

A Short and Incomplete History of the Abbasid Caliphate

A Caliphate is an Islamic state ruled by a religious leader, the Caliph. After the death of the Prophet, there were 3 (sometimes folks say 4) great Caliphates. The first was the Rashidan, started by Mohammad's father in law, Abu Bakr. The second was the Umayyid Caliphate, then the Abbasids, and some consider the Ottomans the last or fourth Caliphate.

At the death of Mohammad, the elders of Mecca met and elected Abu Bakr to manage the Islamic state that had been created. This is the start of the Rashidan Caliphate. These Caliphs considered themselves administrators, not rulers. The title of Caliph was not hereditary. Abu Bakr began the Islamic conquest by capturing Damascus, Syria, and Palestine. He introduced the Islamic calendar. Uthman, the next caliph, set up the Divan, a ruling council to manage the government while he led the military conquests. When Umar was assassinated, Uthman stepped up. During his time, the Koran was assembled. Uthman was assassinated as well and the fourth and final Rashidan Caliph, Ali, stepped up. Ali was a cousin of Mohammad and married to his youngest daughter, Fatima. Ali was assassinated and his son Hasan stepped up but almost immediately abdicated. That marks the end of the Rashidan Caliphate.

The Rashidan Caliphate is important for several reasons. The massive expansion of Islam began during this time period. Also, it is during this period that the first great Islamic Civil War occurred and the split into the Sunni and Shiite sects began. The Rashidan Caliphs believed that they were responsible for continuing the spread of the religion and for managing the empire. It was a responsibility, not a right.

The next Caliphate was the Umayyid Caliphate, which was founded by Muawiyah I. The leaders of this Caliphate focused on continuing the expansion of the Islamic empire, moving into the Caucasus, the Iberian peninsula, Transoxiana, and the Maghreb. They favored Arabic families and focused on creating an Arabic identity. The Caliphs allowed conquered areas to rule themselves as long as heavy taxes and levies were paid to them. They taxed non-Arabs, converts, and non-Muslims consistently. Finally, they created the idea of a hereditary ruling family that had divine right to rule the people.

During the end of the Umayyid era, many of the converts (mawali) became very discontented with the taxes and lack of respect they faced. The non-Arab Muslims disliked the preferential treatment the old, wealthy families received. The Shiites disliked the Sunni leadership. There were several small rebellions that were put down by the Umayyid military leaders. Finally, an Iranian general from the Barmakid family joined with a powerful Arab family and led the disparate groups in a true rebellion against the Umayyids.

Abbas ibn al-Muttalib and the Barmakid generals led the fight against the last Umayyid Caliph and created the Abbasid Caliphate. The Abbasid rulers were heavily influenced by the Persian noble families and Persian culture. They claimed their right to rule as descendants of the Prophet and believed in their divine right to rule. Arabic was the language of the court, Persian literature influenced Abbasid literature and art. The Abbasids created a wealthy court that was populated by artists, scholars, and civil administrators. The Umayyids left them a strong military and stable empire, which meant they focused less on expansion and more on consolidation.

The early rulers focused on creating a strong administration to run the empire. They replaced the local governors with their own, intensely loyal administrators. They used the taxes and levies to build massive structures, including schools, hospitals, roads, inns, and palaces. They invited scholars to court, they collected art, and acted as patrons to artists and philosophers. An intellectual class developed an ideal of urban refinement and a set of etiquette rules that centered on appearance and culture.

The Abbasid court was made up of a military elite, a wealthy/noble elite, an intellectual elite, and the civil administrators that actually handled business. People could move between classes based on their intelligence and abilities rather than just birth but everyone was expected to know all the rules of the court and the whims of the Caliph. The Palace was a large complex that included residential quarters, administrative offices, mosques, prayer halls, baths, entertainment pavilions, sport halls and arenas, gardens, orchards, pleasure gardens, banquet halls, schools, and art workshops.

The official language of the Court was Arabic. The Caliphs celebrated artists and intellectuals. They held lavish dinners and parties where poets competed, scholars debated, and philosophers argued, all for the pleasure of the court. The ones who argued best or created the most interesting verse would be rewarded by the court with expensive presents and honors. Those popular with the court could expect to get positions with the nobles and earn good salaries as teachers, engineers, or entertainers.

The capital of the Abbasids was Baghdad, a city they built specifically as a center of intellectualism and education. The Caliphs funded a large library and school called the House of Wisdom. Here they collected classical texts, sponsored debates, ran an observatory, a school, and science lab. It is here that the Translation Movement began, with the goal of preserving ancient knowledge. The Caliphs requested Greek, Roman, Persian, Byzantine, and African works to be translated into Arabic. Scholars from around the world came to translate and study from these texts. Many then ran tests based on the work they read, experimenting with principles and ideas. Major accomplishments in medicine, philosophy, math, optics, and astronomy were made there. It became a combination of school, lab, think tank, and cultural center and it attracted some of the best thinkers of the time.

Over time the rulers became more interested in these artistic pursuits and began to withdraw governing. The Abbasid Caliphs created the position of vizier at this time and these men ran every aspect of the government. This of course created a situation where the ruling class was very disconnected from the people. They often were unaware of issues and missed important signs that the people were growing discontented. Many of the areas at the edge of the empire rebelled and became their own kingdoms. The Caliphs lost a lot of the physical part of the empire but also the taxes that kept them afloat. The government slowly collapsed as the money stopped flowing in. As the government became weaker, it attracted other expanding empires. Groups such as the Mongols swept across the empire decimating the last remnants of the Abbasids.

After the Abbasids were defeated, many different rulers claimed the title of Caliph but they never gained the support of the Arabic Muslims like the previous ones. The Ottoman Sultans ultimately claimed their empire was the fourth Caliphate but there is some disagreement on that.

This period of Caliphates is important as it is during this time Islam flowered and became a major power player in the world. The Golden Age of Islam is considered to be during the Abbasid reign. This was a time where Islam was a leader of intellectualism and encouraged experiment and questioning. Some of the most famous Islamic artists and scholars lived during this time. Advances in science, math, medicine, were made that we still base a lot of our current studies on. Sadly, many of the ideological schisms that plague the Middle East today developed during this time as well. A better understanding of how these problems started would help us understand how to address them.