



SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION

A detailed illustration of a hand holding a quill pen, writing on a scroll. The background is a grid of ancient cuneiform tablets, suggesting a historical or archaeological context. The entire scene is set against a dark, textured background.

Syria

The Ancient Realm of Writing

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معن حيدر : المدير العام لهيئة الإذاعة والتلفزيون
مناف فلاح : المدير العام للمؤسسة العربية للإعلان

Published by the Ministry of Information,
Syria, 2004

Arabic and English texts: Abdul Nabi Isstaif

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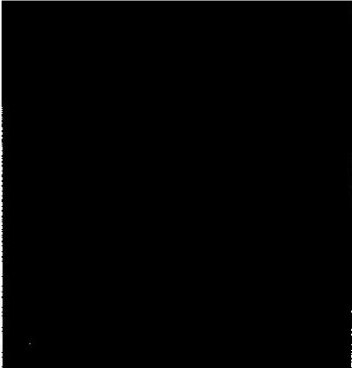
تصميم وإخراج : رحاب العجة

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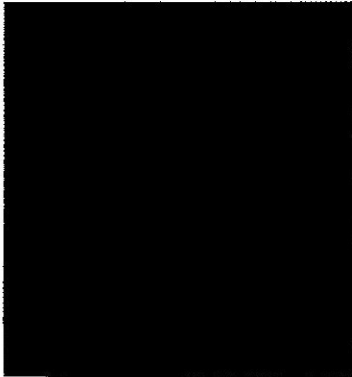
The geography and history of Syria affirms the fact that it has been the homeland of ideas and vital environment for interaction among civilizations and for exchange of the lights of love among its people.

From Syria, Saint Paul set out to spread the light of Christianity throughout the world. In Syria the first Arabic Empire, which is the Umayyad Caliphate, was established and expanded to Spain where it ruled for more than eight centuries, consolidating the active interaction between the civilizations of the East and those of the West.

Syria is proud of its Arabic-Islamic culture as well as of its role as a permanent incubator for creativity and intellectual vitality, treasuring the legacy of interaction among civilizations, caring for the "Other" and upholding the sublime values of truth, justice and Peace.

The Arabic participation in **Frankfurt International Book Fair** is a reminder of our past history as a nation as well as of its close relationship with writing, libraries and books. It is a real opportunity for reconnecting our glorious past with the present, for obliterating the many misconceptions related to our image, and the image of our culture and civilizations, and finally, for re-establishing our relationship with the "Other" on the solid ground of truly humanist values of peace, justice and freedom.

Ahmad Al-Hasan,
Minister of Information,
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The Ancient Realm of Writing

Defining the notion of “prehistory”, Peter Daniels writes: “Prehistory isn’t like a ‘veil’ or a ‘curtain’ that ‘lifts’ to reveal the pre-set ‘stage’ of history. Rather, prehistory is an absence of something: an absence of writing”. (**The World’s Writing Systems**, Edited by Peter T. Daniels and William Bright, **Oxford University Press**, New York and Oxford, 1996, p.19).

In other words, the existence of writing is an absolutely necessary precondition for any entry into the realm of human history. The invention of writing by the Near Eastern people was, therefore, the greatest gift that has ever been given to humanity since Adam and Eve came down to earth from Heaven. It is true that “humankind is defined by language; but civilization is defined by writing. Writing made historical records possible, and writing was the basis for the urban societies of the Old World. All humans speak; only humans in civilization write” (ibid, p.1). Thus the invention of writing by the people of Mesopotamia was the beginning of civilization and history in the Old World. Perfecting this gift by the Phoenicians who invented the first alphabet changed human history.

“About 1500 B.C.E. Phoenician scribes simplified Mesopotamia’s cuneiform writing system by devising twenty-two symbols representing consonants” (Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Ziegler, **Traditions and Encounters: A global Perspective on the Past, Volume I: From the Beginnings to 1500** (McGraw-Hill Higher Education, New York, 2000, p.52), for the earliest Phoenician alphabet has no vowels. This had facilitated the spread of literacy in the Near East, and in the rest of the Old World, because “learning twenty-two letters and building words with them was much easier memorizing hundreds of symbols that mastery of cuneiform writing required”(ibid, p.52). Humanity, in fact, does not owe the Phoenicians only the invention of the first alphabet, but also the spread of its use throughout the Old and, later, the New World too. While trading and traveling throughout the Old World,

the Phoenicians taught their alphabet to other peoples, who adopted it to their own languages. Thus the Greek, the Egyptians, the Romans have adopted it and in later centuries it spread to central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and ultimately throughout most of the world.

Using first the cuneiform writing system, and then the alphabetical system and its subsequent developed versions, adopted for the different languages used in the area, the Syrians, during the last five thousands years, have produced a uniquely extensive record that had determined our knowledge not only of the various cultures of the Syrians landscape but also those of the Near East and the Old World. Thus the recovery of third-millennium palace archives from Ebla dating to the twenty-fifth century B.C., with their literary texts, letters, and juridical documents has radically altered the history of the Near East and Semitic languages.

(Harvey Weiss "Introduction", in **Ebla to Damascus: Art and Anchaology of Ancient Syria**, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., 1985 pp. 40-1). In the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries the language of the letters and the literary and administrative texts from Ugarit provided an illuminating record of yet another Northwestern Semitic innovation and the beginnings of alphabetical writing as well. Furthermore, the emergence of the Aramaeans, the foundation of the Aramaean city states at Damascus, Hama, Arpad, and Sam'al, the adoption of Aramaic as the *lingua franca* of the Achaemenid empire, and the continued use of Aramaic with the communities of southern Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine through the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods is a unique record almost of one thousand years long.

Among the Aramaic languages is Nabataean, spoken and written in Petra between the first century B.C. and the third century A.D. The Arabic script evolved from the Nabataean , and has been in use for more than sixteen centuries throughout the Arab World and in some Muslim countries as well. With Arabic becoming the *lingua franca* of the Islamic world

throughout the Middle Ages, the spread of Arabic script had, no doubt, facilitated the production of yet another vital record of the Arab-Islamic civilization. Arabic in fact had become the greatest source of knowledge in the Middle Ages, with contributions from all the peoples and communities living under the banner of Islam. Gibb, for example, sees "Classical Arabic literature" as "the enduring monument of a civilization, not of a people. Its contributors, nevertheless, under the influence of their Arab conquerors lost their national languages traditions and customs and were molded into unity of thought and belief, absorbed into a new and wider Arab nation"(Hamilton Gibb, **Arabic Literature: An Introduction** (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1974, p.1). The genius of Arabic literature, in his view, stems from the fact that it is the product of a unique and unprecedented process of interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim peoples of the Middle Ages.

It is no wonder; therefore, that Arabic literature had a great impact on its Western counterpart. As a matter of fact, most Western literary genres in Middle Ages and the Renaissance were influenced by Arabic literature. Recent scholarship had documented this Western debt, and one needs only to refer to a few examples such as Alice E. Laster's **Spain to England: A Comparative Study of Arabic, European, and English Literature of the Middle Ages** (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1974), and Maria Rosa Menocal's **The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage** (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1987). In addition, Western Folk Literature was also influenced by Middle Eastern Literatures, and in this is quite natural in view of the fact that Arabic culture was a major component of Medieval Western culture and the so-called European Renaissance would not have been possible without the Arab-Islamic contribution. Cured of their euro-centric tendency, most Western scholars acknowledge nowadays this fact. Discussing the Near Eastern

Ancestry of Western Folk Literature, E. L. Ranelagh writes in his 'Introduction' to his book entitled most tellingly **The Past We Share :**

„We were taught that our civilization stemmed from classical and Christian roots, Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian ,and that the classical elements had been largely lost until their rediscovery, known as the Renaissance. But now that the world is smaller, communication easier, organized religion more relaxed and scholarly exchange more widespread, our common ground with Arabian tradition is being recognized. Medieval culture was in fact Greek, Latin and Arab”. (Quartet Books, London, 1979, p. xi).

Furthermore, he adds:

“The great part of Greek knowledge which included the sciences and philosophy was handed down by the Byzantines through translation from Greek into Arabic, was further developed by the Arabs, and in the Middle Ages was conveyed from Arabic into Latin. The massive translation projects in twelfth-century Spain and Sicily were major bridges over which scientific learning was carried from the Arabs into the then primitive Western Europe”(ibid).

One hops that an awareness of this great debt to the Arab-Islamic culture would help in changing the attitude of some recent seekers of clash of civilization with the Muslim and Arab Worlds. It is really most heartening to hear H. R .H. The Prince of Wales addressing the issue in these words:

“The contribution of Muslim Spain to the preservation of classical learning during the Dark Ages ,and to the first flowerings of the Renaissance, has long been recognized. But Islamic Spain was much more than a mere larder where Hellenistic knowledge was kept for later consumption by the emerging modern Western world. Not only did Muslim Spain gather and preserve

the intellectual content of ancient Greek and Roman civilization, it also interpreted and expanded upon that civilization, and made a vital contribution of its own in so many fields of human endeavour- in science, astronomy, mathematics, algebra (itself an Arabic word), law, history, medicine, pharmacology, optics, agriculture, architecture, theology, music. Averroes and Avenzoar, like their counterparts Avicenna and Rhazes in the East, contributed to the study and practice of medicine in ways from which Europe benefited for centuries afterwards...

The surprise is the extent to which Islam has been a part of Europe for so long, first in Spain, then in the Balkans, and the extent to which it has contributed so much towards the civilization which we all too often think of, wrongly, as entirely Western. Islam is part of our past and our present, in all fields of human endeavour. It has helped to create modern Europe. It is part of our own inheritance, not a thing apart". (**Islam and the West, Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Oxford, 1993, pp.17-8).**

If Europe sought the Arabs' science in its keen endeavour to get out of its Dark Age, it was because Arabic science was the most advanced in the World for well over seven centuries:

"From the eighth century to the end of the fourteenth, Arabic science was probably the most advanced science in the world, greatly surpassing the West and China. In virtually every field of endeavor - in astronomy, alchemy, mathematics, medicine, optics, and so forth - Arabic scientists (that is, Middle Eastern individuals primarily using the Arabic language but including Arabs, Iranians, Christians, Jews, and others) were in the forefront of scientific advance. The facts, theories, and scientific speculations contained in their treatises were the most advanced to be had anywhere in the world, including China". (Toby E. Huff, **The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China and the West, Cambridge University Press,**

Cambridge, 1993, p.48).

In short:

“ Considered altogether, in mathematics, astronomy, optics, physics and medecin, Arabic science was the most advanced in the world”.(Ibid, p.52).

Syria, which has always been an integral part of the Near East and the Old World as well as the Arab and Muslim Worlds, was, in Harvey Weiss' words “the homeland of a multitude of ancient and medieval culture”. It played a vital role in the history of the Ancient and Medieval World and had made a great contribution to human civilization. It is natural, therefore, that the Syrians nowadays would aspire to resume their positive role in modern history and would seek to renew their contribtion to modern civilization. However, being at the heart of the Near East and confronted with a powerful enemy, which has never stopped expanding its frontiers in all directions at the expence of its neighbouring countries, Syria is facing a serious challenge. It has to carry, in the one hand, the torch of learning in order to develop its potential and secure a better life for its people, and, in the other hand, the sowrd with which it can protect its people and liberate its land (occupied by Israel since 1967).

Although strategically committed to a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, a peace that would secure the liberation of the Golan province and the legitimate right of the Palestinians to determine their own future and establish their own independent and sovereign state, it cannot achieve it alone, without the support of the international community, particulrly in view of the unqualified support enjoyed by Israel from the United States. Nonetheless, the Syrians remain optimists. They hope to revive their strong ties with Europe, and to form a new partnership that works towards peace and prosperity for all the nations of the Middle East, Europe and the rest of the world.