Chapter 12

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

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

The development of trade routes, particularly routes run by sturdy dhows in the Indian Ocean, enabled Islam to spread as far as present-day Indonesia and the Philippines. Trade routes also facilitated the spread of Islam into central Asia and Africa.

II. The Islamic Heartlands in the Middle and Late Abbasid Eras

A. Introduction

Political divisions and religious diversity were already apparent by the reign of the third Abbasid caliph, al-Mahdi. Shi'i rebellions against Abbasid rule continued to trouble the dynasty until the 13th century C.E. Problems in determining the succession also arose in the reign of al-Mahdi. One of the most famous of the Abbasid caliphs, Harun al-Rashid, succeeded to the throne after the assassination of his older brother.

B. Imperial Extravagance and Succession Disputes

Under Harun, the Abbasid court continued its reputation for luxurious living. Beginning with Harun and continuing in subsequent reigns, powerful ministers began to usurp the authority of the caliphs. After the middle of the 9th century C.E., the Abbasid rulers were often merely figureheads. After Harun’s death, a civil war among his sons determined the succession. Thereafter, potential heirs to the Abbasid throne began the practice of recruiting private armies. These private armies came to be dominated by slaves, often drawn from the Turkic populations of central Asia. The mercenary armies of former slaves often acted independently to determine the succession. Turkish generals vied for power over figurehead rulers. Mercenary armies became uncontrollable elements within the Baghdad population.

C. Imperial Breakdown and Agrarian Disorder

Increasing military costs and the construction of new capitals increased the burden of taxation on the rural population. Heavy taxation and military intervention led to abandonment of fields and disruption of the critical irrigation works of Mesopotamia. Peasants who left the land turned to banditry to support themselves. Dissident religious groups instigated peasant uprisings.

D. The Declining Position of Women in the Family and Society

During the Abbasid period, Muslim women were increasingly confined to the household and
totally subjected to patriarchal authority. The Abbasid caliphs maintained harems, in which both wives and concubines were secluded in the imperial chambers. The prosperity of the later Abbasid period allowed the Muslim elite to obtain numerous slaves, many of which were taken or purchased from the non-Islamic regions that surrounded the empire. Female slaves were not secluded and may have had greater freedom than Muslim wives. Elite women were cut off from any occupation other than running a household.

E. Nomadic Incursions and the Eclipse of Caliphal Power

After the 9th century, the process of political fragmentation within the Abbasid Empire accelerated. In 945 C.E. the Buyids of Persia captured Baghdad and reduced the Abbasid rulers to puppets, while actual administration was in the hands of Buyid sultans. In 1045 C.E. the Seljuk Turks replaced the Buyids as masters of Baghdad. Staunch Sunnis, the Seljuks moved to eliminate Shi’ite influence within the empire. The Seljuks temporarily reversed the momentum of territorial loss and managed to defeat the forces of the Byzantine Empire. Seljuk victories opened the way for the conquest of Asia Minor.

F. The Impact of the Christian Crusades

The Christian Crusades sought to recapture the Holy Land for the West. The first Crusade (1096 C.E. to 1099 C.E.) resulted in the division of Palestine and Syria into a chain of Crusader kingdoms. Later Crusades were less successful and posed little threat to Muslim rulers. Under Saladin, most of the Holy Land was recaptured for Islam at the end of the 12th century C.E. Muslim forces eliminated all of the Christian kingdoms by 1291. The Crusades served to intensify the European exposure to Islamic culture and civilization. Most importantly, the West was able to obtain from the Muslim world much of Greek learning. Westerners also benefited from Muslim advances in science and medicine. Luxury cloths produced in the Middle East made their way into European markets.

III. An Age of Learning and Artistic Refinement

A. Introduction

Despite political disorder, Muslim civilization enjoyed a period of great creativity under the Abbasids. Urbanization continued, even though the rural countryside experienced economic decline. Cities both provided a market and created a conduit for the long-distance commerce that allowed merchants to prosper. Opportunities abounded for craftsmen and artists working in the urban centers.

B. The Full Flowering of Persian Literature

Persian gradually replaced Arabic as the primary language of the Abbasid court, particularly in terms of literary expression. In the late 10th and early 11th centuries, Firdawsi produced the classic epic poem Shah-Nameh, a stylized history of Persia. Other authors concentrated on different literary genres, but Persian was the language in which Abbasid high culture was expressed.

C. Achievements in the Sciences

Islamic civilization during the Abbasid period produced numerous scientific discoveries and made major advances in mathematics. Muslim scientists developed objective experimentation.
improved scientific devices for measuring, and created the most accurate astronomical charts available to that date. Much of Arabic science was practical. Muslim medical advances found their way into practicing hospitals. Muslim craftsmen developed and improved many techniques for paper-making, ceramics, and silk-weaving that had originated much earlier in China.

D. Religious Trends and the New Push for Expansion

There were contradictory trends in Islamic religious tradition. Sufi mystics gave impetus to Islamic expansion, but the traditional ulama scholars began to reject non-Islamic ideas and technology. The ulama scholars became increasingly opposed to the combination of Greek and Islamic ideas typical of theologians such as al-Ghazali. Sufis injected a mystical tradition into Islam and sought a more personal relationship with Allah. Because of the growing popularity of Sufism, the movement was responsible for the expansion of Islam to new regions.

E. New Waves of Nomadic Invasions and the End of the Caliphate

The Mongols under Chinggis Khan smashed the Islamic kingdoms on the eastern borders of the Islamic world in the first decades of the 13th century. Under Hulegu Khan, the Mongol hordes destroyed the center of Islamic civilization and captured Baghdad in 1258. The Mongols murdered the last Abbasid caliph. The Mameluk armies of Egypt finally halted the westward advance of the Mongols, but Baghdad was never able to reestablish itself as the capital of the Islamic world.

IV. The Coming of Islam to South Asia

A. Introduction

The process of converting some of the peoples of India to Islam began in the 7th century. By the 13th century, Islamic dynasties ruled much of northern India. Islam was never able to replace Hinduism entirely, however, and the two religions remained in uneasy equilibrium in South Asia. Until the 7th century, the invaders of India had been absorbed into Indian civilization and converted to Hinduism or Buddhism. Islamic missionaries to India represented a challenge to traditional Indian society and religion. Islam stressed monotheistic exclusivity and social equality before Allah, ideas that were totally foreign to Indian concepts of caste and tolerance. In the first stages of Muslim entry into India, conflict between religious beliefs was most common, but over time peaceful interaction between Hindus and Muslims became more normal. Muslims continued to make use of the Hindu administrative elite and were unable to eliminate Hindu places of worship.

B. Political Divisions and the First Muslim Invasions

The first Muslim military attack on an Indian kingdom was in response to attacks on Muslim traders. An army under Muhammad ibn Qasim conquered the kingdom of Sind on the western coast of India. The kingdom was temporarily added to the Umayyad Empire. Populations conquered territories were treated as people of the book and granted religious toleration of Hindu beliefs in return for payment of the poll tax on nonbelievers. Most of the administrative elite of conquered territories continued to serve new Muslim masters. The Muslims continued to recognize the Brahmin caste system. Little conversion of conquered populations was attempted.
C. Indian Influences on Islamic Civilization

Through the conquest of Sind, Indian scientific advances were disseminated to the Islamic world. Of great importance was the adoption of mathematical numerals, which spread from the Islamic world to the West. Arabs who migrated to the kingdom of Sind and other Islamic regions of India rapidly assimilated Indian lifestyles. From their enclave in Sind, Muslim traders extended their influence to trading enclaves in Malabar and Bengal.

D. From Booty to Empire: The Second Wave of Muslim Invasions

Mahmud of Ghazni, a Turkish ruler of Afghanistan, initiated the second stage of Muslim conquest in South Asia. In the 11th century, Mahmud raided the various kingdoms and principalities of northern India. Mahmud’s raids were intended to seize the legendary wealth of the Hindu princes and temples, but Muhammad of Ghur was able to subject much of north-central India to his political control. One of Muhammad’s successors established a Muslim capital in India at Delhi on the Ganges. A succession of Muslim rulers of various ethnic extraction ruled much of northern India as the sultans of Delhi. All of these rulers based their power on extensive military organization. The support of large armies and an opulent court was the primary function of the Delhi sultanate. Public works and social welfare were secondary interests.

E. Patterns of Conversion

Under the Delhi sultanate, large Muslim enclaves were established in northern India. Sufi mystics and traders carried the new religion to other areas of India. Most of the Indian converts to Islam came from Buddhist groups, which saw some similarities in the religious practices of the Sufi, and from low-caste groups. The decline of monasteries as centers of Buddhist instruction and belief accelerated the conversion to Islam. Low-caste social groups, including untouchables, were drawn to Islam by the promise of social equality. Some converts may have sought to escape the Islamic tax on non-believers.

E. Patterns of Accommodation

Little progress was made in converting the masses of the Hindu population, which continued to regard Muslims as foreign outcasts. Hindus remained socially separate from the Islamic overlords and the few converts to the new religion. Many Hindus assumed that, like previous conquerors of India, the Muslims would be assimilated into Hindu culture and social stratification. Muslims tended to be separated along Hindu caste lines into new social divisions. Muslims simply placed themselves at the top of the social hierarchy. Muslim-Hindu cultural interaction served to depress the social condition of Islamic women residing in India.

F. Islamic Challenge and Hindu Revival

Hindus found that Islam could not be assimilated into traditional Indian religious practices and that Muslims actively sought to convert the indigenous peoples of South Asia. In response, Hinduism became more actively devotional, emphasizing cults of gods and goddesses. Bhaktic cults were open to men and women of all castes. New religious ceremonies stressed emotional connections between the worshipers and the deities. The most popular cults were those of Shiva and Vishnu. The creation of Bhaktic cults tended to slow the conversion of Indians to Islam.
II. Stand-Off: The Muslim Presence in India at the End of the Sultinate Period

Attempts to compromise the religious differences between Islam and Hinduism met with resistance from both religions. Hindus became increasingly intolerant of Muslim practices, while the Islamic ulama stressed the differences between Muslims and Hindus. Despite the creation of a sizable Muslim population in India, Hindus retained an overwhelming majority within the population of South Asia. Most Indians demonstrated little interest in conversion to Islam.

V. The Spread of Islam to Southeast Asia

A. Introduction

From India, Islam spread along trade routes to Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia was a transfer point for goods moving from Chinese civilization to Islam. Muslim traders from India carried Islamic culture into the islands and trading centers of Southeast Asia. With the collapse of the Buddhist trading empire of Shrivijaya on the Strait of Malacca during the 13th century, the way was opened for more direct Islamic penetration of the region.

B. Trading Contacts and Conversion

Trading contacts, not conquest, provided the means for the expansion of Islam into Southeast Asia. The first areas to be converted were ports on the northern coast of Sumatra from which the religion spread to Malaya. The trading center of Malacca, which controlled a trade network that extended into the mainland, was the key to Islamic expansion. From Malacca, Islamic traders carried the religion to Demak on the island of Java. From Demak, Muslims penetrated the interior of Java and spread to nearby island systems. Populations of port cities tended to convert to retain trading relationships with other ports in the commercial network of Southeast Asia.

C. Sufi Mystics and the Nature of Southeast Asian Islam

Because Islam came to Southeast Asia from India and because Sufis were the primary evangelists, the Islamic religion of the Southeast trading ports was suffused with mysticism and tended to be more tolerant of indigenous animistic religions. Pre-Islamic law continued to govern the indigenous populations, while Islamic law was restricted to specific religious issues. Women remained important in the economic structure of the region. Some indigenous religious practices were incorporated into Islamic worship.

VI. Global Connections: Islam: A Bridge Between Worlds

Although political centralization ended during the Abbasid period, Islam continued to serve a significant role as the connective link between the civilized cores of Eurasia. Islam also facilitated the civilization of nomadic peoples of central Asia and Africa. Some developments pointed to weaknesses that later proved serious deterrents in the contest with European civilization. Political divisions granted opportunities for European expansion in the Middle East. The growing conservatism of the ulama made the Islamic world less receptive to technological and scientific advances in other civilizations. Entrepreneurial activities within the Islamic commercial network were increasingly dominated by non-Muslims.
TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

Buyids capture Baghdad
spread of Islam into Southeast Asia
first Muslim raids into India

Crusaders capture Jerusalem
establishment of Delhi Sultanate
Mongols capture Baghdad

711 C.E.
945 C.E.
1099 C.E.
1206 C.E.
1258 C.E.
1290s C.E.

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

al-Mahdi
Seljuk Turks
Shah-Nama
al-Ghazali
Demak
Ghazni
Qutb-ud-din Aibak
Shrivijaya

al-Rashid
Crusades
Sufis
Mongols
Hajjaj
Mahmud of Ghazni
bhakti cults
Malacca

Buyids
Saladin
ulama
Chinggis Khan
Muhammad ibn Qasim
Muhammad of Ghur
Kabir
Vishnu
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

Delhi
Sind

Malacca
Demak

1. Looking at the expansion of Islam during the Abbasid era, how important was commerce and seaborne trade? Why?

2. How did the expansion of Islam during the Abbasid era serve to link more closely two of the traditional civilized cores?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What were the causes of the weaknesses of the later Abbasid Empire?
2. What was the position of women in the Abbasid Empire?
3. Describe the economy of the later Abbasid Empire.
4. Discuss the theological divergences in Islam during the Abbasid Empire.
5. Discuss the stages of Islamic incursion into India.
6. To what extent were the Muslims successful in converting India to Islam?
7. Discuss the stages of Islamic incursion into Southeast Asia.
8. To what extent were the Muslims successful in converting the peoples of Southeast Asia to Islam?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. Compare and contrast the initial spread of Islam throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East with the Islamic incursions into India and Southeast Asia. For example, who were the primary conquerors?
2. How did the cultural and economic fortunes of the Abbasid Empire contrast with its political development? What accounts for the differences?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which of the following was NOT a reason for the decline of the Abbasid Empire?
   a. the collapse of the cities
   b. continued Shi’a resistance to Abbasid rule
   c. indulgent overspending by Abbasid rulers
   d. the difficulty of solving the problem dynastic succession

2. How did the Shi’i react to the later Abbasid dynasty?
   a. They accepted them as the rightful rulers and became the strongest supporters of the Abbasid caliphs.
   b. Various Shi’i groups participated in peasant uprisings.
   c. They forced the Abbasids to abdicate in favor of a family more closely related to the Prophet.
   d. Shi’i sects were eliminated by the Abbasids.

3. Which of the following groups did not capture Baghdad?
   a. Mongols
   b. Seljuk Turks
   c. Buyids
   d. Crusaders

4. Which of the following statements concerning the Crusades is most accurate?
   a. The Crusaders were successful only because of the political fragmentation of Islam and the element of surprise.
   b. Crusader strongholds in the Holy Land were held by the West until the 18th century.
   c. The Crusaders succeeded because of the overwhelming superiority of Western military technology.
   d. Jewish support for the Christian Crusaders guaranteed their victory in the Holy Land.

5. What was the trend in urbanization during the Abbasid period?
   a. Because the Abbasids abandoned Baghdad for other capitals, cities tended to wither and die.
   b. Successive invasions led to a decline in urbanization.
   c. Despite a decline in the agricultural economy, towns continued to grow rapidly.
   d. Towns established in the early years of the dynasty were able to hold their own, but there was little growth.

6. Which of the following was a literary figure during the Abbasid period?
   a. Muhammad ibn Qasim
   b. al-Ghazali
   c. Omar Khayyam
   d. Mahmud of Ghazni
7. What region of India did the Muslims first conquer under Muhammad ibn Qasim?
   a. Nepal
   b. Sind
   c. Delhi
   d. Rajputana

8. Which of the following statements concerning the Delhi sultanate is most accurate?
   a. Delhi sultans descended from Arabs who first entered India in Sind.
   b. The Delhi sultanate was unique in that it possessed little military power.
   c. Support of their armies and the maintenance of a sumptuous court were the primary objectives of the Delhi sultans.
   d. The Delhi sultanate was able to break Muslim dependence on local Hindu ruling elites.

9. Bhaktic cults stressed
   a. strict monotheism.
   b. the importance of a strong emotional bond between the devotee and the god or goddess.
   c. a conservative interpretation of Islamic religious texts.
   d. the restriction of religious activities to upper caste groups.

10. What city proved to be the key to the conversion of mainland Southeast Asia?
    a. Malacca
    b. Shrivijaya
    c. Demak
    d. Bombay