

The Book of

ISLAMIC DYNASTIES

A CELEBRATION OF ISLAMIC HISTORY AND CULTURE



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
1. THE Umayyads of Syria (661–750).....	3
2. THE Umayyads of Spain (756–1031)	9
3. THE ‘Abbasids (749–1258 & 1261–1517)	17
4. THE Samanids (819–1005)	27
5. THE Fatimids (909–1171)	35
6. THE Ghaznavids (977–1186)	43
7. THE Great Seljuqs (1040–1194)	47
8. THE Seljuqs of Rum (1077–1307)	53
9. THE Berber Dynasties: The Almoravids (1056–1147)	59
10. THE Almohads (1130–1269)	63
11. THE Ayyubids (1169–1260)	69
12. THE Delhi Sultanate (1206–1556)	77
13. THE Nasrids of Spain (1232–1492)	87
14. THE Mamluks of Egypt (1250–1517)	97
15. THE Ilkhanids of Iran (1256–1353)	107
16. THE Timurids (1370–1506)	115
17. THE Ottomans (1281–1922)	123
18. THE Safavids (1501–1722)	139
19. THE Mughals of India (1526–1858)	149
MAP	164
GLOSSARY	167
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	181
INDEX	185

BAGHDAD – THE NEW CAPITAL

In 762, after receiving advice from his *wazirs*, the caliph Al-Mansur chose the site of the small village of Baghdad to be the new ‘Abbasid capital city. The city of Baghdad was built on the west side of the Tigris River not far from the ancient Sasanian winter capital of Ctesiphon (*Mada’in* in Arabic) which had fallen to the early Muslim victors after the famous Battle of Qadisiyyah in 636 (see illustration 3-1).



3-1 EMPIRES RISE AND FALL: In 637, the victorious Muslim Arabs entered Ctesiphon, the winter capital of the Persian Sasanian Empire. What surprised the Muslims most was the magnificent Palace of Khushraw (*Taq Kisra* in Arabic). Today, the palace is in ruins and lies thirty-two kilometres southeast of Baghdad. Here is the ruined vault of the great audience hall that contains the world’s largest brick archway. The arrogant Khushraw II (590–628) likely received and read the letter of invitation to Islam from the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ under this very arch. He subsequently tore the letter up. On hearing this, the Prophet ﷺ simply replied, “May his kingdom be torn apart.” In 628, Khushraw II was killed by his own son. After 637, *Taq Kisra* was used as a mosque by the Arabs, but later, the ruins of Ctesiphon provided building material for the new ‘Abbasid capital of Baghdad.

Ibn Khaldun, the famous Arab social historian, writes eloquently of the decline and fall of empires:

And when old age and weakness overtake a state, it begins to contract at the extremities, the centre remaining preserved until Allah decrees the total extinction of the state, whereupon the centre, too, is wiped out. ... Consider the Persian Empire, whose capital was Ctesiphon; once Ctesiphon had been captured by the Muslims, the total power of the Persians was wiped out; nor were the remaining outlying provinces of any use to Yazdagird [Yazdagird III, the last Sasanian monarch].*

* Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah* (trans. Franz Rosenthal). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967.

Al-Mansur thought that the site was ideal for a military base because it was situated on the Tigris and was also close to the Euphrates River. Baghdad was originally a circular city (first called *Dar as-Salam* and later *Madinat as-Salam*) surrounded by three thick concentric walls, the outermost one being about two-and-a-half kilometres in diameter. It was logical that the round city wall would not only be cheaper to construct but also easier to defend. Four main gates permitted entry into the city; from Syria (north), Basra (south), Khorasan (east), and Kufa (west). Baghdad was ideally situated on the great trade routes from China, Persia and India to the Mediterranean.

In the centre of Al-Mansur's "Round City" were the large caliphal palace, mosque and gardens. Lively shops and markets lined the four streets leading to the heart of the city. Soon after its construction, a similar settlement was built on the east bank of the Tigris River. The city grew so rapidly that by the ninth century, it measured about twenty-five square miles and had a population approaching half a million. Baghdad was a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious capital which truly reflected the varied inhabitants of the extensive 'Abbasid Empire.

As the Islamic Empire grew, so too did its new capital city, Baghdad, which soon became the largest cosmopolitan centre on earth, outside of China. Besides the wealth of agricultural crops taken from the fertile soil of Mesopotamia (the farmland between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers), Baghdad quickly developed important textile and leather industries. Chinese papermakers were captured after the Battle of Talas in 751 and were subsequently taken to Samarkand where the secret of paper-making was revealed to Muslims for the first time. Within fifty years, a thriving paper industry in Baghdad provided the city's *suq al-warraqin* (paper sellers' market) with reams (from the Arabic *rizmah* meaning bundle) of inexpensive writing material.

Some Islamic scholars now began to copy the Qur'an on paper instead of the more traditional and much more expensive parchment (dried, stretched animal skin). The wide availability of such affordable paper initiated one of the most important "information explosions" in history. Countless scientific and philosophical manuscripts written in ancient Greek, Pahlavi (old Persian) and even Sanskrit (ancient language of India) could now be translated into Arabic by learned Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars. Much of this translation work was done in the *Bayt al-Hikmah* (House of Knowledge), the academy founded for this purpose by Al-Mansur's grandson, Harun al-Rashid, and great-grandson, Al-Ma'mun.

The historical importance of this astonishing period of creative activity cannot be overestimated. The goal of these translators was clear: to translate into Arabic – and thus preserve – the entire scientific legacy of the Ancient Greeks. The thirst for knowledge in the Islamic world was such that this Greek learning gained a new life when it was transmitted through a new language, Arabic. The direct result of this enormous translation effort, begun in Baghdad in the eighth century, can be seen centuries later in different parts of the Islamic world where Muslim scholars had internalised this Greek learning and were now writing original scientific works of their own. For example, without the translations made in Baghdad, the great Muslim philosopher of Al-Andalus, Ibn Rushd (1126–1198), would never have been able to write his extremely detailed *Commentaries on Aristotle*.

Perhaps equally important, was the conversion of many non-Arabs to Islam under the rule of Al-Mansur. While the Umayyads had discouraged conversions to Islam, the more inclusive 'Abbasid regime meant that the number of Muslims in the caliphate doubled. At the beginning of Al-Mansur's rule, roughly eight percent of the residents in the caliphate were Muslim. By the end of his rule, this number had risen to fifteen percent.

Al-Mansur died in 775 on his way to Hajj and was succeeded by his son and grandsons, one of whom was Harun al-Rashid.

HARUN AL-RASHID (786–809)

The golden age of the ‘Abbasid dynasty continued with the rule of Harun al-Rashid. Baghdad had become a flourishing trading centre on the Silk Road. Merchants from the East and West met there. With the secret of Chinese papermaking now known by the Arabs, inexpensive paper soon flooded the market. At the same time, “Arabic numerals” – the revolutionary Indian system of calculation that included the number zero, or *sifr* in Arabic – were adopted by the Islamic world.

By the end of the eighth century, the ‘Abbasid state had reached its zenith. The state treasury was full and extensive trade links all across the Empire encouraged the expansion of commerce. Baghdad prospered. A very sophisticated system of banking enabled merchants to conduct business securely. Letters of credit (a type of cheque), for example, issued in Baghdad would be honoured even in North Africa or Central Asia. Inspectors, known as *muhtasibs*, would roam the markets ensuring the accuracy of weights and measures there. At this time, the ancient Persian postal system was reorganised and improved. Communication relay towers were built at regular intervals from the ‘Abbasid capital to as far away as Morocco! Even carrier pigeons were used in this complex communications network.

Towards the end of the rule of Harun al-Rashid, the ‘Abbasid empire began to shrink in size. In the West, Ibrahim ibn al-Aghlab, Harun’s trusted governor in Tunisia, declared himself independent of Baghdad and subsequently established the Aghlabid dynasty. Revolts in various parts of Egypt, Arabia and Iran also helped to weaken the caliphate.

Harun al-Rashid left his empire to his two sons of different mothers. While Al-Amin was given Iraq to rule, Al-Ma’mun was given Iran. A brief but bloody civil war broke out between the two brothers with Al-Ma’mun finally becoming victorious and seizing the caliphate for himself in 813.

AL-MA’MUN IBN HARUN (813–833)

Al-Ma’mun, like his father, continued to encourage the translation of important works of classical learning in his *Bayt al-Hikmah*. Outstanding achievements in the fields of science and the fine arts also occurred during his reign. Al-Ma’mun could be considered the most intellectual and important of the ‘Abbasid rulers despite making several serious blunders in his life. For example, he publicly declared the Qur’an to be “created”. This official acceptance of the Mu’tazilite² school of philosophy was rejected by his subjects and many of the ‘ulema, or religious scholars of the day, who believed the Qur’an to be the “uncreated” word of Allah in its essence. The Mu’tazilites also attempted to analyse the *hadith* by logical reasoning.

After Al-Ma’mun adopted the revolutionary Mu’tazilite philosophy, the ‘ulema were questioned about many of their beliefs. Thus began the period in Islamic history called the *mihnah* (testing or trial), or the Islamic Inquisition. During the last four years of Al-Ma’mun’s life, *qadis* (judges), *muhaddiths* (scholars of *ahadith*), and even *muadhdhins* (callers to prayer) from cities like Baghdad,

² “Those who have removed themselves”, from the Arabic *a’tazala*, “to remove oneself”.

Damascus, Makkah and Madinah were all given an *imtiḥan* (test) to determine their willingness to accept the Mu'tazilite doctrine. Anyone who disagreed with the Mu'tazilites was severely punished. The Muslim masses simply could not accept the doctrine of a "created" Qur'an. The famous jurist, Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855), for example, believed in the "Eternal" Qur'an that could be understood through the *sunnah* of the Prophet ﷺ. In 834, he, like many others, was flogged, enchained and imprisoned for rejecting Mu'tazilite beliefs.

The *mihnah* continued during the reign of Al-Ma'mun's brother and successor, Al-Mu'tasim, and lasted for twenty years. It was finally ended in 847 under the rule of the caliph, Al-Mutawakkil. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, now a free man, refused the new caliph's offer to take care of his affairs. Throughout his life he had always wanted to remain distant from those in power. In old age, however, Ibn Hanbal did forgive one of his torturers who had come to his bedside. The importance of this failed Islamic Inquisition was to show that the spiritual authority of the state rested with the *'ulema* and caliphs could no longer attempt to interfere in religious matters.

Al-Ma'mun made yet another mistake. He had entrusted the remote Iranian province of Khorasan to his general, Tahir ibn al-Hussain. In 820, his descendants founded the independent Tahirid state and a year later ceased to mention the caliph's name in the Friday *khutbah* (sermon). This and similar renegade states clearly eroded the central control of the 'Abbasids in the provinces of the Empire.

AL-MU'TASIM IBN HARUN (833–842)

With the death of Al-Ma'mun in 833, his brother, Al-Mu'tasim, became the new caliph. He is noteworthy for importing and employing Turkish slave soldiers known as *mamluks* as a defence force. Al-Mu'tasim vacated Baghdad and built a new capital at Samarra', one hundred kilometres to the north. Samarra' remained the caliphal capital for almost sixty years (see illustration 3-2).

WEAKENING OF THE 'ABBASID STATE

The *mamluk* troops rose to positions of great power, eventually deposing the next caliph, Al-Mutawakkil, in 862. These Turkish soldiers were able to remove and install caliphs whenever they wanted. Caliphs were now mere puppets representing a weak dismembered 'Abbasid state and in 935, the title of *Amir al-'Umara'*, "Commander of Commanders", was given to the head of the *mamluk* troops.

The once vast and unified 'Abbasid Empire had disintegrated into a number of (semi-) independent states: the Aghlabids, Tulunids, Hamdanids, Tahirids, Saffarids and the Samanids, to name but a few. In 945, Baghdad fell to a Shi'ite family of *amirs*, the Buyids, from the northern part of Iran, who remained in power there for almost a century.

With the arrival of a new wave of invaders, the Great Seljuqs (a Turkic people from Central Asia), the old 'Abbasid state was partially reunified under Sunni rulers once again. The Seljuq commander, Tughril Beg, entered Baghdad in 1055. Caliphs were still appointed, but the real power lay in the hands of the Turkish Seljuq sultans. Within a century, the Seljuqs too had become a weak force and until the arrival of the first Mongol hordes in the middle of the thirteenth century, a string of incompetent caliphs ruled Baghdad.