PART I

Historical and religious roots

It is a common assumption that the presence of Muslims in Britain and the influence of Islamic culture and history on British society is a recent phenomenon, confined mainly to the post-Second World War era. The period after 1945 is certainly distinctive in terms of the scale of Muslim migration to Britain, but the history of Muslim settlement here, and wider British engagement with Muslim majority countries, goes back much further. The extent to which the first two chapters of this book explore this history is a reflection of the fact that ideas, impressions and encounters from the past have a considerable impact on apprehension and understanding in the present. The first chapter offers an overview of some key aspects of the complex history of Muslims in Britain and, particularly, English perceptions of Islam, from the earliest times to the mid nineteenth century.

During the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century, there was a qualitative and quantitative shift in the nature of Muslim settlement in Britain. The character of Muslim communities began to change with the rapid expansion of the British Empire. Large numbers of unskilled Muslim labourers came to Britain as part of the colonial enterprise and by the late 1800s a distinctive Anglo-Muslim community had begun to emerge in Britain (Murad 1997). In some cases this was led by notable British converts to Islam. Discussion of this, and the subsequent arrival of Muslims to Britain after the Second World War, is the focus for the second chapter. Here it becomes possible to see also the 'routes' of more recent migration, and the socio-political circumstances which have led to the emergence of vibrant Muslim communities in Britain today.

Alongside the importance of a broad historical understanding, it is also essential to appreciate the religious 'roots' of Muslim communities, and to grasp the significance of religious ideas and interpretations that

have led to the development of multiple Islamic discourses over time. The religious, social and political identities of Muslims in Britain today have been shaped by the legacy of Islamic religious movements established in predominantly Muslim countries. These influential socio-political and religious schools of thought continue to shape British Muslim experience. Two chapters explore the principal currents of religious thought that emerged in the Middle East and in South Asia respectively from the eighteenth century onwards. Considerable attention is paid to the way in which such thinking has found new expression in the lives of Muslims living in British towns and cities. Here the focus is not so much upon the movement of people over time, but more upon the transmission of religious ideas and the new interpretations to which these ideas are subject as they move from one social context to another.

Overall, then, Part I of the book is devoted to providing sufficient background to enable a social, historical and religious 'placing' of Islam and Muslims in Britain today. The dynamics of Muslim institutions and the themes that are explored later in the book can only be fully understood against this backdrop.

CHAPTER I

The roots of Islam in Britain

INTRODUCTION

This chapter identifies some of the ways in which the Islamic world has been encountered, engaged with, understood and, of course, substantially misunderstood in Britain from an historical perspective.[1] The historical narrative ranges from early encounters and impressions, through to the settlement of the first traders, sailors and students. What has brought Muslims to Britain across the course of history? How has the character of Muslim communities developed over time? How have perceptions of Muslims changed? Finally, some instances of contact and engagement between Britain and majority Muslim regions, especially from the sixteenth century onwards, are brought into focus. Fascinating insights emerge about the first converts to Islam, and the establishment of embryonic Muslim communities in the seventeenth century.

It is important at the outset to consider where information about Islam and Muslims in Britain has come from over the course of history, and the limitations and biases of difference sources. Any understanding of the relationship between Islam and Britain is inevitably shaped by the available evidence, so whether we are examining Christian ecclesiastical texts, travel diaries, captivity narratives, parliamentary papers, literary fiction, or stage plays, there are inevitably inherent limitations and biases. Misunderstandings of Islam and Muslims in one genre are often reproduced in another. So, for example, in the Anglo-Saxon world, information about Islam and Muslims was understood within a framework of Christian theological ideas and assumptions that pre-dated Islam

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[1] I use shorthand phrases such as 'Islamic world' or 'Muslim world' with full awareness that they can potentially be very homogenizing descriptors, masking the enormous linguistic, racial, cultural and religious diversity among Muslims living in different parts of the world. I use these phrases with awareness of this diversity, and also with mindfulness of the opposition that can be (unhelpfully) implied by reference to a supposedly monolithic 'Muslim world' and other non-Muslim 'worlds'.

(Scarfe Beckett 2003). Perceptions contained within travel diaries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries directly influenced later impressions of Islam among playwrights. In the medieval period, alongside prodigious theological and literary writing about Islam that was often negative (and rarely supported by actual personal encounter with Muslims), there was also secular engagement with Muslim states via trade and commerce. Scholars today therefore have access to numerous literary records about Islam produced by medieval ecclesiastics, but they do not have other kinds of data, such as trade records or visual representations, except in the form of material culture such as ceramics or coins (Petersen 2008). Such material simply has not survived as a source of information which might enlighten and diversify perceptions of Islam that are otherwise almost wholly shaped by literary (and mostly theological) records. Furthermore, some periods of history have been studied in more depth than others. For the study of Islam and Muslims in the West, 'there are still many dark corners and some subjects which have scarcely been touched' (Southern 1962: 2). This is especially true of 'remoter' times. Given that the relationship between Islam and Britain in history has not been systematically investigated, there is scope for considerably more exploration and study.

Bearing in mind this limitation in scholarship so far and the extent of available data, it becomes critical to think about *who* was writing about Islam and Muslims from the eighth century onwards, and with what authority, knowledge, power and evidence. What kinds of agendas and assumptions are likely to have framed their perceptions? Such writing has never emerged from a void: it has always been shaped by prior assumptions and received impressions. Furthermore, over the course of history existing information about Islam and Muslims has been subject to fresh interpretations, to serve newly emerging interests. At different times in the past, the specifically 'religious' aspect of the Muslim world has been both highlighted and, paradoxically, at the same time more or less ignored (Daniel 1979: 7–8). Consequently, across different eras of British history, there have been multiple perceptions of, and engagements with, Muslims and the Islamic world, often existing in parallel, and also often contradictory.

It is not wise, therefore, to make generalized assumptions about perceptions of Islam or Muslims across time because the nature of the relationship and the character of engagement have been diverse and constantly changing. Over the course of history the Islamic world has

been resisted, traded with, studied, negotiated with, written about and plundered. The British have therefore apprehended Islam and the Muslim world in multiple and often paradoxical ways. Looking back historically:

accurate knowledge of Islam as a religion and polity and of Muslims in daily life jostled with hearsay, wishful thinking, polemic and received opinion; information was acquired, generalised, distorted, consolidated and in some cases apparently created from scratch, and yet, in other cases, the received opinion survived for a surprisingly long time despite its patent inaccuracy. (Scarfe Beckett 2003: 230)

It might be plausibly argued that this 'received opinion' is still alive and well.

THE WRITINGS OF BEDE AND THE TRADING OF KING OFFA

The Prophet Muhammad was born in 570 and died in 632. By the time of his death, the Islamic faith was spreading rapidly. As new information about Islam and Muslims became known during the early medieval period, it was accommodated within pre-Islamic theories about the 'Saracens'. So as the English monk, scholar and writer Bede (673–735) began shaping some of the first medieval understandings about Islam in England from his monastery in Northumberland, he was indebted to the earlier writings and perceptions of St Jerome (342–420), a Christian scholar and early church father, 'widely seen as a pre-Islamic authority on the Orient' (Scarfe Beckett 2003: 22). So, right from its inception, Islam was not apprehended on its own terms, but understood within pre-existing frameworks of thought about 'the Other' derived from Christian dogma and biblical exegesis. Instead of being apprehended matter-of-factly, as a people living by their own values and social norms, Muslims were framed within an entirely Christian perspective.

Living and writing at a time when textual authority rested upon quotation from the works of scholars, it was almost inevitable that Bede would accommodate his understanding of the newly emerging Islamic faith within a set of assumptions about the Orient originally derived from Jerome. For Jerome, there was a direct connection between the desert-dwelling 'Saracens' and all that was 'dark' or within 'shadows'. He defined Arabia as 'evening', the beginning of night and sin, and he contrasted this spiritual darkness with 'the light of scriptural knowledge' (Scarfe Beckett

2003: 103).[2] Just as Jerome stigmatized the 'shadowy' ones, Bede describes the 'Saracens' (Muslims) as enemies of the Christians. These kinds of connections, associations and prejudices, established so early in Christian Anglo-Saxon views, appear to have resulted in a unique kind of opposition and antipathy towards Islam within English-speaking Christendom, a legacy of which arguably remains evident in the contemporary world today.

Hearing about the rapidly expanding borders of the Islamic world in the early eighth century, especially in southern Europe, Bede had vivid contemporary evidence to support negative and prejudicial views about Muslims. Without ever actually meeting a Muslim, Bede nevertheless writes about the 'hatred'[3] that invading Muslim armies had for Christians. In his writings he draws a sharp distinction between the Christian 'us' and the Islamic 'them', although a full antipathy between Islam and Christianity was not to emerge until the Crusades. Muslims, he says, are 'undifferentiatedly shiftless, hateful, aggressive (*uagos, incertisque sedibus; exosi et contrarii*)' (Scarfe Beckett 2003: 20). From as early as the eighth century therefore, the power and literary influence of a single English monk, regarded as the 'father of history' among the Anglo-Saxon peoples, shaped a dominant perception of the Islamic world that was wholly negative, with Muslims characterized as an obdurate and callous 'Other'. Bede was one of a number of influential European theologians who laid the foundations for anti-Islamic prejudice in the Christian world (Kalin 2004).

However, clues from contemporary material evidence indicate a striking contrast. For instance, within decades of Bede's writing, the Anglo-Saxon king, Offa of Mercia (757–96), issued a gold coin bearing an inscription featuring the Islamic declaration of faith, the *shahādah*, as well as the Latin formula 'Offa Rex' ('King Offa')[4] engraved on the coin. The coin is a copy of a gold dinar originally minted in 774 by the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mansur, and there have been lively debates about why Offa might have chosen to produce such a coin.[5] These even include the proposition that King Offa was Britain's first convert to Islam. This is highly implausible given, for instance, Offa's promotion of a new archbishopric

[2] See Scarfe Beckett (2003: 100ff) for an explanation of Jerome's commentary on Genesis 4:14–16.
[3] See Scarfe Beckett, p. 18, for the original Latin text.
[4] Another example of the influence of the Islamic world is the 'Ballycottin' cross from Ireland. It is a piece of jewellery in the form of a cross with a glass bead in the centre inscribed with the *Bismillah* in Kufic script (Porter and Ager 1999).
[5] A number of theories are explored by Shaykh Abdullah Quilliam, writing as Professor H. M. Leon in 1916: www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMH-AQ-offa.htm. See also Allan (1914).

Figure 1. Offa's dinar, British Museum (Cat. CM1913–12–13–1). Copy of
'Abbasid dinar dated AH 157 (AD 773–4) made for King Offa of
Mercia. Reproduced by kind permission of the British Museum

at Lichfield. Moreover, it has been noted that the Latin inscription on the
coin was inserted upside down among the lines of Kufic script, suggesting
that neither Offa nor his moneyers had any idea of the form or mean-
ing of the Arabic (Metcalf, D. M. 1982). The coin was found in Rome, so
another possibility was that it was part of a payment to the see of Rome
(Scarfe Beckett 2003).

The very existence of this coin nevertheless indicates some degree of
influence of the Islamic world upon Anglo-Saxon economics and politics.[6]
Offa may well have wished to imitate what was an internationally recog-
nized trade coin of the time, widely respected for its high gold content.
This would accord well with Offa's reputation for projecting an image of
himself as entrepreneurial, cosmopolitan and outward-looking (Wormald
1982). Ultimately, it was probably therefore commercial acumen and pol-
itical aggrandizement that lay behind the decision of the Mercian court
to authorize such a coin.[7]

[6] There is moreover evidence that Muslim cartographers and geographers were aware of the British
Isles as early as 817. The mathematician, astronomer and geographer Muhammad bin Musa al-
Khwarizmi in his 'Kitab ṣurat al-Ard (*The Face of the Earth*) refers to a number of places in Britain
(Sherif 2002), and we can deduce that at least some of the seventy or so geographers working with
him might have visited Britain during their explorations. A more definite record of Muslim visi-
tors to England comes in the twelfth century, when al-Idrisi (1100–66), a North African scholar,
travelled to the west of England as part of his geographical endeavours (Watt 1972: 21).

[7] A range of Muslim coinage has been found in Britain dating from the early medieval period.
These coins arrived via Mediterranean and Scandinavian trade routes. Later, the treasury of
Henry III (1207–72) contained significant quantities of Islamic gold coins (Grierson 1974).

In the history of the relationship between Britain and various Muslim nations, the determinant role of economic and material interests in shaping contact and influence is repeated continually, as we shall see. When Britain has been in a position of relative weakness, interests have tended to be negotiated with the Muslim world. But when Britain has been more powerful, economically and politically, negotiation has usually been replaced by the imposition of terms and conditions detrimental to Muslim participants both in trade and in politics. Paradoxically, therefore, throughout history negative assumptions about Islam and Muslims have coexisted alongside very different secular views about the material culture of Muslim countries. Bede himself is a good example of this irony. For example, on his deathbed in Northumberland in 735, Bede requested one of his monks to gather his fellow priests around him, so that he could distribute the goods in his 'treasure box'. Bede's treasures included pepper and incense, products of the Arab Middle East and which 'must have passed through Muslim hands' (Scarfe Beckett 2003: 61) before finding their way to Bede's box. So while he might have regarded the Muslims as the hateful 'Other', he was appreciative of the unusual products that emanated from their world. Throughout medieval England, a taste for the exotic was acquired, and there is evidence for a whole range of medicinal ingredients,[8] spices, silk and ceramics having been imported from the Muslim world during the late first millennium (Petersen 2008).[9]

Alongside the theological and symbolic 'darkness' brought about in the Anglo-Saxon mind by the advent of Islam, there was also a very real perception of threat from Muslim armies. Bede was writing at a time when Muslim forces were advancing rapidly into territories under former Christian control. Long before the Crusades, Christian Europe therefore had reason to fear the advent of a 'new world order', at least as it affected the Mediterranean and Iberia. The first Caliphate saw not only the invasion of Sicily and the Balearics, the Maghreb and Spain, but also an apparently unstoppable advance of Muslim armies northwards into France. Only the Battle of Poitiers (732) – also known as the Battle of Tours – saw the halting of a northern advance by Muslim armies led by Amir 'Abd al-Rahman. During the battle the Franks, led by Charles Martel, defeated

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[8] Anglo-Saxon medical recipe books include references to a number of ingredients which could only have arrived from territories ruled by Muslims (Scarfe Beckett 2003).

[9] Ceramics from the central Middle East, especially Syria, Iran and Iraq, were regarded in particular as luxury items in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. 'The pieces found in Britain are all of the blue under-glaze painted variety which would certainly have looked exotic and sophisticated within the context of British green, yellow and brown glazed earthenwares' (Petersen 2008).

the Muslims. The victory has been subsequently interpreted as one of the decisive and most important military exchanges in the world (Watt 1972). Martel was seen as the saviour of Western Christendom for generations. A no doubt apocryphal story has it that when news of the victory at Poitiers became known in France, local bakers began to bake bread in the shape of the Islamic crescent in celebration of Charles's victory. The *croissant* that remains so popular on breakfast tables across Europe today may therefore have entirely unacknowledged origins in an event that took place 1,200 years ago – a symbol of a perceived epoch-making European victory over the Muslim world.

But was the Battle of Tours really as significant for relations between Islam and Europe as historians have claimed? The famous eighteenth-century English historian Edward Gibbon clearly regarded Charles Martel as the 'saviour of Christendom' and noted that without his victory over the Muslims 'perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet'.[10] The assumption that the Battle of Tours was somehow a 'salvation of Christendom' from the Islamic world is regarded today in some quarters simply as a myth constructed by modern historians (Mastnak 2002: 99). The historical validity of such a claim has never been closely challenged, and Mastnak notes also that contemporary chroniclers of the battle did not give it the same significance as did later historians. At the time, it was pictured as 'just one of many military encounters between Christians and Saracens – moreover, as only one in a series of wars fought by Frankish princes for booty, power and territory' (Mastnak 2002: 100). It was the lure of the East and the foundation of Baghdad that diverted the dynamic emergent Islamic world away from Christian Europe:

The eastward pull of the vast mass of Persia in the Islamic empire was the salvation of Europe … not the Frankish cavalry of Charles Martel at Tours. The division of East and West, which had been blurred throughout the Late Antique period by the confrontation of Byzantium and Persia along the Fertile Crescent [the area between Turkey and Iran], came to rest along the shores of the Mediterranean itself. The Muslim world turned its back on its poor Christian neighbours across the sea. The cultivated man drew his language from the desert, and the style of his culture from eastern Mesopotamia. In the more stable world created by this vast shift of the balance of culture, Western Europe could create an identity of its own. (Brown 1971: 203)

[10] Edward Gibbon cited in Mastnak (2002: 99).

So while the emergence of the *croissant* following the Battle of Tours could be interpreted as an indicator of the defeat of the Muslim world, it is only later that it has been reinterpreted as the 'salvation of Christendom'. The quotation above indicates what a Euro-centric perception of history this actually constitutes (Herrin 1989).

Bede certainly had cause to be fearful of the incursion of Muslims into former Christian territory, however, not only in Spain, but also in other parts of the world previously under Christian control, for example in the eastern Mediterranean and areas of Africa and Asia. The boundaries of the Christian world were being markedly reduced by the spread of Islam. However, Bede's response was not a call to political or military action, but rather the creation of a polemical 'othering' of Muslims. The Islamic world was an ideological resource in Bede's worldview. By portraying Muslims as opponents of Christianity itself rather than simply of Christian states, Bede created a rhetorical means of pushing them back into the desert whence they came. Thus the Muslims 'act as a foil for the virtue and eventual success of the Christians and, at last, confirm their righteousness … Bede's representation of the Saracens constitutes an aggrandizement, however small, of the institution of the medieval church' (Scarfe Beckett 2003: 21). Bede's treatment of Muslims and Islam can thus be regarded as a tactical device in reference to the situation of his own religious community.

THE CRUSADES AND THEIR LEGACY

By making Jerome's views of the Saracens even more widely known and by presenting Muslims also as spiritually deviant and 'anti-Christian', Bede helped shape prevalent negative ideas about Islam within and beyond the medieval church. In this way, he provided the kind of religious sanction that fuelled the Crusades. Whereas resistance to Muslim influence upon Europe had prior to the Crusades been predominantly theological and literary in England, it now became military and material, if heavily idealized and 'penitential' (Riley-Smith 2008: 29–44). Crusading was believed to be 'directly authorised by Christ himself, the incarnate God, through his mouthpiece the pope' (Riley-Smith 1987: xxix), as for instance by Pope Urban II in his 'launch' of the First Crusade at Clermont in France on 27 November 1095 (Tyerman 2004: 27–8). The most tangible aim of the Crusades, beyond securing the safety of Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem, was to wrest back control of the holy places, and especially the Church of Jerusalem, 'from the savagery and tyranny of the Muslims' (Riley-Smith