

Some Remarks on the History of Science and Technology in Islam¹

Ever since there has been a more developed appreciation of history people have certainly thought about which devices or instruments were created when and where. The modern academic discipline of history, however, for a long time saw its mission especially in registering political, military, and to a certain extent also economic events and changes, and treated developments in the fields of science and technology in a rather dilatory fashion.

To trace each of the stages of development that science and technology attained before the ancient Greeks is difficult. The Greeks themselves provide us with hardly any hints about the predecessors of their approximately eight-hundred year long, important phase in the development of the sciences. The custom of citing sources was only poorly developed in those days.

The opinion which has prevailed in historical scholarship for over three hundred years, that the significant position of the Greeks should be viewed as the beginning, has not undergone any fundamental change, in spite of a wealth of archaeological work on the culture of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites, Canaanites, Arameans, and Egyptians and the insights gained from deciphering inscriptions. A proposition that also received scant attention was one put forward by the eminent Austrian science historian Otto Neugebauer. Neugebauer was convinced that the Greeks did not stand at the beginning, but rather in the middle of the development, so it was actually necessary to add another 2500 years for the earlier period of those who paved the way to the 2500 years that have elapsed since the Greeks took over the leading role in the history of science.

During the first half of the seventh century the sciences, which had achieved a high level under the Greeks, developed further in an attenuated way in the Eastern Mediterranean area and in Persia under the Sassanids, when Islam entered the stage of history as a force that encompassed these cultural centres. Because the representatives of these cultural centres, irrespective of their religion, were

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