

What the Occident owes to the Orient

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The Crusades

When the first Crusaders set out for Jerusalem, Europe was a continent of illiterate peasants and soldiers. But despite all the slaughter, these hostile expeditions resulted in a cultural exchange between the Orient and the Occident. This exchange promoted the intellectual development of what was then backward Europe. We have been profiting from it to this day.

The great booty

That is another story: the greed of the Crusaders. Every town that was conquered in the Holy Land was mercilessly looted. For besides the pious fervour to rescue the sacred places of Christianity from the "heathens", it was something quite different that drove knights and massed armies to the Orient: the reports of its fabulous treasures, the greed for rich booty. And the men obtained their booty. They did not seize it illegally: there was the booty law, which was regulated by the highest authority.

So anyone who survived the devastating fighting, hunger, thirst and disease, was not taken prisoner and then finally succeeded in making the voyage home safe and sound - he was a made man. He returned to his country with looted treasures, gold and silver, he was highly respected. Others who remained in the Orient acquired houses and the wives of the natives and lived off the fat of the land.

The Church, towns and politicians strove for more than mere material gains: they wanted relics and art treasures. And they helped themselves. So many "new" relics flooded into Europe at that time that many a clergyman complained that the "old" remains were being badly neglected – which meant that pilgrimages to the appropriate monasteries and Churches were dwindling.

In the treasury of San Marco, the Venice Cathedral, you can still admire wonderful gems that were looted by the Venetians from the Orient. But the showpiece of their Crusaders' booty is the ancient quadriga: four large, formerly gilded, bronze horses which Doge Enrico Dandolo brought back from Constantinople, conquered in 1204. For four and a half centuries they adorned the cathedral's central portal, until Napoleon seized this priceless work of art and set it up in Paris to celebrate his victory. After the fall of the emperor, the horses came back to their old location in Venice.

The Christian world rejoiced at the looting of such precious objects. And a long time passed before it realised that the actual "booty" of the Crusades was something different from and more significant than money, gold, relics and art treasures – a peaceful booty which was to change the face of Europe.

Cultural booty

In the beginning knights and scholars had regarded the Arabs' books and writings as the works of the devil, if only because of their unknown and strange script, which aroused their suspicion. They regarded with mistrust what they took to be heathen occultism, the vile products of superstition and diabolic spells with which it was probably possible to get up to all kinds of magic mischief.

What the uneducated Crusaders uneasily pushed aside, burnt, destroyed – these were testimonies to centuries of the greatest wisdom and culture. And only when the invaders had learnt the language and script of the vanquished did it emerge that these "heathen works of the devil" contained the actual treasures of the Orient – treasures that were to carry the Occident on to undreamt-of heights. Did the heathens therefore become the Christians' teachers? It was the Church which in those days had a firm hold on European intellectual life. The clergy monopolised for itself the entire scholarship as "ancilla theologiae" (the maiden of theology), since everything had to be subordinated to Christianity and its beliefs. Admittedly, new ideas and systems were certainly born, despite all the constraints; and Latin – that is also a cultural act – was turned into the world language by the Churchmen, and this benefited the intellectuals in particular, as it enabled them to discuss with one another across the language barriers.

The legacy has a seminal effect

The fact that Rome led the people by the nose led to impoverishment. "The intellectual liberation resulting from the Crusades" is the title given by the historian Hans Prutz to a chapter in his work on this development. He describes the dichotomy like this: "The Church becomes the teacher and educator of the people. But by making them subservient to itself and wanting to keep them in a state of permanent immaturity, the Church finally drives them to mount a general uprising against its authority, which had once had such a beneficial effect, but which was now felt to be not only a merely tiresome, but also a disastrous shackle. This change was essentially brought about through the Crusades."

Let us add to this: and through the rediscovery of the Greeks' works, especially Aristotle's, and this is something we owe to the Arabs. For, although it was permitted to read Latin authors in the Occident, great importance was attached to scribes, clerics and monks cultivating their style from the works of Cicero, Virgil,

Horace and Ovid, without assimilating much of the spirit of the ancients. The Christian faith was not to be tainted by heathen thought. And the Greek philosophers? They remained largely unheeded, lost, suppressed and if not, one only learnt about them second hand – from appropriately prepared compendiums.

In the Orient it was different. There the works of antiquity had been carefully guarded and translated into Arabic. At the time of the Crusades the Moslem "heathens" for generations possessed flourishing scholars' schools and academies in which the ideas of the ancients were fostered. And not only fostered, but also developed. "Great pioneering advances were made there in intellectual culture and new areas were opened up to human thought at a time when the intellectual culture of the West, treated with condescension by the Church, still had no notion of them," is the judgement of the historian Hans Putz.

Take Baghdad, for example. The city on the Tigris was for a long time a metropolis of scholarship famous in the Orient. It is here that philosophy was pursued according to Plato and Aristotle and mathematics according to Euclid, astronomy according to Ptolemy and medicine advanced according to Hippocrates. Another example is the Academy of Gondeshapur (in present-day Iraq): here flourished a pioneering medical school based on the medicine of the ancient Greeks. Arabs and Jews who had studied here were known as the best doctors in the world at that time.

Some of this knowledge seeped out beforehand to Central Europe via North Africa and Moorish Spain. But now, in the new era of the struggle for Jerusalem, a flood of Greek works together with their Arabic commentaries swept into the Occident and gave fresh impetus to scholasticism (the educational tradition of the medieval schools, ie universities), leading in the end to one of the greatest upswings in civilisation: the Renaissance.

The great masters of antiquity are discovered anew

It was above all the universal genius Aristotle, Plato's master scholar, probably the most comprehensive intellect of antiquity altogether, who had an explosive effect. For centuries his ideas now supplied material for heated discussions at the universities, which were mushrooming in Europe: for example, in Italy Bologna in 1119, Naples in 1224 and Padua in 1222, in France Paris around 1200 (the Sorbonne) and Toulouse in 1229 and in England Oxford in 1163 and Cambridge in 1209.

While the Crusaders were either murdering or being murdered in Palestine, at home great scholars were grappling with the original works of Aristotle and his Arabic commentators. University professors and the Church teacher Albertus Magnus (the Great) and his (no lesser) pupil Thomas Aquinas – both Dominican monks, theologians and philosophers – dedicated their lives to creating Christian

Aristotelianism and to harmonising the conception of the world of the Greek philosopher and natural historian, his ideas and approaches with the teachings of the Church.

There were passionate, fruitful intellectual struggles about differing views, for example those of the Arab philosopher Averroes (1126-1198), the most significant Aristotle commentator, who had lived in Spain. It was against his "Averroism", which became fashionable at the Paris Sorbonne in particular, that Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas fiercely campaigned. In this way Aristotle, the ancient philosopher, livened up the listless Occident, and it was the Crusaders who imported this dynamite to Europe from the Arab countries.

Aristotle's influence

What was actually so special and exciting about Aristotle's works? Firstly, that in them he brought together the entire knowledge of antiquity; and secondly, that he pointed out the way to completely new areas of knowledge. Aristotle's creative works contain an absolutely incredible wealth of ideas: he dealt with philosophy and political science, rhetoric and drama, astronomy, zoology and botany - and all of this logically, soberly and systematically, even including statistics. However, the ancient professor knew – like so many of his colleagues at universities today – how to delegate work to his students and assistants. And he had the good fortune to be subsidised by Alexander the Great; and what is more, the King of Macedonia placed a whole army of slaves and aids at his disposal to help him in his research into the animal and plant kingdoms.

In Europe people were now interested in the biography of the ancient Greek. Coming from a doctor's family, he had spent some twenty years with Plato, first as a student and then as an assistant teacher. Years of wandering followed before he was appointed tutor to the later conqueror of the world, Alexander, to finally run a school of his own in Athens. Towards the end of his life he was threatened by the same fate as Socrates: the Athenians wanted to put him on trial; but before being condemned he managed to flee to his estate on the island of Euboea. It was looked upon as rather improper that this great and wise man was not only married (to Phytias, the close relative of a tyrant in Asia Minor), but became so dependent on a lover that he is said to have offered sacrifices to her as if she were a goddess.

But Aristotle was not alone in reaching the scholastics in Europe. Thanks to the diligence of the Arab scholars, important dialogues of the philosopher Plato also returned to the Occident; the teachings of the Stoics, of the Neopythagoreans, of the Neoplatonists were imported. Hippocrates, the founder of scientific medicine, became known and recognised; Euclid's theorems and Archimedes' findings gave fresh impetus to mathematics; and the complicated geocentric concept of the universe of the geographer, astronomer and astrologer Ptolemy, who calculated the

positions of planets and fixed stars with an accuracy hitherto unachieved. Not in every case, however, is it possible to discern what came to us from the Near East and what came on a roundabout way via the Arabs and Jews in Sicily, North Africa or Spain.

Knowledge of the occult also comes to the West

Various kinds of esotericism also washed over from the Orient; in this case the illiterate and superstitious Crusaders were not so wrong; and what already partly existed covertly in the West received fresh impetus: the secrets of alchemy (from which modern chemistry emerged) and – through the astrologer's handbook "Tetrabiblos" by Ptolemy – the arts of astrology.

Esoteric and occult knowledge of magic and mysticism, originating from a mixture of Egyptian, late Greek, Jewish, Christian and oriental ideas of the beyond, appeared on the scene to the annoyance of the clergy. So those who were secretly on the edge of Church life received welcome intellectual support. Numerology and a belief in and the invocation of demons were practised in the backrooms of the intellectuals; in particular the magic spells of a work wrongly ascribed to Aristotle entitled "Secreta secretorum" (The secret of secrets) enjoyed great popularity. But it is difficult to separate the belief in ghosts, charlatanry and a delight in horror adventures from serious philosophical and scientific endeavours.

The influence on literature

Hard to tell the extent to which the literature of the Orient influenced that of the West. But there are examples: impressed by the colourful pictures of the Arabic-Persian poetry, Crusaders returning home passed on what they had heard from narrators of fairy tales. For instance stories from the popular "Book of the Seven Wise Masters", much loved over there. Or the fantastic tale of Barlaam and Josaphat, which found its way into our medieval poetry through Rudolf von Ems. There are also amazing parallels, for example, between the Persian love novel "Wis and Ramin" and the Tristan and Iseult poems (which arose later); that this material was directly taken over is, however, doubted by quite a few modern scholars.

An especially precious gift from the Orient to us was later the ghazal (Arabic for spun yarn), a highly artificial form of poem, which was occasionally used even by Goethe in his work "West-östlicher Divan" (one meaning of the Arabic word divan is a collection of poems). The Weimar author was certainly clear about the significance of the cultural import from the East: "The Orient has magnificently forced its way across the Mediterranean," he wrote enthusiastically – and: "Although the Western nations have taken over much of the wealth of the Orient for their own use, a few things to reap will still be found here."

The first-hand experience of the Crusaders' fighting, too, has entered our literature. It is not difficult to recognise in many an epic poem of those times the actual carnage of the Crusaders, for example in the conquest of Constantinople; the writer was no doubt present himself.

All at once history was written in a fresh and realistic style. Whereas before this historians had produced dry and impersonal material, quite often mere court circulars, eye-witnesses were now writing for an eager readership. From this there developed a new branch which today still fills whole bookshops: travel literature. Well informed authors described the travel routes, the climate, the localities, the people and their countries for those readers who themselves felt an urge to set out on pilgrimages to the Holy Land between the fighting. For now some movement came into the Occident, even among the civilians.

The influence on trade

Trade with the East made the port towns of Genoa and Venice still more powerful and immeasurably wealthy. Spices, dyes, aromatic scents, silk cloth, carpets, beads and precious stones were imported, and in return Europe sent its products to the Orient. For this exchange of goods warehouses by the sea were needed, and so the Germans, too, – the merchants of Augsburg, Nuremberg, Regensburg – owned their "fondacos" on the Canal Grande in Venice.

Occident and Orient moved closer together. As proof of this we find quite ordinary words in our language to this day which were taken over or formed from Arabic. Here a small selection: algebra, alchemy and aniline, elixir and carafe, mattress and lemonade, sofa, spinach, talisman and zenith.

And there was something else the merchants brought with them, something revolutionary, without which our modern computer world would be inconceivable: the Arabic numerals (which gradually supplanted the Roman ones). They introduced to the West what the clever Arabs had taken over from the Indians and what is today the basis of all calculations: the nought and the use of this figure which multiplies all the other numbers in the decimal system.

Here again the historian Hans Prutz on the "booty" of the Crusades and its impact on Europe and its development: "New countries, new circumstances, new products, new skills, new expressions, new languages were opened up to the Occident." And more besides: "The intellectual liberation and the rebirth of Europe began in those times."