

Unit 10: Early Islamic Civilisation (Baghdad)

Non-European Study option

c.700 - 1258

Period Overview

The Abbasid caliphate based in Baghdad was a successor Empire to the initial spread of Islam out of the Hijaz (modern day Saudi Arabia) and across the Middle-East. The Caliphs (kings) decided to build a city to emphasise their greatness and they did this on the site of modern day Baghdad. During this period the city became a centre of learning and great advances were made in science, maths and the arts. The city became the effective historical successor to the scientific advances of the Greeks and Romans. The period ended (preceded by years of decline) when the city was sacked by the Mongols, a tie-in with of the period of the nomad warriors (see the Vikings).

Life in Baghdad

Life in Baghdad was extremely exciting. There was a recognition among the elite that they were achieving great advances in maths/science. This must have led to an atmosphere of learning and a feeling of being an advanced society. It is thought that people led a pious existence, with city life centred on the mosque in the centre of the round city. The bustling markets and shops around the mosque contained goods from everywhere due to Baghdad's position on the 'Silk road' to the far-east. Connected to this was the presence of traders from all across the known world who flocked to Baghdad to sell their wares. The great works of philosophy from Greek scholars like Plato and Aristotle were translated and their ideas openly discussed and expanded upon. There were great advances in medicine which contributed to the general health of the city. As the population increased they spilled out of the round city into the surrounding area, where they settled on the fertile banks of the Euphrates and Tigris.

Changing Times

Perhaps the main change of this period was the change from transient settlement to major towns and cities. By 1258 there were 5 cities with over 1 million people living in them, compared to none in 900AD. The supposed dark ages were anything but, with important Empires growing around the world, on every continent. It was an era of great scientific advances in the Middle East and China, and it took until around 1500 for Europe to catch up. This time belies the idea that history is Eurocentric. The growth of Islam across southern Europe and Asia added a new factor into the world, especially with the trend towards conquering new territory and assimilating new peoples into Islam. Contact between peoples increased during this period as goods were traded between east and west. Baghdad, at the heart of the route to the east, benefitted from this. Not only this, but ideas too were exchanged through this contact. The continents of Europe, Africa and Asia became international.

Possible Enquiries

- Islam – Practice and influence on society.
- Art – Islamic patterns.
- Great individuals: al-Khawarizmi.
- Geography – compare locations of major world cities in the 9th Century.
- Power – Monarchy – Legitimacy of this type of rule.
- Organisation of society, structure of cities.
- Diplomacy, meeting of "east/west."

Key Individuals

- **Caliph 'Abbas** – First Abbasid Caliph - moved Abbasid capital from Kufa to Baghdad
- **Al-Khawarizmi**, mathematician, astronomer, scientist, provided the foundations of algebra and other concepts
- **Haroun al-Rashid** – Caliph from 786-809, defeated Byzantines in battle (806), made links with European Empires such as Charlemagne in France.



A page from Al-Khwarizmi's "Algebra"¹⁰

What did Baghdad ever do for us?

Algorithm – a set of instructions to solve a problem
 Numerals – the expanse of maths into algebra
 Algebra/Trigonometry – Pioneered in this period
 Rise of the city – a pioneering design based on quarters, adopted by many other cities in the region/world.
 Islam – the organisation around Islam as the unifying force in society.

Big Concepts

Islam – how states interpreted Islam being part of the state
Empire – growth of centralised empires in areas outside Europe/China.
Philosophy – translation and introduction of great works by Aristotle and Plato to a whole new audience.
Discovery – trying to understand the world, at the time the centre of world study on big issues.

Places to Visit:

Visit a local mosque to understand about Islam and the centrality it takes in Muslim's lives.
 British Museum – has some objects from the time – see collection here: <http://tinyurl.com/qf47rrx> - main point would be to understand Baghdad's place in the world at the time.
 Oriental Museum – Based in Durham, great for understanding the Middle-East region and its links.

Timeline of Key Events:

- c. **762 AD** – The decision to build a great city in Baghdad made
- c. **768 AD** – The 'round city' finished
- c. **800 AD** – The city becomes the largest city in the world
- c. **810 AD** – Baghdad becomes a hub for learning and commerce, great scientific and maths advances made
- c. **900** – Paper spreads into the region from China
- c. **930** – Cordoba (Spain) overtakes Baghdad as world's largest city
- c. **950** – The decline of the Abbasid caliphate begins and continues until the 13th century
- 1258** – Baghdad destroyed by Mongols

Broader Context

- Rise and spread of Islam (6th C)
- Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in UK (5th - 10th C)
- Tang rule in China unites the country (10th C)
- Khmer Empire, Angkor capital (10th C)
- Yoruba people (Benin) in E. Africa (9th C)
- Visigoth rule Spain ended by Islam (8th C)
- Charlemagne Emperor of France (8th C)
- Vikings spread out of Scandinavia (8th -11th C)
- Byzantine rule in S- Europe (4th -15th C)
- Mayan rule in c. America (9th – 17th C)

Further Information:

Richard Farrow's sample Baghdad planning for KS2: <http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Non-European-Study-Baghdad-c-AD900-6412028/>

Many universities in major metropolitan areas (Manchester, London, Edinburgh, Durham, Exeter and more) have Middle-Eastern departments. Getting in touch with them might lead to some useful information.

¹⁰ Al-Khwarizmi's "Algebra" image [<http://bit.do/algebra>] is available having been released into the public domain