

The Abbasid Dynasty

The Abbasid Caliphate

The Abbasid Caliphate (758-1258) was founded on two unfriendly Islamic populations: non-Arabic Muslims and Shiites. The Umayyads were the previous controlling group but because they were outsiders who opposed Muhammad, most Muslims did not consider their claim as legitimate rulers.

The Abbasid's took their name from al-Abbas, who was paternal uncle to Muhammad and an early supporter of his claims. Al-Abbas was a close companion of Muhammad and this helped the Abbasids gain support among Muslim communities. These communities are what made the Abbasid seizure of power possible. They had a heavy reliance on client Muslims, or **Mawali**. The Mawali were foreigners who converted to Islam, but because they were foreigners they could not be incorporated into the Arab based society of Muslims. Because of this they had to be voluntarily included which is why they are known as "clients". The Mawali were second-class citizens even though they were Muslim.

The majority of foreigners that rallied behind the Abbasid's were Iranian. This represented the growth of the Islamic religion. When the Abbasid's took power, the center of the Islamic world moved from Syria and Arabia to the Iranian or Persian world of Iraq. The shift of the capital from Damascus to Baghdad by the Abbasid's marked the blending of the Semitic and Persian cultures.

1. What are the Mawali? Why are they so important to the Abbasid caliphate?
2. What did moving the capital of the Abbasid dynasty do for the caliphate?

The Growth of Abbasid Power

The Umayyad Dynasty accumulated great wealth and territory, but its political system was unstable. The Umayyads had two persistent problems. The first was that the dynasty suffered severe fiscal situations. The empire believed that non-Muslims would pay most of the taxes, but as more people began to convert to Islam a growing problem arose. This caused the dynasties fiscal problems to grow. Secondly, intra-Arab rivalries caused the eventual fall of the Umayyads. The constant civil wars led to several groups of Shi'a Muslims to join together and overthrow the Umayyad Dynasty.

The growth of the Abbasids started to change the face of the Muslim world, as the empire became less and less Arab. Non-Arabs and half-Arabs became important in Muslim life. The changes did not stop there the Muslims placed less importance on tribes and the army consisted of trained slaves. In short the empire began to become more Islamic than Arabic. During the early years of the dynasty the Abbasid rulers encouraged intellectual expansion. The great period of Islamic philosophy occurs in the ninth and tenth centuries CE. The Abbasids absorbed ideas from Byzantium and India and ancient Greek philosophers were translated into Arabic. The Abbasids adopted Indian mathematical ideas such as a system of numerals and the concept of zero. These intellectual improvements made the Islamic community a center of cultural and intellectual growth.

1. What two problems caused the Umayyad Dynasty to collapse?
2. How did the Abbasids take control?
3. What did the Abbasids do to improve Islamic culture

Moving the Empire

One of the first changes the Abbasids made after taking power was to move the capital of the empire from Damascus in Syria to Baghdad in Iraq. The latter region was influenced by Persian history and culture. Moving the capital was part of the Persian mawali demand for less Arab influence in the empire. The city of Baghdad was constructed on the Tigris River in 762, to serve as the new Abbasid capital. The Abbasids established the position of vizier in their administration, which was like “vice-caliph” or second-in-command. This was to give the caliph in a ceremonial role and the vizier in real power. Another government change was the switch from an Arab aristocracy or ruling wealthy elite to a bureaucracy where officials rule the government. This move showed that the Abbasids were much different than the Umayyads.

1. Why did the Abbasids change the capital from Damascus to Baghdad?
2. What major changes were made to the government?

The Decline of the Abbasid Caliphate

The decline of the Abbasid caliphate started when the caliphs lost the centralized power of the government. By 945 CE the area around Iraq fell to a dynasty of *Amirs* or the Buyid Dynasty. Even though the Buyids were in power the Abbasids remained as caliphs until 1030 but only as figureheads.

Islamic history entered into a new phase after this. The history of early Islam is a history of the spread of a single cultural force throughout the Iranian, Semitic, North African, and to a lesser extent the Hellenistic and European worlds. That single cultural force was religious, social, linguistic, and political and was based entirely on Arabic culture and worldview. In the earlier years Islam was consolidated to a very small area and only located in certain regions. During the later years of the Umayyad caliphate, the cultural and political unity began to break down. The Abbasids did this by adopting Iranian culture and distancing themselves from their Semitic origins. This further accelerated the cultural divisions in the world of Islam. After two hundred years in power, the unified world of Islam broke up into many independent cultural and political units.

This begins the medieval period in Islam, a period of cultural and political disunity. This was not a bad thing. Islamic culture split into several different groups that were divided by ethnic lines, but they expanded the cultural and intellectual richness of the religion.

1. How did the Abbasid caliphate fall?
2. What were some causes for the break up of the Islamic world?
3. How did Islam fall into a medieval period?

Document on Golden Age of Islam under the Abbasid Dynasty

Document #1

“A French knight in Syria, who had severely wounded his leg, came under the care of a Lebanese (Muslim) doctor. Using herbs and oils, the doctor was able to ease the leg’s infection. Suddenly, a French doctor arrived on the scene and demanded to take over the treatment. The Lebanese doctor reported what happened next. ‘The French doctor then said to the knight: ‘which would thou prefer, living with one leg or dying with two?’ The latter replied, ‘living with one leg.’ The physician said, ‘bring me a strong knight and a sharp axe.’ A knight then came in with an axe. Then the physician laid the leg of the patient on a block of wood and bade the knight strike his leg with the axe and chop it off at one blow. Accordingly he struck—while I was looking on—one blow, but the leg was not severed. He dealt another blow upon which the patient died on the spot.”

Sali-Ali Huram—Muslim Doctor

Document #2

...Like many people in many parts of the world, they were interested in finding the philosophers’ stone, a material that they believed would change common metals, such as iron, copper, or tin into precious metals such as gold or silver. This notion came to be called ALCHEMY, an Arabic word. An outstanding Muslim alchemist was Jabir. Like Aristotle, he speculated that all objects were created from combinations of air, fire, earth and water. However, Jabir experimented with these and other materials. He explored the processes known as oxidation, crystallization, and filtration, and carefully recorded the steps he took, the equipment he used and the results he obtained, thereby laying the foundations for science and chemistry.

Howe, A World History, 1992

Document #3

From the Hindus the Arabs learned arithmetic; especially the valuable invention termed by us as Arabic numerals, but honourably ascribed by them to its proper source, under the designation of “Indian numerals.” ...From Spain it passed into Italy, its singular advantage in commercial computation caused it to be eagerly adopted in the great trading cities. We still use the words algorithm in reference to calculations. The study of algebra was intently cultivated among the Arabs, who gave it the name it bears. Ben Musa...was the inventor of the common method of solving quadratic equations. In the application of mathematics to astronomy and physics they had long been distinguished...The Spanish Moors were teaching geography in their common schools from globes.

J.W. Draper, “History of the Intellectual Development of Europe” in Readings in Medieval History, Appleton: Century, Crofts, 1933

1. How do these authors view the Islamic golden age? Use quotes and evidence from the documents to answer the question.