ARAMCO WORLD
NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1991

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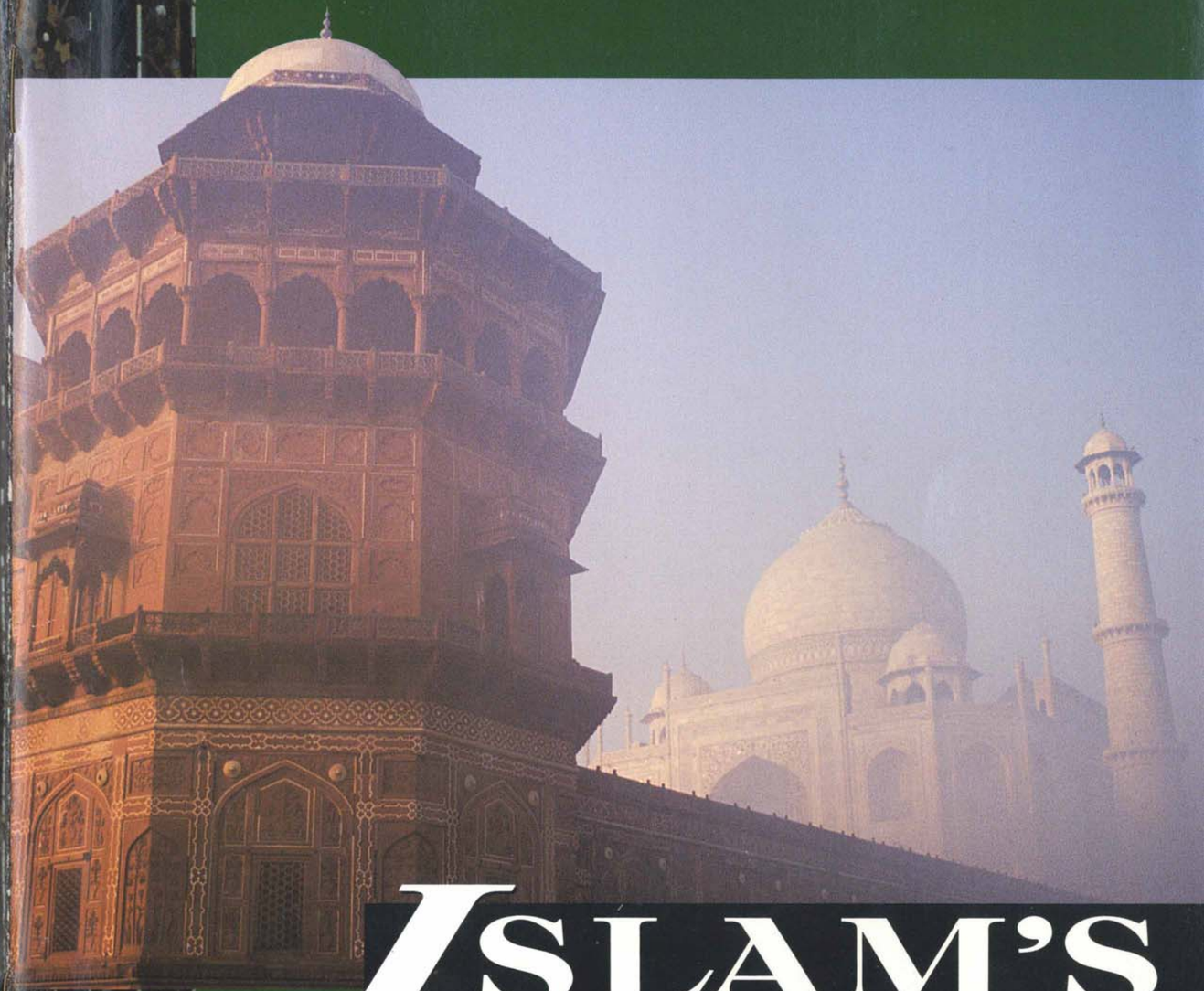

ISLAM'S PATH EAST

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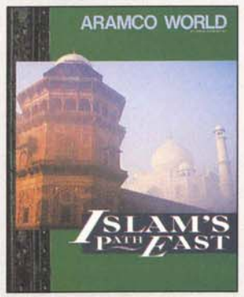

Cover: Morning sun drinks away Yamuna River mists to warm the domes and towers of the Taj Mahal, epitome of the Indo-Islamic architectural style created under the Moghul rulers of India. Blending cultural elements from both Persia and India, the Moghuls created one of history's most artful and sophisticated civilizations. Photograph: Nik Wheeler. Back cover: Tiles adorning Timur's palace at Shahrisabz still hold their luster after 400 years. Photograph: Francesco Venturi.

◀ Chinese Muslims in Quanzhou greet travelers retracing the trade routes that brought Islam.

ARAMCO WORLD

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Aramco World is pleased that this issue, and the travels described in it, have been accepted as an Associated Project of UNESCO's "Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue."

In the thousand years between the fall of Rome and the discovery of the New World, no single event in history was more significant than the rise of Islam. United by the monotheistic religion revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century, the Arabs overthrew the Persian Empire in Iraq and Iran and expelled the Byzantines from Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Egypt.

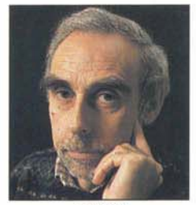
By the year 750 the Islamic realm reached from the Atlantic to the borders of India and China, and the brilliantly intellectual and artistic courts of its Muslim rulers outshone all their rivals'.

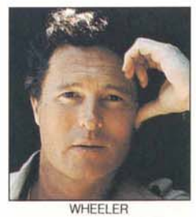
Further conquests by non-Arab Muslims carried Islam across the rest of India, where the Moghuls created one of the most sophisticated civilizations in history, epitomized by the graceful Taj Mahal. Meanwhile Muslim traders and missionaries spread the faith even farther east to Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula and southeast China.

In marathon journeys during 1990 and 1991, *Aramco World* contributing editor John Lawton traced the world-altering eastward path taken 14 centuries ago by the Muslim religion, now the faith of nearly one billion people around the world.

In the company of Saudi Aramco photographer Abdullah Dobais, Lawton's travels began in the land where the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, in what is now Saudi Arabia, and continued into the Sultanate of Oman. With free-lance photographer Bill Lyons of Amman, Lawton also traveled the route of the new revelation north and east into Palestine and Jordan. Then, accompanied by Nik Wheeler, a free-lance photographer based in Los Angeles, Lawton set out along the route east traveled in earlier centuries by the Muslim armies and Arab traders whose most effective unifying force, and most enduring cargo, was Islam.

Traveling by airplane, train and car – and intermittently aboard the Sultan of Oman's yacht *Fulk al-Salamah*, lent to UNESCO to trace ancient trade routes – Lawton and Wheeler crossed Pakistan and India, Malaysia, Indonesia and China, ending their trip in Quanzhou, one of the southern Chinese ports through which Islam entered some 1300 years ago.


LAWTON


WHEELER

Lawton and Wheeler had traveled to China before, writing and reporting for *Aramco World* on Turkic Muslims in 1984, and Lawton had crossed into China from the Soviet Union in 1987 to report on the trans-Asian Silk Roads, also a pathway along which the teachings of Muhammad had made their way east. Drawing on these journeys, as well as on one undertaken with photographer Francesco Venturi in researching their recent book on Samarkand and Bukhara, Lawton has brought together the story of one of world history's seminal events: the spread of the Muslim religion from its birthplace in western Arabia to its farthest eastward expansion.

Other contributors whose knowledge and talents have been vital in creating this issue of *Aramco World* are former Aramco chief photographer S. M. Amin, free-lance artist and illustrator Michael Grimsdale, designer Peter Keenan, and consulting editor Ismail I. Nawwab. – *The Editors*

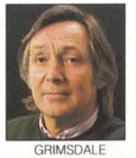

NAWWAB


AMIN

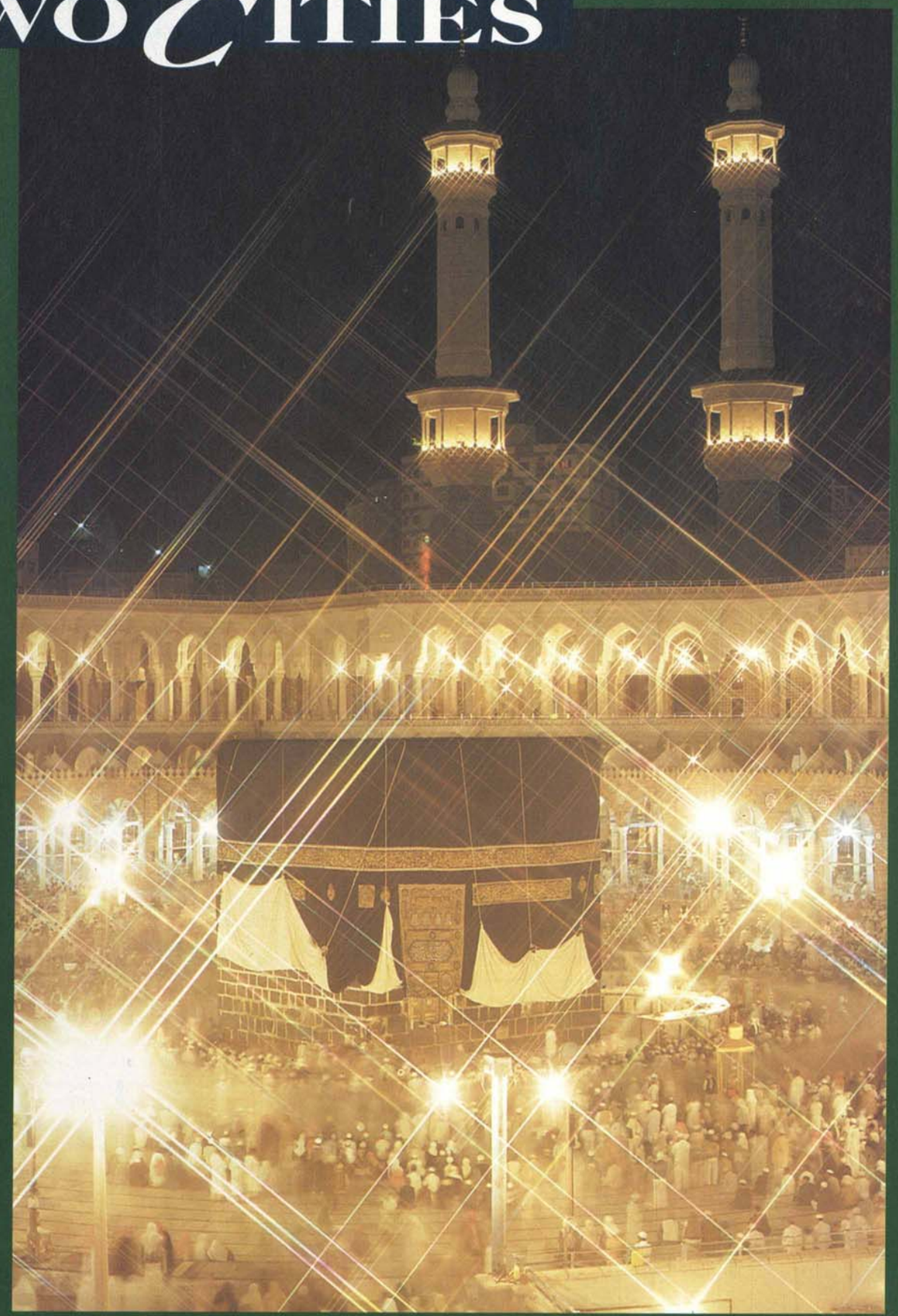

DOBAIS


LYONS


VENTURI


GRIMSDALE

A MAN AND TWO CITIES



It started as a story of a man and two cities.

Incredibly, the experiences of one illiterate inhabitant of "an uncultivable valley" in Arabia, more than 13 centuries ago, shaped the world we live in today. Within the space of one generation, that man introduced changes that affected all facets of the contemporary daily life of one sixth of humanity: its religious, political, cultural, legal, social, economic, literary, scientific, governmental and philosophical being.

The man was the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad son of 'Abd Allah, son of 'Abd al-Muttalib, son of Hashim, who was ordered to insist, "I am but a human being like yourselves" (The Qur'an, 18:110). The seed of the divine message he so painstakingly sowed in the inhospitable soil of his birthplace, Makkah, sprouted vigorously in Madinah during his lifetime and has continued to grow and bear abundant fruit in every corner of the globe, where Islam's multilingual multi-ethnic followers now number about a billion.

The fascinating and, at times, complex story behind the rise and spread of Islam is closely interwoven with the extraordinary life, message and legacy of the Prophet.

O humankind, We have created you Male and female, and made you Races and tribes, that you may know One another. Surely the noblest Among you in the sight of God is The most God-conscious of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware.

The Qur'an, Surah 49 (The Chambers), Verse 13

Muhammad was born in 570 into the Banu Hashim, an illustrious family belonging to the Quraysh, the ruling tribe of Makkah, the most important town of the Hijaz region of western Arabia.

The people of this town were descendants of Abraham through his son Ishmael. According to tradition, Abraham and Ishmael built the Ka'bah together for the worship of the one God; it was also Abraham who first established the pilgrimage to Makkah. In the sixth century, the town was still a religious center, though its citizens had strayed far from the monotheism of the patriarch, and had defiled the sanctuary with idols.

There were other reasons why Makkah was preeminent in Arabia. It had become a very wealthy and prosperous "commercial republic" with growing power and prestige. In the months of peace accompanying the pilgrimage, an annual pan-Arab fair in the area encouraged trade between the nomadic and settled populations. More significantly, Makkah lay on the only secure and economical international route for the transit of goods coming from the Indian Ocean and destined for Gaza, Bostra and Damascus in the Mediterranean region. This world trade involved the exchange of considerable quantities of imported silk, spices, textiles and skins – and, to a lesser extent, frankincense and myrrh – for grain and wine from Byzantine Syria.

Tradition holds that the patriarch Abraham built the Ka'bah and first instituted the pilgrimage to Makkah. Today some two million Muslims make the Pilgrimage each year.

Skilful diplomats and financiers, the Quraysh laid the foundations of the commercial greatness of their native city by taking responsibility for the safe passage of camel caravans from South Arabia through Makkah to the Mediterranean. The two feuding superpowers of the time, Christian Byzantium and Zoroastrian Persia, did their best to establish spheres of influence in Arabia; the Quraysh, concerned that neither empire jeopardize Makkah's prosperity, shrewdly observed a policy of neutrality.

Despite or because of its prosperity, however, Makkah in the sixth century had an ugly side: It was experiencing a progressive breakdown of social bonds, extremes of wealth and poverty, the erosion of moral values, overweening arrogance of the materially successful, oppression of women, slaves and the dispossessed, and a belief that material prosperity was the be-all and end-all of life.

And if social injustice scarred the face of Makkah, paganism disfigured it completely. Most Makkans were polytheists. Judaism, with its concept of a chosen people, existed in a few other Arabian towns, including Yathrib. Christianity had spread among nomadic and settled communities in several regions of Arabia in confusing and contradictory sectarian forms – Orthodox, Monophysite, Nestorian – and some of its adherents held beliefs or followed practices that were, for most people, indistinguishable from polytheism. Only a few Makkans, who had some knowledge of revealed religions, rejected polytheism. Their spiritual needs unsatisfied, these meditative few groped for truth in a vestigial monotheism.

Such was the urban environment into which Muhammad the Prophet was born. His father, 'Abd Allah, died on a trading mission before Muhammad's birth; his mother, Aminah, died when he was six; his grandfather and guardian, 'Abd al-Muttalib, died when he was eight. His uncle Abu Talib, now head of the Banu Hashim, became his protector and took the boy on his trading expeditions to Syria. As a young man, Muhammad also traveled there on business on behalf of the widowed Khadijah, daughter of Khuwaylid. Because of his honesty, she soon married him. He was 25 then, and though she was some 15 years older, their marriage was a happy one that lasted 25 years and brought him children, financial security and moral support. As he grew in maturity and wisdom, the citizens of Makkah, impressed by his character, gave him the sobriquet *al-Amin* – the trustworthy.

Rejecting polytheism, Muhammad began to retreat for solitude and meditation each year to a cave in Mount Hira', which lies within the city limits of modern Makkah. It was there one night in 610, during the month of Ramadan, when he was 40 years old, that he heard an angel command him, "Recite!" He replied, "I cannot recite." The angel then grasped him and squeezed him until Muhammad was exhausted. Twice more, the angel repeated the command; twice more, Muhammad gave the same response; twice more, the angel squeezed him in the same way. Finally, after the third time, Muhammad received the first revelation, the first verses of the Qur'an (96:1-5).

Muhammad repeated these verses after the angel, who disappeared. Trembling and in panic, Muhammad had started to leave the cave when he heard the same voice calling him from above. Muhammad lifted up his head and saw the angel filling the horizon, and heard the angel assure him, "O Muhammad, you are indeed the Messenger of God, and I am Gabriel."

Muhammad was at first distraught by this unexpected

encounter with the divine word, but the support, faith and farsightedness of Khadijah and the continuation of the revelations convinced him that his call was genuine and his responsibilities unique. The revelations continued over a period of 23 years and were collated in a book, the Qur'an – Islam's scripture.

The first people persuaded of the genuineness and rightness of Muhammad's revelations were those closest to him: his wife Khadijah; Abu Bakr, son of Abu Quhafah; his cousin 'Ali, son of Abu Talib; and his freed slave Zayd, son of Harithah. But in 613 Muhammad was commanded by God (26: 214-216) to proclaim Islam's message publicly. More conversions followed, but so did controversy and persecution of the converts – some of them humble folk – by the Quraysh. Yet this did not stop Islam from gaining new adherents.

The message of Islam, revealed to the Prophet and recorded in the Qur'an, is considered by Muslims to be the final, universal and immutable revelation of God, who had already sent a succession of earlier prophets. Muhammad, "the Seal of the Prophets" (33:40), was the last. All had brought teachings of divine unity and right conduct.

Muslims are required by their faith to believe in all the prophets whom God has sent to humankind, including Moses and Jesus (2:136), and to consider their followers to be the recipients of divine grace and guidance through the scriptures revealed to their prophets. The Qur'an has a distinctive name for Jews and Christians: It calls them *Ahl al-Kitab* – People of the Book.

Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created,
Created man from a clot.
Recite: And thy Lord is Most Bounteous,
Who taught by the pen,
Taught man that which he knew not.

Surah 96 (The Clot), Verses 1-5

Say you: "We believe in God, and
In that which has been revealed to us
And revealed to Abraham, Ishmael,
Isaac and Jacob and the [twelve] Tribes,
And that which was given to Moses and Jesus
And to the Prophets, from their Lord; we
Make no difference between any of them, and
To Him we surrender."

Surah 2, (The Cow), Verse 136

Islam insists on its affinity to Judaism and Christianity; it teaches that it is simultaneously a fresh divine message and a reaffirmation in essentials of God's earlier messages in their pristine form. Islam does not agree with Judaism's concept of a chosen people, nor with what it sees as Christianity's forsaking of its original monotheism in favor of the doctrine of the trinity. Nevertheless, the area of agreement between Islam and its two sister faiths is much greater than the area of disagreement. All three Abrahamic religions affirm that God is one and that He alone is worthy of worship. They share a vision of the world based on justice, love, mercy, right conduct and service to God and humanity.

The clarion call of the early Qur'anic revelations was their stress on the oneness of God (112:1-4).

Also emphasized were His creativity, greatness, omniscience, omnipotence and grace, and His resurrection of the dead for judgment (80:18-22).

Other early verses urged social responsibility by criticizing greed and indifference to pain and poverty (89:17-20).

Such teachings went against the grain of the pagan aristocracy of Makkah. They feared that their economy and prestige – dependent to some extent on Makkah being a center of idol-worship – would suffer from the uncompromising monotheism of Islam and its vehement onslaught on their gods and goddesses. They also refused to accept that God would resurrect the dead and judge them according to their deeds. Moreover, the brotherhood of all believers, an essential principle in Islam, was anathema to the Quraysh, who were not willing to allow class barriers to be demolished from which they benefitted.

The Makkans thus escalated their persecution of the growing number of Muslims. The Prophet's life was further clouded during this period by the deaths of his loving wife and his protecting uncle. Soon after, some citizens of Yathrib – which became known as Madinah during the Prophet's time – converted to Islam and Muslims from Makkah began to emigrate there. In 622 the Prophet too emigrated to Yathrib along with Abu Bakr, after learning that his enemies planned to assassinate him.

After the migration, or *hijrah*, the Prophet continued to face many difficulties and threats, external and internal. Under divine guidance, he organized the Muslims as a unified, God-conscious, dynamic community with a system of law and with institutions built on justice and high moral principles. He drew up a charter, the Constitution of Madinah, for the coexistence of the city's hitherto warring factions that guaranteed freedom of religion to the local Jewish community – perhaps the first constitution in history to enshrine this principle. The persecuted prophet of Makkah became, in addition, the successful statesman of Madinah, and later the acknowledged temporal and spiritual leader of all of Arabia.

Many reasons have been adduced for the astonishingly rapid, successful and lasting diffusion of Islam beyond Arabia after Muhammad's death. Some of these reasons depend on a materialistic interpretation of early Muslim history; others propose an ideational explanation. Without entering this controversy, I shall put forward some general considerations relevant to the rapid spread of Islam, which I believe resulted from the interaction of several elements. Obviously, their importance varied according to the times and places involved.

During the early days, the main factors in the expansion of the faith were the predominantly religious motivation of the Muslims, the power conferred by their unity, the crystal-clear simplicity and intelligibility of their creed, the attractiveness of the concept of the brotherhood and equality of all Muslims, the high caliber of their leadership, the societal breakdown and military exhaustion of their adversaries, and the Muslims' generous and tolerant treatment of conquered peoples, which often contrasted with the heavy taxation and religious persecution to which they had been subjected under former rulers.

Some western scholars, such as the Dominican Jacques Jomier, today recognize that it was above all the religious conviction of the Muslims, coupled with the simplicity of their dogma and the fraternity of their adherents, which made Islam so successful. Indeed, though a number of the factors mentioned above existed well before Islam, the pre-Islamic Arabs had been unable to live together peacefully, let alone leave their mark on even immediately neighboring countries. It was only after they became Muslim that they were united into a single community and found a mission: to prepare the ground for the freedom to choose Islam in lands which denied their citizens religious liberty. This was the motive behind the remarkably successful military campaigns of the early Muslims: The Qur'an commanded them (2:193) to fight in defense of their religious freedom.

Say: He is God, One,
God, the Everlasting Refuge,
Who has not begotten, and has not been begotten.
And equal to Him is not anyone.

Surah 112 (Unity), Verses 1-4

From what a thing did He create him [i.e. man]?
From a sperm-drop!
He created him and assigned him power,
Then the way He made easy for him,
Then He made him to die and buried him,
Then when He wills, He raises him.

Surah 80 (He Frowned), Verses 18-22

No indeed! But you honor not the orphan,
And you urge not the feeding of the needy,
And you devour the inheritance greedily,
And you love wealth ardently.

Surah 89 (The Dawn), Verses 17-20

It is important, however, that we do not ascribe the conversion of conquered populations directly to the Muslims' military campaigns. The purpose of the conquests was never to convert people by force, but rather to enable them to freely profess Islam without risk of persecution. The Qur'an (2:156) is categorical on this point: "There is no compulsion in religion." And in his *Islam: A Historical Survey*, H.A.R. Gibb, one of the most renowned Western scholars of Islam, writes, "To the peoples of the conquered territories the Arab supremacy at first signified little more than a change of masters. There was no breach in the continuity of their life and social institutions, no persecutions, no forced conversion." Nor was such force necessary, then or later: Even in the days of its political and military eclipse and in the colonial period in the 18th to 20th centuries, Islam astonished observers by gaining significant numbers of adherents in different parts of the world – sub-Saharan and eastern Africa are examples.

Islam's religious tolerance, another important factor in its rapid and worldwide diffusion, follows naturally from its recognition of the legitimacy of all revealed faiths. In his last years, to give an example recorded by Ibn Ishaq, the earliest biographer of the Prophet, Muhammad received in the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah a Christian delegation from Najran in southwestern Arabia. When it was time for the Christians to pray, the Prophet allowed them to do so in the mosque, facing east as was their custom. Before they left, the Christians entered into a treaty with the Prophet that gave them the full protection of the Muslim state for their persons, properties and churches.

That treaty became the model for the protection of the rights of non-Muslim communities governed by Muslims. Though the model was not followed in every case, historically, the Muslims' record in this area has had no parallel until recent times. Non-Muslims held positions of power and prestige in many Muslim lands and made important contributions to Muslim civilization as well as to their own. Conflicts that did occur were commonly due not to racial or religious considerations but to reasons of state, as in cases of active disloyalty – circumstances in which Muslims too might be harshly dealt with. Islamic history includes no pogroms, no anti-Semitism; on the contrary, several historians, including the magisterial Heinrich Hirsch Graetz, have written almost nostalgically about the golden age of the Jews under Muslim rule in Spain, and many Jews who fled the Spanish Inquisition – which began in 1492, the same year that the last Muslim state fell to the *reconquista* – fled to Muslim lands for safety. Similarly, Muslims ruled India for about 800 years, yet the vast majority of the population was still Hindu when the British displaced the Muslims as the subcontinent's sovereign power.

After this brief introduction, which aims to put the diffusion of Islam into some perspective, we can turn to the stirring events themselves. We can trace the wave of Islam surging in an easterly direction, sweeping over desert and sown, steppe and mountain, plateau and peak, ocean and island, finally to break on the fringes of the Pacific with the course of history changed in its path. And as we do so, we must ask, how did it all start?

It started as a story of a man and two cities.

Ismail Ibrahim Nawwab, a Makkan, has taught at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Malaya. As a member of an international editorial board, he is collaborating on a six-volume series on Islamic civilization; he is also joint editor of the first volume, titled Foundations of Islam.

THE ARAB HEARTLAND

CENTRAL AND SOUTH ASIA

THE FAR EAST

ISLAM'S PATH EAST

Islam's Path East

Aramco World Journeys

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL GRIMSDALE

TURKEY
SYRIA
DAMASCUS
JERUSALEM
AMMAN
JORDAN
PETRA
BAGHDAD
IRAQ
IRAN
MADINAH
MAKKAH
RIYADH
YABRIN
SAUDI ARABIA
SUHAR
MUSCAT
OMAN
YEMEN
ARABIAN GULF
ARABIAN SEA

CENTRAL ASIA
KHIVA
BUKHARA
SAMARKAND
TIAN SHAN
ÜRÜMQI
KASHGAR
XINJIANG
KARAKORUM RANGE
KHYBER PASS
AFGHANISTAN
PAKISTAN
PESHAWAR
HUNZA VALLEY
ISLAMABAD
LAHORE
DELHI
AGRA
JAISALMER
AJMER
KARACHI
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BOMBAY
HYDERABA
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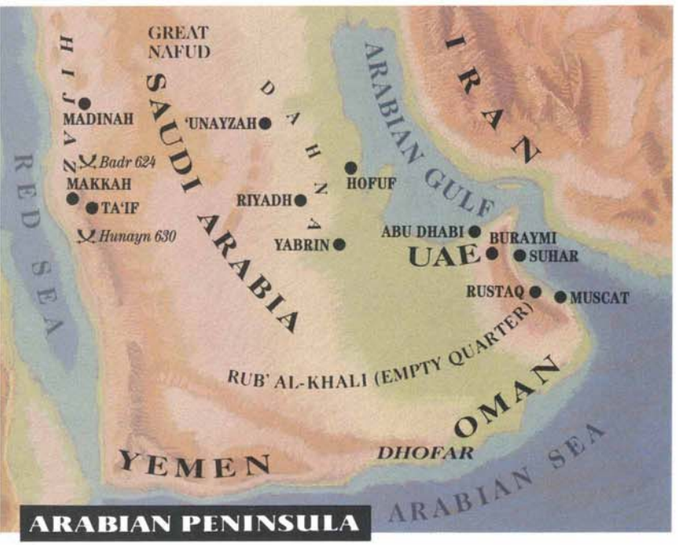
BAY OF BENGAL
SRI LANKA
TRIVANDRUM
COMBO
MALDIVES
INDIAN OCEAN

CHINA
XIAN
QUANZHOU
GUANGZHOU
PHILIPPINES
SOUTH CHINA SEA
BRUNEI
MALAYSIA
BANDA ACEH
KUALA LUMPUR
MALACCA
SUMATRA
BORNEO
SULAWESI
MAKASSAR
INDONESIA
JAKARTA
KUDUS
JAVA
YOGYAKARTA

THE ARAB HEARTLAND

The cluster of familiar white skullcaps stood out conspicuously amid the colorful Chinese costumes on the pier. But the presence of Muslims in the turbulent crowd there to greet us was not as incongruous as it seemed. For we were sailing into Quanzhou after retracing the routes of the Muslim warriors, Muslim missionaries and Muslim merchants of centuries past who had spread the new monotheistic creed of Islam from the Arabian Peninsula as far east as China. So it was fitting at journey's end to be welcomed by some of the descendants of those who had preceded us along Islam's path east.



ARABIAN PENINSULA

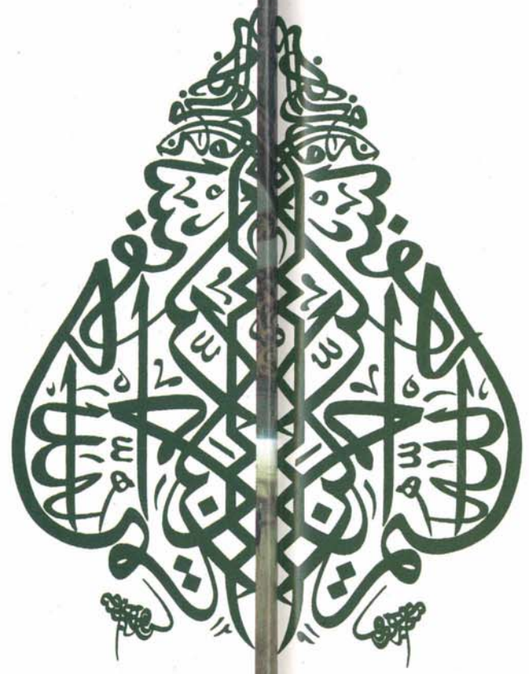
Photographer Nik Wheeler and I had journeyed three months to reach Quanzhou, on China's southeast coast opposite the island of Taiwan: from Islam's Arab heartland across Pakistan and India to the islands of the Maldives and Sri Lanka, then via Malaysia to Indonesia and, finally, on to China. We had sailed the Arabian and South China seas in the wake of ancient Arab traders, and had followed the routes of medieval Muslim armies through the Khyber Pass and across the plains of Punjab. Together with earlier *Aramco World* reporting assignments in the Arab East, the Muslim republics of the Soviet Union, and northwest China – some with Tor Eigeland and other photographers – this totaled some 30,000 kilometers (19,000 miles) traveled along Islam's eastward routes. For although Islam once reached across Spain and into France, before being pushed back at Poitiers in 732, its advances to the west were far outstripped by its advances eastward. And while the Islamic tide ebbed from Spain, the changes it wrought in the East were permanent: Today there are about 500 million Muslims in the broad band of lands running across central and southern Asia from the Red Sea to the Pacific.

The rise of Islam in the East, as a religion and as a military and political power, was meteoric. Within a decade of establishing an Islamic city-state in Madinah, in today's Saudi Arabia, in the mid-620's, the Prophet Muhammad had welded together the divided pagan tribes of Arabia through the unifying force of the monotheistic religion revealed to him. And within a further decade his successors, the caliphs Abu Bakr (632-634) and 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (634-644), had overthrown the Persian Sasanid Empire in Iraq and Iran and expelled the Byzantines from Palestine, Jordan and Syria, effectively pushing aside the two superpowers of the era. Later, the Umayyad (661-750) and Abbasid (750-1258) hereditary caliphs incorporated Sind, Afghanistan and Central Asia into the Islamic realm, while other Muslim conquerors spread Islam to India.

Further east, Islam was propagated by pious Muslim merchants who settled in Sri Lanka, the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia to trade in spices, porcelain and silk. Some even settled as far east as China, and it was members of China's Hui minority – descendants of either Chinese converts to Islam or Chinese intermarriages with Muslim merchants – who welcomed us to Quanzhou.

Ended inclemently by sea – you could not see the bow of the ship from the bridge for fog as we entered Chinese waters – our journey east began by land in the hot, clear deserts of Saudi Arabia, at the gates of Madinah, the adopted home of the Prophet and the first capital of Islam. As a non-Muslim, I could not enter Islam's second-holiest city, where Muhammad lies buried in the Prophet's Mosque with the caliphs Abu Bakr and 'Umar. But a room in a high-rise hotel in the modern suburbs of the city – where, at Quba, stands the very first mosque built in Islam – provided a panoramic view of the city's slender minarets and lofty domes. Even from a distance, Madinah lived up to the epithet *al-Munawwarah* – the radiant – that is usually added to its name: The night before our departure, bright lights illuminated the city's shrines in dazzling white against the background of the black volcanic hills amid which Madinah stands.

Previous spread: The Prophet's Mosque at Madinah, its modest height counterpointed by soaring minarets, encompasses, with its subsequent extensions, the site of Muhammad's death and his tomb.



This modern mirror-image calligraphy reads, "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful" – the phrase that begins every chapter of the Qur'an but one, and every endeavour of a pious Muslim.

Quba, the first mosque of Islam (at right), was originally built by the Prophet Muhammad and his fellow emigrants from Makkah on their arrival in Madinah in 622. That year marks the beginning of both the Muslim era and the Muslim calendar.

At the time of Muhammad's revelations – later all collected in the Qur'an – Madinah was an oasis famed for the dates from its palm groves and notorious for the feuding among the several fissile Arab clans that cultivated them. About 618, after nearly a century of feuding, a great battle broke out involving almost all the clans of the oasis; it resulted in heavy casualties and ended inconclusively.

The clans of Madinah, having heard of Muhammad's inspired religious leadership, sent envoys to the commercial city of Makkah, 330 kilometers (210 miles) south, asking the Prophet to mediate their disputes and, eventually, to settle in their oasis. Faced with increasing opposition in his native Makkah, where the city's powerful merchant families saw his message – submission to the will of the One God – as a threat to their positions as aristocrats of the Arabian Peninsula and to their own local pagan cults, Muhammad accepted the clans' invitation and moved to Madinah, preceded by a small group of persecuted and dispossessed adherents to the new faith.

This emigration is known as the *hijrah* and marks the beginning of the Muslim era; Islamic chronology commences with the first day of the lunar year in which the emigration took place: July 16, 622, in the Gregorian calendar of the West.

In Madinah, Muhammad won more converts. But continuing friction with the Makkans culminated, in March of 624, in Islam's first military confrontation, called the Battle of Badr after what is now a small town southwest of Madinah. Though outnumbered three to one, the 300 Muslims trounced the Makkans in this crucial encounter, killing some 70 of the enemy and capturing about an equal number.

Some Western historians say the victory was a result of the discipline displayed by Muhammad's army, which fought in ranks instead of using traditional hit-and-run tactics, while others suggest that the farmers of Madinah were physically stronger than the townsmen of Makkah. But according to *The Cambridge History of Islam*, "the chief reason for the victory was doubtless the greater confidence of the Muslims as a result of their religious faith."

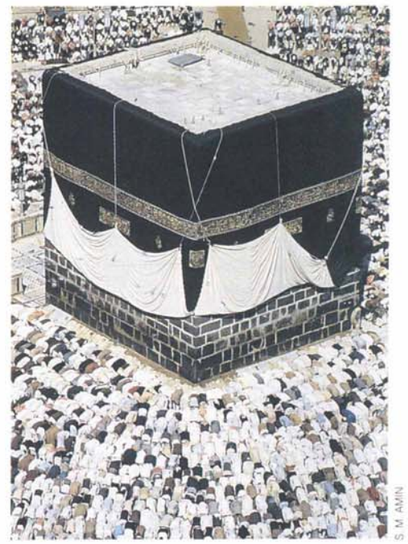
A year later the Makkans struck back. Assembling an army of some 3000 men, including 200 cavalry, they met the Muslims at Uhud, a volcanic ridge outside Madinah. Once again, the Prophet's army, with only 700

The Ka'bah, spiritual center of the Islamic world (right), toward which Muslims turn to pray five times a day, is an ancient stone structure about 17 meters (55 feet) high, roughly cubical in shape. It is customarily washed each year by Saudi Arabia's king. The *kiswah* that covers the Ka'bah, a black cloth on which Qur'anic verses are embroidered in gold, is replaced every year.

The interior of the Prophet's Mosque at Madinah (left) with its *qiblah*, or prayer niche, which indicates the direction of Makkah.

men and no cavalry, was heavily outnumbered. Nevertheless, the superior Muslim infantry was close to victory when a flank attack by the Makkan cavalry forced them to retreat. The Makkans, however, believing the battle won and Muhammad dead – he was in fact only wounded – failed to press home their advantage, and withdrew. And although the Muslims were badly mauled at Uhud – 75 were slain – the Makkans failed in their strategic aim of destroying Muhammad.

In 627, the Makkans, in alliance with several Bedouin tribes, again attacked Madinah – this time with a force said to comprise 7000 to 10,000 men, including 600 cavalry. To counter the threat of the cavalry, the Muslims, who had only 3000 men and no more than a score of horse, dug a deep trench across the northern side of the oasis – whose other sides were protected by ancient lava flows – to force the Makkans into what was, in effect, a siege. This was outside the normal patterns of Arab warfare, and the attackers, and their Jewish allies within Madinah itself, soon became restive. Dissension among them grew, and when the weather became exceptionally cold and a violent wind unleashed torrents of rain, the vast alliance faded away.



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The collapse of the siege was a great victory for the Prophet: The Makkans, despite having committed all their resources to the effort, had again failed to destroy him. Muhammad further strengthened his position by a series of alliances with the Bedouin tribes of the Hijaz, the Red Sea coastal region of Arabia in which Makkah and Madinah are located. At the same time, he won the allegiance of several leading Makkans previously bitterly opposed to him, among them the astute politician 'Amr ibn al-'As and the gifted general Khalid ibn al-Walid, whose cavalry had wrought such havoc on Muhammad's flank at Uhud.

Now, with their help, the Prophet was able to reenter Makkah and, in effect, conquer the city virtually unopposed. On January 11, 630, he returned to his native town in triumph at the head of 10,000 troops who entered the city in four columns, only one of which met with resistance. Muhammad destroyed the idols in the Ka'ba, a focus of pilgrimage since ancient times, and put an end to pagan practices there forever.

Muhammad's treatment of the Makkans was generous, establishing an ideal for future conquests. Addressing the enemy he had just defeated, and at whose hands he had suffered intense persecution, the Prophet asked, "Men of Quraysh, what do you think I am about to do with you?" "Everything good," they answered, "for you are a noble and generous brother, son of a noble and generous brother." The Prophet said, "Rise and go, for you are free." Thus it is not surprising that when a new threat arose – the massing of hostile Bedouin tribes at Hunayn, near Ta'if – some 2000 Makkans marched out with the Muslims to defeat them, making the Prophet the undisputed temporal and religious leader of the Hijaz.

Muhammad at once sent 'Amr to what is today Oman, the second-largest country on the Arabian Peninsula, to invite its Arab rulers to embrace Islam, thus making the port of Suhar Islam's gateway to the Arabian Sea and the starting point of its maritime path east.

It was in 'Amr's footsteps that we began our journey.

I could find no record that precisely described 'Amr's journey from Madinah to Oman, so Saudi Aramco photographer Abdullah Dobais and I took the route which, in 'Amr's time, would have been the most likely: the ancient caravan trail from the mountainous Hijaz across the central plateau of Arabia and the fertile al-Yamamah region to Yabrin, once the most important staging post for caravans across the Rub' al-Khali to Oman. Although this 1200-kilometer (750-mile) journey would have taken 'Amr many weeks by camel, it took us only three days by car, mostly on modern asphalt highways.

Starting from the small plain called Manakhah where caravans to Madinah once camped -- the name derives from *nikh*, the Arabic command to make a camel kneel – we headed east across gravel plains, their monotony broken only occasionally by weirdly weathered rock outcrops and flat-topped acacia trees.

We stopped at the small oases of al-Hanakiyyah, Nuqran and 'Uqlat al-Suqur – now consisting mostly of dilapidated adobe homes and neglected palm groves, abandoned years ago in favor of modern buildings and businesses built beside the nearby highway.

Between al-Hanakiyyah and Nuqran we crossed the path of the Darb Zubaydah, the pilgrims' road built by Zubaydah, wife of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid, in about 740. It connected the holy cities of the Hijaz with southern Iraq via a string of about 50 way stations, which in addition to accommodation for pilgrims, caravan crews and their animals included wells that supplied water for drinking and bathing. Although little now remains of the highway or its facilities, the circular, basalt-built pool at Khurabah – six meters (20 feet) deep, 40 meters (130 feet) in diameter and with 21 steps down into it – has been partially rebuilt.

Continuing across the stony desert, we skirted escarpments which, although not very high, seemed to us like major elevations compared to the featureless adjacent plain. And we crossed fingers of sand reaching out from the Great Nafud desert to our north before finally arriving at the bustling market town of 'Unayzah, on the eastern rim of Arabia's central plateau.

Here too we found the old part of town abandoned in favor of the new and modern, some mud brick walls already collapsing to reveal gaping cross sections of empty homes.

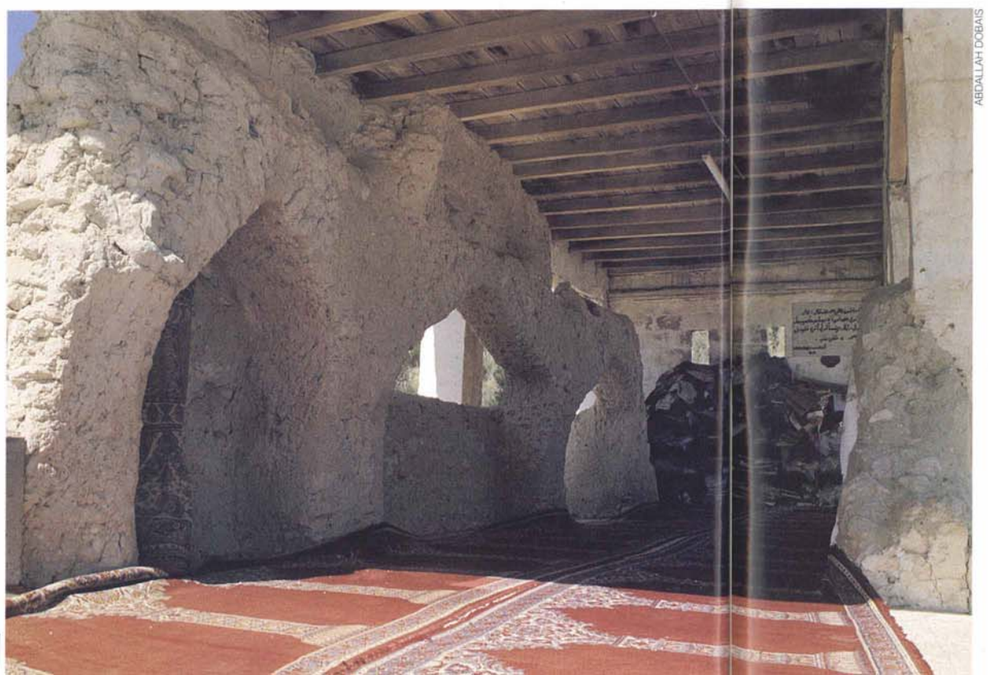
Something similar must have happened to the historically documented but long disappeared "30 palaces and 30 gardens" of Hajr, once the main town of the al-Yamamah region, which was then, as now, the heartland of Arabia. Unable to locate it, we headed for the present center of the region and the country, with its palaces and parks: the modern Saudi capital of Riyadh.

Here we joined what maps call the "Old Yamamah-Baghdad Route" running roughly north-south across Arabia. Fighting against early-morning rush-hour traffic, we left Riyadh's futuristic city center, passed suburban industrial complexes and outlying mechanized farms, and finally emerged among the orange dunes of the Dahna – the great arc of sand sweeping southward from the Great Nafud to the Rub' al-Khali.

On the edge of the Rub' al-Khali, or Empty Quarter, a desert larger than France, or Colorado and New Mexico combined, lies the oasis of Yabrin, once a busy crossroads for the camel caravans that were the livelihood of ancient Arabia and along which the news of Islam flowed 14 centuries ago. From here, two caravan trails led out across the Rub' al-Khali: one – the continuation of the Old Yamamah-Baghdad Route – headed south to the incense-growing region of Dhofar, and the other east to Oman.

Modern traffic, however, gives Yabrin and the roadless Empty Quarter a wide berth, following instead the Arabian Gulf coastal highway from Hofuf through the United Arab Emirates to Oman. As a result, Yabrin today is an isolated backwater, 95 kilometers (56 miles) from an asphalt road along a rutted track; its fort, that once stood sentinel over lucrative trade routes, is a ruin.

The remains of Jawatha Mosque (below), built about 635 and reputedly the oldest mosque in eastern Arabia, are still a cherished site for prayer.



ABDALLAH DOBAIS

Recently restored Rustaq Fort (right) has played key roles in Oman's history: Originally the seat of the pre-Islamic Persian governors, it also served several times as the Muslim sultanate's capital. Today, young Omanis (above) relax in the cool of its great gateway.

We doubled back to Hofuf, the center of Saudi Arabia's largest oasis, al-Hasa, and the site of what is reputedly the oldest mosque in eastern Arabia. Built about 635 by the Bani 'Abd al-Qays tribe at Jawatha, following a visit to Madinah during which their leaders embraced Islam, the original mosque has long since vanished. But several stone arches of undetermined age still stand on the pleasantly-landscaped site – cherished by Muslims, and still used for prayer.

From Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates, the highway to Oman cuts inland, via the oasis of Buraymi, to the mountainous interior of Oman – 'Amr's final destination. For although the Sasanid Persians controlled the coast, they allowed the Arab Azd tribe, from whom the present ruling family of Oman is descended, to exercise considerable autonomy in the interior of the country. In return for controlling the inhabitants of the mountains, they were allowed to collect taxes, and the head of the tribe was given the Sasanid administrative title *julanda*.

When 'Amr arrived in Oman with a letter from Muhammad to Julanda Bin-Mustansir, enjoining him and his subjects to embrace Islam, he found that the head of the Azd was dying. His mission, however, was successful: The julanda's two sons accepted Islam and sent a letter to the pagan Sasanid governor of Rustaq, inviting him to do the same. When he refused, they defeated him in battle. The Azd then besieged the Persian garrison at Suhar, forcing it to surrender and forcing the Persians to leave the country.

Recently restored to their original splendor, the honey-colored fort at Rustaq Oasis and the dazzling-white coastal garrison at Suhar today serve as magnificent reminders of Oman's important role in the spread of Islam – both by land and by sea. From Suhar, legendary home of Sindbad the Sailor and, according to 10th-century geographer al-Istakhri, "the greatest seaport of Islam," Arab sailor-merchants carried word of their new religion as far east as China, while the Azd, under their great general al-Muhallab ibn Abi Safra, took part in the conquest of Khurasan.

Meanwhile, the Prophet Muhammad had sent his son-in-law, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, south to teach the new principles of Islam to the tribes of Yemen – then, as now, the most populous corner of the Arabian Peninsula. A Persian satrapy where Judaism and Christianity were upheld by warring factions against an anarchic background of tribal paganism, Yemen did not seem to be a fertile field for the Muslim message. But surprisingly, conversion was spontaneous: All 14,000 members of the powerful Hamdan tribe are said to have embraced Islam in a single day.

With his authority supreme elsewhere in Arabia, Muhammad now turned his attention to the still-pagan north of the Arabian Peninsula. In October, 630, the Prophet led the greatest of all his expeditions – reportedly comprising 30,000 men and 10,000 horse – against the oasis of Tabuk. Here, without a single military engagement, he concluded treaties with the region's tribes which resulted in the capitulation of all of northwestern Arabia and the establishment of Islam throughout the Peninsula.

This event not only opened the way for Islam's thrust into the Fertile Crescent and beyond, but was also significant for another reason. The treaties signed with the Jewish and Christian populations of Maqna and Aylah, on the Gulf of Aqaba, set the pattern for the later establishment of the *dhimmi* system in the Islamic polity. Dhimmis, or protected peoples, were granted security and the rights to retain their property and profess their religion, on condition that they paid an annual tax. In practice, not even pagans, whose concepts stood in stark conflict with the uncompromisingly monotheistic principles of Islam, were forced to convert.

Thus, when Muhammad died less than two years later in Madinah, the stage was set for the expansion of both the Islamic religion and Arab rule outside the limits of "the island of the Arabs," as the Arabian Peninsula was known.

JORDAN

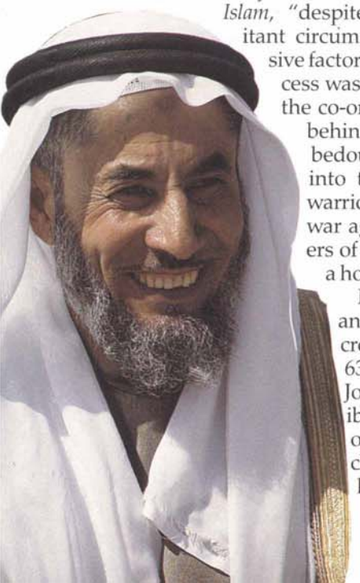
In the great expansive thrust that followed, unsurpassed if not unparalleled in world history, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the forces released by the new religion and the warlike energies of the Arab conquerors.

In *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Albert Hourani explains that "the Arabs who invaded the [Byzantine and Sasanian] empires were not a tribal horde but an organized force.... The use of camel transport gave them an advantage in campaigns fought over wide areas; the prospect of land and wealth created a coalition of interests among them; and the fervour of conviction gave some of them a different kind of strength."

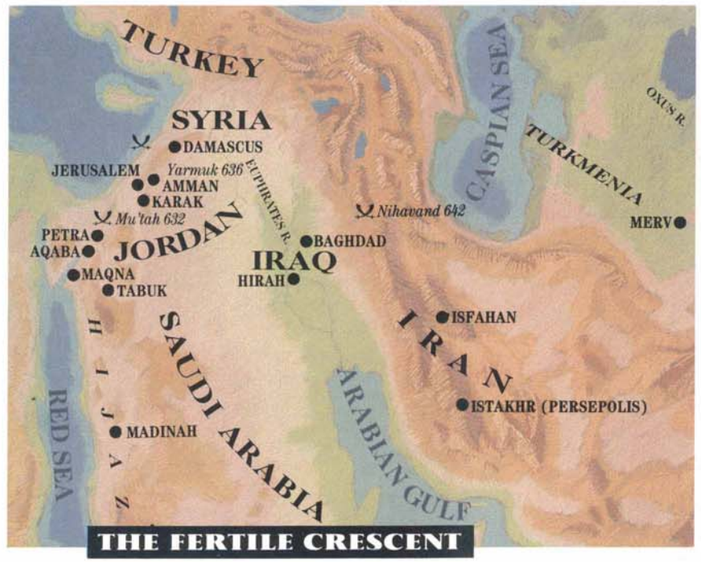
Most Muslim historians, on the other hand, emphasize the primacy of the ideological motive for the expansion of Islam. They point out that the martial tactics and strengths of the Arabs after their conversion to Islam were not significantly different from those they possessed in pre-Islamic times. But once they had become Muslims, their new convictions led to a unification of purpose and a sense of mission, and thus to success in both the religious and military spheres.

However it was motivated, the Muslim advance was facilitated by the fact that the two major powers of the Near East, the Byzantines and the Persian Sasanians, were exhausted by years of constant conflict with each other. They also faced rising resentment among their subject peoples in the Fertile Crescent bordering Arabia – the Holy Land, Greater Syria and Iraq. And many of these peoples were Arabs who, because of their ties of language and customs, not only welcomed the Peninsular Arabs but strengthened their forces with contingents of their own.

"Nevertheless," says *The Cambridge History of Islam*, "despite these concomitant circumstances, the decisive factor in this [Arab] success was Islam, which was the co-ordinating element behind the efforts of the bedouin, and instilled into the hearts of the warriors the belief that a war against the followers of another faith was a holy war...."



Muslim and Byzantine armies first crossed swords in 632 at Mu'tah, in Jordan, when Zayd ibn Harithah, one of Muhammad's closest companions, led 3000 men out of Arabia to avenge the death of a Muslim envoy executed by the Ghassanids, Christian Arabs who were clients of the Byzantines. The battle ended disastrously for the Muslims: Zayd and two other leaders who subsequently took command were all slain, leaving the newly converted Khalid ibn al-Walid to lead the shattered remnants of the Muslim army back home.



THE FERTILE CRESCENT

Today, an impressive modern monument stands on the traditional site of the battle, approximately opposite the Jordanian Military Academy of Mu'tah and beside the remains of an ancient mosque, of which only one arch and the prayer niche are still standing. In the nearby town of Mazar, another impressive modern memorial to the Muslim dead of Mu'tah – four towering stone stelai, each penetrated by a tall, slender arch – stands opposite a twin-minaretted mosque. And in a nearby park is the small, green-domed mausoleum of Zayd.

To reach Mu'tah I had traveled, with *Aramco World*'s Amman-based photographer Bill Lyons, along one of the most historic and scenic roads in the Middle East: The King's Highway linking Aqaba, on the Red Sea, with Amman, the original Philadelphia of 2000 years ago and now the capital of Jordan.

Along this route, in use since 3000 BC, are Petra, rock-carved capital of the Nabatean Arabs; commanding Crusader castles at Karak and Shobak; and a litany of Biblical sites, including Machaerus – present-day Mukawir – where Salome danced and John the Baptist lost his head. Even parts of the road paved by the Romans are still visible in places.

The route is at its most spectacular when it plunges through the gorges of Wadi al-Hasa and Wadi Mujib; the latter, about 3000 meters (almost two miles) wide and 1440 meters (4600 feet) deep, is comparable to the United States' Grand Canyon.

A modern memorial and an ancient mosque (right) mark the site of the battle of Mu'tah in Jordan, where Muslim and Byzantine armies clashed for the first time in 632.

An Arab from Jordan (left), where Muslim and Byzantine armies first crossed swords in 632.

Previous spread: The tile-sheathed shrine of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem – begun in 684 and restored by Süleyman the Magnificent – is built over the rock from which Muhammad is believed to have ascended on his nocturnal journey to heaven. It is the earliest great Muslim building in existence.

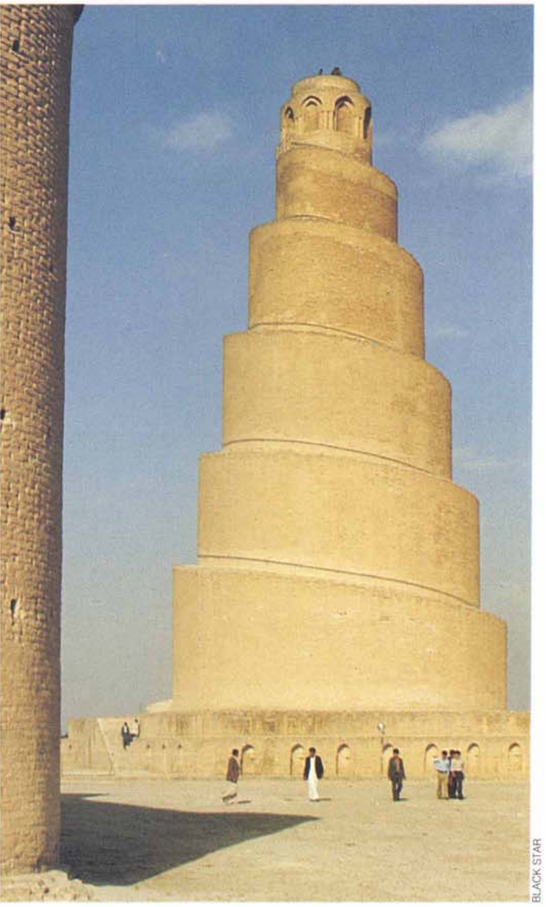
BILL LYONS

SYRIA IRAQ IRAN

We started our journey along the King's Highway at dawn at Petra, walking through the Shiqq, the winding fissure between overhanging cliffs which suddenly opens out into a hidden valley lined with temples, "treasure houses" and tombs carved into the salmon-pink rock by the Nabateans some 2300 years ago.

By mid-morning, we were clambering over the battered battlements of Shobak fortress, built on a mountain of rock by the Crusader Baldwin I, King of Jerusalem, in about 1115 and captured, in 1189, by Salah al-Din, or Saladin. In mid-afternoon we paused for Turkish coffee beneath the glowering walls of Karak Castle, the most important Crusader stronghold in Jordan. And as the sun set we climbed slowly out of Wadi Mujib and headed across rolling highlands to modern Amman.

We had traversed 5000 years of history in the course of a single day.

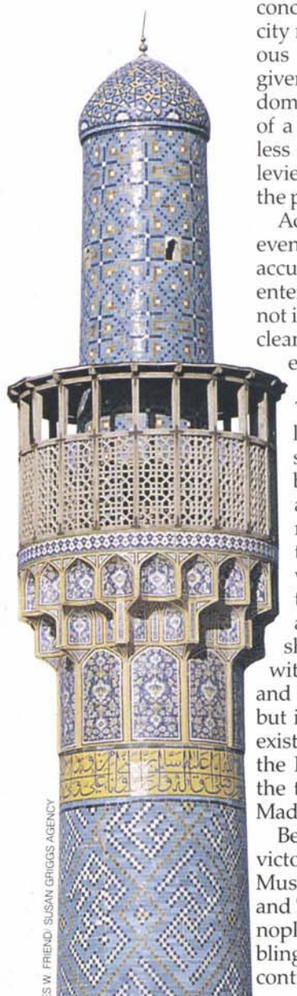


BLACK STAR

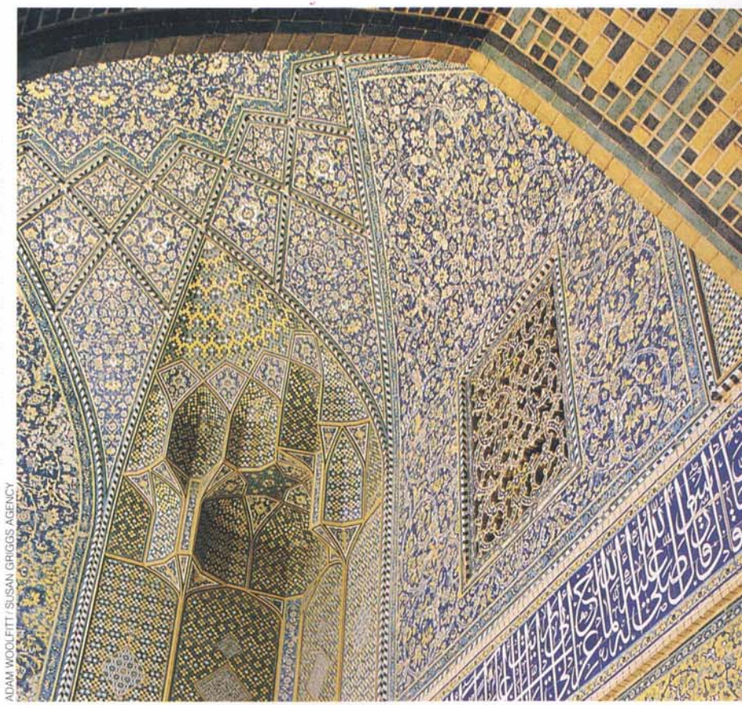
BILL LYONS

Dressed inside (right) and out (below) with blue and turquoise tiles, Masjid-i-Shah at Isfahan, in Iran, is the city's largest and most brilliant mosque. At left, a fragment of a carved, gilt and painted wooden panel from the original Dome of the Rock, now preserved in Jerusalem's Islamic Museum.

The Great Mosque of al-Mutawakkil at Samarra, in central Iraq (left), was begun in 847 and was long the largest mosque ever built. Constructed of fired brick, it is famous for its ramp-encircled spiral minaret.



CHARLES W. FRIEND; SUSAN GRIGGS AGENCY



ADAM WOOLFITT / SUSAN GRIGGS AGENCY

'The next stage of our journey took us from the Jordanian highlands to below sea level, along the 100-kilometer-long (62-mile) Jordan Valley, which lies 200 to 400 meters (656 to 1312 feet) below sea level. Following the Jordan River from the Dead Sea to Lake Tiberias, we turned east along its northernmost tributary, the Yarmuk, present-day frontier between Jordan and Syria.

It was here that the Muslims and Byzantines fought their most crucial battle.

Following Muhammad's death, his successor Abu Bakr launched simultaneous offensives against the Byzantines and the Persians.

Khalid ibn al-Walid, "the Unsheathed Sword of God," led a column of Muslims against the Persians, attacking the capital of southern Iraq, Hirah, which only saved itself from armed occupation by peaceful submission to the Muslim armies and the payment of a tax.

Meanwhile, two columns of Muslims entered Jordan, and another, led by 'Amr ibn al-'As, penetrated southern Palestine. Sergius, the patrician of Palestine, was defeated and his country overrun; only a handful of cities, such as Jerusalem, held out in expectation of reinforcement from the Byzantine emperor Heraclius.

Hearing that Heraclius was equipping a large army, Abu Bakr ordered Khalid to hasten from Iraq to Syria. Khalid led a forced march by a few hundred men across the Syrian desert, appeared almost miraculously to inspire the Muslim troops with fresh courage and, in a series of battles, defeated Heraclius and occupied Damascus in September of 635.

Meanwhile, in Persia, the energetic Shah Yazdegerd III had ascended the throne and raised a large army. 'Umar, who had succeeded Abu Bakr as caliph, sent reinforcements, but the Muslims suffered a severe defeat in 634 known as the Battle of the Bridge – where al-Muthana, valorous chieftain of the Bakr bin Wa'il tribe of northern Arabia, saved the army from annihilation by putting up a heroic stand at a bridge over the Euphrates.

The victory of Buwayb, in 635, restored the Muslims' fortunes, however, and at a decisive battle at Qadisiyyah, in 636, they definitively defeated the Persians and gained complete control of Iraq.

Meanwhile, Heraclius, refusing to admit defeat, had raised a new army and marched south to meet the Muslims in the Yarmuk Valley. This was the scene of a pitched battle in August, 636, when a dust storm – a more severe handicap to the Byzantines than to their desert-bred opponents – helped the Muslims win a critical victory.

With relief now impossible, Jerusalem sued for peace. 'Umar personally concluded a treaty with the city notables on very generous terms: Christians were given protection and freedom of worship on payment of a tax, which was in fact less heavy than the one levied by the Byzantines in the past.

According to Arab historians who describe the event, 'Umar amazed the people of Jerusalem, accustomed as they were to Byzantine splendor, by entering the city that his forces had conquered clad not in magnificent robes but in a coarse mantle. He cleansed and then prayed on a site in the southeastern part of the present Old City that he found abandoned and littered with rubble. This site is thought by some to be the former location of the Herodian Temple that was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. A mosque was built at or near the spot where 'Umar prayed – a modest edifice not to be confused with the magnificent building which stands there today: the Dome of the Rock, *Qubbat al-Sakhrah*, which stands over the naked rock from which the Prophet made his celebrated nocturnal ascent (*mi'raj*) to heaven. Today's building, sheathed in multi-patterned tiles and capped with a gold-leaf dome, was not begun until 684 and was restored by the Ottomans in the 1560's – but it is still the earliest great Muslim building in existence, and it stands in the city which, even in the Prophet's lifetime, Muslims considered to be the third holiest in the world, after Makkah and Madinah.

Besides the surrender of Jerusalem, the Muslim victory at Yarmuk also delivered most of Syria into Muslim hands. But attacks northwestward in 673 and 717 against the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, in modern Turkey, were unsuccessful, enabling the heartlands of the Byzantine Empire to continue in existence until 1453.

The eastward thrust of Islam, however, continued unabated.

After occupying Iraq, the Muslims pursued the Persians across the Iranian plateau and, in 642, in the neighborhood of Nihavand, won what they thereafter called "The Victory of Victories," one which sealed the fate of the Sasanian Empire and established Muslim rule over the Middle East.

Unable to offer any serious resistance after Nihavand, Shah Yazdegerd retreated first to Isfahan and then to Istakhr, the ancient Persepolis, finally taking refuge in Merv, some 230 kilometers (140 miles) southwest of the Oxus River, in the present-day Republic of Turkmenia. Here, in 651, he was assassinated by a local satrap: The Sasanian dynasty was at an end and the Muslims' way to Central Asia lay open.

It was another 60 years, however, before the Muslims turned their attention to the territory across the Oxus, which they called "What Lies Beyond the River."

For the conquests begun under Abu Bakr and continued under 'Umar had increased the Islamic empire enormously in extent – and in administrative complexity. 'Umar allowed local officials in occupied lands to carry on and confined himself to appointing a commander or governor with full powers, responsible directly to Madinah, thus giving the new Muslim polity a certain unity.

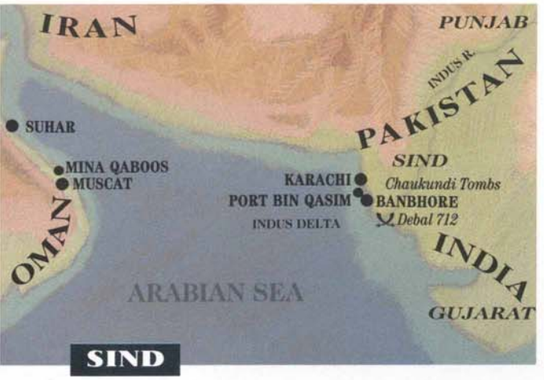
But Arab logistics were stretched and conflicts within the Muslim leadership over the question of succession brought the first phase of Islam's advance eastward to a close.

CENTRAL AND SOUTH ASIA

In the spread of Islam to the East, sea routes were of paramount importance. Riding the monsoon winds across the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, Arab naval expeditions incorporated new lands into the Islamic realm, while Arab traders who settled in ports en route founded Muslim communities, seed crystals for widespread conversion.

It was in the wake of these zealous seafarers that Wheeler and I now set sail from Muscat aboard Oman's royal yacht, the *Fulk al-Salamah*, lent by Sultan Qaboos to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for a voyage retracing the ancient maritime trading routes to Southeast Asia.

The voyage was part of UNESCO's project "Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue," whose main purpose is to draw attention to the importance of ancient trade routes in contacts between nations. And our fellow passengers were geographers, historians, archeologists and maritime experts from around the world who were to present papers on the history of trade, navigation and religion in seminars at ports en route.



SIND

For it was not only merchants and their wares that traveled the Silk Roads, the network of ancient trade routes linking Europe and China. Some of the world's basic technologies, greatest inventions and most universal religions, including Islam, were transmitted vast distances on these land and sea routes.

Setting sail from Muscat's modern container terminal of Mina Qaboos to the incongruous strains of "Scotland the Brave," played by the pipe and drum band of the Omani Royal Naval Squadron, we arrived in Karachi two days later to a more indigenous welcome: Scores of flag-decked wooden fishing boats escorted us up the Indus Estuary to a dockside reception of traditional music and dance performed by men in bright orange turbans at Port Bin Qasim – named after Muhammad ibn al-Qasim, the teenaged Arab general who brought Islam to Pakistan.

After the murder of the third caliph, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, in 656, the election of the Prophet's son-in-law 'Ali ibn Abi Talib was challenged by Mu'awiyah, nephew of 'Uthman and governor of Syria. 'Ali was assassinated and Mu'awiyah rose to power, founding in 661 a hereditary caliphate, the Umayyad Dynasty, which, from its capital at Damascus, ruled the Islamic state for over a century, rekindling the spirit of expansion.

In 711, the Umayyads sent an expedition by sea under 17-year-old Muhammad ibn al-Qasim, to suppress pirates who were preying on Arab shipping in the Indus Delta, while almost simultaneously another Arab general, Qutaybah ibn Muslim, crossed the Oxus River into Central Asia.

Previous spread: Pools on the grounds of Karachi's futuristic Tawbah Mosque reflect its enormous, shallow dome. The Indus Delta region – today Pakistan's province of Sind – was added to the Islamic realm in 711 by teenaged Arab general Muhammad ibn al-Qasim.

The UNESCO flag flies crisply over Oman's royal yacht (above) as it crosses the Arabian Sea to a colorful welcome from Pakistani fishermen (right) in the Indus estuary.

According to the eighth-century account in the *Shah-nama*, Muhammad ibn al-Qasim commanded a force of 15,000 infantry, plus horse and camel cavalry, and was armed with five catapults, the largest of which took 500 men to operate. The garrison at Debal, at the mouth of the Indus River, surrendered – quickly followed by other cities of the lower Indus valley, which is now the Pakistani province of Sind.

Archeologists have identified the ancient remains of a port city at Banbhore, 64 kilometers (40 miles) from Karachi, as the site of Debal, which fell to Muhammad ibn al-Qasim in 712. So Wheeler and I hired a car and set off on what was to be the first of many seemingly suicidal road journeys across the Indian subcontinent in search of Islam's path east.

The most impressive remains at Banbhore are the eighth-century city walls, built of limestone blocks, with semicircular bastions at regular intervals. But, from our viewpoint, the most interesting were those of the mosque, dating from 727 and said to be the earliest on the subcontinent. About 40 meters (130 feet) square and consisting of an open courtyard surrounded by covered cloisters on three sides and a prayer chamber on the fourth, the foundations and floor of the mosque are still clearly visible. So are many of the bases of the 33 pillars which, in three rows, once supported the roof of the prayer chamber.

Today Banbhore stands deserted on the northern shore of the obscure Gharo Creek, centuries of silting and occasional earthquakes having altered the course of the Indus and driven back the sea.

A small museum nearby, however, helps give the visitor some idea of what the port was like in its heyday, and the display of pottery and coins indicates it once traded with Muslim countries to the west, and with territories as far east as China.

While Muhammad ibn al-Qasim was subjecting Sind, Qutaybah ibn Muslim was conquering Central Asia. Crossing the Oxus in 711, he captured the legendary caravan cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, then Sogdian strongholds astride the ancient Silk Roads and now situated in Soviet Uzbekistan.

Legend relates that, on the arrival of Qutaybah's forces outside Samarkand, the Sogdians shouted from the ramparts that the Arabs were wasting their time. "We have found it written," they said, "that our city can only be captured by a man named 'Camel-Saddle.'" Being ignorant of Arabic, they did not know that that was precisely what Qutaybah's name meant.

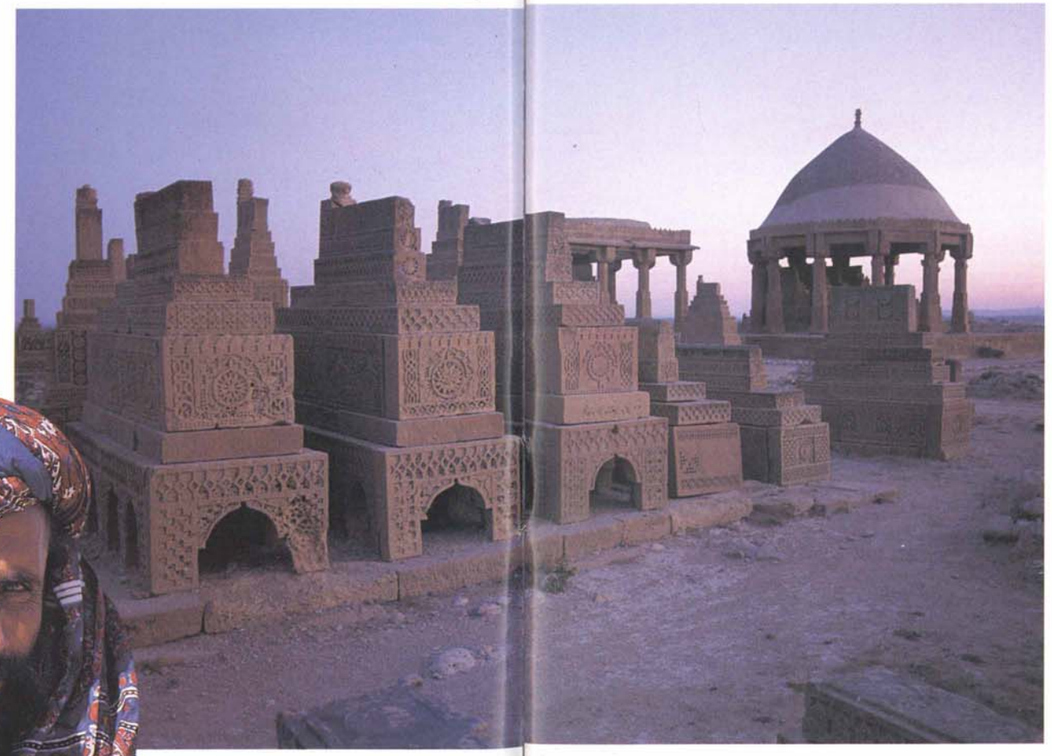
Pushing even further east, Qutaybah occupied the Ferghana Valley and, in 713, marched across the Tian Shan (Heavenly Mountains) which protect China from the West, and took Kashgar.

By the middle of the eighth century, when the Abbasids replaced the Umayyads as rulers of the Islamic empire, most of Central Asia had been incorporated into the Muslim realm, and the second phase of expansion was all but complete.

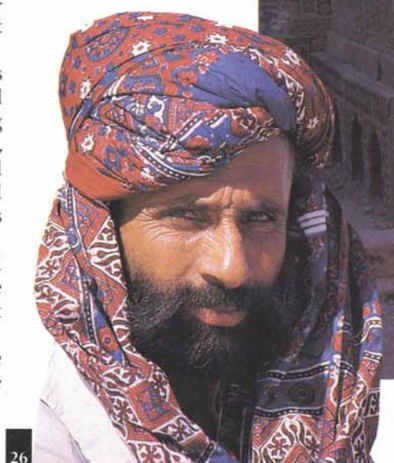
The Muslims' Central Asian conquests, however, had put them on a collision course with China, which was now in a period of vigorous expansion of its own.

The two super-powers met for the first and only time in 751, at Talas near Dzhambul in present-day Soviet Kazakstan, in a battle to determine which of the two civilizations – Muslim or Chinese – would dominate Central Asia.

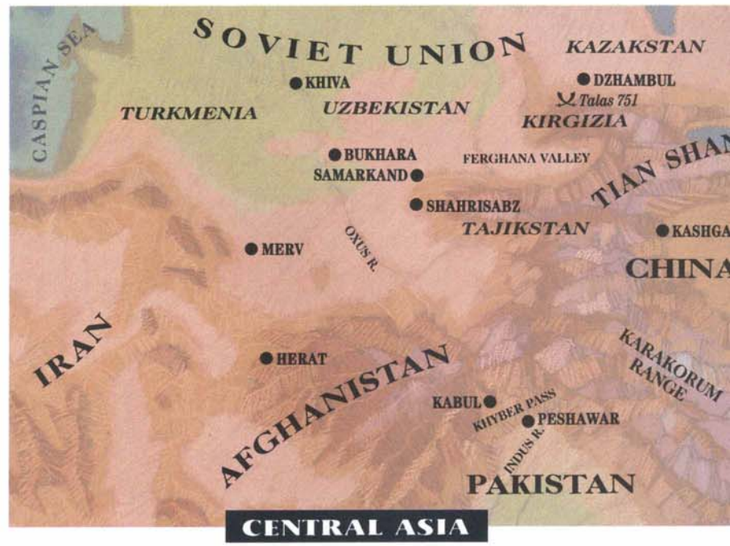
Overleaf: Profusely patterned with floral, geometric and calligraphic designs, the Chaukundi Tombs are among the finest examples of medieval Muslim stone carving on the subcontinent, and particularly beautiful at dawn (below).



Although little remains of what is believed to be the first mosque on the Indian subcontinent, built in 727 at Banbhore (above), the bases of some of the pillars that once supported its prayer hall are still visible



A Pakistani musician (below) in traditional Sindi headwear.



CENTRAL ASIA

The clash at Talas lasted five days, with the two titans attacking, retreating, reforming and attacking again inconclusively, until finally, joined by the mounted bowmen of the Qarluq Turks, the Muslim Arabs won the day.

Chinese chronicles say the Turks treacherously changed sides in the midst of the action, attacking them from the rear; Arab historians claim the Turks had been secretly allied with them all along, and that the attack from behind was part of a carefully pre-arranged battle plan.

Whatever the case, the Chinese army broke and fled, leaving the Mulims to rule Central Asia for the next 200 years, and bestowing upon the region the Muslim religion and the Arabic script, both of which have flourished there almost ever since.

The battle of Talas was not only a political and military landmark; it had important technological consequences, too. Chinese prisoners captured at Talas and taken to Samarkand taught the Arabs how to make paper – a process the Arabs in turn transmitted to the West.

In 763, the Abbasids founded Baghdad on the banks of the Tigris as the new center of the Muslim empire, ushering in what is known in the West as the "golden age" of Islam, because of its cultural and especially scholarly achievements. This was the era of the *Bayt al-Hikmah*, the House of Wisdom, an early version of today's think-tanks, from which came translations of Greek mathematical and scientific papers, breakthroughs in geometry and, eventually, discoveries in everything from medicine to hydrology, most of which knowledge was eventually transmitted to the West.

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A circular city with four gates, Baghdad was intended to express by its physical form the unity of Islam. This unity, however, did not last. With the seizure of temporal power by the Buwayhids in Baghdad in 936, the Abbasid caliphs were largely restricted to their religious functions. Rival caliphates were established in Cairo and Cordoba, Spain, and the Islamic world fragmented into local dynastic entities whose acknowledgement of Abbasid suzerainty was often only nominal.

But although it lost its original political unity, the Muslim world retained a great degree of cultural unity – largely through faith, but also, in some measure, through the Arabic language, which by the ninth century had become the language of international scholarship and was developing a distinctive and well-elaborated literature of its own.

Translations from Greek, including Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen and Ptolemy, were accelerated, and important new works in Arabic in mathematics, science and the humanities were produced. A plethora of astronomical tables and geographic route books appeared, and the first version of *The Thousand and One Nights*, a vivid though largely fictional description of the Baghdad court in the reign of Harun al-Rashid, was compiled.

Among the foremost Muslim thinkers were the geographer and historian al-Mas'udi; the annalist and exegete al-Tabari; the physician Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna), whose works are still studied in medical circles; and al-Biruni, who searched into every branch of human knowledge, anticipating the principles of modern geology, investigating the relative speeds of sound and light, and – 600 years before Galileo – discussing the possibility the earth rotated on its own axis.

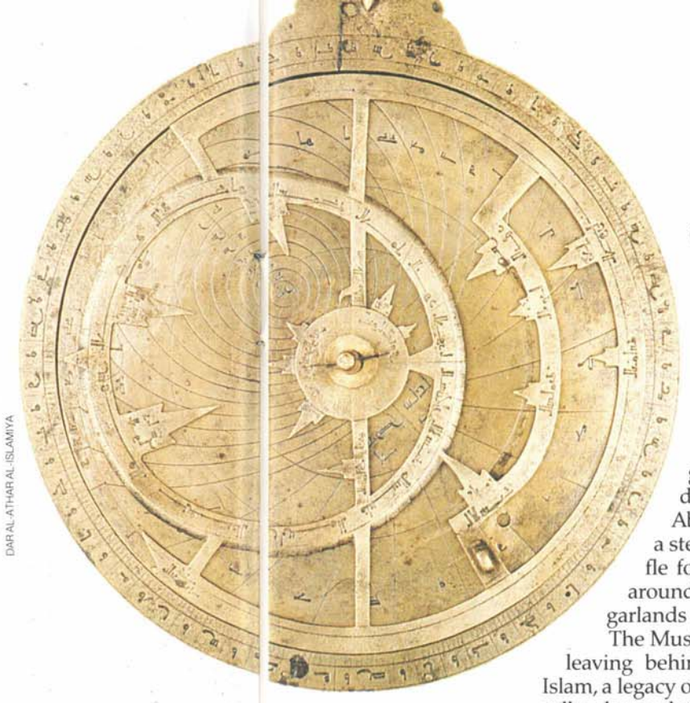
This Muslim cultural progress, expressed chiefly in Arabic, far outstripped all contemporary rivals, while the brilliantly intellectual and cosmopolitan courts of the Islamic rulers outshone those of all their non-Muslim rivals.

Also, although the Islamic state declined as a religious entity, Islam itself continued to expand as a religious force – partly as result of conquests by non-Arab Muslims, and partly because of missionary activity by Arab traders and preachers.

Islam was, from the outset, a proselytizing but tolerant religion. The Prophet Muhammad himself respected Judaism and Christianity, whose prophets from Abraham to Jesus he regarded as his precursors, and under the Umayyad caliphs Jews and Christians were left alone to practice their own beliefs. With some rare exceptions, Muslims adhered to the principles of religious tolerance – witness, for example, the large non-Muslim communities found today in areas such as India where Muslims ruled for several centuries.

Soon after Muhammad ibn al-Qasim's conquest of Sind, Muslim preachers and *sufis* traveled to the subcontinent to invite the local Hindu population to Islam. The first sufis – the word is derived from *safa*, meaning purity – were wandering ascetics who preached love, peace and brotherhood. Many were scholars or poets who attracted large followings to their gentle view of Islam.

Islam abhors worship of any but God, admits no intermediaries between the individual Muslim and God, and militates against the veneration of saints in any form – yet the places where certain revered sufis lived and died nonetheless became centers of visitation, and today still attract thousands of sincere, if religiously ignorant, believers. They hope that prayer at these sites will be answered by God with the granting of some favor, such as health, fertility or success.



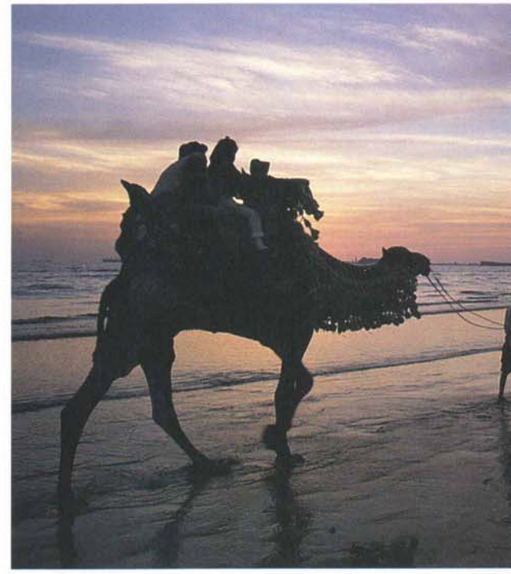
DAR AL-ATHAR AL-ISLAMIYA

A bronze astrolabe (above) made in the Abbasid realm in 927, during a great Islamic cultural efflorescence that saw much classical Greek scholarship translated, preserved and advanced. At left, an Arabic manuscript shows a proof of the Pythagorean theorem.

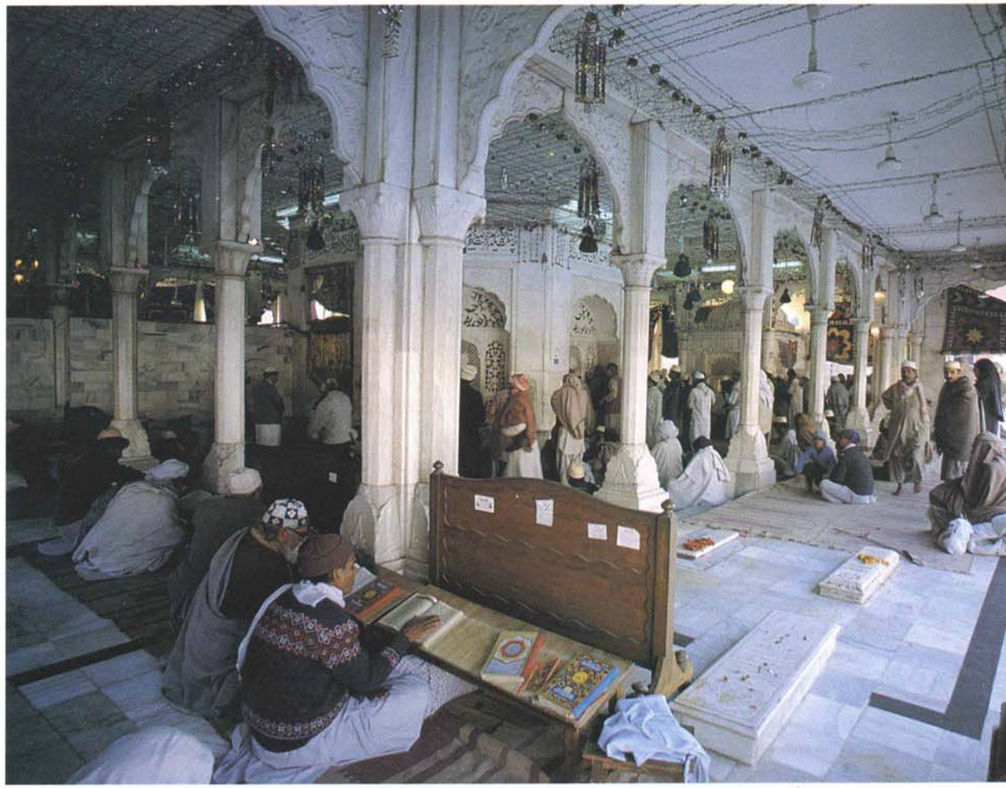
The tomb of Abdullah Shah Ghazi, a ninth-century sufi who claimed direct descent from the Prophet and is thought of by his followers as something like the "patron saint" of Karachi, is typical of such sites all over Pakistan.

Perched on a hilltop overlooking Karachi's popular Clifton Beach, its tall square chamber and green-and-white striped dome decorated with flags and bunting, Abdullah Shah Ghazi's tomb attracts a steady stream of devotees who shuffle forward to caress the silver railing around the burial place and drape it with garlands of flowers.

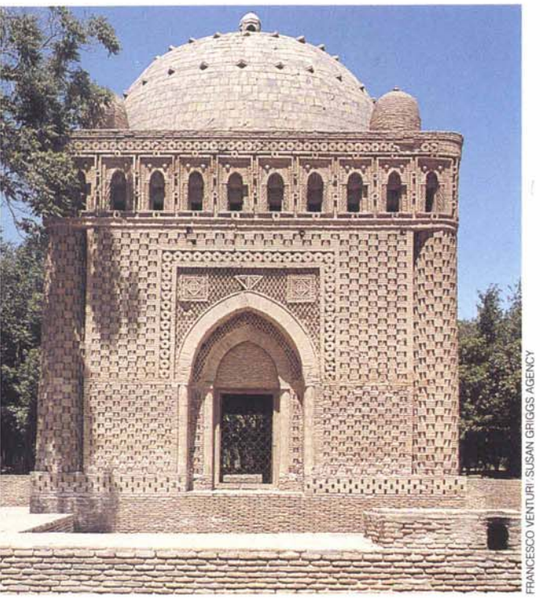
The Muslims ruled Sind for over 150 years, leaving behind, through the introduction of Islam, a legacy of equity and fraternity which radically changed the lives of the local population, riven by the caste system imposed earlier by the Brahmanical Hindu elite.



A family takes a camel ride at dusk (right) along Karachi's popular Clifton Beach.



The tomb in Lahore of Data Ganu Bakhsh (right), one of the many *sufis* who brought Islam to Asia by peaceful means.



FRANCESCO VENTURI/ SUSAN GRIGGS AGENCY

The remarkable decorative brickwork of the 10th-century Tomb of the Samanids at Bukhara (left) may have been derived from carved-wood techniques used in the region's early mosques.

The first independent Muslim state in Central Asia, that of the Samanids, emerged in the ninth century. Its capital was at Bukhara, which under Samanid rule become the showplace of Central Asia, and, thanks to its strategic position astride the Silk Roads, became one of great commercial and cultural centers of the Muslim world.

The Samanid state stretched from Herat in Afghanistan to Isfahan in Iran; the court languages were Arabic, Persian and Turkish; and, at a time when manuscripts were "published" only by tedious hand-copying, it had several privately-owned libraries that were open to the public.

Although all trace of these libraries is now obliterated, one outstanding relic of the Samanid reign remains: the dynasty's 10th-century tomb of decorative brickwork. Small and strikingly simple – a cubical building with inset corner columns supporting a squat dome – the mausoleum is regarded as one of the finest examples of early medieval architecture. By layingthe mud bricks with which it was built at different angles, 10th-century craftsmen covered the building with intricate geometric patterns, and established architectural conventions – including that of a dome set on a wedge-shaped drum – which were followed in Central Asia for five centuries.

Buried for hundreds of years, the tomb of the Samanids was rediscovered in 1930 during landscaping of the Kirov Park of Rest and Culture, and was restored using bricks made of clay bound with egg yoke and camel's milk, to match the originals.

Islam's Central Asian domain fluctuated violently, alternately extended by conquest and conversion or contracted by nomadic invasion, as the riches of the Silk Roads brought wave after wave of Turkic and Mongol invaders from the Eurasian steppes to the plains of Central Asia, where each encountered and eventually adopted Islam.

In the course of their drive for empire, the Mongols came into contact with three religions and their associated cultures – Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. Their attitude toward all three was ambivalent; they professed an ancestral shamanism of their own, embodied in the *yasa*, or law, of Genghis Khan, but felt the powerful attraction of the new creeds, which seemed invariably to be associated with higher cultures.

Islam at first seemed unfavorably placed. Baghdad was captured and sacked by the Mongols and the Abbasid Caliphate, which had lasted five centuries, was extinguished in 1258. But the Islamic faith slowly established its ascendancy over the conquerors and a powerful revival began. The Golden Horde of the Volga, and the Il-Khan Mongols in Persia, became Muslim, followed somewhat later by the Chaghatai Khans of Central Asia.

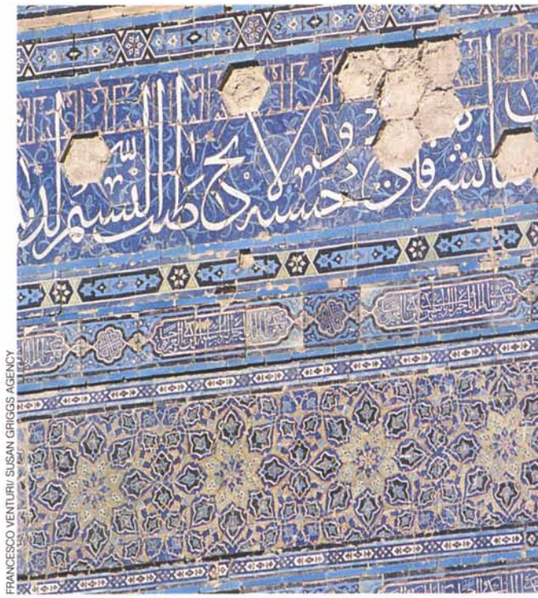
Although they stubbornly preserved many strong traditions of their pre-Islamic past, most of the Turkic peoples embraced Islam during the 11th and 12th centuries. Indeed, the Turks of Central Asia came to be among the faith's main champions.

Under the banner of Islam, the Seljuq Turks swept west into Asia Minor, which makes up most of today's Turkey, where, in 1453, their successors, the Ottomans, conquered Constantinople and finally extinguished Islam's old adversary, Byzantium. Successive waves of other Central Asian Turks poured southeast through the Khyber Pass and across the Indus and Ganges plains, making Islam the dominant religion of Pakistan and northern India.

The first of these Turkic invaders were the Ghaznavids, who, in 1008, defeated a confederacy of Hindu rulers at Peshawar, annexed the Punjab, and extended Muslim influence as far south as Lahore.

Even after five centuries, the tile work (right) adorning the ruins of Timur's palace at Shahrisabz has retained its beauty.

The ribbed dome of Bibi Khanum Mosque (below) at Samarkand is a monument to the 15th-century flowering of Islam in Central Asia under the Timurid Turks.



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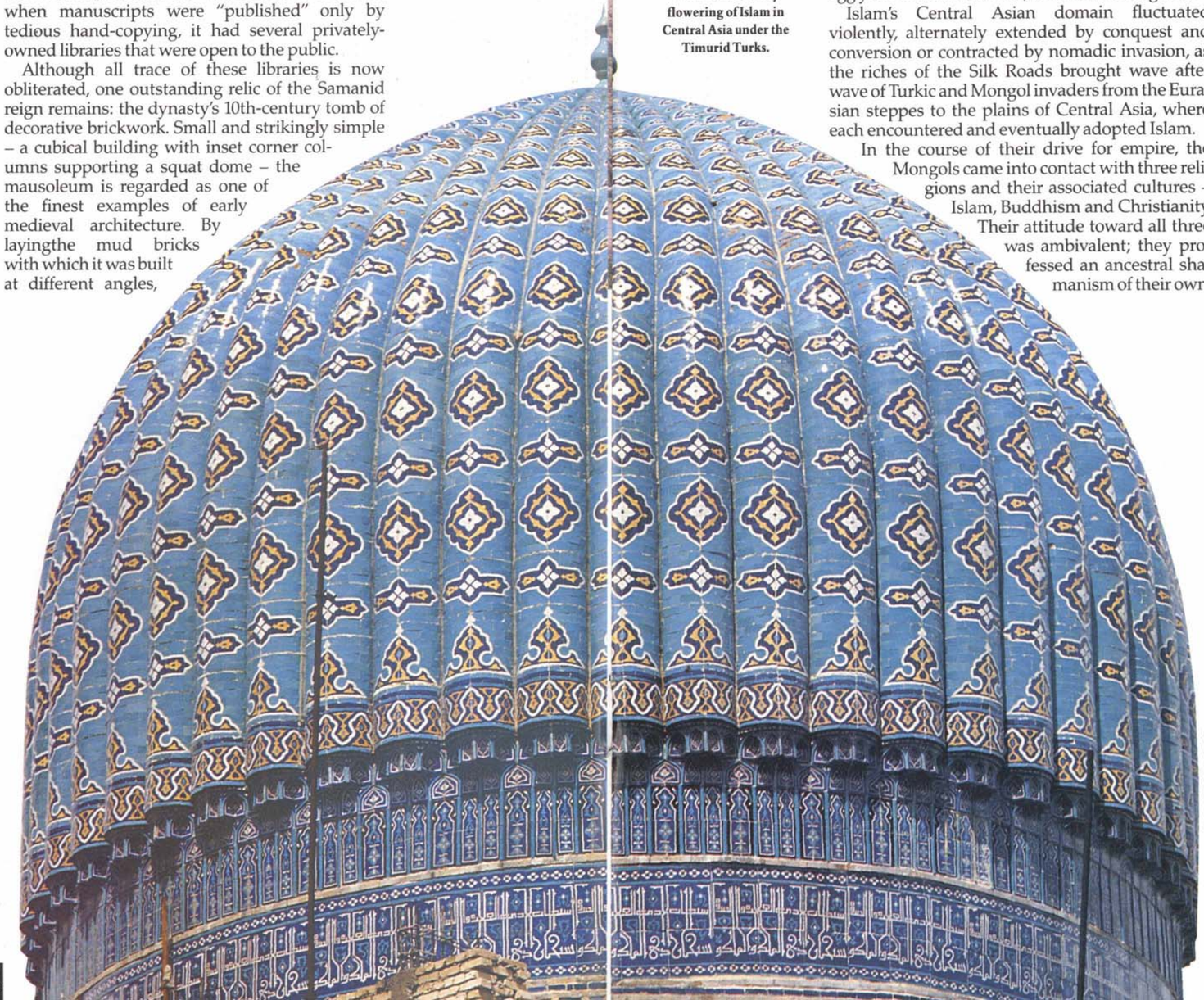

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Similarly, although the Arabs stayed in Central Asia for only two centuries, they left an indelible imprint on the region south of the Aral Sea. During the eighth and ninth centuries the teachings of the Prophet rapidly superseded other religions, and Islamic tradition and practice took firm root. By the 10th century, Buddhism, Manicheism and Zoroastrianism had virtually ceased to exist in Central Asia, and Islam had become the predominant religion of the vast region.

Even today, despite decades of religious repression under Communist rule in the Soviet Union, six Central Asian republics – Azerbaijan, Kazakstan, Kirgizia, Tajikstan, Turkmenia and Uzbekistan – are still consciously Muslim. In fact, following Islam's path east with photographer Francesco Venturi across the Soviet Union's Muslim republics, I found the Islamic faith not only surviving but – under Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost'* (openness) – gradually reviving. In Samarkand, for instance, there were 23 functioning mosques compared with only three that had existed two years before, while in Bukhara the Mir-i-Arab Madrasa, or religious college, had been granted permission to more than double its number of students.

Politically too the Muslim republics of the USSR, like other subject nationalities of the Soviet Union, are seeking to regain control of their own destiny, first demanding sovereignty, then declaring their independence from Moscow – as five of the six have done as of this writing. They are this harking back to an era that began over 1000 years ago.

Then came the Ghurid conquests which, by the end of the 11th century, had expanded Muslim rule over most of northern India, adding Delhi and Ajmer to the Islamic realm in 1192, and two years later Bihar and Bengal.

In 1206 Qutb al-Din Aybak became the first Sultan of Delhi, founding an Islamic state which gradually brought the greater part of the south Asian subcontinent under its sway, and making the city one of the jewels of Islam.

The Delhi sultanate expanded and contracted greatly, depending on the strength and abilities of its ruling dynasty. In 1297 the Khaljid Dynasty pushed its borders southeast into Gujarat and, in 1310, conquered Madura – extending the boundaries of the sultanate to the subcontinent's southeastern coast. The Tughluq Dynasty continued to rule almost all of India until revolts in 1339 cost them Bengal and the south, and struggles between nobles and princes further weakened the sultanate.

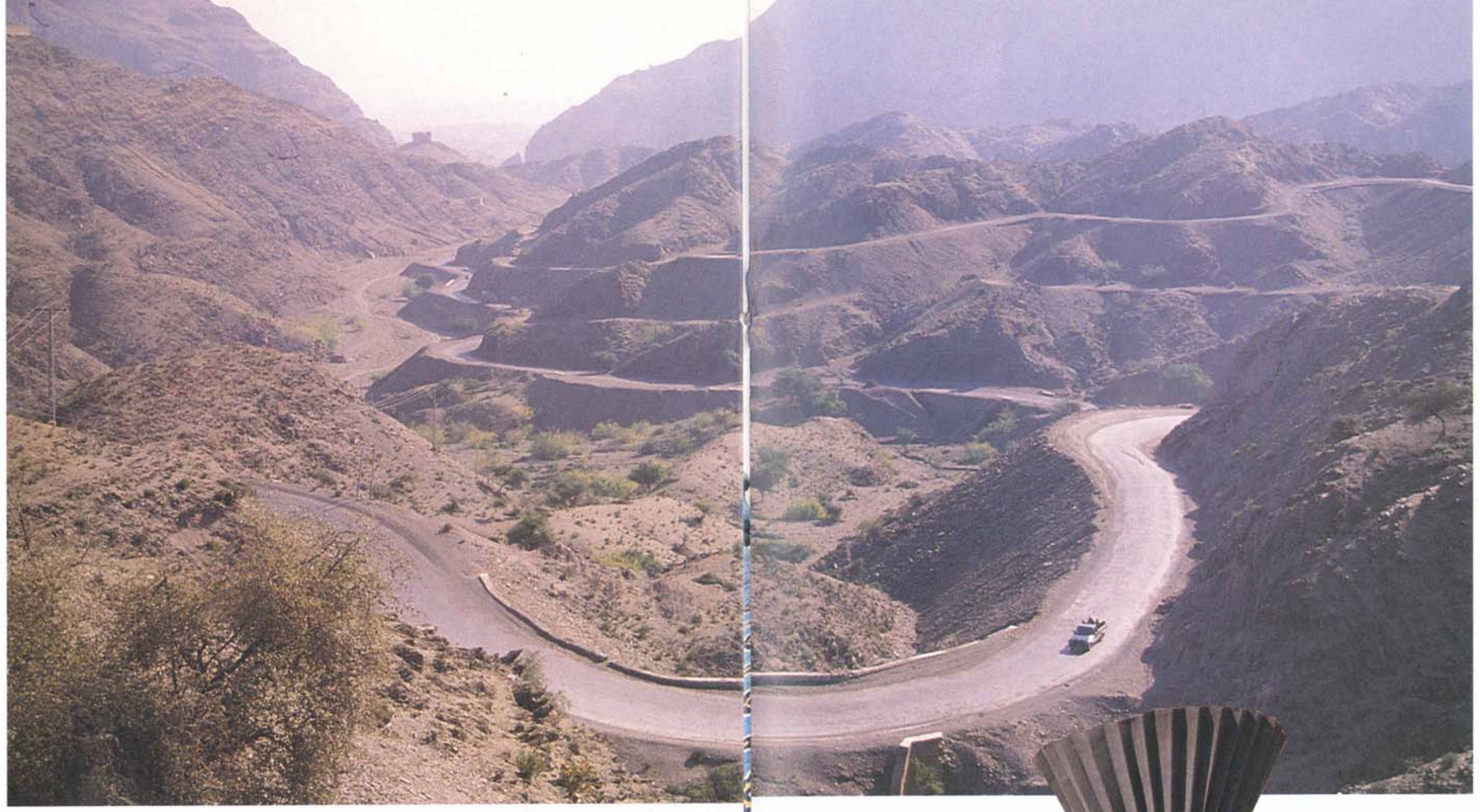
Fate did not stay its hand for long. In 1398 the famous Muslim warrior Timur the Lame (Tamerlane) stormed through the Khyber Pass, devastated Sind and Punjab and sacked Delhi. Timur did not try to maintain control of these vanquished lands – his empire already stretched from the Great Wall of China to the Black Sea – but returned instead to his capital, Samarkand. There, with the loot from his Indian conquests, and using 95 Indian elephants to drag materials into place, he built Central Asia's most magnificent mosque.

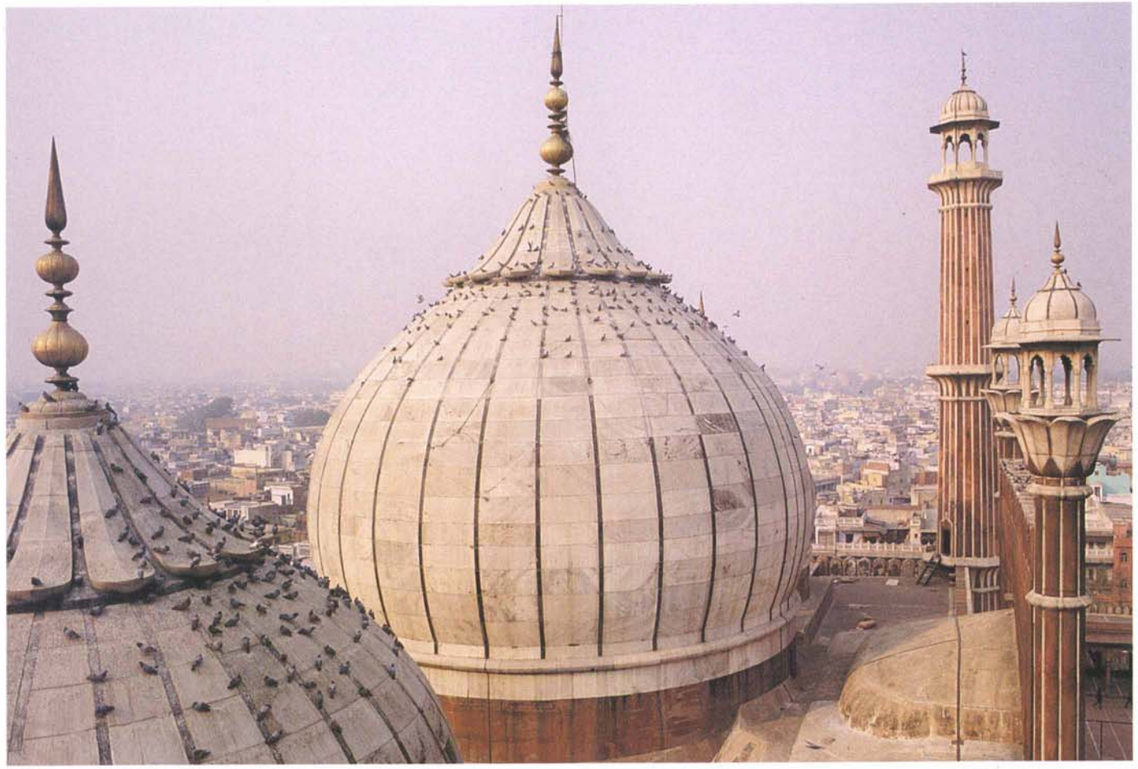
The enormous star-spangled portal and colossal blue dome of Timur's tile-covered mosque – named after his favorite wife, Bibi Khanum – prompted one chronicler to write, "Its dome would have been unique had it not been for the heavens, and unique would have been its portal had it not been for the Milky Way." And although time and history have been merciless – an avaricious Uzbek amir melted down its metal gates to make coins, and a Russian cannon shell shattered its enameled dome – the mosque's gauntly beautiful ruins still dominate Samarkand's skyline, and are slowly being restored.

From Samarkand, Venturi and I had followed the route of the Muslim armies south to the Afghan border, where, at Shahrisabz, near Timur's birthplace, stand the ruins of the crippled king's White Palace. All that remains are two giant fragments of what was the largest man-made arch of its time: 50 meters (165 feet) high, with a span of 22 meters (74 feet). But even in decay, the tiles adorning the ruined palace portal are a tribute to 15th-century ceramists. Their luster has outlived the empires of Timur's Central Asian successors, the Uzbeks and the czars, and even though, when we were there, Lenin struck a defiant pose in bronze in the adjacent square, it has now managed to outlive Communism too.

It was impossible then to cross Afghanistan because of the civil war there, but several months later, having circumnavigated that country, Wheeler and I reached the Khyber Pass, throughout history Central Asia's main gateway to the subcontinent, and again picked up Islam's path east.

A young soldier with an aging rifle, who was fortunately not called upon to protect us from the Kalashnikov-carrying Pathans who control the semi-autonomous Tribal Areas of northwest Pakistan, escorted us through the Khyber Pass, which in places narrows to as little as 16 meters (52 feet). From the headquarters of the colorful Khyber Rifles, near the head of the pass, the road first snakes through craggy canyons beneath armor-plated watchtowers manned by Pakistan's Frontier Force. It then descends in wide sweeps, past fortified Pathan compounds with high mud brick walls, menacing gun turrets and massive iron gates, to the Punjab plain below. Meter for meter, this is possibly the world's most heavily defended stretch of road.



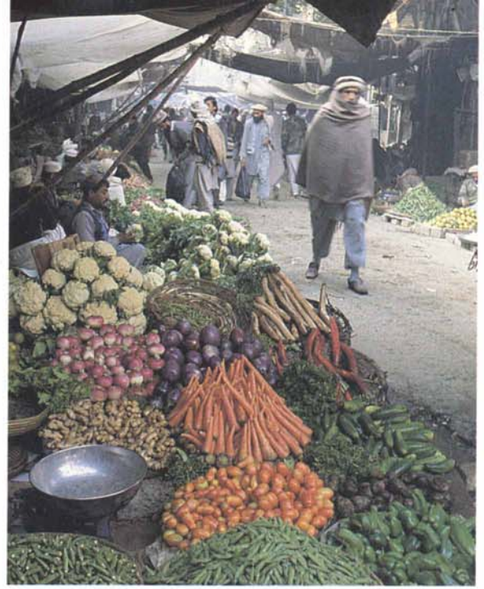


Medieval Muslim armies marched through the Khyber Pass (above), preparing the way for the spread of Islam to Pakistan and northern India. The pass is defended today by troops of the legendary Khyber Rifles (right).

India's largest mosque, Jami' Masjid (left), towers above the crowded streets of Delhi, Muslim capital of India between the 12th and 19th centuries. The modern capital, 20th-century New Delhi, is open and spacious.

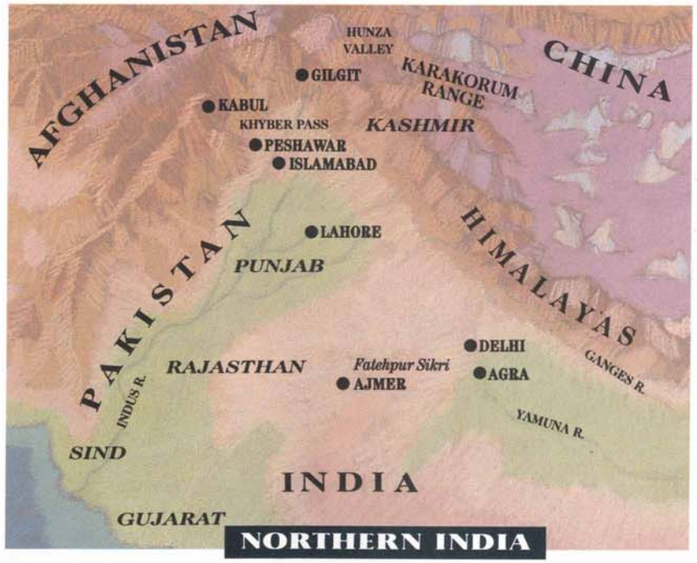
Previous spread: Emperor Aurangzeb's Badshahi Mosque, with its simple lines and pleasing proportions, is an example of the best of Moghul architecture.

PAKISTAN



Pathan mountain men in rolled felt caps and woollen shawls shop for produce from the Punjab plains (left) in the Peshawar bazaar.

A sign near the foot of the Khyber Pass proclaims, "Anybody who was ever anybody passed this way." Among the "anybodies" was Rudyard Kipling, who wrote, "The snowbound trade of the north comes down / to the market square of Peshawar town." It still does. And although, when we arrived, Peshawar's market square, Chowk Yadgar, was being torn up to build an underground parking garage, Peshawar's bazaars are still among the most exotic in Asia. Here, from shoe-box-sized shops, carts and stalls squeezed into a maze of alleys, all manner of merchandise is bought and sold – from elaborately constructed bouquets of bank notes for newly-weds to bullet-studded bandoliers and Stinger missiles. Now, as always, Peshawar is very much a frontier town, where turbaned Punjabi farmers from the plains rub shoulders with Pathans from the hills in rolled felt caps.



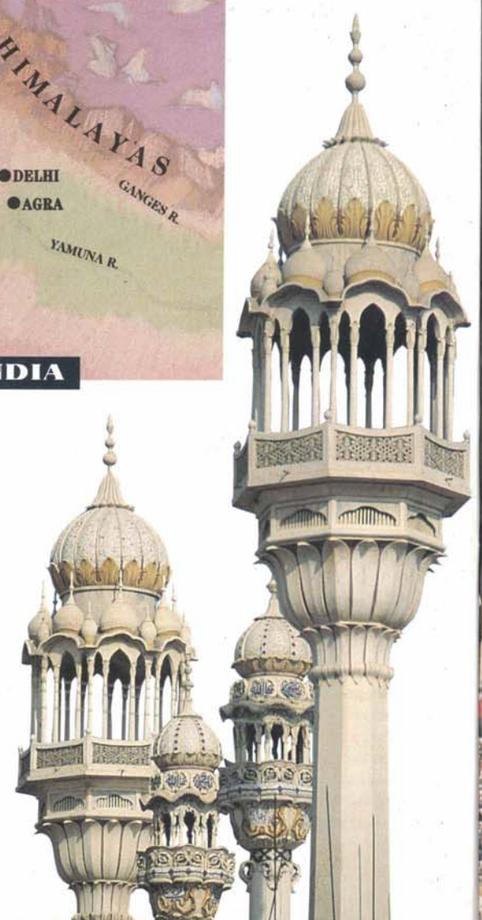
NORTHERN INDIA

Traffic on the Great Trunk Road south to Rawalpindi and Lahore cannot be said to be organized, but the trucks and buses that bore down on us three abreast were colorful, covered as they were from bumper to bumper with paintings of Muslim shrines, landscapes and wildlife, intricate patterns and portraits of film stars and politicians.

Leaving the traffic and its unique art at Pakistan's purpose-built capital, Islamabad, Wheeler and I skimmed by propeller plane over a sea of snowy peaks, stretching range after range as far as the eye could see, to Gilgit, near Pakistan's border with China. We then jeeped into the lovely Hunza Valley, set amid the gleaming glaciers of the Karakorum Range.

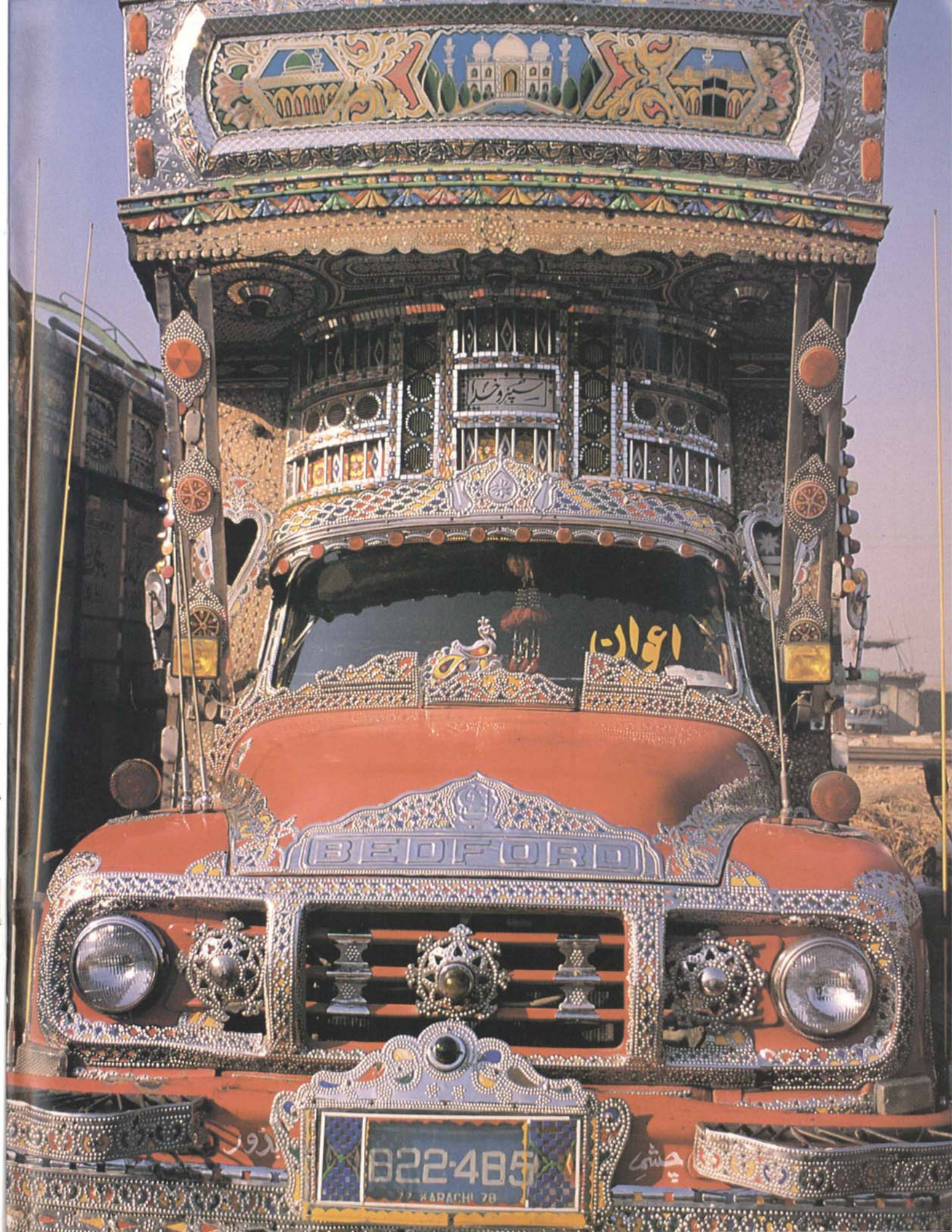
Said to be the model for James Hilton's fictional Shangri-La, Hunza has no written history – mostly songs and tales of brave battles and great polo matches. Polo, in fact, originated in the region and was brought to the West by the British, who also played their own "great game" – espionage – with the Russians in these mountains.

How Islam reached here is not well documented, but it was probably Hunza's economic and strategic value astride the Silk Road from China to India which led to Pathan invasions in the eighth, ninth and 13th centuries before their Muslim forces finally captured the valley and made it possibly the world's highest outpost of Islam.

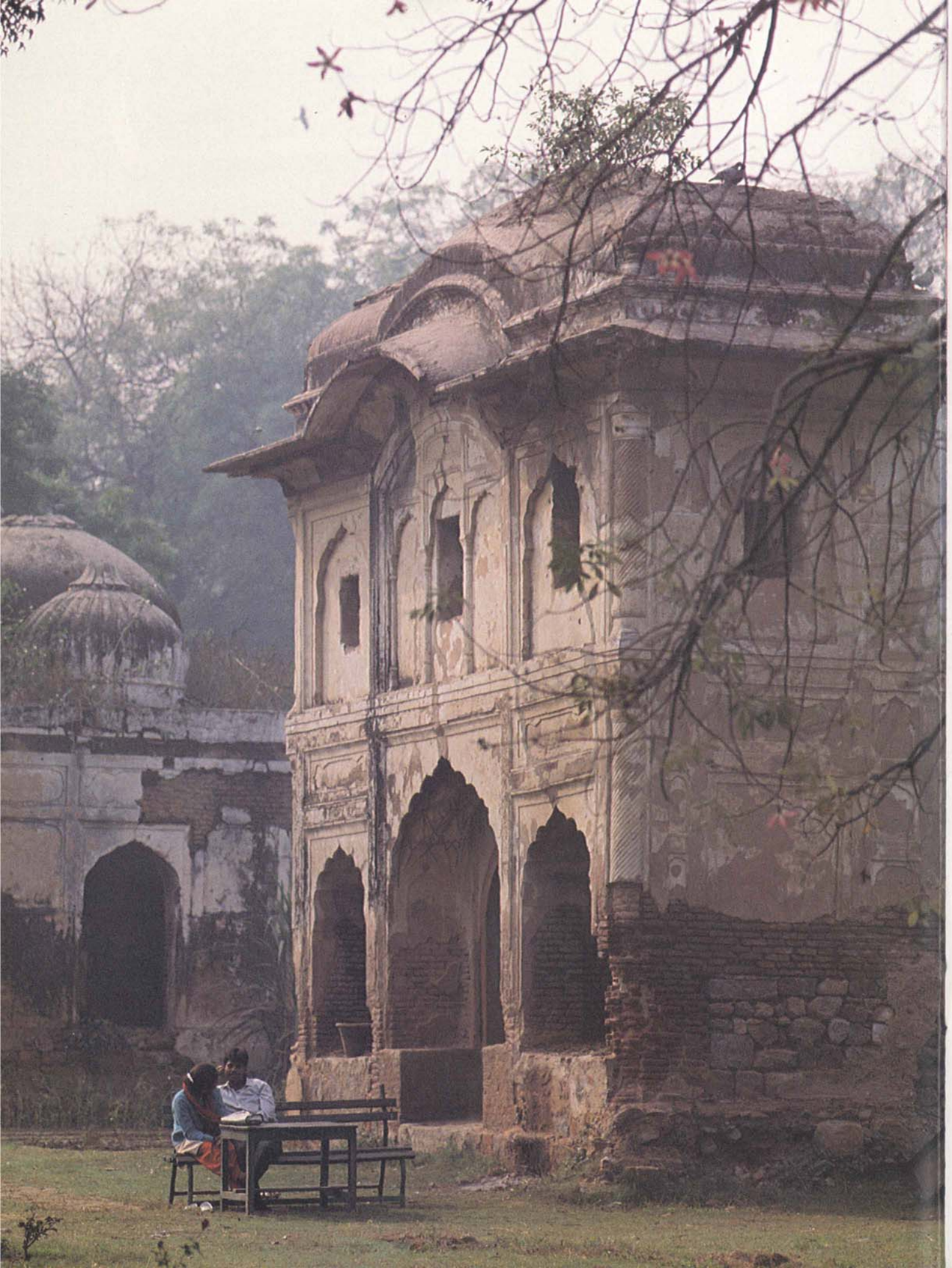


Previous spread: Emperor Aurangzeb's Badshahi Mosque, with its simple lines and pleasing proportions, is an example of the best of Moghul architecture.

The minarets (below) of Akhora Khattah mosque, on the Great Trunk Road between Peshawar and Islamabad, exemplify the Indo-Islamic style.



A gaudy goliath of the Great Trunk Road (right) features, among other decorations, a painting of the Ka'bah at Makkah above the driver's cab.



Delhi's green lungs, the Lodi Gardens (left) are landscaped around the tombs of the Lodi Dynasty, which ruled Muslim India from the warrior-king Timur's incursion, in 1398, until the invasion of his grandson Babur, founder of the Moghul Empire, in 1526.

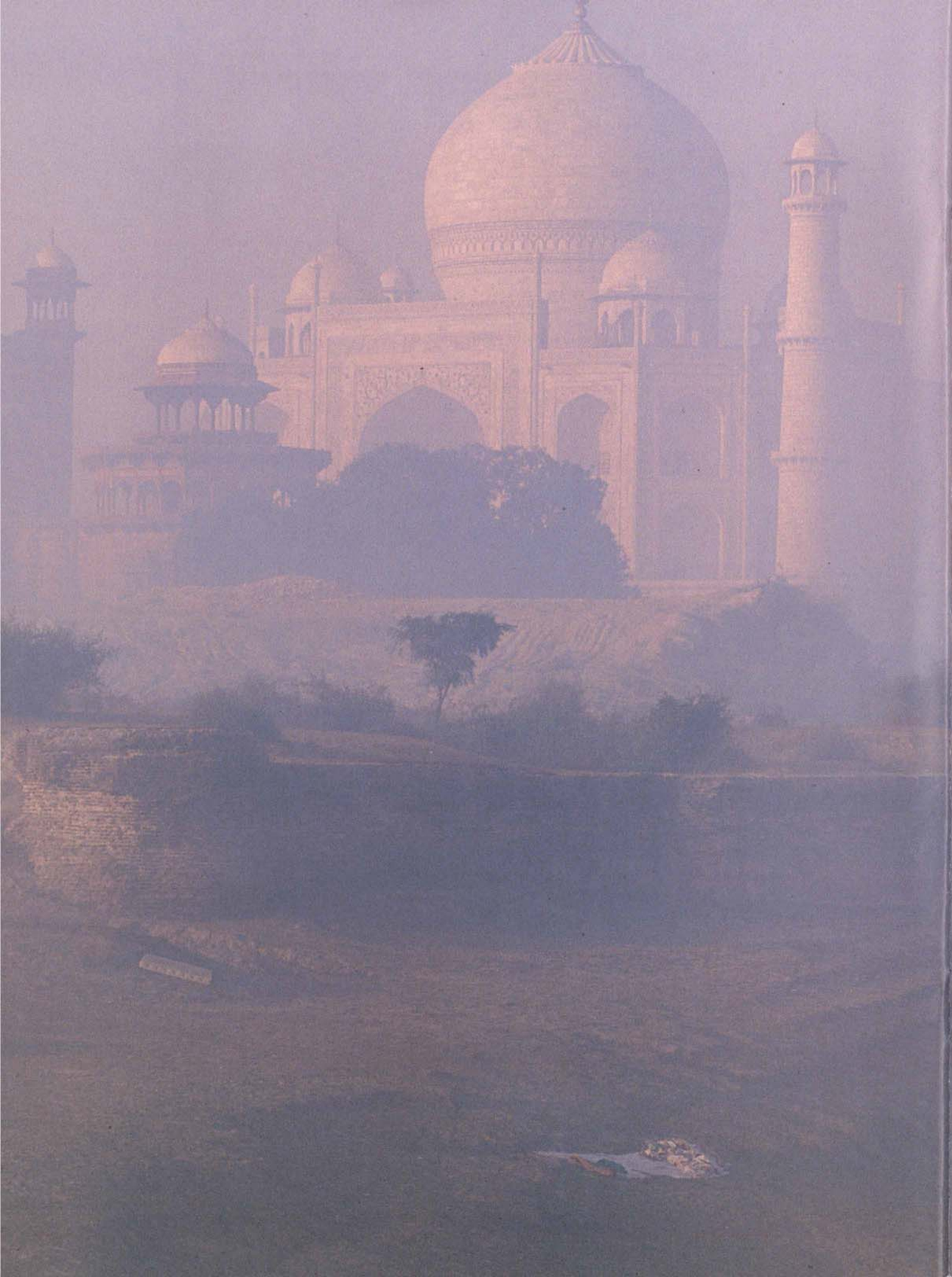
Dating from the onset of Muslim rule in India in 1193, the massive Qutb minaret (right) and the Quwwat al-Islam, or Might of Islam, mosque (inset) are symbols both of Muslim victory and of the fruitful interaction of Islamic and Hindu architectural styles.

It was also the Pathans who, in 1313, introduced Islam to Kashmir, in the neighboring Himalayan range, although it was not until the late 14th century that the Delhi Sultan Sikander – commonly called But-shikan, or idol-breaker – made it a predominantly Muslim state. And it was the Pathans too, who restored order to Muslim India after Timur withdrew, leaving it in anarchy. The Pathan Lodi Dynasty ruled from Delhi until 1526.

It was at this stage that Babur, founder of India's most celebrated Muslim dynasty, the Moghuls, marched through the Khyber Pass. A descendant of Timur on his father's side and of Genghis Khan on his mother's, and a self-described "itinerant emperor," Babur became ruler of the Central Asian principality of Ferghana at age 11, and conquered Samarkand at 14. He then lost both and went off to Afghanistan, where he seized Kabul. Finally he invaded India, defeating Ibrahim Lodi, the last Sultan of Delhi, and established his own capital there.

Employing Hindu artisans, the early sultans had built mosques, palaces and elaborate mausoleums in Delhi, best evidenced by the Quwwat al-Islam mosque and the large, domed Lodi tombs. The earliest extant mosque in India, the Quwwat al-Islam stands at the foot of the mighty Qutb minaret, started by Qutb al-Din Aybak in 1193, after he defeated the last Hindu kingdom of Delhi, and completed by his successors. The mosque's rectangular courtyard is enclosed by cloisters lined with carved stone columns, and although a massive screen of five lofty arches gives the front of the prayer hall an Islamic flavor, the carved calligraphic inscriptions betray the hands of Hindu craftsmen in their naturalistic, curving lines.

Under the sultans of Delhi, Muslims and Hindus had deeply influenced each other's way of life: Turkic and Pathan dynasties adopted Indian-style dress, while Hindu intellectuals were introduced to Persian literature. Nonetheless, it was interaction between India and Islam under the Moghuls which produced the most creative encounter between the two cultures. By blending elements from Persia and India, the Moghuls created one of the most sophisticated civilizations in history, and fashioned a new, distinctive Indo-Islamic architectural style epitomized by the Taj Mahal.

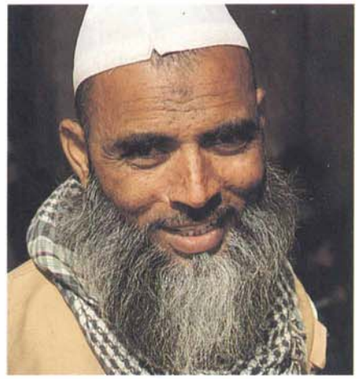


Babur's son Humayun was more of an intellectual than a statesman. He spent most of his life in exile in Persia and, shortly after regaining the Delhi throne in 1536, died in a fall down his library stairs. He did, however, introduce the art of miniature painting into the Moghul court, where it reached an excellence which has rarely been surpassed.

The real establishment of Moghul rule over India was the achievement of Babur's grandson Akbar, called "the Great." His empire stretched from Afghanistan to central India, and from Sind to Kashmir. Akbar built Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra, as his capital, but, despite the splendor of the imperial city, abandoned it after 14 years – some say because of lack of water, others because of troubles in the north. Akbar did, in fact, move north to Lahore, now in Pakistan, where he built the solid sandstone citadel of Lahore Fort.

Akbar's pleasure-loving son Jehangir built a beautiful palace within the fort's walls, and his extravagant grandson Shah Jahan added the famed Naulakha Pavilion, made of marble studded with semi-precious stones. Aurangzeb, the last and most pious of the great Moghul rulers, built the massive Alamgiri Gate and, opposite it, the enormous Badshahi Mosque, large enough for a congregation of 66,000.

Moghul art and architecture reached its height in the 17th century under Jehangir, who laid out the Shalimar Gardens in Kashmir, and later under Shah Jahan, during whose reign (1627-1658) some of the most vivid reminders of Moghul glory were constructed, including the Red Fort at Delhi and, at Agra, the Taj Mahal. Indeed, some say that it was Shah Jahan's passion for building that led to his downfall and that his son, Aurangzeb, deposed his father in part to put a halt to his architectural extravagances, which were bankrupting the empire.

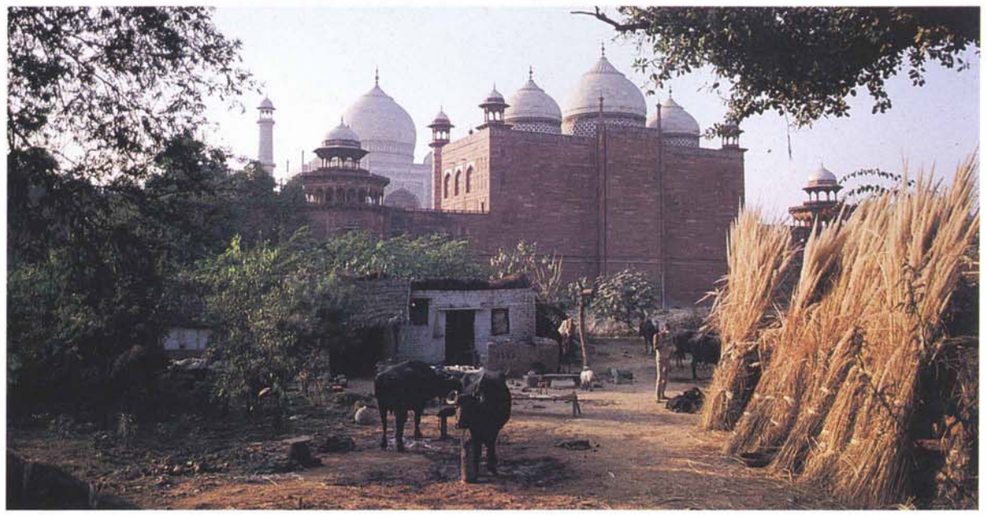


In fact, the Taj Mahal's unerring symmetry and perfectly proportioned lines may be sublime, but the marble mausoleum that Shah Jahan built for his queen, Mumtaz Mahal, was indeed an extravagance. Spotless white marble was brought from Makrana, precious and semi-precious stones were collected from within and without the empire, and the legendary imperial coffers never ceased pouring forth money as more than 20,000 architects, craftsmen and laborers toiled for 22 years to complete the mausoleum, whose doors were of silver and vaults lined with gold.

Such opulence seems even more extravagant when measured against the grinding poverty prevalent throughout India today. And although some people argue it is best seen under a full moon, and others insist it is more sensuous by sunset, my own most lasting impression of the Taj Mahal is at dawn, when it looms out of the mist over the Yamuna River and over the paupers of Agra washing their clothes in the filthy river water.

From Agra, Wheeler and I drove along roads clogged with bicycle rickshaws and buffalo carts – with the occasional dancing bear among the pedestrian traffic – to the former imperial city of Fatehpur Sikri, whose red sandstone palaces and audience halls remain almost as perfectly preserved today as when Akbar abandoned them over 400 years ago.

Children leaving a Qur'an class file across the courtyard of Dargah Mosque (right), built by the Moghul emperor Akbar at his short-lived capital of Fatehpur Sikri. Above, the children's teacher.

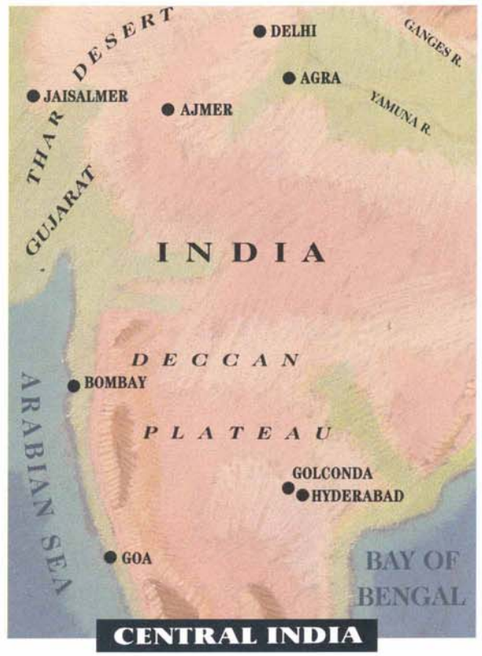


Living in the shadow of the opulent past, Agra's poor wash their clothes in the Yamuna River below the Taj Mahal (previous spread), and eke out a living farming nearby land (left).

Our journey along Islam's path east next took us to the medieval citadel of Jaisalmer, near where Akbar was born as his parents fled into exile across the Thar Desert, and in Akbar's footsteps across Rajasthan to one of India's most renowned mausoleums: the tomb of the 14th-century Muslim cleric Khwaja Muin al-Din Chisthti, at Ajmer. Akbar used to travel to Ajmer every year from Agra, and Chisthti's marble-domed tomb, which stands in the heart of the old city surrounded by shops selling floral wreaths and other offerings, still attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors a year.

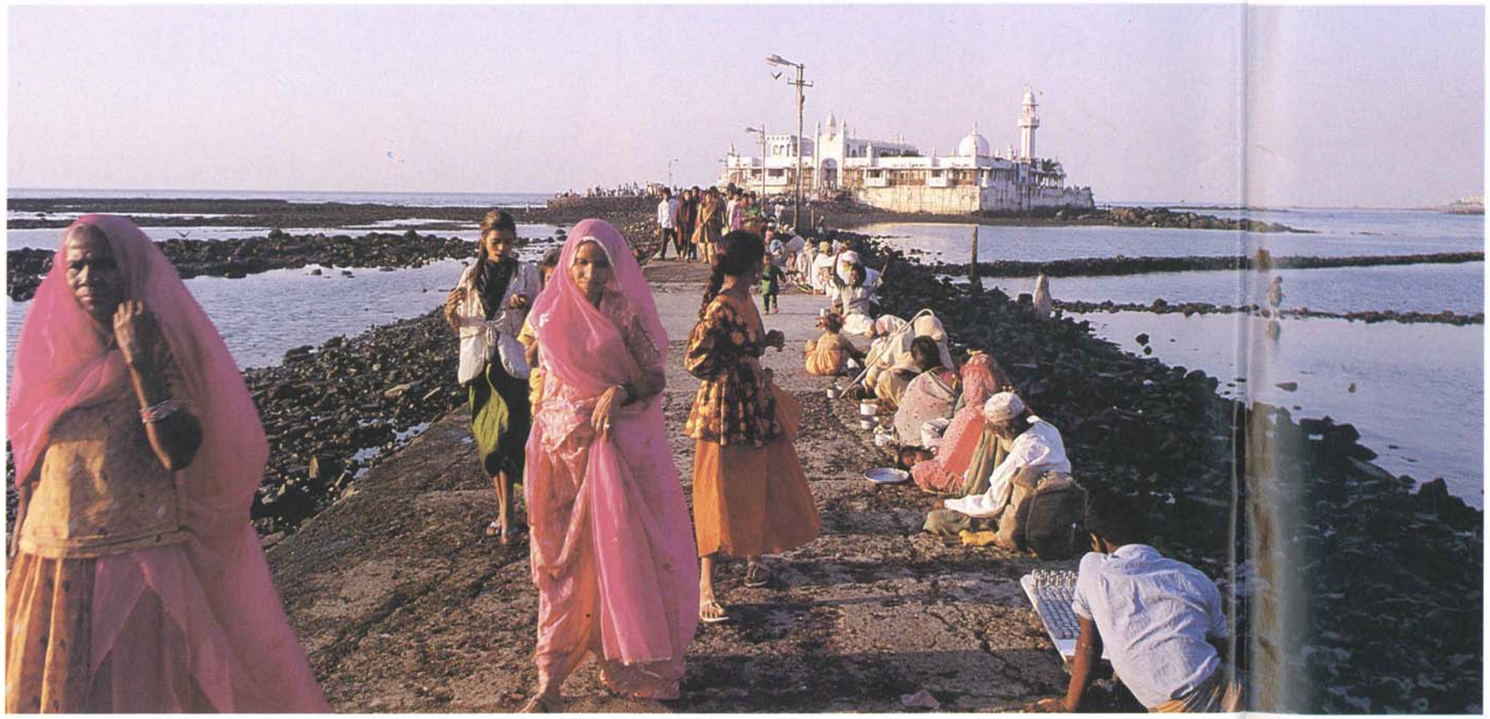
Our next destination was another popular, and unusual, site: the offshore mosque and tomb of Hajji Ali, who drowned in Bombay harbor. The buildings are reached by a long causeway which can only be crossed at low tide. It is lined with beggars, and since the giving of alms is one of the five pillars of Islam, the visitors are an easy touch.

South of Bombay lies India's central plateau, the Deccan, which for centuries was an arenaof Hindu-Muslim power struggles. Even today the region's capital, Hyderabad, with its almost equally divided population of Muslims and Hindus, is frequently the scene of intercommunal strife; during our visit, for example, a dusk-to-dawn curfew was in force in parts of the city following sectarian violence.



Previous spread: Rising from the eerie, boulder-strewn landscape of the Deccan, Golconda fortress, near Hyderabad, was the capital of the Qutb Shahis – a dynasty of Muslim poet-sultans that ruled southern India in the 16th century.

Low tide exposes a causeway in Bombay harbor (below) which links the mainland with the island mosque and tomb of Muslim preacher Hajji Ali.



Young girls (above right) from a Muslim village near Jaisalmer, in the Thar Desert, wear distinctive tonsures.

Hyderabad's Makkah Mosque (below right) took nearly 60 years to build. Begun in 1618 by the Qutb Shahis, it was not finished until 1687, by which time the Moghuls had annexed the Golconda kingdom.

Islam reached this far south in the 14th century, and Hyderabad's most famous Muslim monument, the Char Minar – a triumphal arch in the heart of the old city, surrounded by lively bazaars – dates from that period. The most impressive monument to medieval Muslim rule in the Deccan, however, is 11 kilometers (seven miles) from Hyderabad: Golconda, one of the largest fortress ruins in the world.

Protected by the ramparts of Golconda, and enriched by nearby mines that produced such world-famous diamonds as the Orloff and the Koh-i-noor, the Turkoman Qutb Shahi Dynasty ruled over part of the Deccan for a century and a half. Their wealth and liberality, however, attracted the unwelcome attention of Delhi, and in 1687 the devout Moghul emperor Aurangzeb, accusing them of "lack of piety," appeared with his armies at Golconda's gates.

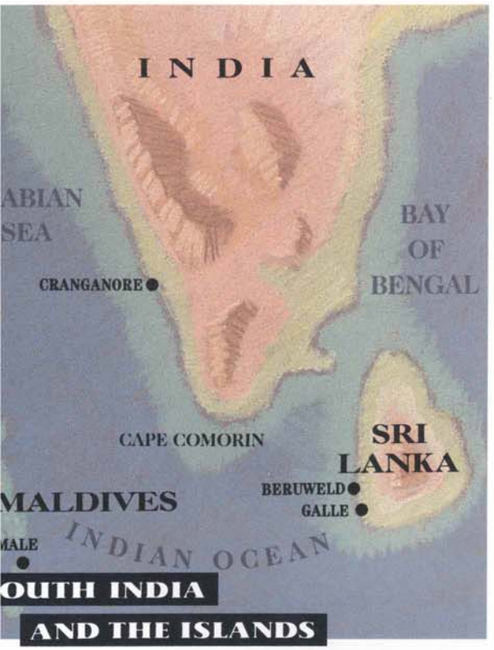
From the fastness of their citadel atop Golconda's granite hill, ringed by battlemented walls, the Qutb Shahis held out for seven months before losing the fort through treachery: One of the defenders was bribed to leave a gate open at night. Ironically, however, their defeat also signaled the beginning of the long decline of the Moghul Empire itself. Finally, in 1858, the last of the Moghuls, by then bereft of any real power, was deposed by the British.

Some nine decades later, when the British withdrawal from India became inevitable, intercommunal strife posed the central, and most painful, political issue to be faced by both the departing empire and the newly independent state to be born. The optimum proposal from the Muslim point of view – partition – proved to be the only one that could be adopted. Thus, in 1947, Pakistan became an independent nation with a population that was 90 percent Muslim. Today, Pakistan has the second largest Muslim population, after Indonesia, in the world.

And India has the third.

THE FAR EAST

Although Islam's growth in Central Asia and northern India came in the wake of military expansion, its spread elsewhere in the East was largely marked by the absence of armed conquests. Carried by the sail rather than the sword, Islam first entered southern India when monsoon winds powered Arab dhows across the Arabian Sea to the subcontinent's west coast. Here in 664, tradition has it, two Muslim notables named Malik ibn Dinar and Sharaf ibn Malik landed at Cranganore with a party of learned men and their families, settled down and built India's first mosque.



More Muslims followed during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, founding trading colonies along India's western littoral, from Gujarat, in the north, to Cape Comorin, at the subcontinent's southern tip. From those settlements they exported black pepper, gemstones and textiles to Arabia, and imported incense and perfume.

The Hindu rajas of the coastal states left their Muslim subjects to worship as they wished – some even encouraged Islam – since the ruler's wealth and power depended almost entirely on customs revenues and profits from their personal transactions in maritime trade. Many coastal Hindus converted to the new religion.

The 13th-century conquest of Gujarat and Goa by the Sultan of Delhi further strengthened the position of Muslim merchants, who by then were sailing as far as Southeast Asia in search of silk, spices and other riches, taking their religion with them. Indeed, prominent Muslim merchants became commercial partners and political allies of local rulers in lands all along the trading routes, furthering the spread of Islam.

This was the case in Indonesia, where conversion to Islam began when Muslim merchants acquired a permanent foothold on the northern tip of Sumatra about 1290, and in Malaysia, where Malacca became a stronghold of the faith following a 1445 palace coup backed by Muslim merchants.

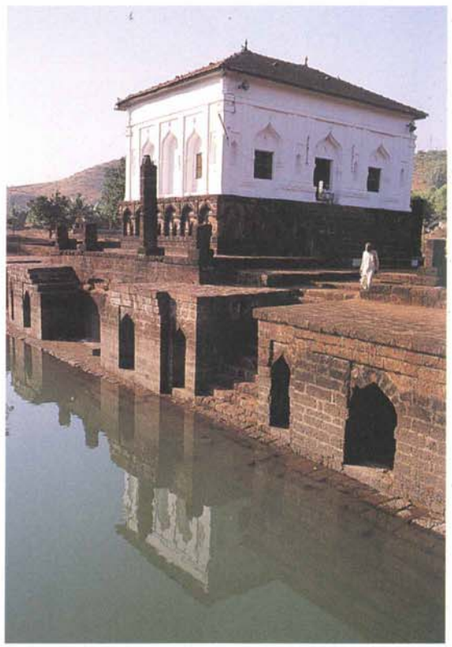
From Malacca, the main trading center of the region, Islam was disseminated along the trade routes northeast to Brunei and the Philippines, southeast to Java and the Spice Islands.

Preachers, religious teachers and devout Muslims followed in the merchants' wake, their teachings finding fertile ground among the people of the South Asian islands. Yet historians puzzle over why the new faith took root so easily in a region whose existing cultural tenor was so alien to Islam, which in its purest form is austere, demanding, egalitarian and uncompromisingly monotheistic.

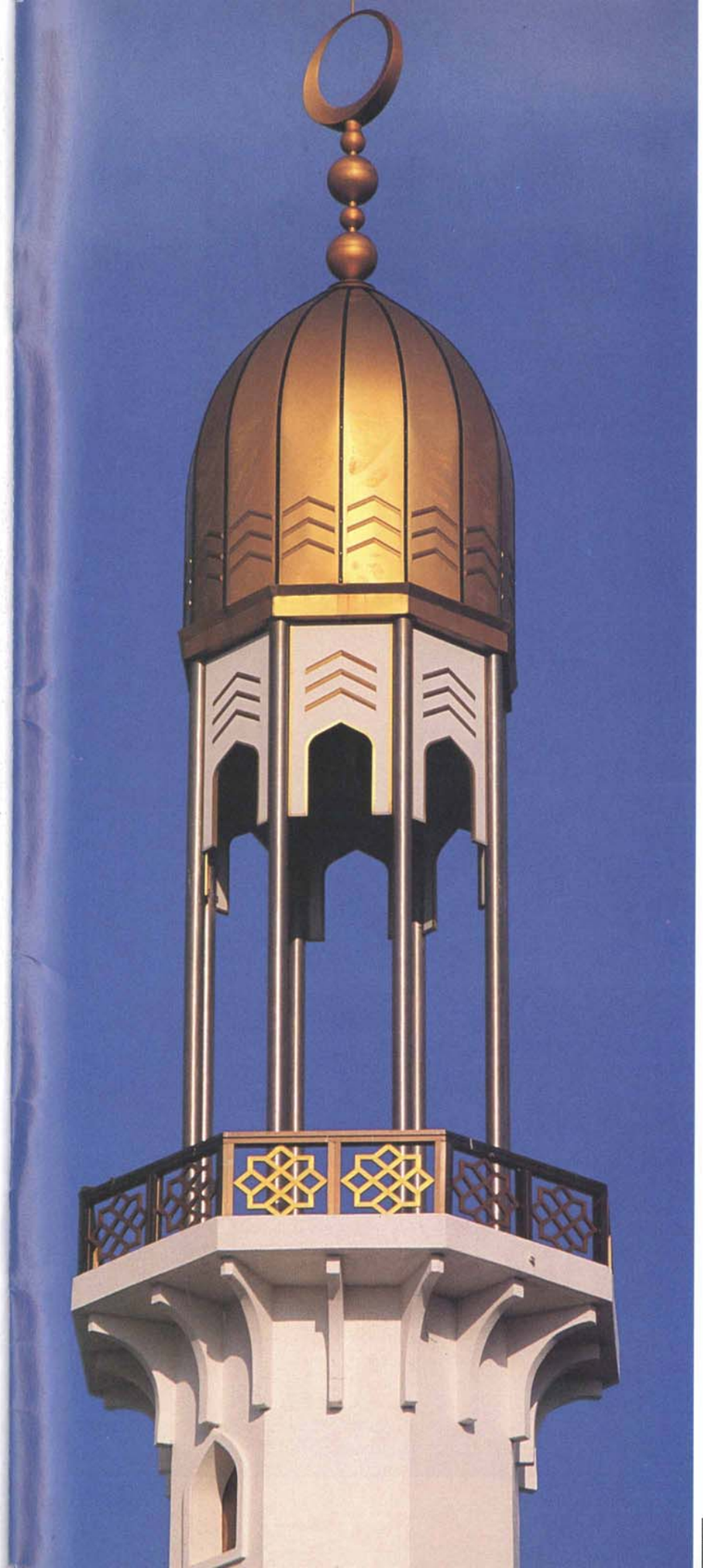
One reason frequently given for Islam's acceptance is that it came as a social revolution that freed the common man from his Hindu feudal bondage – as it had in Pakistan and northern India. However, the evidence indicates that it was the old Hindu-Buddhist aristocracy which converted first. Another possibility is suggested by Muslims who say that Islam spread quickly because its basic teachings are easily grasped by the common man.

Certainly the commercial advantages which Muslims enjoyed at a time when Islam dominated the culture of the Indian Ocean trading system were not lost on some Southeast Asian island princes – nor was the political attraction of Islam as a counter to the threat of Portuguese and Dutch incursions. Yet few Asians adopted Christianity when Christian countries seized control of the spice trade; on the contrary, Islam became a rallying point against colonial domination.

Previous spread: The imposing Baturrachan Mosque at Banda Aceh, on the northwestern tip of Sumatra, where Islam first found acceptance in the Far East.



Built in 1560, Safa Shahouri Mosque (above) at Ponda, in Goa, was allowed to decay during Portuguese occupation, but has recently been restored. At right, the gold-capped minaret of Sultan Thakorotuan Mosque in Male, capital of the Maldives.



Whatever the reason, it is clear that the teachings of the Qur'an were freely embraced by many of the peoples of South Asia. By the close of the 16th century most of the Hindu states of the region had been converted, the main exception being Bali, which never adopted Islam.

Arab traders also settled in Sri Lanka, and converted the Buddhist Maldive Islanders to Islam, which they still profess.

Following Islam's path east along the old Indian Ocean trading routes, Wheeler and I sailed into Male, capital and only town of the Maldive Islands, in a tropical storm. We huddled for shelter in the stern of a dhow ferrying merchandise among the 1196 palm-tree-covered, coral-reef-ringed islands – average size four square kilometers, or 1.5 square miles – which make up this remote republic.

But although today the Maldive atolls, drizzled across the equator like strings of pearls some 720 kilometers (450 miles) off the southern tip of India, have a "lost paradise" look, they once provided regular anchorage for ocean-going dhows engaged in international trade.

For not only were they strategically located along the Indian Ocean trading routes, but the Maldives also produced two commodities vital to East-West trade. One was coir, or coconut-fiber rope, used to stitch together the hulls of dhows – for dhows are sewn, not nailed, together. The other commodity was the shells of the little marine gastropod called the cowrie, which were used as currency as far east as Malaysia and as far west as the African Sudan.

The Maldive Islanders were originally Buddhist, but in 1163 their ruler became a Muslim and – as often happened in Southeast Asian states – his subjects followed suit. In his *Rihlah* – the account of his travels – 13th-century Muslim judge Ibn Battutah recounts the legend, told even today by old men of the islands, of Abu al-Barakat, a pious Berber from the Maghrib who rid the islands of a terrible demon by reading aloud the Qur'an. The ruler of the time, persuaded, then razed the Buddhist shrines and ordered the new faith to be propagated among his subjects.

From the Maldives, eastbound traders headed for Sri Lanka, which served as one of the main transhipment centers for goods moving between the two halves of the Indian Ocean. The normal pattern – at least until the early 15th century – was for lateen-rigged Arab dhows to carry goods across the western half, and Chinese junks, with their lug-type fore-and-aft sails, to carry them across the eastern half.

Almost all the transit trade of Sri Lanka and the southern Indian ports was in the hands of Muslims. Furthermore, owing to the Yüan Dynasty's policy of encouraging foreign participation in China's sea

trade, even the owners and captains of junks, as well as the merchants who sailed in them, were more often than not Muslims of Indian, Arab or Persian descent. Muslims were thus masters of the early medieval East-West trade.

Arab traders gave Sri Lanka the name Sarandib, a name that Horace Walpole, in a fairy tale called "The Three Princes of Serendip," expanded into *serendipity*, or what the dictionary now calls "an aptitude for making desirable discoveries by accident." And indeed, it was only by happy accident that we found the mosque in the old walled port of Galle, on Sri Lanka's southern tip. With its twin-towered facade and oblong "nave," it resembled a church so much that we almost walked past it.

"Architects," explained a Muslim who lived opposite the mosque, "were more conversant with church architecture at the time it was built," during the occupation of the island by Western trading companies, whose steamships eventually displaced the dhow and the junk as giants of East-West trade.

There was no mistaking, however, the domed and minaretted Kechemalai Mosque, built on a headland overlooking the fishing-boat-filled harbor of Beruweld, further up the coast. Today a focal visiting point for Sri Lanka's Muslim minority, the mosque is said to stand on the site of the first Muslim landing, and subsequent settlement, on Sri Lanka in 1024.

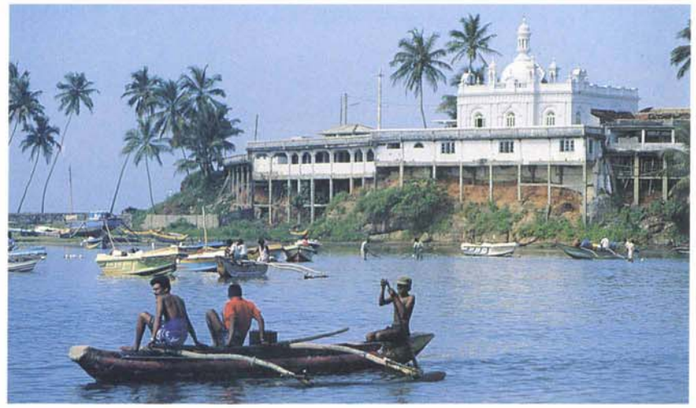
From Sri Lanka Islam followed trade across the eastern half of the Indian Ocean to northern Sumatra. And it was here, at Aceh, where the trade route from India and the West reached the Indonesian Archipelago, that Islam gained its first firm footing in the Far East.

Marco Polo, stopping off in Sumatra on his way home from China in 1292, reported that the coastal principality of Perlak was already Muslim "owing to contact with Saracen merchants, who continually resort here in their ships." And in 1332, when Ibn Battutah visited neighboring Samudra, he found it a sophisticated Muslim sultanate with international relations with India and China.

From Sumatra, Islam spread east at the beginning of the 14th century, across the Straits of Malacca to the Malay Peninsula, where the earliest record of Islam is a stone tablet found half-buried in the bank of a river, near Kuala Berang, in 1932. Written in Arabic characters in the Malay language, it proclaims Islam to be the official religion of the local ruler, records Muslim laws relating to sexual behavior and false witness, and is dated 1323.

It was not until the next century, however, that Islam became the dominant faith of the Peninsula. In 1400 the Sumatran prince Parameswara, fleeing from the excesses of the Hindu Majapahit Empire, founded the town of Malacca on the Malaysian side of the straits to which it now gives its name. Local tradition credits Parameswara too with introducing Islam, revealed to him in a dream by the Prophet Muhammad. But historians say it was not until a palace revolution, backed by Indian Muslims, brought Sultan Muzaffar Shah (1445-1459) to the throne that Islam truly prevailed in Malacca. And it was during the reign of his successor, Mansur Shah (1459-1477), who conquered all the peninsula up to the Burmese border, that the majority of Malays embraced Islam.

The conversion of Malacca, by then the greatest trading center in Southern Asia, gave Islam a powerful new base from which it was spread to the region's numerous port kingdoms, which were then freeing themselves from the slackening grip of the declining Majapahit Empire and other residual Hindu-Buddhist powers.



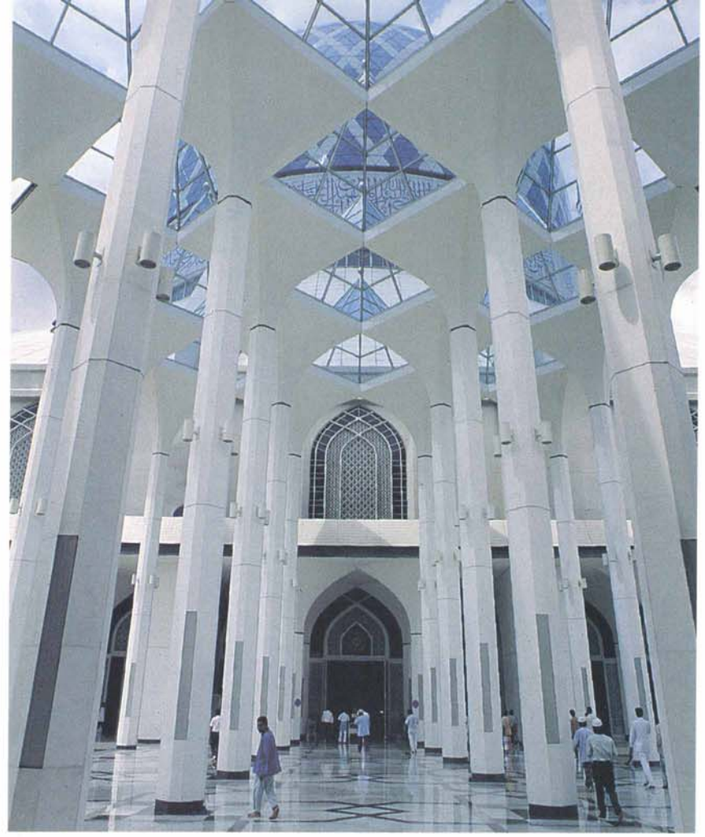
A focal point for Sri Lanka's Muslim minority, Kechemalai Mosque (above) at Beruweld marks the location of the first recorded Muslim settlement on the island in 1024.

It was at this stage, however, that the Portuguese, attracted by the vast profits to be made from trade in spices and other Oriental luxuries, appeared in the Indian Ocean. Unable to break into the close-knit Islamic trading network, the Portuguese quickly resorted to force. They seized Malacca – the hub of this trade – in 1511 and scattered its Muslim merchants all over Southeast Asia, thus spreading Islam even further afield.

For centuries a city of pivotal importance in global trade, Malacca is now just a cog in minor coastal commerce. Scruffy little motor sailers carrying wood and charcoal from neighboring Sumatra have replaced the stately dhows, junks and galleons which brought gemstones, silks and perfumes from far lands. But the old red-tile-roofed town, clustered around Malacca's river-mouth harbor, still has a colorful, cosmopolitan flavor. Austere colonial administrative buildings ring the main square, ornate Chinese merchants' residences line its narrow streets and Malay fishermen's homes huddle on stilts along the river bank.

The blue and white checkered dome of the Selangor state mosque appears (right) through the soaring pillars of its main entrance. At far right, a Malaysian boy wearing the black *songkok* headgear of many Southeast Asian Muslims.

Overleaf: The treetop-level onion domes and ornate minarets of Jakarta's Jami' Masjid contrast sharply with the city's hard-edged skyscrapers.



On Harmony Street, Kampong Keling Mosque, with its typically Indonesian two-tier pyramidal roof and pagoda-like minaret, stands between a shrine dedicated to the Hindu deity Vinayagar and a Chinese temple combining the doctrinal beliefs of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. On a hill-top overlooking the harbor stands the ruined church of St. Paul and a statue of the indefatigable Catholic missionary Francis Xavier, said to have traveled 60,000 kilometers (38,000 miles) across Southeast Asia.

More typical, however, of today's thriving Muslim Malaysia are the towering sky-scraper offices and hotels of Kuala Lumpur. Midway between the federal capital and modern Port Klang stands the Selangor state mosque, whose distinctive dome and soaring 142-meter (455-foot) minarets gave us our last glimpse of Malaysia as we jetted across the Straits of Malacca to Sumatra.

Ocean-going Arab dhows once called in the Maldive Islands as they rode the monsoons across the Arabian Sea, but today only fishing boats (right) ply the waters of the 1196-island republic.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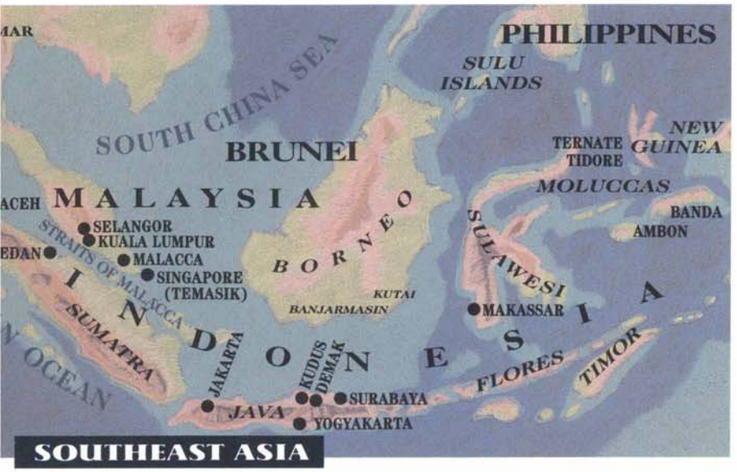
For, after conquering Malacca, the Portuguese attempted to extend their influence to the Muslim port-states of Sumatra. The effect, however, was to unite them under the banner of Aceh, a new sultanate formed around 1500 at the northwestern tip of the island. Aceh then entered a period of great prosperity, replacing Malacca as the center of the region's Muslim trade network and as the regional stronghold of Islam.



Aceh's peak of power and wealth was reached under Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636); his palace, glittering with gold, aroused widespread admiration – as did the great five-story mosque at Banda Aceh, the sultanate's opulent capital. But warfare and the impermanence of wooden buildings have left little trace of either, except for a strange stone structure – resembling tombstones piled against a central pillar – which architects cannot decipher: It appears to be either a scientific observatory or a sultan's folly.

An imposing five-domed mosque, however, still dominates the center of Banda Aceh – one built not by Muslims, but by the Christian Dutch, in 1897, to replace the mosque they destroyed during their assault on the sultanate to seize control of its pepper trade. But the mosque, modeled on a mixture of styles from Arabia, India and Malaysia, failed to appease the Acehnese, who fought a bitter 40-year guerilla war against Dutch occupation.

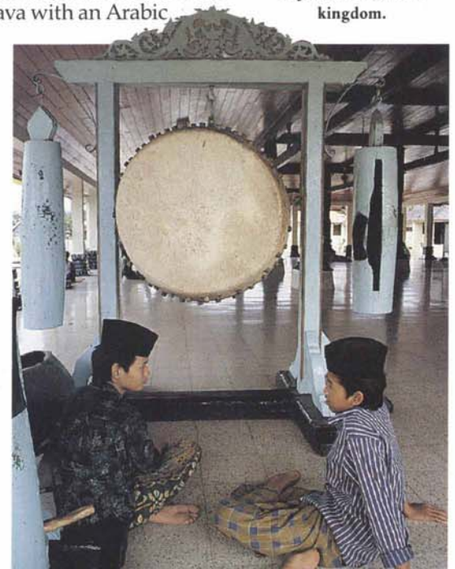
Islam's next destination east – and ours also – was Java, the most populous of the 13,677 islands of the Indonesian Archipelago, where it is believed that it was among the Chinese minority that the new faith found its first adherents.

In the 15th century, records show, the scribe Raden Rahmat was appointed by the Majapahit court to be imam of Ngampel Denta, the foreign quarter of Surabaya at the eastern end of Java, and his numerous pupils spread Islam across the island. The faith received an important boost when coastal princes of north Java, who had grown tired of subservience to the Majapahit Hindu god-king, broke their ties with him by embracing Islam. The most prominent of these new independent Muslim kingdoms was Demak, which became Java's first Islamic state, conquering and converting the whole northern coast between 1505 and 1546, and snuffing out the last remnants of the Majapahit Empire in the process.

Today Demak's Masjid Agung, said to have been built in 1428, is Java's oldest and most revered mosque. Tradition has it that four of the carved pillars supporting its deeply recessed veranda were brought from the Majapahit court following its fall in 1518. Certainly they are old – as are the four other massive wooden pillars that underpin the mosque's three-tiered pyramidal roof – although the remainder of the building was completely rebuilt in 1845 and again in 1987.

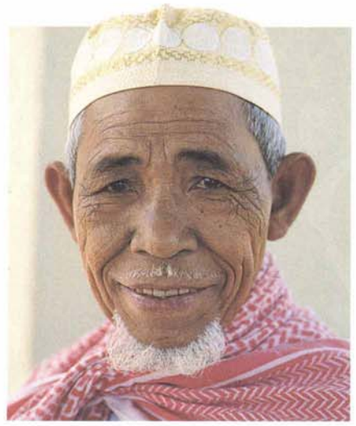
Still more interesting is the mosque of nearby Kudus, for not only are its split gates reminiscent of those of a Balinese temple, but its red-brick minaret is so similar to a Hindu *kulkul*, or gong tower, that it may actually have been one. Kudus is a corruption of *al-Quds*, the Arabic name for Jerusalem, and the town is one of the few in Java with an Arabic name. The mosque itself is known as al-Aqsa. It was founded in 1549 by Sunan Kudus, one of the nine teachers popularly credited with the Islamization of Java, and his carved tomb at the rear of the mosque is today an important site among Javanese Muslims.

Muslim forces broke Hindu control of Sunda Kelapa, in west Java, on June 22, 1527 – a date still celebrated – and renamed it Jakarta, or City of Victory. It is today the capital of Indonesia.



This large gong – a reminder of Southeast Asia's pre-Islamic past – is used to accompany the standard Muslim call to prayer at the Masjid Agung in Demak, once the capital of Java's first Islamic kingdom.

Light filters through stained glass windows to reveal the elegant Moroccan-style interior of Masjid Raya (right), the largest mosque in Sumatra.



Ternate's inhabitants (above) traded nutmeg, cloves and cinnamon with Arab merchants for centuries, but embraced Islam only at the end of the 15th century.

Traveling on eastward along the trade routes beyond Java to other islands of the Indonesian archipelago, Islam then spread to the Spice Islands of Ternate, Tidore, Banda and Abon – part of the group called the Moluccas – in the latter half of the 15th century, and to Sulawesi in 1605, finally reaching New Guinea in the 17th century, where today a sprinkling of coastal Malays represent Islam's easternmost penetration.

Despite the passage of centuries during which Arab merchants had sailed to the Moluccas to trade cloth and luxuries for nutmeg, cloves and cinnamon, the Spice Islanders were among the last Indonesians to embrace Islam. Local tradition credits their conversion to the artful Javanese missionary Mawlana Husayn who found the Moluccans fascinated by the mysterious shape of the Arabic script in which the Qur'an is written and vainly trying to imitate it. He offered to teach them to read and write Arabic – but only those who accepted Islam would be allowed to learn the sacred letters. In this way Husayn won many converts.

The first Muslim ruler of Ternate was Zayn al-'Abidin (1486-1500), who took the title of sultan; his descendants still use the honorific today, a rare privilege in the modern Indonesian republic. Sultan Zayn is credited by Abon historian Rijali with converting Perdana (prince) Jamilui, the ruler of Hitu, one of Abon's two peninsulas, whose people fought a fierce struggle with the Portuguese when, in 1574, the Europeans established themselves on Lestmor, Abon's still-heathen peninsula, and introduced Christianity. To ensure communal harmony today, the Abonese practice a system whereby each village is paired with another of a different faith, with villagers attending each other's religious festivals and even helping to build or repair each other's churches or mosques.

Because of remarkably detailed accounts by 17th-century Makassar historians, there is more information about the conversion to Islam of Sulawesi – formerly known as the Celebes -- than that of any other Indonesian island. These chronicles, for example, give the exact date -- September 22, 1605 – that the ruler of Makassar, the southernmost of the four tentacle-like arms of Sulawesi, accepted Islam. According to the same accounts, this event followed long years of contact with Muslim merchants, and was followed, on November 19, 1607, by the first Friday prayers in Makassar, at which those who had not already done so publicly professed Islam.

From then on, the people of Makassar became champions of Islam in East Indonesia, playing an important part in the battle between the Dutch and the Muslims of the Moluccas for monopoly of the spice trade. And although the Dutch won the trade war, their missionary efforts on behalf of Christianity were as unsuccessful as those of the Portuguese had been elsewhere in Indonesia, where Francis Xavier and others succeeded only in converting those remote islands – such as Flores and Timor – which Islam had not already reached.

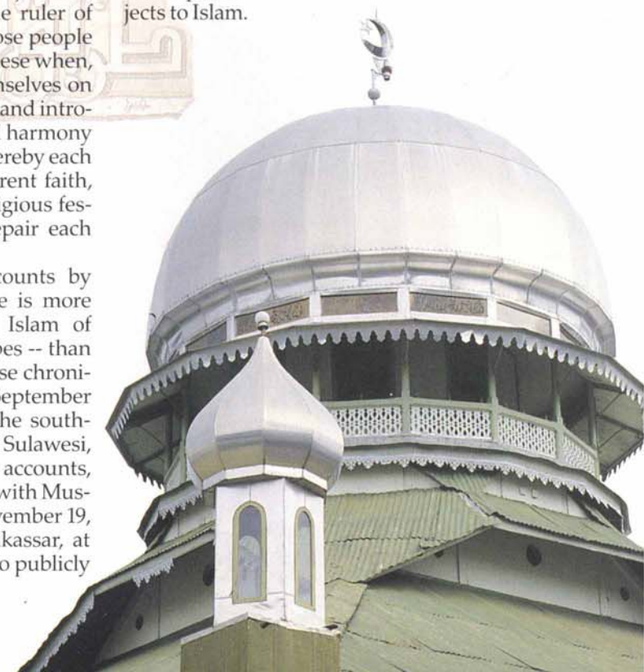
As a result, Indonesia today has the world's largest Muslim population.

The rise of Islam in Indonesia heralded no great artistic renaissance like that in India under the Moguls. But, stimulated by the sultans of the new Javanese Islamic states, the textile decorating art of batik flourished, while *wayang* puppetry and gamelan music attained their most refined and subtle development.

Borneo – the third largest island in the world after Greenland and New Guinea – received Islam from three different directions. From Sulawesi, in the east, Dato'ri Bandang and his followers spread Islam to Kutai state – now a major oil- and gas-producing region – on the eastern coast of Borneo. The state of Banjarmasin, in southern Borneo, was converted from Java to the south, and chronicles record a conflict between two pretenders, Samudra and Tumengung, in which the former enlisted the aid of the Muslim rulers of Demak, who dispatched 1000 warriors to Banjarmasin to settle the dispute in Samudra's favor and convert his subjects to Islam.

Plants reclaim the ruins of a subterranean mosque (left) in Tamar Sari, a park built by the first Muslim sultan of Yogyakarta. The city was the royal – and remains the cultural – capital of Java.

Because the Moluccas – Indonesia's Spice Islands – experience frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, many buildings, including this mosque at Abon (right), are built of light tin sheeting.



Brunei, on the northwestern coast of Borneo, along with the Sulu Islands and the southern Philippines, was situated on a trade route which linked Malacca and China, and it is mostly Arabs, calling in on their merchant travels, who are reputed to have been the bearers of Islam to these three regions. An Arab, Sharif Karim al-Makhdum, is said to have settled in Ewansa, in the Sulu Islands, where the people built him a mosque, flocked to it and were converted. Sharif Kabungsuwan, a native of Johor Baharu and son of an Arab father and Malay mother, is said to have spread Islam in the southern Philippines until the Spaniards established themselves in the north and prevented it from penetrating any farther.

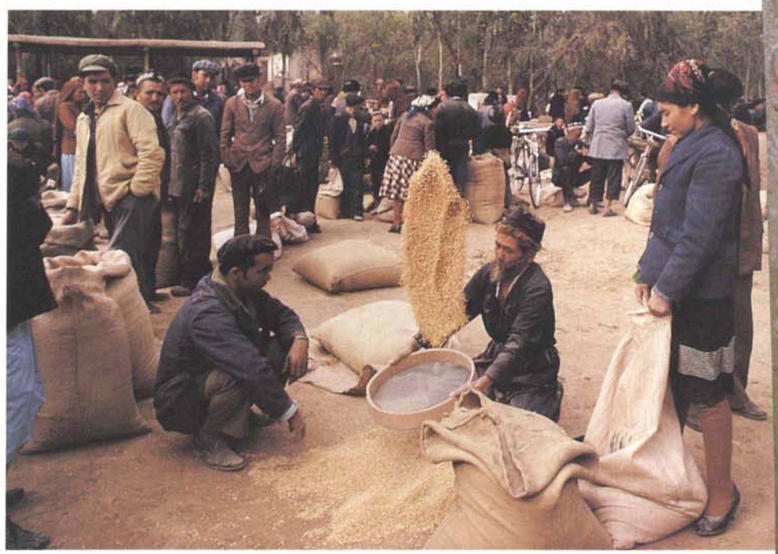
According to the genealogy of the Sultans of Brunei, Sultan Muhammad Shah was the first ruler to establish a Muslim kingdom in Brunei in 1386; local legend says he embraced Islam after marrying Puteri Johor, daughter of the Muslim king of Temasik – present-day Singapore – in the early 1360's. But some Muslim scholars believe a Muslim kingdom existed in Brunei as early as 1301, and that Islam was introduced to the sultanate from China.

As evidence of this, they point to the tombstone of Maharaja Bruni, found in Brunei and inscribed in Arabic rather than in Jawi, the Malay language, written in Arabic script, used on other royal Brunei tombstones. Although the stone gives neither the personal name nor the date of the Maharaja Bruni, it has been identified by comparative methods as having been engraved in Quanzhou, China, about 1310 and then transported to Brunei. Chen Dasheng of China's Fujian Academy of Social Sciences, and author of *Islamic Inscriptions in Quanzhou*, says the tombstone is identical in material, design, carving, wording and spelling to that of Fatima bint Naina Ahmad, who died in Quanzhou on May 22, 1301, and it was almost certainly made by the same craftsmen.

How, then, did Islam reach China?

It came from two different directions: from the northwest along the overland caravan routes across Central Asia, and from the southeast through the ancient trading ports on the South China Sea. And the geographical distribution of Muslims in China today still reflects these two main routes of penetration.

Two of Islam's main entry points into China were the Pearl River port of Guangzhou (above) in the southeast and the northwestern oasis of Kashgar (below), site of Central Asia's largest weekly open-air market.

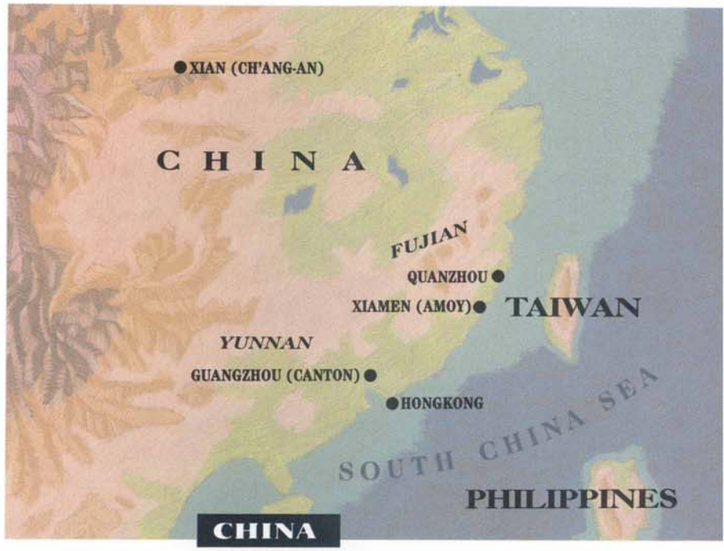


Inscriptions on Muslim tombstones like the one at left, at Guangzhou in China, have helped scholars piece together the early history of Islam in Southeast Asia.

The majority of China's 16 million Muslims are Turkic peoples living in the vast Xinjiang region of northwest China. The rest are mainly Hui – either descendants of Chinese converts to Islam or the offspring of Chinese intermarriages with Muslim immigrants – whose appearance is distinctly Chinese. They live in sizeable communities in the former Silk Road oases of western and central China, in the southern province of Yunnan, and in the industrial cities and ports of the east.

Contacts between Muslims and Chinese began very early. Arab merchants traded in silk even before the advent of Islam, and tradition has it that the new religion was brought to their port-city trading colonies by Muslim missionaries in the seventh century.

In 755, a contingent of 4000 soldiers, mostly Muslim Turks, was sent by the Abbasid caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur to help the Chinese emperor Su Tsung quell a revolt by one of his military commanders, An Lu-Shan. Following the recapture of the imperial capital, Ch'ang-an (today's Xian), these soldiers settled in China, married Chinese wives and founded inland Muslim colonies similar to those established by the traders on the coast.



Islam made its first real inroads into what is now western China in the middle of the 10th century, with the conversion of Sultan Sutuq Bughrakhan of Kashgar and his subsequent conquest of the Silk Road oases of Yarkand and Khotan in southwest Xinjiang.

During the Song Dynasty (960-1279), China experienced spectacular economic growth. This stimulated expansion of the Muslim mercantile communities – particularly in Ch'ang-an, the eastern terminus of the Silk Roads, and in the port cities of Quanzhou and Guangzhou, where Muslims largely governed the internal affairs of their own neighborhoods, building mosques and appointing *qadis* to adjudicate according to Islamic law.

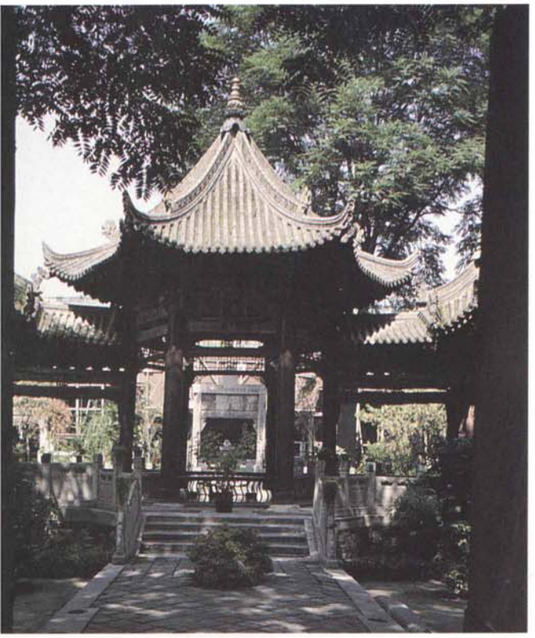
But although some Chinese merchants involved in international trade did become Muslims, other converts were few, and Islam in China was confined largely to Muslim immigrants and their descendants. Until, that is, the Mongol invasion overthrew the Song Dynasty and ushered in what Chinese Muslims regard as the "golden age" of Islam in China.

Although the Mongol Yüan Dynasty (1260-1382), founded by Kublai Khan, was the only one of the four great Mongol khanates whose rulers never converted to Islam, they nevertheless gave Muslims special status, often placing individual believers in responsible, even powerful, positions of state. In addition, when Yunnan fell to the Mongol invaders and most of its population fled, leaving an empty land, Kublai Khan sent the tough Muslim soldiers from Central Asia who had helped him conquer China to repopulate the south – though this was probably partly to keep them out of mischief and far from his own capital. It was also during the Mongol period that the Uighur Turks of northwestern China converted to Islam.

Following the conversion of the Chaghatai Mongols of Central Asia in the 13th century, large stretches of northwest Xinjiang were won over to Islam. In 1513 the oasis of Hami in eastern Xinjiang put itself under the sovereignty of Mansur Chaghatai, who two years later made it his capital and a base from which to spread Islam even further east. The religion advanced as far as Lanzhou, in today's Gansu province, where a Muslim seminary still operates on the banks of the Yellow River.

When the indigenous Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) overthrew the Mongols in their turn, however, the Muslims' position began to deteriorate. They lost their special status and under the Ch'ing, or Manchu, Dynasty (1644-1911) were so oppressed that they rebelled repeatedly – most notably in the Panthay Rebellion, which lasted from 1855 to 1873, but was crushed with great cruelty.

Because of such repression, the Hui Muslims developed a strong sense of community, living in segregated enclaves usually focused on a single mosque. The roofs of their prayer halls flared, Buddhist-style, and their minarets were built like squat pagodas so as to blend with neighboring Chinese architecture. Mosques in the predominantly Uighur northwest maintained the traditional Muslim architectural style of domed roof and tall, slender minarets, however.



In the 20th century, Muslims throughout China continued to practice their faith discreetly following the advent of Communism, despite the ideology's atheistic principles. But during the savagery and purges of the Cultural Revolution, between 1966 and 1971, most mosques were destroyed or closed down. Then, following the death of Mao Zedong, Muslims were again given a limited amount of religious freedom. Mosques and religious schools were reopened and some hundreds of Muslims were permitted to make the pilgrimage to Makkah.

And when I visited China in 1984 with Nik Wheeler, to write and photograph a special issue of *Aramco World* on the country's Muslims, and again in 1987 with photographer Tor Eigeland to research another issue, on the Silk Roads, we found China's renovated mosques crowded and the call to prayer echoing once more from the minarets of the northwestern province.

Mosques in China reflect a mixture of architectural styles, sometimes in one building. The minaret of Huaisheng Mosque in Guangzhou (left) is simple and smoothly finished like traditional buildings of Arabia. Its courtyard, however (previous spread) is purely Chinese in woodwork and rooflines, like the Grand Mosque in Xian (far left), which has the elaborately flared eaves typical of Chinese pagodas.

Freshly washed skullcaps (right) of the kind worn by many Chinese Muslims dry in the sun in Guangzhou. Below, a Muslim member of the party that welcomed Lawton and Wheeler to Quanzhou at the end of their retracing of Islam's path east.

Overleaf: A page from an early 19th-century Qur'an, written in Chinese and Arabic, taken by British troops from Amoy, present-day Xiamen. The Qur'an is now part of the British Library's Oriental Collections.

In Beijing, also, we saw the recently repainted Niu Jie mosque, its pillars lacquered in red and gold and its walls covered with a mixture of Arab and Chinese motifs. In Xian we watched workmen restoring the Great Mosque – China's largest – said to have been built by the 15th-century Muslim hero Cheng Ho, who cleared the South China Sea of pirates and rose to be admiral of the emperor's fleet.

In Xinjiang we found that, despite government attempts to dilute the Muslim population by settling masses of Han Chinese among them, the region still retains a distinct Muslim atmosphere. Here the men wear gaily embroidered skullcaps and go regularly to the mosque to pray. They also proudly tell visitors that Wuer Kaixi, who headed the 1989 democracy movement that culminated in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, was a Uighur from Xinjiang.

Policies introduced by the Chinese government since then, limiting Muslim families to two children per couple in urban areas and three to four in rural areas, along with curbs on religious education, have caused new friction between the Uighurs and the Han Chinese. In the Xinjiang village of Baren last May, for example, 22 people died in clashes with security forces following Beijing's denial of permission to build a mosque.

There was no sign of friction, however, when we arrived in Quanzhou, this year, on the last leg of our journey along Islam's path east. In fact, Hui Muslims played a prominent part in official ceremonies welcoming the UNESCO Silk Roads survey ship *Fulk al-Salamah*, which Wheeler and I had rejoined in Guangzhou, known in the West as Canton.

Over 2400 kilometers (1500 miles) from Beijing and only a short train ride from Hong Kong, Guangzhou has always been more open to foreign influence than other Chinese cities, and its mosque is generally considered to be the oldest in China. Said to have been founded by one of the first Muslim missionaries to China some 1300 years ago, Huaisheng Mosque displays a mixture of architectural styles: a 36-meter (118-foot) cone-shaped minaret, built during the Tang Dynasty (618-906), towers over a cloistered courtyard and the sweeping tiled roofs of the prayer hall, rebuilt to replace the original that was destroyed by fire in 1343. It is also known as the Beacon Tower mosque, because during the Tang and Sung Dynasties, when the Pearl River flowed close to the minaret – before silting shifted it away – a light was hung at night from the top of the tower for navigational purposes.

We sailed down the Pearl River estuary and out into the South China Sea, running into thick fog and then heavy rain as we approached Quanzhou. But it failed to dampen the spirited reception for the *Fulk al-Salamah*: massed bands, lion dancers, acrobats – and Hui Muslims – gathered jubilantly at dockside.

Once one of the world's largest ports, Quanzhou reached the peak of its prosperity during the Sung Dynasty's commercial revolution, with Muslim merchants playing a leading role. Today, however, the bustle of big-time commerce has gone, leaving the city a rich cultural heritage of classical Chinese buildings and an opera unchanged in song, dance and music since the Ming era.

Of the city's mosques, which once numbered seven, only one remains. But the massive granite walls of Masjid al-Ashab, built in 1009 in this, one of Islam's easternmost outposts, reflect the enduring vitality of a faith born in the deserts of Arabia and spread across Central Asia and India, all the way to China's Pacific shores.

And that is only its diffusion in one direction: eastward. Islam's way west is another story.

Aramco World *contributing editor John Lawton has eight other complete issues of the magazine to his credit, the first published in 1977. He is also the author of* Samarkand and Bukhara, *published in London by Tauris Parke Books.*

SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF ART

Deccani, painting of elephant balking at crossing a ford.

EVENTS & EXHIBITIONS

Myths, Monsters, Maharajas: *Introducing the Binney Collection*. One hundred paintings have been selected for display from the Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, called the most comprehensive assemblage of South Asian paintings in the Western Hemisphere. The bequest of the 1400 art objects in the Binney Collection has made the San Diego Museum of Art one of the world's most important repositories of East Indian art. The exhibition focuses on the Mogul, Rajput, Deccani and Punjab Hills Courts. The entire Binney Collection – drawings, paintings, manuscripts, prints and photographs – represents more than 60 courts or principalities and dates from the 12th to the 20th century. Richly detailed Mogul paintings, well represented in the collection, offer insights into many aspects of life in 16th- and 17th-century India. The Muslim rulers of the Deccan plateau commissioned elegant, sensitive paintings that blend foreign motifs (such as Persian and Turkish) with native influences. Deccani paintings are known for their strong, sensuous use of pinks, oranges and violets. **San Diego** Museum of Art, November 23, 1991, through January 26, 1992.

Anatolian Kilims: *An Ancestral Art* features Turkish carpets from the collection of Caroline and H. McCoy Jones. Institut du Monde Arabe, **Paris**, through November 23, 1991.

Nusantara: *Lands and Peoples of Indonesia*. This Muslim country's varied cultural heritage and rich natural resources are highlighted through books and other objects. Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, through November 29, 1991.

The Afghan Folio. Luke Powell's striking photographs of Afghanistan displayed as dye-transfer prints. **Parkersburg [West Virginia]** Art Center, through December 1, 1991; Sarah Lawrence College Art Gallery, **Bronxville, New York**, through December 20, 1991; National Exhibition Center, **Swift Current, Saskatchewan, Canada**, December 3 through 29, 1991.

Ancient Egypt's Final Glory: *The Art of the Late Period*. This Third Annual Symposium on Egyptology, held with the American Research Center in Egypt, brings together international scholars to discuss artistic achievements from 750 BC-AD 300. New York University School of Continuing Education, **New York**, December 7, 1991.

Crushed Lapis and Burnished Gold: *The Art of Illumination* explores embellishment of manuscript pages with designs in brilliant gold, lapis lazuli and other vibrant colors, from the Sackler Gallery's Vever collection. Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, **Washington, D.C.**, through December 8, 1991.

Fabled Cloths of Minangkabau. An extensive exhibit of textiles, jewelry and accessories of Indonesia's Minangkabau. The magnificent weavings symbolize aspects of the social code that governs behavior among this Muslim people. **Santa Barbara [California]** Museum of Art, through December 8, 1991; **Bellevue [Washington]** Art Museum, March 13 though April 12, 1992; Utah Museum of Fine Arts, **Salt Lake City**, May 10 through June 21, 1992.

Yemen: *A Culture of Builders* takes an artistic look at Yemeni architecture. Ball State University College of Architecture & Planning, **Muncie [Indiana]**, November 4 through December 13, 1991.

The Here and the Hereafter: *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art*. Some 50 art works demonstrate the cultural importance of the Islamic vision of the afterlife. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, **Brunswick, Maine**, through December 15, 1991; the University Art Museum, **Berkeley, California**, January 22 through March 29, 1992.

Armenian Art: *3000 Years of History*. A panoramic look at the artistic achievements of the Armenians. The Armenian Museum, **Paris**, Thursdays and Sundays through 1991.

Beyond the Java Sea: *Art of Indonesia's Outer Islands*. The exhibition explores the culture of this Muslim nation's Outer Island peoples, as expressed through traditional arts. M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, **San Francisco**, through January 5, 1992.

Court Arts of Indonesia. Some 160 works reflect the 1000-year traditions of the royal courts of Indonesia. Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, **Los Angeles**, through January 5, 1992.

The Designer's Eye: *Mary McFadden Selects Textiles from the Permanent Collection*. The acclaimed fashion designer chose for this exhibition 20 favorites from the 4500 pieces at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Those on display include fabrics from Egypt, Turkey and Central Asia. **Minneapolis** Institute of Arts, through January 5, 1992.

The Sculpture of Indonesia is an exhibition of 135 masterpieces from the eighth to 15th centuries of the world's most populous Muslim country. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, through January 5, 1992.

Where the World Meets the Sky: *Photographs of Ladakh and Tibet*. More than 40 color photographs by Ellen Kaplowitz include intimate human portraits and magnificent mountain landscapes of Ladakh in northern India and Lhasa in Tibet. University of Pennsylvania's University Museum, **Philadelphia**, through January 5, 1992.

Forty Indian Paintings from the Collection of Howard Hodgkin. These paintings and drawings from India, on loan from an eminent English painter, depict village and court life in three major regional styles: Rajput, Deccani and Mogul. The Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, **Washington, D.C.**, through January 12, 1992.

Islamic Art and Patronage: *Selections from Kuwait*. Masterworks of Islamic art – ceramics, glass, metalwork, wood, illuminated manuscripts, textiles, and rugs – are drawn from one of the world's top private collections. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, **Richmond**, through January 19, 1992; **St. Louis [Missouri]** Museum of Art, February 15 through April 12, 1992.

Out of the East: *Palestinian Embroidery and Adornment* features traditional embroidered dresses and jewelry created and worn by the people of Palestine, supplemented by such objects as cushions, copper and brass vessels, ceramics and calligraphy. Mingei International Museum of World Folk Art, **La Jolla, California**, through February 4, 1992.

Beyond the Pyramids: *Geometry and Design in the Carpets of Egypt, 1450-1750*. The Textile Museum's unparalleled but rarely seen collection of classical Egyptian carpets is featured. The Textile Museum, **Washington, D.C.**, through February 16, 1992.

A Princely Array: *17th-Century Textiles From Mogul India*. Five rare, rich textiles highlight new displays. This extraordinary gathering of fabrics produced at the height of the Mogul empire includes one of the two earliest known dated Indian textiles. **Cincinnati** Art Museum, through March 8, 1992.

Current Archeology in the Ancient World. A series of lectures on current research and discoveries. Upcoming Middle Eastern and Islamic topics include the Phoenician port of Kition (Cyprus), ivories of ancient Palestine and Europe, Chinese ceramics in the early Islamic world and new discoveries at Ebla (Syria). Musée du Louvre. **Paris**, through June 26, 1992.

Gulf Arab States: *Beyond Camels, Oil and the Sand Dunes*. This year-long traveling exhibit, slated for one-month stays in 12 California public libraries, moves beyond stereotypes to explain the culture and social life of the Gulf Arab states. Featured are items from the Nance Museum, embassies, consulates and personal collections. Through August 1992. For schedule, call (714) 528-1906.

Pre-Islamic Arabia. A preview of pre-Islamic antiquities – inscriptions, sculpture, pottery and architectural elements from the Arabian Peninsula – to be exhibited later at the Louvre. Featured are pre-Islamic artworks from Yemen, alabaster sculptures, ceramics, etc. Institut du Monde Arabe, **Paris**, until 1993.

Turkish Traditional Art Today. This display of contemporary Turkish folk art emphasizes religious and social environments that nurture folk art. The exhibition reflects the cornerstones of Turkish culture: mosque, bazaar and home. Museum of New Mexico, **Santa Fe**, through June 30, 1993.

Nomads and Nobility: *Art From the Ancient Near East*. Spectacular artifacts from the pre-Islamic Middle East, primarily gold, silver and bronze, but including ivory and ceramic objects. The Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, **Washington, D.C.**, continuing indefinitely.

The Aramco Exhibit. Centered on the Arab-Islamic technical heritage, this permanent interactive, "learn-by-doing" scientific exhibit relates the historical background to today's petroleum exploration, production and transportation. **Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.**

Information is correct at press time, but please reconfirm dates and times before traveling. Readers are welcome to submit information for possible inclusion in this listing.

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