

In the Middle East, churches survived better – partly because Christian liturgy and literature were translated into local languages (this never happened in North Africa or the Gulf), and partly because churches were spared destruction at the hands of the Vandals.

THEN CAME THE ARABS

During the middle of the seventh century the Muslim armies famously burst from Arabia. Within a hundred years of the Prophet's death, barely pausing for a few brotherly spats, Arabs had swept all over the Middle East and North Africa, to the heart of Asia (one tradition says even to China), across Spain and deep into France. That they even turned back there was probably due to disinterest, rather than military defeat.

It was a dazzling series of military conquests, greatly helped by the divisions in the Christian world at the time. Then the Arabs followed military victory by constructing a great new civilization.

They unified into a single empire, with a single currency, an area from Central Asia to Western Europe: the first time this had ever been done. Trade between East and West flourished. Prosperity grew and with it, fine cities. Cordoba, Fez, Tunis, Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad became the great cities of the western half of the world. Innovation and new products flowed west: Indian numerals (we call them 'arabic'), cotton, rice, sugar-cane and citrus fruits. Our English names for fine fabrics date from the Muslim empire: muslin, damask, gauze, mohair, taffeta.

The Muslim empire took the best of Greek science and philosophy (getting it translated into Arabic first by Syrian Christians), and then built on it to become the leading scientific and technological power of the day: disciplines like medicine, pharmacology, astronomy and astrology thrived in Muslim hands. Paper-making arrived from China. Great buildings were erected: perhaps most audaciously of all, the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the world's most uncompromising architectural statement. A Muslim male citizen of this empire had rights and freedoms the equal of any man anywhere on earth at that time. It was (breathe it softly) the United States of its day, a civilization with supreme energy and vision, the global superpower, rivalled only by China.