

# 1 Introduction

## Why the Study of the Abbasids Matters Today

The modern world owes a great debt to medieval Islamic civilization generally, and to the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258), more particularly. In recent years a variety of popular surveys have described the critical scientific and intellectual achievements that took place in the golden age of the Abbasid capital, Baghdad, during the ninth century. The “House of Wisdom” movement patronized by the caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813–833) promoted the revival of Classical Greek philosophy and science, long before these attracted attention in Europe in the later phases of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. To many readers, the names al-Razi, al-Khwarazmi, and al-Kindi are today as familiar as those of Aristotle, Ptolemy, Euclid, and Hippocrates, with both providing the two streams (ancient and medieval) that contributed to the stimulation of the Western Renaissance.<sup>1</sup>

Islamic history was still relatively young, less than a century and a half old, when the Abbasids came on the scene in 750, after the momentous events that spanned the era of the Prophet (610–632), the reigns of his Companion successors (the Rashidun caliphs, 632–661), and the period of Islamic conquests with the Umayyad dynasty (661–750). But the Islamic empire comprised a diversity of more ancient communities (Arabs, Persians, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, and Buddhists), all of whom partook in energizing the transition from the

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (London, 2009); John Freely, *Light From the East: How the Science of Medieval Islam Helped to Shape the Western World* (London, 2011); Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Salim T. S. al-Hassani, ed., *1001 Inventions: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Civilization* (Washington, DC, 2012).

divided world of Late Antiquity between the Roman (Byzantine) and Persian (Sasanid) empires straddling a border along the Euphrates river to a unified world of cultural and economic synthesis under the caliphate.

It is tempting to study the achievements of Islamic science and culture without attention to their context in political history, but this legacy would not have gone very far without the initial guidance and resources provided by a series of Abbasid caliphs, such as al-Mansur, al-Rashid, al-Ma'mun, and al-Mu'tasim, who were keen patrons of scientific discovery and professional thought. These caliphs were also famous for their patronage of literary and religious debate, and their reigns witnessed the rise of other Arabic classics that continue to resonate in the legal practice and cultural life of Islamic society today. The *Sira* (or saga) of the Prophet Muhammad was compiled in the mid-eighth century by Ibn Ishaq, and a little later jurists such as Abu Hanifa, Malik, and al-Shafi'i contributed the ideas and texts that provided the foundations for Islamic legal thinking for centuries to come. The Abbasid court became a magnet for pioneering linguists, such as al-Khalil and Sibawayh, who laid out the rules of Arabic grammar and the correct style of expression; for poets, such as Abu Tammam and al-Buhturi; and for belles-lettrists such as Ibn al-Muqaffa', famous for his book of animal fables, *Kalila wa Dimna*, and al-Jahiz, a prolific essayist.

In spite of these legacies, the attention of modern historians to the Abbasids has been slim and uneven, with as yet no full survey available for the entirety of the history of the Abbasid caliphate. Abbasid history has often tended to be caught up in wider surveys of medieval Islamic history, which mostly tell the story of the Prophet and the rise of Islam, later conquests under the Umayyads, and then provide a sketchy look at the caliphs of Baghdad. Coverage of the Abbasids has tended to focus excessively on the reign of Harun al-Rashid, and mostly for a fairy-tale image colored more by *The Thousand and One Nights* than actual history. The focus on a period considered a golden age of the caliphate has made the first century of Abbasid rule, with names such as al-Mansur and al-Ma'mun, well known, but those of other caliphs from later centuries, such as al-Mu'tadid (r. 892–902), al-Qa'im (r. 1031–1075), al-Mustadi' (r. 1170–1180), and al-Mustansir (r. 1226–1242), remain obscure to the general reader. As the central control of the Abbasids gives way to more assertive provincial dynasties or “successor states” such as the Tahirids, Samanids, and Buyids in tenth-century Iran, or to

the Isma‘ili Fatimids of Egypt; and as the Turkic sultanates of the Ghaznavids and Seljuks emerge in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Abbasid caliphate becomes lost in a forest of political changes.

This study aims to provide a survey of the Abbasid caliphate – mostly as a political history, but with digressions on the social and cultural developments that accompanied the five-century period of Abbasid history. An important part of this corrective in ranging beyond the first century of the Abbasids is to appreciate the caliphate not simply in terms of its early military and territorial hegemony but as a political office that remained a central symbol of historical continuity in Islamic society and a source of legitimation to various dynasts around the Islamic world. Caliphs such as al-Mansur and al-Rashid in the eighth and ninth centuries may have held great military and territorial reach, but what later caliphs lost in military power in the tenth and eleventh centuries they were able to make up for in the reigns of al-Qadir, al-Qa‘im, al-Nasir, and al-Mustansir with an increase in their religious authority as a source of legitimacy for newly emerging dynasts. Various rulers, such as the Ghaznavids, Seljuks, Ayyubids, Ghurids, and the Delhi sultans could only project their new status as “sultans” upon receiving an edict of “blessing” from the caliph in Baghdad, who wielded a leverage similar to that of a medieval Pope in giving greater legitimacy to some rulers over others, and as such influenced the political geography of the Islamic world. To always measure the Abbasid caliphate by its military strength and territorial control in the early period overlooks the transformation of the caliphate over the centuries, and its ability to redefine its credibility and leverage in different phases of Islamic history.

### **A Survey of the Caliphate**

To Western readers the term “caliph” remains enigmatic, and less recognizable in meaning than the terms “Caesar” or “Pope.” And even for Muslims the term can be elusive, since the “caliphate” is not an institution enshrined in Qur’anic injunctions or recommended by the Prophet, but is more an accident of history. It was a makeshift political office hastily crafted by the Companions of Muhammad to help fill the leadership vacuum left after his death in 632. The Arabic word itself, meaning “deputy” or “successor,” remained ambiguous, blurring the boundary between political and religious authority, and it remained unclear whether the term “caliph” meant “deputy of the

Prophet” or “the representative of God on earth.” The religious and political dimensions of the leadership vacuum left by Muhammad were so strongly felt that when his Companions argued over the question they reportedly often referred to this leadership and succession challenge as “this matter” (*hadha al-amr*), not knowing what to call it, or whether the caliph was a religious or political leader. It took a relatively oppressive dynasty, the Umayyads (661–750), to establish the caliphate as a hereditary monarchal institution, but the full implications of the caliphal office did not crystallize until the Abbasids came to power. The Umayyads tried briefly to project a meaning of “caliph” as “deputy of God” rather than “deputy of the Prophet” during the reign of Abd al-Malik, but the experiment clearly failed, since the title was soon removed from coinage. Challenged by the family of the Prophet, Kharijites, and intertribal rivalry, the Umayyads found their only safety in projecting brute imperial force. Waves of conquest on different frontiers became a necessary distraction from internal questions of religious and political legitimacy.

The task of communicating both a political and religious meaning for the caliphal leadership, however, was far more successfully accomplished by the Abbasids, after the revolution that brought them to power in 750. As members of the Prophet’s Hashimite family, and descendants of his uncle, al-Abbas, they held a special mystique. In the last years of Umayyad rule they had joined with the Alids, descendants of the Prophet’s cousin Ali, in a revolutionary movement that was launched in Khurasan to overthrow the Umayyad dynasty, viewed by their opposition as usurpers of the greater, kin-based legitimate right of the Prophet’s family to rule. Khurasan, with further cultural influences from neighboring Transoxiana and Central Asia, also infused Abbasid caliphal pretensions with additional dimensions of charismatic authority, based on notions of messianic renewal and divine election, to make the Abbasid political office a highly religious one. The new, post-revolutionary state was referred to as *dawla*, a term that carries connotations of a new order, and the new caliphs assumed titles that reflected their roots in Prophetic heritage and divine support, such as al-Mansur (the Victorious), al-Mahdi (the Guided), al-Rashid (the Wise), and al-Ma’mun (the Well-Entrusted). Later court writers, such as Baladhuri and Qudama b. Ja’far, would refer to the dynasty as “the blessed dynasty” (*al-dawla al-mubarak*a).

In social terms, the Abbasid state brought radical change after the Umayyad period in the way it opened up the Islamic empire, transitioning

from the “Arab” kingdom of the Umayyads, which had relied on government by an Arab tribal confederacy and discouraged conversion to Islam. The Abbasid state instead opened up access to circles of power to new converts to Islam, promising an equality of sorts between the Arabs and non-Arabs, the former *mawali* (clients) of the Umayyad period. This trend toward Perso-Arab integration was perhaps best reflected in the office of the vizierate, which was dominated by the Iranian family of the Barmakids for many years between the reigns of al-Mahdi and Harun al-Rashid. The experiment opened the way for a stronger integration in the reign of al-Ma'mun, and the later emergence of provincial dynasties, such as those of the Tahirids and the Samanids. The Abbasids were not only aware of the social and religious diversity their empire spanned, but hammered out a legal system – in the Hanafi mold initially and with digressions to other trends later on – that ensured an attitude of flexibility in dealing with issues and groups. The institutions they put in place would later function as foundations of the great empires of Islam up until that of the Ottomans, which ended after World War I.

More than anything the name of the Abbasids has been associated with the city of Baghdad, which they founded in 762 as their new capital on the Tigris river. Baghdad grew rapidly to become the largest urban center of the medieval world – perhaps only matched in size by Constantinople – and it grew into an economic and intellectual powerhouse. The city comprised a learned society benefiting from numerous bookshops and public libraries, and became a hub for students traveling in search of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The eleventh-century Khatib al-Baghdadi best described the sense of wonder surrounding Baghdad, when he said: “In the entire world, there has not been a city which could compare with Baghdad in size and splendor, or in the number of scholars and great personalities . . . Consider the numerous roads, markets, lanes, mosques, bathhouses, and shops – all these distinguish the city from all others.”<sup>3</sup> As for its reputation as a center of commerce, Baghdad was famous even earlier; a late eighth-century Chinese traveler, Du Huan,

<sup>2</sup> Olga Pinto, “The Libraries of the Arabs During the Time of the Abbassides,” *Islamic Culture* 3 (1929), 214; Ibn Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd al-Farid*, ed. Ahmad Amin et al. (Cairo, 1940–1953), 2:223; Ruth Mackensen, “Four Great Libraries of Medieval Baghdad,” *Library Quarterly* 2 (1932), 281.

<sup>3</sup> Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Tarikh Baghdad* (Cairo, 1931), 1:108–109, trans. Francoise Micheau as “Baghdad in the Abbasid Era: A Cosmopolitan and Multi-Confessional Capital,” in *The City in the Islamic World* (Leiden, 2008), ed. Renata Holod et al., 1:244.

stated: “Everything produced from the earth is available there ... Brocade, embroidered silks, pearls, and other gems are displayed all over markets and street shops.”<sup>4</sup>

The founding of Baghdad as the new capital of the Abbasid empire on the Tigris signaled not just a political shift from the Umayyad capital Damascus but a cultural and economic one as well. The Abbasids recognized their debt to the Iranian east that had brought them to power, and became strongly attached to the strategic location of Baghdad in the richest agricultural heartland of Mesopotamia, which was helped by the easy river transport that the Tigris and Euphrates provided. With the proximity of the ruins of the Sasanid capital Ctesiphon – famous for its Arch of Khusraw – and the vivid archaeological record elsewhere in Iraq of Assyrian and Babylonian ruins, the founder of Baghdad, al-Mansur, was making a statement of final imperial inheritance of ancient Near Eastern empires.<sup>5</sup> He was helped in this by a diversity of communities that placed hopes on better times under the Abbasids: Nestorian Christians who were deeply at odds with the Church of Constantinople; Zoroastrians who yearned for an ally against Manicheans and Mazdakites; Jews who still remembered the harsh days of Byzantine rule under Heraclius; and Shi‘i Muslims who considered the Abbasids, as Hashimites, closer to the principle of rule by the family of the Prophet than the Umayyads. And these were still different from the hopes of the provinces, such as Khurasan, which wanted to be in the driving seat of the empire; Armenia, which sought a measure of self-rule; and the Hijaz, which looked for better integration with a caliphate always based in the north. In the inaugural age of the Abbasid dynasty it seemed that everyone wanted this state to succeed. The caliph was not viewed as a foreign leader but as a promising ally, and generally as the enabler of political stability, social order, and economic prosperity. Al-Mansur was in many ways Persia’s Cyrus in Arabic garb.

The general outline of Abbasid history defies a simple model of rise, prosperity, and decline. There was more than one moment of decline, and more than one of surprising recovery. This was noticed already in the tenth century by writers in the Abbasid chancery, such as Ibrahim

<sup>4</sup> Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (Oxford, 2010), 101.

<sup>5</sup> J. Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages* (Detroit, 1970), 162, 232 no. 6.

b. Hilal al-Sabi' (d. 384/994), who wrote in one letter on behalf of the caliph to the Buyid king Bakhtiyar, that "you and others have seen how [over the years] the Abbasid state (*al-dawla al-'abbasiyya*) weakens at times, and revives at others ... and yet in all conditions it has firm roots." Al-Sabi' explains that turmoil when it happens "[is] by way of divine instruction for the subjects and admonishment to them ... to a duration that God has preordained," and that it has also been a pattern that when God again decrees the restoration (of the caliphate), he does so by sending someone who is loyal to its cause, and that no sooner does this happen than we find the state becoming "young again, renewed in vigor, and sturdy as before."<sup>6</sup> Although al-Sabi's reasoning for these ups and downs is religious, it is interesting nevertheless that he and his administrative cohorts held a historical view based on cycles in the fortunes of the Abbasid state.

The reign of Harun al-Rashid was undoubtedly a peak in Abbasid power. When it was followed by the succession crisis and civil war between his children, al-Amin and al-Ma'mun, and the rise of the first provincial dynasty of the Iranian Tahirids in the east, it may well seem like the end of the caliphate's story for traditional historians. Anyone trying to tell al-Mu'tasim, al-Ma'mun's successor, that he ruled over a period of decline might well have received the answer he allegedly once gave the Byzantine emperor: "The least of the territories ruled by the least of my subjects provides a revenue larger than your whole dominion."<sup>7</sup> Al-Mu'tasim built the new city of Samarra, some 60 miles up the Tigris from Baghdad, which for about half a century was the new Abbasid capital, filled with palatial mansions, military cantonments, athletic and hunting grounds. The frenzy of luxury and palace building at Samarra reached its peak with al-Mutawakkil, who built his own city of al-Mutawakiliyya in what reflected the revived ability of the state to spend, an ability to exercise central control over land-tax revenue collection, and a state treasury awash with funds.

After the assassination of al-Mutawakkil in the mid-ninth century the Abbasid state, which then had a string of short-lived, beleaguered caliphs, could have been written off, but toward the end of that century

<sup>6</sup> al-Sabi', *al-Mukhtar min Rasa'il Abu Ishaq Ibrahim b. Hilal al-Sabi'*, ed. Shakib Arslan (Beirut, n.d.), 316–318.

<sup>7</sup> al-Muqaddasi, *Ahsan al-Ta'qasim fi Marifat al-Aqalim* (Leiden, 1906), 64; trans. Basil Collins as *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions* (Reading, 2001), 60.

al-Mu'tadid brought about a military revival, and the Abbasid state went on to garner wealth from tax revenues that supported a glamorous court in the early tenth century. Ibn Khaldun, famous for his theory of how urban culture dilutes the ties of tribal and family solidarity, and how luxury breeds political feebleness, could find proof for his theories in history during this period, as the Abbasids were overwhelmed by the hardy Buyid mountain-dwellers from the Caspian region. If there was a time when the Abbasid state seemed on the verge of oblivion, it was with the era of Buyid domination over the regions of Iraq and Iran (945–1055). Caliphs lost all territorial control, and they became no more than emblems of the past in the Islamic world, reduced to having only their names included on coinage and invoked for blessing in the sermon (*khutba*) of the Friday prayer. Buyid adherence to Shi'i Islam (in its Zaydi and Twelver forms) added more pressure on the Sunni Abbasid caliphate.

But then historical circumstances turned against the Buyids with the rise of new Turkic dynasties, the Ghaznavids and the Seljuks, who espoused Sunni Islam and indirectly revived the importance of the Abbasid caliphal institution by aiming to act as its protectors against the Buyids and the rising Fatimids in Egypt. This coincided with a time when two Abbasid caliphs, al-Qadir, followed by al-Qa'im, were actively working on reviving in a new way the religious authority of the office. They had cultivated strong ties with the religious class of the *'ulama*, postured as guardians of orthodox Islamic belief in an age of great schism between Sunni Islam and Isma'ili Shi'ism, and even set about articulating, in almost ideological terms, an official religious testament – the famous Qadiri Creed or *al-'aqida al-qadiriyya*, first made public in 409/1018. The main challenge in this conflict was no longer the Buyids, but the Isma'ili Fatimids in Egypt, who for a while seemed on the verge of overrunning the entire Middle East and ending the Abbasid caliphate.

During the Seljuk sultanate the Abbasid caliphs did not wield political control over territory any more than they had under the Buyids, but the relationship between caliph and sultan was markedly improved since both the Abbasids and Seljuks were Sunni, and their relationship found its best moment of equilibrium during the vizierate of Nizam al-Mulk, the Seljuks' famous Iranian chief minister and ideological architect of the Islamic educational institution known as the madrasa. Helped by their unusually long reigns, the Abbasid caliphs al-Qadir



(r. 991–1031) and al-Qa'im (r. 1031–1075) were able to revive the position of the Abbasids as a focus of Islamic and historical loyalty, and were aided in this effort by prolific jurists, such as al-Mawardi, who helped them articulate their authority as "Imams," as he laid out the political theory in his famous treatise *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya*, the first succinct theory of government from an Islamic juristic point of view. In Baghdad, the Abbasids and Seljuks each had their own palace as a base, with Dar al-Khilafa for the caliphs, and Dar al-Mamlaka (later Dar al-Saltana) for the sultans. This situation remained stable until the caliph tried to assert a claim for more control in the Iraq region. This was bound to happen given the distant anchor of the Seljuk empire in eastern Iran at Marw, and the Abbasid memory of their once wider scope of territorial sovereignty.

An attempt to assert renewed military power was put forward by the caliph al-Mustarshid (r. 1118–1135), and although he was defeated, his attempted move to empower the caliphate in Iraq seems to have galvanized later Abbasids into persisting with the project of trying to shake off Seljuk hegemony and revive their real political authority. Al-Mustarshid's successor, al-Muqtafi, gradually pieced together control over Baghdad, and extended it over southern Iraq. With an economic and political base in the Iraq region, a new caliphal state became a cohesive entity from Baghdad to Basra, and in the twelfth century the caliphs found new allies in place of the Seljuks with the rise of the Zangids, Ayyubids, and Rum Seljuks in Syria and Asia Minor. The background of war against the Western Crusades indirectly strengthened the position of the caliph as a central religious symbol for Islam. A diploma of investiture from the caliph to a Rum Seljuk or Ayyubid prince, usually accompanied by a robe of honor, a standard, a ring, and a sword, functioned like a coronation as well as religious blessing. Al-Mustadi's designation of the Rum Seljuk prince Qilij Arslan II (r. 1156–1192) as "sultan" therefore raised the latter's profile in Asia Minor above that of other neighboring principalities, such those of the Artuqids and Danishmends, and similarly gave the Ayyubid sultan Saladin much-needed legitimacy, after once having served merely as vassal of the Zangids of Aleppo.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Songül Mecit, "Kingship and Ideology under the Rum Seljuqs," in *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society and Culture*, ed. Christian Lange and Songül Mecit (Edinburgh, 2011), 68.

The climax of Abbasid efforts at revival finally culminated with the near half-century reign of al-Nasir (r. 1180–1225), the longest-reigning Abbasid caliph, who was able to exercise political authority in Iraq without any outside influence. Al-Nasir's success was greatly helped by his crafting of a religious policy that attracted both Sunni and Shi'i loyalty, and later by his addition of a new dimension of Sufism. The twelfth century was a time of rising Sufi piety, especially with the saintly figure Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 561/1166), whose shrine in Baghdad became a place of pilgrimage that rivaled the shrines of Abu Hanifa and the Shi'i Imams. Al-Nasir joined Sufism through its Suhrawardi movement in 1207, and appointed as his key advisor the leader of this movement, Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, who acted as his envoy on many official diplomatic missions. The caliph cultivated a chivalric order, known as Futuwwa, that centered on loyalty to his leadership and on practicing a set of virtues that was considered embodied in the heroic career of the caliph Ali. The caliph encouraged various leaders, including princes of the Ayyubids (1169–1260), Rum Seljuks (1077–1307), Ghurids (1000–1215), and others, to join this movement, envisioning the Abbasid caliph as a Grand Master within the frame of this chivalric order. Al-Nasir's long reign lent stability to his rule, and he was greatly aided by the help of a capable minister from Shiraz, Ibn al-Qassab, who helped expand Abbasid control over Khuzistan, Isfahan, Qazwin, and Rayy (modern Tehran). But above all, the Abbasid caliphate was helped in this twilight phase by foreign developments, namely the rise of new dynasts in the east, such as the Ghurids in India, who were bitter rivals to al-Nasir's enemies the Khwarazm shahs (1077–1231), and helped distract the latter, although the end of the Khwarazm shahs actually came with the invasion of Genghis Khan.

Abbasid Baghdad continued to progress during the reign of the caliph al-Mustansir, who built the famous madrasa of al-Mustansiriyya, an architectural and artistic wonder of its time, which was also the first to harbor an ecumenical tendency by including academic training in all four schools of Sunni jurisprudence, rather than only one, as was the case with previous madrasas. Al-Mustansir maintained an efficient army that on more than one occasion fended off Mongol attacks in areas adjacent to Baghdad. In order for the caliphate to survive at that critical juncture in its history it needed a vigilant and steady leader skilled at diplomacy and maintaining the social and religious unity of Baghdad in an hour of crisis. Al-Mustansir's successor, al-Musta'sim, was hardly the capable