

Were the Muslim Arab Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East Colonialists?¹

Robert G. Hoyland

ABSTRACTS

Im Laufe des siebten Jahrhunderts eroberten muslimische Araber erfolgreich Länder und Völker von Marokko bis Afghanistan; sie gründeten Städte in ihren neu gewonnenen Gebieten, ließen sich in diesen nieder, bauten Herrschaftsstrukturen auf und schöpften Ressourcen aus dem Hinterland ab, sowohl materielle als auch menschliche. Das klingt nach eindeutig kolonialistischem Verhalten, aber es gibt gute Gründe, hier innezuhalten und diesen Punkt genauer zu bedenken. Zunächst besteht das grundsätzliche Problem der Anwendung moderner Begriffe auf vormoderne Gegebenheiten. So ist es in einer Welt, in der Staaten klar definierte Grenzen haben, offensichtlich, wenn eine Macht in das Reich einer anderen eindringt. Aber wie stellt sich dies in einer Welt dar, in der Grenzen fließend sind und sich verschieben oder sogar als inexistent angesehen werden? Zudem sind die besonderen Umstände des Nahen Ostens zur Zeit der Spätantike zu beachten, die geprägt war von den um die Vorherrschaft ringenden Imperien Roms und Persiens. Kann man die muslimisch-arabische Bezwingung dieser Reiche und die Besetzung/Ausbeutung ihrer Gebiete als Kolonialismus beschreiben? Und welches Bild machten sich die muslimischen Araber selbst von ihren Eroberungen? Was waren ihre Absichten, und sollten wir diese in unsere Beurteilung ihrer Herrschaft miteinbeziehen? Diese und andere Fragen werden in diesem Aufsatz behandelt.

In the course of the seventh century Muslim Arabs successfully conquered lands and peoples from Morocco to Afghanistan; they founded cities in their newly acquired territories, settled

1 This article draws on material published in R. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*, New York 2015; the reader will find there more discussion of the sources and issues presented below. However, the book does not consider at all the question stated in the title, which is discussed here from a purely academic standpoint, without any agenda.

in them, ruled from them and extracted resources, both physical and human, from their hinterlands. This sounds like eminently colonialist behaviour, but there are reasons to pause and reflect on this point. There is the general problem of applying modern terms to pre-modern situations; for example, in a world where states have a clear sense of borders, it is more evident when one power trespasses upon the realm of another, but what about a world where borders are fluid and shifting or even seen as non-existent? Then there are the specific circumstances of the late antique Middle East, which was dominated by the empires of Rome and Persia, both of which aspired to supremacy. Can the Muslim Arab defeat of these states and occupation/exploitation of their lands be characterized as colonialism? And how did the Muslim Arabs conceive of their own conquests, what were their intentions and should we factor them into our assessment of the nature of their rule? These and other questions will be considered by this paper.

The subject of this article is one that still prompts debate today, especially in online magazines and forums. If one googles the title, lots of passionate blogs will pop up that advocate forcefully for one side or the other. Most often, they relate to ongoing debates, such as the Palestinians as victims or agents of colonial aggression, the Berber language as collateral damage or target of colonial oppression, sub-Saharan African enslavement, and the persecution of minorities, such as Yazidis, Kurds and various Christian communities.² Some theorists seeking to explain modern fundamentalist groups argue that they continue a tradition of Islamic imperialism that goes back to the original mission of the prophet Muhammad.³ Then there are those residents of the Middle East who worry that the narrative they are taught in schools portraying the seventh-century Muslim Arab conquerors not as imperialists, but as bearers of God's truth and conveyors of God's justice, who were welcomed wherever they went, may not be accurate.

Clearly, the answer to the question depends on how one defines colonialism. A number of dictionaries opt for a very simple definition, such as Collin's English Dictionary: "the policy and practice of a power in extending control over weaker peoples or areas", and Merriam-Webster's Dictionary: "the system or policy of a nation seeking to extend or retain its authority over other people or territories". But this does not tell us much and does not distinguish colonialism from other terms for domination, such as imperialism. Ronald Horvath adds a useful extra ingredient: "The important difference between colonialism and imperialism appears to be the presence or absence of significant numbers of permanent settlers in the colony from the colonizing power."⁴ There is a corollary to this definition, namely that the settlers from the dominating group will likely establish for themselves a set of favourable socio-legal and/or socio-economic conditions whereby

2 E.g. C. Ibekwe, Arab Colonialism since 640 AD, <https://www.abibitumi.com/community/education/chinweizu-arab-colonialism-since-640ad/>; M. Jaff, How Arab Colonialism Conquered the Middle East, in: Progress ME Magazine, 18 January 2018, <https://medium.com/progressme-magazine/how-arab-colonialism-conquered-the-middle-east-73a247c7465d>; D. Swindell, The Arab World is Guilty of Colonialist Reversal, in: The Times of Israel, 22 March 2018, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-arab-world-is-guilty-of-colonialist-reversal/> (all three accessed 22 February 2019).

3 In particular, see E. Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History*, New Haven 2013.

4 R. Horvath, A Definition of Colonialism, in: *Current Anthropology* 13 (1972), p. 47.

they can maintain and even extend their dominance. In addition, the dominating group will likely invent a justifying narrative or ideology that explains and legitimates their continuing domination.

Objections to each of these three aspects of the definition of colonialism can of course be raised, and indeed have been, but they do have the advantage of offering some distinctiveness for the term and it seems worth seeing what insights they bring when applied to the Muslim Arab case.

1. Muslim Arabs as Settlers

One of the earliest surviving texts to come from the hand of the Muslim Arab conquerors is papyrus no. 558 in the collection amassed by Archduke Rainer in Vienna; it describes itself in its subject heading as a “receipt for the sheep given to the *magaritai* and others arriving with them as a down-payment for the taxes of the first fiscal year”. It is issued in the name of the Arab general ‘Abdallah ibn Jabir to two representatives of the local government in a town just to the south of modern Cairo and it is dated very exactly by two different dating systems – the Egyptian Christian era of the martyrs and the Islamic calendar – to 25 April 643 AD. It is written in Greek and Arabic, and is the earliest extant dated documentary text in Arabic that we possess.⁵

An interesting feature of this papyrus is its designation of the conquerors in the Greek part as *magaritai* (also written *mōagaritai*), which is how they are most commonly referred to in Greek documents of the seventh century. A clearly related term is found in Syriac literary texts from the 640s onwards, namely *mhaggrē*. Both terms are intended to convey the Arabic term *muhājir*, usually translated into English as “emigrant”, formed from the verb *hājara*, “to emigrate”. In the Qur’an it is often connected with fighting, as in verse 22.57: “Those who emigrate and are killed and die will be provided for” and 8.72 (and 8.74, 8.75): “Those who emigrate and fight with their own wealth and lives [...] they are allied to one another.” It is the word used in the foundation agreement drafted by the prophet Muhammad to specify those who left Mecca with him to start a new community in Medina and begin the war against the “infidels”, and he allegedly used it again in a prediction for the expansion of the community after him: “You will emigrate to Syria and conquer it.” Just as Muhammad established Medina as a base for the emigrants to settle in and to launch attacks against opponents, so his successors, the first caliphs, established garrisons for the Arab warriors outside of Arabia for the same purpose. They were designated as *dār hijra*, that is, an abode of migration, or *manzil jihād*, a base of war. And these two expressions together nicely capture the dual sense of the word *muhājir*: both a settler who has left his homeland and a soldier.⁶

5 A. Grohmann, *From the World of Arabic Papyri*, Cairo 1952, pp. 115–116.

6 For these and other references, see P. Crone, *The First-Century Concept of Hijra*, in: *Arabica* 41 (1994), pp. 352–387.

A substantial number of these garrison settlements were established in the Middle East in the course of the seventh century to house and supply the Arab armies and to administer and police the conquered territories. First, there was Basra and Kufa in Iraq and Fustat in Egypt. Then came Aqaba in Jordan, Ramla in Palestine, Qayrawan in Tunisia, Anjar in Lebanon, Qinnasrin in Syria, Wasit and Mosul in Iraq, and so on. Those who settled there were paid stipends from the taxes exacted from the local population and received a share of any booty so that they did not have to go out to seek their livelihood. The garrisons were generally founded at a short distance from an existing city and over a relatively short time, because of the great wealth of the Arab soldiers and the large numbers of prisoners-of-war that they brought back, these new settlements became thriving cities that soon replaced those that they had been built near to. The numbers of troops that they could accommodate varied, but it seems to have been substantial. A census of the garrisons of Kufa and Basra conducted around the year 670 by the superintendent of the military register revealed that they contained 60,000 and 80,000 fighting men respectively. This is certainly sizeable enough to satisfy Horvath's aforementioned "significant numbers of permanent settlers". And for the most part the settlement was indeed permanent, as he stipulated, with no evidence of any major reverse.⁷

Those who had made this commitment to leave Arabia and settle in the new garrisons, the *muhājirs*, were contrasted with the Bedouin (*badū*) or *a'rāb*, those who had chosen to maintain a nomadic life or had returned to it after finding that the garrison cities did not suit them. As one early governor of Iraq said: "A *muhājir* is never a nomad." Given that the fast-expanding nascent Islamic state needed military manpower, those who refused to migrate to the garrisons and serve in the army were denigrated, and the predilection for desert life was seen as pejorative. The prophet Muhammad is even said to have cursed "those who returned to the desert after their emigration" (*man badā ba'da l-hijra*), and it is an issue that crops up frequently in contemporary poetry. For example, one reluctant warrior observes of his beloved: "She knows that I am noble, but she is perturbed by the traces of nomadic yearnings (*a'rābiyya*) in a *muhājir*." And many still boasted of their adherence to an itinerant life in the wilderness despite all the material rewards of garrison life: "We are people of the desert, we do not deal in coins and settle in towns", or: "And he whom settled life has attracted, behold, what great men of the desert are we."⁸

One could also join the Muslim Arab armies even if one were not a Bedouin or not even in the Arabian Peninsula, but you did still have to physically relocate to a garrison city. Thus, Muhammad told his followers to invite the enemy to convert before engaging them in battle: if they accept, then "invite them to transfer from their abode to the abode of the emigrants" (*al-taḥawwul min dārihim ilā dār al-muhājirin*), and tell them that they will have the same rights and duties as the emigrants. Even if one was not going to fight,

7 M.J. de Goeje (ed.), A. ibn Yahya al-Baladhuri, *Futūḥ al-buldān*, Leiden 1866, p. 350 (census); Horvath, Definition, p. 47; on the first Islamic cities, see S. Denoix, *Founded Cities of the Islamic World from the Seventh to the Eleventh Centuries*, in: S. K. Jayyusi (ed.), *The City in the Islamic World*, vol. 1, Leiden 2008, pp. 115–139.

8 For these and other references, see S. Agha/T. Khalidi, *Poetry and Identity in the Umayyad Age*, in: al-Abhath 50–51 (2002–2003), pp. 55–120.

one had to relocate, the idea being that you needed to be in a place where Islam was properly practised. For example, the former pagan prophetess Sajah converted to Islam and emigrated from northeast Arabia to Basra. And there were other ways to help the cause besides fighting. The caliph ‘Umar I (634–644) held the best person to be a man endowed with a home, family and property who learns about Islam and who reacts by driving his camels to “one of the abodes of emigration” (*dār min dār al-hijra*), where he sells them and spends the money on equipment in the path of God, staying among the Muslims and aiding them against their enemy. Even as late as the reign of Caliph ‘Umar II (717–720), the idea that one must make a physical *hijra* was still there, as one can see in a decree that he proclaimed: “Whoever accepts Islam, whether Christian or Jew or Zoroastrian [...] and joins himself to the body of the Muslims in their abode, and who forsakes the abode wherein he was before, he shall have the same rights and duties as the Muslims.”⁹

There is of course some fuzziness with this view of the Muslim Arabs as colonial settlers. Arabia was contiguous to the Fertile Crescent, so it is not exactly comparable with the European establishment of colonies overseas. Moreover, Arabs had for centuries travelled and settled in the Fertile Crescent, though only in relatively small numbers and they had usually assimilated to the local culture. And finally, although the first Muslim rulers were based in Medina in Arabia, they moved their capital after three decades to Damascus and then Baghdad, and so they did not remain a remote governing elite for long. Nevertheless, the migration of some 200,000 to 300,000 Arab tribesmen to take up residence in the Middle East as troops and rulers inevitably had an enormous impact on the peoples that they conquered and governed.

2. Muslim Arabs Differentiated from the Subject Population

While the Muslim Arabs were mostly all soldiers in garrisons, they were naturally distinguished from the subject population by virtue of their status as conquerors and the fact that they paid no taxes, and indeed received money in the form of military pensions. As these pensions became increasingly restricted to those on active duty, rather than a reward for past service, and as the days of easy conquest and plentiful booty came to an end, more Muslims dropped out of the army to become civilians. However, they did not want to rub shoulders on an equal footing with the non-Muslim conquered peoples, and so restrictions were placed on the latter to emphasize their inferior status. These were mostly visual requirements that would distinguish them from Muslims (not using saddles on riding animals, wearing a distinctive belt, not bearing arms, not copying Muslim dress, headgear or hairstyles), limitations on promoting their religion (not building new synagogues or churches, not proselytizing, not holding large public processions, not obstructing conversion to Islam, sounding bells/clappers quietly and minimizing display

of crosses), some security requirements (not harbouring spies, reporting sedition) and a few economic measures (not selling alcohol to Muslims, limitations on holding high public office and, in particular, paying a designated non-Muslim tax). By the ninth century there had evolved an extensive body of legal rulings governing what non-Muslims could and could not do and how they should behave towards Muslims.¹⁰ Although there were of course numerous and frequent violation of these conditions, Jews and Christians and other non-Muslims did become a subordinate class, and yet were integrated within the Muslim legal system and granted protection. By the standards of the time, it was a relatively favourable setup, especially in contrast to medieval Europe where no such legal protection existed for non-Christian groups. Nevertheless, it was a clearly discriminatory system, and it had its roots in the fact that the Muslim Arab conquerors wished to distinguish themselves from those whom they had conquered. Given that it also had negative socio-economic implications for the non-Muslims, it inevitably impacted upon the life of that population and likely influenced its gradual diminution.¹¹

Although conversion to Islam removed this socio-legal discrimination, the Muslim Arab conquerors and their descendants still attempted to maintain a distinction between themselves and these converts, called *mawlās* (usually translated as “clients”, because they had to find a Muslim patron to endorse their conversion), by engaging in the practice, common among conquerors, known as “othering”, that is, stressing one’s superiority over other groups in terms of innate features, historical achievements, and so on.¹² Prejudice against these converts, because of their subject/conquered status combined with their non-Arab origins (so foreign immigrants in modern parlance), is extremely widespread in our sources and Arabic literature is replete with such sayings as: “The worst of people is the slave and the son of the slave, and the most miserable of people to walk on earth is the *mawlā* of a *mawlā*” or: “Nafi‘ ibn Jubayr ibn Mut‘im let a *mawlā* lead the prayer; when asked why, he said: ‘I wanted to abase myself before God by praying behind him’.” And according to the famous ninth-century jurist Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Arab superiority was built into Islam itself: “There is recognized for the Arabs their priority, their superiority and their precedence and also love for them, according to a saying of the messenger

10 The process and the legislation is described and discussed by M. Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence*, Cambridge 2012.

11 There has not really been any study of the ways in which this discrimination affected the material life of those who endured it, though it is widely assumed that it is responsible for the drastic decline of Christian communities in the Middle East. For a comparative perspective, see A. Woolf, who argues that a differential legal system led to the gradual erosion of the status of the Britons vis-à-vis the dominant incoming Anglo-Saxons (*Apartheid and Economics in Anglo-Saxon England*, in: N.J. Higham (ed.), *Britons in Anglo-Saxon England*, Woodbridge 2007, pp. 115–129).

12 The most famous study of this phenomenon is E. Said’s *Orientalism*, New York 1978. One could argue that the *mawlā* in the Muslim Arab Empire was in a similar half-way position to the “Western Oriental gentleman” (i.e. wog) of European colonial society, but the *mawlā* was equal to the Muslim Arab in the eyes of the law and by the time of his or her children and especially grandchildren the distinction was lost, and had in any case all but vanished by the ninth century when it became no longer necessary to seek a patron to endorse one’s conversion.

of God: ‘Love of the Arabs is part of the faith, hatred of them is hypocrisy’.¹³ Over time, with increased conversion from non-Arab populations and more intermarriage among Muslims of all backgrounds, the descendants of the Muslim Arab conquerors were less and less able to retain their privileged position, but it is interesting to see how strongly the idea of Arab precedence maintained its hold within Islam. Even into the twentieth century Muslims in non-Arab lands, like India and Indonesia, liked to claim Arab descent, and many Arab leaders would affirm their claim to superior status, such as al-Bazzaz, prime minister of Iraq: “The fact that the prophet Muhammad was an Arab was not a matter of chance; a genius, he belonged to a nation of great abilities and qualities [...] It is clear that the Arabs are the backbone of Islam. They were the first to be addressed in the verses of revelation [...] Their swords conquered countries and lands, and on the whole they are as ‘Umar described them in a saying of his: ‘Do not attack the Arabs or humiliate them for they are the essence of Islam’.”¹⁴

3. The Muslim Arabs’ Justifying Narrative

The Muslim Arabs did not perceive/portray what they were doing as straight conquest and occupation/colonization. The word that was used to describe their military achievements by Muslim historians of the conquests was *futūḥ*, the plural of *fath*, which literally means “opening”. Why was this word used rather than one that suggested overcoming or victory or the like? If we turn to the Qur’an, we never find *fath*, or the associated verb *fataḥa*, used with the sense of conquest. Rather, it either has the common Semitic meaning of “open” or the Ethiopic and south Arabian sense of “to render judgement”; additionally, with the prepositions *‘alā*/unto or *li*/to, it has the sense of “to open up to” or “to bestow”. For example, verse 7.96 states: “If the people of the surrounding villages had believed and been God-fearing, we would have bestowed upon them/opened them up to blessings from heaven and earth”, and 35.2 speaks of “the mercy that God bestows upon people/opens people up to”. And it would seem to be this latter sense that was intended by the chroniclers of the Muslim Arab conquests when they chose to use the word *futūḥ* to characterize the Muslim Arab expansion. The victories were a sign of God’s favour, divine blessings for those who fought in His path and for His purpose. And this is stated explicitly in a number of Muslim-Christian disputation texts, where the Muslim interlocutor boasts to the Christian: “It is a sign of God’s preference for us that he has given us dominion over all nations.” This fits with the phraseology of the conquests: it is always said that God *fataḥa* a place *‘alā* X, where X is the name of the successful general.¹⁵

13 Al-Baladhuri, *Ansāb al-ashrāf*, vol. 4b, M. Schloessinger (ed.), Jerusalem 1938, p. 10; Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi, *al-Iqd al-Farīd*, A. Amin et al. (eds.), Cairo 1940–1965, vol. 2, p. 260; Ibn Abi Ya‘la, *Ṭabaqāt*, M. al-Fiqi (ed.), Cairo 1952, vol. 1, p. 30.

14 J. Donohue/J. Esposito (eds.), *Islam in Transition*, Oxford 1982, p. 86.

15 F. M. Donner, *Arabic Fath as ‘Conquest’ and its Origin in Islamic Tradition*, in: *Al-‘Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 24 (2016), pp. 1–14.

There were direct words that Muslim historians could have used to characterize the successes of Muslim conquerors, like *zāhar alghalaba ‘alā* or *qahara*, but the point that they patently wanted to make was that the victory was achieved not by the clever strategy of the human agent, but by the awesome power of God. The Muslim Arab conquests were God’s work, a reward for those who followed His messenger Muhammad and emigrated to fight the Lord’s fight, the ultimate aim being to extend God’s dominion over the whole world.¹⁶ The same is true when Muslim histories talk about rule. If they are speaking of Christian rule of formerly Muslim lands, such as the Byzantines in northern Syria in the tenth century and the Normans in Sicily in the eleventh century, they use terms such as “occupation” (*iḥtilāl*), whereas they designate Muslim rule of formerly non-Muslim countries as *amr* or *ḥukm*, which occur in the Qur’an with the sense of divine government. The suggestion is that the Muslims were running things on behalf of God, as is further implied by the fact that the Muslim sovereign is called the “deputy of God” (*khalīfat Allāh*).

However, this is classic conquerors’ propaganda and it is similar to the spin that European colonialists put on their own conquests, especially as set forth by the missionaries accompanying them.¹⁷ Thus Jan H. Boer of the Sudan United Mission declared: “Colonialism is a form of imperialism based on a divine mandate and designed to bring liberation – spiritual, cultural, economic, and political – by sharing the blessings of the Christ-inspired civilization of the West with a people suffering under satanic oppression, ignorance and disease.”¹⁸ One could, therefore, argue that both Muslim Arabs and Europeans told themselves that God was on their side in order to justify their military aggression and subsequent rule. Many European, and later American, colonialists put forward a more secular justification: that they conquered in order to bring order and enlightenment, liberty and equality, or freedom and democracy to their conquered subjects, but this is not so different from the Muslim Arabs’ assertion that they conquered in order to bring the truth of Islam and the equity of God’s rule.

4. Does Islam Make a Difference?

These three features – the settlement of large numbers of Muslim Arabs in the conquered lands, a discriminatory socio-legal system, and the elaboration of a justifying narrative – might be regarded as evidence for the idea that early Islamic rule was indeed a form of

16 Donner (Arabic Faith, pp. 9–10) concludes from this that we should not translate the word *faṭḥ* as conquest, but use a less violence-charged term, not appreciating the propagandistic/legitimizing use of the term in Muslim histories. More sensitive to this is D. Cook (The Muslim Man’s Burden: Muslim Intellectuals Confront their Imperialist Past, in: Israel Affairs 13 (2007), pp. 811–812). I do not thereby mean that conquerors are only ever being insincere; many will certainly have believed the narrative that they put out; the point is that their subjects are less likely to have bought into their message.

17 As is pointed out by Cook, Muslim Man’s Burden, p. 813.

18 Quoted in: T. Falola, Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies, Rochester, NY 1998, p. 33.

colonialism. Modern Muslims generally reject this assertion, arguing that they advanced the material and spiritual wellbeing of mankind by bringing Islam, the latest version of God's message, and that, even if there was short-term pain in the conquests, there was long-term gain in Islamic rule. This is obviously an extremely difficult proposition to evaluate, but is it true that Islam is of such a different nature to Western culture that we cannot really compare Muslim Arab rule and European rule?¹⁹

It seems to me that there is one particular way in which the Muslim Arab form of domination was very different from the European one, namely that Islam provided a means whereby the conquered could enter into and integrate within the conquest society, whereas there was no such automatic mechanism in the European case. Those conquered by the Muslim Arabs could join the ranks of the conquerors simply by converting to Islam. This porousness of the boundary between conqueror and conquered in the Islamic case was unusual; victors do not normally grant access to their echelons so easily, for they want to keep the privileges of conquest for themselves. European imperial powers did of course collaborate with local peoples in various ways, especially in order to obtain military support, administrative services, physical labour and the like, but it was difficult for the conquered to become "a European" or to enter the ranks of the Europeans on an equal basis (even indigenous women married to Europeans and their offspring tended to be viewed as inferior or an oddity). One could argue that Christianity also served as an integrative force, forging a bond between the Europeans and those they conquered. However, it was extremely difficult for the colonial subjects to have any impact upon official Christianity. In the case of the Muslim Arab conquests, by contrast, the fact that they occurred at the same time as the emergence of the religion of Islam, which was as yet very malleable and little defined, meant that the conquered people were able to participate in the elaboration of the religion and civilization of Islam in a way that was simply impossible for the conquered in the time of European expansion.²⁰

The Muslim Arab conquerors do not seem to have expected or planned for this to happen. God had ordained that the conquered people would be the Arabs' booty, not their equals. Thus the general Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas encouraged his men on the eve of the Battle of Qadisiyya, in modern southwest Iraq, by pointing out to them: "This land is your inheritance, this is what the Lord has promised you. He made it over to you three years ago and you have been enjoying it and eating from it, killing its people, collecting taxes from them, and enslaving them until today."²¹ And so, he urges, they must fight hard or they will lose all these benefits. There is no sense in this and other similar statements that the conquered should have the chance to share in the good fortune of the conquerors. Later Muslim historians maintained that the conquerors had offered their opponents

19 Of course, there was no single type of European rule; it could be more religious (like the Spanish), more mercantile (like the Portuguese and Dutch), more secular (like the British and French), and inevitably there were numerous variations according to place and time. All forms are, however, sufficiently distinct from the Muslim Arab type of rule that the comparison remains valid.

20 This point is discussed at greater length in Hoyland, *In God's Path*, pp. 228–230.

21 M. ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, M.J. de Goeje et al. (eds.), vol. 1, Leiden 1879–1901, p. 2289.

the opportunity to convert before fighting them, but this is never mentioned in earlier sources. As the north Mesopotamian monk John of Fenek observed, writing in the 680s: “Of each person they required only tribute, allowing him to remain in whatever faith he wished.”²² But since neither the Qur’an nor Muhammad had put up any bar to conversion and given that it presented a clear route to partaking in the privileges of the conquerors, it was inevitable that many would seek to take advantage of it.

In the first century or so after the Arab conquests, when one had to find a Muslim patron in order to convert, there were few non-Muslims of status who converted, balking at having to submit themselves to those they had formerly looked down upon. However, this issue did not arise for those who had been taken captive, for they were assigned as booty to a Muslim Arab conqueror. Since, from early on, there was a distaste for the idea that a Muslim should be a slave, it was common that captives who had converted would be permitted by their Arab master to be freed, even if often with the requirement of a payment or continued performance of some services. Many of the female captives served as concubines, or sometimes became wives, and their offspring were counted as Muslim and usually as free persons. This meant, given the enormous numbers of prisoners-of-war captured in the course of the Arab conquests, that very soon there were more Muslims of non-Arab origin than there were of Arab origin. Initially everyone knew who they were, and ethnic Arabs looked down upon these ex-captive Muslims. But a few generations of urban living diluted these clear-cut distinctions and the term Arab largely shifted in meaning from a geographical-ethnic tie to a cultural-linguistic one (i.e. accepting the values/norms of Islamic society and speaking Arabic).

Inevitably these converts – and even more so their descendants, who had been born into Islam – wanted to explore and expand their new religion and to reconcile it with their former religion and culture (or what they knew of it from their parents), others to map the grammar of their newly acquired language, Arabic, and to augment its literary repertoire, and others again to situate their new community within the broader currents of world history. As noted above, these new converts faced prejudice in Muslim Arab society, but there were not really physical barriers; since Islam had no clergy and in its early stages had no colleges to restrict accreditation, scholarship was open to all who had the time, inclination and ability to pursue it. Numerous converts availed themselves of this opportunity and dedicated themselves to elaborating a new world view. There are too many to even begin to list them, but here are a few of the most famous: Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767), a captive from Balkh, author of the earliest extant Qur’an commentary; Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), grandson of a captive from ‘Ayn al-Tamr in Iraq, author of the most famous biography of Muhammad; Ibn Jurayj (d. 767), grandson of a captive from Anatolia, and Sulayman al-A’mash (d. 764), son of a captive from Tabaristan, both prolific collectors of sayings of Muhammad; ‘Abdallah ibn al-Mubarak (d. 797), son of a Khwarizmian mother and Turkish father, author of one of the first Muslim creeds; Abu

22 S. Brock, North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century: Book XV of John Bar Penkayē’s *Riṣ’ Mellē*, in: Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 9 (1987), p. 61.

Hanifa (d. 767), son of a trader from Kabul, eponymous founder of a law school; Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), son of a captive from Maysan in Iraq, a celebrated Muslim ascetic; Hammad al-Rawiya (d. 772), son of a captive from Daylam, an expert on ancient Arabic poetry.²³ And here is where we see a very sharp distinction from the European colonial experience, since there are very few persons conquered by the Europeans who came to write books that reworked European culture in some way (or at least not until the post-colonial period). And there are extremely few texts from countries conquered by the Europeans dating to the pre-conquest period that went on to become part of mainstream European culture (again, not until post-colonial times), whereas numerous books from the cultures that the Muslim Arabs conquered were quickly translated into Arabic and became classics of Muslim literature.²⁴ To some extent, of course, this reflects the fact that the European conquerors possessed a much richer high culture than the Muslim Arab conquerors, who were subjugating peoples more advanced than themselves, but it also reflects the Europeans' lack of a mechanism to facilitate the assimilation of those they conquered.

The eastern lands of the caliphate (East Iran and Central Asia) were crucial in this process: they provided many of the scholars who would play a leading role in creating a new Islamic civilization, breaking it away from the narrow Judeo-Christian focus that it had had in Damascus and suffusing it with elements from this culturally syncretic world where Manicheism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism had long co-existed. Since the Arab conquerors were relatively few and far from home in this region, many of them took Persian wives, began to speak Persian, attended Persian festivals like Nawruz, and so on. Ethnic and cultural allegiances became blurred and a Persianized Islam became the common idiom for a new elite. Tellingly, when Nasr ibn Sayyar, the Arab governor of the region, and Harith ibn Surayj, an Arab leader of a local insurrection, decided to negotiate peace in the 740s, they chose to represent them "men mindful of the Book of God", namely Muqatil ibn Hayyan, a lawyer resident in Balkh (in modern north Afghanistan), and Jahm ibn Safwan, a theologian resident in Tirmidh (on the Afghan-Uzbek border), both sons of Persian captives turned Muslim.²⁵

People like Muqatil ibn Hayyan and Jahm ibn Safwan are a good example of how quickly many of the conquered people became involved in the religious, cultural and political life of the world of the conquerors. If one examines the family histories of some of the main actors of this new regime, both Arab and non-Arab, one can see that in only three generations their whole social situation and cultural orientation has changed beyond recognition. To some degree that is the exciting thing about all empires, and in any imperial capital in history one can find characters who have gone from rags to riches, from

23 For references to these figures and for further discussion, see Hoyland, *In God's Path*, pp. 162–164.

24 For Greek secular works translated into Arabic see D. Gutas, *Greek Thought Arabic Culture*, London 1998. One of the earliest literary works to be translated into Arabic was the Indian collection of political fables known as *Kalila wa-Dimna*, which was enormously popular (it is now the subject of a major research project run by Beatrice Gruendler of the Free University of Berlin).

25 Al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, 2.1918–1919.

obscurity to fame or from servitude to high office in a single lifetime. But this seems to have happened on a particularly grand scale and at an accelerated rate in the case of the Muslim Arab Empire.

5. Conclusion

In my opinion this integrative dimension of the Muslim Arab conquests does make them different from the European colonial enterprise. Because the homeland of the Europeans was so far away from their colonies and because fewer Europeans relocated to them, the culture of the Europeans was relatively little affected by that of those they conquered; mostly the influence was one way, with the Europeans inflicting substantial changes upon the indigenous cultures that they ruled. In the Muslim Arab case the influence was two-way, with the conquered population participating in a very substantial way in the new Islamic civilization that emerged in the wake of the Muslim Arab conquests. Indeed, the Arabs soon felt that their culture had been overwhelmed by the conquered, who seemed to supplant them; “the Arabs fell, their strength disappeared and their ranks vanished”, as one complained, for non-Muslim Arabs could be found at every level of Muslim society below that of the caliph himself, who continued to be of the prophet Muhammad’s tribe of Quraysh.²⁶

One aspect of the Muslim Arab conquests that is comparable with that of the European conquests, however, is the havoc that both wrought upon local cultures. In the creation of a new civilization, many elements of the pre-conquest world were lost. Some was deliberate; for example, the Islamic antipathy towards non-Abrahamic religions meant that most of these were in general wiped out, or, as with Zoroastrianism, massively reduced. But much was incidental; a good example here is languages, such as Coptic and North African Latin, which were crushed in the stampede to use Arabic. Whatever way one answers the question about the seventh-century Muslim Arabs as colonists, it is worth bearing in mind that any large-scale imperialist venture will always have casualties.