

Introduction to Part I

Interest in the Islamic World and the Middle East, in particular, has seen a revival in recent years. One area getting much attention is the role Britain played in the creation of the modern Middle East. Lost amid the discussion of Sykes-Picot, T. E. Lawrence, and the rise of ISIS is the long and varied history of British involvement with Islam and its practitioners. This 1300-year association provides a variety of details about the relationship that developed between the peoples and governments of Britain and the different countries that make up the Islamic World. Pertinent to the discussion is how these two sets of people came to appreciate and disparage each other's culture, beliefs, and individual worth. A focus on the period that England, and consequently Britain, as a nation, had its first encounters with the Islamic World provides readers with a better understanding of how the British view of Islam has changed over the years.

Andrew Magnusson focuses on the myths of Islamic barbarity and inferiority that grew out of the initial contacts made between the English and Muslims. By taking a broad approach to the subject, Magnusson provides the readers with a greater understanding of the intricacies inherent in the British conception of Muslims as others. He points out that early scholarship set the tone for much of the exclusion of Muslims and the framing of the religion as violent which eventually exacerbated the tensions between British and Muslims. As such, the people of the Islamic World came to be seen as inferior because they were seen as the antithesis to everything the British believed Britain represented.

Because trade was so central to the development of Britain as a nation, it had expanded into the eastern Mediterranean Sea, primarily present-day Turkey and Syria. The importance of trade within the Mediterranean Sea becomes clear when one realizes that during the seventeenth century, English trade with this region was more significant than the combined trade with India and America. The English maritime community, most of them civilian traders, made the most dramatic inroads and gained an appreciation for the Islamic World. As Alistair Maer notes, it was in many ways the seventeenth-century English merchants and mariners that provide a window into the encounters with the Islamic Mediterranean. Muslim traders had dominated the Mediterranean for centuries, and as such, they initially had no issue with private English merchants. The rapid expansion of British trade had an adverse effect on Muslim merchants that led to occasional skirmishes and eventually to the gradual development of the realities of English trade that led to imperial ventures in the region.

As with the sailors and traders that frequently encountered the Islamic World, individual travelers did too. Conon Meleady examines the role literature produced by various travelers and diplomats played in determining how the British would conceptualize the Shi'a minority in Islam. This focus on the Shi'a–British connection offers an alternative perspective on where India stood within the British Empire in terms of Islam and the sectarian fighting within it.