PERCEPTIONS AND IMAGES OF ISLAM AND THE ORIENT

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CONTENTS

DRAGAN POTOCNIK was born in Maribor, Slovenia, where he went to school and in 1998 obtained his PhD in cultural history at the Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, where he now works as an associate professor of history.

Dragan is a Founding member and President of Vagant society, which organises cutting edge talks and discussions on cultural, social and travel related topics. He is widely considered to be the leading expert in Asian History in Slovenia and is Director of the Centre for Intecultural Colaboration with Asian, African and Latin American countries at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor. In that role, he has organised and particiapted in a number of international conferences and symposia on the topic of intercultural dialogue.

Dragan's interest in both academic and applied history and philosophy of Asian and African cultures led him to extended travels, which he started as a student and has continued with throuout his life. His unique amalgamation of academic knowledge and practical, lived experience is evident in many travel reports, essays and research studies.

In addition to Dragan's extended research and travel writings, he has been a prolific writer of poetry and prose, that are a inspired by travels and cultural, personal and political historical events. This has resulted in two published collections of poems, Sebil and Sahrah, and a collection of short stories with a title Stories from African and Asian Backyards.

Some of Dragan's best selling novels are Poem for Sinin jan, Mountain, sing to me and Heavenly rain.

He is also the author of the following monographs:

Cultural Life in Maribor in the years 1918 – 1941;

Asia between the past and the present;

Historical Context of the Activities of General Rudolf Maister in Styria, Carinthia and Prekmurje;

History, the Teacher of Life;

Sources in the Teaching of History;

Students from Primorska at the Classical Grammar School in Maribor;

Iran, the Country between Persia and Islam;

History of Islamic civilization;

The art and science of the Islamic world.

Dragan Potocnik is a co-author of several history textbooks, such as the textbooks for the second year of secondary schools, and the seventh and eighth years of primary schools.

As an Academic leader Dragan in the field of the history of non-European nations and has written a number of research and review papers on

Slovenian and non-European history. This highly esteemed academic work resulted in Dragan being the first Slovenian Academic to be

invited as a guest Professor at the University of Esfahan in Iran, and other Universities in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Turkey.

For his scientific work and writing, Dragan has received a wide recognition and a number of awards, including the prestigious Glazer Award, the award for the best travel novel, recognition of the Islamic community in Slovenia.

Maribor, August 2025

INTRODUCTION

In my earliest childhood, even before I sat in a school desk, I could draw a world map from memory. My older brother had a school atlas, which I used to copy, sketching in large and small ships, traveling from one continent to another, across blue oceans and snow-capped mountains to the most distant lands. Before long, I knew most countries and even their capitals. I immensely enjoyed these first imaginary journeys. I still keep that atlas, along with letters and postcards I received from various foreign embassies. In third grade, I was awarded a statistical almanac for my academic success. It listed all the embassies in Yugoslavia at the time. I wrote to the Indian, Chinese, and Egyptian embassies, asking for postcards because I longed to travel through their lands. When I looked at the pictures they sent me-of tigers, of elephants parading, of sunburnt faces, strange clothes, and hats people wore, my passion for discovering foreign lands only grew stronger.

Thus I dreamed my childhood dreams and already knew that one day, I would visit all those lands on the map for real. During my childhood, documentary films on television were rare, so books became the most important food for our imagination. I didn't just read books-I devoured them. In my imagination, I lived as Robinson Crusoe on a deserted island or traveled the world like Karl May.

The first book I ever received was *Mladi vedež* (The Young Explorer)-again a reward for good grades. The chapters about Africa, India, and faraway unknown lands fascinated me the most. Slowly, my interest also turned to history.

But the geography and history lessons at school were a complete disappointment. Instead of encouraging my curiosity, the teacher stifled it. He lacked that childlike wonder, had no dreams, no knowledge. The textbooks were dull; with black-and-white photos, they tried to show me what a tree looked like-even though I had climbed every tree in the neighborhood, and in my mind, even those in the jungle. I had played with Eskimos, African and Australian natives. For a curious young mind, it soon became clear that school was nothing but boredom. Even then, I was upset

with the curriculum-though I didn't yet know it was the fault of those dry and boring men who wrote it in a wholly Eurocentric way.

In history class, there was no mention of my India, nor of fabled Persia or the tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Nothing. Just European history, and even that told in chapters written by adults who had never traveled across a map by ship from one continent to another, who didn't know the sounds a monkey makes when it's happy or afraid. No, they didn't even have animal friends like the Little Prince who tamed the fox.

My young mind wondered why I had to learn about capitalism, imperialism, or the heroes of the October Revolution and socialist revolution in Yugoslavia. I was once again forced to seek answers on my own, escaping even more into reading and imagination.

By the time I was fifteen, I had figured out how Western civilization came to be. I traced its origins to Greek civilization, which gave rise to Rome, which birthed Christianity, from which came the Renaissance and then the Enlightenment. That's how I came to understand the development of Western civilization. At the time, I didn't yet realize how strong the influence of other civilizations had been-especially the Islamic one.

But in high school, at last, a guiding star appeared. In the desert of boredom, I soon realized that my geography teacher truly knew how the world map smells, how a hungry elephant cries, or how a lion roars. What joy! Someone knew of kingdoms and empires like Persia or China, even spoke of the Incas, Mayas, and African tribes.

To this day, I'm grateful to Professor Nikola Hočevar, who guided me by the hand through Syria, from Palmyra to Hama and Aleppo, from Istanbul to Alexandria, from Samarkand to Delhi. We didn't have textbooks-nor was the curriculum important. He was there. He knew everything: where the name Asia came from, why Africa was called Africa, and he knew that Europe was not the center of the world, that our world was just one among many, and that we owe the Renaissance and Enlightenment to many other civilizations as well.

He spoke of the alluvial plains of Mesopotamia, of mighty Hammurabi, who over 4,000 years ago issued the first laws about the duties of his subjects and the punishments for breaking them. Of how the great Achaemenid Empire emerged in the 6th century BCE, managing to govern a vast empire composed of many different nations with an advanced system of administration. Roads connected the coasts of Asia Minor with Babylon, Susa, Persepolis, and made it possible to travel over 2,000 kilometers in just seven days.

Ancient Persia was the land that connected the Mediterranean with the heart of Asia-Central Asia, where even then, Samarkand shone in all its splendor. Then came Alexander the Great, whose conquests and legacy connected ancient Greece with Persia, India, Central Asia, and China. The cultural exchange between Europe and Asia was incredible. Greek could be heard in Central Asia and even in the Indus Valley. Amazing.

This is what this third book, titled *The Orient and the Western World*, will explore. It will not only focus on the historical relationship between Western and Islamic civilizations, or the influence of the latter on the Renaissance and Enlightenment, or on today's relations between the Islamic world and the West, but also on the vibrant cultural exchange between Europe and Asia that existed even before the rise of Islam.

But before we begin the first chapter, let me finish the story of my teacher.

He didn't just know how wild animals sound-he had actually visited all those countries and told us about them. The limits of imagination were becoming too narrow; my dreams were growing ever more tangible. I could touch them, speak with them, taste and smell them.

Later, throughout my long academic path, no one ever matched him. He didn't just know-he *felt*, because as a child, he too had traveled by ship from one continent to another. He knew every bend, pool, and rapid of the Amazon River. He even knew how the river smelled, how it breathed, how mosquitoes buzz just before they bite.

I couldn't hold back any longer-I had to set out. At sixteen, I traveled with a friend toward the Maghreb. There was too much imagination and curiosity for us to head toward Western Europe. That year we didn't reach the Atlas Mountains or Morocco, the heart of the Maghreb. But we succeeded the following year.

Upon my first real contact with the Islamic world, I wrote in my travel journal:

"I will never forget that sunny August morning in Tangier. My friend and I sat in a teahouse. Horse-drawn and donkey-drawn carts passed by, the scent of mint lingered in the air, and a whole new world began to unfold inside me. I was only 17, and my dreams-woven from emotion and sensation-were still completely innocent. I simply sat there, at what felt like the edge of reality, and marveled. I didn't think, for in such a different environment, I couldn't engage the outer world with reason. I just absorbed and drank it all in. I was fully there. Happier than I would be many times later. The smell didn't bother me, nor did the locals constantly approaching us, nor the unbearable flies in the heat. I didn't ask what I should do or how I should behave. Life itself brought me joy. I was content, smiling, and because of that, kind and open to the world around me. Only later did I realize how close I had been to pure love-or to God, one might say-in those moments."

My friend and I had, between us, no more than what would today be a hundred euros. But that didn't matter. Even then, I knew that happiness requires something more than money. The world was ours, and we belonged to it.

Across from our teahouse stood a mosque, adorned with majestic arches and multicolored columns. The splendor of Oriental imagination, which had fascinated me even then. It wasn't hard to conjure images of the past: silk and brocade, myrrh, incense, and perfumes, loaded onto camels rushing toward the port. Ships awaited to carry the goods to Spain and beyond.

In the mosque courtyard was a true oasis of greenery and peace. Pack animals rested there, given water and shade. Their handlers performed their

prayers. Not much had changed. Only a motorcyclist, carrying a mountain of fabric on the back of his bike, disturbed the idyllic scene.

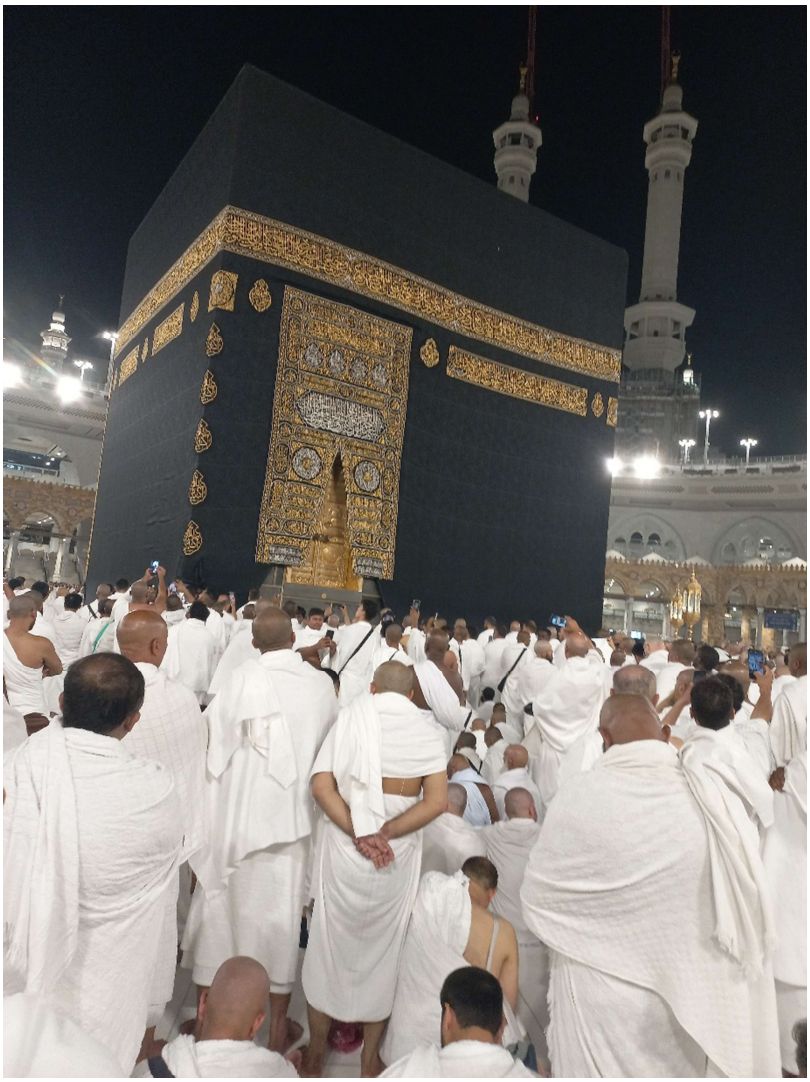
Then the intoxicating scent of incense reached me. I felt how its aroma filled and inspired me, how it stirred me while bringing inner calm. I could perceive the world around me more subtly than ever before.

This was my first contact with a world I had previously only known through books and the teachings of my first real teacher. When I returned, he didn't ask me how it had been. He didn't need to-he knew I was on the right ship, and not even a storm could sink me. I had begun to live my dream.

This book owes its creation to my Muslim friends, both in Slovenia and abroad, who encouraged me-drawing on all my travel experiences, academic visits to various universities from Turkey to Iran and Iraq, and on the basis of my knowledge of historical, political, social, and religious contexts-to present as objective a picture as possible of the region where Islam predominates, where conflicts between the West and the Islamic world have raged for centuries, and where, despite an awareness of the dangers of Western interference, peace still seems elusive.

My heartfelt thanks go to my Turkish friends, the professors at the Department of History at Marmara University in Istanbul-especially department head Dr. Fehmi Yilmaz and Dr. Nuri Tinaz, director of the Office for International Relations and Academic Cooperation. During my six-month residency at Marmara University, their help granted me access to archival materials, manuscript libraries, and the Islamic studies library.

I am also deeply grateful to my friends in Iraq, who helped me uncover the past of this incredibly fascinating country. Thank you, Dr. Wafaa Abdulaali, Dr. Ghada Altaee, Dr. Kareem Aikorji, Dr. Sameera Alsaedi, Dr. Emad Alshummari, Dr. Dhuha Albahadli, Dr. Subhi Aldaini, and many others who generously helped me visit historically and spiritually significant sites in Iraq. With your help, I had the opportunity to lecture at universities in Najaf, Kufa, and Nasiriyah. Thank you for these priceless experiences.



I. CONTACTS BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE ORIENT IN ANTIQUITY

During antiquity-up until the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE-there were ongoing and, at times, intense interactions between the Mediterranean world (ancient Greece and Rome) and the regions of the Near East, Central Asia, India, and even China. This vast area, stretching from the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea to the Himalayas, represented, for millennia, the navel of the Earth-the axis around which our world revolved.

On this bridge between East and West, powerful centers of civilization emerged five thousand years ago: Babylon, Nineveh, Uruk, and Akkad in Mesopotamia-known for their wealth and artistry. The first settlers in the fertile region between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers survived through agriculture and livestock breeding. They built canals, directing river water to irrigate their fields. Among their technical innovations were the potter's wheel (around 3500 BCE) and the earliest known wheeled carts (around 3250 BCE). Agricultural surplus led to the emergence of a class of priests, scribes, traders, and artisans. These developments gave rise to the first organized communities.[1]

This crucible of civilization saw the formation of numerous kingdoms. Four thousand years ago, Hammurabi, king of Babylon, through skillful diplomacy and military campaigns, created a kingdom stretching to the Persian Gulf, encompassing Assyria and Syria. He was not only a notable ruler but also a groundbreaking legislator. During his reign, the Code of Hammurabi was created-based on earlier Sumerian and Akkadian laws, but improved and expanded. It comprises 282 laws regulating social, economic, military, and property matters. The code was inscribed on a diorite stele, depicting Hammurabi receiving the laws from the god

[1] J. M. Roberts, *The New Penguin History of the World*, (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 49–56 (hereinafter: Roberts, *The New Penguin History*).

Shamash-the Babylonian sun god and god of justice, son of the moon god Sin and brother of the goddess Ishtar.[2]

Almost five thousand years ago, great urban centers also developed in the Indus Valley. The most famous are the majestic ruins of Mohenjo-daro-the "Mound of the Dead." Spread over 260 hectares, the city housed around 40,000 inhabitants. Another important site is Harappa, located on the banks of the Ravi River. Both cities were built to nearly identical urban plans, in the same style, using fired brick. Their architectural uniformity, numerous public buildings, and vast drainage and irrigation systems point to a unified and highly advanced culture. Mohenjo-daro's layout is perhaps its most impressive feature: it resembles a chessboard. Its modern urban design is evident in the grid-based street layout; wide main roads (up to ten meters) intersected at right angles, forming large quarters made up of multiple homes-often spacious, some as large as 7.5 meters wide. Homes were built from fired brick, equipped with bathrooms and waste shafts, and connected to a shared drainage system. The facades were aligned, and corners rounded. The city had both sewerage and water supply systems, with wells and public baths available for refreshment.

This ancient civilization is notable for something else too: the absence of monumental religious or royal architecture. There are virtually no buildings designed to glorify gods or exalt a lavish ruler. The brick walls, unadorned structures, and the uniform street grid all reflect the understated character of this early Indus Valley civilization.

Excavations have revealed nine archaeological layers, showing long-term habitation. Numerous clay artifacts have been found-especially charming are the clay figurines of animals and various human forms. Among the remains are exquisite examples of pottery, underscoring the importance of ceramics. Items made of copper and bronze were also uncovered. Alongside metallurgy, other crafts flourished-particularly weaving and shipbuilding.[3]

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[2] "Code of Hammurabi." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Accessed August 12, 2023.
[3] Keay, John. *India: A History*. London: HarperCollins, 2000, p. 7–18.

The culture of these early Indian cities can be compared with that of other ancient Near Eastern civilizations, particularly Mesopotamia. In the ruins of some Sumerian and Akkadian cities, stone seals have been found bearing carved images of ancient Indian style. These findings suggest cultural and trade connections between the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia.

Then there is the Chinese heartland, shaped by its great rivers. Ancient Chinese history begins with the emergence of its first known urban civilization in the 18th century BCE. The Shang dynasty founded the first historically attested Chinese state along the lower reaches of the Yellow River. They established a permanent bureaucracy and a standing army to defend against nomadic invaders from the north.

This era saw the rise of both material and spiritual culture in China, much like in Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley five thousand years ago. It was during this time that writing first emerged in East Asia-somewhat later than in Mesopotamia or India. From the beginning, Chinese script was ideographic, meaning that it was intelligible regardless of time or place to anyone familiar with the characters. It was written vertically, from top to bottom, and from right to left. But Chinese writing was more than just a visual representation of speech-it became a supreme art form, an expression of cultural refinement. Calligraphy was not simply about mastering technical writing skills or rhythmic aesthetics; it was the embodiment of philosophy and beauty.[4]

Let us not forget that this region-this bridge between East and West-was also the birthplace of many great world religions: Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It was a zone of linguistic diversity, where alongside Altaic, Turkic, and Caucasian languages, people spoke Indo-European, Semitic, and Sino-Tibetan languages.

This land saw the rise and fall of vast empires. Cultural clashes and rivalries radiated for thousands of kilometers. New perspectives on the past emerged from this region, revealing how deeply interconnected the world was-how

[4] Mitja Saje**,** *The Chinese Language and Chinese Script: Paths and Dead Ends*, Proceedings of the International Symposium "Current Topics in East Asia", Ljubljana, 1998, p. 69–77.

events in Central Asian steppes reverberated in North Africa, how developments in Baghdad echoed even in Scandinavia.[5]

A vast network of roads extended in all directions. Pilgrims, warriors, nomads, and merchants traversed these paths, bearing not only goods but also ideas, philosophies, and religions. East and West-more precisely, the Mediterranean world-were interconnected, since what we now call Western Europe was still inhabited by fragmented tribal societies and had yet to emerge on the historical stage.

For centuries, Asian cities held leading roles-now nearly forgotten. Merv, for instance, was described in the 10th century as enchantingly beautiful, bright, spacious, and hospitable. Or Ray, near present-day Tehran, which another writer at the time called so magnificent that it was considered the bridegroom of the state and the loveliest place on Earth.

In the following centuries, numerous cities dotted the spine of Asia like pearls on a necklace, linking the Far East with the Mediterranean: Constantinople, Damascus, Baghdad, Isfahan, Bukhara, Samarkand, Kabul, Kashgar… They sparked rivalry among rulers and elites, which in turn inspired architects and artists. Marvelous cultural monuments, libraries, temples, churches, observatories, and more sprang up. For centuries, these cities served as the intellectual capitals of the world, long before places like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, or Yale rose to prominence.

These cities became home to outstanding scientists who pushed the boundaries of knowledge. Today, some of their names are widely known: Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al-Biruni, Muhammad al-Khwarizmi-great minds in astronomy and medicine.

In the pre-Christian era, this vast region was home to many kingdoms and empires, but the greatest and most influential of all was the Persian Empire.

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[5] *"Middle-Eastern Religion." Encyclopædia Britannica*. Accessed August 15, 2023.