

CHAPTER 7

Abbasid Decline and the Spread of Islamic Civilization to South and Southeast Asia

CHAPTER SUMMARY

By the mid-9th century, the Abbasids were losing control over their vast Muslim Empire. Distance hampered efforts to move armies and control local administrators. Most subjects retained local loyalties. Shi'a dissenters were particularly troublesome, while slave and peasant risings sapped empire strength. Mongol invasions in the 13th century ended the very weakened state. Despite the political decline, Islamic civilization reached new cultural heights, and Islam expanded widely in the Afro-Asian world through conquest and peaceful conversion.

The Islamic Heartlands in the Middle and Late Abbasid Era. The Abbasid Empire disintegrated between the 9th and 13th centuries. Peasant revolts and slavery increased. Despite the artistic and intellectual creativity of the age, the position of women eroded. Signs of decline were present during the reign of Caliph al-Mahdi (775-785). He failed to reconcile moderate Shi'a to Abbasid rule. Al-Mahdi abandoned the frugal ways of his predecessor and surrounded his court with luxury. He failed to establish a succession system resolving disputes among his many sons, leaving a lasting problem to future rulers.

Imperial Extravagance and Succession Disputes. One son, Harun al-Rashid, became one of the most famous Abbasid caliphs. The luxury and intrigues of his court were immortalized in *The Thousand and One Nights*. The young ruler became dependent on Persian advisors, a trend followed during later reigns as rulers became pawns in factional court struggles. Al-Rashid's death led to the first of many civil wars over the succession. The sons of the winner, al-Ma'mun, built personal retainer armies, some including Turkic nomads, to safeguard their futures. The armies became power centers, removing and selecting caliphs; their uncontrolled excesses developed into a general focus for societal unrest.

Imperial Breakdown and Agrarian Disorder. The continual civil violence drained the imperial treasury. Caliphs increased the strain by constructing costly new imperial centers. Peasants had imposing tax burdens, often collected by oppressive tax farmers, forced upon them. Agricultural villages were abandoned and irrigation works fell into disrepair. Bandits and vagabonds were everywhere; they participated in peasant rebellions often instigated by dissident religious groups.

The Declining Position of Women in the Family and Society. The freedom and influence during the first centuries of Islam severely declined. Male-dominated Abbasid society imagined that women possessed incurable lust, and therefore men needed to be segregated from all but the women of their family. The harem and the veil symbolized subjugation to men. The seclusion of elite women, wives, and concubines continued, and the practice of veiling spread to all. Abbasid wealth generated large demand for concubines and male slaves. Most came from non-Muslim neighboring lands. Poor women remained economically active, but the rich were kept at home. They married at puberty and spent their lives in domestic management and childbearing. At higher political levels, women intrigued for advancement of their sons' careers.

Nomadic Incursions and the Eclipse of Caliphal Power. By the mid-10th century, breakaway former provinces began to challenge Abbasid rule. The Buyids of Persia captured Baghdad in 945. The caliphs henceforth became powerless puppets controlled by sultans, the actual rulers. The Seljuk Turks defeated the Buyids in 1055 and ruled the remnants of the Abbasid Empire for two centuries. The Seljuks were staunch Sunni who purged the Shi'a. For a time, Seljuk military power restored the diminished caliphate. Egyptians and Byzantines were defeated, the latter success opening Anatolia, the nucleus of the later Ottoman Empire, to settlement by Turkic nomads.

The Impact of the Christian Crusades. West European Christian knights in 1096 invaded Muslim territory to capture the biblical Holy Land. They established small, rival kingdoms that were not a threat to the more powerful surrounding Muslim leaders. Most were recaptured near the close of the 12th century by Muslims reunited under Saladin. The last fell in 1291. The Crusades had an important effect on the Christian world through intensifying the existing European borrowing from the more sophisticated technology, architecture, medicine, mathematics, science, and general culture of Muslim civilization. Europeans recovered much Greek learning lost after the fall of Rome. Italian merchants remained in Islamic centers after the crusader defeat and were far more important carriers of Islamic advanced knowledge than the Christian warriors were. Muslim peoples were little interested in European civilization.

An Age of Learning and Artistic Refinements. The political and social turmoil of late Abbasid times did not prevent Muslim thinkers and craftsmen, in states from Spain to Persia, from producing one of the great ages of human creativity. Rapid urban growth and its associated prosperity persisted until late in the Abbasid era. Employment opportunities for skilled individuals remained abundant. Merchants amassed large fortunes through supplying urban needs and from long-distance trade to India, southeast Asia, China, north Africa, and Europe. Artists and artisans created mosques, palaces, tapestries, rugs, bronzes, and ceramics.

The Full Flowering of Persian Literature. Persian replaced Arabic as the primary written language of the Abbasid court. Arabic was the language of religion, law, and the natural sciences; Persian became the language of "high culture," used for literary expression, administration, and scholarship. The development of a beautiful calligraphy made literature a visual art form. Perhaps the greatest work was Firdawsi's epic poem, *Shah-Nama*, a history of Persia from creation to Islamic conquest. Other writers, such as the great poet Sa'di and Omar Khayyam in the *Rubaiyat*, blended mystical and commonplace themes in their work.

Achievements in the Sciences. Muslim society, for several centuries, surpassed all others in scientific and technological discoveries. In mathematics, thinkers made major corrections in the theories learned from the ancient Greeks. In chemistry, they created the objective experiment. Al-Razi classified all material substances into three categories: animal, vegetable, and mineral. Al-Biruni calculated the exact specific weight of 18 major minerals. Sophisticated, improved astronomical instruments, such as the astrolabe, were used for mapping the heavens. Much of the Muslim achievement had practical application. In medicine, improved hospitals and formal courses of studies accompanied important experimental work. Traders and craftsmen introduced machines and techniques originating in China for papermaking, silk weaving, and ceramic firing. Scholars made some of the world's best maps.

Religious Trends and the New Push for Expansion. The conflicting social and political trends showed in divergent patterns of religious development. Sufis developed vibrant mysticism, but ulama (religious scholars) became more conservative and suspicious of non-Muslim influences and scientific thought. They were suspicious of Greek rationalism and insisted that the Qur'an was the all-embracing source of knowledge. The great theologian al-Ghazali struggled to fuse Greek and Qur'anic traditions but often was opposed by orthodox scholars. The Sufis created the most innovative religious movement. They reacted against the arid teachings of the ulama and sought personal union with Allah through asceticism, meditation, songs, dancing, or drugs. Many Sufis gained reputations as healers and miracle workers; others made the movement a central factor in the continuing expansion of Islam.

New Waves of Nomadic Invasions and the End of the Caliphate. In the early 13th century, central Asian nomadic invaders, the Mongols, threatened Islamic lands. Chinggis Khan destroyed the Turkic-Persian kingdoms east of Baghdad. His grandson, Hulegu, continued the assault. The last Abbasid ruler was killed when Baghdad fell in 1258. The once-great Abbasid capital became an unimportant backwater in the Muslim world.

The Coming of Islam to South Asia. Muslim invasions from the 7th century added to the complexity of Indian civilization. Previous nomadic invaders usually had blended over time into India's sophisticated civilization. Muslims, possessors of an equally sophisticated but very different culture, were a new factor. The open, tolerant, and inclusive Hindu religion was based on a social system dominated by castes, whereas Islam was doctrinaire, monotheistic, evangelical, and egalitarian. In the earlier period of contact, conflict predominated, but as time passed, although tensions persisted, peaceful commercial and religious exchange occurred in a society where Muslim rulers governed Hindu subjects.

Political Divisions and the First Muslim Invasions. The Umayyad general Muhammad ibn Qasim conquered and annexed Sind, and, despite quarrels among succeeding Muslim dynasties, the occupation endured. Many Indians, treated as "people of the book," welcomed the new rulers because they offered religious tolerance and lighter taxes. Few Arabs resided in cities or garrison towns, and minimal conversion efforts did not change existing religious beliefs.

Indian Influences on Islamic Civilization. Although Islam's effect on India was minimal, Islamic civilization was enriched by Indian culture. Indian achievements in science, mathematics, medicine, music, and astronomy passed to the Arabs. Indian numerals were accepted, later to pass to Europe as "Arabic" numerals. Colonies of Arabs settled along India's coasts, adopted local customs, and provided staging points for later Islamic expansion to island and mainland southeast India.

From Booty to Empire: The Second Wave of Muslim Invasions. After the initial Muslim conquests, internal divisions weakened Muslim rule and allowed limited Hindu reconquest. In the 10th century, a Turkish dynasty gained power in Afghanistan. Its third ruler, Mahmud of Ghazni, began two centuries of incursions into northern India. In the 12th century, the Persian Muhammad of Ghur created an extensive state in the Indus valley and north-central India. Later campaigns extended it along the plains of the Ganges to Bengal. A lieutenant to Muhammad, Qutb-ud-din Aibak, later formed a new state, with its capital at Delhi on the Ganges plain. The succeeding dynasties, the sultans of Delhi, were military states; their authority was limited by factional strife and dependence on Hindu subordinates. They ruled much of north-central India for the next 300 years.

Patterns of Conversion. Although Muslims came as conquerors, early interaction with Indians was dominated by peaceful exchanges. The main carriers of Islam were traders and Sufi mystics, the latter drawing followers because of similarities to Indian holy men. Their mosques and schools became centers of regional political power, providing protection to local populations. Low and outcast Hindus were welcomed. Buddhists were the most numerous converts. Buddhist spiritual decline had debased its practices and turned interest to the vigorous new religion of Islam. Others converted to escape taxes or through intermarriage. Muslim migrants fleeing 13th- and 14th-century Mongol incursions also increased the Islamic community.

Patterns of Accommodation. In most regions, Islam initially had little effect on the general Hindu community. High-caste Hindus did not accept the invaders as their equals. Although serving as administrators or soldiers, they remained socially aloof, living in separate quarters and not intermarrying. Hindus thought the Muslims, as earlier invaders, would be absorbed by Hindu society. Muslim communities did adopt many Indian ways; they accepted Hindu social hierarchies, foods, and attitudes toward women.

Islamic Challenge and Hindu Revival. Muslims, despite Indian influences, held to the tenets of Islam. The Hindu response, open to all individuals and castes, led to an increased emphasis on devotional cults of gods and goddesses. The cults, open to men, women, and all castes, stressed the importance of strong emotional bonds to the gods. Mira Bai, a low-caste woman, and Kabir, a Muslim weaver, composed songs and poems in regional languages accessible to common people. Reaching a state of ecstatic unity brought removal of all past sins and rendered caste distinctions meaningless. Shiva, Vishnu, and the goddess Kali were the most worshiped. The movement helped, especially among low-caste groups, to stem conversion to Islam.

Stand-Off: The Muslim Presence in India at the End of the Sultanate Period. Similarities in style and message between Sufis and bhaktic devotees led to attempts to bridge the gaps between Islam and Hinduism. The orthodox of each faith repudiated such thought. Brahmins denounced Muslims as temple destroyers and worked for reconversion to Hinduism. Muslim ulama stressed the incompatibility of Islam's principles with Hindu beliefs. By the close of the sultanate period, there were two distinct religious communities. The great majority of the population remained Hindu. They were convinced of the superiority of Indian religion and civilization and of its capability to absorb the Muslim invaders. South Asia remained the least converted and integrated of all areas receiving the message of Islam.

The Spread of Islam to Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia had been a middle ground where the Chinese part of the Eurasian trading complex met the Indian Ocean zone. By the 7th and 8th centuries, southeast Asian sailors and ships were active in the trade. When Muslims, from the 8th century, gained control of Indian commerce, Islamic culture reached southeast Asia. The 13th-century collapse of the trading empire of Shrivijaya, ruled by devout Buddhists and located on the Strait of Malacca and northern Sumatra, made possible large-scale, peaceful Muslim entry.

Trading Contacts and Conversion. Peaceful contacts and voluntary conversion were more important to the spread of Islam than were conquest and force. Trading contacts prepared the way for conversion, with the process carried forward by Sufis. The first conversions occurred

in small northern Sumatran ports. On the mainland, the key to the spread of Islam was the city of Malacca, the smaller successor to Shrivijaya. From Malacca, Islam went to Malaya, Sumatra, and the state of Demak on Java's north coast. Islam spread into Java and moved on to the Celebes and Mindanao in the Philippines. Coastal cities were the most receptive to Islam. Their conversion linked them to a Muslim system connected to the principal Indian Ocean ports. Buddhist dynasties were present in many regions, but since Buddhist conversions were limited to the elite, the mass of the population was open to the message of the Sufis. The island of Bali and mainland southeast Asia, where Buddhism had gained popular support, remained impervious to Islam.

In Depth: Conversion and Accommodation in the Spread of World Religions. Great civilizations and world religions have been closely associated throughout world history. World religions, belief structures that flourish in many differing cultures, have to possess a spiritual core rich enough to appeal to potential converts. They have to possess core beliefs that allow adherents to maintain a sense of common identity but also must be flexible enough to allow retention of important aspects of local culture. The capacity for accommodation allowed Islam, and later Christianity, to spread successfully into many differing communities.

Sufi Mystics and the Nature of Southeast Asian Islam. The mystical quality of Islam in southeast Asia was due to Sufi strivings. They often were tolerant of the indigenous peoples' Buddhist and Hindu beliefs. Converts retained pre-Islamic practices, especially for regulating social interaction. Islamic law ruled legal transactions. Women held a stronger familial and societal position than they had in the Middle East or India. They dominated local markets, while in some regions matrilineal descent persisted. Many pre-Muslim beliefs were incorporated into Islamic ceremonies.

Global Connections: Islam—A Bridge Between Worlds. Despite the political instability of the Abbasids, Islam's central position in global history was solidified. The expanding Muslim world linked ancient civilizations through conquest and commercial networks. Islam was the civilizer of nomadic peoples in Asia and Africa. Its cultural contributions diffused widely from great cities and universities. There were, however, tendencies that placed Muslims at a disadvantage in relation to rival civilizations, particularly their European rivals. Political divisions caused exploitable weaknesses in many regions. Most importantly, the increasing intellectual rigidity of the ulama caused Muslims to become less receptive to outside influences at a time when the European world was transforming.

KEY TERMS

al-Mahdi: Third Abbasid caliph (775-785); failed to reconcile Shi'a moderates to his dynasty and to resolve the succession problem.

Harun al-Rashid: Most famous of the Abbasid caliphs (786-809); renowned for sumptuous and costly living recounted in *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Buyids: Persian invaders of the 10th century; captured Baghdad and acted as sultans through Abbasid figureheads.

Seljuk Turks: Nomadic invaders from central Asia; staunch Sunni; ruled from the 11th century in the name of the Abbasids.

Crusades: Invasions of western Christians into Muslim lands, especially Palestine; captured Jerusalem and established Christian kingdoms enduring until 1291.

Saladin: 12th-century Muslim ruler; reconquered most of the crusader kingdoms.

Ibn Khaldun: Great Muslim historian; author of *The Muqaddimah*; sought to uncover persisting patterns in Muslim dynastic history.

Rubaiyat: Epic poem of Omar Khayyam; seeks to find meaning in life and a path to union with the divine.

Shah-Nama: Epic poem written by Firdawsi in the late 10th and early 11th centuries; recounts the history of Persia to the era of Islamic conquests.

Sa'di: A great poet of the Abbasid era.

al-Razi: Classified all matter as animal, vegetable, and mineral.

al-Biruni: 11th-century scientist; calculated the specific weight of major minerals.

Ulama: Islamic religious scholars; pressed for a more conservative and restrictive theology; opposed to non-Islamic thinking.

al-Ghazali: Brilliant Islamic theologian; attempted to fuse Greek and Qur'anic traditions.

Sufis: Islamic mystics; spread Islam to many Afro-Asian regions.

Mongols: Central Asian nomadic peoples; captured Baghdad in 1258 and killed the last Abbasid caliph.

Muhammad ibn Qasim: Arab general who conquered Sind and made it part of the Umayyad Empire.

Arabic numerals: Indian numerical notation brought by the Arabs to the West.

Harsha: 7th-century north Indian ruler; built a large state that declined after his death in 646.

Mahmud of Ghazni: Third ruler of a dynasty in Afghanistan; invaded northern India during the 11th century.

Muhammad of Ghur: Persian ruler of a small kingdom in Afghanistan; invaded and conquered much of northern India.

Qutb-ud-din Aibak: Lieutenant of Muhammad of Ghur; established a kingdom in India with the capital at Delhi.

Sati: Hindu ritual for burning widows with their deceased husbands.

Bhaktic cults: Hindu religious groups who stressed the importance of strong emotional bonds between devotees and the gods or goddesses—especially Shiva, Vishnu, and Kali.

Mira Bai: Low-caste woman poet and songwriter in bhaktic cults.

Kabir: 15th-century Muslim mystic who played down the differences between Hinduism and Islam.

Shrivijaya: Trading empire based on the Malacca Strait; its Buddhist government resisted Muslim missionaries; when it fell, southeastern Asia was opened to Islam.

Malacca: Flourishing trading city in Malaya; established a trading empire after the fall of Shrivijaya.

Demak: Most powerful of the trading states on the north Java coast; converted to Islam and served as a dissemination point to other regions.

Latten sails: Large triangular sails that are attached to the masts by long booms or yard arms which extend diagonally high across both the fore and aft portions of the ship.

Eunuchs: A castrated man in charge of a harem or high officer of a court of emperor.

Sultan: Word meaning “victorious”; came to designate Muslim rulers.

Holy Land: The region of present-day Israel; includes the city of Jerusalem, which is a holy city to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

Chinggis Khan: Born in 1170s in decades following death of Kabul Khan; elected khagan of all Mongol tribes in 1206; responsible for conquest of northern kingdoms of China, territories as far west as the Abbasid regions; died in 1227, prior to the conquest of most of the Islamic world.

Hulegu: (1217 – 1265) Ruler of the Ilkhan khanate; grandson of Chinggis Khan; responsible for capture and destruction of Baghdad in 1257.

Mamluks: Turkic slave-warriors who ruled Egypt and defeated the Mongols to prevent their entry into northern Africa.

Rajas: Term used for Hindu kings.

Sultans of Delhi: Title of the Islamic imperial houses of India, which literally means princes of the heartland.

Pan: Indian chew food which consists of limestone wrapped with betel leaves.

Sati: Hindu ritual in which widows were burned on the same funeral pyres of deceased husbands.