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HST103

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The History of The Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE)

Introduction:

The Abbasid Caliphate was an important period in Islamic history. During this period culture, politics, and science changed and grew for centuries. In 750 CE, a major revolution ended Umayyad rule and the Abbasid Caliphate began. This event marked the beginning of a new era in the Islamic world . Since the Abbasids were related to the Prophet Muhammad's family, many people supported the Abbasids and trusted them to be just rulers, this family connection helped them win the support of many different groups throughout the land, and helped them set up a strong government when they first came to power. Once they took control, the Abbasids changed many policies and rules, these changes affected culture, education, and the daily life of people living under the Abbasids government. We will discuss the Abbasid's rise, growth, decline and collapse in 1258 CE, we will also discuss three important rulers: Al-Mansur, Harun Al-Rashid and Al-Mamun, whose leadership guided the empire. Each one of these caliphs ruled during a key time in Abbasid history and helped the empire grow. Al-Mansur strengthened the government by building the city of Baghdad, Under Harun Al-Rashid's rule learning grew and he also built hospitals and encouraged scholars to study and research. During al-Mamun's rule learning continued to grow. He created the House of Wisdom and supported research and book translations. Thanks to the Abbasids' efforts, the Abbasid caliphate became a center of knowledge and culture. Science and medicine grew rapidly while philosophy and literature explored new ideas. As a result, during the Islamic Golden Age, many discoveries and ideas continued to influence the entire world even after the Abbasids rule collapsed.

The Rise to Power: The Abbasid Caliphate's Foundation (750-775 CE):

The story of the Abbasid rise to power begins with a revolution, the Abbasid family claimed that they should be the ones in charge and rule the Islamic empire since they had a more direct connection to the prophet Muhammed. They used this claim to convince people that their rule would be more valid so they could gain their support. They eventually overpowered the Umayyads and established their empire. The real issue now was building a successful empire.

Caliph al-mansour, who was the main leader, focused on building a secure and stable government. To do so he knew he needed a central capital city. So he founded the city of Baghdad in 762 CE. The location of Baghdad was perfect for trading and for building a strong empire. Al-mansour was highly recognized and appreciated for being a magnificent leader. He created a fair tax system to pay for the necessities, buildings and soldiers and workers. He also invited bright people from different countries, as such as Persia. This move from revolution to a well structured state was very important. Mansour created a powerful and peaceful state. The mixing of different cultures and the fair tax trading was a powerful move. It was this solid foundation from which arose the golden age of Islam. This made it possible to have advancements in art, medicine and science in the following years.

The Golden Age of the Abbasids (775-833 CE):

The golden age of the Abbasids was a period of incredible growth and development filled with intellectual and scientific achievements. The achievements ranged from major intellectual achievements to technical ones. Such as the translation movement and Bayt al-Hikma movement which was the translation of Greek scientific texts from people like Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Galen into Arabic, mathematics and computations which Al-Khwarazmi and others developed algebraic methods to be used for taxation, engineering, surveying, while also introducing Indian numerals, achievements in medicine which included hospitals, med schools, and the translation and adaptation of medical texts from Galen and Hippocrates, astronomy and geography which was formal observatory work to improve world maps and star tables, and lastly achievements in engineering and mechanics which were done by Banu Musa and others translating and developing mechanical treatises, improved irrigation, and developed instruments. At this point of time, Baghdad became the empire's cultural capital, being full of libraries, book markets, scholars, physicians, scientists, translators, and became the region's largest and most diverse city. All of these achievements were done thanks to the caliphs of the time. One of them being the caliph Harun al-Rashid who ruled from 786-809 CE and came to power after the death of caliph al-Hadi, although having been already second in line to the throne he also had the support of powerful court factions which included his mother Khayzuran and the Barmakids, which ensured his succession. Harun's court funded libraries, translation, and scholars, which created the administrative and intellectual foundation for early Islamic medicine, which was massively helped by the translated medical texts and court-supported physicians. His strong and stable rule created an environment for scientific and medical advancements, marking his reign as one of the brightest times of the golden age. Another caliph of the golden age was caliph al-Ma'mun who ruled from 813-833 CE after defeating his brother al-Amin in a long civil war, whom was killed by al-Ma'mun's Khurasani-backed general in Baghdad, giving him full control. His achievements included

strengthening and expanding the translation movement, supporting scholars in medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and engineering, and establishing scholarly institutions such as Bayt al-Hikma. He also promoted rationalist theology, Mu'tazila, and enforced it through the Mihna, emphasizing reason and intellectual inquiry and encouraging an intellectual climate that valued reason, logical analysis, and debate, directly supporting science. Al Ma'mun's reign advanced astronomy, math, and medicine through major scientific experiments and translations, making his reign the peak in intellect of the Abbasid Golden age.

The Decline of the Abbasids (833-990 CE):

Following the death of al-Ma'mun, the Abbasid Caliphate experienced a steady decline in political unity as regional kingdoms such as the Buyids and Samanids gained freedom and weakened the central government's authority. This division worsened with the rise of Turkish military elites, whose increasing power in the army and the court further reduced the caliph's control over the empire. As stability declined, major institutions of learning and healthcare suffered, Baghdad slowly stopped being the main place for learning, ideas, and study. However, although the political divisions, scholars continued to preserve and develop knowledge in different regions, ensuring that the cultural knowledge of the Islamic world remained alive even during the caliphate's decline.

The Caliphate's Religious Authority (990-1225 CE):

This period of the years 990-1225 of the Christian calendar marks the genius transition of the Abbasid Caliphate. As the real power of ruling by force and ruling politically had come into the hands of dynasties such as the Buyids and later the Seljuks, the caliphs systematically transferred their attention from that of an empire of administration toward an essential seat of religious power. Caliphs al Qadir who ruled the empire during the years of 991-1031 and al Qaim who ruled during the years of 1031-1075 understood that their sole power remained religious. Al-Qadir completely transformed the religious place of the caliphate by emphasizing scholarship and the active and committed dedication to the religious and moral duties. He became famous for his ascetism which is a biographer referred to the caliph as the monk of the Abbasids. His famous deed was the declaration of the (Qadis Creed) of 1018. This text codified the phenomenon of Sunni Orthodoxy by systematically renouncing the provocative Mutazlic tenet of the createdness of the Quran and the line of the first four properly guided Caliphs. This particular action of the caliph combined with the famous mission that sought to nullify the lineage of the caliphal house of the Fatimids placed the Abbasid caliph on the proper side of the true residence of the final arbiter of the religion of the Sunnis. This particular shift received its theoretical

justification with the development of the idea of al Mawardi's al Hakam. This text became the standard justification of the theoretical requirement of the institution of the caliphate of the Sunnis. This religious revival was abetted by an enormous investment made in institutionalized education. The establishment and development of religious schools called madrasas and medical schools received crucial investments through waqfs or religious endowments. This system of funding offered financial freedom so that these institutions could educate the next set of juridical and academic staff who could sustain the preestablished Sunni consensus of the caliphate. Simultaneously, the preservation of knowledge seemed thriving and expanding. Scholars such as Ibn Sina or Avicenna played an essential role and an instrumental part in the maintenance of the major works of medicine, therefore sustaining the academic sudden flow of the Islamic world. Through the successful transition of the Caliphate into the religious center of the Islamic world, the Caliphate managed its survival institutionally after the loss of its territorial control.

The Collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate: the Fall of Baghdad (1225-1258 CE):

The collapse of the Abbasids caliphate in 1258 CE happened due multiple factors, the major ones being of internal weakness along side an unexpected external pressure. In Baghdad's final decades, it suffered from fractures in its society and political negligence such as the chliphas failure to address the rising sectarian tensions also allowing Shii's grudge to spread and allowing Ibn Al Alqami to turn against the regime. In addition to multiple natural disasters that further destabilized the capital such as the water floods in 1258, 1255 and 1256 that damaged a large part of the city, destroying its defensive structure and displacing its population leaving Baghdad vulnerable and unsettled. Lastly at that time Hülegü was seeking glory and political favor from the mongol he targeted Baghdad as a symbolic prize, in addition to the chaotic state of Baghdad at that period, resisting Hülegüs power and army was impossible, leading to baghdad's final destruction in 1258.

Conclusion:

The history of the Abbasid Caliphate shows just how well a powerful and organized empire shaped one of the most important intellectual periods in Islamic history, from the moment they came to power in 750 CE the Abbasids introduced stability, new administrative systems, and cultural openness that led to unexpected amounts of growth and advancements in the areas of science, medicine, literature, and education. The major caliphs such as Al-Mansur, Harun al-Rashid, and Al-Ma'mun contributed in different ways and made this growth possible, whether it was by establishing Baghdad and turning it into a center of knowledge, patronizing hospitals and a translation movement, or initiating the House of Wisdom to turn the Islamic world into a leading

center of learning. Although the Abbasid empire later weakened due to fractures such as political fractures and internal divisions, the rise of military elites, and increasing independence of regional powers, and despite all of that the scholarly tradition of the Abbasids still endured and held on. Even as the political control and strength of the Abbasid caliphate continued to fade and crumble, the scholars, physicians, and religious institutions of the time persisted in helping preserve and advance knowledge. Despite the invasion of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 CE that destroyed the Abbasid's authority in that city, they could not suppress and destroy the cultural and scientific influence that the Abbasids had already established. To this day, the era of the rule of the Abbasid caliphate 750-1258 CE, remains a symbol of the Islamic Golden Age and its achievements, and its eventual fall provides a lesson as to how knowledge of that time spread, how innovations and scientific advancements thrived under the stable rule of the competent caliphs, and finally how intellectual traditions continue to live on long after an empire has fallen.

Source:

El-Hibri, Tayeb. The Abbasid Caliphate: A History. Cambridge University Press, 2021.

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