

Lesson 1: What led to the overthrow of the Umayyad caliphate in 750?



Extract 1 – ‘Rival Caliphates.’ Taken from Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: How Classical Ideas were Lost and Found: A History in Seven Cities*

1 It is the year 747 and inside the Umayyad capital of Damascus, trouble is brewing.

2

3 20 years earlier a perfume seller had visited a small town in what is now the country of
4 Jordan. It was an out of the way area surrounded by harsh stone and endless desert. The
5 people in this place had somehow carved out a living for themselves. Using careful
6 techniques of water harvesting, they had been able to grow crops and feed themselves.
7 The perfume seller was impressed.

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9 There was nothing unusual about the appearance of the traveller. He wore an ordinary
10 cloak and was accepted by the people of this town. Travel, it seems, was not difficult for
11 a man in his position. The Muslim empire, ruled over by the Umayyad caliphs since 661
12 had few internal borders. He could, if he chose, travel from the edge of India to the tip of
13 Egypt. But he had no such desires. He was in this town for a reason.

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15 He had come to see the owner of the largest house in the town of Humayma. He had
16 come to see a man by the name of Muhammad Ibn Ali. The house of Ibn Ali was built
17 around a rectangular courtyard. It was not as grand as the palaces of the Umayyads,
18 with their fine stonework and decoration, though some rooms were certainly impressive.

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20 To the untrained eye, Ibn Ali was simply a retired landowner living in a large house. But he
21 had one characteristic that set him apart. He had something that made him very special
22 indeed. Ibn Ali was a member of the family of the Prophet Muhammad.

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24 The prophet Muhammad had died 90 years before and in the years since his death the
25 Muslim world had been ruled by the Umayyad Caliphs. There were some, and the
26 perfume seller was one such man, who believed that the Umayyads had betrayed the

27 ideals of Islam. In his eyes, they had made themselves rich while ordinary Muslims
28 remained poor and hungry. To these people, the family of the prophet Muhammad was
29 their great hope. An alternative to the powerful Umayyads.

30 Knowledge Check: MCQs	
31 1. Since the death of the prophet Muhammad, the 32 Muslim empire had been ruled by...	31 2. The fact the perfume seller had been able to 32 travel so far so quickly tells us that...
33 A. The Abbasids	33 A. The Muslim empire was very small
34 B. The Umayyads	34 B. The Muslim empire was not well 35 connected
35 C. Muhammad Ibn Ali	35 C. The Muslim empire was well connected
36 3. Muhammad ibn Ali was special because...	36 4. The fact the perfume seller had come to visit 37 Muhammad Ibn Ali tells us that...
37 A. He was a member of the Umayyad family	37 A. He liked perfume a lot
38 B. He lived in a large house with a courtyard	38 B. There were people who were not happy 39 with Umayyad rule
39 C. He was a member of the family of the 40 prophet Muhammad	39 C. The perfume seller wanted to become 41 rich and powerful
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44 Ibn Ali was not a son or grandson of the prophet Muhammad. In fact, he was not even a
45 direct relative. He was descended from the prophet's grandfather, Abbas. In this way he
46 was part of the Abbasid family.

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48 Back in the year 747, 20 years after the perfume seller had visited Ibn Ali in his house, the
49 Abbasids had grown in strength and number. In the years after their famous meeting,
50 Abbasid messengers had been sent by Ibn Ali across the entire Muslim empire with a
51 simple message – "if all Muslims support the family of the prophet Muhammad, then the
52 rule of the Umayyads could be overthrown, and the interests of all Muslims protected." It
53 was an attractive offer to those who loathed the powerful Umayyads.

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55 As the revolution gained momentum, conflict became more and more bitter. Members of
56 the Abbasid family were captured and murdered, while their loyal followers attacked
57 Umayyad forces at every opportunity they could get. As conflict became war, the stage
58 was set for a final battle between the Abbasids and the Umayyads.

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60 On the banks of the River Zab in 750, Abbasid forces now numbering in their thousands
61 overthrew the last Umayyad Caliph. He was chased to a small town in Egypt where he
62 was beheaded. The Muslim world was now in the hands of the sons of Ibn Ali. The Abbasid
63 era had begun.

Lesson 2: What is a statue of an Umayyad Caliph doing in Spain?



Extract 2 – ‘The House of Wisdom.’ Taken from Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: How Classical Ideas were Lost and Found: A History in Seven Cities*

1 As the black flags of the Abbasids fluttered on the banks of the River Zab in the year 750,
2 they must have felt a sense of hope. There would be an Abbasid Caliph ruling over the
3 Muslim empire. At the battle on the banks of the river Zab alone, 300 Umayyad family
4 members were killed. But the Abbasids were no fools. They knew that as long as an
5 Umayyad male lived they represented a threat to their power and rule.

6
7 Abbasid horsemen searched mercilessly for remaining members of the Umayyad family.
8 Assassins were sent to villages across the empire, and horsemen roamed the lands around
9 Damascus. No Umayyad was safe.

Knowledge Check: MCQs

11 **1. The 300 Umayyad family members killed tells us that...**

- 12 A. The Abbasids wanted total control of the Muslim empire
- 13 B. The Abbasids were not bothered by the Umayyads after they had won the battle
- 14 C. The Abbasids were prepared to work alongside the Umayyads

11 **2. The Abbasid assassins tell us that...**

- 12 A. The Umayyads were all dead
- 13 B. The Umayyads were not a threat to the Abbasids anymore
- 14 C. The Umayyads still represented a threat to the Abbasids

17
18 The Umayyad prince Abd al-Rahman was 20 when the Abbasid Revolution shook his
19 entire world to its core. In an instant he had gone from powerful royalty to a fugitive on
20 the run. And now, in late 750, Abbasid horsemen were baring down on him.

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22 He must have had little time to think. All he knew was that he had to escape the clutches
23 of the Abbasids before his life was taken from him. Alongside a servant named Badr and
24 his younger brother, Rahman fled. At every step they felt the sinister presence of the black
25 flags fluttering behind them. The next few weeks were spent desperately trying to outrun
26 their pursuers – hiding in forests, begging for shelter in villages, and running for their lives.

64 Eventually, they reached the bank of the river Euphrates and, with the Abbasids hard on
65 their heels, they threw themselves into the water and began to swim. Rahman's brother,
66 exhausted, turned back towards the enemy soldiers who were shouting from the bank
67 that there was nothing to fear. Rahman begged his brother to keep swimming to the
68 other side. He turned and watched helplessly as the Abbasids dragged him from the
69 water and beheaded him on the spot. Safely on the opposite bank, Rahman and Badr
70 ran until they collapsed with exhaustion. They had escaped, for now at least.

71

72 Rahman spent the next four years, if not always on the run, then on the move. By 755, he
73 had travelled across the desert of northern Africa and made his way to Spain. Here, he
74 set about making his new world. As news of his miraculous escape from the Abbasids
75 spread, people rushed to him from across the world. At the age of 25 he triumphantly
76 rode into the small city of Cordoba. He moved into the old fortified palace of the former
77 rulers and set about transforming the city.

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79 In 784 he began building a mosque – La Mesquita. La Mesquita was built in the style of the
80 mosque he had worshipped in as a little boy in Damascus. It was magnificent. 800
81 columns of red and white striped arches creating hypnotic patterns for all who enter. By
82 the time Rahman died in 788, Cordoba was a flourishing centre of trade and civilisation.
83 He had laid the foundations of the great Mesquita that dominated the skyline and
84 secured safety for the Umayyads far from their mortal enemies. When the Abbasids sent
85 an army from Damascus to Cordoba in 763, Rahman was able to defeat the black-flag
86 waving soldiers. He sent the heads of their leaders in neatly-packaged boxes back to the
87 centre of Abbasid rule in Syria. Rahman, the Umayyads, and Cordoba were safe.

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89 Back in his homeland, progress had begun on the building of another city. After taking
90 power from the Umayyads, the new Abbasid Caliph Al Mansur was desperate to move
91 power away from their old capital in Damascus. His greatest achievement was the
92 foundation of a new city which he called 'The City of Peace' – we know it as Baghdad.

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94 The Abbasid Caliph sent out decrees to all corners of his Empire, calling on thousands of
95 workmen, builders and slaves to come and build his new city. Each brick was weighed
96 and every penny was counted. Within forty years of its foundation, Baghdad was a
97 thriving city. People came there from across the world – attracted by its promise of peace
98 and equality. The population rocketed, and the city grew into perhaps the most glorious
99 of the entire age.

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Lesson 3 title: What made Abbasid Baghdad so special?



Extract 3 – ‘Cordoba.’ Taken from Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: How Classical Ideas were Lost and Found: A History in Seven Cities*

1 After the successful Abbasid Revolution in 750, the first Abbasid Caliph Al-Mansur began
2 work on his new city of Baghdad. It was completed in the year 765 and when it was
3 finished Al-Mansur boasted that it would stand unrivalled against all the cities in the world.
4 He was not wrong. A safe distance from their old enemy the Byzantine empire, and
5 connected to the great trading routes of the Muslim empire, Baghdad soon became
6 unimaginably wealthy. As it did so, Al-Mansur set about transforming his capital into the
7 centre of the scientific world. He surrounded himself with Arab, India, Persian, and
8 Byzantine Greek scholars, and dedicated vast sums of money to the building of a library.

9

10 Known as the House of Wisdom, this library provided a space for intellectuals from across
11 his empire. Here, they would read, copy texts, challenge each other, and question the
12 world around them. In 771, desperate to fill the House of Wisdom with the very best books,
13 the Caliph sent ambassadors to Constantinople to request ancient Greek texts. It was in
14 this way that copies of Euclid's *The Elements* arrived in Baghdad and were translated from
15 Greek to Arabic. Over the course of the next 150 years, scholars inside the House of
16 Wisdom would translate all available Greek books on science. The scholars who made the
17 copies were so valued, that the very best would be paid the weight of the books they
18 translated in gold.

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Knowledge Check: MCQs

20 **1. The House of Wisdom tells us that...**

- 21 A. The Abbasid Caliphs thought war was important
- 22 B. The Abbasid Caliphs thought science and learning were important
- 23 C. The Abbasids Caliphs thought travel was important
- 24
- 25
- 26

2. The arrival of Euclid's *The Elements* from Constantinople tells us that...

- A. There was no trade between the Muslim empire and the Byzantine empire
- B. The Abbasid's were only interested in Greek books
- C. Trade between the Muslim empire and the Byzantine empire took place

27 Baghdad's golden age of science would take a step further under the 7th Abbasid Caliph
28 Al-Ma'mun in the years 813-830 CE. The new Caliph may have been breathtakingly
29 arrogant, but it is said that he had a child-like enthusiasm for science.

30

31 He took under his wing 3 orphaned brothers. The Banu Musa brothers had been educated
32 according to the Greek curriculum, and had studied in the House of Wisdom. So brilliant
33 was their scientific understanding, that when the excitable Al-Ma'mun came to them with
34 the most outrageous of demands, to measure the size of the earth, they got straight to
35 work.

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37 In the dead of night, and on the endless desert plains to the north-west of Baghdad, they
38 divided themselves into two small groups. Each group walked in opposite directions. Using
39 the position of a single star they stopped when they had measured one degree of the
40 earth's curve. The groups then walked back to each other, carefully measuring the
41 distance they had travelled.

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43 The Banu Musa brothers multiplied the distance they walked by 360 – the number of
44 degrees in a circle. In this way they calculated that the circumference of the earth was
45 24,500 miles. Their total was just 400 miles off the calculation given by modern science. It
46 was a breath-taking achievement.

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Knowledge Check: MCQs	
1. The Caliph Al-Ma'mun tells us that... A. Were not particularly interested in science B. Abbasid Caliphs were prepared to give time and money to science C. Were all very excitable	2. The story of the Banu Musa brothers tells us that... A. Modern science is not as good as science during the years of Abbasid Baghdad B. The scientific achievements of Abbasid Baghdad were not very good C. The scientific achievements of Abbasid Baghdad were incredible

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Lesson 4 title: Did the same things make Cordoba special?



Extract 3 – ‘Cordoba.’ Taken from Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: How Classical Ideas were Lost and Found: A History in Seven Cities*

1 By the year 860 of the common era, 100 years after prince Abd al-Rahman had
2 desperately fled across North Africa, Cordoba was a thriving city. It was large, wealthy,
3 and filled with the scents of delicious food and fragrant spices.

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5 It was around this time that scientific ideas began to arrive in the city in great numbers.
6 The great period of translation was well under way in Baghdad, and the many Greek texts
7 that had been translated into Arabic soon found their way through the Muslim empire to
8 Cordoba. Book markets were filled with men eager to get their hands on the latest
9 scientific works from Baghdad. The Caliph – Muhammad I of Cordoba – was one such
10 man.

11

12 In 865 he built a library. It was the largest of its kind in all of Western Europe and was filled
13 with the ever-growing number of scientific books that could be found in the great book
14 markets of the city.

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Knowledge Check: MCQs

16 **1. The movement of books between Baghdad and Cordoba is an example of...**

- 17
- 18 A. No connection between Baghdad and Cordoba
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- 20 B. A physical connection between Baghdad and Cordoba
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- 22 C. A symbolic connection between Baghdad and Cordoba

16 **2. The Caliph taking an interest in science is an example of...**

- 17
- 18 A. No connection between Baghdad and Cordoba
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- 20 B. A physical connection between Baghdad and Cordoba
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- 22 C. A symbolic connection between Baghdad and Cordoba

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24 One man who we know for sure brought books from Baghdad to Cordoba was a man
25 named Abbas Ibn-Firnas. Early in his life, Ibn-Firnas made the long journey across the
26 Muslim empire to the city of Baghdad. Here, he studied in the House of Wisdom.

27 When he returned to Cordoba, Ibn-Firnas's fame grew. He wrote poetry, taught
28 mathematics and music, designed and constructed a water-powered clock, and even
29 founded a planetarium to study the stars above Cordoba's night sky. He is most well
30 known, however, for attempting to fly.

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32 One morning, when Ibn-Firnas was deep in his 60s, he looked towards the Mezquita
33 mosque in Cordoba. You will remember that the foundations of the mosque had been
34 built by Abd al_Rahman, and it had since turned into the the grandest building in the city.
35 At its northern end was a tower.

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37 By this point in his life, Ibn-Firnas had become a very learned man. He had studied for
38 many years, and had used Maths, science, and reason, to conclude that a man could
39 glide safely from a great height if he had the correct equipment. Looking up at the tower,
40 Ibn-Firnas began covering himself in feathers and picked up his gear.

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42 Once at the top, we can only assume that Ibn-Firnas must have been a little scared. The
43 tower was over 100 feet tall and looked out over a sea of houses and dwellings. Holding
44 firmly onto specially designed wings, Ibn-Firnas jumped...

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46 By some miracle, the old man survived. According to some, he glided for 10 minutes,
47 soaring above the rooftops of the city. We cannot say for sure what happened, but we
48 do know that he was left both injured and disappointed, later saying that he had no idea
49 ho important a birds tail was in its landing.

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51 Despite his mad experiments, Ibn-Firnas was an incredibly important figure in Cordoba. He
52 helped begin a tradition of scientific experiment and study that would one day rival even
53 the great Baghdad. His name would be known across the Muslim empire, a world in which
54 science and learning had become king.

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Lesson 5: Why is it too simple to say that Baghdad and Cordoba were divided?



Extract 4 – ‘A flourishing trade.’ Taken from Violet Moller, , *The Map of Knowledge: How Classical Ideas were Lost and Found: A History in Seven Cities*

1 If you were to travel back 1100 years to the city of Baghdad you would find a city
2 teeming with life. Millions of people, Jews, Arabs, Persians, Byzantine Greeks, Indians and
3 more would be jostling for survival and success.

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5 You would be forgiven for wanting to spend your entire time in Baghdad. Stepping out
6 into the great Abbasid capital you would be hit with an astonishing array of sights and
7 smells. In the House of Wisdom you could meet the greatest Islamic scholars on earth and
8 discuss, science, mathematics, poetry, and philosophy.

9
10 But as you look beyond the walls of the circular city, you might want to find out more. You
11 may have heard stories of migration – the movement of people from place to another –
12 and grown interested. You may have even met migrants like Abbas Ibn-Firnas and grown
13 interested by their tales of faraway lands.

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15 And so you may decide to load a camel and leave Baghdad. Heading on the trading
16 routes that ran like rivers through the Muslim empire, you could migrate East towards India
17 or West towards Cordoba. On your journey you would likely stop and meet other migrants
18 and travellers. Many of these people will be merchants carrying precious objects to be
19 traded in the bustling markets of Europe and Asia. Some will almost certainly carry books,
20 possibly from Byzantine Constantinople.

21
22 Though these people may come from rival cities, they themselves do not share the intense
23 hatred of their leaders. You will make friends, trade stories, share food, and pray together
24 each day. if you were travelling in the year 818 CE, you may even be lucky enough to
25 meet Ziryab, making his way from Abbasid Baghdad to Umayyad Cordoba.

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Knowledge check: MCQs	
1. An example of a migrant is... A. Someone who has remained in one place B. Someone who has moved from one place to another C. Someone who is always on the move	2. Baghdad was physically connected to other cities and worlds by... A. Many walls B. Many camels C. Many trading routes
3. The merchants who brought goods between the cities of Baghdad and Cordoba represent... A. A symbolic connection between the cities B. A physical connection between the cities C. No connection between the cities	4. Which of these statements is most correct? A. The cities of Baghdad and Cordoba were fierce rivals, and all people hated the other city. B. The cities of Baghdad and Cordoba were fierce rivals, and most people hated the other city C. The cities of Baghdad and Cordoba were fierce rivals, but it was mainly the Caliphs who hated each other.

Ziryab was a legendary singer. He had been born in Baghdad and had spent time studying in the House of Wisdom. During one performance for the Abbasid Caliph, he is said to have embarrassed all other performers with the quality of his voice.

In the early 800s of the common era, Ziryab migrated from Baghdad to Cordoba. By this time, trade had opened up the Muslim empire, as different rulers built and repaired roads. Scholars travelled with merchants and enormous caravans of camels stretched along winding desert paths.

Upon his arrival in Cordoba, Ziryab was welcomed by the Umayyad Caliph Rahman III. Along with his extraordinary singing voice, Ziryab had brought with him many of the most fashionable items that could be found in Baghdad. Carried by his servants was toothpaste, asparagus, cutlery, tablecloths, fashionable new clothes and a range of exotic hairstyles sported by his train of supporters.

The Cordoban Caliphs and their royal court fell for the charm of this man from Baghdad. He became cultural icon, the man who taught wealthy Cordobans how to live in style. By the time of his death, you would have struggled to notice any difference between the lives of wealthy Cordobans and Baghdadis. It was in this way, that these two rival cities thousands of kilometres apart became that little bit closer.