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1001 Inventions and Muslim Heritage

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Voice of America

Coffee, computers and piston engines – could we imagine a world without them? These are intricate parts of every day life for most of us and the knowledge that led to them was either invented by or passed down through the ancient Muslim world. That's the theme of an exhibit in London's Science Museum and it's a far cry from the view held by some that the Muslim and Western World represent a "clash of civilizations".

And there were many other inventions or innovations passed on by the early Muslim world from the 7th Century onward. "One of them is the invention of the university. This was done in the year 850 by a young lady called Fatima al-Firhi in the city of Fez in Morocco. The first university as we know it in the world, giving degrees and so on," he said.

And that's the theme of this exhibit at the London Science Museum. It's called 1001 inventions: the Muslim Heritage – a bit like "1001 Arabian Nights" the well known fairy tale.

But, the exhibit here focuses on scientific or technological inventions and advances that changed our world — from some of the earliest universities, to innovations in medicine, hygiene, pumps, and water wheels.

"Forgotten history? Not really. Ask just about anyone on the streets of Cairo or Damascus today and they'll readily tell you about Islam's glory days – not just its conquests but its cultural, scientific and technological innovations."

And then there is mathematics and algebra. In general, our numbers are known as Arabic numerals today, but it wasn't always so. "The numbers that we have today – 1,2,3,4 – they're called Arabic numerals, but actually the Arabs at the time called them Indian numerals," he said.

And, the number "0" for example – "zephir" in Arabic – was used first by early Arab scholars as an integral part of mathematical equations. And that's part of the all-important formula of zeros and ones that was crucial to the development of computers and other new technology.