

Definition: **Abbasids** from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*

A dynasty of caliphs who ruled the Muslim Empire from 750 until destroyed by the Mongol invasion in 1258, and who claimed descent from al-Abbas (d.653), uncle of the Prophet MOHAMMED. Haroun al-Raschid (b.765; r.786-808) was one of their number.



Image from: [A parchment-and-ink folio from a Koran, Abbasid... in Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa](#)

Summary Article: **Abbasids**

From *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa*

The Abbasid caliphate was the third of the Islamic caliphates, and it lasted from 750 until 1258, making it the longest of the caliphates and one that presided over great advances in science and technology until it was destroyed by the Mongols. Its capital was Baghdad, and at its height in the 9th century, it dominated most of the Middle East and large parts of north Africa.

The name *Abbasid* comes from Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib (566-662), the youngest of the uncles of the Prophet Muhammad. His supporters contrasted themselves with their rivals, the Umayyads, whom they succeeded. Their success came after seven years—from 743 until 750—of internal power struggles among the Umayyad leadership, various regional revolts, and some religious bickering, ending with Abu'l Abbas becoming the first Abbasid caliph in 750. Initially, the caliphate was essentially sectarian in its approach to many matters, but gradually, with moves against heresies, these approaches were slowly eroded.

Challenges to the Dynasty

The first threat to the Abbasids came soon after they took over, with the Byzantines using the period of disorder to launch attacks on them, and succession disputes. These destabilized the caliphate so soon after its creation, a situation made worse by intrigues of Umayyad loyalists. This intrigue caused the loss of control of Spain, and to reassert his control, Al-Mansur moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad. At the same time, there had been fighting in the east, leading to the Battle of Talas in 751, which had major repercussions for the Abbasid caliphate in a way that nobody had expected.

During the battle, some Chinese prisoners were taken, and they knew the art of papermaking—a secret that the Chinese had guarded for centuries. The Abbasids were able to develop their own improvements, using not only the bark from mulberry trees, as done by the Chinese, but also including starch. This greatly reduced the cost of paper, encouraged literacy and book production, and allowed the Abbasids not only to write down their ideas but also for them to spread the ideas throughout the caliphate and beyond.

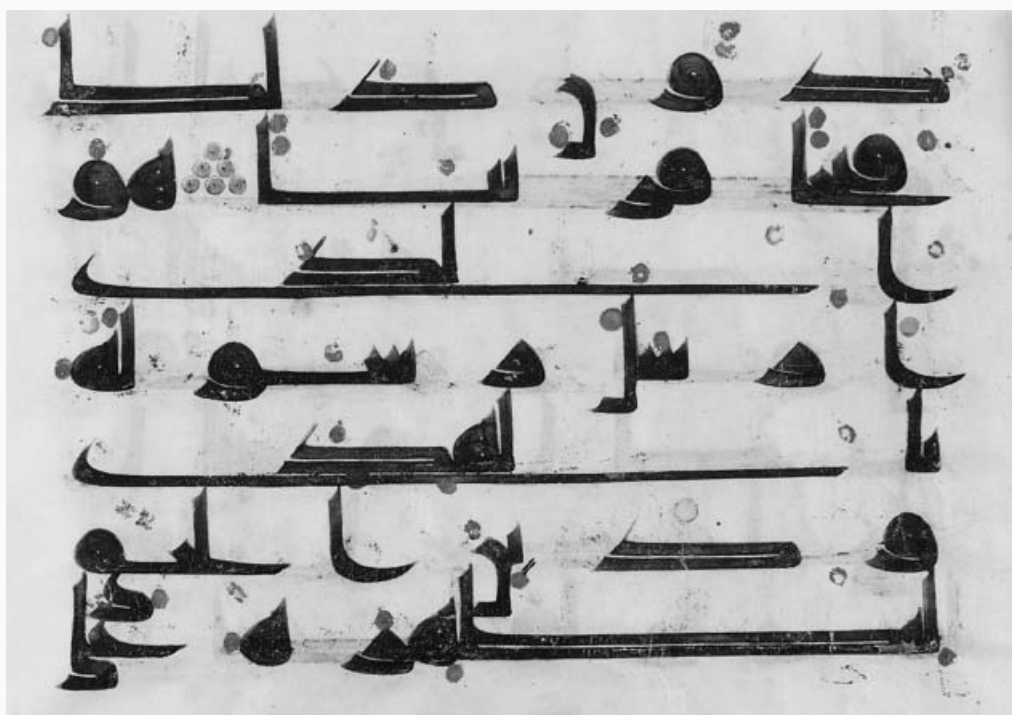
There were further regional revolts, but Al-Mansur's son Al-Mahdi reached an agreement with the Byzantine empress Irene, who started paying tribute. The next caliph, Harun al-Rashid, ruled from 786 until 809. His reign marked the high point of the Abbasid caliphate. Militarily, it had defeated most of its enemies, and there had been a halt to the internal rebellions. Culturally, Baghdad became one of the major centers of learning in the world. In terms of science, medicine, mathematics, and astronomy, it was far ahead of most of its rivals.

The Byzantines attacked in 803 and were defeated two years later. At the same time, al-Rashid's fleet was able to capture Cyprus and also attack Rhodes. Any further attacks on the Byzantines ended when there was a rebellion in Khorasan, in modern-day Iran, and al-Rashid died leading his armies there.

Throughout the remainder of the 9th century, there were constant internal revolts and renewed wars with the Byzantines. Under Abbasid rule, citizens' lives varied tremendously depending on where they lived. In most of the areas, life changed little from the rule by the Umayyads to the rule by the Abbasids. Those people who lived in the areas of major combat, such as central Anatolia, continued to see their towns and farms ravaged by Byzantine and Abbasid armies. The same applied to some of those in areas that saw constant regional revolts, or when central authority was under attack, such as between 863 and 870. Syria, the former central base of the Umayyads, was also often in turmoil with fighting in 936-944, again in 969, and in 974-977. For people in towns and cities, there were fewer problems with these wars, although some cities such as Damietta in Egypt in 853 were sacked. Even Baghdad was not entirely safe, with General Tahir ibn Husain storming the city in 811. It was again captured by rebels in 946. There were also areas that were transformed tremendously during this time. Many Muslim refugees from Spain fled in 826 to Crete, which became a major base for Muslim pirates.

Characteristics of the Abbasids

However, alongside this fighting, the Abbasids ruled over a multicultural empire that included large numbers of Christians and Jews. Both lived harmoniously until the mid-11th century, providing, of course, they were not involved in missionary work. That the Byzantines were able to intrigue and formulate regional revolts on so many occasions shows that Christians (and also some Muslim supporters of the Byzantines) must have held senior positions in the administration of the Abbasid caliphate.



A parchment-and-ink folio from a Koran, Abbasid dynasty. It is part of Al-Fath Sura (48) verses 27-28: "... and hath given you a near victory beforehand. He it is Who hath sent His messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may cause it to prevail over. ..."

During this period, in spite of the fighting, the wealth of the Abbasid caliphate attracted many people to Baghdad. The period of the Abbasid caliphate is often called the Islamic Golden Age. The

development of papermaking had spread, and by 900 there were many hundreds of shops in Baghdad where scribes, scriveners, bookbinders, and booksellers started producing books in such a manner that it was not long before public libraries were established. The University of Al Karaouine in Fez, Morocco, was established in 859, and this was followed by Al-Azhar University, Cairo, in 975. The former was the first to grant degrees, and the latter was the first to offer a variety of degrees, including degrees for postgraduates. In the case of Avicenna (ca. 980-1037), the best physician and philosopher of his time, it was his book *Canon of Medicine* that proved to be important in the diagnosing of many diseases and medical conditions such as cancer. Prior to the increase in book production, his ideas would not have flourished in the manner in which they did.

Collapse

The main event that shook the region followed the emergence of the Fatimid caliphate. It emerged in 909 and lasted only until 1171. Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah ordered the destruction of all churches in Jerusalem, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 1009. This was the event that—largely because of political intrigues in Western Europe—led to the First Crusade of 1096, which saw large numbers of French, German, and other knights heading to the Holy Land and starting the Crusades. Although the Fatimids had provided the cause for the Crusades, to get to the Holy Land, the Crusaders had to march through land controlled by the Abbasids. There were fractures and occasional periods of unity among the Muslims. However, fighting the Crusaders weakened the Abbasid caliphate—and led to some Abbasid ideas being taken to Europe—and this allowed for the Mongol invasions that led to the eventual collapse of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258 with the sacking of Baghdad.

See Also:

Byzantium , Seljuk Domination , Umayyads

Further Readings

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