

The Umayyads and the Abbasids

It was the Umayyad family, the family of Uthman, who took over after Ali's death. The Umayyad Caliphate, 661–750 CE, was a time of military consolidation rather than expansion, but it was above all a time when the caliphate established itself as a proper empire, ruled by institutions and bureaucratic routines. The first leader of the Umayyads, Muawiya, who was governor of Syria, moved the capital to Damascus. It was here that the caliphate's first own coins were minted – instead of copies of Byzantine originals – and now that a regular postal service was set up, a requirement for the empire-wide disseminating of information, instructions and decrees. And crucially, Arabic was made into the official language of the state, replacing Greek and assorted other languages. Greek had been spoken by administrators throughout the Middle East since the days of Alexander the Great – for close to a thousand years – but from the Umayyad Caliphate onwards it was Arabic you had to know if you aspired to an administrative career. As a result, territories in which no Arabic speakers previously had existed – such as Egypt – were Arabicized for the first time. And with Arabization, in many cases, came conversion to Islam.

Yet no amount of administrative reorganization could stop political conflicts from tearing also this caliphate apart. In the middle of the eighth-century, the Umayyads were challenged by new regional elites, in particular by the governors of Iraq, a particularly fertile and rich part of the empire. Before long a new civil war, the Second Fitna, broke out. In 750 the Umayyads were decisively defeated and the Abbasid Caliphate, 750-1258 CE – claiming a descent from Abbas, Muhammad's youngest uncle – took their place. Their first capital was Kufa, in southern Iraq, but in 762 they constructed a new capital for themselves in Baghdad. Baghdad was soon to become the largest and richest city in the world,

and a great center of culture and learning. In Baghdad many cultures mixed freely and, much as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the *dhimmi* – the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism – were given the right to run their own affairs according to their own customs. During the Abbasid caliphate the influences from Persia and Central Asia were particularly strong. Persians, or rather Arabized Persians, were employed in the administration of the caliphate, as advisors and judges, and Persian scholars and artists populated the caliph's court. The highest positions in the caliphate were no longer reserved for Arabs only and Islam became a religion not just for Arabs but for anyone, regardless of their ethnic affiliation.

Cultural influences did not only come from Persia, however, but also from far further afield – including Central Asia, India and China. From the Indians the Arabs learned about the latest advances in mathematics, such as use of the decimal system and the number “zero.” But they also began telling Arabized versions of Indian folktales and stories of magic and suspense – eventually famous as the “Tales of a Thousand and One Nights.” [Read more: Arabian nights] Through exchanges with China, the Arabs came to master the secrets of paper-making and soon a paper mill was founded in Baghdad which came to have a profound impact on cultural developments there. [Read more: The Battle of Talas, 751] Since paper is far cheaper to produce than alternatives such as parchment or papyrus, it was suddenly possible to amass far larger collections of books. Large libraries were established throughout the caliphate which contained hundreds of thousands of volumes. The caliph's library in Baghdad had the largest collection of books in the world and was an important center of scholarship. [Read more: Bayt al-Hikma]

During the Abbasid caliphate, the Arab world received influences from Byzantium too. Indeed, since Byzantium remained the caliphate's greatest military enemy, competition

with this remnant of the Roman empire was intense. One cultural expression of their rivalry was the great translation movement which began already during the reign of the founder of the Abbasid caliphate, al-Mansur, 754–775 CE. [Read more: The translation movement] Compared to the Greeks, the Arabs were *nouveaux riches* upstarts and although their sponsorship of culture and scholarship was paying off handsomely, they had none of the historical prestige of the Greeks. Indeed, the Arabic language had until recently been spoken mainly by Bedouins in the desert and it lacked much of technical terminology required to express philosophical and scientific ideas. No amount of Bedouin wisdom was going to be enough to defend the Muslim faith, and as they increasingly had come to realize, the caliphs needed access to more sophisticated techniques of argumentation. Very conscious of these deficiencies, the Abbasid caliphs embarked on a vast project of translating Greek books into Arabic.

They began with the most useful texts – works on mathematics, optics, geography, astronomy and medicine, and then moved on to philosophy, history and the arts. Indeed, by the time they were done – some two hundred years later – the entire classical Greek cannon had been translated into Arabic, apart from Greek dramas and works on politics in which the Arabs took no interest. The translations were often carried out by Syrian Christians, who spoke both Greek and Arabic, and often they used Syriac as an intermediary language. The translators would send for manuscripts from Byzantium, or they would go there themselves to look for books. And they were handsomely rewarded by the caliphs for their work – a translator might be paid some 500 golden dinars a month for his work, an astronomical sum of money. The fact that Byzantium was the caliphate's enemy was not an obstacle to this project but instead its spur. It was important to the caliphs to show that they had mastered the Greek tradition and that they had developed it even further than the Greeks themselves. And, according to some Persian scholars in the caliph's court, what

the Greeks called “their tradition” was originally a Persian tradition anyway, stolen from them by Alexander the Great.

Despite its glories and successes, Baghdad was not the only center of the caliphate. Indeed in Iraq itself, Basra was an important intellectual hub and Samarra, 125 kilometers north of Baghdad, became its political center once the caliphs moved their capital here in 836. In addition, various provincial cities became prominent since they made themselves independent of the caliphate and since they all wanted not only political power but also the reputation of running an intellectually and culturally sophisticated court. Thus the library of the Buyid rulers of Shiraz, in Persia, was reputed to have a copy of every book in the world, and the library of the Samanids of Bukhara, in today’s Uzbekistan, had a catalog which itself ran into thousands of volumes – besides, the library provided free paper on which its users could take notes. Bukhara was the hometown of Ibn Sina, 980-1037 CE, a scholar celebrated not only for his philosophical thought experiments but also for books such as *The Canon of Medicine* and *The Book of Healing*. Meanwhile, the local rulers of Afghanistan made that part of the Abbasid caliphate into a thriving intellectual center. Following their armies on their campaign into the Indian subcontinent, Abu Rayhan al-Bīrūnī founded the study of Indology and brought back Indian books on astronomy and mathematics which he synthesized and expanded.

As the power of these regional centers grew, the Abbasid rulers in Baghdad became correspondingly weaker. They lost power over North Africa, including Egypt, already in the eighth-century, and in the tenth-century they controlled little more than the heartlands of Iraq. Even in Baghdad itself, the caliphs lost power to the viziers, the prime ministers, and to the Mamluks, soldiers of Turkic origin who had started out as slaves. Despite its political decline, however, Baghdad continued to be a prominent center of scholarship and the arts. Indeed, the city seemed to benefit

culturally from the political fragmentation of the caliphate and the new influences it provided, and the tenth- and eleventh-centuries in Baghdad are often referred to as the “golden age” of Arabic culture. The *majlis*, or salon, was a particularly thriving institution. In the drawing-rooms of the members of the elite, scientists, philosophers and artists would meet to gossip, debate and exchange ideas. In the *majlis*, Muslims, Jews and Christians could mingle quite freely and often the political elites, including the caliphs themselves, would participate in the proceedings. The *majlis* provided a free intellectual atmosphere in which many different opinions on matters of philosophy, religion and science could thrive. This is how Muhammad al-Razi’s chemical discoveries – including the discovery of alcohol – became known, together with al-Farabi’s synthesis of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.

The glories of Baghdad, together with the Abbasid caliphate itself, came to an abrupt end with the Mongol invasion of 1258. What the Mongols did to Baghdad counts as one of the greatest acts of barbarism of all time. A large proportion of the inhabitants were killed – estimates run into several 100,000’s – and all the remarkable cultural institutions were destroyed together with their contents. Survivors said that the water of the river Tigris running through the city was colored black from the ink of the books the Mongols had thrown into it, and red from the blood of the scholars they had killed. The caliph himself was rolled up in a carpet and trampled to death by horses. Baghdad never recovered.