

Dynasties

Abbasid Dynasty (750 - 1258)

Write short notes on the main characters and activities of the main `Abbasid rulers:

The Abbasid Dynasties came just after the Umayyad Dynasties and lasted from 750 to 1258. There were achievements and twists during that period. The most Important Caliphs were Abu al-‘Abbas al-Saffah, Abu Ja‘far al Mansur, al-Mahdi, Harun al-Rashid, al-Ma‘mun and al-Mutawakkil.

The **first** most important one was Abu al-‘Abbas al-Saffah (750 – 754). He magnified the virtues and claims of the descendants of the Prophet (ﷺ) and Hazrat Abbas (رضي الله عنه). He denounced the usurpation (seizure of power and property by force) and crimes of the Umayyad and their Syrian followers and praised the Kufans for their fidelity to his family. He declared openly: "I am the Great Avenger, and my name is As-Saffah, the Shedder of Blood." His first care was to sweep from the face of the earth the entire Umayyad race. In Palestine, an amnesty was offered to the Umayyad family. They (90) were invited for a feast and were killed. The bodies of Umayyad caliphs (except Mu‘awiyah and Umar II) were unearthed, hung and burned (throughout Syria, Khurasan and Ethiopia). He used to stand looking at himself in a mirror and exclaimed, "I do not say, as Sulaiman, Behold the kingly youth; but I say, Lord give me long life, and health to enjoy it." As he spoke, a slave said to his fellow, "The term between us is two months and five days." He took it as an evil augury (prophecy); and so he sickened, and death (smallpox) overtook him as the term expired. Towers were constructed for protection of the pilgrims at convenient distances all the way from Al-Kufa to Mecca. He had small respect for human life. He intensified his cruelty and guilt by treachery in the face of solemn oaths, and also by ingratitude. He began his rule at Kufa. He had to face revolts from the partisans of Umayyad, Shi‘a and the Khawarij. He had two great men and soldiers with him – Abu Salama and Abu Muslim. They played a leading role to the downfall of the Umayyad. There was jealousy between them. Men of Abu Muslim killed Abu Salama.

The **second** caliph to be studied is Abu Ja‘far al Mansur (754 – 775). He was the brother of As Saffah and when he returned from pilgrimage, he assumed khilafat. He led the prayer and made his announcements of caliph. He assumed the name of Al-Mansur, the Victorious. Al Mansur feared the attitudes of his uncle Abdullah. Abu Muslim assured him that he would take charge of him. When the enemy and burden Abdullah was calmed down, al Mansur killed Abu Muslim. The reason he gave was – "It was a lesson to be laid to heart; the man began well, but ended ill, and now by pride and rebellion has forfeited his life." Abu Muslim was at the head of the army. He was powerful and a threat to al Mansur. There was complete loyalty of the army towards al Mansur. Peace restored in Persia and Ethiopia (Mesopotamia). Abdullah was imprisoned. There was the rise of the Rawandiyah – a Persian sect. Al Mansur already had 200 of their leaders imprisoned. They didn’t consider al Mansur as divine though he came personally talking to them. They were then extirpated (destroyed). There was rebellion at Khurasan and as such its leader’s hands, feet and head were cut off after cruelty. Al Mansur, to his enemies he was cruel but to his friends he was liberal. He invested in statecraft (control and diplomacy) and was very strict in maintaining accounts. He left the treasury to his successor. He maintained religious discipline in his court and didn’t allow repugnant practice outside Islam.

The **third** Caliph was al-Mahdi (775 – 785). He succeeded his father, al-Mansur. Al-Mahdi, whose name means "Rightly-guided" or "Redeemer," was proclaimed caliph when his father was on his deathbed. He was mild and generous in contrast to his father. He tried to win the hearts of people by kind and benevolent policies. He adopted a conciliatory attitude towards his opponents. He made a rapprochement with the Shi‘a Muslims in the Caliphate and Islamization of the administration. He tried in reaching out to Shi‘a and he appointed them to senior posts. The city attracted immigrants from all of Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Persia, and lands as far away as India and Spain. He also engaged in dialogue with the leader of the Nestorian Church (emphasizes the disunion between the human and divine natures of Jesus.), an early episode in Christian-Muslim relations. It was the period of prosperity, scholarly

excellence and religious freedom although there were persecutions. He expanded the Abbasid administration, creating new divans, or departments, for the army, the chancery (like an embassy / paper work) and taxation. Qazi or judges were appointed, and laws against non-Arabs put into place by the Umayyad were dropped. Shari'ah began to develop, neglected under the Umayyad as part of an Islamization process. The Abbasids had swept the Umayyad from power promising to restore Islam to the centre of the what, effectively, was an imperial royal polity. The Umayyad had privileged Arabs over non-Arabs. Al-Mahdi had two important religious policies: the persecution of the zanadiqa (atheists), and the declaration of orthodoxy. The zanadiqa ridiculed the Qur'an, but admired Muhammad as a human law-maker. The zanadiqa were almost certainly followers of Mani, or Manichaeans (one of the Iranian Gnostic religion). Al-Mahdi singled out the persecution of the zanadiqa in order to improve his standing among the Shi'i, whom he also presented with gifts and appointed to posts, including the Viziership (position of a minister or councillor) as well as releasing political prisoners. He was able to use the considerable financial legacy left by his father. Scholarship flourished, including the translation of Greek philosophical works into Arabic. Al-Mahdi "enlarged and beautified the Mosques of the Holy Cities, and of the capital towns elsewhere. Al-Mahdi also began the practice of withdrawing into isolation to emphasize the sanctity of the office of caliph. He therefore depended heavily on his Vizier. Ultimately, this led to a weakening of the temporal power of the caliphate, although it may have enhanced the caliph's spiritual status. Al-Mahdi continued the war with the Byzantine Empire throughout his reign, extending the caliphate as far as Ankara (capital of Turkey). It was a prosperous period marked by internal stability and peace although territorial expansion continued. Al-Mahdi dealt severely with what he saw as heresy (unorthodox and deviant). He tried to build bridges with Shi'a Muslims and was tolerant and even magnanimous in his dealings with the "people of the book".

The **fourth** caliph was Harun Ar-Rashid (786 – 809). He was the brother of Musa (surnamed as Hade) being the son of al Mahdi. His time was marked by scientific, cultural and religious prosperity. Art and music also flourished significantly during his reign. He established the library Bait al-Hikma ("House of Wisdom"). Islamic literature (the work of ibn Kathir, for example) has raised him to the level of an ideal figure, a great military and intellectual leader, even a paragon (model) for future rulers to emulate. His best-known portrayal in the West, in the stories of the Thousand and One Nights, has little basis in historical fact, but does show the mythic (fabulous) stature he has attained over time. He was strongly influenced by the will of his mother, Khaizuran in the governance of the empire. Baghdad flourished into the most splendid city of its period. Tribute was paid by many rulers to the caliph, and these funds were used on architecture, the arts and a luxurious life at court. Agriculture was flourishing to support the new Imperial centre. He tried to bring to heel the princes and chieftains of the region, and to re-impose the full authority of the central government on them. This new policy met with fierce resistance and provoked numerous uprisings in the region. He imposed heavy taxes on farmers, traders and artisans. He maintained slave-girls and concubines to entertain him. Al-Rashid virtually dismembered the empire by apportioning it between his two sons, al-Amin and al-Ma'mun. Very soon it became clear that by dividing the empire, Rashid had actually helped to set the opposing parties against one another, and had provided them with sufficient resources to become independent of each other. After the death of Harun al-Rashid civil war broke out in the empire between his two sons, al-Amin and al-Ma'mun. Harun made the pilgrimage to Mecca several times. Harun is widely considered the greatest of the Abbasid caliphs, presiding over the Arab Empire at its political and cultural peak. He died in Tus, Iran.

The **fifth** caliph is Al Ma'mun (813 – 833). On the death of Al Amin, al Ma'mun took over. There were many disturbances in Iraq during the first several years of al-Ma'mun's reign. Lawlessness in Baghdad led to the formation of neighbourhood watches. Most of Persia was sympathetic to the Hashimites. Al-Ma'mun's opponents in Baghdad gave allegiance to Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi (one of the Alids). Imam Ali Raza informed al-Ma'mun of happenings in Baghdad and sided with the Alids. When Ali Raza fell sick and died at Tus, Al-Ma'mun wept and mourned for him and tried to show himself innocent of the supposed crime. While Baghdad became peaceful, there were disturbances elsewhere. There was uprising in Qum sparked by complaints about taxes. After it was quashed (crushed), the tax assessment was set significantly higher. Egypt continued to be unquiet. Sind was rebellious. There was also struggle against the Byzantines. In 830, al-Ma'mun led a victorious force across the border. He

captured several fortresses, sparing the surrendering Byzantines. Al-Ma'mun's relations with the Byzantine Greeks were marked by his efforts in the translation of Greek philosophy and science. Al-Ma'mun gathered scholars of many religions at Baghdad, whom he treated magnificently and with tolerance. He sent an emissary to the Byzantine Empire to collect the most famous manuscripts there, and had them translated into Arabic. It is said that, had he been victorious over the Byzantine Emperor, Al-Ma'mun would have made a condition of peace be that the emperor hand over of a copy of the "Almagest" (influential scientific text written in Greek). He made efforts toward the centralization of power and the certainty of succession. The Bayt al-Hikma, or House of Wisdom, was developed during his reign. The ulama emerged as a real force in Islamic politics during al-Ma'mun's reign for opposing the Mihna (it is a move to impose his theoretical views upon people), which was initiated in 833, only four months before he died. People who were subject to the mihna were traditionalist scholars whose social influence and intellectual quality was uncommonly high. Al-Ma'mun introduced the mihna with the intention to centralize religious power in the caliphate institution and test the loyalty of his subjects. The mihna had to be undergone by elites, scholars, judges and other government officials, and in consisted of a series of questions relating to theology and faith. The central question was about the createdness of the Qur'an, if the interrogate stated he believed the Qur'an to be created he was free to leave and continue his profession. During his reign Alchemy greatly developed and the pioneers of the science were Jabir Ibn Hayyan and his student Yusuf Lukwa was patronized by Al-Ma'mun, although he was unsuccessful in his attempts regarding the transmutation (transformation) of gold, his methods greatly led to the patronization of Pharmaceuticals (medicines) compounds. Although the mihna persisted through the reigns of two more caliphs, al-Mutawakkil abandoned it in 848. The ulama and the major Islamic law schools became truly defined in the period of al-Ma'mun and Sunnism, as a religion of legalism, became defined in parallel. Doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam began to become more pronounced.

The sixth caliph is Al Mutawakkil (847 – 861). Upon the death of al Ma'mun, he appointed his brother Musta'sim, then the latter's son Wasiq then the latter's brother Jaafar known as Mutawakkil. The latter was not in good term with Wasiq. During Wasiq's reign, Mutawakkil was ill-treated. Mutawakkil on assuming caliphate reversed the policies of the regime and avenged himself. He restored fundamentalism (strict adherence to specific theological doctrines) and banned rationalism (use of reason as a source of knowledge). He stated that the Qur'an was not created. The rationalists were expelled from public offices and all discussions on science and philosophy were banned. All fundamentalist Imams like Imam Ahmad bin Hambal (رضي الله عنه) were set free and the Mu'tazilah were imprisoned and their properties confiscated. He was hostile to the Shi'a and continued anti-Shi'a policies. He destroyed Mausoleum of Imam Husain (رضي الله عنه) and banned pilgrimage of Najaf (according to the Shi'a Hazrat Ali (رضي الله عنه) said that this valley is part of paradise) and Karbala (martyrs of Karbala). He ordered the Jews and the Christians to wear distinctive dress. They were forbidden to ride on animals other than donkeys and mules. No new church and synagogue was built. There were revolts in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Hims. All of them were crushed. In Egypt the Sufi Dhun Nun proclaimed communication with God. The fundamentalist wanted punitive measures. But when he was questioned by al Mutawakkil, he found nothing wrong in his belief and let him free to return to Egypt. During his reign, a great part of his dominion suffered from earthquakes and other natural calamities. Special measures and prayers were made. Mutawakkil wanted his son Muntasir to succeed him but through the influence of his wife Qabiha he changed his idea and wanted Mu'taaz (the son of Qabiha) to be the successor. Muntasir refused and that created bitterness between them. Muntasir and his army conspired and killed the caliph. He was the first caliph to be killed by his own army.

What were the main traits of the Abbasid Dynasty?

There were many achievements during the time of the Abbasid dynasty.

Firstly, it was in the field of Agriculture & Economy. The Golden age of the Abbasids was between the 3rd and 4th / 9th and 10th centuries. During that time the Middle East and North Africa

witnessed a major shift from a largely agricultural economy to one driven by trade. There were imports and exports leading to economic development.

Moreover, there was emphasis on education. The seeking of formal knowledge was encouraged by the state. Many schools were established in Baghdad and the provinces. The art of book translation thrived and led to the preservation of many key Greek, Persian and Indian works which were translated into Arabic. Significant contributions were made in the fields of science, mathematics, medicine and philosophy.

Furthermore, there was development in medical field. The Abbasids supported and patronised medical research and medical practitioners. Great developments in medicine were achieved. There were many books on a variety of medical subjects which were written and translated. Medical experiments were conducted and documented and a number of medical instruments were designed to deal with a variety of procedures.

In addition, there was the development of town infrastructures. With an expanding population and an awareness of how valuable was good urban planning, the Abbasids built a number of towns and cities where special attention was given to communications and transport routes. Everything was available in these new towns and cities.

Fifthly, there were experts in the fabrication of Islamic ceramic. It was not until the Abbasid period that a distinct type and style of ceramic was emerged and that can be distinguished technically as 'Islamic'. They were mainly used for decorations of mosques, administrative blocks, palaces, libraries and museums.

More to the point, there was the manufacture of Lustre wares for shining and brilliance as part of decoration. During the early Abbasid period, the refined and luxury-loving ruler and imperial court got directly involved in sponsoring new innovations in the ceramics industry, especially in the development and manufacture of lustre wares. They were meant for inland and foreign business.

Last but not least, there were innovative architectural designs. As the Abbasid Empire expanded from Afghanistan to Algeria, regional ceramics industries were influenced by techniques, designs and motifs from other parts of the empire, adding to the variety of designs, decorations and styles available locally.

What were the reasons for the downfall of the Abbasid Dynasty?

There were many reasons why the Abbasid dynasty came to an end.

Firstly, most of the later caliphs of this dynasty led pompous and luxurious life and cared little for the state. They were concentrated in amassing wealth for their own use.

Secondly, instead of making any attempt to uplift the condition of the subjects and to improve the government, they devoted their valuable time to wine, women and music. They were engaged in illicit activities.

Moreover, the supremacy of the Turks in the later period was one of the causes of the fall of the empire. After the death of Mutawakkil the power of the Turks began to increase rapidly and the successors of Mutawakkil could not resist it.

Fourthly, the Arabs and the Persians became disgusted with their high handed policy. They were not loved and appreciated by the public.

Furthermore, the negligence of the military department under the later caliph greatly contributed to the downfall of the Abbasids. They were interested in obtaining money and booty of war from the dynasty and they were not loyal soldiers and commanders.

Added to the above, the relation between the province and the central government was not cordial. There was no cooperation and unity among the different parties of their administration. They were interested in money and not the public welfare.

Besides, many provinces declared their independence. That situation was due to the fact that they were disgusted with the promises made by the caliphs. But in fact when they were in power nothing was done for their provinces.

As well, the struggle between the Arabs and non-Arabs between the Muslims and non-Muslim was going on in full swing during this period. The caliphs were not able to contain that situation.

Ninthly, the Iranians who were favoured by the Abbasids despaired (saw no hope in) the Arabs and the Arabs despaired the Iranians and other. There was no cooperation between the allies.

Tenthly, the imposition of taxes for the interest of the ruling class discouraged farming and industry and the constant bloody striper (someone with ranks in the army) left many a piece of cultivated land desolate and hopeless.

Another reason was the flood in Mesopotamia made the people hopeless and homeless. Besides this famine and epidemic decimated the population in many provinces.

As such, to these causes of decay must be added the invasion of Halaqu, a grandson of Changez Khan (founder of Mongol empire from different tribes from Mongolia and china) who divested the city of Baghdad on such a scale that for three years the streets ran with blood and the water of the Tigris was dyed red for miles along the course. He killed the last caliph of this dynasty and massacred his family so much so that for the first time in its history the Muslim world was left without a caliph whose name could be cited in the Friday prayers.

Among others, the Khawarij who were always pestering the lives of the Muslims since the creation of the Islamic state were continuing their plots to destabilise the society.

Added to that the Shi'a party was constantly demanding their rights and as such they were dividing the Ummah and creating confusion and rebellions.

Above all, the people were disgusted with a society based on blood and iron policy of the Abbasids. There was no peace and harmony and as such no stability and security.