

A MIDDLE EAST MOSAIC

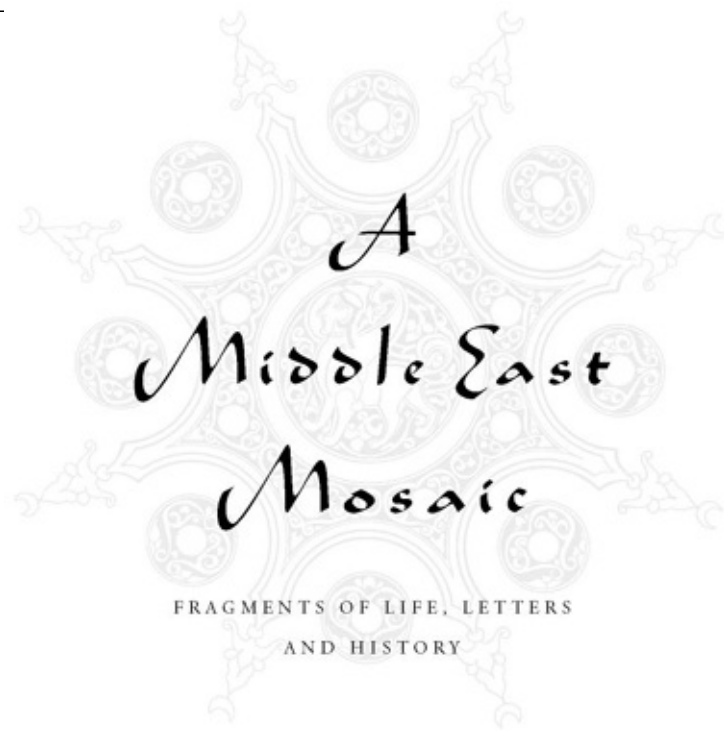
FRAGMENTS OF LIFE,
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A
Middle East
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AND HISTORY

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To Buntzie

“... *along with me* ...”

A man will turn over half a library to make one book.

—*SAMUEL JOHNSON (1775)*



Map of Istanbul from Hapfelius, Die Kurze Beschreibung der Gantzen Turkey, 1688.

Preface

Toward the middle of the tenth century, an Arab geographer and cosmographer from the great city of Baghdad wrote an account of the known world in which he included a few words about some of the strange, wild people beyond the northwest frontier of civilization—that is to say, of the Islamic empire of the caliphs. Of the northernmost of these peoples, he observed, “Their bodies are large, their natures gross, their manners harsh, their understanding dull and their tongues heavy. Their color is so excessively white that it passes from white to blue. . . . Those of them who are farthest to the north are the most subject to stupidity, grossness and brutishness.”

In 1798 an Ottoman secretary of state wrote a memorandum to inform the Imperial Council about the recent troubles in Paris. He began his description of the events which, in the West, came to be known as the French Revolution: “The conflagration of sedition and wickedness that broke out a few years ago in France, scattering sparks and shooting flames of mischief and tumult in all directions had been conceived many years previously in the minds of certain accursed heretics. . . . The known and famous atheists Voltaire and Rousseau, and other materialists like them, had printed and published various works, consisting . . . of the removal and abolition of all religion, and of allusions to the sweetness of equality and republicanism, all expressed in easily intelligible words and phrases, in the form of mockery, in the language of the common people.”

During the nine and a half centuries that intervened between these two reports, the level of information about Europe among Middle Eastern visitors and observers had improved considerably. The basic attitudes of contempt and certitude, however, remained substantially unchanged. Much the same may be said about Western attitudes toward the Middle East. Though in general rather better informed, medieval and early modern Western observers of the Middle East, including travelers, showed a similar self-satisfied ignorance in their discussions of the places they visited and the peoples they met.

The rise and spread of Islam brought the Middle East into contact—and sometimes into collision—with other regions and cultures: in the east with India and China, in the south with Africa, in the west and north with Christendom. The last of these, seen by Islam as its only serious rival both as world faith and world power, gave rise to the most sustained and most traumatic of these encounters. It began with the advent of Islam in the seventh century and the irruption of the Muslim Arabs into Palestine, Syria, Egypt and North Africa, all until then part of the Christian world. Three major areas of European Christendom were for a while lost to Islam: the two peninsulas at the southwestern and southeastern corners of Europe, Iberia and Anatolia, and the vast plains of Russia. The first was conquered and ruled by Arabs and Moors, the second by Turks, the third by Islamized Tatars. The loss of Anatolia proved permanent. The attempt by the Crusaders to reconquer the Holy Land failed. But in both Russia and the Iberian Peninsula, the Christian inhabitants were in time able to defeat and expel their Muslim rulers, and, in the flush of victory, even pursued them whence they had come—from Russia to Asia, from Spain and Portugal to Africa and beyond. The reconquest grew into conquest and

began the great expansion of Europe, from both east and west, which in time brought most of Asia and Africa into the European orbit.

The relationship between the Middle East and the West has not been limited to war and its consequences—fear and mistrust, resentment and hatred, and a readiness to invent and believe the most absurd of calumnies. As well as fighters and preachers, there were others who looked at the people beyond their religious frontier with sometimes puzzled, sometimes eager curiosity. By turn amused and bewildered, they reflected in their books and in their letters home a range of envy, respect, hostility and—very rarely—admiration.

With the expansion of commerce during and after the crusades, European diplomats began to establish permanent missions in the coastal cities of the Ottoman Empire. Trained to observe and ready to comment on their hosts, their colleagues and (with deep mistrust) their interpreters, diplomats traveling in both directions provide some of the best accounts we have of the habits and customs of those with whom they were sent to negotiate. Merchants in the Middle East, as elsewhere, discussed commodities, prices and their competitors. European Christian merchants defied papal and national bans to sell arms to Saladin fighting the Crusaders and, centuries later, to the Turks advancing toward the heart of Europe. Constructive engagement has a long history.

European travelers in the East discovered such delights as coffee and polygamy. An Italian pilgrim in fourteenth-century Alexandria describes his joyous discovery of the banana; an Egyptian sheikh in nineteenth-century Paris describes the French postal system and observes how it is used, among other purposes, for assignations. Inevitably, there are more negative comments—on the position of women, the punishment of crime, the conduct of war.

Much has been written of late about Western misperceptions, through negligence and prejudice, arrogance and insensitivity, and sheer lack of interest. Some have gone so far as to argue that Western views of the Middle East are largely the result of such attitudes and that misperception has frequently been aggravated by willful misrepresentation, serving a Western desire to dominate and exploit. Certainly, there is no lack of ignorance and prejudice in what Westerners, through the centuries, have written about the Middle East. But the same is true about much of what Middle Easterners have written about the West, in the phases of both their advance and their retreat.

Some territorial definition may be useful. The term Middle East has never been precisely demarcated and extends, for some purposes, as far west as Morocco. Broadly speaking, it applies to the countries of southwest Asia and northeast Africa, with vague and ill-defined extensions at both ends—from Iraq into Central Asia and beyond to the borders of China; from Egypt into Africa, westward to the Atlantic and southward up the Nile as far as the Islamic faith and the Arabic language predominate.

The words “Europe” and “West,” in common use in Europe and the West, were not in the past used in the Islamic Middle East, where “West” meant their own west, North Africa and for a while Sicily and Spain. The term “Europe” occurs very infrequently, in a few translations of Greek geographic works. These regions and their inhabitants were usually designated either by religious terms—infidels, pagans, Christians—or by ethnic terms—Greeks and Romans in the adjoining Mediterranean lands, Slavs and Franks in eastern and western Europe.

For a long time, the peoples of Europe used similar designations, referring to their southern and eastern neighbors by religious terms, as infidels or Mohammedans, or by ethnic terms, as Moors, Saracens, Turks and Tatars. The terms “Near East” and “Middle East” came into general use at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Clearly, they reflect a view of the world from a Western vantage point—more specifically, from Western Europe, then rapidly extending its rule, and to an even greater extent its influence, in the rest of the Old World.

In Greco-Roman antiquity and medieval Christendom, the region which we now call the Near and Middle East was simply the East, with no need for more precise identification. It was known by a series of names, all meaning “sunrise”—the Greek *anatoleê* (whence Anatolia), the Latin *oriens*, the Italian *levante*, and their derivatives. In Greek and later in Latin writings, these names often carried with them a suggestion of something exotic and barbaric, sometimes also effete and luxurious. At most times the East was seen in Europe as hostile and dangerous, the dark hinterland from which came the invading armies of the great kings of Persia and their many successors. The last of these, the Ottoman Turks, confronted Europe with what came to be known as “the Eastern question” in its two phases: first the menace of the Ottoman advance, second the problems posed by the Ottoman retreat.

When a new and more distant Orient was perceived, the old and familiar East—Anatolia, the Levant—seemed much nearer. It was the new awareness of a remote and unknown Far East that led Europeans to rename the countries around the eastern Mediterranean the Near East, and those immediately beyond them the Middle East.

It is easy to understand how these terms came into European usage. It is more difficult to understand why they still remain in common use at the present time, when European domination of the East has decisively ended and Europe itself—apart from the Greenwich meridian—is no longer the principal point from which the world is viewed.

The Middle East, along with China and India, is one of the three most ancient regions of civilization in the world. Yet it differs significantly from the other two in its pattern of diversity and discontinuity. This diversity goes back to remote antiquity and surely owes much to the geographical configuration and situation of the region. Its division into valleys separated by high mountains and cultivated plains separated by vast and impassable deserts encouraged cultural polycentrism. It was the meeting place of the very different peoples and cultures of Asia, Africa and, in the later stages, of Europe, all of which helped to produce a region of striking contrasts.

From the earliest times we see not one but several centers of civilization: in the river valleys of Egypt and Mesopotamia, on the high plateaus of Iran and Anatolia, in the mountain ranges that go from north to south, from Taurus to Sinai, and on their slopes, facing westward to the coastal plain around the Mediterranean, eastward to the desert and to Asia. These were inhabited by different peoples who spoke different and often unrelated languages, wrote in different scripts, worshiped different gods and created different, sometimes contrasting, societies and polities. Relations between them developed in antiquity from minimal to hostile.

The discontinuity of Middle Eastern history was the result of consecutive phases of conquest and conversion—the one bringing a restructuring of power and authority, the other a reorientation of religion and culture. There were four major phases, beginning with the Hellenization of much of the

region after the conquests of Alexander the Great, and continuing with the extension of Roman imperial authority to all of the lands of the eastern Mediterranean. Hellenization and Romanization prepared the ground for two great waves of religious conversion, first to Christianity and then Islam.

All four processes have left their mark on the present-day Middle East. Of the four, the last undoubtedly the most comprehensive, the most profound and the most enduring, and gave the people of the Middle East the only shared perceived identity they have ever known. To this day, the term “Islam” is used as the equivalent of both “Christianity” and “Christendom,” to designate both religion and a civilization. The cumulative effect of these four cataclysmic changes was to obliterate the religions, the cultures, the languages and, to a large extent, even the nations of the ancient Middle East and to replace them with a new faith, a new political system and a new set of languages and loyalties.

Since the advent of Islam and the Arab conquests in the seventh century, there have been three major languages in the region: Arabic, Persian and Turkish. Some other languages survive. Kurdish and Berber are both spoken by numerous peoples, though neither has evolved a standard written language or literature. Older literary languages still in use are Hebrew, Armenian and Georgian, which others survive in a vestigial form as spoken dialects in a few remote villages, or as the scriptural and liturgical languages of minority religions. The other ancient languages of the region—Sumerian and Elamite, Assyrian and Babylonian, Egyptian, Hittite and Old Persian, together with the literature written in those languages—were lost, literally buried and forgotten until modern times, when they were exhumed, deciphered and interpreted, mostly by Western Orientalists, and restored to the historical self-awareness of the remote descendants of those who had created them.

Some civilizations, including a few that might be seen as very advanced, have regarded history as unimportant, preferring to live only in the present. Others have attached great, at times even religious significance to the past—that is, of course, their own past—and have devoted great effort to creating, preserving, and interpreting a record of events.

Their purposes were varied, and the presentation, even the selection, of events varied accordingly. The ancient kings were at great pains to provide written, publicly displayed narratives of their victories and achievements for the edification of their subjects, their rivals and posterity; their modern successors use modern media for the same purpose. But the three major Middle Eastern religions saw history in a different light and created a historiography of universal significance. In the historical books of the Old Testament, history is the record of the working out of God’s purpose for mankind and this required a level of honesty rarely equaled in other historiography. King David, the founder of the royal house of Judah and the greatest of Jewish heroes, is depicted with brutal frankness: his weaknesses, his pettinesses, his sins both great and small. And the rest of the kings and leaders of the Jews, present as well as past, fare no better at the hands of Jewish historians.

Much the same spirit inspired the classical historians of Islam, who saw their task as a sacred trust. The Sunna, the practice and usage of the past and more particularly (though not exclusively) of the Prophet and his companions, was accepted as a source of binding law; it was therefore a religious duty to preserve an accurate record of that past. An immensely rich and varied historical literature attests the fulfillment of that duty.

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