

Japanese Civilization (Part 3)

– Islam and the West –

By Kawakatsu Heita

A Lecture by Prince Charles

The world's oldest university is Bologna University in Italy. The oldest university in Britain, Oxford University, dates back to the 12th century. Oxford is made up of 36 colleges. Since this college system is unique to Oxford and Cambridge, there is no Japanese word that expresses the meaning of "college" in the sense that it is used at these universities. In addition to their distinctive college system, Oxford and Cambridge are also organized into academic departments or faculties in the same way as other universities throughout the world. Students of history at Oxford University belong to the Faculty of Modern History, which treats all history since

the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 as "modern history." Oxford has traditionally made the distinction between "modern" and "ancient." According to this interpretation of history, the classical ancient period ending with the collapse of the Roman Empire marked the beginning of the modern age. Just as the Renaissance in European history signaled the revival of classical art and learning, the period in which the British assimilated ancient learning was viewed as the modern age in British history. Oxford University has produced 23 of Britain's prime ministers, most of whom studied classics (ancient Greek and Latin literature and history). This is no coincidence: the modern British Empire can in many

ways be compared to the ancient Roman Empire.

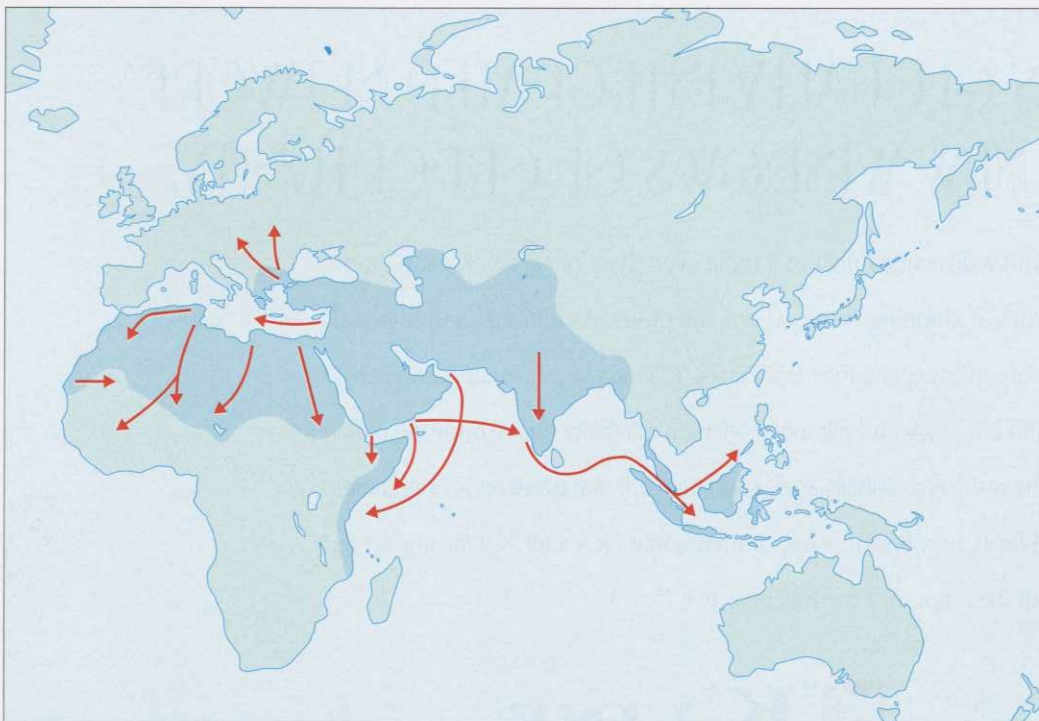
Medieval Britain is generally defined as the period from the fall of the Roman Empire to the beginning of the reign of the Tudors (1485), but at Oxford medieval history all comes under the heading of "modern history." In this field, the interpretation of medieval history is undergoing a revision and the "dark" image of medieval Europe is coming to be seen as old-fashioned.

Nevertheless, Islamic civilization of the same period undoubtedly shone more brightly than medieval Europe. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean was dominated by Islam, whose prosperity lasted for 800

years from the 8th century to the end of the 15th century. This was the medieval era in European history – a period during which the Christian world languished in the shadow of the bright beacon of Islamic civilization.

In 1993, to mark the opening of the Islamic Research Institute at Oxford University, Prince Charles (a graduate of Cambridge University) gave a lecture titled "Islam and the West." In this lecture, he pointed out that "Muslims, Christians and Judaists are all followers of scripture. The year 1492 was not only a crucial for the West but also for Islam: it was the tragic year of the fall of Granada. In 10th-century Cordoba, for example, there had been as many as 400,000 books, whose contents

Trade Range of Maritime Islam around 1500



Source: Kawakatsu Heita *An Oceanic History of Civilization*

show how advanced Islamic civilization was. In countless fields now seen as characteristic of modern Western culture, including diplomacy, free trade, scholarship, etiquette, fashion and medicine, the West was indebted to Islam. Today we often mistakenly attribute these advances to the West, but it is actually surprising how much we were in the shadow of Islamic civilization." One has to admire Prince Charles's insight founded on a broad historical grasp of the Christian and Islamic worlds as a dynamic whole.

As well as diplomacy, free trade, scholarship, etiquette, fashion and medicine, there is another very important product of Islamic civilization that Prince Charles did not mention in his lecture.

The Legacy of the Arab Agricultural Revolution

In his study *Fudo (Climate)*, Watsuji Tetsuro describes his strong impression of the Middle East as a "desolate and barren region where neither plants nor animals can live." In this desert nature is dead. A bleak desert devoid of the verdure needed to sustain life: this was the Middle East that Watsuji saw when he traveled there at the beginning of the Showa period (1926-89).

The "Green Revolution" in the Middle East

In fact, the Middle East has not always been a barren desert. During the period from the eighth to the 11th century, the region underwent a "green revolution" which the Canadian economic historian Dr. Andrew Watson calls the Arab Agriculture Revolution ("The Arab Agriculture Revolution and Its Diffusion," *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 34., 1974).

When the territory ruled by Islam was at its greatest extent before the Europeans started to make inroads, it stretched from Spain in the west to today's Indonesia in the east. As the Arabs advanced into new regions, they encountered foreigners and discovered all kinds of things they had never seen

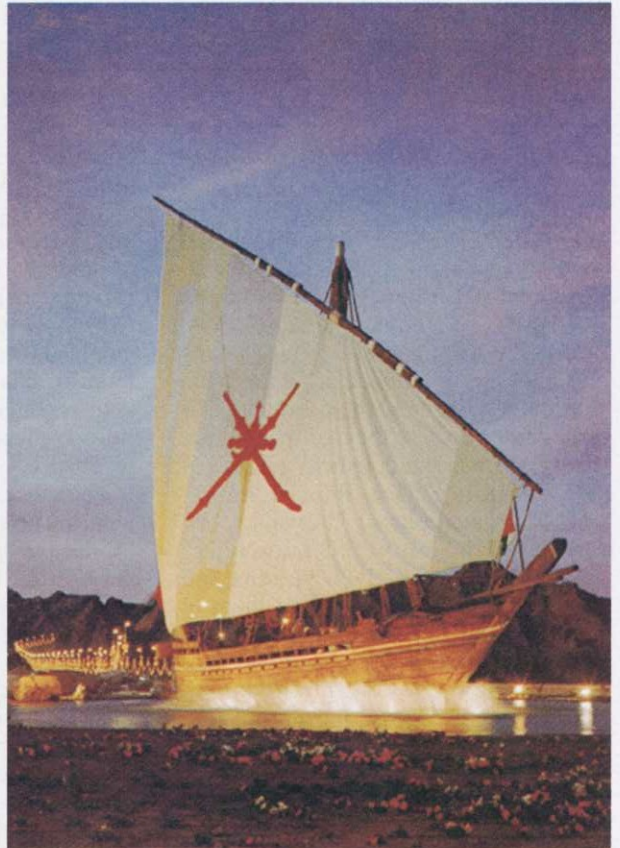
before. They marveled at and sampled perfumes, spices, medicines, rice, coriander, sugar cane, watermelons, eggplants, spinach, lemons, limes, bananas, coconuts, indigo, cotton and garden flowers, to name but a few. As a result of these discoveries, the Arab world underwent a major lifestyle revolution.

These rare plants and other goods were mostly products of the tropical regions around the Indian Ocean, which the Arabs had crossed in their dhows. At first they went back and forth carrying these goods to the Middle East, but by the 11th century they had succeeded in transplanting and cultivating most of them locally. The cultivation of crops and plants native to the wet regions of India in the arid environment of the Middle East may seem an impossible task. During this period, however, the Arabs constructed the *qanat* underground canal and exploited every single river, oasis and spring in the region. They repaired and rehabilitated the old irrigation system and steadily improved the efficiency of the water supply. At the same time, the Arabs learned how to cultivate the various crops they had brought back from India.

Before the rise of Islam, the traditional method of cultivation in the Middle East and Mediterranean region had been to sow seeds in the fall and harvest in the spring. Plants withered and died in the summer heat and, due to the infertility of the soil, crops could not be grown on the same land in successive years. But summer sunlight was essential for the cultivation of products of tropical regions such as rice, sugar

cane, eggplants and watermelons. In order to grow them, the Arabs strove mightily to make the land usable in the summer months. They studied the quality and structure of the soil and the relationships between soil and crops, learning, for example, that sugar cane grows best in soil containing a small quantity of salt. For manure, they learned how to make use not only of animal excrement but of all kinds of materials. In these ways, the Arabs succeeded in utilizing the same land continuously through multiple cropping and crop rotation. This led to an increase in incomes as labor-intensive farming methods drove up demand for labor, and bring out population growth. At the same time, agricultural advances stimulated commercial activities, the development of transportation networks, and establishment of an admin-

Photo: Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman



Dhow ships have played a significant role in trade by maritime Arabs

istrative structure. There can be no doubt that the cornerstone of Islamic civilization was the Arab agriculture revolution.

The Diffusion of Islamic Civilization

The Muslim caliphs showed great interest in the new objects they discovered as they extended their empire. The products of foreign cultures such as rare birds and animals, jewels, coins, pottery, textiles, carpets, foliage plants and books were collected. They were particularly interested in botany and built gardens where they cultivated rare plants, such as the botanical gardens at the Alhambra Palace, the last stronghold of the caliphs of Granada. The scholars who provided knowledge about plants were given patrons and privileged treatment, enabling them to travel around in their avaricious quest for new knowledge. As these rare objects, new cooking methods and other techniques were introduced into the Islamic world, the information was rapidly disseminated through the Arabic language and unified religion based on *Dar al-Islam* ("home of Islam"). In the course of one century, all of the books written in Persian, Greek and Sanskrit were translated into Arabic. The library of the Umayyad caliphate alone housed 400,000 books produced by hundreds of translators, copiers and bookbinders.

The movement of people and materials is a characteristic feature of the Islamic world, but as a result of this migration, Islam also came to own a common culture. The urge to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land played no small part in this process – whether they were rich or poor, scholars or illiterate, everyone went on pilgrimages. Islamic culture came to be characterized by advanced learning, sophisticated processing techniques, fashion, architecture, music, dance, cookery, etiquette and games. Thus Islam not only underwent a complete transformation but also became an advanced civilization admired by the whole Christian world.

Culture spread in various directions,

but the main trend was from east to west. The court culture of the Abbasid caliphate in particular imitated Indian and Persian fashions and styles, and these oriental tastes found their way to Spain via Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. Similarly, the new crops and farming methods underlying the Arab agriculture revolution entered Europe as a part of this process of cultural diffusion. In Europe this was the age of the Crusades, which were to some extent modeled on the pilgrimages to the Holy Land in Islam. The 12th century was also the great age of translation in Europe, described by the historian Ito Shuntaro as the "12th century Renaissance." This marked the beginning of the extensive imitation of Islam by the Europeans, who had very good reasons for their enthusiastic translation and transplantation of Islamic culture. Possessing knowledge of Western Europe and East Asia on either side of its extensive territory, Islam was worthy of admiration as the only civilization that embraced the world's three great civilized regions.

Products of the Arab agriculture revolution were among those that circulated from Europe to the New World. The word "cotton," for example, originates from the Arabic word "*quth*." In the Islamic world, the poor dressed in woolen cloth and the rich in cotton, which found its way to Southern Europe as the Islamic empire extended westwards. The sugar cane, rice and coffee transported across the Atlantic to the New World were carried on the wave of the westward diffusion of the Arab agriculture revolution, and cultivation of these products on plantations was to become the economic basis of modern European society. The Arab agriculture revolution was the prototype for the development of modern

civilization in the West.

Dynamic Interaction between the Islamic and Christian Civilizations

Europe Regenerated by Islam

It is generally held that the Renaissance was the dawn of the modern Europe, but in *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, Ito Shuntaro points out that the theory of nature of the quintessential Renaissance man Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) was copied from 14th century theories. Furthermore, the foundations of the 14th century intellectual revolution had already been laid two centuries earlier in the 12th century when Europe entered the great age of translation of the Islamic writings. The verse forms and musical instruments used by the troubadours of medieval Europe also had Arab origins. Europe was thus regenerated through the transmission of Islamic culture that may be described as the "12th century Renaissance."

Photo : Asakura Publishing Company / Itagaki Yuzo



Arabs marveled at watermelons, foreign produce

The word “renaissance” came into wide use after the publication of Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). In European history, there are at least three historical phenomena that are recognized as renaissances: the Carolingian Renaissance of the 8th and 9th centuries, the 12th century Renaissance, and the Italian Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries. External influence played a crucial role in all three of them: the Carolingian Renaissance resulted from the transmission of Roman culture to Western Europe via Britain; the dissemination of Greek classical learning by Byzantine scholars who escaped from Constantinople after its fall in 1453 had a significant influence on the Italian Renaissance; and Islamic culture conveyed via Spain, Northern Italy and Sicily was the driving force behind the 12th century Renaissance.

What is Europe?

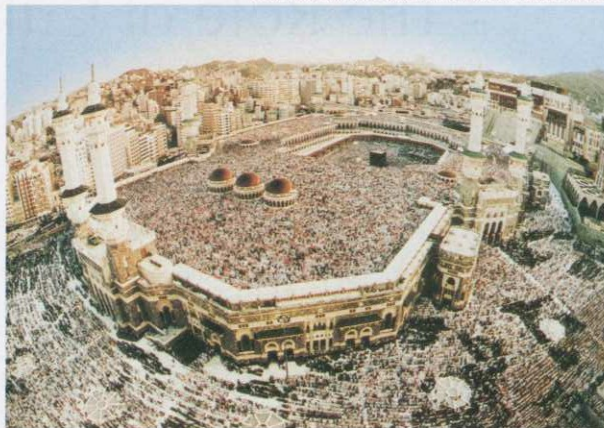
When considering the question of the identity of Europe, the Christian and Islamic worlds can be viewed as a single dynamic cultural space. It is difficult not only for non-Europeans but also for Europeans themselves to clearly define Europe. In his fascinating study *What is Europe?*, written more than 30 years ago, Masuda Shiro stressed the importance of viewing Europe not as an aggregate of individual countries such as Britain, France and Germany but as a single historical entity. Although there are a few outstanding exceptions such as Masuda, most Japanese scholars’ understanding of Europe has tended to remain at the level of focusing on each country in turn. To some extent this is a reflection of Japan’s long history of national seclusion and the resulting habit of thinking in terms of a single country, but it is also because Europeans themselves, even though they have the same Christian background, have studied history mainly at the national level, particularly after the advance of specialization following World War II.

The End of the Age of European History as “World History”

The Maastricht Treaty, which took effect on Nov. 1 1993, has spurred the rapid revision of the historical legacy of Europe to provide a common foundation for the political and economic association known as the European Union (EU). This movement can be seen in the publication of new textbooks emphasizing Europe’s shared history, such as *The History of Europe* (edited by F. Dorsch), which has been simultaneously published in over 10 countries, and *Europe*, currently being published in Britain, Germany, France, Spain and Italy. However, we cannot expect these books to immediately give us a clear historical definition of Europe, just as a hundred related volumes would not provide a definite answer to the intractable problem of Japan’s identity. The continuous posing of such questions should rather be viewed as means of gradually forming a new European identity. There is a growing recognition that it was Europe as a whole that formed the national histories of countries such as Britain, France and Germany. This trend will undoubtedly exert a significant influence on the Japanese understanding of the “world history.”

One thing is certain. The recent formation of the EU through the reinterpretation of Europe is just one instance of a general movement of regional reformation happening all over the world. It is linked to a worldwide trend reflected in the collapse of the former Soviet Union and East European communist bloc, the establishment of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the emergence of the Western Pacific Economic Region. This ongoing revision of European history amid worldwide regional reorganization will surely confirm once and for

Photo: Ministry of Information, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



The urge to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land facilitated the movement of people and materials

all that Europe no longer represents the whole world and that the age when European history meant world history has finally come to an end.

Now, when and how did Europe become established as a single historical entity? Historians tend to divide the European (or world) history into ancient, medieval, early modern (16th to 18th centuries) and modern (19th century onwards) in accordance with Europeans’ sense of their own history and with reference to the views of the best historians that Europe has produced. From this it will become apparent that two factors had a particularly profound influence on the periods of transition between these ages. The first was Europe’s relationship with the sea and the second was its interaction with the Orient (Islam).

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Continued in Part 4

Kawakatsu Heita is a professor of economic history at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto. His books and articles have been published in both English and Japanese. He also serves as an advisor for various governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport.