

## Antiquity Comes Full Circle – Part III



### The Islamic Influence

Prophet Mohammed was born in Mecca in about 570 AD. He belonged to the leading tribe of the city, the Quraysh. His own family was respectable but not wealthy. Mohammed the man is largely lost in various eastern interpretations of his role as a prophet; however, there are certain stages of his development and role that are broadly agreed.

Mohammed began his adult journey as a camel driver and contractor in a caravan company. By the time he was 40 he was an affluent, though apparently unremarkable, market trader. Then in 610 AD, while asleep in a cave, he had a vision of the Archangel Gabriel. This vision left Mohammed with an overwhelming conviction that he had a mission to perform. This compulsion was further cemented by a series of religious experiences throughout his life. During the first years of his teaching, he spoke of one God, and initially found keen listeners but equally he was mocked by the materialistic and conservative merchants of the city. They found his condemnation of many of the local cults (who worshipped or revered trees, wells and stones as well as having animistic observances) distasteful, and so they opposed him. His concepts of philanthropy on earth, divine judgment and a life hereafter were also frowned upon at the time.

Over the next 20 years of his life, Prophet Mohammed recorded his moments of illumination when he was inspired by divine teachings. He recorded these experiences in short verses, which were gathered after his death to form the Koran. By that time, a complete moral code had been formed. The Koran is one of the earliest examples of Arabic literature. The overriding message is of the unity of One God. Mohammed saw God as infinite, merciful, and compassionate. The Koran emphasises the virtue of human charity and inspires a sense of social obligation and duty. The Koran at the time was also attempting to persuade the Jews and Christians to go back to the simplicity of the laws Abraham had brought. It is important to note here that Arabs are simply those who lived in Arabia.

Their legendary ancestor was Shem, and their first prophet was Abraham. So, they are in fact the same Jews referred to in the early books of the Old Testament.

The Prophet was utterly opposed to those consumed by idolatry, immodesty and to heathens (those who had no concept of an afterlife). He spoke passionately and eloquently of heaven and hell, believing the just and devout would taste the sweetness of heaven, whilst those who did not embrace the notion of One Supreme God, would become victims of hell. His message as stated earlier, was not well received and for five years he preached in Mecca but only really earned notoriety as there were few adherents. So, in 622 Mohammed left Mecca and went 280 miles northeast to Mecca's lesser rival, Medina. Some 75 of the first Muslims went with him. This event came to be called Hijrah (emigration) and was the turning point in Islam: it is from that year (622 AD) that the Muslim calendar is dated. Mohammed found support in Medina and as a consequence led expeditions with his followers towards the south, against Mecca. By year six of the Hijrah (628 AD) he had surrounded Mecca and an armistice was signed. Mohammed finally re-entered Mecca in triumph in year eight of Hijrah (630AD). In the remaining two years of his life, he became master of Hejaz (which included Mecca and Medina). This submission to the Prophet's rule led to the conversion to 'Allah's Law'.

The word Islam means submission (to Allah) and Muslim armies which challenged the Byzantine (Roman, largely Christian) and Persian (Iran and the Gulf States) Empires combined a religious fervour with a military zeal, which Mohammed described in his years at Medina as the 'Jihad' or Holy war. It is however a myth that Muslim armies forced conversion only by the sword. They largely used skilful negotiation and promise of status to maintain their Arab supremacy. As a consequence, within the lands that they conquered, their subjects slowly chose Islam as their faith, eventually leading to the Arabs becoming the minority sector of the Muslim population in those places of occupation. This happened by default rather than by design because as the Muslims used the bureaucratic systems and commercial traditions of the lands they acquired, a natural evolution and blossoming of Islam amongst the people followed. Over time, voluntary conversions ended Arab supremacy within Islam.

Mohammed died in 632 AD. He left a powerful legacy (far too much to document here). His successors were called Caliphs or deputies of the Prophet of God; they became the heirs to an empire which swiftly outgrew its origins in Hejaz (in Saudi Arabia, along the borders of the Red Sea). One conquest followed another: Damascus and Syria in 634, Alexandria and the Egyptian Corn lands in 641. As Mohammed had left no sons, disputes amongst his successors went on to dictate Muslim politics for centuries to come. The speedy conquests of Islam both as a faith and a state led to ever-increasing internal divisions. These were complex and many and are still played out today in the conflicts between the Sunnis (who form the majority of the Muslim world) and the Shiites (the followers of Ali, the fourth Caliph). The Shiite sect was born in the civil wars between the fourth and fifth Caliphs, but its conception was also a symptom of the growing unrest among non-Arab Muslims who fought in the armies of Islam but as second-class citizens. This discrimination also fuelled their sense of injustice and discontent. So, these ethnic factors are amongst the primary reasons for conflict between Sunnis and Shiites. Added to this are social and economic differences that went on to maintain the conflict.

The Arabs were now thin on the ground in their own kingdoms and so they clung tenaciously to all their special privileges. They managed to do that for a further century. Jews and Christians stood second in their religious and social hierarchy (paying a poll and land tax for privilege and also to avoid military service) as Islam continued to expand. The rapid conquest and expansion during the

early 700s would never again be matched in later Islamic history. The Islamic march in 710 AD went west and conquered the African coast up to Morocco. Visigoth Spain was overrun by 713 in a three year long campaign. It took seven centuries for the Christians of Spain to recover the territories they had lost. In the east the armies of Islam penetrated the Indus Valley and Sind in 712; two years later they were in Kashgar on the fringes of the Chinese Empire.

There the expansion stopped, in fact within a century of the Prophet's death, this vast Islamic Empire slowly began to contract. A defining moment in these events and undoubtedly a turning point was the failure of the Arabs to take Constantinople (now Istanbul) by sea in the siege of 717-18. It would be seven centuries before a Muslim conqueror (Mehmet II) would set foot in Constantinople. The Chinese also drove the Arabs back to Ferghana (Turkestan) in 715. The tide of Islamic conquest was turning. Where the Muslims had invaded, they largely absorbed the machinery of government and the culture of the occupied territories. This is certainly true of the arts and architecture. For example, in Damascus the Umayyads (Sunni Muslims), having invaded and secured the city, adopted the existing Greco-Roman and oriental traditions.

The earliest important Islamic monument is the 'Dome of the Rock' Mosque in Jerusalem, which was completed in 691 AD and is said to be built on the site of Abraham's sacrifice and that of the Prophet's ascension. In 706 the Umayyads also converted the fourth century Basilica of St. John the Baptist into one of the first congregational Mosques. This was one of many conversions from churches to mosques. These conversions represented the cultural confidence of Islam at the time over both Judaism and Christianity. It is worth noting that Islam tolerated these two religions on account of their monotheism and of their recognition of prophets.



## China's Glory Days

During the rise of Islam, the formation of the T'ang dynasty (618-907 AD) in China had taken place and China had entered one of the most glorious eras of its history. Following the overthrowing of the Sui dynasty a string of very capable rulers followed. T'ai Tsung (626-649 AD), Kao Tsung (649-683 AD) and a remarkable woman, the Empress Wu (625 – 705 AD). She reorganised and systemised the landholdings of the previous centuries. This opened up new agricultural areas and encouraged economic development. Empress Wu helped to facilitate the shift in the economic centre of the country from the wheat and millet land found in the north of China plains, to the rich rice growing fields of central China.

This shift helped with meeting the needs of the growing population of China; it also brought prosperity for its people and a generous income for the government. Chang-an, the capital, conveniently located at the eastern end of the central Asian trade routes, was also strategically placed to act as a focus for the economic and cultural life of the country. It was a glittering metropolis which attracted travellers from all over the known world. It was a vast walled city which included parks, temples, palaces, cosmopolitan markets, and was home to nearly 2 million people: Chang-an was an advert for what was best about the T'ang dynasty. By the eighth century the T'ang Empire was the largest the world had ever seen, as they extended Chinese rule by conquering the Turks and moved southwards into Vietnam and northeast into parts of Korea.

The high point of the T'ang opulence and achievement was reached during the reign of Hsüan-tsung (712-756). It was a brilliant age which produced breath-taking works of art (pottery, sculpture and painting) and for many is seen as the Golden Age of Chinese poetry. The work of Wang Wei (699-760), Tu Fu (712-770), Li Po (701-762), and others emerged as wonderfully elegant and poignant commentaries on the customs and feelings of that age, and their works have left a rich cultural heritage that still speaks to us today.

However, the high point reached at this time also marked the beginning of the decline of the T'ang Empire. Like his predecessors, Hsüan-tsung pursued the imperial ideal and sought to extend Chinese influence into central Asia. By the mid-century his armies had reached the Hindu Kush. Here in 751 AD the Chinese came up against the Arabs, a very different foe from those they had been used to (the Uighurs and the Turks). In the battle of Talas, Hsüan-tsung's armies were decisively halted and he never recovered his position in central Asia after that defeat. Here we see the coming together of the two major powers of the East, the Chinese and the Arabs (the Muslims). This is one of many such clashes with which history is littered.

Although the T'ang empire continued until 907, the years that followed Hsüan-tsung were never quite as rich, although beautiful art, pottery and poetry continued to dazzle. Growing financial and economic difficulties led to widespread unrest to such an extent that the fabulous wealth of the Buddhist monasteries was coveted by the hard-pressed government. Between 841 and 845 violent persecutions occurred and thousands of monasteries were dispossessed.

Buddhism by this time had flourished and its simple philosophy had evolved into a number of complex philosophical sects. It had comfortably evolved under the shade of the T'ang Empire having spread to Japan and Korea. But it too fell foul of the arrogance and stench of conflict and power. Over the next 50 years, China once again endured an era of division and political collapse. Five separate dynasties emerged, and ten independent kingdoms were set up, and once again barbarians invaded the north.

## East versus West

The rich tapestry of rise and fall of kingdoms, dynasties and empires continued throughout the medieval and renaissance period of history and for the East as was indeed true of the West, religion and spirituality were the uncomfortable companions of war, division, and conflict. They co-existed in what many might even describe as an unholy alliance. After all, can war and spirituality ever be on the same side? And yet throughout history there are those who've made their spirituality the basis of war. This is a contradiction that exists both in the East and the West. However, there is a fundamental difference in how this contradiction plays out within these two hemispheres. The primary difference is that in the East, despite the rampant expansion of the afore mentioned religions and dynasties, the idea of God or a Divine Designer or some notion of an Imperial influence was never deposed by the evolution of knowledge and the emergence of science. Whereas in the West, science had begun to question the notion of a Supreme deity and that deposition continues today. Many would say that has been to our detriment.

This was not because the eastern world did not see the 'magic' or the potential that the understanding of science was offering. It was simply inconceivable to the eastern cultures that there wasn't a great architect at work. In other words, understanding 'it' (God/life) or its 'workings' did not somehow elevate us beyond 'it', whatever that Supreme presence/influence may be. If we look at this period, we can see that the Arab translations from Greek and Syriac (of the classical Greek and Roman texts) pertaining to geography, natural history and the 'profane' sciences gave the Muslim world a significant lead over Europe in scientific knowledge (medieval sciences). This advantage wasn't lost until the fifteenth century. And it's not unreasonable to suggest that it is because the eastern propensity, in spite of its obvious 'scientific' interest and heritage, has almost always leaned more towards 'looking inwards' rather than outwards for the answers. This remains true even today.

It's important to state that our advocating an 'inward-looking habit' doesn't represent an eastern allegiance; our allegiance is to what we perceive to be true. That is that the self and the world are best understood through a marriage of the inner and outer universes. Understanding one to the exclusion of the other provides a breeding ground for ignorance, speculation, arrogance, and assumption. Therefore, for us, the imbalances we see evolving in the West are due, in part to the loss of this spiritual focus. Ironically, we also believe that to be true to a lesser extent for the East: so many of the religious and territorial disputes and conflicts that have taken place in the East have happened as it was losing sight of its own values and principles in pursuit of power. It's interesting that, whatever view you take of history, it seems to us that ego has a lot to answer for, as so many battles have been fought and continue to be fought in its name!

The Islamic story continued its journey of expansion into Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt and even into Spain, over several centuries. In many of these instances the Islamic influence is still clearly visible today, but the greatest evidence of Islam can now be found in India. Over half of all Muslims still live in India today but the coming together of these two differing forces would tell a tale that is arguably the most dramatic in human history.

## **Antiquity Loses Its Grip**

In the tenth century, another civilisation, the Chola, a Tamil power, dominated and shaped the medieval kingdoms of southern India (900 –1300 AD). The Cholas were known as the 'Athenians of India'. The Cholan age was a wonderful period of Indian art, worship, and tradition (especially Hinduism). In fact, their worship of Shiva continues today maintaining an unbroken tradition right back to 1010. The main figure who established the foundation for this Tamil domination of southern India was 'Raja Raja the Great'. Through him this Tamil empire became one of the world's great powers. The Chola period was one of strange contradictions. On the one hand they used blood and violence to expand their kingdom and yet on the other hand preached justice and virtue. Here again we see the spirituality of the East fighting for its place in a world that was losing its way. Even today, southern India, in large part due to this influence, still holds onto much of the abundance and virtue conceived at this time. This region certainly has a greater continuity of thriving Indian traditions, as it has been less affected by the numerous invasions that impacted on the North and so has retained much more of its cultural integrity.

During this period a different story was being played out in the north of India, as we see an enormous clash between the 'new' religious force (Islam) and the ever increasing multicultural and independent mindedness of the sub-continent (India), which had already evolved through so much change in the previous centuries. Once again it was to undergo enormous challenges and changes...

## **India Meets Islam**

Although some Muslim traders had settled in southern India at the end of the Middle Ages, the effect of Islam was only really felt in the north with a number of invasions and eventual settlements that took place. It began in Multan (which is now in Pakistan). The key figure in the telling of this story is the highly contentious individual, Mahmud Ghazni. To Muslims he was, and to some still is, an emblematic figure of Islam, a protector of the faith, a great ruler and builder of empires. To Hindus he was and is an oppressor and a fanatic who plundered the riches of India.

It was from Multan (which at the time was Hindu) that he began his raids and pillaging. Mahmud at the time was head of a great Muslim empire in Afghanistan (in the 11th century) and he saw India as a wealthy nest from which he could take and fill his own coffers. This was an age of violence and as we've seen so many times as this historical summary unfolds, it was also a time where there was the meeting of minds. The facilitators of this meeting of minds were the great Sufi Saints who were the first to try and bring Hindus and Muslims together.

During this period of contradiction and conflict, Mahmud led a dozen expeditions into India in pursuit of its wealth and riches. The most famous of these invasions took place in January 1026 – when he raided the great Hindu temple of Somnath. He tried to justify this raid on the basis of religious grounds, by describing the Hindus as infidels (a premise which had become the basis of so many 'holy wars' or 'Jihad' since the time of the Prophet). The Afghans and Turks of Baghdad may have accepted his justification as 'the defender of the faith' but the truth was he simply wanted the riches of Somnath. He set out in November 1025 from Multan and travelled 750 arduous miles south, through the desert down to the Arabian Sea, such was his appetite and determination. When he arrived, he ransacked the city, plundered the temple's gold and silver, and left it in ruins. His

twelve plundering expeditions led to great hatred between the Hindus and Muslims for many years; in some cases, this deep-seated resentment remains even today.

Mahmud Ghazni's raids were not the last to impact on India's psyche. In 1192 the military advances of the Afghans and Turks into Delhi brought another phase of domination by Muslims. They became the Sultans of Delhi and they established Muslim rule in India. This is where the first mosque in India was established. Twenty-seven Hindu temples were destroyed in order to build it. This was as much a political statement as a religious one. From the time of Mohammed in the 7th century, Islam's gradual march outwards from the Middle East had led to much invasion and eventual domination. However, it was the Delhi Sultans who realised India couldn't be converted by force – it was too large and diverse. Co-existence had its price though, as Hindus had to pay a head tax to practise their faith. It was the Sufis that would change the religious and spiritual landscape (for a while at least). They brought Islam's mystical tradition to the forefront and spoke of the sanctity of all life. So, despite the discrimination against the Hindus in the Middle Ages, wars and pillaging in the north and forced conversions, the Sufis came and laid a foundation for peace.

Once again, we see out of the hypocrisy and tragedy of human conflict that kindness tolerance and peace keep trying to make their way to the surface. The next chapter in this story begins with the 'promise of peace' that the Sufi Saints brought to India with the hope that the perpetual conflicts would end and again lead to an Empire of the Spirit rather than an Empire of the Sword. And for a time that endeavour would be fulfilled. There is an incredible contribution from a female who courageously helped to orchestrate change in what was a very male dominated world, making her contribution all the more exceptional. We will begin the next chapter with her story...