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*May peace and blessings of Allah be on thee*

In 750 the Umayyad Dynasty was removed from power by rebels, and a new dynasty, the Abbasid, ruled most of the Muslim world from 750 to 1258. The city of Baghdad was built in 762 as the capital of the new caliph, Abu-al-Abbas, a descendant of the Prophet's uncle. The Abbasids owed their initial success to the discontent of the non-Arab Muslims, who were the primary leaders in the towns and in the Shia.

The fall of the Umayyad Dynasty marked the end of Arab domination within Islam; the Abbasid caliph made great effort to establish equalitarian treatment of all Muslims. The Arab aristocracy had led the forces of conquest during the great period of Islamic expansion, but with the advent of more stable political conditions, the important status previously held only by the Arab soldier was given to non-Arab administrators, merchants, and scholars. The traditional Arabic patterns of nomadism and warfare gave way before economic prosperity, the growth of town life, and the rise of a merchant class. Caliph Abu-al-Abbas forecast that Baghdad would become the "most flourishing city in the world"; and indeed it rivaled Constantinople for that honor, situated as it was on the trade routes linking West and East. Furthermore, Abbasid patronage of scholarship and the arts produced a rich and complex culture far surpassing that then existing in western Europe.

The location of a new capital at Baghdad shifted Islam's center of gravity to the province of Iraq, whose soil, watered by the Tigris and Euphrates, had nurtured the earliest human civilization. Here the Abbasid caliphs set themselves up as potentates in the traditional style of the ancient East (more particularly of Persia) so that they were surrounded by a lavish court that contrasted sharply with the simplicity of the lifestyle of the Prophet.

The Abbasid Dynasty marked the high point of Islamic power and civilization. The empire ruled by these caliphs was greater in size than the domain of the Roman Caesars; it was the product of an expansion during which the Muslims assimilated peoples, customs, cultures, and inventions on an unprecedented scale. This Islamic state, in fact, drew from the resources of the entire known world.

[See Abbasid Dynasty: The Islamic world under the Abbasid Dynasty.]

#### Trade, Industry, And Agriculture

From the eighth to the twelfth century the Muslim world enjoyed enormous prosperity. In close contact with three continents, the Muslims could shuttle goods back and forth from China to western Europe and from Russia to central Africa. The absence of tariff barriers within the empire and the tolerance of the caliphs, who allowed non-Muslim merchants and craftsmen to reside in their territories and carry on commerce with their home countries, further facilitated trade. The presence of such important urban centers as Baghdad, Cairo and Cordova stimulated trade and industry throughout the Muslim world.

The cosmopolitan nature of Baghdad was evident in its bazaars, which contained goods from all over the known world. There were spices, minerals, and dyes from India; gems and fabrics from Central Asia; honey and wax from Scandinavia and Russia; and ivory and gold dust from Africa. One bazaar in the city specialized in goods from China, including silks, musk, and porcelain. In the slave markets Muslim traders bought and sold Scandinavians, Mongolians from Central Asia, and Africans. Joint-stock companies flourished along with branch banking organizations, and checks (an Arabic word) drawn on one bank could be cashed elsewhere in the empire.

Muslim textile industries turned out excellent cottons (muslins) and silks. The steel of Damascus and Toledo, the leather of Cordova, and the glass of Syria became internationally famous. Notable also was the art of papermaking, learned from the Chinese. Under the Abbasids, vast irrigation projects in Iraq increased cultivable land, which yielded large crops of fruits and grains. Wheat came from the Nile valley, cotton from North Africa, olives and wine from Spain, wool from eastern Asia Minor, and horses from Persia.

#### The Spectacular Reign Of Harun Al-Rashid

Just as the Abbasid Caliphate was the most impressive Islamic dynasty, so the rule of Harun al-Rashid (786-809) was the most spectacular of the Abbasid reigns. A contemporary of Charlemagne, who had revived the idea of a Roman Empire in the West (see ch. 9) there can be no doubt that Harun was the more powerful of the two and ruler of the more highly advanced culture. The two monarchs were on friendly terms, based on self-interest. Charlemagne wanted to exert pressure on the Byzantine emperor to recognize his new imperial title. Harun, on the other hand, saw Charlemagne as an ally against the Umayyad

rulers of Spain, who had broken away from Abbasid domination. The two emperors exchanged embassies and presents. The Muslim sent the Christian rich fabrics, aromatics, and even an elephant named Abu-Lababah, meaning "the father of intelligence." An intricate water clock from Baghdad seems to have been looked upon as a miracle in the West.

Relations between the Abbasid caliphate and the Byzantine Empire were never very cordial, and conflicts often broke out along the constantly shifting border that separated Christian and Muslim territories. Harun al-Rashid once replied to a communique from the Byzantine emperor in the following terms:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.  
From Harun, Commander of the Faithful, to Nicephorus,  
the dog of the Greeks, I have read your letter, you son  
of a she-infidel, and you shall see the answer before  
you hear it.

Whereupon the irate caliph sent forth expeditions to ravage Asia Minor.

In the days of Harun al-Rashid, Baghdad's wealth and splendor equaled that of Constantinople, and its chief glory was the royal palace. With its annexes for eunuchs, officials, and a harem, the caliph's residence occupied a third of Baghdad. The caliph's audience chamber was the setting for an elaborate ceremonial, which imitated that of the Byzantines and Persians.

#### Disintegration Of The Abbasid Empire

In some ways, the opulent reign of Harun al-Rashid marked the highpoint of Abbasid achievement. In others it exhibited the warning signs of weakness. Despite the unprecedented prosperity of the far-flung Abbasid Empire, the political unity of Islam began to crumble soon after the accession of the Abbasid caliphs. The first sign of political disintegration appeared in 756 when a member of the deposed Umayyad family founded his own dynasty at Cordova in Spain; in 929 his descendant assumed the title of caliph. Also in the tenth century the Fatimids - Shiites who claimed descent from Muhammad's daughter Fatima who had married Ali, the fourth caliph - proclaimed themselves the true caliphs of all Islam. From their capital at Cairo, which they founded, their rule eventually extended from Morocco to northern Mesopotamia.

Meanwhile, in the latter part of the tenth century Turkish nomads, called Seljuks, had migrated from Central Asia into the Abbasid lands, where they accepted Islam. After annexing most of Persia, the Seljuks gained control of Baghdad in 1055 and subjugated Iraq. Subsequently they conquered Syria and Palestine at the expense of the Fatimids and proceeded to annex most of Asia Minor from the Byzantines. It was the Seljuks' advance that prompted the First Crusade in 1095. The Seljuks permitted the Abbasids to retain nominal rule, but a new and powerful enemy now appeared and overran Abbasid lands.

Early in the thirteenth century Genghis Khan succeeded in uniting the nomads of Mongolia, and conquering much of China and Russia; he and his successors moved on to eastern and central Asia (see ch. 8) and swept into Persia and Iraq. In 1258 a grandson of Genghis Khan captured Baghdad and had the caliph put in a sack and trampled to death. Not only did the Abbasid Dynasty come to an end, but so did most of the vast irrigation system that had supported the land since the beginning of civilization; Iraq was not to recover until modern times. The dynasty established by the Mongols survived for only a short time, and the Mongol ruling class was eventually absorbed into the native populations of Persia and Iraq.

Muslim Egypt was saved from the Mongol advance by the Mamluks ("the owned ones"), captured Turkish slaves trained to become Muslims and soldiers. Serving as an elite guard for their Fatimid masters, the Mamluks rebelled, seized power in Egypt, and eventually took over Palestine and Syria, ejecting the last of the crusaders in 1291. Ultimately they fell before the onslaught of another Turkish force, the Ottomans, in 1517.

#### The Ottoman Turks

Having settled in northwestern Asia Minor in the thirteenth century as vassals of the Seljuks, the Ottoman Turks had organized their own aggressive state by the end of that century. The name Ottoman is derived from Osman I (d. 1324), founding chieftan of the dynasty, who organized Muslim volunteer fighters against the Byzantines on the western borders. These fighters committed themselves to ghaza, or Islamic holy war, in order to eliminate the unbelievers surrounding the Turkish homeland. The Ottomans pitted their considerable strength against the crumbling power of the Byzantines, pressed on into southeastern Europe, and finally captured Constantinople in 1453. Driving as far as Vienna, they were turned back with tremendous difficulty in 1529 and again in 1683. Meanwhile, in 1517, the Ottomans had conquered the Mamluk territories, and within a few years they added Iraq, much of Arabia,

and all of the North African coastal belt to the borders of Morocco.

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