

## L E S S O N 2

# The Golden Age

**T**his island between the Tigris in the east and the Euphrates in the west is a marketplace for the world. All the ships that come up the Tigris will go up and anchor here; wares brought on ships . . . will be . . . unloaded here. It will be the highway for the people. . . .

*Praise be to God who preserved it for me and caused all those who came before me to neglect it. . . .*

*It will surely be the most flourishing city in the world.*

Abu Jafar al Mansur, 752

With these words the second Abbasid caliph described his reasons for choosing Baghdad as the new capital of the Islamic Empire. He had made a very wise choice for his capital city.

Baghdad, in Mesopotamia, was ideally located to become a world

marketplace. It was situated along ancient trade routes serving both the East and the West. Soon Baghdad, somewhat like an island between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, grew into a huge city that was the center of trade, learning, and government.

## THINKING

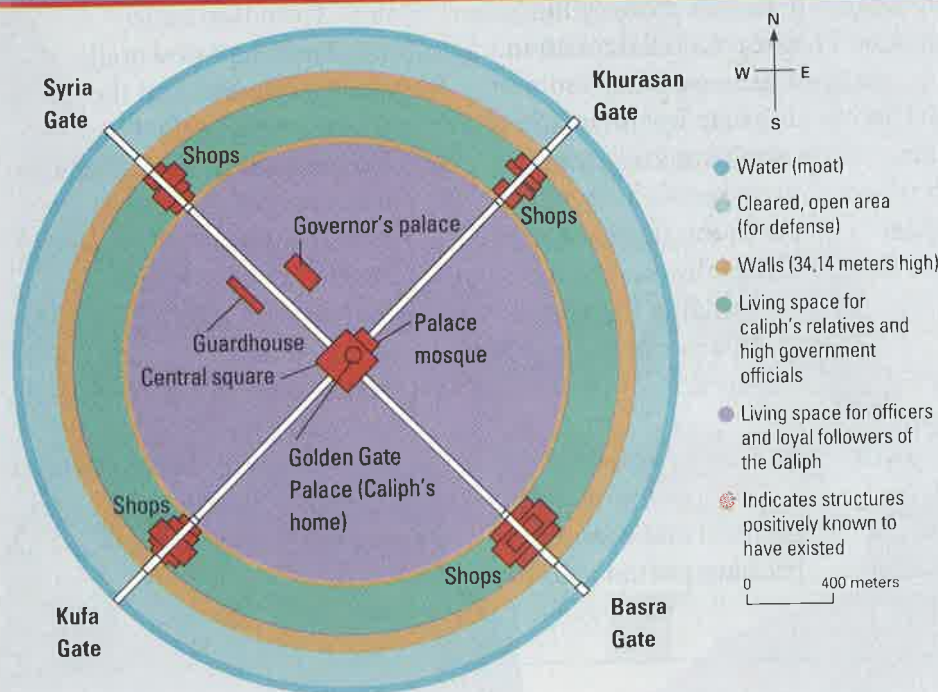
## FOCUS

*How did the same wealth that brought the Abbasids power lead to their downfall?*

## Key Terms

- calligraphy
- faction

### Baghdad: A City in the Round



◀ *Baghdad was a planned city famous for its beauty and luxury. The caliph's palace was at the center of the city, which was surrounded by three circular walls. Each wall held four gates through which passed roads leading to the four corners of the empire.*

## Islam Under Abbasid Rule

The Abbasids forcibly took over the territories that had been conquered originally during the time of the old Umayyad Empire. This new Abbasid Empire lasted from 750 to 1258.

One of caliph Abu Jafar al Mansur's first actions was to move the capital of the Islamic Empire from Damascus in Syria to Baghdad in Mesopotamia, where the Abbasid family had much support. Mesopotamia was also the richest province in the empire in tax revenues and in agricultural production. It was an ideal location for a capital city.

Once the Abbasids had achieved power, they were able to hold on to it because of their strong standing army. These military forces were always available to the caliph. Abu Jafar al Mansur also used the postal communication system that the Umayyads had developed. However, Abu Jafar al Mansur used it as a spy network that would relay information about any dissent in the empire back to the caliph's palace.

The Islamic Empire began to absorb the traditions of the many different cultures that were a part of the empire. As the power center

### UNDERSTANDING EMPIRE

**W**hen Muslim soldiers marched out of Arabia to make conquests in the name of Islam, they were creating an empire. An empire is a group of countries or territories ruled by the strongest one of them.

Not all the subjects, or the people, of an empire have the same language, religion, or physical appearance. But they do have the same ruler.

#### The Life of an Empire

The life of an empire follows a pattern of growth, height, and decline. The beginning period is one of expansion. Soldiers of the

empire conquer the people of other countries.

Appointed governors represent the country building an empire. The governors replace the local and national rulers of the countries that are forced to join the empire.

During the height of an empire, culture and the economy usually flourish. As in the Islamic Empire, the civilization of the country building the empire often absorbs some other cultures.

#### An Empire in Decline

As an empire declines, political and economic problems often lead to its



weakness and downfall. Such a fate awaited the Roman Empire in 476. Countries that have long been part of the empire may rebel against the powers that control them. War may disrupt the empire when country after country breaks free of the imperial control of the nation that once conquered them. This was the fate suffered by the Islamic Empire when it eventually declined.

of the empire moved farther east, it was no longer possible for the Arabs to dominate completely the government, the cultural life, or the economy.

The new culture that developed was Islamic, and it was open

to ideas from countries other than Arabia. However, the culture remained in large part Arabic, for the Arabic language continued to be the vehicle of government, education, poetry, and, of course, religion. ■

■ *How did the Abbasids get and keep control of their empire?*

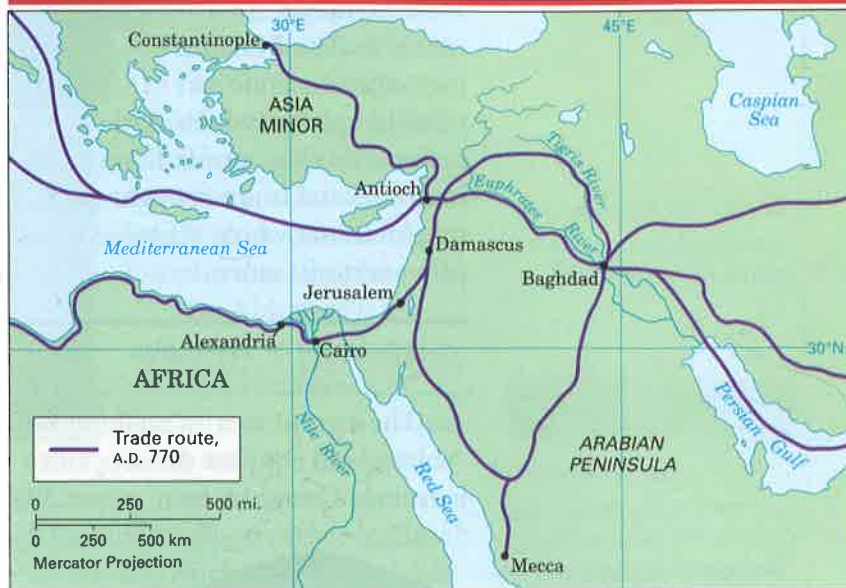
## The New Capital of Baghdad

At the heart of this Islamic Arabic culture was a strong economy. The economy was based on taxes and the riches that could be found in the capital city of Baghdad.

The empire was rich in the gold, silver, copper, and iron used in trade. Pearls from the Persian Gulf and precious gems from other Islamic lands were in great demand in the Baghdad market.

The Abbasids preserved and improved the ancient network of wells, underground canals, and waterwheels. They drained swamps and irrigated dry areas. Food production improved under the Abbasids. Dates, rice, and other grains flourished in the rich soil between the Tigris and the Euphrates. In addition, the Abbasids introduced

Baghdad: An Ideal Location



new breeds of livestock and hastened the spread of cotton.

Traders from Scandinavia to Africa came to Baghdad for the products of its industries as well. Leather goods, textiles, paper, metalwork, and perfumes were produced and sold in the city.

▲ *Between which two rivers did Baghdad develop?*

◀ *Silks, pearls, silver and gold powder, copper ore, papyrus, perfume, and leather all were sold in Baghdad's bazaars.*



► This ivory chess piece was presented to Charlemagne, king of the Franks from 768 to 814, by Harun al Rashid, fifth caliph of the Abbasid Empire.

■ Why did Baghdad become such an important center of world trade?

► Plaster moldings laced with an intricate leaf design cover the walls and ceilings of this Islamic palace.

To handle this great volume of business, the Muslims developed something very similar to a banking system throughout their empire. There were no bank buildings yet, but business people engaged in giving loans on credit.

Islamic rule unified most of the eastern world. Boundaries were no longer an obstacle. The Muslims introduced a uniform coinage system, which made commerce even easier. Soon brisk international trade brought great wealth to the whole Abbasid Empire and to its rulers.



The caliphs and the upper classes grew rich, and they enjoyed spending their money on lavish homes, fine clothing, and elaborate amusements.

Horse racing and polo playing were popular activities. People with leisure time could engage in the sport of falconry—training falcons to hunt other birds which the trainer might eat. Wealthy families invited each other

to elegant banquets with entertainment by dancers and poets. Many passed their leisure time playing chess and backgammon or gambling by throwing dice. ■

## Abbasid Culture

Their great wealth enabled the Abbasids to support the arts and learning. The years from about 800

to around 1000 were a period of high achievement in the areas of art and literature.

### Art and Design

The unique style of Islamic art is unmistakable, because it so often uses Arabic script as its inspiration. Arabic lettering had a special significance for Muslims, because it was used to write down God's words as they had been given to Muhammad. **Calligraphy**, which means beautiful handwriting, flourished under the Abbasids. When used as decoration, the letters were often so fancy that they were almost unreadable. Examples on this and the next page show some of these designs.

Calligraphy and geometric designs, rather than the human form, were common decorations in mosques. The reason Muslims did this was because they were concerned that human images





◀ In this painting of a coeducational classroom of the time, overseen by a bearded master, some students are reading and writing. The border of the painting is decorated with calligraphy and geometric designs.

would distract worshipers from praying to Allah. Some Muslims feared that if they drew images of humans or animals, they would be accused of playing God by trying to create a living thing.

Muslim artists often turned to decorative designs made up of plant patterns. The most common of these floral designs was the arabesque, a winding stem, leaves, and flowers, that formed a spiraling design.

### Bookmaking and Literature

In 751, during a raid into central Asia, Abbasids captured some Chinese artisans skilled in paper

making. These Chinese prisoners taught their captors the secrets of paper making. In time the skill of paper making spread throughout the Islamic world, making books more available.

The availability of books contributed to the general interest in all types of learning. Caliph al Ma'mun, who ruled from 813 to 833, founded a school in Baghdad called the House of Wisdom. In the school, scholars translated Greek classics in philosophy into Arabic.

The Abbasids later shared these translations with the Umayyads in Spain, who in turn shared them with the Christians in Europe. The Abbasid scholars of Baghdad helped preserve Greek classics that might otherwise have been lost or destroyed.

The Abbasids also became famous for their sensitive poetry:

**Y**ou departed  
from my sight  
and entered my thoughts,  
travelled from my eyes  
to my heart.

Al Abbas Ibn al Ahnaf,  
c. 800

Many poets and writers from far-away flocked to Baghdad, where the caliph welcomed them to his court. ■

### Across Time & Space

The craft of paper making was developed in China around 150 B.C. Paper was made by soaking flattened plant fibers and then allowing them to dry on a screen. The first paper making factory in the Islamic Empire was built in Baghdad in A.D. 792.

■ What achievements in culture led to this period being known as the Golden Age?

## Abbasid Achievements in Learning

The interest in reading also extended to learning about science, mathematics, and medicine. The

excellent reputation of Islamic scholars spread across the Islamic Empire into Europe.

▼ A window (below) at Princeton University honors Abbasid doctor ar-Razi. Muslims also honored the Greek Aristotle, painted as a Muslim (bottom), for his study of plants, such as coriander, shown at top.



## Science and Mathematics

Islamic scholars of the Abbasid period were interested in further developing the findings of the ancient Greeks in science, mathematics, and medicine. For example, Islamic astronomers mapped the solar system. Long before Columbus's time, they, like the Greeks, believed the earth was round.

Modern algebra is based on explorations in mathematics in the early 800s by one of the most famous Abbasid mathematicians, al Khwarizmi (*al KWAH rihz mee*). Today, we call this type of mathematics *algebra* after the title of one of al Khwarizmi's books, *al jabr*, meaning "the addition of one thing to another."

## Medicine

Muslim doctors, who lived during the Abbasid reign, became skilled at diagnosis and treatment of disease. One doctor, ar-Razi, a Persian-born physician of the 900s, wrote the first accurate description of the diseases that we know today as measles and smallpox. Other doctors performed surgery on patients in clean hospitals that were free to the public. At this time, Muslims were also experimenting with the treatment of disease

through herbal medicines. Plants, such as coriander, were used for their medicinal powers. One of the leading Abbasid figures of medicine was Ibn Sina, known in Europe as Avicenna (*av ih SEHN uh*). In his autobiography Avicenna wrote:

**M**edicine is not one of the difficult sciences, and therefore I excelled in it in a very short time, to the point that distinguished physicians began to read medicine with me. I cared for the sick, and there opened up to me indescribable possibilities of therapy which can only be acquired through experience. At the same time, I was also occupied with jurisprudence and would engage in legal disputations, being now sixteen years of age.

Ibn Sina, c. 1000

In addition to law and medicine, Avicenna had a number of other interests—philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. He also wrote a vast medical encyclopedia called *Canon of Medicine*. It summed up the medical knowledge of the time and accurately described diseases and treatments.



Interest in treating illness went back to the earliest days of Islamic history. It was the prophet Muham-

mad himself who stated that Allah had provided a cure for every illness. ■

## A Divided Empire

The years 800 to 1000 were a golden cultural period for the Abbasid Empire. The end of this period was also a financially difficult time for the government. Tax money was increasingly important to the caliphs because the Abbasids had lost control of several important trade routes. This hurt Baghdad's economy and led the caliphs to increase taxes to support their costly style of living.

### Factions and Revolt

During the same period, several **factions**, or opposing groups, began either to leave the empire for other lands or to take control of distant parts of the empire away from the Abbasids. For example, the Fatimids, who were descendants of the Prophet's daughter Fatima, were unhappy about the costly lifestyle of the Abbasids. The Fatimids felt this lifestyle was corrupt compared to the simple lifestyle of Muhammad.

The Fatimids broke away from the Abbasids by the 900s and then migrated into North Africa. By 969, they had conquered most of North Africa and claimed the city of Cairo as their capital.

### Seljuk Turks

As groups continued to break away from the weakened Abbasid Empire, it was open to invasion from outside forces. In 1055, Baghdad was conquered by nomadic Turks from Central Asia, who were descended from a warrior named Seljuk.

These Seljuk Turks captured the weak Abbasid caliph, plundered his palace, and took over the government. The Turks allowed the caliph and those who followed him to remain in Baghdad, but only as religious leaders of Islam. Once in control of the government, the Seljuk Turks took their responsibilities as rulers seriously. They began to govern the empire in the tradition of Islamic law.

The Abbasid-Seljuk Empire continued for 200 years but received its death blow when Baghdad fell to Mongol invaders from central Asia in 1258. Thus ended the Abbasid Empire, which had itself begun with the violent assassination of nearly 80 Umayyad leaders in 750. Only one Umayyad leader had survived, and that was Prince Abd al Rahman, who had escaped to Spain. ■

■ *How was Islamic Baghdad famous as a center of scientific, mathematical, and medical achievements?*

▼ *This delicate crystal vase, decorated with an arabesque floral design, is from the early Fatimid period in Egypt during the late 900s.*



■ *What led to the division of the Abbasid Empire?*

## R E V I E W

1. **FOCUS** How did the same wealth that brought the Abbasids power lead to their downfall?
2. **CONNECT** In what ways did the Abbasids further develop the Islamic culture?
3. **POLITICAL SYSTEMS** How were non-Arabs treated by the Abbasids?
4. **CRITICAL THINKING** How were the Islamic trade routes important in spreading new ideas and knowledge?
5. **ACTIVITY** Write your first name in the center of a sheet of paper. Then work the letters into a design in the way that Moslems make Arabic letters become part of an intricate design.