

## [Transcript] The Rest Is History / 376. Baghdad: The Forging of Islam

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Dawn in the city by the river. As the streets come to life, you haul yourself up from the gutter.

Your name is Basim Ibn Issaq and once when your father was working on the great mosque of Samara, you might have been somebody.

But he was cast into exile and died a poor man. And you have grown up here in the streets of the old capital.

A beggar and nobody. A thief in the shadows of the 9th century.

Already the streets around you are bustling with people. The uncounted souls who live here in the round city.

Merchants and traders, hawkers and hustlers, slave girls and soldiers from every corner of the earth.

From the shores of Africa, the deserts of Arabia, the frozen wastes of the north, the far steps of the east.

This is the city founded by the caliph Almansoor, home to a million people.

This is the city of peace, the greatest, richest, most colourful, most popular city on earth.

This is Baghdad.

So this is the setting for the video game Assassin's Creed Mirage, which is out, Tom, as you will know, at the end of this week.

And we talked in our Library of Alexandria episode about this franchise.

They've sold more than 200 million copies and they have these very intricately designed historical settings.

But never, I think, one more colourful or more exciting than this 9th century Baghdad.

It's interesting, isn't it? Because you alluded to the one in Alexandria.

What have they had? They've had one set in French Revolutionary Paris.

So cities that have a kind of popular global resonance.

And Baghdad obviously does.

It's the city of the Arabian Knights of Harun al-Rashid, Alibaba, all that kind of thing.

Saddam Hussein.

But also Saddam Hussein.

That's the issue, isn't it? That probably, if you say to most people now at Baghdad, they would think of death squads and the Iraq War.

Did you ever watch the banana splits, Dominic?

I did in the 70s, yeah.

So the banana splits were what they were kind of loveable cartoon characters going around in cars, running into each other.

And they had some cartoons and one of them was called the Arabian Knights KN.

And I remember there was one of them who had the ability to transform himself.

And he would say, size of a hunting bird or something.

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And woof, he would become a hunting bird.

So for me as a child, Baghdad was absolutely this romantic place of Arabian night style, glamour.

And it is one of the great poetic cities, a city of myth, and we will go on to look at that.

So we'll look at the Arabian Knights and the degree to which they actually did originate in Baghdad.

But I think the other point to make about Baghdad is that it is a massively globally significant city for the vast sweep of history.

Because the story of how it comes to be founded and then to flourish is essentially the story of how Islam itself evolves to become the civilization that we would recognize today.

So I would say we're going to do four episodes on Baghdad, the story of how it comes to be founded. It's golden age, the legends that surround it.

I would say that these episodes are as influential on global history as any episodes we've done.

Right, because this is a huge sort of transition moment in world history.

The development of a, I mean, we're looking back a little bit.

So it's the development of an Islamic empire, isn't it?

But it's also the development of Islam's sense of itself.

It's also the way in which the center of gravity of the Islamic world moves, isn't it?

Because the Arabs have come out of the desert.

They take the Eastern Roman Empire and then they kind of become, they move back towards the, I guess, towards what used to be the old Persian heartland.

Yeah, it's basically how Islam becomes that little bit more Persian.

We've done two episodes on early Islamic history.

So we did one on Muhammad himself and we did one on the evolution of the Kaaba.

And in both of those, we were exploring the way in which the legends that are told about Muhammad, the origins of Islam, the emergence of the Islamic empire, how hard it can be to distinguish from the actual history.

Yeah.

But I think the key argument that we were making in those episodes was that Islam does not emerge fully formed, like kind of Athena emerging from the brows used that it takes time to evolve.

And the first great imperial dynasty of Islam, the Umayyads, are toppled and they are replaced by a new dynasty, the Abbasids, and it's the Abbasids who found Baghdad.

And in lots of recent histories, including my own, shout out of the sword, the founding of Baghdad is seen as a kind of punctuation point where that transitional process, the process by which Islam emerges from antiquity from the Roman and the Persian worlds.

It's a really, really significant break.

So I know that we've begun by saying we're going to do four episodes on Baghdad.

Actually, in this episode, I just want to set the scene and Baghdad will still not be founded by the end of the episode.

Craigie, that's a terrible spoiler, Tom.

But the portrait we give of the late Umayyad world, it's a portrait of the circumstances from which this extraordinary revolution that brings the Abbasids to power and culminates in the founding of Baghdad.

So I hope that people will listen to it and not feel that it's completely irrelevant to the story we want to tell.

No, no, it's a great moment, isn't it?

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It's a great watershed in the transition from late antiquity to the medieval world.  
Kind of classical Islamic empire, yeah.  
So let's start by in the broadest brush painting the scene, Tom.  
So at the beginning of what, the 7th century, the Arab armies have carried the message of Muhammad out of the deserts.  
They have absolutely wiped the floor with the Eastern Roman Empire, with the Persians.  
And they've created an empire that actually, when we talk about empires, we always think of colonial empires or we think of the Romans.  
But this is one of the greatest empires in human history, isn't it, the Arab Empire?  
And they're staggering how quickly they put it together.  
Yeah, so it's much larger than the Roman Empire.  
It's probably by the early 8th century, so a century or so after the death of Muhammad.  
It's about five million square miles.  
It extends from the Atlantic right the way up to the walls of China.  
The process of conquest has revolved around the dismembering of the Roman Empire.  
So the Arabs have conquered Syria, Palestine, Egypt.  
They've spread along the North African coast.  
They've invaded Spain.  
They've crossed the Pyrenees.  
They're kind of probing the defenses of the Frankish Kingdom.  
Eastwards, they have swallowed the Persian Empire entire.  
So the Persian Empire ruled by a dynasty called the Sasanians.  
The Sasanians have a kind of sacred bloodline.  
It is believed by the Persians that this bloodline has been appointed by God.  
Most of the subjects of the Sasanians, the Persians, are Zoroastrian.  
They believe in a world that is divided into good and evil.  
It's believed that a kind of apocalyptic reckoning will come.  
But all of these Sasanian possessions have been swallowed up.  
And the last Sasanian king has kind of fled Eastwards trying to reach China  
and died in a region called Korazhan.  
So Korazhan, it's northeastern Iran now.  
It's Afghanistan.  
It's Central Asia.  
And it's dotted with Oasis cities that still have a resonance to this day.  
So Samarkand, Herat, brilliantly named Murph.  
And that has been conquered by about 705, 706.  
And then there's the Oxus River.  
And that's been crossed.  
And they're coming up, you know, they're approaching China.  
So they've gone further than Alexander?  
Absolutely.  
I would say that no dynasty in history has presided over  
a greater array of conquests than the Amayads.  
And so therefore they have this enormous sweep of conquests.

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And this is an age when it is taken for granted that things do not happen in the world without the say so of God. So the Amayads can point to the vast, vastness of the sweep of their conquests and say this proves that we are indeed what we say we are, the deputies of God, the caliphs. So Tom, just on the, you know, my ads. So they're not the original people who had taken Islam out of the desert. Are they? They're a successor dynasty. Well, again, it's very confusing because there's a lot of kind of propaganda, Amayad propaganda and anti-Amayad propaganda surrounding this. According to Muslim historians, they come from Mecca, but there is also a very strong tradition that they had made their fortune trading with the Romans, which implies that they probably came from the borders of Palestine or Syria, actually. Yeah, because they build the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is very important to them and they make their capital in Damascus, the capital of Syria. So that seems to be their kind of their native land. They're essentially a Syrian dynasty and they come to power after four commanders of the faithful, four caliphs who will be commemorated by Islamic tradition as the Rashidun, the righteously guided. So that's Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. And Ali is a key figure in this story because he is both the cousin and the son-in-law of Muhammad. He rules as a caliph, but he ends up assassinated and he leaves behind children. And the question of what the role of his bloodline should be is going to be a kind of key part of this story. But before we come to all that, by the 740s, although the Amayads are the masters of this vast empire, there is a kind of growing mood of crisis because for the first time they're starting to experience military reverses. Right. So in 732, a raiding party going northwards into the land of the Franks up to the Great Shrine of Saint Martin in Tor is defeated. At the opposite end of the Islamic world, in Trans-Oxania, so approaching China, the armies of Islam are defeated, a battle called Aksu in 717. And that basically means that they lose northern Trans-Oxania. The greatest enemy, of course, faced by the Caliphate is the surviving rump of the Roman Empire with its capital in Constantinople. And the Amayads have twice tried to capture it. So in 674, and then again in 716-717, vast amphibious invasions of the Great City of the Caesars, but it holds out. And so in the decades that follow, you start to get sayings that are attributed to the Prophet saying that Byzantium will never fall, that the people of Rum are like rock and water. They will be with you till the end of time. Yeah. And this is bad for the Amayad reputation because their legitimacy to a degree has been founded on a sense of their invincibility.

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So up to that point, Tom, had they envisaged themselves as living in a sort of unipolar world where they would be the only super bearer

and now they have to accept that every empire has its limits and they have theirs.

And they have to accept that there are going to be other geopolitical powers, the Romans or whoever, and they have to live within those boundaries.

I think they continue to hope that they will conquer Byzantium and that the conquest will continue.

But there is definitely a sense that perhaps the conquest of the world isn't going to be quite as easy as they had assumed in the kind of heady days

when it seemed that God was giving them victories wherever they went.

Yes.

So there's trouble on the frontiers.

At the same time, there are all kinds of sectarian conflicts going on within Islam itself.

And these date back to the reign of Ali, which we talked about.

So that's back in the 7th century.

So the guy who was assassinated.

The guy who was assassinated, the cousin and the son-in-law of the prophet.

So the people who are responsible for Ali's assassination, this is a group of people called the Karajites,

which literally mean those who go out.

And these are people who are in Ali's army.

They feel that Ali is basically a heretic, that he is not measuring up to the high standards that they would expect from a Muslim,

let alone a blood relative and marriage relative of the prophet.

Why? What's he doing?

Because the Karajites are reading the Quran, which preaches a very radical kind of egalitarianism.

Justice and equality are very, very fundamental to the moral teachings of the Quran.

And they argue that actually, you know, the true aristocracy in Islam should be one of piety, not of blood.

And therefore, if a slave is more devoted to God than, say, the cousin of Muhammad, then he is more righteous.

And this is a notion that Ali is not prepared to tolerate.

And so he kind of expels them from his army.

And the Karajites are, I mean, to the degree that you can find four bears of the Islamic state in the 7th century or the 8th century.

I mean, it's kind of very anachronistic, say so.

But the Karajites would be the parallel.

They are very, very brutal.

There are all kinds of stories of them slicing open the bellies of those whom they condemn as infidels.

They go into marketplaces cloaked with swords hidden underneath their cloaks.

They'll draw the swords out and just kind of turn and turn like whirling dervishes, killing as many people as they can until they're killed.

So very, very kind of intimidating, frightening figures, a kind of murderous piety.

Right.

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And Ali sees them as the dangerous opponents to the same rule that they are.  
And he militarily crushes them in 658.  
But then three years later, one of them succeeds in murdering him while he's at prayers in the great city of Kufa, which is a kind of equivalent of a Roman legionary base.  
It's a great military base for the Arabs built on the borders of Mesopotamia.  
So what's now Iraq?  
That's quite close to where not that a million miles away from where they will end up founding Baghdad, right?  
It's absolutely that kind of that corner, yes.  
And Kufa will play a very important part because there are lots and lots of Karajites inside Kufa.  
Right.  
It's a kind of breeding ground for radicalism.  
But there are other radicals as well in Kufa going through the Umayyad period right the way into the eighth century.  
And the most significant of these are kind of the opposites of the Karajites.  
The Karajites reject Ali's claim to be the legitimate heir of Muhammad because they say he's not pious enough.  
But there are those who say that Islam can only be ruled by the heirs of Ali.  
And these people become known as the Shia Ali, the Shia Ali.  
So these are the Shia, Shia Muslims.  
They're still with us to this day.  
And these are people in the seventh century who believe that Ali's sons who are obviously also the grandsons of the prophet should rule.  
These grandsons are denied the rule of the Caliphate by the Umayyads.  
One of them is killed at Karbala.  
Again, still a great place of pilgrimage outside what is now Baghdad for the Shia.  
And the Umayyads have every stake in crushing the Shia as they do the Karajites.  
But the Shia remain and they kind of basically take a leaf out of the Sasanian books.  
So you remember I said that the conviction of Zoroastrians in the Sasanian empire is that the Sasanian royal dynasty are essentially divinely appointed.  
That this is a divinely sanctioned bloodline.  
So this is Persia, right?  
Yes, that conviction essentially migrates to the descendants of Ali.  
So Tom, is that why to this day Persia, aka Iran, is a hotbed of Shia or Shiites as people might call them?  
No, it becomes Shiite much later, I think in the 16th century.  
But you could, I mean, it has been argued that there is a kind of implicit buried Zoroastrianism that fuses with Shiism that does perhaps explain it.  
It's a very complicated territory.  
I think the key thing is that at this point, these various factions, these various sectarian divisions are still very much alive.  
They're kind of fusing.  
So in the, again, under the Umayyads, there's a kind of brilliant figure who gets thrown up.  
This is the process of civil wars that sees Abdul Malik, the great Umayyad Caliph who ends up

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building the Dome of the Rock.

While he is busy establishing his rule in Syria, this figure appears in Iraq who is commemorated as Muhtar the Deceiver.

Seizes the treasury in Kufar, gives it all away to the poor.

So again, you see this kind of sense of radical egalitarianism, this sense that the poor can claim justice from the rich,

urging a revolution, saying that all men should be equal, claiming to be a prophet and huge excitement because he has Dominic a magic chair.

Oh, Gregi.

Which he parades around.

I love a magic chair.

Like the wishing chair in Ena Blyton, Tom.

Yeah, exactly.

So he's a kind of tremendous figure and it's said by his supporters that he's accompanied by angels on horses of fire.

Actually, his followers are kind of terrifying cudgel bearers they're called and they end up kind of beating everyone up.

Right.

And so this sense that militant piety can shade into extreme violence is a continuing theme throughout this period.

And it explains actually why Amayad rule comes to be welcomed.

So Muhtar the Deceiver ends up killed.

His severed hand is nailed to the mosque in Kufar.

His chair is burned, but he comes to be revered by the Shia as a supporter of Ali.

And in the seven forties, you have a whole kind of renewal of Karajite uprisings of Shia uprisings because these are people who are looking at the military defeats on the frontiers, looking at the wealth and the splendor of the Amayad Caliphs and saying these are un-Islamic figures.

God does not favor them.

He wants a new dispensation.

And in seven, four, five, the Karajites actually proclaimed their own Caliph and managed to secure a big kind of chunk of Iraq.

So none of this is good for the Amayads.

Yeah.

But I think it would have been manageable for them if it wasn't for the fact that something else is also happening,

people in the long run be terminal for the Amayads themselves, but even more seismically be hugely influential on the growth and development of Islam.

And essentially, it's a process that will culminate in the development of the kind of Islam that is by far the largest form, what we call Sunni Islam.

And I think we should maybe take a break now.

And when we come back, we can look at exactly what Sunni Islam is, how it develops and exactly why it's so menacing for the Amayads and the role that it will come to play in the revolution that overthrows the Amayads and brings the Abbasids to power.

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We'll find out more after the break.

Very exciting.

Hello.

Welcome back to The Rest is History.

So we have been in what is now Iraq.

We're eventually going to get to the founding of the great city of Baghdad, but we're very carefully setting out the context for it.

So Tom, we've been talking about the Umayyad dynasty.

They're based in Damascus in Syria.

They're presiding over this empire that is very fractious.

They've suffered a series of defeats.

They're all kinds of sectarian, millenarian movements that are challenging their authority.

But you said before the break that this might have been manageable.

Were it not for this development a long way away?

So we're going to get to that, aren't we?

But do you want to talk a bit about the kind of people that the Umayyads are ruling, the kind of the population, whose support they need?

Right.

So I think there's always a temptation when you think of the coming of Islam.

You think, you know, there's the Romans and the Persians and then the Arabs conquer it.

And basically everyone in the Middle East becomes Muslim.

This is absolutely not the case.

The Arabs are a very tiny minority, ruling lands that are absolutely teeming with different peoples, with different traditions,

and perhaps most importantly with different understandings of the divine.

So if you look at the heartlands of the Caliphate, so Syria, Palestine, Egypt, the lands that had been ruled by the Romans,

and Iraq and Iran, the lands that had been ruled by the Persians, by the Sasanians, the largest number of people there are Christians.

This is a very, very Christian world in the 7th and 8th centuries.

They're obviously dominant in the form of Roman provinces, but there are also an awful lot of them in the form of Sasanian empire.

So there are a lot of Christians in Mesopotamia.

You also, of course, have the Zoroastrians who we mentioned in the first half.

For them, the overthrow of the Sasanians is devastating because they had seen the Sasanian dynasty as a kind of a pledge that God was on their side.

Dare I say the sacral quality of the Sasanian bloodline?

But, Tom, a quick question.

Why is that more devastating for the people in the old Persian empire, the Zoroastrians, than the loss of their territory is for the Christians in the form of Roman empire?

Is it because the Christians, they didn't need to be in an officially Christian state because they had a different conception of...

Right, because Christians have flourished in Mesopotamia, despite the fact that it's the Zoroastrian king ruling Iran and Iraq.



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They don't have to worry about it.

And it doesn't.

Christianity flourished long before Constantine converted to Christianity and before the Roman emperors became Christian.

So that's fine.

There's a kind of, if you want to put it in anachronistic terms, there's a division between church and state for Christians, even in late antiquity.

But there is no real division between church and state in the Persian world.

And so therefore, the loss of the Sasanian dynasty is completely devastating.

So we have a Zoroastrian priest in the wake of the Arab conquests mourning the faith is ruined.

The Shah and Shah, say the king of kings, he was slain like a dog.

And the two are kind of, you know, he's equating the two.

The loss of the Sasanian dynasty means that the faith is ruined.

And there's a further tragedy for the Zoroastrians, which is that in the Quran, it's specified that those who follow the teachings of the prophet should allow

the peoples of the book, as long as they acknowledge the supremacy of Islam, as long as they pay a tax called the jizya,

they should be allowed the freedom to worship as they please.

And those are what? Jews and Christians?

Jews and Christians and a mysterious people called the Sabaeans who may be popping up later in this podcast.

Nobody's entirely sure who the Sabaeans are, but the Jews and the Christians, absolutely.

So Jews and Christians, it's fine.

The Arabs do not go around kind of destroying synagogues or churches.

They respect them.

But the fire temples of the Zoroastrians, fire is sacred to Zoroasta.

And across Iraq, across the western fringes of Iran, these start to be destroyed.

And it's actually only in the very remote regions of Korazan, so northeastern Iran, that the fire temple survive.

And it's possible for the Zoroastrian priesthood and Zoroastrian worshipers to continue their faith as they had done back in their heyday under the Sasanian rulers.

So you've got Christians, you've got Zoroastrians who are very, very unhappy.

And then you have Jews and Jews like the Christians are much happier.

And this is a golden age of Jewish scholarship.

So you have Jews in Palestine who are great scholars, but the greatest centers of Jewish scholarship towns called Surah and Pompadita in Mesopotamia.

The rabbis are developing the Talmud and the Talmud is a vast kind of sprawling edifice of legal commentary.

And then it's legal commentary on legal commentary on legal commentary, textual analysis commentary on Torah.

In these great Jewish centers of scholarship, you have the idea of teachings from God that are preserved in Torah that have literally come from God,

that have been written by God on the tablets of stone brought down from Sinai by Moses.

You also have this other idea that there is a kind of vast legal complex that can be analyzed by these

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rabbis,

that is also kind of interfused with an understanding of God's purpose and the laws that he wants to govern God's people.

And that sense of a written law and a spoken law is the kind of the great cultural innovation that the rabbis over the course of late antiquity in Palestine,

but above all in Mesopotamia have been developing.

And so all these traditions are now subject to the Arabs who are starting to develop what will become Islam.

Just before you move on just a bit.

So in other words, if you're an ordinary Christian or a Jew, you know, you're plotting along, you're a baker or whatever.

The coming of Islam and the Arab Empire doesn't make any difference.

Yeah, it's kind of fine, right? You pay a tax, which has probably been annoying.

Yeah.

But on the other hand, there are all kinds of, you know, controversies and bus stops and stuff in the late Eastern Roman Empire.

You're probably glad that a lot of that has gone away and you've got a bit of order and...

I think it's more disruptive for Christians than it is for Jews in the Roman provinces, because Christians were accustomed to being the bosses and now they go to being equivalent to the Jews.

So the Jews had been forced to pay taxes to the Romans for the right to practice their faith and now Christians are having to do the same.

So it's a bit humiliating for them. They're very a bit resentful of it.

But, you know, no real skin off their nose. They can carry on doing what they do. It's all fine.

And as I say, Christians remain vastly in the majority.

And this for the Arabs is a problem because the risk is that they will be kind of swallowed up by the vast mass of Christians.

And so it's right from the beginning, it's been important to the Arabs that they distinguish themselves from their subject peoples,

which is why, for instance, they found Koufa, this great kind of military base,

not in the heartlands of Mesopotamia, but right on the desert borders,

so that they can kind of preserve, you know, their desert purity, if you like,

that they can maintain their identity.

And because in early Islam, there is a sense that the Arabs, like the Jews, are descended by blood from Abraham.

So Abraham has two sons. He has Isaac, from whom the Jews claim descent.

And he is Ishmael, from whom the Arabs claim descent.

So for many Arabs, Islam is seen as being only for the Arabs.

So they absolutely don't want non-believers to convert to Islam.

They want to preserve their identity on the margins of the fertile crescent and also keep their Islamic identity as something that is distinctive to them.

Now, obviously, you get all kinds of fiscal privileges if you're a Muslim.

Jews and Christians and Zoroastrians are all having to pay poll taxes

and taxes that will enable them to continue practicing their faiths.

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So if you become a Muslim, you get out of that.

But the Arabs are aware that, you know, this is a scam that they have to guard against.

And so they, you know, they hedge conversion about with all kinds of indignities.

So it's not enough for a Jew or a Zoroastrian or a Christian to submit to God.

He also has to submit himself to an Arab patron.

And this, you know, if you're a kind of a high-born Christian or Zoroastrian dignitary, you know, you don't want to be effectively a kind of a servant, a placeman to an Arab.

Tom, we're recording this today after our public school episodes came out.

You've gone from being a prefect to being a fag, right?

Exactly.

So that's particularly, you know, that's particular indignity

for those who are relatively well off among the ranks of non-Muslims.

But even peasants, so there's an incident in the reign of Abdul Malik,

the great Umayyad Caliph who builds the Dome of the Rock,

a whole band of Iraqi peasants convert en masse to Islam and say,

well, you know, we no longer need to work the fields because we are now Muslims.

We are equal with all the Arabs.

And they go off to Basra, which is the great port on the Persian Gulf.

And Abdul Malik sends his best general after them.

He rands them up and he returns them to the estate of their masters.

So there is no sense there in that kind of behavior that the egalitarianism

that is so much a feature of the Quran's doctrines is being practiced by the Umayyads at all.

But all of that said, Tom, you know, you look at the demography of the Middle East right now, or indeed a few centuries after the point about which we're talking,

obviously people do convert, aren't they, in massive numbers.

So how does that happen?

I think in two ways.

So the first is that the Arab Empire, like the Roman Empire before it, reaps a vast number of slaves.

I mean, a huge number of slaves.

So there's a monk who describes the process of Arab slave raiding.

And he writes annually, their robber bands went to distant parts into the island.

So that's the islands in the Mediterranean,

bringing back captives from all the peoples under the heavens.

This is not an exaggeration.

So huge numbers of Persians are brought to the slave markets of Kufa and Basra.

From the furthest most west, Visigoths from Spain,

8,000 are led in chains from Spain all the way to the slave market in Damascus.

When the Arabs cross the Pyrenees, they're rounding people up there and sending them off to the slave markets as well.

And often when cities surrender to the Arabs,

a kind of tithe of slaves is part of the deal.

So there's a fortress called Zaranj, which again, brilliant name, that commands the approaches to the Hindu Kush.

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And it's agreed as part of the terms of the surrender of the people of Zaranj, that every year they will deliver up to the Umayyad court, a thousand of their most beautiful boys, and each one will hold in his hands a golden cup.

And this for the Muslims is a kind of foretaste of the joys of paradise.

And these are sex slaves, Tom?

Absolutely, yes.

I mean, again, very like the Romans.

But also there are a lot of girls being enslaved as well.

And so Abdul Malik, builder of the Dome of the Rock,

terrible halitosis was said to be able to kill a fly with a single blast of his breath.

He said of the sheer range of different kinds of girl that you could have.

He defines them culturally.

He says that if you wish to take a slave girl for pleasure, then take a Berber slave girl.

If you wish to take one as a domestic servant, someone who'll do your housework, take a Roman.

And if you wish to have one that will give you a child, then take a Persian.

So again, this idea that the Persians are particularly good at breeding continuous bloodlines.

Is that because the Persians are the most prestigious in the Arab sense?

There's the most high status empire, would you say?

Well, because they've conquered it completely,

it means that the Persian aristocracy are there waiting to be enslaved.

And even Sasanian princesses are enslaved.

So they're kind of set up in beautiful palaces, but they're still slaves.

Yeah.

This is basically what's going on.

And obviously the effect of the transplantation and intermingling of all these different peoples coming from all the various corners of the world is very profound because they're bringing with them their different customs, their different understanding of the gods, and they're serving out their term of slavery.

Again, as in the Roman world, I think we talked about this before.

As a slave in the Roman world, if you're a domestic slave, the likelihood is at some point you will be freed.

And so there's a sense in which being a slave is like kind of earning your green card.

Yeah.

You will become a part of the Roman order once you are freed, once your master frees you.

The same is true in the Islamic world because, again, Muhammad himself had been a slave owner.

It's absolutely illicit for Muslims to own slaves,

but at the same time it is seen as a pious thing to do to free slaves.

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And so lots of these people, women, men being brought to Kufa or to Damascus or whatever, they're serving their term of servitude and then they're being released and they are joining the kind of the mix and over the course of their servitude they will have become Muslim, almost certainly.

Right.

Because it will make their life easier.

So this is a kind of supply of Muslims that is feeding into these great cosmopolitan cities.

And what if you're not a slave?

Well, you want to escape the taxes that are imposed on you and also the kind of the social indignities

that are really the legacy of Roman Christian rules that were applied to the Jews and that are now being applied to Christians as well.

So there are kind of sumptuary laws saying you can't dress like an Arab.

You're not allowed to sit in the presence of an Arab.

You're not allowed to wear a sword.

You're not allowed to ride in a saddle.

If you do ride, you have to ride a mule and you have to do it side saddle like a woman.

And all of this is, you know, I mean, it's not terminal.

You can live with these kind of indignities, but they are indignities.

Yeah.

And so you probably do want to get out of them.

And there are increasing numbers of people who are prepared to kind of accept that they, you know, they get a Muslim patron and become Muslim.

So gradually over the course of the century or so that follows the Arab conquests, you do see more and more people starting to become Muslim.

And particularly you start to see Zoroastrians for the reasons that we talked about, that in a sense for the Zoroastrians, the experience of conquest by the Arabs has been worse than for Jews and Christians.

And I think that for Zoroastrians in particular, it's not just about trying to escape the taxes and the indignities.

It is also about wanting to find meaning in a world where everything that you've been familiar with has been destroyed.

And so practices that are Zoroastrian over the course of the century or so that following the Arab conquest start to appear in Islamic practice.

So for instance, the five daily prayers that Muslims have, this is not prescribed in the Quran, but it comes to be seen as a kind of statutory requirement for Muslims as it had been for Zoroastrians.

The notion that if you become an apostate, if you abandon your faith, you should be put to death. Again, this is not in the Quran, but it is a Zoroastrian tradition.

Most intriguing of all, perhaps, the idea that it's a mark of party to use a toothbrush.

So you start to get all kinds of Arab stories that the Muhammad was obsessed with cleaning his teeth.

And again, this seems to come from Zoroastrian practice.

They were very, very keen on dental hygiene.

That is a stunning revelation to me.

The only person I can think of like that in the modern world is Martin Amos.

Well, there's a comparison that's never been made before.

He was very interested in teeth.

Is this really using a toothbrush as seen as the mark of a pious Muslim?

Yes, because Muhammad did it.

Surely Muhammad must have done it.

He wasn't the first person in the human history to use a toothbrush.

No, because probably the historical Muhammad didn't do it.

This is coming from Zoroastrianism.

So that's the question.

How do these traditions that seem to be Zoroastrian end up becoming part of Muslim practice when they weren't initially, often even overriding the dictates of the Quran?

How is this process happening?

The only answer is coming not so much from Zoroastrian conversion,

but from Jewish conversion because, Dominic, you will remember,

I talked about the very, very distinctive understanding of law that the rabbis in...

You did. That was thrilling.

In Iraq.

Yeah. I wondered where it was going.

I thought it was a bit tangential.

Okay.

So in Jewish practice in the great cities of Mesopotamia,

these rabbinical schools, these Yeshivas,

you have this idea of a written law, Torah,

and a spoken law, which is the Talmud.

Right.

And over the course of the century or so, following the Arab conquest, you start to see the same in Islam.

So you have the Quran, which is the equivalent of Torah.

Yes.

And you start to get vast body of sayings

that are attributed first to the companions of the Prophet

and then increasingly to the Prophet himself.

And these are called hadiths.

Yeah.

If you were a very strict observant Muslim,

you would undoubtedly say, listen, these are absolutely bona fide, 24 carats.

This is absolutely what the Prophet said.

If you're a skeptical non-Muslim historian,

you might say these are cobbled together from other traditions,

decades, or indeed centuries after the event.

I think cobbling together is perhaps an overly negative way of framing it.

So great efforts are made by Muslim scholars,

exactly as they had been made by Jewish scholars,  
to show that these sayings, if they're attributed to the Prophet  
or to the companions of the Prophet,  
did authentically come from them.

So they're called Isnad.

They are so-and-so, told so-and-so, who told so-and-so,  
who told so-and-so, who'd heard it from the Prophet.

Yeah.

So these chains.

But I think it's very difficult to place much confidence in them  
as authentically historical.

And I think it's pretty clear that what is happening  
is that the influence of the Talmud  
on what will come to be called the Sunnah,  
so the Sunnah is the kind of the great body of spoken law,  
the laws that derive from the sayings of the Prophet,  
that the idea for this, I mean, it would be a massive coincidence  
if these two very distinctive ways of understanding divine law,  
that you have a written law and a spoken law,  
should magically appear in the same region of the world  
at the same time.

I mean, it seems to me impossible  
that the one is not influencing the other.

Right.

And it's kind of brilliant if you want, you know,  
if you want to import the things that you believe  
as a Jew or a Christian or a Zoroastrian  
into the growing emergent fabric of Islam,  
then this offers you the way to do it.

As you can say, oh, the companion of the Prophet said X,  
and it just happens to match our use of toothbrushes or whatever.

Absolutely.

Yes.

So you're a Zoroastrian.

You know that dental hygiene is very important.

There's nothing in the Quran about dental hygiene.

So you say, well, I know that the Prophet did it.

And here's the proof.

Here's the great chain of Isnad.

Here's the hadith.

And it gets incorporated into the fabric of Islamic law,  
which lawyers and scholars are starting to compile  
over the decades.

And there you go.

And it's absolutely brilliant.

Tom, I don't want to send this totally off-peast.

Just to be absolutely clear, the Romans brush their teeth.

No.

I'm really, I don't know.

You don't know.

I mean, yes, they did.

They did.

But I think they had, it's a particular kind of twig.

Right.

But the toothbrush specifically is Persian.

That's what you're claiming.

I believe so.

It's actually quite a long time since I did my research into personal dental hygiene.

But I believe so.

OK.

So we could, we could perhaps pay a visit to the Bodleian and do an episode.

No, I think we should absolutely return to this topic in greater depth at a future date.

But in the meantime, press on with, towards Baghdad.

Well, the implication of this is astounding because basically it means that the conquered people, the Jews, the Christians, the Zoroastrians, when they become Muslim, they're not simply kind of passively absorbing, you know, the teachings of Islam.

They are contributing to it.

They're shaping it.

Right.

Exactly.

And they're able to read the Quran as well as anyone.

And in the Quran, they can see that it's forbidden for the powerful and the rich to grind the poor into the dust or their inferiors into the dust.

And so they can turn the teachings of the Quran against their masters.

So it's rather like Fanon or someone like that turning Western ideas against Western imperialism.

It's the same kind of idea.

Or African American slaves who have converted to Christianity saying, whoa, whoa, whoa, you know, you preach about the Bible,



but the Bible explicitly says be kind,  
don't torture and repress people.  
Yes, except that in Christianity,  
unlike in Judaism and Islam,  
you don't have a written body of law.  
That's the way in which Islam is most like Judaism,  
that it does have this body of law.  
And so what is happening over the century or so  
that follows the emergence of Islam originally  
is that what initially had been a kind of  
808 swirl of beliefs and doctrines and teachings  
starts to be transformed into basically,  
you know, a religion of lawyers.  
And these lawyers overwhelmingly seem to be coming  
from the body of the conquered people.  
So, you know, it's kind of as a check upon the arrogance,  
the sense of superiority of an imperial elite.  
It's a completely remarkable counter blast  
from a defeated people.  
Right.  
I mean, nothing like it had been seen before, really.  
So this is what's going on.  
And you can see how and why this would be dangerous  
for the Amayads,  
because the Amayads are kind of old school autocrats.  
These are people with enormous palaces,  
with soldiers, people who are taking lots of slaves.  
And they have all these kind of lawyers  
who are starting to emerge in cities across Mesopotamia  
saying, well, actually, you can't behave like this.  
This is very bad.  
And the other thing, of course,  
is that looking back to the time before the Amayads,  
so back to the time of the Rashidun,  
the rightly guided Caliphs and Muhammad himself,  
it puts the Amayads in a very bad light.  
Because if these teachings of Muhammad have been forgotten,  
you know, as the emergence of the sun implies,  
that's the kind of foundation for it,  
then whose fault is it that they were forgotten?  
It's obviously the Amayads.  
The Amayads are presiding over, you know,  
a sinister, upper state regime.  
And so increasingly, the Amayad Caliphs

come to be cast not as defenders of the faithful,  
but as the enemies of the faithful.

So they're pampered, gilded autocrats  
being challenged by a puritanical, new,  
and at least the wrong word, new class.

Is that the right way to put it?

Yeah, a new class.

I mean, to the Amayads, you know, the fact that all these,  
you know, they're Persians and Jews and Turks and people,  
you know, they're kind of pen pushes.

They're kind of blotterdotters.

I mean, who are these foreigners, these pen pushers,  
to tell the deputy of God what he should be doing?

But this is the process that's happening.

And so this is why in the 740s,  
when you've got military reverses on the frontiers,  
you've got sectarianism within Islam,  
breaking out with the Karajites and with the Shiites,  
you also have this vast kind of emergence of lawyers  
equipped with a way of undermining  
the entire moral basis of Amayad rule.

And increasingly, they are targeting everything  
that had enabled the Amayads to seem, you know, dazzling rulers.

The wealth of the Amayads and their fellow Arab warlords,  
the wealth that they've garnered from across the world,  
the spices, the kind of peacock silks, the beard dye.

So great fashion for kind of dyeing their beards yellow and red.

And so lo and behold, this is condemned as being very sinister.

Probably doesn't fit well with the dental hygiene.

I wouldn't have thought.

Anyway, that's by the by.

Possessed with the dental hygiene.

And so you get, you know, there's people in the slums of Kufa

or of Basra are looking at all this and saying,

this is not what the Prophet said.

You know, they'll quote the Quran.

You do not honour the orphan, nor urge one another to feed the poor.

You consume an inheritance to the last mouthful

and you love wealth with a love inordinate.

These are the words of God as mediated through the Prophet  
that the conquered peoples can now turn back against the Amayads.

So in other words, it's not just the sectarians, the Shia,

the Karajites who have incentive and means to oppose the Amayads,

but actually the vast mass of the people who are becoming Muslim in Iraq.

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And so, you know, this is very, very bad for the Amayads who in any way are based in Syria. Iraq is increasingly becoming ungovernable. And on top of that, there are then two further disastrous developments. And the first is that the Amayads start fighting one another. So there's a tremendous Caliph who's the grandson of Abdul Malik called Al Waleed, who is, he's an alcoholic and he's absolutely obsessed with sex. He's kind of an infamaniac. And he is assassinated in one of his desert pleasure palaces in 744. And this precipitates a kind of mass bloodletting among his relatives. And the man who emerges victorious from this, this kind of the great war of the Amayad cousins is a guy called Marwan, who's very grizzled, has curly hair, a veteran of many battles, and a pretty proficient military leader. And by 747, he is undisputed as Caliph, but it's come at terrible cost because he's lost the support of many Amayad loyalists. Civil war has brought ruin to many of the cities in Syria as well as in Iraq. And in fact, he is so hated in Syria that he abandons it completely. He goes to live in a town called Iran. So that's bad. But what's even worse is that a rival dynasty has appeared. And this is a dynasty that is capable of appealing to Sunnis. So these people in Iraq who are saying that the Amayads are autocrats, that they're like Caesars, that they're like pharaohs, that there should be a new regime, there should be a revolution that overthrows them and enshrines a rule of equality and justice and charity. So they're able to appeal to them, but they're also able to appeal to the Shia, this idea that there is a holy bloodline. Because this dynasty, the Abbasids claim descent from Abbas, who is the uncle of Muhammad. So there you have a kind of sense that both the Shia and the Sunni can kind of meet in loyalty to the Abbasids, the descendants of Abbas, the uncle of Muhammad. And agents of the Abbasids start to fan out. They start to suborn people in Iraq. They particularly start to suborn people in Korazan. You know, that vast stretch of lands heading eastwards from Iran. And the whole Amayad world, Dominic, it's a tinderbox. It's a tinderbox, just waiting for the spark, Tom. Waiting for the spark. Is that the image you were looking for? That's the image.

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I don't think anyone's ever used that before.

People are dancing on the edge of an Abbas, aren't they?

They are on the edge of a volcano, Dominic.

Fantastic.

So, Tom, what a cliffhanger.

And the good news is, if you remember, the Rest is History Club.

In other words, if you're paying tribute to us, then you can listen to that episode where Tom describes the war between the Amayads and the Abbasids, the great Abbasid Revolution.

And then at last, we'll get back to where we started with the foundation of the great city of peace, the round city of Baghdad, the greatest city at that point in human history.

So we'll get back to that next time.

You can listen to that now if you remember the Rest is History Club.

If you're not, if you're a person of the book, so in other words,

that means you just listened to the Rest is History,

but you're not really part of the elite,

then you'll just have to wait until Thursday.

But I hope it'll be worth waiting for, because the story of the Past is Revolution is a brilliant, brilliant narrative.

And then the founding of Baghdad, a very, very romantic, an epic moment in world history.

So very, very thrilling.

It could not be a more exciting story.

And if we're really lucky, Tom will talk to us a little bit more about toothbrushes.

No more toothbrushes.

On that note, goodbye.

Bye-bye.