

The Great Arab Conquests - How the spread of Islam changed the world we live in by Hugh Kennedy.  
Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2007.

Hugh Kennedy follows up his excellent book on the Caliphate (*The Court of the Caliphs*, 2004) with this enthralling telling of how Islam conquered a large part of the known world within a century of its creation. By 641, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq were within the ambit of Islam, by 700 all of North Africa, and by 720 Central Asia, Pakistan and Spain. By any standards this was a lightning fast conquest, not just of territory but also of the hearts and minds of the people of these lands.

Kennedy divides his work into 12 chapters, covering the conquest chronologically, and including a chapter dedicated to the impact of the conquest on those who did not embrace the Islamic faith. In his final chapter of conclusions he considers how and why the Arabs were able to conquer so much land, not just militarily and politically but ideologically and spiritually too. As well as the ruthlessness of the invaders he also details their practical common sense and generosity of spirit towards those who chose surrender and accommodation over battle.

Hugh Kennedy's scholarship is impressive, but it is equalled by his ability to tell a good story. There is much to be gleaned from *The Great Arab Conquests* concerning precisely what it was that made Islam such an unstoppable force during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries of the current era, and it also provokes many thoughts about how the failure to sustain that power into the modern era has impacted on Islam today.

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