From the Conquest of Egypt by Sultan Selīm I in 1517 to the Napoleonic Expedition to Egypt in 1798

Introduction

After the conquest of Syria and Egypt, the Ottoman Empire was complete. And it did not take long for a lively exchange between the various regions of the eastern Mediterranean to come about, an exchange that was good for trade and for scholarship. The capital Istanbul especially, from where the sultan in his mercy distributed all the benefices of the empire, was very attractive for scholars from all regions. But all this coming and going did not produce any fertile movement of the mind. While in the West the enlargement of the geographical horizon, the revival of classical antiquity, and the struggle against the spiritual bonds of the Old Church led to a new worldview, the Orient persevered in its intellectual torpidity. Even though the new worldview that was brought on by the discovery of the Americas was closely monitored in learned circles in Istanbul and by the statesmen who kept a keen eye on the shifts of power in Europe, the only “benefit” from the New World that reached the Muslim masses was tobacco. Even though this was to lead to a lively debate among the fuqahā’ that lasted several decades, tobacco itself seemed merely to aggravate the listlessness of the masses. It was only with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt that the Orient was opened to the influence of European culture, which gradually made itself felt in intellectual life as well.

Next to Istanbul, Cairo also asserted itself as a intellectual capital of Islam in this period, primarily through the al-Azhar academy, to which students from all parts of the Muslim world flocked together. Syria, on the other hand, fell into the background, immersing itself ever more deeply in an isolated provincial existence, lacking any internal urge to develop further. Even the emirates that came into being under Ottoman dominion in coastal cities like Tripoli and in Lebanon were unable to add new lustre to that existence. Despite their political hegemony, the Turks never fully disengaged themselves from the Arab school. In Iran, on the other hand, which had once given so many excellent contributors to Arabic literature, Arabic was more and more overshadowed by the national language. In contrast, Arabic was able to spread to the East, from South Arabia to India, all the way to the inhabitants of the Malay archipelago.
In North Africa, Islamic intellectual life was even more fossilised than in the east, but here, too, its influence reached ever further into the Sudan.


