

## **STATION THREE: THE ABBASID DYNASTY**

In 750, Abu-al-Abbas assassinated the last Umayyad caliph and launched a new dynasty, the Abbasids. One of their important decisions was to move the capital from Damascus to Baghdad (“The City of Peace”), at that time a humble backwater on the Tigris River; one effect of this decision was the start of a major cultural exchange between Arabs and Persians. The Persians were converted to Islam, while the Arabs absorbed many aspects of Persian artistic and architectural styles. There was thus assimilation and accommodation on both sides.

Under Abbasid rule, the Arabs enjoyed a growing trade with China and India; Abbasid coins have even been found in Scandinavia, which suggests active trade between these far-apart regions. Trade and cultural exchange led to a broader Arabian understanding of the world beyond the peninsula. A growing curiosity about the ancient world, particularly the Greek world, led to the translation of foreign books into Arabic. In the early ninth century, the Abbasids began buying Turkish slaves to serve as soldiers; a certain term of military service would usually earn a slave his freedom. The Turks were very able warriors—so able that they eventually became the rulers of the great Muslim state known to history as the Ottoman Empire.

Probably because it included such an ethnically diverse population, the Abbasid Empire was cosmopolitan in its outlook. Many of the ruling elites surrounding the caliph were not ethnic Arabians; they were religiously unified, but ethnically and culturally diverse, coming from all parts of the Muslim Empire (‘mawali’).

The Abbasid caliphs ruled over a very large area that stretched to Armenia in the west and Afghanistan in the east, including the entire Arabian peninsula. In 750, this region was only about 10 percent Muslim; by the beginning of the tenth century, it was about 90 percent Muslim.

Like the Umayyads, the Abbasids were not universally acclaimed as divinely chosen rulers; they lost territory to local warlords, especially in North Africa. Rival caliphates were set up in Spain, Egypt, and elsewhere, and much of Iraq and Iran was broken up into collections of separate kingdoms.

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### **Shifting Gears**

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 (or non-Arab Muslims) 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.

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 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.

## Growing Wealth and Power

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 one of the Caliph's 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 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 (Arabian Nights)* testifies, life for much of the elite in Baghdad and other major urban centers was luxurious. (This volume contains such famous stories as Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves and Aladdin) 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.

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.

### **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.