**The Abbasid Caliphate**, which ruled most of the Muslim world from Baghdad in what is now Iraq, lasted from 750 to 1258 A.D. It was the third Islamic caliphate and overthrew the Umayyad Caliphate to take power in all but the western-most fringe of Muslim holdings at that time—Spain and Portugal, known then as the al-Andalus region.

After they defeated the Ummayads, with significant Persian assistance, the Abbasids decided to de-emphasize ethnic Arabs and recreate the Muslim caliphate as a multi-ethnic entity. As part of that reorganization, in 762 they moved the capital from Damascus, in what is now Syria, northeast to Baghdad, not far from Persia in present-day Iran.

**Early Period of the New Caliphate**

Early in the Abbasid period, Islam exploded across Central Asia, although usually the elites converted and their religion trickled down gradually to ordinary people. This, however, was not "conversion by the sword."

Incredibly, just one year after the fall of the Umayyads, an Abbasid army was fighting against the Tang Chinese in what is now Kyrgyzstan, in the Battle of Talas River in 759. Although Talas River seemed like just a small skirmish, it had important consequences—it helped to set the boundary between the Buddhist and Muslim spheres in Asia and also allowed the Arab world to learn the secret of paper-making from captured Chinese artisans.

The Abbasid period is considered a Golden Age for Islam. Abbasid caliphs sponsored great artists and scientists and great medical, astronomical, and other scientific texts from the classical period in Greece and Rome were translated into Arabic, saving them from being lost.

While Europe languished in what was once called its "Dark Ages," thinkers in the Muslim world expanded upon the theories of Euclid and Ptolemy. They invented algebra, named stars like Altair and Aldebaran and even used hypodermic needles to remove cataracts from human eyes. This was also the world that produced the stories of the Arabian Nights—the tales of Ali Baba, Sinbad the Sailor, and Aladdin came from the Abbasid era.

**The Fall of the Abbasid**

The Golden Age of the Abbasid Caliphate ended on February 10, 1258, when Genghis Khan's grandson, Hulagu Khan, sacked Baghdad. The Mongols burned the great library in the Abbasid capital and killed the Caliph Al-Musta'sim.

Between 1261 and 1517, surviving Abbasid caliphs lived under Mamluk rule in Egypt, wielding more or less control over religious matters while having little to no political power. The last Abbasid caliph, Al-Mutawakkil III, supposedly handed over the title to the Ottoman Sultan Selim The First in 1517.

Still, what was left of the destroyed libraries and scientific buildings of the capital lived on in Islamic culture—as did the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, especially concerning medicine and science. And although the Abbasid Caliphate was considered Islam's greatest in history, it would certainly not be the last time a similar rule took over the Middle East.