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Social Studies

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The Golden Age of Baghdad

Genre	Comprehension Skills and Strategy	Text Features
Expository nonfiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sequence• Draw Conclusions• Monitor and Fix Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Captions• Maps• Time Line• Sidebar

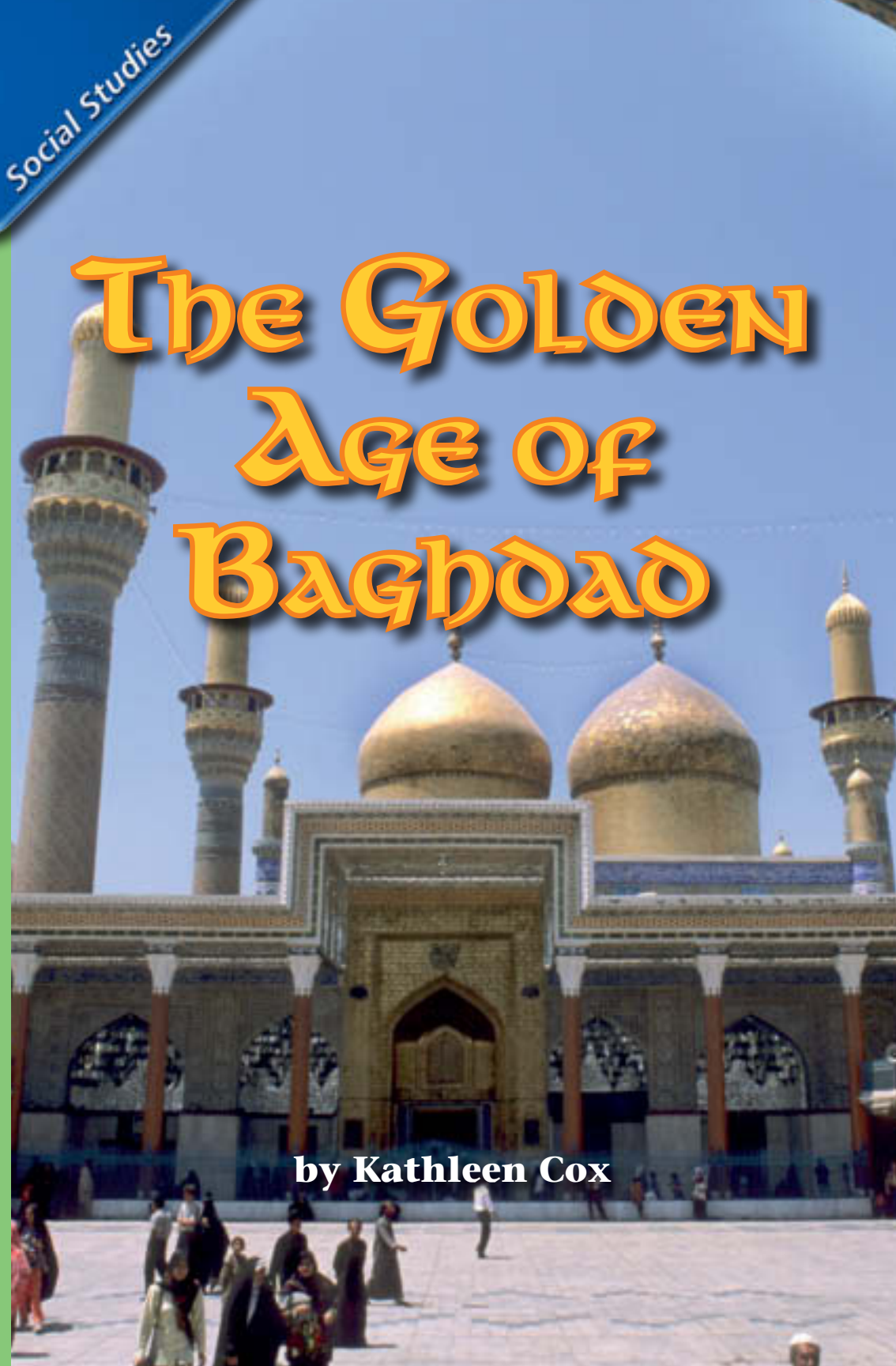
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by Kathleen Cox



Vocabulary

beacon

caravans

legacy

manuscripts

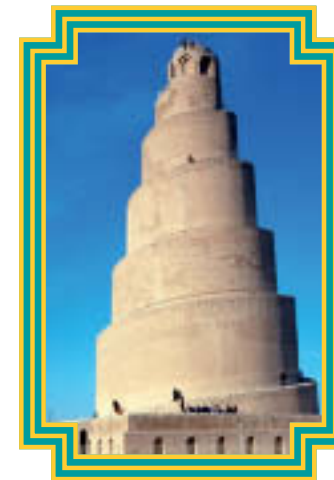
medieval

observatory

patron

Word count: 2,406

The Golden Age of Baghdad



by **Kathleen Cox**



Note: The total word count includes words in the running text and headings only. Numerals and words in chapter titles, captions, labels, diagrams, charts, graphs, sidebars, and extra features are not included.

Editorial Offices: Glenview, Illinois • Parsippany, New Jersey • New York, New York
Sales Offices: Needham, Massachusetts • Duluth, Georgia • Glenview, Illinois
Coppell, Texas • Ontario, California • Mesa, Arizona

In the Center of the Medieval World

Today we know Baghdad as the capital of Iraq. But Baghdad has a long history. In fact, from the eighth century through the thirteenth century, Baghdad was one of the richest and most advanced cities in the **medieval** world.

Located in Asia but near Europe, Baghdad was the gateway to the Arabian Peninsula and Africa. People didn't yet know about the continents that lay on the far side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Baghdad was a powerful **beacon** that drew travelers from distant lands. Traders came by camel **caravans** or in ships to sell every imaginable product in one of the world's largest markets.

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Illustrations Susan J. Carlson

ISBN: 0-328-13664-6

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The Ancient Greeks

Long before the founding of Baghdad, Europe went through the rise and fall of two great civilizations—one Greek and one Roman. Around 600 B.C., the ancient Greeks began to emerge. Over time, they developed a remarkable culture.

Greek scholars greatly advanced the world's knowledge. In addition to philosophy, the Greeks studied science, math, medicine, and astronomy. They composed great literature. They also kept written records of wars and other historic events. Architects built beautiful cities such as Athens and Alexandria.

Then, in 338 B.C., Greece was defeated by Macedonia, its northern neighbor. During the years 336–323 B.C., the new Macedonian king, Alexander the Great, established the Macedonian Empire. Greek ideas and customs spread as far as Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and India.

The Empire of Alexander the Great, around 323 B.C.



Alexander's vast empire stretched as far east as India.

The Roman Empire

The Roman Empire was established by its first emperor, Augustus, who was named by the Roman Senate in 27 B.C. Even before that, Rome controlled a large area around the Mediterranean Sea, which included Macedonia. As an empire, Rome acquired even more territory.

As the empire grew, the knowledge and customs of Roman civilization spread with it. The work of historians, playwrights, sculptors, and craftsmen all thrived in the Roman Empire. The Romans also made great technological advances, including a system of paved roads and aqueducts.

After several centuries, the empire began to weaken. Finally, in A.D. 395, the empire was divided into East and West. Then, in A.D. 476, the Roman Empire in the West came to an end when barbarian invaders defeated its last emperor.



The Roman Empire included parts of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.



This is a picture from a fourteenth century book. It shows a monk giving shelter to a knight. Catholic monks, priests, and nuns kept reading and writing alive in Europe during medieval times.

The Middle Ages

The invasion and fall of Rome did not lead to the formation of a new empire in Europe. Instead, many tiny kingdoms arose. Law and order crumbled in Europe, and there was no strong central government. Roads that had linked cities together fell into disrepair. Trade broke down. Local markets had fewer products to sell. The people in each small kingdom had to produce whatever they needed or do without it.

This period in Europe is known as the Middle Ages, or the medieval period. Meanwhile, the Middle East was gaining power. A new culture began to take hold.

A mosque is a place of worship for Muslims. The Great Omayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria, was built by Muslim leaders between 705 and 715.

The Muslim Empire

Near the end of the sixth century, a man named Muhammad was born in Mecca, which became a sacred city in Saudi Arabia. Muhammad established the faith called Islam, whose followers are called Muslims, or Moslems.

Inspired by their new religion, Muslim armies began to advance north from the Arabian Peninsula. In 635, they conquered the city of Damascus in Syria.

Damascus at that time was a Christian city in the Byzantine Empire, which was what the Eastern Roman Empire was known as. With the Muslim takeover came a new set of cultural and social rules. But the Muslims allowed Jews and Christians who did not convert to Islam to worship as they pleased.

Each ruler of the Muslim empire was called a caliph, or successor of the prophet Muhammad. In 661, the fifth caliph founded the Umayyad caliphate, or dynasty. Damascus became its capital. Within a century, the caliphate stretched east and west, all the way from Spain to India.



The Abbasid Caliphate

In the eighth century, people from a different family of Arab Muslims called the Abbasids took control of the caliphate. The Abbasid caliphate lasted from 750 to 1258. In an effort to erase all traces of Omayyad rule, they destroyed the great buildings of Damascus. In 762, the second Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur, moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad.

The first three centuries of the Abbasid caliphate are known as a golden age of Islam. Baghdad became the cultural and commercial capital of the Muslim world. Al-Mansur established central government agencies and a professional army. Many non-Arab Muslims were able to rise through these two institutions.

From 786 to 809, the Abbasid caliphate was at the height of its power under Harun al-Rashid. Riches from all over the world flowed into Baghdad, and the empire stretched all the way from Tunisia in North Africa to central Asia.

The Abbasid Caliphate



Time Line: The Muslim Empire

- 635 — Muslim armies conquer Damascus.
- 661 — The Umayyad caliphate is founded.
- 750 — The Abbasid caliphate takes power.
- 762 — Caliph al-Mansur moves the capital to Baghdad.
- 786 — Harun al-Rashid becomes caliph and ushers in a time of wealth and power.
- 812 — Al-Mamun becomes caliph and ushers in a time of culture and learning.
- 836 — Caliph al-Mu-tasim moves the capital from Baghdad to Samarra.
- 892 — Baghdad once again becomes the capital.
- 945 — A rival dynasty takes control of Baghdad; Abbasid power is reduced.
- 1258 — Mongols invade Baghdad. Abbasid caliphate ends.

This is the al-Malwiya minaret. A minaret is the tower of a mosque, from which Muslims are called to prayer. Today, visitors can reach the top by walking along its spiral walls.



The Abbasid caliph al-Mamun ruled during the years 812–833. Under his rule, learning and culture bloomed. Muslim scholars built upon the best of Greek, Roman, Persian, and Indian traditions.

In 836, the caliph al-Mu'tasim founded a city north of Baghdad called Samarra to house his new Turkish guard. Samarra also replaced Baghdad as the capital of the caliphate. New styles and ways of doing things were developed and copied throughout the empire. However, in 892, the capital returned to Baghdad.

Around 850, internal fighting caused the political unity of the Abbasid caliphate to begin to fall apart. Independent dynasties were created in parts of North Africa. In fact, during the years 861–870, the Turkish military force in Samarra made several caliphs their captives. During those years, the Turkish military, not the caliphs, held political control.

In the first half of the tenth century, several Iranian dynasties took control of the eastern part of the caliphate. In 945, one of these dynasties took control of Baghdad. The tight reign of the Abbasids was over. The caliphate remained in name until 1258, but its leaders were just figureheads.

A Good Location for Trade

Baghdad's location on the Tigris River allowed it to become a center of trade. A network of routes, later called the Great Silk Road, connected Baghdad to Central Asia, China, and India. Traders traveled in camel and horse caravans across the Middle East into Asia. The Great Silk Road also headed north into Europe.

The Great Silk Road was a remarkable achievement for the people of the ancient and medieval worlds. It made possible the free flow of goods for hundreds of years. And, importantly, it also made possible the exchange of ideas and mutual understanding among far-flung cultures.

Another route connected the new capital to Egypt and North Africa. From North Africa, ships sailed to Spain, allowing al-Mansur to stay connected to other people in the Muslim empire.

A small caravansary sits along the Great Silk Road, far away from Baghdad in Tash-Rabat, Kyrgyzstan. A caravansary was a kind of fortified inn. It provided food, rest, shelter, and protection for travelers, regardless of race, language, or religion.



North Gate, Baghdad

The Greatness of the Tigris River

The soil in the Tigris River valley was rich. Farmers grew vegetables and grains, along with many date trees and fig trees that supplied plenty of food for the people of Baghdad. The Tigris provided enough water for drinking, bathing, and keeping the gardens and parks well cared for.

The new capital of Baghdad was surrounded by a moat filled with water. A 100-foot-high wall circled the city. Four entry gates, adding more security, were cut into the wall. Each gate opened to a different direction—north, south, east, and west.

Al-Mansur lived in an enormous marble palace with a green dome. The palace was tucked behind its own set of high walls, along with the city's most important mosque, or place of worship. Four main roads led from the palace through the city to each of the four gates.

Life in Baghdad

The bazaars, or markets, of Baghdad were huge. Customers wandered through rows of shops and stalls. They loved to smell flowers and perfumes, gaze at dazzling jewels and gold, and feel soft silks and other fine fabrics. In addition, there were more than one hundred shops that sold nothing but books.

People stared at the vessels anchored at the base of marble steps that led down to the Tigris River. The wide variety of boats and ships reflected different cultures.

There were simple rafts made of animal skins and wood poles. There were Arab sailing boats and colorfully painted ships from China.



A market in Baghdad



The Kazimayn Mosque in Baghdad was begun in the eleventh century at the burial site of the early Abbasid caliphate family members. It was completed in the nineteenth century.

Golden domes and minarets



Mosaic tiles decorate the interior of the mosque.

The Search for Knowledge

The caliph al-Mansur knew that his city of Baghdad would succeed economically. But he also wanted scholars to come to his new city, just as they had come to Athens in ancient Greece.

The Arabs were familiar with Greek culture. They had been introduced to it while under the rule of Alexander the Great centuries ago. They valued the achievements of the Greeks in philosophy, mathematics, and science.

Al-Mansur became a **patron** of scholars. He paid them to live and study in Baghdad. They were as important to him as the traders and merchants. The traders provided the fabulous goods and produce that enriched the quality of life. But the wisdom of the scholars enriched people's minds.

It was al-Mansur's dream to introduce all the ancient works of the Greeks to his own Muslim empire. Many of the Greek **manuscripts** weren't available. Copies had been misplaced or destroyed during the many small wars of medieval Europe.

Al-Mansur persuaded the leader of the nearby Byzantine empire to give him some copies of the great works. He also sent scholars from his empire to find them. Al-Mansur wanted important Greek works to be translated into Arabic. He offered to pay scholars to come to Baghdad to work on this project.



This is a ninth-century Arabic translation of a page from a first-century Greek book on medicines.

Scholars who came to work on the translation project loved Baghdad. The streets, the city bazaar, and even the river were filled with things to observe. They were able to meet with foreign traders from all over the world. They could examine clever new inventions, new foods, and even new styles of clothing.

Visiting scholars and tradesmen brought information and news about their own cultures and other cities they had visited. They introduced people in Baghdad to different religious beliefs and customs.

The Abbasid caliphate continued to build on al-Mansur's **legacy**, which combined a love of both knowledge and commerce. Al-Mamun, a ruler who was al-Mansur's great-grandson, was so fond of the great thinkers that he built them a special institution. He called it the Academy of Wisdom. It included a large library and an **observatory** for studying the stars and the moon.

Once the leading scholars finished translating most of the important Greek manuscripts, they turned their attention to India and the East. Traders who had visited India saw that nation's progress in mathematics and science. Scholars found copies of Indian manuscripts and translated them into Arabic. Then, even more knowledge was made available to the people of the Abbasid caliphate.

The Astrolabe

One of the many contributions made by Muslims was the further development of the astrolabe, a device first used by the ancient Greeks.

An astrolabe is an ancient instrument for observing heavenly bodies. The Muslims improved astrolabes and put them to new uses. By developing new mathematical formulas, they used astrolabes to calculate their position on the face of the Earth, the time of sunrise and sunset, and the direction of certain locations from their position. This last use had religious importance. With an astrolabe, a Muslim could tell the direction of Mecca and thus the correct direction in which to face during prayer.

Muslim astronomers also created astrolabes with gears that made it possible to determine the positions of the planets and stars.



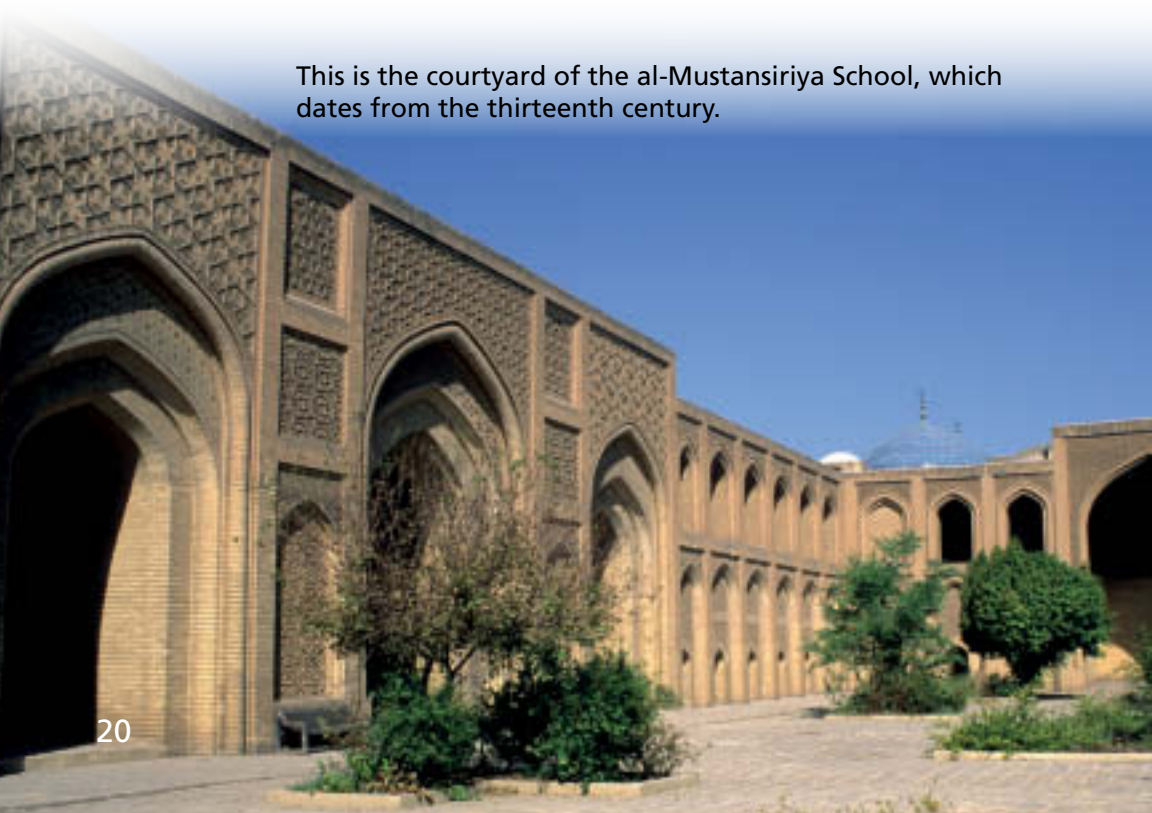
This astrolabe was especially made for finding the correct direction to face for prayer, which is in the direction of the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

Scholars at the Academy of Wisdom added their own knowledge to what they learned from the great thinkers of India and Greece. They created algebra and chemistry formulas. They wrote important mathematics textbooks and a medical encyclopedia that was used by doctors for five hundred years.

In fact, Arabs and Muslims contributed more to mathematics than probably any other civilization. The Muslim civilization gave us arithmetic, algebra, geometry, the decimal system, and the use of the figure zero. It was the use of a zero as a placeholder that made possible the everyday addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division problems that we do today.

Scholars also made important contributions to literature. The *Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of fables set in Baghdad, was translated from Arabic into many other languages. The stories were carried by traders to distant lands and became popular with readers everywhere. You can still read them today.

This is the courtyard of the al-Mustansiriya School, which dates from the thirteenth century.



This photo shows the complex carvings in stone that decorate the ceilings of an outside passageway at the al-Mustansiriya School.

The Muslim rulers who came to power after al-Mansur built hospitals. They turned the mosques of Baghdad into centers of learning, where Muslims could read the new books created at the Academy of Wisdom. The people of Baghdad were encouraged to learn about new discoveries in health, mathematics, and science.

The thirteenth-century al-Mustansiriya School in Baghdad is an example of this continued interest in learning. It was built in six years, during the reign of the 37th and last Abbasid caliph of Baghdad, al-Mustansir Billah, for whom the school is named. The school was the most important university in the Abbasid world. It had courses in mathematics, pharmacology and medicine, theology, astronomy, and Arabic.



This picture from a fifteenth-century book shows the temporary conquest of the city of Damietta in Egypt. It happened during the Seventh Crusade.

The Golden Age Lives On

The influence of Baghdad's golden age continues even to this day. The Mongols adopted Islam, and their descendants spread the religion through India and far into Asia. The Mughals, the last powerful descendants of the Mongols, were a line of Muslim emperors who ruled India from 1526 to 1858. Under their reign, the respect for knowledge and learning of the Abbasid caliphate was continued.

Of course, the world in general owes a great debt to the medieval Muslim civilization. After all, it was the Muslims who preserved much of the knowledge of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The world at large has also benefited from the many innovations and advances developed during the golden age of Baghdad.

The Taj Mahal in India is one of the true wonders of the world. It was built by an emperor as a tomb for his wife. It is a fine example of Muslim architecture.



The End of an Era

The glory days of Baghdad could not last forever. Throughout the Abbasid caliphate, internal fighting weakened the empire. The caliphate was also subjected to many invasions by outsiders who wanted the wealth of the Abbasids for themselves.

Under the cause of taking back the Holy Land from the Muslims, Christian Europeans launched eight Crusades, or holy wars, against the caliphate in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. These wars, though bloody, were mostly a nuisance to the Abbasid caliphate.

The invaders who finally ended the Abbasid caliphate were the Mongols from Asia. Under their leader, Genghis Khan, they began to attack Muslim lands. In 1258, under Hulagu Khan, they invaded Baghdad and put an end to the reign of the Abbasids.

Glossary

beacon *n.* a source of guidance or inspiration.

caravans *n.* groups of travelers journeying together for a period of time, often with animals.

legacy *n.* a thing or idea that is handed down from the past.

manuscripts *n.* books written completely by hand.

medieval *adj.* belonging to the Middle Ages.

observatory *n.* a building designed for studying the stars and planets.

patron *n.* a person who supports someone or something with money.

Reader Response

1. Using a graphic organizer like the one below, put the caliphates of al-Mamun, al-Mansur, and al-Mustansir Billah in order, earliest to latest, and write a sentence about each.

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graph TD; A[ ] --> B[ ]; B --> C[ ]
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2. What is your understanding of the purpose of a mosque, and where in this book could you check your answer?
3. Look up the word *patron* in the dictionary. How do the definitions in the dictionary compare to how the word is used in this book?
4. What contribution of the golden age of Baghdad do you think is most important today? Why?