

***Essays on the Origins of Islamic Civilization* by Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg, privately published at Cambridge, 2006, ISBN 0954188292, Price (paperback) £9, Pages 312 (including Bibliography and Indexes), (Distributor: Kube Publishing Ltd., Rathby Lane, Leicester LE 67 9SY, UK).**

I read this collection of nine essays on the origins of Islamic civilization with deep interest. It is the product of a long-standing enquiry into the different civilizations of many different countries, particularly those in Western Asia and North Africa and around the Mediterranean basin. The main theatres of this historic development are in the Euphrates-Tigris basin, the Nile basin and the Mediterranean littoral. The races involved are the Semito-Hamitic ones, the Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, Greeks and Aryans, the Semito-Byzantines in Western Asia, in Yemen, Syria and Palestine, and the Arabs of the Arabian desert and their sedentary brethren in the oases. The author situates his enquiry in the years between 4000 BC to 1000 AD.

The religions involved in this big drama are the pantheism of the Greeks, the Judaism of the Israelites, the Christianity of the Byzantines and early Islam. Judaism, Christianity and Islam overran the area in succession and ultimately overwhelmed the Achaemenian and Sassanian civilizations as well as their religion, their language and even their scripts. The Assyro-Babylonian civilizations can only be traced in the archaeological remains. The hieroglyphic script or the cuneiform inscriptions gave way to languages like Syriac, Pahlavi and Arabic scripts.

The author has ranged over a number of topics including: the foundation of the Islamic state at Madinah, equality and meritocracy in Islam, women of Arabia in early Islamic times, the Muslim attitude to labour and crafts; the origin of some Islamic cities; the development of architecture, the growth of minor arts, and lastly, the growth of sciences, poetry and calligraphy.

The city-state of Madinah consisted of the *Muhājirūn* (immigrants) of the Quraish from Makkah and *Anṣār* (helpers), erstwhile Aws and Khazraj of Yathrib, the three Jewish clans of Banū Naḍīr, Banū Kainuqā' and Banū Quraizah. These tribes formed a commonwealth where every individual had equal rights and responsibilities. The agreement between all these tribes and the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), known as the Charter of Madina, brought all the communities of diverse faiths under the fold of one *Ummah*, with the Prophet having the chief legislative and executive authority. The Islamic state's approach to non-Muslim peoples as associates (Dhimmi or Millah Bashi, or Millet system of the Ottoman Turkish sultanate) speaks of a new approach to inter-racial or inter-religious relations, approach to the formation of any modern state. Dr. Beg has used dozens of well-authenticated sources and illustrates well how the various components combined to form a state in Arabia, where hundreds of clans and tribes converged to form a central government where there was none previously. He shows how large numbers of people were chosen to act as soldiers, commanders and administrators from among the common people, under the guidance of a great leader. This speaks of Muhammad's (p.b.u.h.) genius as a statesman.

The chapter on 'Equality and Meritocracy' is well-illustrated regarding service to the Muslim nation (*Ummah*) from among the *Ṣaḥābah* (companions of the Prophet) from the *Muhājirūn* and *Anṣār*, farther specified by the term *as-Sābiqūn al-awwalūn* to late-comers such as the *Ahl al-ṣuffah*. It focusses on how the Prophet inspired and galvanized ordinary people to become members of a community in faith: how the *Ahl*

al-suffah were well-provided for their service to the state; how the messages of the Holy Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth were communicated from one end of the country to the other; how hundreds of female *muḥaddithāt* (lit. scholars of Ḥadīth) narrated Ḥadīth as recorded by Imam Bukhari in the *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and Muslim b. al-Hajjaj in the *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*; how women took part in innumerable military campaigns by preparing food for the soldiers, carrying drinking water to thirsty warriors, dressing wounds and even directly participating in the fighting and in naval expeditions in the Mediterranean.

Dr. Beg has explored the growth of Muslim cities and towns outside Arabia, such as the cantonment cities of Kūfah, Baṣrah, Wāsiṭ, Fuṣṭāṭ, Qayrawān, and later on Baghdad or Samarrā', all of which were fortified, and later developed, as well as planned cities, which provided space not only for administrative quarters, but for centres of industry, commerce, education and culture. The author gives a graphic account of the planning that divided the military and administrative areas, allotting residential areas for different tribes to settle down with a specific purpose in view. All this happened under the leadership of people inspired by the teachings of Islam. There was phenomenal progress in education, *belles-lettres* and calligraphy, such as Kūfī, Naskh, Ta'liq, Nasta'liq, Tughrā' and Shikastah. The author also deals with minor arts and crafts, such as minting in Dār al-Ḍarb and ship-building at Dār al-Ṣinā'ah. In architecture the Arabs had no previous experience and tradition of their own, but borrowed from the traditions of Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen and Egypt. The Prophet suggested ideas of how the various elements of a *masjid* (mosque) with its component parts of a *minbar* (pulpit), *mihrāb* (prayer niche) and *ṣaḥn* (courtyard) should look. The mosque itself was later divided into aisles and naves, all facing the Ka'bah at Makkah. Every Muslim city, new or old, had a central mosque built with the *qiblah* (direction of prayer) facing towards the Ka'bah, with colonnades, aisles, naves, *minbar*, *mihrāb*, *maqsūrah* (an enclosure) and a minaret designed for the *mu'adhdhin* (also *mu'azzin*, the caller to prayer). Such religious buildings occupied the main attention of the pioneers, and famous *Jāmi'* mosques, like those of Baṣrah, Kūfah, Damascus, Fuṣṭāṭ, Qayrawān and later on Baghdad, were built by the local artisans using the materials available, usually brick or stone. Residential structures, forts and fortifications, were built based on previous traditions.

Dr. Beg has covered a wide range of subjects in this book. His claims are substantiated with references to contemporary sources. The book has been carefully researched and well presented and provides a more in-depth introduction to the origins of the rise of the Islamic civilizations.

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