

Rise and Fall

The establishment and first collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate due to ethnic and cultural disparities among its subjects.

At its zenith (750-950 AD), the Abbasid Empire had grown from its initial Umayyad-era size and its influence encompassed lands as far into the east as present-day Bangladesh and into the west as far as present-day Morocco. The purpose of this paper is to show that the rise and fall of the Abbasid Caliphate are linked to its most defining aspect: its diversity of ethnicities and openness to non-Arabs. This became the most important facet of the Abbasid Caliphate as in that period, Islam had gained immense momentum and spread everywhere.

Rise

In the Umayyad Caliphate, non-Arab Muslims or “mawali” were left out of government and barred from entry to the army. Mawali were also restricted by a “wala’ “contract to the Arab society if they were to become Muslims¹. However, the concept of mawali and the contract were thrown out altogether once the Abbasids came to power and this was the major difference between Abbasids and Umayyads. This also created a surge in the number of soldiers serving the Caliph as non-Arabs joined the army from a multitude of different areas and gave the Abbasid Caliphate a good initial army. The new sense of equality among all Muslims under the Abbasid Empire meant that the soldiers could fight for something far greater than their tribal leaders: their religious nation. It also meant that non-Arabs Muslims can serve anywhere in the government and military institutions and allow the Caliphate to spread even further as societies away from the capital in Baghdad moved from the “Amsar” model to a more autonomous, merit-based system of society where nationality does not matter as much as religion did.

¹ <http://www.princeton.edu/~batke/itl/denise/mawali.htm>

The more important factor in the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate is its openness to people previously rejected by the Umayyad Caliphate. “Alienated members of the Umayyad-elite played a significant role in the triumph of the rebels in Iraq” and in the spring of 749 AD, the first Abbasid Caliphate was declared in Kufa.² The zeal brought on by the emphasis on equality is clearly visible in the Battle of the Great Zab, in which the Abbasid army defeated their Umayyad counterpart. Moreover, the fact that the Umayyad military was comprised mostly of uninterested Kharijites and Yamanis played a deciding role in the battle ; the Umayyad army disintegrated when the non-Arab tribal leaders believed there was a stock of wealth nearby and deserted, leaving the front-line in shambles to be defeated later by the Abbasids³. This single incident is the perfect example of how the Abbasids came into power as they relied heavily on non-Arab yet feverous Muslims and did not discriminate at the time. At the same time, the Abbasids had recently suppressed a Shiite insurrection, which goes to show that their diversity and acceptance only went as far as their benefitting from it went.

The rise of the Abbasids also greatly enriched Islamic literature as well as the natural sciences. Mathematics, astronomy and chemistry all advanced greatly during that period, mostly due to efforts by Muslim Persians in those respective fields. Exegesis of the many different aspects of the Qur’an also flourished at the beginning of Abbasid rule again due to the new ideas proposed by now-equal Muslims. Trade also prospered in this time as all Muslims in the area were subjects of the same ruler and there was little conflict of interest. The openness of the Abbasid community allowed for new ideas and new methods of production to overcome their Arab counterparts and would reshape the present industries into something more efficient and eventually produce more wealth. The autonomous states that were

² Kennedy, H. The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates. Pg115.

³ Sicker, M. The Islamic world in ascendancy: From the Arab conquests to the siege of Vienna. Page 27.

subjects of the Abbasids were also beneficial, as they allowed some societies to keep their way of life but pay tribute to a local leader. Those same societies would also diversify the types of resources and even the amount and type of troops that can be tapped by the Abbasid Caliphate. Through the diversity of ethnicity, the Abbasid Caliphate achieved technological as well as cultural superiority and continued to spread its influence until the end of its first age(or golden age).

Fall

Although the Abbasids did not discriminate with regards to political progression (the Caliphate was closer to Persia and it was more under the influence of Persians), there was a heavy emphasis on nationality and blood relations in times of civil war. This is visible in the case of the riots of 813 AD, when the Shiite contingent of the population showed their discontent when the half-Persian one of two brothers competing for the position of Caliph was defeated⁴. The Abbasid Caliphate was a group of countries within a country, in the sense that the varying ethnic groups are separate and even conflicting at times but still under some form of Abbasid rule. This variance in cultures would later give way for the Tahirids⁵, a break-away dynasty that ruled the regions providing Persian soldiers for the Abbasids, forcing the Abbasids to exacerbate the problem even more by adding Turkish soldiers. Due to the same openness in politics that gave strength to the Persians previously, the Turkish military leaders would start installing Caliphs that benefit their interests and the cycle of ethnically-fueled power struggles begins again.

⁴ Sicker, M. The Islamic world in ascendancy: From the Arab conquests to the siege of Vienna. Page 31

⁵ Sicker, M. The Islamic world in ascendancy: From the Arab conquests to the siege of Vienna. Page 35

The civil wars were not the only recurrent problems plaguing the Abbasids. A slave revolt including many thousands of African slaves, which were brought to work in agricultural lands, started in 869 AD and went on for as long as 15 years before an Abbasid response. This long response time is mainly due to an empty treasury⁶, which itself was caused by civil war. It is also noteworthy that the Abbasid armies are too busy dealing with insurgents, as author Nigel D. Furlonge states:

“With Kharijite tensions in the government, the rise of the Saffarids, Shiite enemies, and the emerging Qarmatiyyuns, the Abbasid state could not devote the resources necessary to deal with the Zanj revolt until ten years after the Zanj began their military and economic campaign.”

However, for the 15 years the revolt was in action, the Abbasids were denied control over the lands from the city of Basra and into much of the region of Ahwaz⁷. The sacking of Basra was itself a problem ; the Abbasids had not only lost a city and the strategic advantages it offers for controlling the area , but they also lost a center of commerce in a time where money is needed more than before. But the damage caused by this revolt did not stop at Basra as trade routes shifted to avoid the constant disruptions and the flow of wealth from the west to the east circumvented certain Abbasid regions, further exacerbating the financial troubles. The subsequent events resulted in a change in financial management but those changes were short-sighted and eventually caused problems for the Caliphate.

The several periods of financial struggles were mostly due to misappropriate management of government funds as well as the hostility of the area towards traders. Merchants passing through the Middle-East are put-off by the constant danger of rebellion but even in cases of safe passage, they will most likely pay to whoever is controlling the region and not necessarily the Abbasids. Corruption among local rulers meant that another source of income is lost and that the army must go to that region to

⁶ http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1157/is_4_62/ai_76402507

⁷ The Prophet and the age of the caliphates by Kennedy, pg 178-179.

restore order. Natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes also had the same impact on local agriculture in that they require some time to respond to, but did not impact the government's wealth as the lack of trade and corruption did. Break-away dynasties such as the Tahirids and the Suffarids started leeching taxes and customs money and funneling it away from the Abbasids and into Persian hands. This pattern was just repeating itself⁸ as fringe zones previously held by the Umayyads had had started to break away almost a century before the Muslim Persian dynasties.

All of the conflict stemming from cultural and political conflicts culminated in a massive financial deficit in the 10th century AD as Abbasid coffers were being constantly drained by the heavy employment of mercenaries and lavish salaries of officials. Although Persia had been reincorporated into the Abbasid Caliphate and brought in 18 million dinars a year, waste is evident in Abbasid spending as a single contingent of 9000 troops in Baghdad was paid 600000 dinars a year, monthly and in cash⁹. Moreover, the Abbasid solutions to financial problems were always temporary and never resolved the root of the problem. For example, the re-conquest of Persia or the dissolving of some wazirs' (grand overseer or minister) wealth in order to get money. The patterns of government spending had a lot to do with those who can manipulate the caliph¹⁰, them being the army or his advisors and with each advisor or commander having a different ethnicity (and thus a hidden agenda); everybody pursued their own objectives and not the Caliph's.

Prior to the Turkish surge in influence and military presence in the Abbasid Caliphate, the Abbasids followed a simple way of ruling: The Caliph at the time would rule the Islamic nation with the

⁸ <http://historymedren.about.com/library/text/bltxtiraq6.htm>

⁹ The Prophet and the age of the caliphates by Kennedy, pg 187-189

¹⁰ The Prophet and the age of the caliphates by Kennedy, pg 187-189

Quran and God as his guides and subsequently will always rule with religion and politics in mind. Whether or not the Caliphs actually followed this method or pursued their interests is not the issue, but that the Turks now had control over the army, as well as who can become Caliph.

“For the first time, the political power of the caliphate was fully separated from its religious function. The Mamluks continued to permit caliphs to come to power because of the importance of the office as a symbol for legitimizing claims to authority.”

The Turkish surge also caused Persian influence to dwindle and was partly the cause in the rise of the Persian dynasties. Moreover, the rift between Shiia and Sunni Muslims, which was already a problem due to the Abbasid’s suppression of the Shiia, continued to grow as Turks further used the Caliphate as a way of handling their own interests and not particularly the interests of Islam or either sect of it. This had the effect of weakening the overall effectiveness of the Caliph’s authority as more and more Muslims began to see that their interests and those of the Turks (and the subsequently the Caliph) were different.

The autonomous agent-regimes were also a cause for concern for the Abbasids as they simply had no way of controlling them once the agent rulers decided to become independent. This also means that other than the risk of mutiny, the Abbasids were constantly facing the risks of appointing (directly or indirectly) an ambitious or incompetent ruler (Abbasids only required tribute) which would come later into play in Africa. This is visible in the case of the eighth Aghlabid Emir Muhammad II which is described as “An aesthete fond of wine and hunting, he felt able to devote himself to extravagance and displays of pomp.”¹¹ Given that wine is prohibited and that extravagance and pomp are hated in Islam, it is not impossible to imagine a growing discontent with the rulers of the region. Discontent grew in that particular region as the last Aghlabid Emir killed off all other Aghlabids to ensure his position, but the

¹¹ <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Muhammad-II-of-Aghlabids>

people had by then lost all respect for an already hated regime and processes to replace it where in place. Africa's problematic prospects for the Abbasids did not end with the Aghlabids however, as the Abbasids made the same mistake that created the Tahirids by sending a young, ambitious Turkish freeborn¹² to rule Egypt on their behalf circa 865 AD. Although an Abbasid army would come to subdue the resulting dynasty 40 years later, the Tulunids had already caused the Abbasids enough problems through the insurrection alone. The Fatimids would later disrupt Abbasid rule as they conquer most of North and East Africa. The Abbasids were to suffer the consequences of this, as Fatimids seized valuable agricultural land¹³ and denied the Abbasids two crucial advantages that North Africa offers : 1) The African slave trade followed a path northward from central Africa and whoever controls those routes controls massive wealth. 2) The Abbasids lost an ally (The Aghlabids) in the region that was maintaining their influence in Africa and instead gained an enemy.

The openness of the Abbasid political and military systems allowed for great endeavors and cultural enrichment but more often than not has forced the Abbasid Caliphate to exist in a constant state of political and financial turmoil. The amount of variation between the subjects of the Abbasid Caliphate meant that the people cannot be united under the religion of Islam and a single Caliph ruler and so it broke up into many other countries precisely because of the different goals of the leaders of the different ethnic groups.

¹² <http://www.nmhschool.org/tthornton/mehistorydatabase/tulunids.php>

¹³ <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Aghlabid>

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