

Page One

Islam From The Beginning To 1300
Date: 2002

Page Two

Page Three

From Arab To Islamic Empire: The Early Abbasid Era

Page Four

Page Five

Page Six

Page Seven

Page Eight

Page Nine

Page Ten

Page Eleven

Page Twelve

Page Thirteen

Page Fourteen

Page Fifteen

*May peace and
blessings of Allah
be on thee*

The sudden shift from Umayyad to Abbasid leadership within the Islamic Empire reflected a series of even more fundamental transformations within evolving Islamic civilization. The revolts against the Umayyads had arisen in part from a lingering hostility toward the Umayyad clan. But they were even more a product of growing regional identities and divisions within the Islamic world. As Islamic civilization spread even farther under the Abbasids, these regional interests and loyalties made it increasingly difficult to hold together the vast areas the Arabs had conquered. They also gave rise to new cleavages in the Islamic community that have sapped its strength from within, from Abbasid times to the present day. The revolts against the Umayyads were also an expression of the growing displeasure, if not disgust, of the Muslim faithful with the absolutist pretensions and extravagant life-styles of the Umayyad elite. There was a very strong puritanical thrust to the resistance of the Abbasids and their Shi'ite allies. Ironically, as we shall see, the victory of the Abbasids led to bureaucratic expansion, absolutism, and luxury on a scale beyond the wildest dreams of the Umayyads.

Finally, the coalition of forces that overthrew the Umayyads was strengthened by the support of the mawali who were weary of being second-class

citizens in the Muslim world. They saw the Abbasids as champions of a policy of active conversion and their admission as full members of the Islamic community. Of all the major transformations that were marked by the Abbasids'

rise to power, the last was the most significant for the development of Islamic civilization. From the religion of a small, Arab warrior elite, Islam became a cosmopolitan and genuinely universal faith with tens of millions of adherents from Spain to the Philippine islands.

Abbasid Absolutism

The rough treatment the Umayyad clan had received at the hands of the victorious Abbasids ought to have forewarned their Shi'ite and mawali allies of what was to come. But the Shi'a and other dissenting groups continued the support that allowed the Abbasids to level all other centers of political rivalry until it was too late. Gradually, the Abbasids rejected many of their old allies, becoming in the process more and more righteous in their defense of Sunni Islam and less and less tolerant of what they termed the heretical views of the various sects of Shi'ism. With the Umayyads all but eliminated and their allies brutally suppressed, the way was clear for the Abbasids to build a centralized, absolutist imperial order.

The fact that they chose to build their new capital, Baghdad, in Iraq near the ancient Persian capital of Ctesiphon was a clear sign of things to come. Soon the Abbasid caliphs were perched atop jewel-encrusted thrones, reminiscent of those of the ancient Persian emperors, gazing down on the great gatherings of courtiers and petitioners who bowed before them in their gilt and marbled audience halls. The caliphs' palaces and harems expanded to keep pace with their claims to absolute power over the Islamic faithful as well as the non-Muslim subjects of their vast empire.

The ever expanding corps of bureaucrats, servants, and slaves, who strove to translate Abbasid political claims into reality, lived and worked within the circular walls of the new capital at Baghdad. The bureaucratization of the Islamic Empire was reflected above all in the growing power of the wazir, or chief administrator and head of the caliph's inner councils, and the sinister figure of the royal executioner, who stood close to the throne in the public audiences of the Abbasid rulers. The wazirs, who were initially recruited mainly from the Persian provinces of the empire, oversaw the building of an administrative infrastructure that allowed the Abbasids to project their demands for tribute to the most distant provinces of the empire. Sheer size, poor communications, and collusion between Abbasid officials and local notables meant that the farther the town or village was from the capital, the less effectively royal commands were carried out. But for well over a century, the Abbasid regime was fairly effective at collecting revenue from its subject peoples and preserving law and order over much of the empire.

The presence of the executioner perhaps most strikingly symbolized the absolutist pretensions of the Abbasid rulers. With a wave of his hand, a caliph could condemn the highest of Muslim nobles to death. Thus, even in matters of life and death, the Abbasids claimed a status above the rest of the Muslim faithful and even Islamic law that would have been rejected as heretical by the early community of believers. Though they stopped short of declaring themselves divine, the Abbasid rulers styled themselves the "shadow of God on earth," clearly beings superior to ordinary mortals - Muslim or otherwise. The openness and accessibility of the earlier caliphs, including the Umayyads, was increasingly unimaginable. The old days, when members of the Muslim community could request an audience with the caliph merely by ringing a bell announcing their presence in the palace, were clearly gone. Now, just to get into the vast and crowded throne room, one had to bribe and petition

numerous officials, and more often than not the best result would be to win a few minutes with the wazir or one of his assistants. If an official or notable were lucky enough to buy and beg an audience with the caliph, he had to observe an elaborate sequence of bowing and prostration in approaching the throne. Positions at court and throughout the bureaucracy were won and lost depending on one's standing with powerful officials in the Abbasid hierarchy, and these great men could in turn be elevated or dismissed on the whim of the caliph.

The "Good Life" And Its Enemies In The Abbasid Age

The luxurious life-style of the Abbasid rulers and their courtiers both reflected the new wealth of the political and commercial elites of the Islamic Empire and intensified sectarian and social divisions within the Islamic community. As the compilation of folk tales, *The Thousand and One Nights*, from many parts of the empire testifies, life for much of the elite in Baghdad and other major urban centers was luxurious and oriented to the delights of the flesh. Caliphs and wealthy merchants lived in palatial residences of stone and marble, complete with gurgling fountains and elaborate gardens, which served as retreats from the glare and heat of the southern Mediterranean climate. In the Abbasid palaces luxurious living and ostentation soared to fantastic heights. In the Hall of the Tree, for example, there was a huge artificial tree, made entirely of gold and silver and filled with gold mechanical birds that chirped to keep the caliph in good cheer.

Sexual enjoyment, which within the confines of marriage had been condoned rather than restricted by the Quran, often degenerated into eroticism for its own sake. The harem, replete with fierce eunuchs, insatiable sultans, and veiled damsels, provided outside observers with a stereotypic image of the Abbasid world that had little to do with the life of the average citizen of the empire - and often even with that of the caliph and high officials. Yet as the following passage from *The Thousand and One Nights* describing the interior

of the mansion of a Baghdad notable illustrates, the material delights of the Abbasid era were enjoyed far beyond the confines of the palace:

They reached a spacious ground-floor hall, built with admirable skill and beautified with all manner of colors and carvings, with upper balconies and groined arches and galleries and cupboards and recesses whose curtains hung before them. In the midst stood a great basin full of water surrounding a fine fountain, and at the upper end on the raised dais was a couch of juniper wood set with gems and pearls, with a canopy like mosquito curtain of red satin-silk looped up with pearls as big as filberts and bigger.

Since the tales were just that, tall stories, there is some exaggeration of the wealth, as well as the romantic exploits and human excesses, of the world depicted. But for the free-living members of the elite classes, the luxuries, frivolities, and vices of the Abbasid age were very real indeed.

This sort of living was, of course, highly offensive to the pious, particularly those of the dissenting sects, such as the Shi'as. Members of these sects also built up an abiding hatred for what they perceived as the arrogance and heresy of the Abbasid rulers and high officials. Thus, throughout their reign, the Abbasid rulers were threatened by periodic revolts on the part of sectarian groups. The leaders of these risings promised to cleanse the Islamic community of the excesses of the court and notables. In the centuries of Abbasid decline, when real power passed to a succession of regional dynasties, there emerged a number of violence-prone sects, such as the Assassins whose members were devoted to striking down Abbasid officials whenever the opportunity arose. Even for less-radical Muslims, the excesses of the Abbasid court and elite classes made a mockery of their claims to be the religious successors of Muhammad and the upholders of Islamic law. The resulting erosion of their legitimacy had much to do with the extended decline of the caliphates' authority, particularly from the middle of the 9th century onward.

Islamic Conversion And Mawali Acceptance

Popular enmity for the political elite was offset to some extent by the fact that the Abbasid era saw the full integration of new converts, both Arab and non-Arab, into the Islamic community. In the last decades of the Umayyad period there was a growing acceptance of the mawali as equals and some effort

to win new converts to the faith, particularly among Arab peoples outside the Arabian peninsula. In the Abbasid era, mass conversions to Islam were encouraged for all peoples of the empire from the Berbers of North Africa in the west to the Persians and Turkic peoples of Central Asia in the east. Converts were admitted on an equal footing with the first generations of believers, and over time the distinction between mawali and the earlier converts all but disappeared.

Most converts were won over peacefully, due to the great appeal of Islamic beliefs and to the considerable advantages they enjoyed over non-Muslim peoples in the empire. Not only were converts exempt from paying the head tax, but greater opportunities were open to them to get advanced schooling and launch careers as administrators, traders, or judges. No group demonstrated the new opportunities open to converts as dramatically as the Persians, who soon came to dominate the upper levels of imperial administration. In fact, as the Abbasid rulers became more dissolute and

consequently less interested in affairs of state, a number of powerful Persian families close to the throne became the real locus of power within the imperial system.

[See Persian School: A Persian school - bastinado for an unruly pupil.]

Commercial Boom And Urban Growth

The rise of the mawali was paralleled in the Abbasid era by the growth in wealth and social status of the commercial and landlord classes of the empire. The Abbasid age was a time of great urban expansion that was linked to a revival of the Afro-Eurasian trading network, which had declined with the fall of the Han dynasty in China in the early 3d century A.D. and the slow collapse of the Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th centuries. The Abbasid domains in the west and the great Tang and Song empires in the east became the pivots of the revived commercial system. From the western Mediterranean to the South China

Sea, Arab dhows, or sailing vessels with triangular, or lateen, sails that later strongly influenced European ship design, carried the goods of one civilized core to be exchanged with those of another.

Muslim merchants, often in joint ventures with Christians and Jews (which, because each merchant had a different Sabbath, meant that the firm could carry on business all week), grew rich by supplying the cities of the empire with provisions and by taking charge of the long-distance trade that specialized in luxury products for the elite classes. The great profits made from the trade were reinvested in new commercial enterprises or the purchase of land and in the construction of the great mansions that dominated the central quarters of the political and commercial hubs of the empire. Some wealth also went to charity, as required by the Quran. A good deal of the wealth was spent on building and running mosques and religious schools, baths and rest houses for weary travelers, and hospitals, which in the numbers of patients served and the quality of their medical care surpassed those of any other civilization to that time.

Town and Country

In addition to the expanding bureaucracy and servant classes and the boom in commerce, the growth of Abbasid cities was fed by a great increase in artisan handicraft production. Both government-run and privately owned artisan workshops expanded or were established for the production of a wide range of products, from necessities, such as furniture and carpets, to luxury items such as glassware, jewelry, and tapestries. Though the artisans were frequently poorly paid and some worked in great workshops, they were not slaves or drudge laborers. They owned their own tools and were often highly valued for their craft skills. The most skilled of the artisans formed guildlike organizations that negotiated wages and working conditions with the merchant oligarchy and provided support for their members in times of financial difficulty or personal crisis.

In towns and the countryside, much of the unskilled labor was left to slaves, who were frequently attached in considerable numbers to prominent families as domestic servants. Large numbers of slaves were also in the service of the caliphs and their highest advisors. It was possible for the more clever and ambitious of these to rise to positions of considerable power, and many were able eventually to be granted or to buy their freedom. Less fortunate were the slaves forced into lives of hard labor under the overseer's whip on rural estates and government projects, such as those devoted to draining marshlands, or into a lifetime of labor in the nightmare conditions of the great salt mines in southern Iraq. Most of these drudge laborers, who were called the Zanj slaves, were non-Muslims captured on slaving raids in East Africa. With little hope of mobility, much less manumission, they had little reason to convert to Islam, and from the middle of the 9th century they became a major source of social unrest.

In the countryside a wealthy and deeply entrenched landed elite, referred to as the *ayan*, emerged in the early decades of Abbasid rule. Many of the landlords had been long established. Others were newcomers - Arab soldiers who invested their share of the booty in land, or merchants and administrators who funneled their profits and kickbacks into the acquisition of sizeable estates. In many regions, the vast majority of the peasantry did not own the land they worked. They occupied it as tenants, sharecroppers, or migratory laborers who were required to give the greater portion of the crops they harvested to the estate owners. In densely populated areas, the bargaining power of the agricultural tenants and laborers was greatly reduced by the ready supply of extra hands to replace those who would not agree to a division of the harvest that the landlord found sufficiently to his advantage. The control the *ayan* exercised over the cultivating classes gave them more and more independence from the Abbasid regime. In times of crisis, the *ayan* readily shifted their allegiance to regional challengers of the imperial administration or foreign invaders eager to carve out independent kingdoms within the Abbasid domains.

The First Flowering Of Islamic Learning

When the Arabs first came out of the desert, they were for the most part illiterate and ignorant of the wider world. Their provincialism and cultural backwardness was no better revealed than at the moment when the victorious

Muslim armies came within sight of the city of Alexandria in Egypt. Chroniclers of the great conquests record how the veteran Arab warriors halted and sat on their horses, mouths literally open in wonderment, before the great walls of the city that stretched across the horizon from the Pharos lighthouse in the north to perhaps the greatest library in the ancient world in the south.

As this confrontation suggests, the Arab conquerors burst quite suddenly into some of the most ancient and highly developed centers of civilization known to human history. Within the confines of the Islamic domains were located the centers of the Hellenistic, Persian, Indian, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian civilizations as well as the widely dispersed Christian and Jewish traditions of thought and learning. The rather sparse cultural tradition of the Arabs, which one author has fittingly captured with reference to their "mental virginity," made them highly receptive to influences percolating from the subject peoples and remarkably tolerant of the great diversity of their styles and approaches to thought and artistic creativity.

In the first phase of Abbasid rule, the Islamic contribution to human artistic expression focused on the great mosques and palaces. In addition to advances in religious, legal, and philosophical discourse, the Islamic contribution to learning was focused on the sciences and mathematics. In the early Abbasid period, the main tasks were recovering and preserving the learning of the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean and Middle East. Beyond the works of Plato, for example, much of Greek learning had been lost to the peoples of western Europe. Thanks to Muslim and Jewish scholars in the Abbasid domains, the priceless writings of the Greeks on key subjects such as medicine, algebra, geometry, astronomy, anatomy, and ethics were saved, recopied in Arabic, and dispersed throughout the empire. From Spain in the west, Greek writings found their way into Christendom. Among the authors rescued in this manner, one need only mention Aristotle, Galen, Hippocrates, Ptolemy, and Euclid to demonstrate the importance of the preservation effort.

In addition, scholars working in Arabic played a role as transmitters of ideas that paralleled the rise of Arab traders and merchants as the carriers of goods and inventions. Indian numbers, for example - which, along with Greek mathematics, would prove critical to the development of scientific thinking in western Europe - were learned by Muslim invaders of India, carried to the Middle Eastern centers of Islamic civilization, and eventually transmitted across the Mediterranean to Italy and from there to northern Europe. But the best was yet to come. It is no exaggeration that from the 9th to about the 13th century, Arabic was the most important and the first language of science and learning that extended across civilizations. In this era, Islamic scientific discoveries and imagination significantly affected the thinking and creativity of virtually all Old World civilizations from western Europe to China.

Home Page

[World History Project](#)