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The Early Days

By MAX RODENBECK Published: January 6, 2008

Few events in history have had so swift, profound and far-reaching an impact as the arrival of Islam. Within a mere 15 years of the Prophet Muhammad's death, in A.D. 632, his desert followers had conquered all the centers of ancient Near Eastern civilization.

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The triumph was not just military. The explosive expansion of Islam severed at a stroke the 1,000-year-old links of commerce, culture, politics and religion that had bound the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean.

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THE GREAT ARAB CONQUESTS

How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In.

By Hugh Kennedy. Illustrated. 421 pp. Da Capo Press. \$27.95.

And yet strangely, the question of how the Muslim Arabs achieved all this, in such a short time, remains puzzling. Not that no one has tried to explain it.

courage of the victors rather than on more mundane factors that might have aided them. Much attention was paid to such details as the genealogy of Arab generals and the precise division of booty, at the expense of accurate chronology and geography.

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Modern historians have generally discounted the Arab histories, emphasizing instead how the calamitous upheavals of late antiquity sapped capacities to resist the Muslim invasions. Because of the difficult nature of textual sources, which include rare materials in Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Persian and even Chinese as well as Arabic, and because of the relative paucity of archaeological research into early Islam, recent scholarship has also tended to be area- and theme-specific.

Few writers are better equipped for such a task than Hugh Kennedy. A professor of medieval history at the University of St. Andrews, in Scotland, he has written scores of articles and numerous books on the early period of Islam, including popular histories as well as scholarly studies. Kennedy is a fastidious historian, refraining from undue speculation and sticking close to his sources. He is also a judicious one. Rather than dismissing suspect material, like triumphalist Muslim histories, he prefers to sift through them in search of clues. Occasionally, he finds corroborating evidence that some of these accounts appear closer to the truth than fellow historians have assumed.

Given the immense geographical scope of the work and the spotty, disjointed nature of the evidence, Kennedy has wisely chosen to organize the book simply, in more or less chronological fashion, one campaign after another. He begins, however, with a pair of useful chapters, one surveying the textual and archaeological sources for the period, the second outlining the shape of Arab society at the onset of the great Islamic expansion.

Far from being wild, illiterate Bedouins, Kennedy shows, the early Muslim leaders were sophisticated townsmen and highly competent commanders. Once they had rallied a critical mass of converts, the swift adherence to the new faith of tribes from across the Arabian Peninsula created its own impetus for conquest. Arabian society had been geared to intertribal conflict. Having now submitted to the authority of a single leader, the Muslim caliph, nomadic warriors had to direct their energies outward or risk tearing the nascent Islamic nation apart. Their fighting spirit was further primed by the doctrine of jihad, which promised both earthly and heavenly rewards. Martyrs were assured a special place in paradise, while soldiers were allowed to keep four-fifths of captured booty.

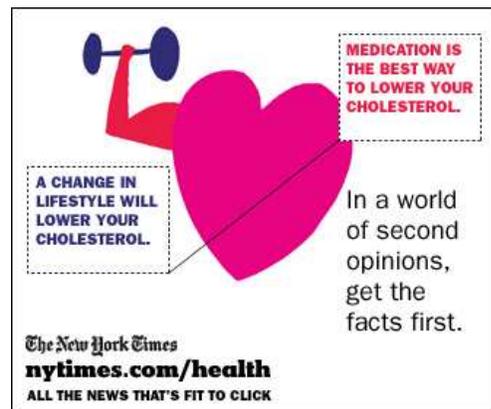
Yet the Muslims' esprit de corps, their desert-trained mobility and the cleverness of their generals still cannot explain how such astonishingly small armies — perhaps 30,000 men for the conquest of Syria, 10,000 for Iraq, 16,000 for Egypt — so swiftly overran these densely populated lands. Several other factors proved crucial. The most important was timing.

Beginning around 540, repeated epidemics of bubonic plague appear to have drastically reduced populations across the Near East and the Mediterranean. Political turmoil was to weaken the region more. Using the assassination of the Byzantine emperor Maurice in 602 as a pretext, the shah of Sasanian Persia, Chosroes II, mounted a blitzkrieg that swept his armies through the rich provinces of Syria and Egypt, and across Anatolia as far as Constantinople. It was not until 624 that the Byzantines under Heraclius counterattacked, landing an army on the shore of the Black Sea, behind Persian lines, that sacked and pillaged its way south through the Persian heartlands. Heraclius recaptured Jerusalem in 630, while Chosroes' son Kavard II, who ascended to the throne after his father was murdered in a coup, sued for peace.

But the decades of war, in the manner of a [Quentin Tarantino](#) script, had left both Byzantium and Persia stunned and bleeding. The sudden Muslim advance found them completely unprepared. As Kennedy notes, "If Muhammad had been born a generation earlier and he and his successors had attempted to send armies against the great empires in, say, 600, it is hard to imagine they would have made any progress at all."

Worse yet, for Heraclius, schism among Christian sects led many Egyptians and Syrians to side with the Arab invaders against the Byzantines, who had tried to impose orthodoxy by brute force. To the Muslims' further advantage, they demanded relatively lenient terms: those among the vanquished who did not embrace Islam could worship as they liked, on payment of an annual tax that was no more burdensome than what they had paid before.

The Muslim advance was not always painless, as Kennedy reveals in a poignant chapter that gives voice to the conquered. On several occasions, cities that resisted were razed, their inhabitants slaughtered or enslaved. In North Africa, the scale of slave raiding was so large that it sparked a huge Berber uprising. Across much of the swiftly conquered territory, the Muslims' hold remained tenuous for generations. It is significant that the



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expansion out of Arabia happened in two waves. The first exploited the weakness of the collapsed neighboring empires. The second, two generations later, used the Muslims' newfound strength but failed to push borders back very far. It is remarkable, in fact, how stable the peripheries of Islam have remained ever since, excepting the loss of Spain to the Christian Reconquista and Muslim forays into India, the Balkans and the East Indies. But these events came centuries later, and Islam's final military triumphs were achieved not by Arabs, but by Turks.

Kennedy's reluctance to pronounce sweeping judgments may disappoint general readers. His preference for dwelling on lesser-known episodes like the conquest of Central Asia, rather than on such oft-related exploits as the capture of Spain, is also more likely to please scholars than laymen. Fellow historians may fault Kennedy, too, for relying on textual evidence more than on archaeology. Nevertheless, this brisk yet richly detailed account is likely to remain the best we have for many years.

Max Rodenbeck is the Middle East correspondent for The Economist.

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