

**What led to the Abbasid Golden Age?**



Contextualize



Think Like a Geographer

The Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) is considered the Golden Age of Islam because it was a long period of stability in which centers of trade became wealthy centers of learning and innovation.

As a result of its location at a crossroads of trade between Europe, Asia, and North Africa, the Middle East and especially major trading and religious centers like Baghdad, Cairo, and Mecca, became prosperous cities that attracted merchants and scholars.

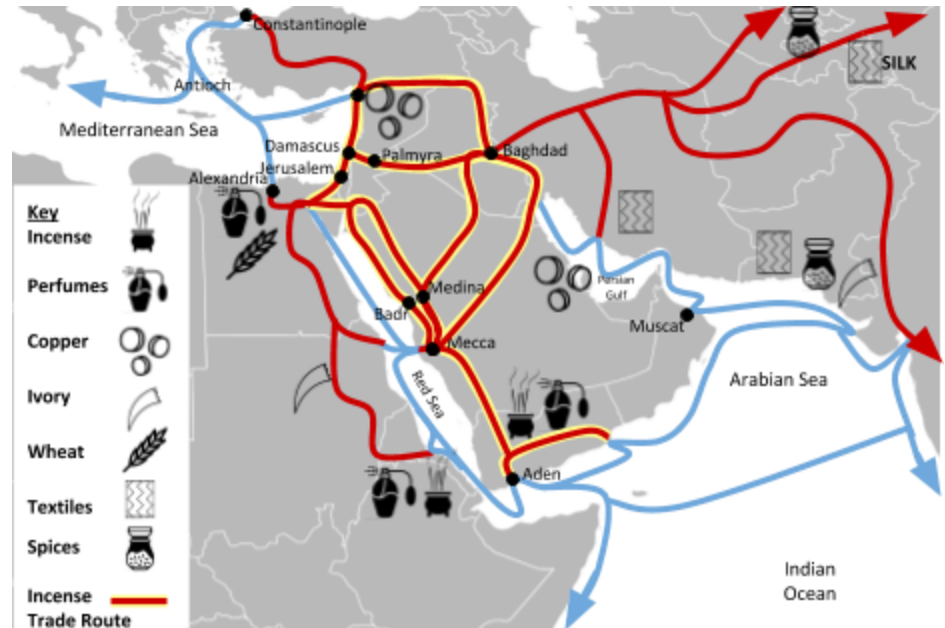
Muslim scholars collected the writings of scholars from Ancient Greece, Classical Greece and Rome, India, and China, translated them into Arabic, then improved on the discoveries of the past.

Abbasid Caliphate



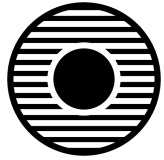
Image created by Gabagool and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license and was modified by New Visions.

Middle Eastern Trade Routes in the Post-classical Era



BlankMap-Middle East.svg created by NuclearVacuum is in the public domain and has been modified by New Visions. Icons provided by Noun Project.

Identify three reasons why a golden age took place during the Abbasid Caliphate.



Contextualize



### [PBS Documentary Islam: Empire of Faith \(Part 2\) Multiple Views and Reads](#)

➔ **Directions:**

- Preview the questions listed in the right-hand column.
- Watch the video (start-14:30) one time through, without stopping and try to answer the questions.
- Read the excerpts from the transcript of the video below and answer those questions that you could not by watching the film.

Time	Excerpts from the transcript of <i>Islam Empire of Faith</i>	Questions
1:42	<p>From every corner of the Muslim world, the faithful embarked on the traditional journey to Mecca, the sacred pilgrimage known as the Hajj.</p> <p>Historian: “The pilgrimage became a central devotional and ritual feature in Islamic life, in fact, since the life of Muhammad himself, the pilgrimage has symbolized unity among all people and equality.”</p> <p>The Hajj set humanity in motion. For the first time since the reign of Alexander the Great, cultures and caravans now flowed freely. Borders closed for a thousand years, opened.</p> <p>Historian: “Both ideas and goods went back and forth over incredible distances. Since every Muslim, once his life journeys to Mecca, it means that there were caravans carrying goods, and pilgrims, and ideas, and people. They all met together in Mecca once a year and then things would radiate back home, so if there was an invention that was discovered in Samarkand [a city on the eastern end of the empire], it could be within the year that it would be known in Cordova [a city on the western end of the empire].”</p> <p>Where pilgrims trod, traders soon followed. Muhammad himself had been a man of commerce and now the spread of his message brought with it the spread of trade and the Islamic way of life.</p> <p>Historian: “Trade was incredibly important in the Islamic world simply because of its geographic position, it was and still is between what people sometimes called the west and what everyone has always called the east, so it was a natural land bridge connecting China to Europe.”</p>	<p>1. According to the video how did the location of the Islamic Empires affect their wealth and success?</p>

In only two hundred year, Islam had extended its reach from Spain all the way to India. It took nearly a year to travel from one end of the Arab empire to the other. At it's heart was a fabled city of wealth. It was called Baghdad.

4:08

The palaces of ancient Baghdad have been lost over the centuries, but in its glory it rivaled Ancient Athens or Rome. It was a magnificent **architectural** achievement, the pride of Islam in a new age. One visitor left this account, "All the exquisite neighborhoods covered with parks, gardens, villas, and beautiful promenades are filled with bazaars and finely built mosques and baths that stretch for miles on both sides of the glittering river." But what made this the greatest city of its time was more than just what met the eye it was the company it kept. Scholars made to Baghdad the jewel of the world.

Historian: "Certainly from the eighth century on, Baghdad was the center of learning in the Islamic world and all major innovations either came from Baghdad or quickly came to Baghdad because the best people came to Baghdad: the best thinkers, the best philosophers, the best artists."

5:54

The Empire's meteoric growth had left its new leaders overwhelmed. They had staggering engineering and logistical problems to contend with. Solving them would take the greatest minds of the day. Historian: "As a new empire now, you are responsible for hygiene, you are responsible for the marketplace, you are responsible for goods being sold in the marketplace. All of those require some basic and elementary science." This new civilization having a need for science, really stems from the need to run that empire.

The best minds rose to the call. The finest were welcomed at the center of **scholarship**: Baghdad's renowned House of Wisdom. Historian: "It was a magnet for scholars and intellectuals who came and work in the academies. They were public libraries associated with the palace and scholars came from all over the empire. There were scholars from Iran, scholars from Byzantium who came, some were Christians, some were Muslims, and some were Jews. All of these different threads of human knowledge came together in the city of Baghdad." Historian: "So, the net effect of this is that you've got human individuals from radically different cultural traditions being thrown into the same crucible."

2. Describe the city of Baghdad from the 8th to 13th centuries.

3. Based on the video, why were there so many scholars studying math and science in Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate?

4. Where did the scholars who worked in the House of Wisdom come from?

7:49

Scholars were dispatched across the empire to locate as many ancient texts as possible, the first international scientific adventure in history. Unlike their Christian counterparts [in Western Europe], Muslim thinkers saw no insurmountable contradiction [problem] between their faith and the laws governing the natural world. So they embraced Aristotle and Plato, writers the Christian Church considered blasphemous. Historian: "So this is the time when we begin to see scientists, bureaucrats, what have you, going and seeking from whatever civilization that had any sciences before, be it the Greeks, be it the Indians, be it the Persians and so on..." From the Hindus came mathematical concepts that guide us today. It was the scholars of the **House of Wisdom** who developed the system of Arabic numerals still in use. It is they a who translated and transformed the writings of the Greeks and made a gift of them to the modern Western world....Historian: "They managed to assimilate quite a lot of the rich legacy of the Hellenistic world, translated into Arabic initially, which was then made available to all other participants in the new Islamic civilization. Arabic emerges as the language of learning throughout the region. This is a very significant development in human intellectual history."

9:40

Having amassed the knowledge the Muslims now began to challenge it. This was perhaps their most important contribution, the scientific process was born. Historian: "They wanted to know why a very intelligent Greek scientist whose text they were just admiring and they were verifying it, 'why would he make a mistake in the first place?' So, they began to dig. Was it because he didn't have the right instruments, or is it because he didn't have the right methodology to use the instruments for their verifications of observation? It is this spirit, you see, this spirit of questioning, the spirit of saying that we have to build science constantly on a systematic consistent basis where we make a physical proposition of how the universe ought to be run and the mathematical representation of that physical universe, ought to match. Now you begin to have what I call 'the birth of the new Islamic science.'"

5. Where did the scholars from the House of Wisdom get the base of their understanding of math, science, and philosophy from?

6. According to the historian in this segment of the film, what was "the birth of the new Islamic science?" What caused it?

10:42 Algebra and trigonometry, engineering and astronomy, countless disciplines integral to our lives today trace their roots to Islamic scientists. More surprising perhaps were their innovations in medicine. At a time when Europeans were praying to the bones of their saints to cure their illness, Muslim physicians developed an innovative theory that disease was transmitted through tiny airborne organisms, the precursor to the study of germs. They determined that sick patients should be quarantined and then treated. This is the basis of the institution most fundamental to medicine today, the hospital.

11:42 Funded mainly through religious endowments, Muslim hospitals had separate wards for patients suffering from different kinds of disease. Even mental illness was treated. Their studies of anatomy was so sophisticated that they remained in use by Muslim and European physicians for six hundred years. Muslim scientists were especially intrigued by light, lenses, and the physiology of the human eye. The father of optics was a Muslim named Ibn Al-Haytham. His work with lenses eventually led to the invention of the modern camera. He produced the first treatise that ventured to explain how the eye actually sees. A thousand years before the West dared to take up the practice, Muslim doctors were removing cataracts surgically, clearing them from the eye with a hollow needle.

13:00 But for all this knowledge to transform and illuminate an empire, it had to be copied and shared across a hundred different cities in the Islamic world. For this, there was a new invention, one that is still fundamental to learning and knowledge today: paper. Historian: "Around the year 700, 750, when Muslim armies reach Central Asia they encountered paper for the first time and very quickly the Muslim bureaucracy started using paper. You find that within fifty years it's in Syria and then few years after that it's in Egypt, and then it's in North Africa, and then it's in Sicily, and then it's in Spain, and that's where Europe learned to make paper from. They learned to make it from the Arabs." Historian: "We begin to have people with family names like 'Papermaker.' So, in other words, not only did paper become available, but it must have become a very wide-spread industry, and hence, the acquisition of books must have also become very easy."

14:18 With the wide use of books and paper, hundreds of scribes, some of whom were women, were kept busy transcribing the translations and new writings of the Baghdad scholars. Historian: "All of this knowledge that's being acquired from the Greeks, and from the Indians, and from Central

7. According to this video, what contributions did the scholars of the Islamic Golden Age make to world history?

8. Based on this excerpt from *Islam: Empire of Faith*, what inventions propelled the spread of learning throughout the Islamic world? Why did these inventions have that effect?

Asians, is all being written down in books, on paper, and these books are being copied in re-copied and sent around.

14:30

We know, for example, that there was a street of booksellers with more than 100 shops, each one with paper and books for sale. This is a time when in Europe a monastery would be lucky if it had five or ten books.” While the monks of the West were hoarding their wisdom on scraps of expensive parchment, paper enabled Islamic civilization to spread its newfound knowledge far and wide, creating a single community linking three continents.

9. How did availability of books in the Abbasid Caliphate compare to the the availability of books in Western Europe from the 700s to the 1300s? How do you think this different affected the two regions?