

## *The Abbasid Caliphate*

The period of the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258) has long been recognized as the formative period of Islamic civilization with its various achievements in the areas of science, literature, and culture. This history of the Abbasid caliphate from its foundation in 750 and golden age under Harun al-Rashid to the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 examines the caliphate as an empire and institution, and probes its influence over Islamic culture and society. Ranging widely to survey the entire five-century history of the Abbasid dynasty, Tayeb El-Hibri examines the resilience of the caliphate as an institution, as a focal point of religious definitions, and as a source of legitimacy to various contemporary Islamic monarchies. The study revisits ideas of ‘golden age’ and ‘decline’ with a new reading, tries to separate Abbasid history from the myths of the Arabian Nights, and shows how the legacy of the caliphs continues to resonate in the modern world in direct and indirect ways.

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# The Abbasid Caliphate

A History

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*To my mother,  
Salma Sibai*

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## *Acknowledgments*

In the Western world, Islamic history is a field of many camps of scholars and many gaps of knowledge. I have eschewed its camps but have been interested in filling its gaps, and one of these is the glaring absence of a book on the Abbasid caliphate from its rise in 750 to its conquest in 1258. A root for this book grew out of a course that I taught on the Abbasids during a two-year stint as the visiting Alfred Howell Chair in the History Department at the American University of Beirut in 2014–2016. The variety of junctures often suggested for the end of Abbasid influence, whether in 861, 945, or 1055 CE, always seemed to be followed by resilience that required an explanation, and eventually it seemed that the story had to be traced for the entirety of a five-century period.

I would like to thank Maria Marsh, Middle Eastern Studies editor at Cambridge University Press, for identifying Abbasid history as a topic for a book survey, and for following the progress of the manuscript through its various stages. I also thank Dan Brown, Middle East editor at Cambridge as well, for keeping up with the review process, and Atifa Jiwa, assistant to the editors at the Press, for keeping the dots connected at various points. At the production stage, Stephanie Taylor was very helpful in making the book project advance with all the necessary supplements, while Mary Starkey applied her treasured copyediting skills to make the text flow with greater readability. On the illustrations front, I thank my colleague and Islamic art history expert, Professor Walter Denny, for his steady availability for consultancy, and am grateful to Islamic numismatist Dr. Michael Bates, of the American Numismatic Society, for generously helping in locating suitable Abbasid coins. The various staff at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Museums in Washington, DC, the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University, and Columbia University's Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, where the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives are housed, were

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all greatly helpful in making a variety of images available, and equally appreciated are the efforts of my departmental office manager, Rachel Diana, for helping in lining up the images and transforming them into manageable files.

The Talisman Gate image of “dragons and caliph” (ca. 1221), in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, remained elusive in circumstances of storage worthy of magic lamps, but thanks are still due to those who tried to retrieve it. To many students, the Abbasids have often been caught up in “Aladdin and Arabian Nights” types of tales relating to the caliph Harun al-Rashid, shady court ministers, flying carpets, and a Baghdad of glitz and splendor. I hope this book brings the topic closer to the reality of history, and helps to disentangle the term “caliphate” from modern myths and political exuberance. The question of why the Abbasids matter today is probably part of why we study history at all, but with a more particular answer – and an increasingly crucial one for today’s world. Finally, and in a transition from my previous work on historiography, I wish to dedicate this book to my mother, Salma Sibai, who, I think, is more partial to history than historiography.

## *Note on Transliteration*

The transliteration system used in the book follows the conventions of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, but goes further in simplifying the diacritical marks. Frequently used words and names, such as Abbasid, sharia, Abdallah, Umar, Uthman, Ali, and Aisha have been freed from the Ayn and Hamza markings, given their relative familiarity to Western readers. Less familiar names have kept the transliteration, but to a minimum. Although written the same in modern English transliteration, the name of the fifth caliph, Harun al-Rashid (pronounced “al-Rasheed”), needs to be distinguished from that of the later medieval brief rule of al-Rashid (pronounced “al-Raashid”). All references to the *Encyclopedia of Islam* refer to its second edition (dubbed “New Edition” when it was published). Dates are usually given in both the Islamic calendar of the *hijra* (AH), which begins in 622 CE, and in Common Era, except for regnal dates of rulers, which are given in the latter only.

## Chronology

- 570–632 Lifespan of the Prophet Muhammad.
- 622 Beginning of the hijri Islamic calendar.
- 632–661 The rightly guided (Rashidun) caliphs: Abu Bakr (r. 632–634); Umar b. al-Khattab (r. 634–644); Uthman (r. 644–656); and Ali b. Abi Talib (r. 656–661).
- 661–680 Reign of Mu‘awiya, who establishes the Umayyad dynasty, with Damascus as its capital.
- 685–705 Abd al-Malik b. Marwan reconsolidates Umayyad rule, mints the first fully Arabic and Islamic coinage, and builds the Dome of the Rock in 691.
- 705–715 The reign of al-Walid b. Abd al-Malik marks the Arab conquest of Spain, Transoxiana, and the Indus river region.
- 724–743 The reign of Hisham b. Abd al-Malik marks the height of Umayyad expansion. An Arab army is defeated at the battle of Poitiers by Charles Martel, while a Pyrrhic victory is achieved against the Turkic khanate in central Asia. Shi‘i revolts by Zayd b. Ali (in Iraq) and his son Yahya (in Khurasan), and limitations surface on further conquests.
- ca. 750 Religious scholars flourish: the jurist Abu Hanifa (d. 767); Ibn Ishaq (d. 768) compiles the Prophet’s *Sira*; Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765) is the Sixth Imam of Twelver Shi‘ism; and Malik b. Anas (d. 795) compiles the traditions (*sunna*) of Medina in the *Muwatta*.
- 743–744 The Abbasids begin their political call (*da‘wa*). Abu Muslim makes the *da‘wa* in Khurasan on behalf of the Abbasid Ibrahim al-Imam (based in Jordan).
- 749 The Abbasid forces conquer Kufa, and defeat the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II, in northern Iraq at the battle of Zab.

- 750–1258 The Abbasid caliphate (reigning caliphs in bold).  
 750–754 Abu'l-Abbas **al-Saffah**.  
 754–775 Abu Ja'far **al-Mansur**.  
 756 Abd al-Rahman b. Mu'awiya b. Hisham b. al-Malik escapes to North Africa, and founds the Umayyad emirate of Spain.  
 762 The revolt of the Alid Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya in Medina.  
 762–763 al-Mansur founds Baghdad as the Abbasid capital.  
 772 al-Mansur constructs the city of al-Rafiqqa near Raqqa.  
 775–785 **al-Mahdi**.  
 778 The building of the Palace of Ukhaydir  
 783 al-Mahdi's son, Harun, leads an army against the Byzantine empress Irene, reaches the Bosphorus.  
 785–786 **al-Hadi**.  
 786–809 **Harun al-Rashid**.  
 786 Construction of the Great Mosque of Cordoba.  
 789–926 The Idrisids take control of the Maghreb.  
 797 al-Rashid sends gifts to Charlemagne.  
 798 The Abbasids and the Khazars reach a truce.  
 800–812 Ibrahim b. al-Aghlab, governor in North Africa, establishes the Aghlabid emirate that rules until 909.  
 802 al-Rashid establishes a covenant of succession between al-Amin and al-Ma'mun in Mecca.  
 803 The downfall of the Barmakids.  
 800 Charlemagne crowned emperor of the Franks.  
 808 The city of Fez founded by the Idrisids.  
 809–813 **al-Amin**.  
 811–813 The war of succession between al-Amin and al-Ma'mun.  
 813–833 **al-Ma'mun**.  
 813–819 al-Ma'mun rules the caliphate from Marw.  
 816–837 Revolt of Babak al-Khurrami.  
 817 al-Ma'mun designates Ali b. Musa al-Rida as successor.  
 821–873 The Tahirids are autonomous governors of Khurasan.  
 827 The Aghlabids begin conquest of Sicily (Palermo taken in 831, and Syracuse in 878). Crete is conquered separately.  
 831 al-Ma'mun's patronage of the Mu'tazila school of speculative theology (*kalam*) accelerates.

- 833 The caliph imposes the Mihna (“trial”) against hadith scholars.
- 833–842 **al-Mu‘tasim.**
- 836 al-Mu‘tasim founds the city of Samarra as the new Abbasid capital.
- 842–847 **al-Wathiq.**
- 844 The Vikings raid Seville through the Guadalquivir river.
- 847–861 **al-Mutawakkil.**
- 848–852 The construction of the Great Mosque of Samarra.
- 850 al-Mutawakkil drafts succession plans amongst his children, al-Muntasir, al-Mu‘tazz, and al-Mu‘ayyad.
- 848 al-Mutawakkil ends the Mihna program, and accepts the views of Ahmad b. Hanbal’s followers as the new orthodoxy.
- 855 Abbasid expedition captures the African king of al-Bujja.
- 861 al-Mutawakkil constructs the Nilometer on Roda isle in Egypt, and the Madinat al-Mutawakiliyya near Samarra.
- 861–862 **al-Muntasir.**
- 862–866 **al-Musta‘in.**
- 863 The Byzantines win a victory over the Arabs in Asia Minor.
- 865 The Bulgarian ruler Boris converts to Christianity.
- 866 Vikings establish kingdom in England; Alfred the Great rules Wessex, 871–899.
- 866–869 **al-Mu‘tazz.**
- 868 Ibn Tulun governs Egypt independently of the Abbasids.
- 869–883 The Zanj rebellion in southern Iraq.
- 869–870 **al-Muhtadi.**
- 870–892 **al-Mu‘tamid.**
- 885 Ibn Khurdadhbih completes his geographical work *al-Masalik wa’l-Mamalik*.
- 874 Hasan al-Askari, the Eleventh Shi‘i Imam, dies in Samarra; disappearance (occultation) of his child, Muhammad, the Twelfth Imam.
- 874–928 The Qaramita movement in southern Iraq; later it spreads to eastern Arabia.
- 876 al-Muwaffaq defeats the Saffarid Ya‘qub b. al-Layth.
- 877 Ibn Tulun takes control of Syria.

- 892–902 **al-Mu‘tadid.**  
 Baghdad reinstated as the Abbasid capital.
- 895 al-Mu‘tadid changes the Nawruz date from 11 April to 17 June.
- 897 A Zaydi state is established in Yemen.
- 902–908 **al-Muktafi.**  
 905 The Abbasids regain control over Egypt.  
 907 Oleg of Kiev, leader of the Rus, attacks Constantinople.
- 908–932 **al-Muqtadir.**  
 908 Ibn al-Mu‘tazz is caliph for one day  
 924 The Abbasid minister Ibn al-Furat is sacked.  
 909 The Shi‘i Isma‘ili Fatimids seize power in Tunisia, and expand to Egypt.
- 914 al-Tabari’s *History of Prophets and Kings* concludes with events that year.
- 917 Byzantine embassy famously received in Baghdad.  
 929 al-Muqtadir is briefly deposed in favor of al-Qahir.  
 930 The Qaramita raid Mecca, remove the Black Stone, and return it in 951 after the Abbasids pay a ransom.
- 929 The Umayyads of al-Andalus proclaim themselves caliphs.
- 932–934 **al-Qahir.**  
 934–940 **al-Radi.**  
 935–937 Ibn Ra‘iq appointed *amir al-umara*.  
 936–961 The Umayyads construct Madinat al-Zahra near Cordoba.
- 940–944 **al-Muttaqi.**  
 944 The Abbasids give up the Mandylion relic of Edessa, purported to have an image of Christ, to the Byzantines.
- 944–946 **al-Mustakfi.**  
 946 Buyid takeover of Baghdad.  
 945–967 The Hamdanid Sayf al-Dawla rules over Aleppo.  
 946–974 **al-Muti‘.**  
 949–983 Reign of the Buyid ‘Adud al-Dawla (from 977 in Iraq).  
 949 Embassy of Liutprand of Cremona, envoy of Otto I, to Constantine VII.
- 960 The conversion of “200,000 tents of Turks” (Qarluqs and Qarakhanids) to Islam in Kashgar.



*Chronology*

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- 961 The Byzantine Nicephorus Phocas captures Crete from the Arabs, and Cyprus in 965.
- 969 Cairo is founded by the Fatimids.
- 972–1152 The Zirids rule in Tunisia and eastern Algeria (vassals of the Fatimids till 1049).
- 974–991 **al-Ta'ī'.**
- 985 The traveler and geographer al-Muqaddasi completes his survey of Islamic lands, *The Best Divisions for the Knowledge of the Regions*.
- 989 Vladimir the Great, leader of the Rus, converts to Christianity.
- 1004 al-Biruni composes *Chronology of Ancient Nations*.
- 1009 Church of the Holy Sepulchre destroyed by the Fatimid al-Hakim.
- 1014 Basil II of Byzantium destroys Bulgarian army.
- 991–1031 **al-Qadir.**
- 999 The Qarakhanids from Kashgar conquer the Samanids.
- 1010 Firdawsi completes writing the *Shahnameh*.
- 1012–1018 Avicenna composes the *The Canon of Medicine*.
- 1023–1079 The Mirdasids rule over Aleppo.
- 1031–1075 **al-Qa'im.**
- 1029 Mahmud of Ghazna captures Rayy and al-Jibal.
- 1030 al-Biruni completes his book survey of India.
- 1031 The end of Umayyad rule in Spain; start of the “Party Kings” of al-Andalus.
- 1036 The Abbasid caliph forbids transactions involving Fatimid dinars.
- 1040 The Seljuks defeat the Ghaznavids at the battle of Dandanqan.
- 1043 The Seljuk Tughril declares himself “Protector of the Commander of the Faithful.”
- 1045 Movable type first invented in China.
- 1055 The Seljuk takeover of Baghdad under the leadership of Tughril Beg (r. 1038–1063)
- 1061–1091 The Norman Roger Guiscard captures Sicily from the Arabs.
- 1062–1067 The “great famine” in Egypt.

- 1065 Nizam al-Mulk, vizir of the Seljuks, founds the Nizamiyya of Baghdad, prototype of the Islamic madrasa.
- 1061–1106 The Almoravids under Yusuf b. Tashfin found Marrakesh in 1062 and win the key battle of Zallaqa in Spain in 1086.
- 1063–1072 Reign of the Seljuk sultan Alp Arslan.
- 1065–1092 Nizam al-Mulk presides over key period of Seljuk prosperity.
- 1066 The battle of Hastings and the Norman conquest of England.
- 1071 Alp Arslan defeats the Byzantine Romanus IV Diogenes at the battle of Manzikert.
- 1072–1092 Reign of the Seljuk sultan Malikshah.
- 1075–1094 **al-Muqtadi.**
- 1076 The Seljuks seize Damascus from the Fatimids.
- 1076 The end of Fatimid rule in Syria.
- 1076 Ghana empire converts to Islam.
- 1075–1122 Investiture controversy between emperor and Pope.
- 1077 Penitence of Henry IV at Canossa by Pope Gregory VII.
- 1081 Beginning of the Rum Seljuk state in Asia Minor.
- 1092 Nizam al-Mulk is murdered by Isma‘ili Assassins.
- 1094 A split follows the death of the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir between the Nizari Isma‘ilis, who remove to the southwest Caspian region, and the followers of al-Musta‘li, who continue to rule in Egypt.
- 1094–1118 **al-Mustazhir.**
- 1105–1118 Reunification of the western Seljuk realm under Muhammad b. Malikshah; divided again after Muhammad’s death.
- 1118–1157 Sanjar rules over the Seljuk east from Marw.
- 1095 New wall built around east Baghdad.
- 1095 Council of Clermont, where Pope Urban II calls for a Crusade to Jerusalem
- 1097 The Anatolian Seljuks are defeated by the Crusaders under Godfrey de Bouillon.
- 1099 The First Crusade captures Jerusalem.
- 1118–1135 **al-Mustarshid.**
- 1118 The Seljuk empire breaks up into principalities.

## Chronology

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- 1125 Start of Guelf–Ghibelline conflict.  
 1128–1256 The Khawarzm shah ‘Ala al-Din Atsiz rules autonomously from the Seljuks in Gurganj (starting in 1141).  
 1135–1136 **al-Rashid.**  
 1136–1160 **al-Muqtafi.**  
 1137 Start of the Qara Khitay Khanate.  
 1137–1175 The Atabeg of the Seljuk sultans of Baghdad, Shams al-Din Eldiguz, establishes an independent state in Azerbaijan (until 1225).  
 1141 The Qara Khitay defeat the Seljuks at Samarqand.  
 1142 Peter the Venerable commissions the first Latin translation of the Qur’an.  
 1156–1192 Qilij Arslan II edges out the Danishmends from central Anatolia.  
 ca.1156 Yoruba states flourish in West Africa.  
 1157 Baghdad is besieged by the Seljuk sultan Muhammad.  
 1161 The Ghurids capture Ghazna, restricting the Ghaznavids to the Punjab and Lahore (till 1186).  
 1146 The Almohads take control of al-Andalus.  
 King Roger II of Sicily mints the first European coins that use the Arabic numeral system, and invites Idrisi (d. 1163) to create a map of the world in 1138, which is completed in 1154.  
 1171 The Almohads build the Mosque of Seville with its La Giralda Minaret (converted to a church in 1248).  
 1175 Gerard of Cremona completes a translation from the Arabic of Ptolemy’s *Almagest* (and Ibn Sina’s *Canon* in 1180).  
 1160–1170 **al-Mustanjid.**  
 1169 Benjamin of Tudela visits Baghdad.  
 1169 Qilij Arslan II takes Ankara.  
 1170–1180 **al-Mustadi’.**  
 1171 al-Mustadi’ grants Saladin the sultanate of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria; the Friday *khutba* in Egypt made in the name of the Abbasid caliph.  
 1175 The Ghurid Muhammad b. Sam invades India.  
 1176 The Seljuks of Rum defeat the Byzantines led by Manuel I Comnenos at the battle of Myriocephalon, near Konya.  
 1180–1225 **al-Nasir.**

- 1185 The Andalusian Ibn Jubayr visits Baghdad.  
 1187 Saladin defeats the Crusaders at Hittin and conquers Jerusalem.  
 1221 The walls of Baghdad are restored and the Talisman Gate is built.  
 1186 The Ghurids end Ghaznavid rule in the Punjab and eastern Afghanistan. The expansion led by Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad in Ghur (1163–1203) conquers Khurasan, and his brother Mu‘izz al-Din Muhammad in Ghazna (1173–1206) conquers northern India.  
 1192 The Ghurids conquer Delhi.  
 1194 The Khwarazm shah Tekish defeats the last of the Seljuks in Persia.  
 1200–1220 Reign of the Khwarazm shah ‘Ala al-Din Muhammad, famous for provoking Genghis Khan to invade Transoxiana in 1219.  
 1206 Genghis Khan recognized as Great Khan over the Mongolian peoples; rules till 1227.  
 1208 The Khwarazm shahs seize the Ghurid capital, Herat, and end Ghurid rule in 1215.  
 1194–1260 Building of Chartres Cathedral begins.  
 1204 The Fourth Crusade captures Constantinople; held by the Latins and backed by the Venetians till 1260.  
 1209 Francis of Assisi founds the Franciscan order.  
 1215 The Magna Carta drafted.  
 1215 The Mongols capture Beijing.  
 1219 Genghis Khan begins his invasion of Transoxiana.  
 1219–1237 The reign of ‘Ala al-Din Kayqubad I; Konya flourishes as capital of Rum Seljuks.  
 1221 al-Nasir orders the construction in east Baghdad of Bab al-Wastani, whose Talisman Gate was blown up in 1918.  
 1225–1226 **al-Zahir**.  
 1227 Death of Genghis Khan, and the partition of his empire: Batu (r. 1227–1255) of the Golden Horde ruling in southern Russia and Khwarazmia; Ogedei (r. 1227–1241) ruling in northern China; Chagatai (r. 1229–1241) ruling in Transoxiana; and Tolui in Mongolia.  
 1228–1574 The Hafsidis succeed the Almohads in Tunisia and eastern Algeria.

*Chronology*

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- 1229 Ogedei is recognized as Great Khan over the whole Mongol empire.
- 1229–1244 Jerusalem given by al-Kamil of Egypt to Frederick II.
- 1226–1242 **al-Mustansir.**
- 1220–1231 The last of the Khwarazm shahs, Jalal al-Din, resists the Mongols.
- 1231 The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athir concludes with events in that year.
- 1232 Muhammad I b. Yusuf b. al-Ahmar establishes the Nasrid kingdom of Granada.
- 1232 Construction of the Harba bridge on the Tigris, south of Samarra.
- 1233 The founding of al-Madrassa al-Mustansiriyya in Baghdad.
- 1235 Rise of the Mali empire.
- 1236 The Muslim city of Cordoba falls to Christian Castile.
- 1238 Batu of the Golden Horde Mongols destroys Moscow.
- 1241 The Golden Horde expands into Poland and Hungary.
- 1242–1258 **al-Musta‘sim.**
- 1243 The Mongols defeat the Anatolian Seljuks (of Rum) at the battle of Kosedag near Sivas.
- 1248 The Seventh Crusade led by Louis IX invades Egypt.
- 1248 Seville is captured by the forces of Castile.
- 1253 The beginning of the Mongol invasion led by Hulegu.
- 1257–1266 The reign of Berke, first Muslim Khan of the Golden Horde.
- 1258 The Mongol sack of Baghdad.
- 1258 Qubilai Khan invades south China and Korea.
- 1260 Qubilai elected Great Khan.
- 1260 The Mamluks defeat the Mongols at the battle of Ayn Jalut, and again in 1277 at the battle of Elbistan.
- 1924 Atatürk abolishes the Ottoman caliphate.