The Abbasid Empire: The Golden Age of Islam

By the 13th century, Islam had spread across India and Southeast Asia. The reasons for the success of Islam, and the expansion of its empire, can be attributed to the strength of the Arab armies, the use of a common language, and fair treatment of conquered peoples. Islamic civilization experienced a golden age under the Abbasid Dynasty. Under the Abbasids, Islamic culture became a blending of Arab, Persian, Egyptian, Indian and European traditions. The result was an era of stunning intellectual and cultural achievements.

Baghdad was chosen by the Abbasid rulers to be the center of the empire in the eighth century. Baghdad was an ideal choice because it was between two rivers and was at the crossroads of great trade routes. At the very hub of the city was the Caliph’s palace of marble and stone.

Caliph al-Mansur’s new city of Baghdad was built with one enterprising goal in mind: to stand unrivaled, the greatest city of the medieval world. The city grew rapidly after its inception: its military strength, economic power, booming trade, cultural and intellectual dominance and dizzying wealth establishing it as the center of an empire stretching from across the East and into North Africa. The wealth helped to stimulate many of their cultural and intellectual achievements.

Directions: Answer the questions below based on the reading.

1. What cultures helped to create Islamic culture? What did this result in?

2. Why was Baghdad chosen as the capital for the Abbasid Empire?

3. Describe the city of Baghdad and how it played a role in helping the Abbasids achieve a golden age.
Gallery Walk: Analyzing the Abbasid Golden Age

**Art, Architecture, and Literature**

1. What do the design and decoration of Muslim mosques tell us about the Muslim relationship between Allah and humans?

2. Describe the historical and geographic influences on Islamic architecture.

3. Make a connection between Islamic literature and today.

**Math and Science**

4. Describe Islamic advancements in mathematics and science.

5. Make at least three connections between Islamic advancements in medicine to medicine today.

**Indian Influences on Islamic Achievements**

6. What surprised you?

7. Hypothesize why some Indian achievements are often mistaken as Arab achievements.
Indian Influences on Islamic Achievements Continued...
8. Describe how Indian influences helped contribute to Islam’s Golden Age under the Abbasid Empire.

Abbasid House of Wisdom

10. Why was the Abbasid House of Wisdom significant (important)?

Trade in the Abbasid
11. Describe trade in the Abbasid Empire.

12. How did religion play a role in trade?

13. What ships were used to help trade?
Indian Influences on Islamic Civilization

Islamic civilization was enriched by the skills and discoveries of Indian learning, which rivaled the Greeks as the most advanced of the ancient world. Hindu mathematicians and astronomers traveled to Baghdad after the Abbasids came to power. Their works on algebra and geometry were translated into Arabic, and their instruments for celestial observation were copied and improved by Arab astronomers.

Arab thinkers in all fields began to use the numerals that Hindu scholars created centuries earlier. Because these numbers were passed on to the Europeans through contacts with the Arabs in the early Middle Ages, they are called Arabic numerals today, but they originated in India. The links between the Islamic and Indian civilizations allowed for two scientific revolutions to take place: one in the Middle East and one in Europe centuries later.

In addition to science and mathematics, Indian treatises (written work) on subjects from medicine to music were translated and studied by Arab scholars. Indian physicians were brought to Baghdad to run hospitals. Indian doctors were able to cure Arab rulers and officials whom Greek physicians declared could not be cured. Indian works on government, chemistry, and palmistry (predicting one’s future based on interpreting one’s hand) were translated into Arabic. It is believed that some of the tales in Arabian Nights were based on ancient Indian stories. Indian instruments and melodies made their way into Arab performers and the Indian game of chess became a favorite of the Arab world.
Art, Architecture, and Literature

According to the teachings of the Qur'an, Islamic artists were forbidden from using human figures and animals in religious art. Therefore, they developed a style of geometric shapes and patterns that were used to decorate religious buildings called Mosques. These geometric patterns usually contained verses from the Qur'an written in a stylized form of decorative handwriting called calligraphy.

Islamic architects borrowed heavily from the Byzantine Empire which used domes and arches extensively throughout their cities. Many Muslim cities can be identified around the world by their domes and minarets of mosques. Minarets are tall slender towers found on mosques. An example of these uses can be seen in the Dome of the Rock, a famous mosque in Jerusalem.

There were many different styles of Islamic literature. Most works were based on the Qur'an, but some Islamic artists wrote poetry about the joys and sorrows of love. Also, stories from other cultures were adapted and rewritten for Islamic civilization. The most famous collection is called The Thousand and One Nights, which is a collection of tales that includes such well known stories as Aladdin and His Magic Lamp. As a result, books became more available and contributed to all styles of learning.
Math and Science

Islamic scholars studied both Greek and Indian mathematics before making important contributions of their own. The most well-known Islamic mathematician was al-Khwarizimi, who pioneered the study of algebra. His textbook on the subject became a standard in European universities for centuries. Islamic scholars were also skilled in astronomy. They studied eclipses, the rotation of the planets, and calculated the circumference of the earth to within a few thousand feet.

Many advances were also made in the field of medicine. Physicians and pharmacists were required to pass exams before treating patients. They setup hospitals that had separate areas for trauma cases, this is the basis for today’s emergency rooms. Physicians developed treatments for cataracts, used a variety of herbal remedies, and were adept at treating a variety of injuries. Islamic pharmacists were the first to mix sweet tasting syrups with medicine, ensuring that they would be taken. Ibn Sina, a famous Islamic physician, wrote a book called Canon on Medicine, which was an encyclopedia of Greek, Arabic, and his own knowledge of medicine. This book became the standard medical text in Europe for over five hundred years.

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Abbasid House of Wisdom

Known as Bayt al-Hikma in Arabic, the House of Wisdom was founded in 8th century Baghdad by Caliph Harun al-Rashid of the Abbasid dynasty. Different intellectual traditions became united under Muslim rule, including Greek learning from Europe and Alexandria, as well as that of the Persians, Indians and Sumerians in the east. It was a center of learning in the medieval world. Built primarily as a library, the House became the home of ancient and modern wisdom during the Islamic Golden Age, preserving important works of scholarship from across Europe and the Middle East.

The House of Wisdom came into being as a library, translation institute and academy of scholars from across the empire. Beginning as a project to protect knowledge, including philosophy, astronomy, science, mathematics and literature, it quickly became, and is still considered today, a symbol of the merging and expansion of intellectual traditions from across different cultures and nations. The library grew to become the flower of the Islamic Golden Age, a period between the 7th and 13th centuries of great intellectual growth and discovery in the Islamic world.

The House of Wisdom’s main project was collecting and translating numerous works from the Greek literary canon, which established an enormous influence on Arab thought. Works including those by Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Hippocrates and Euclid were requested from libraries in the West, such as the library at Constantinople, and brought back to Baghdad to translate.
Trade in the Abbasid

Under the Abbasids, a vast trading network was created which helped to spread religion, culture, and technology among the different peoples of the empire. New business practices such as, partnerships, the use of credit, and banks to exchange currency were developed to handle the increase in trade. The establishment of such vast trading networks made the many nations within the Islamic Empire very wealthy, and helped to stimulate many of their cultural and intellectual achievements.

The Abbasids had trading domains in Western Europe through Asia with the Tang and Song dynasties. Many goods were traded on Arab dhows, or ships. Arab merchants and Indian traders used these ships to navigate the coasts of Africa and the Middle East. Their hulls were stitched together and their sails were a triangular (lateen) shape. Muslim merchants worked closely with Jewish and Christian merchants to conduct trade seven days a week. Merchants had access to the Trans-Saharan Trade Network, the Silk Road, the Indian Ocean Trade Network, and Mediterranean trade routes.