

THE CAPITALS AND MAJOR CITIES

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Introduction

Today we are passing through the fifteenth century of the Hijrah or the twentieth century of the Christian era. Now we shall cast a cursory look at some of the cities of the Islamic world of its days of glory, and some big cities of the western world of the period. The reader shall find a great difference between the two. He will be surprised to see on the one side life, vitality and civilization, that is, in the Islamic world,....and on the other side a backward region of the primitive period, where there is neither any trace of learning, nor that of life and civilization....that is in the west. We want to compare the big towns of these two regions of the world, and present before you the situation existing in the cities of the western world so that you may be able to form an idea of their economy, the expanse of their cities and the standard of life of their inhabitants.

England - Seventh to Tenth Century

La Face and Rombo write in their world history:

"Anglo Saxon England of the seventh to the tenth century and even later, was a very poor country, cut off from the rest of the world. Ignorance, wildness and barbarism were rampant. Houses were built of unhewn stone, cemented together with mud. And the floors too were plastered with mud. The houses were small and their outlets and ventilators were very small, the doors very fragile, and the animal enclosures were entirely lacking in windows or ventilators. Cattle that were the only wealth of the land were dying constantly due to different (Systemic,Tr.) diseases and epizootics. In the

matter of residence and shelter the condition of the people themselves was no happier than that of their beasts. The chief of the tribe lived in his hut with his tribe, servants and others connected with him. All these people assembled in a large room in the centre of which there was a hearth and a hole exactly in the centre of the roof was provided for the exit of the smoke. They all ate off the same table, the head of the family and his wife occupying one side (as heads) of the table. Knives and forks were unknown in those days. The bowls were pointed at the bottom and had to be held in hand, or the person eating out of it had to take its contents at a gulp. Having taken their dinner early in the evening the head of the family retired to his room and the rest drank themselves to drunkenness in that same big room. After that every one took his pillow and sword and slept on the floor on a raised platform in that open hall. Every one kept his weapon handy since robbery was so common and the thieves were so bold that every one had to remain alert so that he might not be caught on the wrong foot.

"Most of the land in Europe was covered with dense continuous forests. Agriculture was in a primitive stage. Around the towns there were pools of stagnant dirty water, whose noxious odor, so injurious for health made the atmosphere stinking all around, and poor people fell prey to so many diseases and died in large numbers. In Paris and London houses were built with mud mixed with straw and wood, as we find them in our villages during the last half century. There were neither windows nor doors to their rooms. Bedding was something unknown to them. Their bedding was straw and dried grass which made the hard surface of the ground a little less uncomfortable. They were totally ignorant of cleanliness and other hygienic measures. The animal excretions and kitchen refuse were thrown before their own houses and were stinking. The entire family slept under the same roof, men, women and children all huddled together. And so often the domesticated animals also found refuge in the same room. The thing they called bed was a bag stuffed with straw and raised from the ground. And with some sort of pillow they used it as their bed. Gutters were not provided with the roads, nor were they properly made even (cobbled with awkward boulders, Tr.), nor were the streets lighted. The largest town in Europe could not boast of more than fifteen thousand people."

These were the conditions rife in Europe up to the eleventh century and even after, as admitted by the European authors themselves.

The Condition of the Cities of the Islamic World

Now let us have a look at the cities of the East in imagination along with the miserable condition of those of the western world presented here in the preceding lines, so that after this comparison you may in a position to have an idea of the big cities and capitals of the Islamic world such as Baghdad, Damascus, Cordoba, Granada and Isabella, and the conditions of civilization and culture in them.

Let us commence our talk with the cities of Andalusia since they are situated in close neighborhood of Europe with which we are going to compare them. So we must start our journey from Cordoba and it would be proper for us to deal with its apparent features only and leave out all other things connected with it.

Cordoba

Cordoba was the capital of Muslim Andalusia during the period of the Umayyid ruler, Abd-al-Rahman III (912 - 961 AD). During the night it was illumined with lamps with bulbous glass shades. People could travel for sixteen Kilometers in the light of these streets without any difficulty and it did not seem to come to an end. All the streets were properly paved and all the garbage was removed from the public roads, leaving them clean. The entire city was surrounded by dense groves. Any body coming to the city would enter it after a pleasant walk through these groves and public parks. It could boast of accommodating more than a million citizens at a time, when no European city had a population more than twenty-five thousand men. It had 900 Hammams (hot baths or Turkish Baths) and 283,000 houses. The places and other big mansions were eighty thousand. There were 600 mosques. The outer circumference of the city was 30 Farsakh or thirty thousand yards (about 27 Kilometers). All the inhabitants were educated. In the eastern sector of the town alone 170 women worked as scribes of the Qur'an. They all wrote the Quran in the Kufi script. This much about just one quarter of the town. There were 80 madrasahs (schools) in the city. The poor students received instruction free of charge. There were also 50 hospitals to cater to the needs of the city. As for the major congregation mosque of Cordoba, it was, and is to this day, in the matter of architectural beauty and novelty of design, an abiding monument. Its minaret for the call to prayers was 45 cubits (about 70 feet) high. Its light dome rested on props of fine wood. The entire mosque rested on 1093 pillars, built of various kinds of marble and in rows looked like a chessboard, 19 columns lengthwise and 38 breadth-wise. 4,700 lamps illumined the mosque at night, consuming 24,000 pounds of olive oil annually. Southward there were 9 doors. They were made of a strange kind of bronze plates. However, the central gate had plates of gold fixed to it. Similarly, there were nine gates each, east and west of the mosque, resembling the southern gates. And for the arch of the mosque, it would be enough to quote the English historians:

"Whatever the human eye has witnessed, this is the most charming of them all, and its craftsmanship and splendor are not to be found in any of the ancient or modern monuments."

Al-Zahra Palace of Cordoba

In close vicinity of Cordoba was a grand palace, Al-Zahra. From the point of view of its architectural merits and splendor it is regarded as one of the wonders of the world. The Turkish historian, Zia Pasha has to say about it:

"This palace is such a wonder of the world that a concept of the design of this type could not occur to any human being from the dawn of creation to this day and human intellect has through the ages failed to produce a parallel or even approaching it in beauty of design."

Its domes rested on 4316 columns built out of different kinds of marble, but had similar embellishments. Its floor was paved with marble slabs of various colors in beautiful designs. The walls were paneled with panels of sky blue and golden color. In the mansions within the palace there were streams of clean fresh water, which passed through marble tanks and they all joined in a huge and very beautiful reservoir (tank) in the palace of the caliph. A golden duck set with a pearl in its head, swam on its surface in the center. This huge tank had beautiful fish of all colors and varieties fed on 12,000 loaves of bread every day. There was a special parlor called "Qasr-al-Khilafat" (The

palace of caliphate), whose ceiling and walls were built of various kinds of marble interspersed with gold. In the center of this palace was a tank filled with mercury. On all the four sides of this parlor were eight arched gates made out of ivory and ebony set with gold and pearls of all kinds, resting on lofty columns made of colored stones and stainless marble. Sunlight entered through these gates and the rays illumined the walls and the center of the floor. The brilliance was enough to dazzle the inmates. And the caliph, Al-Nasir, if he was in a frivolous mood, to frighten any one gathered around him, he would just make a gesture to some slave who would set the mercury in the tank in motion, which would convert the entire scene into one of lightning surrounding the entire assembly. The whole assembly was terror stricken by the allusion of flying into the air, palace and all. This allusion lasted so long as the mercury on the tank did not come to rest. The place was surrounded by thick groves on all sides and outside it were large open fields. And still further lay the rampart all round this magnificent building reinforced by three hundred hurrets for military purposes. The Al-Zahra palace comprised the mansions of the caliph, the nobles and the haramsaras or the palaces of the ladies. Besides, there were some halls where the caliph held court. The place where the caliph took his seat was known as "Satah-e-Mutamarrid" or the raised platform, over which there used to be a dome built with bricks of silver and gold. But when Qazi Munzar bin-e-Saeed, severely criticized the caliph in the congregation mosque of Cordoba, in a large gathering, for the use of gold and silver in that manner, he had that demolished and rebuilt with ordinary bricks. Within the compound of this magnificent and vast palace there were also factories where various implements (including weapons of war) and other items were manufactured. In this way the arms factories too were functioning there. (We ought to make a careful mental note of it. (These factories were established within the four walls of the vast palace that in case of being described by the enemy, the supply line, particularly, replenishment of arms, might not be cut off, ensuring uninterrupted supply to the besieged defenders).

Now that we are arming ourselves afresh, we ought to recall that there was a time when we manufactured our own arms and did not have to beg any one for them). There was a factory for decoration pieces and ornaments, sculpture, ship-building and image-forming factories. Besides these there were centers of other industries and crafts also. It was completed in four years. 6,000 stones were hewn and fashioned into the required shape daily, on an average. These were over and above those used for the paving of floors. 10,000 workmen toiled in various sections, and 1,400 mules were all the time employed in transport of material. Every third day 1,100 camels laden with lime and other ingredients of mortar came to the site. In the congregation mosque of Al-Zahra, 1,000 skilled workmen worked every day, including 300 masons, 200 carpenters, 500 men of unskilled labor and some other craftsmen. It was completed within 48 days only. It is difficult to find a parallel of such speedy construction of an extra-ordinary edifice.

In 351 A.H. (962 A.D.), Al-Mustansir welcomed the king of the Christian Spain Ordon bin-e-Azfonish in the same magnificent palace. When he entered Al-Zahra and witnessed its splendor and pomp and show as also its weaponry and furnishings, he was dumb-founded. When he got to the assembly of Almustansir, and saw the peers of the state and noblemen included among whom were great learned men, orators and military generals, his amazement knew no bounds. When this Spanish ruler approached the king, he took off his crown, put down his shroud and kept kneeling until he was allowed by the caliph to get up. When face to face with the caliph, he fell in prostration before him, stood up, walked a few steps and again prostrated. By the time he reached the king, he had repeated this prostration or adoration, out of extreme awe, several times and once there, bowed to kiss his hand. After kissing his hand, he retraced his steps with his face to the king so that he may not be found guilty of turning his back upon the caliph. With this respectful attitude he occupied the seat kept for him. And the caliph welcoming him among their midst, said to him: "We welcome you at your arrival here. Let this visit of yours be a happy occasion for you, since we have a much better opinion of you

and greater acceptance of you than you can ever expect. When the condescending words of the caliph were conveyed to him rendered into his own tongue, he was very much pleased, bowed down at his place and kissed the ground, and said, "I am a humble slave of my Lord, Amir-al-Muminin. On his grace I put my trust and look forward to be favored by him. I have perfect faith in him and his men. So what ever service he entrusts to me, and in which ever position he is gracious enough to keep me, I hope to proceed with sincere intent and purely from a point of view wishing well and doing 'Good.'.....At this the caliph said to him, "You hold a position in our regard and estimate the position of men of whom we have a good opinion, and we hope our honoring you and holding in esteem, will be a source of pride for you among your own people, and you will find what advantages yon derive through leaning towards us as living under our protection."

Just think over, what force the words pronounced by the caliph Mustansir have in them and what grandeur that immediately on hearing them the Spanish ruler once again falls prostrate before him, prays for his long life and prosperity since he had been gracious to him, and assured him of his support.

Granada

Again, when we come to Granada, the greatness of architecture appears before us in the form of Al-Hamara. Those looking at it were wonder-struck. And in spite of the ravages of the cruel hand of time even today it is the center of attraction for the travelers of the world. This palace was constructed in the foothill plain of the mountain of Granada in the vast expanse or lush green fields, which surround it on all sides. Thus, this building is regarded among the most beautiful buildings of the world. It had spacious halls and large rooms. For example, the black stone hall, two adjacent rooms built of white and black stones, the court room, and the room to meet the ambassadors granted that honor.

In a short discourse like this it is not possible for us to depict all the merits and beauties of Alhamra. Suffice it for its greatness that the world renowned French poet, Victor Augo, addressing it, expresses his ideas and feelings like this:

"O Hamara! O Hamara! O the palace which the angels decorated according to the wishes of the imagination, and adjudged thee as a symbol of order and good taste, dexterity and skill. O thou castle of greatness and glory! In thee decoration in the form of flowers and engravings of bent down branches are worth seeing. When the silver rays of the moon passing through thy western minarets, fall on thy walls, during the stillness of the night, a whisper is heard which fascinates those with feeling hearts (sensitive people)."

Isabilla (Seville)

As for the account of other cities of Andalusia and the description of their greatness and progress, it is a long story. I think, leaving alone other towns, it would suffice to say about Isabella alone that there were 6,000 looms to weave silken cloth. This city was surrounded on all sides by olive groves, and for this reason there were a hundred thousand olive expellers here.

Baghdad

Now we are returning to the Eastern wing of the Islamic world to see the conditions existing in its big cities and its splendid civilization. Confining myself here to a brief account of Baghdad, I shall try to explain how after its build up, this city became a wonder of the world without a parallel in the ancient history.

Baghdad, before its build up and expansion, was a small village, to which gathered traders from the neighborhood about the close of every year. When the well known Abbasid Caliph, Mansoor, decided to build and extend it, he brought together great engineers and architects. He also called the experts of agriculture, mensuration and the distribution of land. He laid the first brick of its building up and recited: In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds: Lo! The earth is Allah's. He giveth it for an inheritance to whom He will. And Lo! the sequel is for those who keep their duty (unto Him). (Al Quran 1:1; 7:128).

After this he said, "Proceed with the name of God." The amount of money spent on its build-up was four million rupees. One hundred thousand workmen were employed in this work. There were three walls of the city one after the other and adjacent to one another. Two million has been the highest figure of population for this city. The Eastern wing of the city had 6,000 roads and lanes, and in the western section 4,000. And besides the rivers Dajlah (Tigris) and Farat (Euphrates), there were offshoots of eleven major canals, whose water ran to every section of the town and every house in it. And on the river Tigris alone there were innumerable ferry points and 30,000 ferries to take people across the waters. There were 60,000 Hammams or hot public baths in the city, and during the last days of the Abbasid rule this number had dwindled to 10,000. The number of mosques had reached three hundred thousand (300,000). As for the correct estimate of its population, the large number of learned men, men of letters and philosophers, God only knows about them.

It would be in the fitness of things to present here an extract from Abu Bakr Al-Khateeb about Baghdad: "While mentioning Baghdad we missed some of its characteristics which are to be found in Baghdad alone and nowhere else in the eastern and the western world. Among them are the courtesy of the citizens, good traits of their characters, the palatable fresh water so pleasant to drink, very tasty fruit in abundance, general prosperity, expertise in every industry, facilities for meeting every need, immunity from the propagation of innovations, enviable abundance of the learned men, students, legists, and the law-students, very outstanding scholastics, Mathematicians, Grammarians, the best poets, the reporters of historical facts and Genealogies, experts of arts and literature being drawn from far and near; in short presence of every thing, however quaint, at all times.

There are to be found fruits of all kinds here in all seasons, particularly, in Kharif (the period between summer and winter seasons), in whichever country a fruit may be in season it would be brought here. If a citizen found his house inadequate for his needs it would be very easy for him to find another better residence. If somebody came to fancy a house other than his own it would not be difficult to materialize such a transfer. The citizens could obtain their residences in any quarter of the town they came to have a liking for. If a person fleeing his enemies came here, it would be very easy for him to seek asylum anywhere. So many people came forward to give him shelter and protection. And he would be offered facilities on all hands to shift from one highway to another. In short, he could easily make any changes he deemed fit in his program to meet the newly arising situations. The big traders, kings, and the nobles and affluent persons living in lofty mansions were always ready to and did shower donations and offer generous help to those in need and of a lower financial status. And this

was a continuous process. In short, these were the bounties of Allah whose real nature and position He only knows.

The same author writes at another place:

"Baghdad was a city that had no parallel on the face of the earth in its grandeur and glory, greatness, the large number of 'Ulama (religious scholars) and nobles, the distinction between the elite (the learned people) and the common folk, the expanse of the suburbs and those of the river banks and canal sidings, the abundance of the palaces and the houses of the common people, mosques and Hammams (public baths), hotels and shops, fresh air free from dust, palatable water, cool shades, temperateness of summers and winters, the health-giving effects of both the spring and autumn, and the density of population.

"This city had reached its zenith during the period of **Harun Rasheed**, and its population had also become maximum when it had the best shelters and the best resources of food. On every side there was verdure and freshness all round, and the streets were crowded with pedestrians. However, there followed a period of ruination. People were in distress. The city was deserted, depopulated and desolate. The entire families abandoned the town en-block. But before our times conditions were not as bad as we find them. Everywhere there is chaos and people are miserable. But there was a time when this city was distinguished from, all other cities and peculiar among them in every way."

Manufacturing Industry

All the towns of Andalusia were thickly populated, and every city was well known for some particular industry, and the interest of the Europeans evinced in Spanish manufactures is unparalleled. Spanish helmets and armors were very popular. Steel was cast into various molds for all purposes, particularly, weapons. Orders from all over Europe were received here. ... In the modern age we must stop a little to think over it. ... An idea of the manufactures can be had from the fact that 'Zeno writes in his book 'Invasion of France': "When the Arabs invaded South France from Andalusia and under the leadership of Musmah Kholani, Anbasah Kalabi and Hur Thaqafi conquered Rabonah, Fartashonah, Afnion and Lyon, they were armed with such weapons which were not to be found even in the British armory.

The Glory of the Past, Ruins of the Present Day

We are closing this discourse with an account of the Baghdad of the period of Al-Muqtadir-Bi-Allah. ...the splendor and glory of it! (When factually Baghdad was on the road to decline). Also during the period when the envoy of the Roman Emperor had attended the durbar of the caliphate, what was the pomp and glory of the Islamic caliphate in Baghdad. In Baghdad, the Dar-al-Khilafat (House of caliphate) alone was, in its expanse and the number of men living there, greater than the greatest of the Syrian towns. The number of eunuchs alone was 11,000. One shift of the peons and other attendants working there, comprised 4,000 men.

When the envoy of the Roman emperor visited, he was accommodated at the Guest House. From the guest house to the Dar-al-Khilafat the army lined up on both sides of the

road, numbering a hundred and sixty thousand, both cavalry and infantry. He covered the distance between the guest house and the Dar-al-Khilafat between these two rows of armed men. He made his obeisance to the caliph, and here orders were issued that he should be taken round the Dar-al-Khilafat and shown every thing in and out of the place. The residence of the caliph had been vacated and the occupants had left it to the charge of 7,000 attendants, seven hundred door keepers and four thousand black skinned slaves. Here the treasures of the empire and the military arms were displayed like the dowry of a bride. When this envoy was ushered into the Dar-al-Shajarah, 'the house of the Tree' he was simply dumb-founded at the sight of it. This tree was made out of silver, weighing 500,000 drachmas (about 1750 Kilograms). It spread out into 28 large branches, branching off further into many smaller ones. And on these branches rested various kinds of Birds, some silver, others gold.

The leaves of this tree too were of different designs and colors and trembled as if moved by a gentle breeze. All these silver and golden birds were perched at such angles that air from natural directions entered their open beaks and the waves thus set into motion made music like that of the chirping and song of the living birds, in their natural state. Close to the Dar-al-Shajrah there were fifteen statues of horsemen in silk brocade. They held short lances in their hands. They had been shown chasing one another.

After that the envoy entered the palace called Al-Firdaus. It had a plentiful store of weapons of war. After this he was taken from one palace of the period of the caliph Harun to another and visited 33 palaces. So tiring were these visits that he had to rest seven times before being finally led to the assembly hall in the presence of the caliph Al-Muqtadir Bi-Allah.

The historians have left it on record that:

"The number of carpets spread in various parts of the Dar-al-Khilafat was 22,000, excluding, of course, those that were normally there, visits or no visits. 38,000 silk and gold embroidered curtains hung in various palaces were on this occasion. The places visited by the envoy of the Roman emperor also included the zoo (zoological garden) maintained there. There were different kinds of wild and unfamiliar animals kept there. There was an elephant house too in this zoo, housing four female elephants, for the up-keep of each one of them there were eight Indian attendants. There were a hundred houses to accommodate the wild animals, fifty on either side of the building of the zoo. Every lion and other beast of prey was held by an attendant. Their heads and neck were secured with pillories."

After visiting the Khilafat House the envoy of the Roman emperor was astounded, since there was no other palace on the face of this earth like the one he had seen just then.

I understand that is enough for the evidence of the greatness, strength and the splendor and glory of the cities, palaces, mansions and other edifices of the days of the culmination of our civilization.

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