

## It was an Islamic, Not an Arab Civilization

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A civilization is a society characterized by its very advanced structures, developments, organizations, complex institutions. Civilizations have governing systems, Laws, have urban areas or advanced cities, a writing system and literature, sophisticated arts, specialized and advanced labor force or divisions, record keeping, advanced science and education centers, among other things; it is a giant system

Arabs are people who speak the Arabic as their native language and identify themselves as Arabs. Muslims, on the other hand, are those who practice the religion of Islam. It is safe to say that the overwhelming majority of Arabs are Muslims, but not the other way around.

When people speak of an Arab civilization, they generally refer to the Arabs of al-Jahiliyya. The word al-Jahiliyya is an Arabic word that means “ignorance” and it reflects a negative Muslim evaluation of pre-Islamic life and culture in Arabia. It is mainly the period in the Arab history that precedes the revelation of the Koran to Prophet Muhammad. The one positive aspect during al-Jahiliyya Arab period is perhaps in regard to Arabic literature, because the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry was, and still is, esteemed by Arabs. Besides poetry, the Arabs had very little to be proud of. The al-Jahiliyya Arabs were Bedouin polytheists who worshipped many gods. We must consider that before Islam in Arabia there were other religions such as Judaism that had several clans and many different sects of Christianity as well, especially in southwest Arabia, mainly in Yemen. There where Christian monks and hermits in the desert regions whose lives relied on the passing by caravans. Arabs where tribal people and within those tribes there were clans that live by the rule of an 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. Disputes were solved in battles, generally. Among the Arabs there were extremely few individuals who could read and write. Most of them were not very eager to learn. Some historians are of the opinion that the culture of the period was almost entirely oral. The Jews and the Christians were the custodians of knowledge in Arabia.

This simple Bedouin tribal society lacked the basic definition of a civilization. However, indeed, there existed a civilization in Yemen long time before Islam, with the pre-Islamic city of Shibam, known for its towering mud-brick skyscrapers, and the legendary Queen of Sheba's ancient capital in Ma'rib. However, many historians argue that the various societies of early Yemen should not be confused with the typical Arabs of al-Jahiliyya.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the early people of Yemen, such as the Mineans, Sabaeans and Himyarites that lived in southern Arabian Peninsula and flourished as civilizations, as they built cities, provided land irrigation, and erected dams. However, these people were not Arabs as they spoke their own language and had their own script<sup>2</sup> that were

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to mention that according to Ismael al-Shatti, a Kuwaiti writer and thinker, there are today four real Arab groups in the Arabian Peninsula that do not speak Arabic, including al-Mahriyya, al-SoqaTtriyya, al-Shahriyya and al-Kholaniyya.

<sup>2</sup> Accessed 8/12/2024 <https://www.yca-sandwell.org.uk/history-of-yemen/>

different than those used by the Arabs in Mecca or the Nabateans in modern Jordan or the rest in Arabia.

On the other hand, the Islamic period refers to the same people, tribes and clans of Arabia but this period focuses on the Islamic identity rather than the Arab ethnic identity of the region. This Islamic renaissance began with the Umayyads and ended with the Fatimids and some extends it to the Ottomans.

The Umayyad dynasty or Umayyads (*al-Umawiyyūn*) was an Arab clan within the Quraysh tribes who assumed the Caliphate between AD 661 and 750 and later of al-Andalus, Iberian Peninsula, between AD 756 and 1031. The Abbasid dynasty or Abbasids (*al-'Abbāsiyyūn*) were an Arab dynasty from Quraysh that ruled the Abbasid Caliphate between AD 750 and 1258. The Abbasid dynasty lost effective power over much of the Muslim realm by the first half of the tenth century. The Umayyad dynasty, which had survived and ended up ruling over Al-Andalus, reclaimed the title of caliph in 929, lasting until it was overthrown in 1031. The Fatimid Caliphate or Fatimid Empire (*al-Khilāfa al-Fāṭimiyya*) was a caliphate extant from the tenth to the twelfth centuries AD under the rule of the Fatimids, an Isma'ili Shia dynasty.

The end of the age of the Islamic civilization is given as three main dates: First, AD 1171 as Saladin abolished the Fatimids dynasty's rule and founded the Ayyubid dynasty, Second, AD 1258 as the Mongols sack of Baghdad and finally in AD 1492 with the completion of the Christian Reconquista of the Emirate of Granada in Al-Andalus.

This period from the rule of the Umayyads to the Abbasids and Fatimids is considered as the Islamic Golden Age. This was a period of scientific, economic and cultural flourishing in the history of Islam, traditionally dated from the 8th century to the 13th century of the Christian Era; however, some scholars extend this era to the 15<sup>th</sup> and even the 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries. This era included the construction of the beautiful mosque of Damascus, building of the city of Baghdad, the cultural flourishing of science, mathematics and the founding of scholarship in the House of Wisdom 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries and the gigantic endeavor to acquire and translate the ancient sciences of the Greeks between the eighth and ninth centuries, the library established in Baghdad by Caliph al-Mansur in AD 825 modeled after the academy of Jundishapur. The Muslims showed a strong interest in assimilating the scientific knowledge of the civilizations that had been conquered. Many classic works of antiquity that might otherwise have been lost were translated from Greek, Syriac (Assyrian), Middle Persian, and Sanskrit into Syriac and then Arabic by non-Arabs<sup>3</sup>, some of which were later in turn translated into other languages like Hebrew and Latin.<sup>4</sup>

None of all this advancement in science and architecture were ever present during the Arab of al-Jahiliyya. It is for that reason that scholars never assign the title of civilization to the early Arabs, but to the Islamic society at large.

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<sup>3</sup> O'Leary, De lacy. How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs. 2001. First published 1949. 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Accessed 8/2/2024 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic\\_Golden\\_Age](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_Golden_Age)