

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON ARAB ACHIEVEMENTS

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Arab culture has very rich traditions that have developed over centuries. They have achieved and accomplished much, yet acknowledgement must be given to those cultures that influenced them. While a great deal of their learning and achievements has evolved into a rich heritage, much of it was acquired or absorbed from the peoples they conquered. The influences they realized from other cultures actually set the foundation upon which they accomplished much in numerous fields of endeavor.

Introduction

As the Arabs expanded their conquests beginning in the early seventh century, they came into contact with many people of diverse cultures. Their earliest battles were not aimed only at conquest or conversion, but also for economic gain in the form of money, camels, food and other necessities for life in the desert (Lamb 58). However, within a century after Muhammad's death, his followers were in control of an empire greater than that of Rome at its peak (Hitti 306).

“In art and architecture, in philosophy, in medicine, science and literature, in government, the original Arabians had nothing to teach and everything to learn ... these Muslim Arabians in collaboration with and by the help of their subject peoples began to assimilate (and) adapt ...” (Hitti 174). They became students of those they conquered, and were quick learners due to their high level of curiosity and keen sense of industriousness.

One factor that made them so successful with their conquests was their attitude towards those they conquered. For example, after Syria was conquered, many of its citizens preferred the new system of control, which seemed more fair than the oppression they had been living under.

By being reasonably fair upon conquest, they were better able to acquire the knowledge of the conquered since those people respected them. It was this attitude of respect that made it easier to expand the conquests and acquire existing knowledge from the local peoples.

Fields of Influence

The Arabs had thoughtful respect for the achievements of past civilizations and for reputable scholarship. They built upon what was already established. It would be helpful to examine from whom they received influence in various fields, along with acknowledgement of the improvements the Arabs subsequently made.

Philosophy

“At the time of the Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent the intellectual legacy of Greece was ... the most precious treasure at hand. Hellenism consequently became the most vital of all foreign influences in Arab life” (Hitti 309). Their philosophy therefore had Greek roots, and Islam’s philosophical ideals were in harmony with Greek philosophy, especially with regards to the use of logic and reasoning.

Arab translators spent much time in translating Greek works, including those of Aristotle, into Arabic. They were responsible for “introducing Neo-Platonic speculations and mysticism into the Arabic world” (Hitti 315). So extensive were their efforts that by the end of the tenth century, the Arabs had far more works of the Greeks in their possessions than did the Europeans.

Music

Regarding music theory, the Arabs followed the Greek understanding of the structured arrangement of music, including that of harmony and chordal patterns. Regarding performance and instrumentation, each region, whether city, desert, countryside, or coastal, had its own tradition and expression of music. “The migration of peoples and the spread of the Arabic

language ... may have moved these traditions in the direction of uniformity, but the differences remained, from one village or tribe to another” (Hourani 198). The Arabs were thus influenced by music from numerous regions, including those of Turkey, Egypt, Persia and India.

Commerce

“The early merchants were Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians” (Hitti 343). But the Arabs eventually superseded them in commerce as they learned to value trade on a broad scale. They went east to the Orient (e.g., China, Indonesia) to acquire items such as silk, and they also went west to Morocco and Spain to acquire other goods. They also exported numerous items (e.g., carpets).

Paper, invented by the Chinese, was first acquired by the Arabs in the very early eighth century. Recognizing its usefulness and value, a paper mill was established in Baghdad. Its success was followed with the construction of paper mills in Egypt, Morocco and Spain.

The Arabs also had a successful glass industry. The original principles of glass making were Phoenician, but the Arabs refined the techniques to create beautiful pieces. Many of their techniques were used for stained glass windows in European cathedrals.

Geography

“Those who wrote on geography combined knowledge derived from Greek, Iranian and Indian writing with the observations of soldiers and travelers” (Hourani 201). The Arabs improved upon geographical specialties, including cartography, and with their new skills made very accurate maps of the regions of Asia, northern Africa and much of Europe. This refinement in map-making not only aided in maintenance of their expansion efforts, but helped them more accurately represent the known world.

Astronomy and Mathematics

The spread of the Arabic language was helpful for making “it possible to bring together Greek scientific tradition with those of Iran and India” (Hourani 202). An Indian around 771 introduced the Arabs to treatises on astronomy and mathematics (Hitti 307, 378). About half a century later, an Arab astronomer, al-Khwārizimi, advanced the efforts of an earlier translation of the treatise on astronomy by combining it with prior Indian and Greek contributions to the field (Hitti 307). In mathematics, Indians introduced the decimal system by the ninth century, an advancement which the Arabs quickly incorporated into their numerical system.

Political Administration

“The Persian model of efficient administration taught the Arabs how to run their expanding empire” (Snodgrass). Efficiency was definitely needed the more that the Arabs expanded. In terms of consistency of political communications, it was helpful that by the tenth century Arabic had become the language of diplomacy (Hitti 316).

Diplomatic courtesies and traditions were often extended in the tradition that was common for those previously in charge. For example, they received “their guests or subjects in accordance with the ceremonial usages of Byzantine emperor or Iranian king” (Hourani 26). Their occasional and strategic compromises of power and their use of assistants from prior administrations allowed the Arabs to manage their expansion.

Architecture

During his leadership, Muhammad didn’t approve of extravagant expenses, including those pertaining to architecture. It is reputed that he censured one of his wives (who had built an addition to their dwelling while he was away) by saying, “The most unprofitable thing that eateth up the wealth of a Believer is building” (The March 49). While building practices during his lifetime may have been modest, his successors used finances gained from conquests to build

impressive structures such as mosques, minaret towers, and column arcades. The Arabs justified the extravagance with the belief that “Great monumental buildings (were) themselves a public statement that the revelation given through Muhammad to mankind was the final and most complete one ...” (Hourani 27). They therefore took immense pride in their building efforts.

Theology

Arabs, especially those of the desert clans, were slow to embrace the monotheistic concepts of Judaism and Christianity, preferring instead the historical traditions of polytheism. Muhammad effectively solidified their burgeoning monotheistic conceptualization, and the idea of one God became central to the new religion of Islam. For world religions, Islam has had the greatest success in having no barriers for its followers regarding race, color and nationality (Hitti 136). The Islamic belief of placing God first above all else has had the favorable effect of unifying Muslims worldwide.

Literature and Poetry

The oldest known literary work in Arabic is Fables of Bidpai. It was originally written in Sanskrit, translated later into Persian, then finally into Arabic. The importance of the Arabic translation is that it is the only one still in existence, and it was the basis for which the work was translated into over forty different languages.

“New poetic forms developed” around the courts of the Umayyads, and the most important new form was the muwashshah (Hourani 193). This was a poetic form that had patterns of lines that rhymed in various series of lines. These new poems reflected the linguistic creativity of the Arabs.

Medicine, Chemistry, and Pharmacy

“The core of Muslim medical knowledge was taken from Greek medical and

physiological theory” (Hourani 202). In 765, one caliph who was sick asked to see Jūrjīs ibn-Bakhtīshū, and was so impressed with the physician’s medical knowledge that he became the court’s chief medical attendant. He had studied at a medical academy that had been built on Greek traditions and that had been in existence for over two centuries.

“(The Arabs) made their greatest scientific contribution in chemistry” (Hitti 380). They valued the creation of healing drugs from plants and chemical mixtures, and did actual studies on humans (Hourani 203). The Arabs became quite successful in exploring the curative uses of medicines. “Pharmacy as an institution is an Islamic invention” and the Arabs were the first to open pharmacy shops (Hourani 203).

Summary

A full appreciation of Arab heritage requires that we look not only at what they accomplished, but also at what influences they incorporated to help them make such great advances. “The inclusion of so much of the world in a single empire brought together elements of different origin into a new unity” (Hourani 56). It was therefore the new unity that gave the Arab culture such strength and distinction. By assimilating much of what had already been in place, and by making improvements as necessary, their own culture, as well as that of humanity, was immeasurably enriched.

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