Islam’s Golden Age: An Archaeological Nonentity

John J. O’Neill’s latest guest-essay concerns the lack of any substantive evidence for a “golden age” of Islam.

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by John J. O’Neill

In my recently published Holy Warriors: Islam and the Demise of Classical Civilization, I have argued in detail that Islam, far from being a force for enlightenment in the so-called Dark Age, was actually responsible for the destruction of the literate and urban civilization that we now call Classical; and that, if anything, it was Islam that caused Europe’s descent into backwardness during the Middle Ages. In the same place I have argued in detail that the Islamic Golden Age of the late seventh to the mid-tenth centuries, during which the world of Islam is supposed to have basked in the light of science and learning, is a complete myth, and that no such epoch ever existed. The evidence for this is archaeological.

Until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries scholars were compelled to rely entirely on written sources for their knowledge of the ancient and medieval worlds. The competent historian of course always had the critical faculty with which to differentiate between fact and fable, between propaganda and honest reporting. There was also, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a more sophisticated form of textual criticism. Yet no matter how discerning the scholar, in the end all he had to work with was the written word. But this all began to change in the nineteenth century. From then on, scholars had something independent with which to check the claims of the chroniclers and annalists of old: the science of archaeology.

By the mid-twentieth century, archaeologists had begun to put together a fairly comprehensive picture of the archaeology of Europe and the Near East. Indeed, several areas of the Near East, such as Egypt, Palestine and Iraq, were and remain among the most thoroughly excavated regions of the earth.

Medievalists had of course been very interested in throwing light on the somewhat romantic though apparently fabulously wealthy and cultured Islamic world of the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. Strange and wonderful tales were told of this epoch, though all agreed it was an age of high civilization. Indeed, the seventh to tenth centuries, as we saw, were regarded as the Islamic Golden Age. This was the age of the Omayyad and Abbasid Caliphs; the romantic epoch of Scheherazade and Harun Al-Rashid, the fabulously opulent Caliph of Baghdad, who is said to have donned the disguise of a commoner and wandered by night through the dimly-lit streets of the metropolis — a city of reputedly a million people. This epoch, and this alone, is said to have marked the age of Islam’s cultural ascendancy. Consider the following description from an English historian of eighth-tenth century Cordoba, typical of the genre: “In Spain … the foundation of Umayyad power ushers in an era of unequalled splendour, which reaches its height in the early part of the tenth century. The great university of Cordova is thronged with students … while the city itself excites the wonder of visitors from Germany and France. The banks of the Guadalquivir are covered with luxurious villas, and born of the ruler’s caprice rises the famous Palace of the Flower, a fantastic city of delights.” (H. St. L. B. Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages; 395-814 (Oxford University Press, 1935) p. 172) All are agreed that in later years, from the eleventh century onwards, the Islamic world began to fall rapidly behind the West.

On the word of the written histories, then, archaeologists expected to find, from Spain to eastern Iran, a flourishing and vibrant culture; an Islamic world of enormous cities endowed with all the wealth of antiquity and the plunder gathered in the Muslim wars of conquest. They hoped to find palaces, public baths, universities and mosques; all richly decorated with marble, ceramic and carved stone.

In fact, they found nothing of the sort.

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The archaeological non-appearance of the Islamic Golden Age is surely one of the most remarkable discoveries to come to light in the past century. It has not achieved the sensational headlines we might expect, for the simple reason that a non-discovery is of much less interest to the public than a discovery. Then again, as archaeologists searched in vain through site after site, they imagined they had just been unlucky; that with the next day’s dig the fabulous palaces and baths would be uncovered. And this has been the pattern now for a hundred years.. In fact, the entire Islamic world is a virtual blank for roughly three centuries. Normally, we find one or two finds attributed to the seventh century, then nothing for three centuries, then a resumption of archaeological material in the mid- or late-tenth century. Take for example Egypt. Egypt was the largest and most populous Islamic country during the Early Middle Ages. The Muslim conquest of the country occurred in 638 or 639, and we should expect the invaders to have begun, almost immediately, using the wealth of the land to begin building numerous and splendid places of worship — but apparently they didn’t. Only two mosques in the whole of Egypt, both in Cairo, are said to date from before the eleventh century: the Amr ibn al-As, AD 641 and the Ahmad ibn Tulun, AD 878. However, the latter building has many features found only in mosques of the eleventh century, so its date of 878 is controversial. Thus, in Egypt, we have a single place of worship, the mosque of Amr ibn al-As, dating from three years after the Muslim conquest, then nothing for another three-and-a-half centuries. Why, in an enormous country with up to perhaps five million inhabitants, should the Muslims wait over 300 years before building themselves places of worship?

And it is the same throughout the Islamic world. No matter where we go, from Spain to Iran, there is virtually nothing between circa 650 and 950. Spain, as we have seen, is supposed to have witnessed a flowering of Islamic culture and civilization in the two centuries after the Arab conquest of 711; and the city of Cordoba is said to have grown to a sophisticated metropolis of half-a-million people or more.. We recall the description of a flourishing and vastly opulent metropolis painted by the writer quoted above. Yet the same author admitted that “Little remains of the architecture of this period.” Little indeed! As a matter of fact, the only Muslim structure in the whole of Spain dating from before the eleventh century is the so-called Mosque of Cordoba; yet even this, strictly-speaking, is not an Islamic construction: It was originally the Visigothic Cathedral of Saint Vincent, which was converted, supposedly in the days of Abd er-Rahman I, to a mosque. Yet the Islamic features that exist could equally belong to the time of Abd er-Rahman III (latter tenth century) whom we know did conversion work on the Cathedral, adding a minaret and a new façade. (Louis Bertrand, The History of Spain (2nd ed. London, 1945) p. 54) Most of the Islamic features in the building actually come after Abd er-Rahman III, and there is no secure way of dating anything in it to the eighth century.

The poverty of visible Islamic remains is normally explained by the proposition that the Christians destroyed the Muslim monuments after the city’s re-conquest. But this solution is inherently suspect. Granted the Christians might have destroyed all the mosques — though even that seems unlikely — but they certainly would not have destroyed opulent palaces, baths, fortifications, etc. Yet none of these — none at least ascribed to the eighth to early tenth centuries — has survived. And even assuming that such a universal and pointless destruction did take place, we have to assume that at least under the ground we would find an abundance of Arab foundations, as well as artifacts, tools, pottery etc. Indeed, in a city of half a million people, as Cordoba of the eight, ninth and tenth centuries is said to have been, the archaeologist would expect to find a superabundance of such things. They should be popping out of the ground with almost every shovel-full of dirt.

Now Cordoba has been extensively excavated over the past seventy years or so, often specifically to search for Arab/Moorish remains. What then has been found?

According to the prestigious Oxford Archaeological Guide, the city has revealed, after exhaustive excavations: (a) The south-western portion of the city wall, which was “presumably” of the ninth century; (b) A small bath-complex, of the 9th/10th century; and (c) A “part” of the Umayyad (8th/9th century) mosque. (The Oxford Archaeological Guide (Collins, 1998) pp. 73, 119, 120) This is all that can be discovered from two-and-a-half centuries of the history of a city of supposedly half a million people. And the rest of Spain, which has been investigated with equal vigor, can deliver little else. A couple of settlements here and a few fragments of pottery there, usually of doubtful date and often described as “presumably” ninth century or such like.

The sheer poverty of these remains can only be properly understood if we compare them to other well-attested archeological eras. Thus for example any single century of Imperial Rome’s history has produced not thousands, but literally millions of archeological finds, ranging from amphitheatres and temples down to pieces of pottery and objets d’art. That almost three centuries of Islamic history — three centuries of a supposedly Golden Age of opulence and prosperity — can produce virtually nothing from the Atlantic coasts of Morocco to the borders of India is an utterly astonishing fact; a fact which leads inexorably to a single conclusion: namely that the Islamic Golden Age of the eighth, ninth and early tenth centuries is a myth. And the elusive nature of all material from these three centuries, in every part of the Islamic world, makes us wonder whether the rise of Islam has been somehow misdated: For the first real mark left (in archaeological terms) by Islam in Spain is dated to the mid-tenth century, to the time of Abd er-Rahman III, whose life bears many striking comparisons with his namesake and supposed ancestor Abd er-Rahman I, of the eighth century. Again, there are strange and striking parallels between the major events of Islamic history of the seventh and eighth centuries on the one hand and of the tenth and eleventh centuries on the other. Thus for example the Christian Reconquista in Spain is supposed to have commenced around 720, with the great victory of Don Pelayo at Covadonga; but the real Reconquista began three hundred years later with the victories of Sancho of Navarre around 1020. Similarly, the Islamic invasion of northern India supposedly commenced around 710-720 with the victories of Muhammad bin Qasim, though the “real” Islamic conquest of the region began with the victories of Mahmud of Ghazni, roughly between 1010 and 1020.

What then does all this mean?

The lack of Muslim archaeology from before the tenth and eleventh centuries (with the exception of two or three monuments such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Amr ibn al-As mosque in Cairo, usually of the mid-seventh century), would indicate that the rise of Islam has been misdated, and that some form of error has crept into the chronology. But error or not, the fact that virtually nothing from before the mid-tenth century has been found means that Islam was not a flourishing, opulent and cultured civilization whilst Europe was mired in the Dark Ages. By the late tenth century Europe was experiencing her own “renaissance”, with a flowering of art and architecture, much of it strongly reminiscent of the Late Classical work of the Merovingian and Visigothic period.