

The Abbasid Caliphate

The Rise of the Abbasid Empire (C. 750 CE)

The Umayyad dynasty was overthrown by the Abbasids, a family from the holy city of Mecca, in 750 CE. The Abbasids appealed to non-Arab Muslims (mawali), who remained outside the kinship-based society of the Arabs and were perceived as a lower class within the Umayyad Empire. The Abbasid dynasty descended from Muhammad's youngest uncle, Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib (566–653 CE), from whom the dynasty takes its name. Muhammad ibn 'Ali, a great-grandson of Abbas, began to campaign for the return of power to the family of Muhammad, the Hashimites, in Persia during the reign of Umar II, an Umayyad caliph who ruled from 717–720 CE.

The Abbasids created a "Golden Age" and moved the empire's capital from Damascus, Syria, to Baghdad, in Iraq, in 762 CE. The Abbasids had depended heavily on the support of Persians mawali in their overthrow of the Umayyads. Abu al-'Abbas's successor, Al-Mansur, welcomed non-Arab Muslims to his court. While this helped integrate Arab and Persian cultures, it alienated the Arabs who had supported the Abbasids in their battles against the Umayyads. The Abbasids established the new position of vizier (high-ranking government official) to delegate central authority, and delegated even greater authority to local emirs (a higher government authority). As the viziers exerted greater influence, many Abbasid caliphs were relegated to a more ceremonial role as Persian bureaucracy slowly replaced the old Arab aristocracy.



The round city of Baghdad

The Abbasids built Baghdad from scratch while maintaining the network of roads and trade routes the Persians had established before the Umayyad Dynasty. Some of the goods being traded through Baghdad were ivory, soap, honey, and diamonds. People in Baghdad made and exported silk, glass, tiles, and paper.

The Abbasids, who ruled from Baghdad, had an unbroken line of caliphs for over three centuries, consolidating Islamic rule and cultivating great intellectual and cultural developments in the Middle East in the Golden Age of Islam. By 940 CE, however, the power of the caliphate under the Abbasids began to deteriorate as non-Arabs gained influence and the various subordinate sultans and emirs became increasingly independent.

The Decline of the Abbasid Empire

The Abbasid leadership worked to overcome the political challenges of a large empire with limited communication in the last half of the 8th century (750–800 CE). While the Byzantine Empire was fighting Abbasid rule in Syria and Anatolia, the caliphate's military operations were focused on internal unrest. Local governors had begun to exert greater autonomy, using their increasing power to make their positions hereditary. Simultaneously, former supporters of the Abbasids had broken away to create a separate kingdoms in North Africa, Egypt, Palestine and Bukhara. While the local governors and military leaders of these regions ruled, they still gave their allegiance to the caliph in Baghdad. By 900 CE, the Abbasids controlled only central Mesopotamia, and the Byzantine Empire began to reconquer western Anatolia.

The Fatimid Caliphate (909–1171 CE)

Several factions challenged the Abbasids' claims to the caliphate. Most Shi'a Muslims had supported the Abbasid war against the Umayyads because the Abbasids claimed legitimacy with their familial connection to Muhammad, an important issue for Shi'a. However, once in power, the Abbasids embraced Sunni Islam and disavowed any support for Shi'a beliefs. This created further turmoil within the empire. The Shi'a Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi Billah of the Fatimid dynasty, who claimed descent from Muhammad's daughter, declared himself Caliph in 909 CE and created a separate line of caliphs in North Africa. The Fatimid caliphs initially controlled Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, and they expanded for the next 150 years, taking Egypt and Palestine. The Abbasid dynasty finally challenged Fatimid rule, limiting them to Egypt.

At this point, the Abbasid dynasty had fragmented into several governorships that were mostly autonomous, although they official recognized caliphal authority from Baghdad. The caliph himself was under "protection" of the Buyid Emirs, who possessed all of Iraq and western Iran, and were quietly Shi'a in their sympathies.

The political power of the Abbasids largely ended with the Mongol conquest and the sacking of Baghdad killing 30,000 people in 1258 CE. Though lacking in political power, the dynasty continued to claim authority in religious matters until after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517.



Source: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldcivilization/chapter/the-abbasid-empire/>