

The Saracenic Contribution to Learning

THE trend eastward among the Mohammedan peoples of the proletarian revolution awakens a desire to know more of these potential allies of ours than the average historian, with his religious prejudices reveals.

Religions being an expression of the central life of a group, i. e., Matriarchal relations, suggest female deities; animism yields to antropomorphism. Feudal religions emphasize authority, etc. Therefore, in dealing with the Saracenic contributions to history it is incumbent on us to investigate the conditions under which it arose.

Saracenic (from the Arabic word Sarquin—to rise) was variously employed by mediæval writers to designate the Mohammedans of Syria and Palestine and the Arabs generally or the Arab-Berbers of northern Africa who conquered Spain, Italy, Sicily and invaded France. At a later date it was employed as a synonym for infidel nations against whom crusades were preached and was thus applied to the Seljuks of Iconia, Turks and others. The work appears as early as the first century of the Christian era, when it was applied by the Greek writers to some Arab tribes of the Syrian desert of Tih.

The rise and spread of Mohammedism has many parallels to the rise and spread of Christianity some six centuries previous. Both founders claimed a common ancestor in Abraham the founder of Judaism, a monotheistic faith. Both claimed divine inspiration from the same God. Both arose and developed in conformity to the economic conditions of time and place.

Although Christ, from whom Christianity derives its name, was supposed to have lived in Judea the religion arose and flourished in certain parts of Europe peculiarly fitted for its growth and development. Judea was entirely untouched and Christianity left no impression upon its historians. It was as though Christ had never lived.

This was because the Jewish religion was sufficient to the Jews; a national God, a God of war to whom they could look for deliverance from the oppressor, as in the days of Moses, Joshua, etc. The pacific Christ did not, and could not find a place in their hearts. But in Rome and Greece the Christians made marvellous headway, first among the slaves, later among the citizens. It suited their needs. Judea was a province of the Roman Empire and the Jewish race had been a subject race many centuries in turn to Assyria, Persia, Greece and Rome.

Mohammed was a merchant prince, owner of great caravans plying a lucrative trade over territory which had not been subject to any other nation, having maintained their independence by force of arms, aided by geographical juxtaposition to the great Arabian desert. The people were largely traders carrying between east and west, a sturdy, independent lot. No slave religion for them.

In the hundred years following the Hegira (622 A.D.) a Saracenic empire was established which extended from Turkestan to the shores of the Atlantic. Mohammed made himself master of Mecca from which flowed the trade routes of the east in 629. By 709 the Saracens had extended their sway over northern Africa to beyond the Strait of Gibraltar and had subjugated almost the whole of Spain by 711. From Spain they passed to Gaul, where their progress was arrested by Charles Martel near Poitiers in 732. Sicily was conquered in 827-878, and early in the tenth century their incursions extended into the Burgundian territories.

The disruption of this great Saracenic realm began about the eighth century when the western portion broke away from the rest and became a separate State with Cordova as its capital. The social forces underlying the rise, spread and decay of the empire were many and varied, but as this article started out to deal with the contribution to learning of this particular period, it would be impossible to dwell on any particular phase except to say that slave production prevailed having lingered on in the east after feudalism had obtained in western Europe. Volumes have been written on the religious and mili-

tary aspects of Mohammedism, but of the cultural—far less.

However, in Amer Ali's "Short History of the Saracens" we find this: "No country in the world enjoyed a higher degree of agriculture than Spain under the Arabs. They raised agriculture to a science. Every kind of soil was appropriated to that specie of culture for which it was best adapted. The Spaniards are indebted to the Arabs for the introduction of rice, sugar-cane, the cotton tree, saffron, spinach and that infinite variety of fine fruits which have now become almost indigenous to the peninsula from which the use and culture of them have gradually been introduced into various parts of Europe. Vast groves of palms and olives were left by them in Spain."

The luxury of their palaces rivalled those of Rome herself. The fine arts also flourished as is attested by the arabesques, paintings and mosaics finished with care and accuracy, harmonious in color and design; the graceful columns and brass work grillings gave evidence of a high degree of skill in the more artistic handicrafts.

The sovereigns of Granada rivalled the Caliphs of Cordova in their patronage of learning and art. Under their liberal and enlightened government Granada became the home and birthplace of eminent scholars, distinguished poets and accomplished soldiers. It was not polite literature alone which was fostered by the Arab rulers of Granada. History, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, the natural and exact sciences in general, medicine and music were cultivated with equal eagerness.

The government of each academy was entrusted to a rector who was chosen from the most enlightened scholars. No religious distinction was made in these appointments, and learned Jews and Christians were often appointed to the posts of rector. Real learning, in the estimation of the Arabs, "was of greater value than the religious opinion of the literate." The age of chivalry had no greater devotee than the Arab cavalier. Women and cleanliness held high place in the estimate of the Arab, contrary to the generally accepted idea. The latter probably being a compliment to the former. The knowledge of political science was also well advanced in conformance with their methods of production. In fact we gather that the Saracenic invasion of Europe, carrying with it as it did the knowledge of the arts, science and literature, was a great factor in the recovery of Europe from the anarchy and chaos following the downfall of Rome.

The architecture of the Mohammedans was filled with rich and varied styles based principally on Byzantium and Persian models adapted to new purposes and different ideals. The mosques, mausoleums, minarets, knaus, hospitals, bazaars, palaces, oratories and fountains form a varied group of buildings. The Moorish school of Spain (Cordova and Granada) and the Egypto-Arabic school of Cairo are the best known, but the Syrian and Palestinian centred in Damascus, and the Persian centred at Bagdad and Ispchay, the latter sending offshoots as far as India and Asia Minor. The development of the dome; the stilted, horse-shoe and pointed arches, stalactite vaulting, geometrical decorations are the chief characteristics of the Mohammedan schools. The latest addition to the artistic heritage was through the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in the 15th century which led to a return in greater force of the influence of the Byzantium.

It will be remembered that it was at the siege of Constantinople that the greatest contribution to military science was demonstrated—the first successful gunpowder.

Under handicrafts—rugs, tapestries, and ceramics were widely known products, while the famed Damascus steel had a prominent place in the romantic literature of the Victorian period, the knowledge and technique of which were preserved and introduced into Europe largely by the returned Crusaders.

Oriental rugs are always woven in one piece. Persia is the home of the Oriental rug. The finest in the world, both in past centuries and today, came from Persia, and while very little seems to be known of the rug-making of the ancients, rug-making was introduced into Europe by the Moors, whose palaces and mosques were adorned with magnificent rugs. They were introduced into Europe again in the latter part of the 13th century by the returned Crusaders, who also brought back with them a knowledge of the technique of rugs and also many other Oriental luxuries, two of which were tapestry and ceramics, which laid the foundation of those industries.

Tapestries were the forerunner of rugs, the earliest of which was embroidery work, being the handiwork largely of the women slaves and concubines of the harems. On some pieces a whole life-time was spent. The writer has had the opportunity to see in an exhibition of Persian bronzes and tapestries a rug which was embroidered for the throne room of the Shah of Persia which took one hundred women ten years to finish. Tapestries became the foundation of the era of industrial art, Flanders especially attaining renown for the earliest specimens of this fine art, which was followed by Brussels, Valenciennes and Turnay until in the latter part of the 16th century the richness and beauty of the weavings produced has caused the period to be termed the Golden Age of tapestry.

Ceramics, the art of the potter—the beginning of which Morgan uses to mark the introduction of barbarism—is of course the oldest art known. To trace the development of this art from its earliest conception would be a monumental task. All nations have contributed their quota to the advancement of this art, but it remained for the Saracens to preserve and disseminate the knowledge of the technical processes as it did most of those of the handicrafts which survived the dark ages.

While Christianity, conforming to feudal land-ownership became a stultifying and reactionary power, hid away in the bosom of the church, what little knowledge, mostly of a philosophical nature that it possessed, of the ancient civilizations Mohammedism preserved and spread abroad the scientific knowledge of the wonderful handicrafts to which those ancient civilizations had attained.

The discovery of steam and power machinery which gave such a tremendous impulse to production in western Europe, and the consequent competition of the cheaper manufactured articles has placed the handicraft products of the Mohammedan countries at a great disadvantage for the past few centuries.

In summing up, the historical function of the Saracens seems to have been that of bridging the gap between the ancient and modern civilizations. In view of the events developing in the east one stops to ponder if her bridge-making has ceased, or will she continue to function in that capacity between the present and future societies? Time alone can tell.

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FOREIGN MAIL CONNECTIONS

Moscow. — According to a report of the Commissariat for Posts and Telegraphs great success is to be reported recently in respect to the postal connection with abroad. With Germany a provisional convention which has been signed ensures the transmission of mails over Lithuania and Lettland. A convention had been concluded with England as well as with the Danish Northern Telegraph Company who forwarded reports from Pekin, Kiachta, Nagasaki, and Vladivostok. The conventions with Poland and Turkey are about to be signed. The proposed international postal and telegraph convention with the Baltic states is now ready. This convention shall be extended to include Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, and Holland.