfth century, integrated the knowledge of Aristotle and previous Islamic philosophers and, despite causing problems across the various caliphates, successfully argued that to ban philosophy would be “a wrong to the best sort of people and to the best sort of existing things” Peterson et al., 2013). Moreover, the synthesis of knowledge from diverse regions opened opportunities not only to learn the best aspects of logic, architecture and philosophy and to apply these throughout the Islamic caliphates but also to develop methodologies to compare and contrast the knowledge in such a manner that improved upon each of the original sources. Consequently, the wide-ranging diffusion of Islamic culture and the integration of many distinct cultures into a system that embraced knowledge allowed for the flourishing of both

¹ Abū al-Walīd Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Rushd.

art and architecture. Moreover, the scholars and other individuals who disseminated knowledge were incentivised for the activities.

Defining the Islamic Golden Age

Renima, Tiliouine and Estes (2016) demonstrated that the Islamic Golden age coincides with the period letters frequently referred to as the European dark ages (500 CE-1000 CE). In some ways, this overlaps the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the resulting power vacuum in the region. However, Falagas, Zarkadoulia and Samonis (2006) gave a more accurate determination of this period, putting the period between 750 CE to 1258 CE. The primary benefits that accrued through this change, according to these authors, involves the development of medicine, education, fine arts, and architecture.

In some ways, the knowledge of the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Hebrews, and Egyptians was integrated within the Islamic societies that developed and spread into many of the former provinces of the former Roman Empire (Burbank and Cooper, 2010; Lapidus, 2014). The spread of the Arabic political system and the more unified religious teachings of Mohammed United many tribal groups and enabled the creation of the Islamic state in 622 CE. As the head of this nation moved from Mecca to Medina, the people within this growing empire spread out, invading and conquering many regions within Southern Europe, North Africa, and eastern provinces, including central Asia and India.

As the Islamic people and armies spread into new regions, the religious justification to incorporate and learn knowledge was used to increase the overall knowledge and ability of doctors, scribes and philosophers in the growing kingdoms. Syed (2002) argues how the resulting medical practices that developed in areas such as Baghdad were 1000 years ahead of the rest of the world. Elgood (2010, p. 261) notes that the majority of Arabian medicine

was created by individuals who were not Arabs. In this, while many individuals from areas such as Baghdad and the near East became Muslim, the fundamental underlying aspect was that Persian knowledge was integrated into the processes of their Arab conquerors as Ibn Khaldun noted, it was strange that most of the learned men among the Muslims who have excelled in the religious or intellectual sciences are non-Arabs with rare exceptions (Fromherz, 2011).

Similarly, as Bowman (1996, p. 7) demonstrates, the most significant contribution from the Arab and Egyptian integration of rule the knowledge was the absorption of the formal learnings of the classical world. The Arab conquerors of Egypt valued knowledge. As Sadr (2015, p. 398-9) demonstrates, the integration of the conquered population into the early Islamic state led to disseminating information and technology around the growing empire. In this, “the combination of incentives, rules and policies implemented in that period allowed rapid growth and accumulation of human capital” (Sadr, 2015, p. 399). The benefit allowed for the rapid development of skilled labour, markets, and knowledge dissemination concerning science, research, and education. In this process, a sense of pristine edge and social status was bestowed to those who became scholars and scientists.

Consequently, the greatest defining characteristic of the Islamic golden age may be seen to be the creation of incentive structures that encouraged individuals to save for future building capital and build human capital by learning skills and disseminating knowledge. This reverence for knowledge led to the dissemination of information in books and through educational facilities that incorporated scholars who travelled, copied books and disseminated information in a single language throughout the growing empire (Chejne,

1968). Moreover, with a relatively safe set of trade routes, merchants and other scholars would travel between different regions gathering and disseminating information.

The movement of individuals and the incentives to share knowledge led to the assimilation of scientific knowledge held by the conquered civilisations and the integration of this knowledge across regions leading to its improvement and development. While the Greek and Roman knowledge were comparatively extensive, many areas of Persian knowledge and those in Chinese and Indian civilisations exceeded the Greek and Roman information in detail. When all of these became integrated, the resulting body of knowledge was far superior to any previous culture.

With the introduction of paper during the tenth century, Islamic scholars could continue to save classic works of antiquity, translate them into multiple languages, and disseminate them throughout the various civilisations they had connected. Moreover, the scientific knowledge of each of these regions could be compared and contrasted. From this, the best aspects of very different civilisations were integrated into a completer and more accurate whole, leading to a more complete science. The use of algebra, geometry, and more advanced mathematics gained through the integration of Persian and Indian knowledge led to new artworks and more advanced architecture.

Ibn Rushd (Averroes) was one of the individuals recognised for transferring information around the Islamic caliphates during the golden age. Taylor (2010, p. 182) notes how Averroes (1126-1198) “represents the culmination of one philosophical tradition in an Islamic cultural context” and further argues that the transfer of knowledge provided the impetus for the later Christian revivals. Glasner (2009) continues this argument, noting that Averroes translated the work in physics conducted by Aristotle and extended it to make

it more accessible and provided the foundations that would be used in the Christian Renaissance in revitalising Europe.

Kemal (2003) compares and contrasts Averroes with the earlier Aristotlean scholars and philosophers Al-Farabi (870-950) and Avicenna (980-1037). In the pursuit of knowledge and what these Islamic philosophers saw as a pastoral understanding of God, the integration of many forms of philosophical and scientific study led to the capture of many forms of classical knowledge and the integration and synthesis of ideas from different regions. Moreover, these scholars took concepts as diverse as logic and poetry and incorporated these concepts into art and architecture. Arguably, the greatest achievement of these philosophers, especially Averroes, would be countering the Sufi-influenced spiritual purification curriculum that more theologically orientated scholars such as Abū Hamid al-Ghazālī promoted.

Al-Ghazālī sought to set aside logic and philosophy and argued that religion and science were outside the realm of religious knowledge (Watt, 2020). In addition, this scholar was attempting to discredit the work of other philosophical Islamic scholars such as Avicenna. In particular, the notion of Greek philosophical thought was argued to be antithetical to the spiritual practices of Sufism. The changes that started to occur throughout the various Islamic caliphates involved the synthesis of new knowledge, the growing secularisation of society and the integration of new cultures. These resulted in many attempts to recapture the past. Moreover, the conflict between cultures led to the further development of Islamic culture. As a result, only the strongest and most useful aspects of Greek and Persian culture were propagated through the various regions.

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Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (Alpharabius) became known as the second teacher following Aristotle, who gained the nomenclature “the first teacher”. Al-Farabi has been credited for preserving many early Greek texts and has been noted to be the inspiration for later philosophers, including Avicenna and Maimonides (al-Farabi, 2014). The integration of juridical science and logic led Al-Farabi to propose the functions of a divinely sanctioned state structured to allow the individual's development and provide the background support to allow sanctioned forms of mercantile trade the study of “God's work”. Working in Baghdad, this scholar integrated Turkish, Greek and Persian texts to synthesise philosophical ideas from the region that represented a Shiite philosophical persuasion.

The development of artwork and architecture (Lowney and Lowney, 2005) represents the pinnacle of Islamic craftsmanship, such as the Spanish Alhambra Palace in Granada (239-240). However, while this form of arabesque architecture was splendid and demonstrated what many considered interest, possibly intricate geometric designs, these outward displays of wealth are only the consequence of the development of political, legal, economic and scientific knowledge during the Islamic golden age. While debates remain over the differences in interpretations, Turki (2010) demonstrates how concepts such as rationality and logic were functionally similar between the two societies. In many ways, the concept of logic and rational thought was derived from Greek philosophers and then later transferred into Europe to spark the development of modern Western culture. This

An analysis of the society and the culture of the time demonstrates that the defining characteristics and achievements of the Islamic golden age are not represented by the outward appearances that remain but rather through the cultural sharing and the synthesis of a wide range of sources of knowledge. As with most modern cultures, the development of

the Arab Golden Age based on the outward appearing artefacts and artwork may be seen as a modern form of national myth-building designed to counteract and condemn what many today see as a colonial conquest of formerly Arab and later Ottoman territories (Stetkevych, 2017). As both Lapidus (1992) and Starr and Buell (2014) demonstrate, the literary achievements of the early Arab and Islamic empires are built upon a unified state and society developed through conquest and an early form of integrated colonialism. As such, it becomes possible to argue how the forced integration of these diverse cultures and the creation of a multicultural system of exchange led to what people today called the Arab Golden Age.

Conclusion

Colonialism stands at the heart of all the beneficial changes throughout this period. By integrating disparate cultures and societies and incentivising and rewarding knowledge while simultaneously limiting the scope of discordant conflict between individuals with different ideas, the Arab conquest of vast ranges of territory and the integration of a standardised legal system and jurisdiction function led to the development of new ideas synthesised from the best aspects of the cultures that had been conquered. In this example, we see the argument put forth by Gilley (2018) and Biggar (2017) in representing the benefits of colonial rule.

While most of the original Arabic texts of each of these authors are generally considered lost, the translations into Hebrew and Latin remain (Mavroudi, 2015). However,

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as Averroes stated, "Veritas non contradicit veritati."¹² In developing a framework where individuals across multiple cultures could share and synthesise knowledge, the Islamic nations developed a cultural environment that provided the necessary frameworks to accept and test the best information and knowledge known around the world and filter this information without feeling resentful others knew more. In addition, the colonial conquest of many African nations, southern Europe, and both the Greco-Roman and Persian world and the integration of the Indian subcontinent created an environment of knowledge sharing that arguably outweighed any negative costs of colonial rule.

² كتاب الرسالة .الحقيقة لا تتعارض مع الحقيقة ." In Liber decisivorum tractatus, originally known as الخامسة.

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