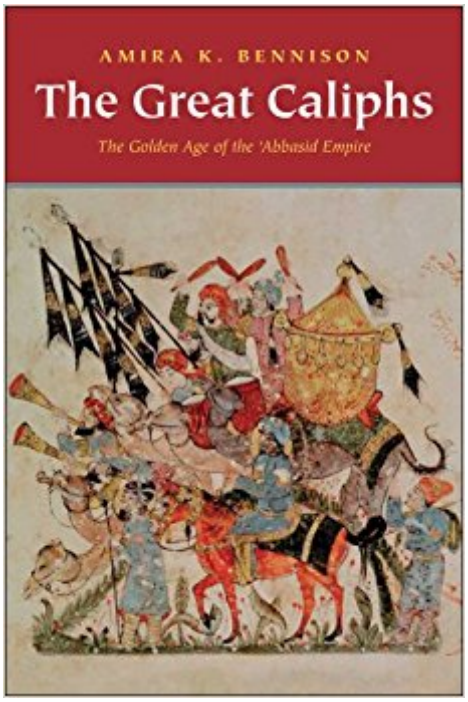
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The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age Of The 'Abbasid Empire



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Synopsis

In this accessibly written history, Amira K. Bennison contradicts the common assumption that Islam somehow interrupted the smooth flow of Western civilization from its Graeco-Roman origins to its more recent European and American manifestations. Instead, she places Islamic civilization in the longer trajectory of Mediterranean civilizations and sees the Ã¢â ¬ËœAbbasid Empire (750Ã¢â ¬â œ1258 CE) as the inheritor and interpreter of Graeco-Roman traditions. At its zenith the Ã¢â ¬ËœAbbasid caliphate stretched over the entire Middle East and part of North Africa, and influenced Islamic regimes as far west as Spain. BennisonÃ¢â ¬â„¢s examination of the politics, society, and culture of the Ã¢â ¬ËœAbbasid period presents a picture of a society that nurtured many of the Ã¢â ¬Å“civilizedÃ¢â ¬Â• values that Western civilization claims to represent, albeit in different premodern forms: from urban planning and international trade networks to religious pluralism and academic research. BennisonÃ¢â ¬â„¢s argument counters the common Western view of Muslim culture as alien and offers a new perspective on the relationship between Western and Islamic cultures.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

". . . concise and comprehensive."Ã¢â ¬â •Choice"Amira Bennison's engaging history of the 'Abbasid caliphate moves beyond more conventional or drier accounts of political intrigue among ruling elites and sectarian squabbles. The author adopts a broader and deeper approach, focusing above all on Ã¢â ¬Ëœthe people:Ã¢â ¬â„¢ that mosaic of urban and rural folk who individually and collectively make up a civilization. Women, children, beggars, tricksters, merchants

and pilgrimsÃ¢â ¬â •as well as the great cities that brought them all togetherÃ¢â ¬â •are given fascinating coverage. Nor does the author neglect the community of scholars cultivated by the 'Abbasids who - in the fields of literature, philosophy, theology, mathematics and astronomyÃ¢â ¬â •left their indelible mark upon Islamic civilization. The Great Caliphs is an important work which offers a new and stimulating perspective on an exciting era."Ã¢â ¬â •David Waines, Lancaster University"Aimed at the educated general reader, this volume offers a sweeping portrayal of major Islamic cultures and societies down to the 13th century AD and occasionally beyond. Drawing on both primary sources and secondary studies, the author provides a lively survey of politics, urban and rural life, societal and religious realities, trade and commerce, and elite culture and learning, with attention to issues of race/ethnicity, gender, and class. Her book is a thoughtful introduction to society, culture, and characteristic institutions as these took shape in the central and western reaches of the Islamic world, from Iran to Spain and Morocco, in the Ã¢â ¬ËœAbbasid era."Ã¢â ¬â •William A. Graham, Harvard University

Amira K. Bennison is senior lecturer in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge.

Thorough, and scholarly.

Interesting book, good introduction to this crucial history. I would have preferred something more political whereas this included a lot of cultural history as well.

The storied early caliphs of the Abbasid dynasty are not so much the subjects of this book as its frame of reference. This is a fine introduction to a much-heralded period of Islamic history. During Abbasid times, from the eighth century to the 13th, Baghdad was the focal point of a great civilization that encompassed the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. Culture, rather than politics, is our concern in this work, as the author seeks to demonstrate that Islamic civilization is not alien to western (i.e., Greco-Roman) civilization, but is rather its logical extension.Under the Abbasids, the scientific and philosophical legacy of the Greeks and Romans was not simply preserved but was amplified and extended. Scientists and translators of every description - Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sabian, Zoroastrian - absorbed the great works of Mediterranean thought and science and took them to the next level. In fact, Abbasid civilization experienced a "Scientific Renaissance" as important as the one Europe underwent centuries later.Bennison uses a

wide-angle lens to encompass the full picture. She includes simultaneous cultural advances in Islamic Spain and Fatimid Egypt, for instance, since these lands were in constant interaction with the central civilization of Baghdad.The Abbasid world is characterized as essentially a Mediterranean society, "stretching the length of the old Roman empire and beyond." It was a strikingly mobile world in many ways, with pilgrims setting out from its far reaches to make the once-in-a-lifetime journey to Makkah and Madinah, with traders seeking commerce in distant lands, and adventuresome travelers crossing vast stretches of desert and sea simply to learn about the unknown. The famous hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, "Seek knowledge even unto China," reflects an attitude, the author points out, as much as historical fact.The quest for knowledge was a key characteristic of the early Abbasid world, and politicians, scholars and scientists alike shouldered their responsibilities well. One might even say the classical Greeks would have been proud of them.[A version of this review appeared in Saudi Aramco World, Mar/Apr 2010.]

Although this book has some good parts, it is rather disappointing overall as it fails in its stated objective and does not have a clear target audience. Amira Bennison claims she wants to dispel negative stereotypes and emphasise links between Europe and Asia. However, her book has its own negative stereotypes: Orientalists, murderous Crusaders and ignorant Latin Christians, and it sometimes praises Abbasid institutions through the denigration of their European counterparts.The chapters on Cities and on Trade are generally good but the long chapter on Baghdad’s Golden Age is quite dull and contains a number of unproven assertions, as does the final chapter on the Abbasid Legacy.The jacket blurb says that the book is for the educated general reader, so not for teachers or students in the field. This possibly explains the rather condescending and dumbed-down style, including a mixture of sociological jargon and hackneyed stock phrases. It is also claimed the book is sweeping, lively and beyond more conventional or drier accounts: a harsher verdict would be it is superficial. Any reader interested enough in this period to read this book does not need to be patronised in this way.A much better introduction to a rather wider period is Hugh Kennedy’s "The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates" which does not compromise its scholarship in the interests of perceived accessibility or general interest.

The Abbasid Empire is considered the golden age of Islamic Civilization when some of the greatest advances were made in various fields and yet very few books are written about this era.Ms. Bennison’s, The Great Caliphs, sheds light on the life and times of the ordinary people living during the reign of the Abbasid Empire. She writes about the urban and rural life, how society was

organized, how each class in society lived and interacted with each other, the community of scholars who were supported by the Caplihs and how the great Abbasid cities were planned and constructed. It is a story of the ordinary person living during height of a great Islamic Empire.The only complaint I have, is there is no analysis of why the Abbasid age is considered the Golden Age of the Islamic Civilization. What was it about the society that led the Abbasids to achieve such greatness? What established the environment and spirit of free thought? What created the Abbasid dynasty's enormous wealth? What were the foundations of the Caliphs power? These aspects of the Empire are not covered. Ms. Bennison focuses completely on the ordinary people living during this time and provides some great insights.The Great Caliphs is a well written introductory book about the Abbasid Empire. For those looking to understand this period, this is a good starting point.

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