

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## The Conquest of Sindh

**Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD**

Islam was introduced into the southwestern part of the Subcontinent, the Malabar coast, through trade. It was introduced into the northwestern part, Sindh and Multan, through an accident of history.

The conquest of Sindh, located in Pakistan, happened in stages. During the Caliphate of Omar ibn al Khattab (r), Muslim armies approached the coast of Makran, but Omar (r) withdrew the troops in response to reports of a harsh and inhospitable terrain. Emir Muawiya subdued eastern Afghanistan and the Northwest Frontier areas. However, it was not until the reign of Walid I (705-713) that much of what is today Pakistan was brought under Muslim rule.

From pre-Islamic times, there was a brisk trade between the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula and the western coast of India and Sri Lanka. Ships rode the eastern monsoons to the coast of Malabar and Sri Lanka to pick up spices and returned home riding on the western monsoons. Spices were in great demand throughout West Asia, North Africa and southern Europe and transactions were extremely profitable. This trade continued to thrive and expand with the advent of Muslim rule in West Asia and North Africa. It was through these merchants that Islam was first introduced into Kerala in southwestern India and Sri Lanka, located near the tip of India.

Sindh was notorious for its pirates in those times. These pirates would wait in ambush for merchant ships on the coast of Sindh and would raid them for booty. In the fateful year 707, these pirates attacked one of the Muslim merchant ships sailing back from Sri Lanka to the Persian Gulf. The men, women and children on board the ship were captured and taken inland to Sindh, where the Raja imprisoned them.

Hajjaj bin Yusuf Saqafi was the Omayyad governor of Iraq. When reports reached him of this incident, he wrote to Raja Dahir demanding that the captives be released and the responsible pirates punished. Dahir refused. This refusal set the stage for the onset of hostilities. It was the responsibility of the Caliphate to protect its citizens and to fight against injustice no matter what quarter it came from. Hajjaj bin Yusuf had that responsibility as a governor representing the Caliph. He sent an expedition under Ubaidullah bin Binhan to free the captives but Ubaidullah was defeated and killed in combat by troops of the Raja.

Determined that the provocations merit an appropriate response, Hajjaj dispatched an army of 7,000 seasoned cavalymen under Muhammed bin Qasim Saqafi. Muhammed bin Qasim was only a young man of seventeen but was one of the most capable generals of the era. Paying attention to detailed

planning, he sent heavy assault engines and army supplies by sea while the cavalry advanced by land through Baluchistan.

The success of an assault requires that the offensive weapons be superior to the defensive weapons. By the year 700, the Muslims had improved upon the various engines of war they had encountered in their advance through Persia, Byzantium and Central Asia. One specific assault engine was the *minjanique*, a catapult that could throw large stones at enemy forces and fortifications. The catapult, as a weapon of war, was in use in China as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Muslim engineers made two specific improvements on the Chinese design. First, they added a counterweight to one end of the cantilever, so as to harness the potential energy of the counterweight as the catapult was let go. Second, they mounted the entire mechanism on wheels so that the lateral reaction of the throw did not reduce the range of the machine. The *minjaniques* could project rounded stones weighing more than two hundred pounds over distances greater than three hundred yards. Persistent pounding by such large stones could bring down the sturdiest walls in the forts in existence at that time.

After capturing Panjgore and Armabel, Muhammed bin Qasim advanced towards the port of Debal, which was located near the modern city of Karachi. The Raja of Debal closed the city gates and a long siege ensued. Once again, the means for offensive warfare proved to be more powerful than the means for defense, enabling the Arab armies to continue their global advance towards military and political centralization. As was the pattern with Arab conquests, the *minjaniques* threw heavy projectiles at the fort and demolished its walls. After a month, Debal fell. The local governor fled and the Muslim prisoners who had been held there were freed.

From Debal, Muhammed bin Qasim continued his advance to the north and east. All of Baluchistan and Sindh fell including Sistan, Bahraj, Kutch, Arore, Kairej and Jior. Raja Dahir was killed in the Battle of Jior. One of his sons, Jai Singh resisted Muhammed bin Qasim at the Battle of Brahnabad, but he too was defeated and had to flee. Muhammed bin Qasim founded a new city near the present city of Karachi, built a mosque there and advanced northwards to western Punjab. Multan was his target. Gour Singh was the Raja of Multan. His large army was reinforced by contingents from neighboring rajas. The Indians excelled in static warfare with armored elephants and foot soldiers but these were no match against swift, hard hitting cavalry. Realizing the advantage enjoyed by Muhammed bin Qasim's cavalry in mobile warfare, the Raja locked himself in the fort of Multan. A siege ensued. Once again the technology of *minjaniques* proved decisive. The heavy machines destroyed the fort and the raja surrendered. Multan was added to the Arab empire in the year 713.

The conquest of Sindh brought Islamic civilization face to face with the ancient Vedic civilization of the Indo-Gangetic Plains. In later centuries, there was much that Muslim scholarship would learn from India —mathematics, astronomy, iron smelting—to name but a few subjects. (Muslim scholarship has focused more on the interaction between Islam and the West and has neglected the interaction between Islamic civilization and the East. This is a surprise considering that until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was little that the West had to offer the more advanced Islamic civilization. The flow of knowledge was almost always from Islam to the West. By contrast, the Muslims learned a great deal from India).

Soon, the borders of the Omayyad Empire extended to the borders of China and the Muslims acquired a great many advanced technologies from the Chinese, including the processing and manufacture of silk, porcelain, paper and gunpowder. The Prophet himself said: "Seek knowledge even onto China". The addition of what is today Pakistan consolidated an empire extending from the Pyrenees to the Indus and

the Gobi desert. This vast empire was now rubbing elbows with the ancient civilizations of India and China. From this vantage point, the Muslims were in a superb position to absorb, transform and develop knowledge from Persia, Greece, India and China.

Muhammed bin Qasim was eager to continue his advance into northern and eastern Punjab but events in far away Damascus overtook events in Pakistan. Caliph Walid I died in 713. In the ensuing political turbulence, Muhammed bin Qasim was summoned back to Iraq, just as Musa bin Nusair was summoned from Spain at about the same time.

After the death of Caliph Walid I, the end of Muhammed bin Qasim was even more tragic than that of Musa bin Nusair. Muhammed bin Qasim was a nephew of Hajjaj bin Yusuf, also known as Hajjaj the Cruel, the governor of Iraq. The new Caliph Sulaiman had a personal dislike of Hajjaj but Hajjaj died before Sulaiman could punish him. So, Sulaiman turned instead against Hajjaj's relatives. Muhammed bin Qasim was dismissed and sent back to Iraq. The new governor of Iraq, Saleh bin Abdur Rahman hated Hajjaj because the latter had killed Saleh's brother. But since Hajjaj had died, Saleh also turned against Hajjaj's relatives. Muhammed bin Qasim was arrested and sent to prison for no fault but that he was a nephew of Hajjaj. In prison, Muhammed bin Qasim was blinded, tortured and killed. Thus ended the life of two of the most brilliant generals of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

The fate of Musa bin Nusair and Muhammed bin Qasim is a lesson of historical importance. With the ascension of Muawiya, legitimacy of rule was no longer by consent of the masses; it was by force. Sultan after sultan arose and established himself by dictate or by virtue of inheritance from soldier-conquerors. When a ruler was competent and just, as happened with Omar bin Abdul Aziz, the common people enjoyed some freedoms. When he was a tyrant, as happened with Sulaiman bin Abdul Malik, the people suffered. Since the period of the first four Caliphs, Muslims have not shown an institutional capability to evolve and nourish their political leadership from among the masses. When the body politic throws up its first echelon of leadership, the tendency has been to destroy that leadership, unless the leader survives through shrewd maneuvering or ruthless imposition. This inability to cultivate and nourish political leadership from the bottom up has defined the limits of Muslim power and in a broader sense, the achievements of Islamic civilization. The survival of potential leaders has always depended on the whims of the despot at the top or of his local political cronies.

A second lesson from the tragic deaths of these two outstanding generals is that the internal dialectic of the world of Islam has defined the limits of its reach. Having completed the conquest of Spain, Musa bin Zubair was ready to launch an invasion of France when he was called back. He might well have succeeded in this goal because there was as yet no strong leader into resist a determined assault. By the time the Muslims did come around to venture into central France, Gaul had a strong leader in Charles Martel and the Muslims were forced to turn around at the Battle of Tours (737). Similarly, Muhammed bin Qasim had successfully penetrated the Indian defenses in the Indus River basin. Given a green signal from Damascus and Kufa, he might well have extended the dominions of the Caliphate into the Gangetic plains. This was not to be. Muhammed bin Qasim was called back from Multan just as he prepared to launch a major thrust beyond the Indus River. Northern India remained in Rajput hands for the time being. It was not until the victory of Mohammed Ghori at the Battle of Panipat (1191) that the Muslims captured Delhi. In both cases, it was the internal turmoil in the Muslim body politic that was the determining factor in the arrest of the Muslim advance.

Comments are closed.

[Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com.](#)