

**THE MANUSCRIPT CENTER 7th INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE
Bibliotheca Alexandrina (25 – 27 May 2010)**

Heritage Continuity

(Origins and Preliminaries of Arabic/Islamic Heritage)

Nothing emerges in a vacuum; this is an established fact that is based on both the experiences of nations and the facts of history. Such a fact is related indeed to other inevitable – though ignored – evidence. Also, it has to be noted that major and minor historical phenomena are either tacitly or explicitly associated with certain mutually interacting origins and preliminaries – an interaction that contributes to the eventual formation of a given historical phenomenon. Other disregarded evidence would also include the notion that a certain phenomenon may seem *prima facie* unique or entirely distinct; meanwhile, it necessarily incorporates traces of the origins and preliminaries out of which that phenomenon had emerged. The aforementioned facts would also involve the idea that every major historical phenomenon has been influenced by its predecessors and would have an impact on its subsequent phenomena - a concept which we term “heritage continuity”.

Undoubtedly, the heritage that has been produced by the Arabic/Islamic civilization through endeavors that spanned almost a millennium of diverse human contributions forms a major historical phenomenon to which the notions presented above are applicable. Nevertheless, contemporary Arabs and Muslims are always

eager to celebrate the impact of the Arabic/Islamic contributions to human civilization to emphasize the cultural influence of their heritage on European Renaissance. Such a trend is certainly appreciated and advocated in order to highlight the Arabic/Islamic presence in the history of mankind and hence in present times – however, it only represents but half the truth. Focusing on Arabic/Islamic heritage consequents while disregarding the antecedents of such an influence, would inevitably create a delusional vision of the Arabic/Islamic heritage. Nevertheless, such a vision had already been formed slowly and firmly within the Arab and Muslim mind. This in turn has created a false conviction that the Arabic/Islamic civilization and the heritage it presented are the fruits of a sudden spark that accompanied the spread of Islam and the Arab domination of the world. Such misconception also provides that the said cultural spark had flared for some time then faded away following the rule stated by the Quranic verse, “So are the days; We trade them off among people,” (03:140); thus suggesting that the Arabic/Islamic heritage sprung up out of no previous origins or preliminaries. Indeed, such a vision is a pure illusion that the Quranic verse has nothing to do with as both cultural exchange among people and the passing of the torch of Civilization from one nation to another are based on rules and laws that have to be carefully considered. Such rules of heritage exchange have to be deeply understood so as to arrive at a keen awareness of the preceding cultural traditions, and hence at a conscious awareness of the current status. Meanwhile, as we follow such pursuit we should adopt the rigorous methodology set forth by past great Arab scholars – the methodology that has been expressed in their statements and further highlighted in their scientific literature that had reached us over the ages. Such methodology is best stated by Ibn al-Nafīs when he says, “We have undertaken in every art to uncover the truth and elevate its beacon; and to abandon falsehood, refute it and eliminate its trails.”

Out of this perspective, we shall enter the wider realm of our next international conference which will consider the origins out of which the Arabic/Islamic heritage had set out as well as the preliminaries preceding such heritage in the different fields of science, culture, literature and art. Our objective is to establish a truthful awareness of that heritage which has been overcome by illusions, while its texts have been decaying in manuscript depositories, or has been investigated by charlatans and hirelings.

No doubt that the Arabic/Islamic heritage has been influential to modern European civilization; but on the other hand, what were the heritage components that influenced the making of the Arabic/Islamic heritage? How did the continuity process of human heritage extend to include Arabs and Muslims for some time? Alternatively, was it the Arabs' incomplete awareness of their heritage that had led them to disregard the pre-Islamic Arabic origins of their heritage? Moreover, to which extent did the pre-Islamic presence contribute to devising the Arabic/Islamic system of civilization? What were the items that were adopted by Arab Muslims from previous classical sciences? How did they adopt such components? Did the Arabs develop such loan items, or did they just preserve them? Furthermore, what is the concept of cultural preservation? What about Arabic and its oral interaction with the Syriac, Hebrew and Persian languages on the one hand; and the Arabic graphological interaction with Syriac and Nabataean writing systems, on the other hand? What is the significance of the hundreds of Syriac, Persian and Hebrew words that exist within the core of the Arabic language whether in ancient Arabic texts, inscriptions or obscure graffiti? What about such loan words which were included within the verses of the Quran – the pivotal book of the Arab and Muslim civilization? Similarly, what about Christians, Jews, Sabians and Magi? Did they live within the framework of the Arabic/Islamic State as “*Ahl al-Dhimmah*” (People of the Pact) according to Islamic law or not? Did their contributions exceed their social status to form a significant participation in the Arabic/Islamic cultural phenomenon? Would this account for the non-Arab contributions to Islamic heritage starting from being inspired by Persian military strategies (ditch digging), up to the translations of Andalusian Jews of Arabic works into their language and later into Latin? Would this also account for the countless Arabic/Islamic adoptions from Christian heritage, which are exemplified intellectually in Islamic theology “*Kalam*”; artistically in the form of the dome structure; and scientifically in the Arabic translations of the ancient texts in Greek and Syriac that were made by Nestorian translators?

Indeed, these many questions might not preoccupy those who are content with their own heritage delusions. However, such issues would engross those who aim at establishing a truthful awareness of the Arabic/Islamic heritage that lies in manuscripts and printed books. Not surprisingly, our heritage has within it allusions to such awareness: these would include Ibn Hazm's reference to the

presence of Syriac in Arabic and Hunayn b. Ishāq's (Johannitius') record of Galen's works. Moreover, these allusions would include the Banū Mūsā emphasis that the preliminaries of Greek science and those of the subsequent Arabic science came from India - according to Banū Mūsā's "*al-Darajāt*" manuscript (*Book on the Motion of the Orbs*). In addition, calling Abū-Mūsā al-Murdār as the 'Mu'tazilite Monk' would provide another instance of such allusions. These were mere examples of Arabic/Islamic heritage gleams, references and remarks denoting heritage continuity between the origins and preliminaries of Arabic/Islamic heritage and the various cultural contributions of such heritage.

Hence, our upcoming conference shall attempt to address these earlier origins as well as the antecedent preliminaries which have paved the way to Arabic/Islamic Civilization in order to explore the nature and dynamism of such "heritage continuity". Furthermore, the conference shall try to pursue a better understanding of heritage in order to "*abandon falsehood, uncover the truth and elevate its beacon.*" Therefore, the topics of the conference shall be as follows:

First: Philosophy and Natural Sciences:

The conference shall tackle ancient philosophy and sciences before Islam and their 'explicit and implicit' presence within the Arabic/Islamic system of science and culture. This investigation shall be carried out *away* from repeating already well-known issues, such as the role of the Baghdad "*House of Wisdom*" in translation, the endeavors of Hunayn b. Ishāq in Greek medicine translations, or al-Ma'mūn's generosity in rewarding translation projects. The conference shall also adopt an authentic tracing of the transmission of ideas, methodologies and models of knowledge from India and Persia as well as those of the Fertile Crescent and classical antiquity into Arabic/Islamic civilization. All these aspects shall be considered in order to establish a deeper understanding of the nature and essence of later Arabic/Islamic contributions.

Second: General Knowledge and History:

This topic shall consider the nature of early 'Arabic/Islamic' awareness of previous civilizations as well as the great discrepancy between Arabs' knowledge of Greek and Persian heritage on the one hand, and their total ignorance of the heritage of ancient Egypt and India on the other hand (with the exception of

Bīrūnī's India). Although such origins were obscure to early Arabic/Islamic awareness, they were inherent active components in many indirect ways. The inceptions of Islamic historiography shall also be explored to address questions, such as: Did Islamic historiography actually emerge due to the prerequisites of the narration of Prophetic Traditions (*Hadith*) – starting from what is known as '*Ilm al-Rijāl*' (science of *Hadith* narrators)? Alternatively, was it a development of the accounts of Ibn al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī in his *al-Jamhara*; or rather an evolution of the approaches of al-Hamadānī in his *al-Iklīl*, Našwān al-Himyarī in his *Mulūk Himyar* and their precursor Ibn Munabbih in *al-Tījān*? Moreover, was Islamic historiography a resumption of the works of Ibn 'Abdul-Hakam's chronicles and al-Balādhurī's accounts of Islamic conquests (*Futūh al-Buldān*)?

Third: Language and Religious Perceptions:

This topic investigates the relationships between Arabic and the other languages that were in its proximity as well as the languages that corresponded to Arabic. Languages, from which Arabic had borrowed on the levels of structure and lexis, shall also be explored. This topic shall also trace the relationships between Arabic and other neighboring languages on the graphological and early Arabic writing levels. This will include the development of the neat Kufic script from the Syriac script known as 'Estrangela' and the Nabataean script which extant monuments and inscriptions signify its intimate connection with the earliest forms of Arabic script. The issue of pre-Islamic and post-Islamic Arabic dialects as well as the dominance of the dialect of Qurayš over the other Arabic tribal dialects – to celebrate the Qur'an and to show appreciation to the dialect of the rulers and *Imams* at early Islamic times when '*the rulers were from Qurayš.*' – shall also be considered. In addition, the conference shall investigate the presence of earlier religious heritage within subsequent Islamic religious perceptions through a careful consideration of the presence of narrations and oral heritage – or what will be called later '*Isrā'īliyāt*' (Judeo-Christian traditions). Furthermore, the presence of schisms and religious sects in previous religions – within the then infant Islamic religious awareness – shall also be reviewed.

Fourth: Arts and Literature

This topic shall focus on the continuum of Arabic literature from the pre-Islamic (*Jāhiliyah*) period to post-Islamic literary schools and trends. The conference shall investigate whether early Arab-Muslims were content with their literary genres; or that they needed – at a specific time – to invoke previous literary classics such as *Kalīlah wa Dimnah*, *Khūsūrū wa Šīrīn* and *The Arabian Nights*. Moreover, early Arab-Muslims have adopted some items from their predecessors in the field of arts and have added some further modifications. They adopted the dome structure from Byzantine architecture; however, did they also take on the minarets as well? What is the significance of minarets in early Islamic architecture? Were they adopted for mere religious practical reasons, or rather signified the essence of the Muslim faith, i.e. monotheism? The conference shall also discuss whether arts have been forbidden in Islam on pure religious grounds – which had led Arab-Muslims to disregard previous artistic traditions – or not? In addition, if arts were truly banned for religious reasons, what about early Arabic/Islamic arts and how did they develop later on?

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All in all, our next conference shall investigate heritage continuity through careful research considerations of the emergence of the Arabic/Islamic phenomenon. Moreover, the conference shall focus on the continuum of the origins and preliminaries out of which the Arabic/Islamic contributions had interacted to yield what we call today ‘The Arabic/Islamic Heritage’ – the very heritage that has provided humanity with major landmarks on the road to Civilization.