

Did Islam Destroy Classical Civilization?

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Introduction

Much of what I say in the article below goes so much against received wisdom that it might initially seem wrong, even obviously wrong. The notion, for example, that Christianity was inherently violent and intolerant is now so deeply ingrained that the reader might balk at the claim made here that this was not the case, and that violence and intolerance entered Christianity at a very specific time.

Also, the belief that Byzantium remained a flourishing outpost of classical civilization all through the “dark centuries” and into the fifteenth is so taken for granted that the reader will be shocked to find that Byzantium too had its “dark age” – a dark age perhaps even more obscure and impoverished than that of the west. Yet this is precisely what archaeology has now found.

For reasons of space I have not always been able to present the evidence in its fullness, complete with references etc., but the reader must understand that such evidence does exist, and is presented at length in my recently-published *Holy Warriors*. Here I have tried to answer some of the objections raised by the reviewers, but to answer them all, in the detail I would like, would take another book in itself.

Decline of Classical Civilization

One of the most enduring problems of history is the decline of Classical Civilization. How is it, scholars have long asked, that the civilization of Greece and Rome, which had endured over a thousand years, gave way to the world of the Medieval, an age which saw, for a while, the decline and apparent disappearance of the rationalist spirit of Greece and Rome?

In academic and journalistic literature and in the popular imagination, there is no mystery at all. After the Barbarian Invasions of the 5th century, we are told, the peoples of Western Europe reverted to living in thatched, wattle-and-daub huts. Cities were destroyed and abandoned, the art of writing virtually lost, and the mass of the population kept in a state of ignorance by an obscurantist and fanatical Church, which effectively completed the destructive work of the Barbarians. Into this darkened stage, the Arabs arrived in the 7th and 8th centuries like a ray of light. Tolerant and learned, they brought knowledge of the science of antiquity back into Europe and, under their influence, Westerners began the long journey back to civilization.

That, in a nutshell, is the story told in an enormous number of scholarly treatises and academic textbooks. It is a story implicitly accepted by a large majority of professional historians, both in Europe and North America; and yet it is a version of the past that is completely and utterly false. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a narrative further removed from what actually happened. And, shocking as it may

seem, historians have known this for several generations. Why this knowledge has never been fully disseminated or integrated into academic thought is a moot point, but the fact that textbooks designed for schoolchildren and students of higher education can still be printed promoting the above version of events should be a cause of deep concern.

The Europe that Muslims Found

The truth is that when the Arabs reached southern Italy and Spain, they found not a bunch of primitive savages, but a highly sophisticated Latin civilization, a civilization rich in cities, agriculture, art, and literature, and presided over by completely Romanized Gothic kings. How do we know this? The Arabs themselves said so. On their arrival in Spain, Gothic Spain, the Muslim conquerors of 711 were astonished at the size and opulence of its cities. Their annalists recall the appearance at the time of Seville, Cordova, Mérida and Toledo; “the four capitals of Spain, founded,” they tell us naively, “by Okteban [Octavian] the Caesar.” Seville, above all, seems to have struck them by its wealth and its illustriousness in various ways. “It was,” writes Ibn Adhari,

among all the capitals of Spain the greatest, the most important, the best built and the richest in ancient monuments. Before its conquest by the Goths it had been the residence of the Roman governor. The Gothic kings chose Toledo for their residence; but Seville remained the seat of the Roman adepts of sacred and profane science, and it was there that lived the nobility of the same origin. (Cited from Louis Bertrand and Sir Charles Petrie, *The History of Spain* (2nd ed. London, 1945) p. 7)

Not much sign of decline here! Another Arab writer, mentions Seville’s great bridge as well as “magnificent palaces and churches,” (Bertrand and Petrie, pp.17-18) and we should note that archaeological confirmation of this picture is forthcoming. Several of the magnificent Visigothic churches and palaces still stand, and the discovery near Toledo in 1857 of a collection of richly wrought Visigothic votive crowns encrusted with precious stones brought the descriptions of the Arab conquerors to mind in the most vivid way possible. (See Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (London, 1992) p. 18)

Documentary and archaeological evidence from throughout the territories of the former Roman Empire has demonstrated, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the Barbarian rulers who occupied Italy and the Western Empire during the 5th century, far from destroying Roman culture and civilization, rapidly became Romanized themselves, and presided over a veritable renaissance of Classical civilization.

In his *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, Henri Pirenne (of whom more later) devotes over 140 pages packed full of evidence to show that the economy, the arts and the sciences flourished under the Gothic kings, who employed their enormous wealth in the construction of brilliantly decorated residences and churches. By 500 AD, virtually all of the damage that had been done during the Invasions of the 5th century

had been repaired, and cities flourished as they had under the old Imperial administration.

Indeed, the “Barbarian” kings of Italy, from the very beginning, actively imitated the Court in Constantinople, and all of them regarded themselves as not only allies, but functionaries and officers of the Empire. The gold coins they issued were stamped with the image of the Byzantine Emperor, and they dwelt in the palatial villas erected by earlier Roman procurators and princes. Some of these were extended, and all were regularly renovated.

Yet, having said all that, it is true that by the end of the 7th century, or at the very latest by the start of the 8th, this flowering Classical civilization came, rather suddenly, to an end; and the medieval world we are all familiar with took shape. Cities and towns declined and were sometimes abandoned, trade diminished, life became more rural, the arts declined, illiteracy prevailed, and the feudal system, which fragmented the kingdoms of Western Europe, took shape.

In the years that followed, the Church became the sole vehicle of learning and administration, and a barter economy largely replaced the monetary system in place shortly before. What coins were issued were minted in silver, rather than the gold used until the start of the 7th century. The Middle Ages had begun.

Who or what had produced this situation?

As early as the 1920s, Belgian medievalist Henri Pirenne found the proverbial smoking gun. But it was not in the hands of the Goths, Vandals, or the Christian Church. It was in the hands of those people whom it had, even then, become fashionable to credit with saving Western Civilization: the Arabs.

The evidence, as Pirenne was at pains to show in his posthumously published *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1938), was incontrovertible. From the mid-7th century the Mediterranean had been blockaded by the Arabs. Trade with the great centers of population and culture in the Levant, a trade that had been the mainstay of Western Europe’s prosperity, was terminated. The flow of all the luxury items, the kind that Pirenne found in the records of the Spanish Visigoths and the Merovingians of Gaul, came to an abrupt end, as Arab pirates scoured the seas.

The flow of gold to the West dried up. Gold coinage disappeared, and the great cities of Italy, Gaul, and Spain, especially the ports, that owed their wealth to the Mediterranean trade, became mere ghost towns. Worst of all, perhaps, from the perspective of culture and learning, the importation of papyrus from Egypt ceased. This material, which had been shipped into Western Europe in vast quantities since the time of the Roman Republic, was absolutely essential for a thousand purposes in a literate and mercantile civilization; and the ending of the supply had an immediate and catastrophic effect on levels of literacy. These dropped, almost overnight, to levels perhaps equivalent to those in pre-Roman times.

Pirenne stressed that the arrival of Islam effectively isolated Europe both intellectually and economically. And with this economic paralysis came war: the

Muslim conquests were to unleash a torrent of violence against Europe. As a direct result of the Arab advance, by the 7th and 8th centuries, Christendom, the area within which Christianity was the dominant religion, diminished almost to vanishing-point. This catastrophic loss of territory – everything from northern Syria to the Pyrenees – took place in a space of two or three generations. In Western Europe there remained only a nucleus of Christian territory, comprising France, Western Germany, the Upper Danube and Italy (as well as Ireland and parts of Britain); and these regions felt themselves threatened also with imminent extinction.

The surviving Christian territories were besieged and under sustained attack from the north and east, as well as the south. As the Arabs sent army after army to plunder, destroy and occupy, they encouraged and, in some ways directed, further attacks on the core areas of Europe from other directions. Thus even the Viking onslaught, which devastated huge areas of the British Isles, France and northern Germany, was prompted by the Muslim demand for slaves. The latter is a fact not yet widely known, though well-accepted by professional historians; and emphasized repeatedly by Hugh Trevor-Roper and others (see *The Rise of Christian Europe*).

The Vikings, essentially, were piratical slave-traders, and their notorious expeditions across the seas to the west and along the great rivers of Russia to the east were elicited first and foremost by the Muslim demand for white-skinned concubines and eunuchs. Contemporary documents make this perfectly clear, and huge quantities of Arab gold found in Scandinavia confirm the trade. Without Islam, there would almost certainly have been no Viking raids. As it was, this trading-alliance between the barbarians of the North and the Muslims of Spain and North Africa was to bring Christian Europe to the brink of collapse.

As if all that were not enough, the attempt to control the inroads of Muslims and Vikings opened Europe to the depredations of other predatory peoples, most especially from the steppe lands of central Asia, and one of these in particular, the Magyars, or Hungarians, were to prove a real threat, for a time, to the continued existence of a Christian Germany.

Henri Pirenne and his Successors

Pirenne's research was first class and was never effectively refuted by his critics. Nonetheless, his findings have been ignored. Year after year popular and scholarly works on the history of the Mediterranean and of Islam's interaction with Christianity continue to be published – especially in the English-speaking world – without mentioning Pirenne's name, far less taking on board his findings.

This was the case, for example, with John Julius Norwich's history of the Mediterranean (*The Middle Sea*), published in 2006. The same is true of the latest offering of David Levering Lewis, whose 2008 book *God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570 – 1215*, not only ignores Pirenne and his ideas, but comes to conclusions reminiscent of those taught before the appearance of *Mohammed and Charlemagne*.

For example in the above volume Lewis contrasted the cultural sophistication of the 8th century Islamic invaders of Spain with what he describes as the almost Neolithic culture and economy of the Visigoths and Franks whom they encountered. For Lewis, the “Dark Age” was still brought about by the Germanic Invaders of the 5th century, and the Arab blockade of the Mediterranean in the 7th and 8th centuries had no effect upon Europe. For him, the Arabs were still, evidently, the saviors of Europe from barbarism.

How to explain this? Without doubt, political correctness has played a part. The spirit of the age dictates that non-European civilizations (such as the Islamic) should never be criticized, or even critically examined. Such an attitude, which essentially places ideology above evidence, is most disturbing, and needs to be combated at every opportunity.

There is however another factor: Pirenne, along with almost all historians of his age, assumed that Byzantium, which had not been overrun by the Barbarians, never experienced a Dark Age or a Medieval period. This view was prompted, in part at least, by Byzantine propaganda, which always advertised the Empire as the Second Rome and the inheritor of Rome’s mantle.

As recently as 1953, for example, Sidney Painter could write that,

from 716 to 1057 came [for Byzantium] slightly more than three centuries of glory. The Byzantine Empire was the richest state of Europe, the strongest military power, and by far the most cultivated. During these three centuries while Western Europe was a land of partly tamed barbarians, the Byzantine Empire was a highly civilized state where a most felicitous merger of Christianity and Hellenism produced a fascinating culture. (*A History of the Middle Ages, 284-1500*).

To this day, popular literature tells us how, after the taking of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, Greek scholars and philosophers, fleeing to the West, helped “kick-start” the Renaissance in Italy. But if Byzantine civilization was not destroyed by the Arabs, why should anyone believe they destroyed classical civilization in the West? This was a point Pirenne did not address: He was perhaps unaware of its importance. Yet developments in Byzantine archaeology since the Second World War have now come dramatically to the support of Pirenne.

Byzantium’s Collapse

It has been shown, much to the surprise of everyone, that from the mid-7th century onwards, the Eastern Empire suffered its own Dark Age. Byzantium experienced three centuries during which – in complete contrast to the opinion expressed above – almost all her cities were abandoned, populations plummeted, and high culture came to an end. Cyril Mango (*Byzantium, the Empire of New Rome*) talks of the “catastrophe” of the 7th century, which plunged the whole of Byzantium into what he describes as a “dark age.”

In a chapter entitled "The Disappearance and Revival of Cities," he looks at the vexing question of causes. "The evidence," he notes, "for the collapse of the cities [in the 7th century and after] is largely archaeological." (p. 69)

This veritable disappearing act is found throughout the Byzantine realms, both in the Balkans and in Asia. Sirmium, he notes, was "completely deserted" after its surrender to the Avars in 582." South of Sirmium, in Stobi, we find "considerable evidence of building" throughout the 5th century, but "no building activity whatever after the 6th century." (pp. 69-70) Town after town throughout the region "ceased to exist" shortly after circa 600. (p. 70)

"The same panorama of abandonment," he notes, "is visible in Greece." This is the case at Athens, Corinth and elsewhere. "In Boeotian Thebes there is no sign of any urban life between the 6th century and the second half of the 9th." "We may add," he says, "that, with the exception of Thessalonica and the island of Paros, not a single Early Christian Church remained standing in all of Greece, and there is no evidence of any building activity between about 600 and the early years of the 9th century."

There seems then to have been a general and complete abandonment throughout all the urban centers of south-eastern Europe. But precisely the same is observed in Asia Minor. "In Bithynia, the Asiatic province closest to Constantinople, only Nicaea appears to have survived. Nicomedia, once a great imperial capital, lay in ruins in the 9th century." (p. 71)

Further south the same picture is repeated. Ephesus, according to the documentary sources, did survive into the 8th century, and produced tax revenue of a hundred pounds of gold; "yet the excavators have found little evidence of any building activity, save for a small church replacing the earlier and much larger basilica of St. Mary." (p. 72) Sardis too was abandoned in the early 7th century, and the same story was repeated at Miletus and Pergamum. "Other sites that have been investigated, such as Nysa and Laodicea, tell essentially the same story ..."

So great was the destruction that even bronze coinage, the everyday lubricant of commercial life, disappeared. According to Mango, "In sites that have been systematically excavated, such as Athens, Corinth, Sardis and others, it has been ascertained that bronze coinage, the small change used for everyday transactions, was plentiful throughout the 6th century and (depending on local circumstances) until some time in the 7th, after which it almost disappeared, then showed a slight increase in the 9th, and did not become abundant again until the latter part of the tenth." (pp. 72-3).

Even the statement that some coins appeared in the 9th century has to be treated with caution. Mango notes that at Sardis, the period between 491 and 616 is represented by 1,011 bronze coins, the rest of the 7th century by about 90, "and the 8th and 9th centuries combined by no more than 9." (p. 73)

And, "similar results have been obtained from nearly all provincial Byzantine cities." Even such paltry samples that have survived from the 8th and 9th centuries (nine) are usually of questionable provenance, a fact noted by Mango himself, who remarked

that often, upon closer inspection, these turn out to originate either from before the dark age, or after it.

When archaeology again appears, in the middle of the 10th century, the civilization it reveals has been radically altered. The old Byzantium of late antiquity is gone, and we find an impoverished and semi-literate rump: a Medieval Byzantium strikingly like the Medieval France, Germany, and Italy, with which it was contemporary. Here we find too a barter or semi-barter economy; a decline in population and literacy; and an intolerant and theocratic state. And the break-off point in Byzantium, as in the West, is the first half of the 7th century – precisely corresponding to the arrival on the scene of the Arabs and of Islam.

The evidence from the East, which has, regrettably, not yet become common knowledge, even in the world of academia, weighs decisively in favor of Pirenne. The debate is essentially over – although the knowledge of that fact has yet to percolate through to the history faculties of our universities. Classical civilization, just as Pirenne said all those years ago, did not end in the 5th century; it ended in the 7th; and it was terminated by the Arabs.

Islam's Influence

While Islam's doctrine of perpetual war against the infidel did turn the Mediterranean into a violent frontier, and did impoverish Europe, Islam now also began to impose its mindset upon the West. Until the closing of the Mediterranean, the predominant cultural influence upon Europe was from the East: from Byzantium and from the ancient Hellenistic centers in the Near East, especially Egypt and Syria. With the closing of the Mediterranean, the West was isolated, and the centre of gravity moved, as Pirenne stressed, to the North; to northern Gaul, Germany and Britain. Yet the influence of the East did not come to a complete end. There was some continuity. But now the East meant Islam. And in the centuries after the first Arab conquests, the influence of Islam became profound: It was this influence that would definitively terminate Classical civilization and give birth to the theocracy we now call "Medieval Europe."

Holy War

The first and most obvious Islamic idea to be adopted by Europeans was that of Holy War. Before the 7th century, Christianity had been, by and large, true to its pacifist roots. Even after becoming the official religion of the Empire, Christians tended to eschew the army as a career and the taking of any human life, even in war, continued to be frowned upon. In the words of Gibbon – no friend of Christianity – by the 5th century:

The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity; the active virtues of society were discouraged, and the last remains of the military spirit [of Rome] were buried in the cloister; a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion; and the soldiers' pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both

sexes, who could only plead the merits of abstinence and charity. (Decline and Fall, Chapter 38).

This may go part of the way to explain the recruitment into the army of great numbers of Barbarians from the 4th century onwards. Actually, by the late 4th and certainly by the 5th century, the words “barbarian” and “soldier” became virtually synonymous.

The Gothic and Vandal kings who supplanted the Roman Emperors in the West were, to begin with, not exactly pacifists. Whilst readily accepting Christianity, the new faith had to find a place alongside the ancient warlike cults of Woden and Thor. Nonetheless, by the end of the 6th century, even the warlike nature of the Teutonic rulers began to dissipate.

Gibbon notes that, under the spell of Christianity, the Goths and Vandals soon lost their martial nature, so much so that by the 7th and 8th centuries, the Germanic populations of North Africa and Spain were utterly unable to stem the Islamic advance in those regions. Whilst Gibbon may have exaggerated the pacifist impact of Christianity, there is no doubt that it did work towards making all of the cultures which adopted it less warlike.

Wars did not cease, but wars of aggression became much less frequent. And the notion that “Holy War” – meaning an aggressive war waged specifically to spread the faith, existed before the Middle Ages has now been formally refuted by none other than Bernard Lewis. True, Christian emperors such as Heraclius did fight “holy wars” against the Persians, but these were entirely defensive, and not to be compared with the Crusades of later centuries.

This new medieval Christianity was a direct consequence of the clash with Islam, for it did not appear until after the arrival of Islam. In one respect, the change came quite simply because it had to: Surrounded by aggressors bent on its destruction, aggressors with whom it was impossible to make peace, Christians had to take up arms. This was as true among the Christians of the North, threatened by the Vikings and Hungarians, as it was among the Christians of the South, threatened by the Muslims. But the change was elicited by ideology as well as simple necessity. Europeans began to be profoundly influenced by Muslim ideas – ideas on war, interpretation of Scriptures, heresy, the Jews, etc. This was a purely “Medieval” outlook: indeed, it was the very epitome of what we now mean by “Medieval.”

Historians are familiar with the influence of Islamic philosophy upon the West at this time, and they quote, generally with approval, the study by Europeans of the Persian Muslim Avicenna and the Spanish Muslim Averroes. But not everything that came from Islam was so benevolent. It is widely accepted, for example, that the Byzantine doctrine of iconoclasm, the destruction of sacred religious images, was directly attributable to the influence of Islam.

But many Islamic ideas, some of them the polar opposite of those found in early Christianity, now began to find resonance in the thinking of Europeans at almost every level. How could it have been otherwise, when impoverished Christians viewed with astonishment the wealth, luxury and sophistication of Muslim cities in Spain,

Sicily, and further east? That this wealth and luxury was barred to them by the very Muslim Emirs and Caliphs whose opulence they so much admired was beside the point. Europeans could only be impressed, and influenced. And influenced they were.

From the Muslims they learned “Holy War;” from them they learned too that the Jews were an accursed race and the enemies of God; an attitude derived directly from the actions and teachings of the Prophet, who personally ordered the massacre of various Jewish tribes in Arabia, and who pronounced the Jews as enemies of Islam. It is a little-known fact that the first massacres of Jews in Europe were carried out in Spain, in Cordoba and Granada (1011 and 1066 respectively) by Muslim mobs. And it was in Spain that the Christian knights who opposed Islam learned this new and lethal form of anti-Semitism.

Islamic fatalism, founded on the conviction that Allah could not be bound by any kind of natural or scientific laws, was lethal to the rationalism of Greece and Rome, which now began to die. Parallel with this development, there appeared, first in Islamic Spain and then throughout Europe, that obsession with sorcery which was to be one of the hallmarks of the Middle Ages.

From Islam too, the Europeans breathed the essence of fanaticism. Islamic law decreed death to be the only fit punishment for a heretic or an apostate. No such idea had ever existed previously among Christians. True there had always been fierce doctrinal and theological disputes among Christians which even, at times, turned violent.

But such violence that occurred was mainly verbal and rarely involved physical attack. By the end of the 11th century, Christian Europe, under the influence of Islam both in Europe and in the Middle East, was beginning to think in a very different way; and within a hundred years, the Popes had defined and published their new doctrine of capital punishment for dissenters. Torture too, absolutely normal in Islamic lands (again, based on the example given by the Prophet), began, for the first time, to be applied judicially in Europe.

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