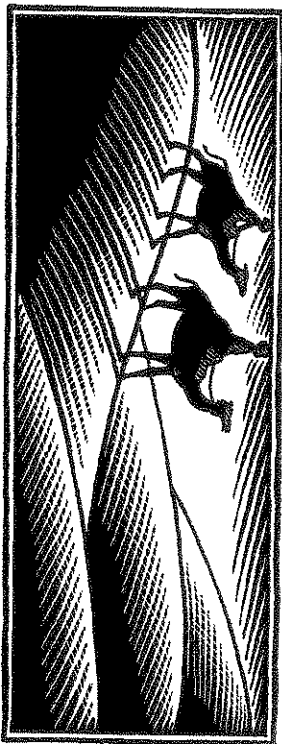


Other monks from Britain braved the wild stretches of land and dense forests of northern Germania, and what we know as the Netherlands today. These were very dangerous places to preach the Gospel. The peasants and warriors who lived there weren't even Christian in name and held fast to the beliefs of their ancestors. They prayed to Odin, the god of Battle, whom they worshipped not in temples but in the open air, often beneath ancient trees which they held sacred. One day an English monk and priest called Boniface came and preached under one of these trees. To prove to the northern Germans that Odin was only a fairy-tale figure, he picked up an axe to chop down the sacred tree. Everyone expected him to be struck down on the spot by a bolt of lightning from the heavens. But the tree fell and nothing happened. Lots of people then came to him to be baptised for they no longer believed in the power of Odin or in other gods, but other people were angry and in 754 they killed him.

Nevertheless paganism in Germany was at an end. Before long almost everyone was going to the simple wooden churches which the monks built next to their monasteries, and after the service they would ask the monks' advice on such things as how to cure a sick cow, or how to protect their apple trees against an infestation of caterpillars. The monks were also visited by the mighty, and of these it was often the most brutal and savage who readily gave them large tracts of land, for when they did so they hoped that God would pardon their sins. In this way the monasteries became rich and powerful, but the monks themselves, in their simple, narrow cells, remained poor, praying and working, just as St Benedict had told them.

20

THERE IS NO GOD BUT ALLAH, AND MUHAMMAD IS HIS PROPHET



Can you picture the desert? The real, hot, sandy desert, crossed by long caravans of camels laden with cargoes of rare goods? Sand everywhere. Just occasionally you see one or two palm trees on the skyline. When you get there you find an oasis consisting of a spring with a trickle of greenish water. Then the caravan moves on. Eventually you come to a bigger oasis where there is a whole town of white, cube-shaped houses, inhabited by white-clothed, brown-skinned men with black hair and piercing dark eyes.

You can tell that these men are warriors. On their wonderfully swift horses they gallop across the desert, robbing caravans and fighting each other, oasis against oasis, town against town, tribe against tribe. Arabia probably still looks much as it did thousands of years ago. And yet it was in this strange desert land, with its few, warlike inhabitants, that perhaps the most extraordinary of all the events I have to tell took place.

It happened like this. At the time when the monks were teaching simple peasants and the Merovingian kings were ruling over the Franks — that is to say, around the year 600 — nobody talked

about Arabs. They were busy galloping around in the desert, living in tents and fighting each other. They had a simple faith to which they gave little thought. Like the ancient Babylonians, they worshipped the stars, and also a stone which they believed to have fallen from heaven. This stone lay in a shrine called the Shrine of the Kaaba in the oasis town of Mecca, and Arabs often made pilgrimages across the desert to pray there.

Now there was at that time, in Mecca, a man named Muhammad, son of Abdallah. His father was of high birth but not a rich man, a member of a family charged with watching over the Shrine of the Kaaba. He died young, and all he left his son Muhammad were five camels, which didn't amount to much. When Muhammad was six his mother also died, and he had to leave the desert encampment where he lived with the other children of men of high rank and earn his living tending goats for the well-to-do. Later he met a rich widow, much older than himself, and made great journeys in her service as a camel driver leading trading caravans across the desert. He married his employer and they lived happily together and had six children. Muhammad also adopted his young cousin, whose name was Ali.

Strong and vigorous, with black hair and beard, eagle nose and heavy, loping gait, Muhammad was highly respected. He was known as 'the Trustworthy One'. He had shown an early interest in questions of religion and enjoyed talking not just with Arab pilgrims who came to the shrine at Mecca, but also with Christians from nearby Abyssinia, and with Jews, of whom there were large numbers in Arabian oasis towns. In his conversations with Jews and Christians one thing particularly impressed him: both spoke of the doctrine of the One, Invisible and Almighty God.

But in the evenings beside the fountain, he also enjoyed hearing about Abraham and Joseph, and about Jesus Christ and Mary. And one day, when he was on a journey, he suddenly had a vision. Do you know what that is? It is a dream you have when you're awake. It seemed to Muhammad that the Archangel Gabriel appeared before him, and addressed him in thunderous tones: 'Read!' cried the angel. 'But I cannot,' stammered Muhammad. 'Read!' cried the

angel a second and again a third time, before commanding him, in the name of the Lord, his God, to pray. Profoundly shaken by this vision, Muhammad returned home. He didn't know what had happened to him.

For three long years, as he journeyed back and forth across the desert, he reflected on his experience, turning it over and over in his mind. And when those three years had gone by he had another vision. Once more the Archangel Gabriel appeared before him in a blaze of heavenly light. Beside himself with fear, he ran home and lay trembling and bewildered on his bed. His wife covered him with his cloak. And as he lay there, he heard the voice again: 'Rise and give warning!' was its command, and: 'Honour thy God!' Muhammad knew then that this was God's message, that he must warn mankind about hell and proclaim the greatness of the One Invisible God. From that moment Muhammad knew he was the Prophet through whose mouth God would make known his wishes to mankind. In Mecca he preached the doctrine of the One Almighty God, the Supreme Judge, who had appointed him, Muhammad, to be his messenger. But most people laughed at him. Only his wife and a few friends and relations had faith in him.

However, it was clear to the priests of the Kaaba, the leading tribesmen who were its guardians, that Muhammad was no fool, but a dangerous enemy. They forbade anyone in Mecca to associate with Muhammad's family or do business with his followers. They hung up this proscription in the Kaaba. It was a terrible blow which must have meant years of hunger and hardship for the Prophet's family and friends. However, in Mecca, Muhammad had met some pilgrims from an oasis town which had long been at enmity with Mecca. In that town there were many Jews, which meant that these Arabs already knew about the doctrine of the One and Only God. And they listened keenly to Muhammad's preaching.

The news that Muhammad was preaching to these hostile tribes, and that his popularity with them was growing, roused the tribe's leaders, the guardians of the Kaaba, to a fury. They resolved to execute the Prophet for high treason. Muhammad had already sent his

followers out of Mecca to the desert town that had befriended him, and when the assassins who had been sent to kill him entered his house, he climbed out of a back window and fled to join them. This flight is known as the Emigration -- the 'Hegira' in Arabic -- and it took place on 16 June 622. Muhammad's followers have counted the years from that date, just as the Greeks did after the Olympiads, the Romans after the founding of Rome and the Christians after the birth of Christ.

In this town that would later be named Medina, 'the City of the Prophet', Muhammad was given a warm welcome. Everyone ran out to meet him and offered him hospitality. Not wishing to offend anybody, Muhammad said he would stay wherever his camel chose to go, which he did. In Medina Muhammad now set about instructing his followers, who listened to him attentively. He explained to them how God had revealed himself to Abraham and to Moses, and how, through the mouth of Christ, he had preached to mankind, and how he had now chosen Muhammad to be his prophet.

He taught them that they should fear nothing and no one but God -- or Allah, in Arabic. That it was futile either to fear or to look forward to the future with joy, for their fate had already been ordained by God and written down in a great book. What must be must be, and the hour of our death has been appointed from the day of our birth. We must surrender ourselves to the will of God. The word for 'submission to the will of God' is 'Islam' in Arabic, so Muhammad called his teaching Islam. He told his followers that they must fight for this teaching and be victorious, and that to kill an unbeliever who refuses to recognise him as the Prophet is no sin. That a brave warrior who dies fighting for his faith, for Allah and the Prophet, goes straight to Heaven while infidels (unbelievers) and cowards go to Hell. In his preaching Muhammad told his followers of his visions and revelations (these were later written down and are now known as the Koran), and gave them a most wonderful description of Paradise:

On plump cushions, the Faithful lie, facing one another.
Immortal youths go round amongst them bearing goblets

and ewers filled with a pure liquor, and no one who drinks of it has a headache or is made drunk. All fruits are there, and the flesh of all fowls, as much as they desire, and doe-eyed maidens as beautiful as the hidden pearl. Under thorn-free lotus trees and banana trees laden with fruit, in ample shade and by running streams, the Blessed take their ease . . . the fruit hangs low for them to pluck and the silver goblets are ever made to go round about them. Upon them are garments of fine green silk and brocade, adorned with silver clasps.

You can imagine the effect of this promise of Paradise on poor tribespeople living in the scorching desert heat, and how willingly they would fight and die to be admitted.

And so the inhabitants of Medina attacked Mecca, to avenge their prophet and loot caravans. At first they triumphed and carried off rich spoils, then they lost it all again. The people of Mecca advanced on Medina, intending to lay siege to the town, but after only ten days they were forced to withdraw. The day came when Muhammad, accompanied by fifteen hundred armed men, made a pilgrimage to Mecca. The people of Mecca, who had only known Muhammad when he was poor and derided, now recognised him as a mighty prophet. Many of them went over to him. And soon Muhammad and his army had conquered the whole town. But he spared its inhabitants, only emptying the shrine of its idols. His power and prestige were now immense and messengers arrived from encampments and oases far and wide to do him homage. Shortly before his death, he preached before a gathering of forty thousand pilgrims, insisting for the last time that there was no God but Allah and that he, Muhammad, was his Prophet; that the fight against infidels -- or unbelievers -- must go on. He also urged them to pray five times a day, facing Mecca, to drink no wine and to be brave. Soon afterwards, in 632, he died.

In the Koran it is written: 'Fight the infidel until all resistance is destroyed.' And in another passage: 'Slay the idolatrous wherever you shall find them, capture them, besiege them, seek them out in all places. But if they convert, then let them go in peace.'

The Arabs obeyed their Prophet's words, and when all the infidels in their desert had been either killed or converted they moved on to nearby countries, under the leadership of Muhammad's representatives, or 'caliphs', Abu Bakr and Omar. There, it was as if people were paralysed in the face of such wild religious zeal. Within six years of Muhammad's death the Arab warriors had already made bloody conquests of Palestine and Persia, and amassed vast quantities of loot. Other armies attacked Egypt – still part of the Roman Empire of the East, but by then a worn-out and impoverished land – and in four years it had fallen. The great city of Alexandria met the same fate. It is said that, when asked what should be done with the wonderful library, which at the time held seven hundred thousand scrolls by Greek poets, writers and philosophers, Omar replied: 'If what is in them is already contained in the Koran, they are not needed. And if what is in them is not contained in the Koran, then they are harmful! Whether this is true or not, we don't know, but certainly there have always been people who think like that. So, in all the fighting and chaos, that most important and precious collection of books was lost to us for ever.

The Arab empire went from strength to strength, the flames, as it were, spreading out from Mecca in all directions. It was as if Muhammad had thrown a glowing spark onto the map. From Persia to India, from Egypt through the whole of North Africa, the fire raged. At this time the Arabs were far from united. Several caliphs were chosen to succeed Omar after his death and they fought bloodily and ferociously against one another. From around the year 670, Arab armies made repeated attempts to conquer Constantinople, the ancient capital of the Roman Empire of the East, but the inhabitants put up a heroic defence, withstanding one siege for seven long years, until the enemy finally withdrew. The Arabs had to content themselves with the islands of Cyprus and Sicily, which they attacked by way of Africa. But they didn't stop there. Returning to Africa, they crossed over into Spain where, as you may remember, the Visigoths had held sway since the time of the Migrations. In a battle that lasted seven days, General Tarik was victorious. Now Spain, too, was under Arab rule.

From there they reached the kingdom of the Franks, ruled by the Merovingians, where they were confronted by bands of Christian-German peasant warriors. The leader of the Franks was Charles Martel, which means Charles the Hammer, because he was so good at knocking people down in battle. And he actually succeeded in defeating the Arabs, in 732, exactly a hundred years after the Prophet's death. If Charles Martel had lost those battles at Tours and Poitiers in the southern kingdom of the Franks, the Arabs would surely have conquered all of what is now France and Germany, and destroyed the monasteries. In which case, we might all be Muslims, like so many of the peoples of the world today.

Not all Arabs continued to be wild desert warriors as they were in Muhammad's time. Far from it! As soon as the heat of battle had reduced a little, they began to learn from the peoples they had defeated and converted in all the conquered lands. From the Persians they learnt about eastern splendour – how to take pleasure in fine rugs and textiles, in sumptuous buildings, wonderful gardens, and precious furnishings and ornaments all beautifully decorated with intricate patterns.

In order to erase all traces of the memory of the worship of idols, Muslims were forbidden to make likenesses of people or animals. So they decorated their palaces and mosques with beautiful, intricate, interlacing patterns of lines of many colours called after the Arabs, 'arabesques'. And from the Greeks who lived in the conquered cities of the Roman Empire of the East, the Arabs learnt even more than they learnt from the Persians. Instead of burning books, they began to collect and read them. They particularly liked the writings of Alexander the Great's famous tutor, Aristotle, and translated them into Arabic. From him they learnt to concern themselves with everything in nature, and to investigate the origins of all things. They took to this readily and with enthusiasm. The names of many of the sciences you learn about at school come from Arabic, names like chemistry and algebra. The book you have in your hand is made of paper, something we also owe to the Arabs, who themselves learnt how to make it from Chinese prisoners of war.

There are two things for which I am especially grateful to the Arabs. First, the wonderful tales they used to tell and then wrote down, which you can read in *A Thousand and One Nights*. The second is even more fabulous than the tales, although you may not think so. Listen! Here is a number: '12'. Now why do you think we say 'twelve' rather than 'one-two' or 'one and two'? Because, you say, 'the one isn't really a one at all, but a ten.' Do you know how the Romans wrote '12'? Like this: 'XII'. And 112? 'CXII'. And 1,112? 'MCXII'. Just think of trying to multiply and add up with Roman numbers like these! Whereas with our 'Arabic' numbers it's easy. Not just because they are attractive and easy to write, but because they contain something new: place value – the value given to a number on account of its position. A number placed on the left of two others has to be a hundred number. So we write one hundred with a one followed by two zeros.

Could you have come up with such a useful invention? I certainly couldn't. We owe it to the Arabs, who themselves owe it to the Indians. And in my opinion that invention is even more amazing than all the Thousand and One Nights put together. Perhaps it's just as well that Charles Martel defeated the Arabs in 732. And yet it was not such a bad thing that they founded their great empire, because it was through those conquests that the ideas and discoveries of the Persians, the Greeks, the Indians and even the Chinese were all brought together.

21



A CONQUEROR WHO KNOWS HOW TO RULE



Reading these stories may make you think it's easy to conquer the world or found a great empire, since it happens so often in the history of the world. And in fact it wasn't very difficult in earlier times. Why was that?

Imagine what it must have been like to have no newspapers and no post. Most people didn't even know what was happening in places just a few days' journey from where they lived. They stayed in their valleys and forests and tilled the land, and their knowledge of the world ended where the neighbouring tribes began. Towards these they were generally unfriendly, if not openly hostile. Each tribe harmed the other in whatever way it could, raiding cattle and setting fire to farmsteads. There was a constant tit-for-tat of stealing, feuding and fighting.

All they heard of a world beyond their own small realm were rumours and hearsay. If an army of several thousand men happened to turn up in a valley or clearing, there was little anyone could do. The neighbours thought themselves lucky if their enemies were slaughtered, and it didn't occur to them that their turn might be

“There Is No God But Allah, And Muhammad Is His Prophet”

Essential Question: What was happening in the Middle East during the Middle Ages?

Task: After reading your packet, answer these questions. You can write on this paper.

1. What is the Shrine of Kaaba? Where is it located? Why is it so special to Arabs?
2. What kind of family did Muhammad come from?
3. What impressed Muhammad when he talked with Christians and Jews?
4. What was Muhammad’s first vision? What was his second vision?
5. What was the Emigration—or the “Hegira” in Arabic?

6. What is the English translation of "Islam"?

7. Describe Muhammad's vision of paradise?

8. How were Muhammad's followers similar to the Christian Crusaders?

9. What mathematical gifts did we get from the Arabs?