Lecture 11

Dissolution and diffusion: the arrival of an Islamic society
Review

• **Aim of lectures**
• Final lecture: focus on religious conversion
• During the Abbasid period conversion primarily happens at elite level (muwalis)
• Popular conversion spotty and inconsistent
• After the fall of the caliphate conversion seems to speed up
• Mass diffusion throughout region and beyond
• How and why this happens
Lecture structure

1. Conversion and diffusion
2. The Abbasid dissolution
3. The rise of local dynasties
4. Islam and political legitimacy
1. Conversion

• Difficult topic
• Hard to know why people convert
• Issue clouded by European prejudice
Why do people convert?

- Reasons manifold: personal, political, economic, sociological
- Can be heartfelt: embracing principals & ideals
- Can be practical: motivated by worldly reasons
- Does not mean turning one’s back on culture
- Islam easily adapted to diverse social structures
European prejudice

- European denigration of Muhammad
- Muslim Imperialism imagined as barbaric
- Belief in forced conversion

Late Medieval Christian manuscript

1500 woodblock print
Diffusion

• The process by which Islam spread throughout South-West, South and Central Asia
• More concrete and trace-able phenomenon
• We can presume that where Islam was prominent converts were likely to follow
Pathways of diffusion

• Conquest
• Economy
• Imperial elites
Conquest

- Islam followed movements of Arab armies
- Armies consistently deployed during the imperial period
- Often contributed to conversion
- Particularly when tribes joined in conquest
- Berber tribes of North Africa
- Arab tribes of Fertile Crescent
- Turkish tribes of Central Asia
Garrison town and forts

• Garrison towns:
• Islamic armies mixing with armies of conquered areas
• Mixing with slaves and administrators
• Solidarity of military communities fostered conversion
• Border outposts and forts
• Brought Islam in contact with those outside empire
• Wide array of communities witness Islam and Islamic conduct
Economy

• Movement of merchants took Islam to remote areas
• Malaysia, Indonesia, China, East and West Africa, Balkans and Caucuses
• Reliability of Islamic financial systems and contracts
• Guilds and commercial organisations created institutional context and community
Elites

- Institutions of power associated with Islam
- Encouraged conversion among elite class
- Baghdad court cultivated a shared elite Islamic culture
- Where Islamic elites invested in strong Islamic society, larger proportion of the population Muslim
- Elites operating on a grand imperial scale during the Abbasid period
- The strength of Islamic society spotty
- As power becomes more localised Islam becomes more significant
2. The Abbasid dissolution

- Abbasid power system predicated on network of imperial elites
- Breaks down after civil war between al-Ma’mun and al-Rashid
- Civil war encouraged al-Ma’mun and his successor (Mu’tasim) to build army that would be loyal to Caliphate
- Not loyal to particular dynasty or caste
The Mamlukes

- Means owned
- Slave soldiers
- Soldiers of Caliph
- Held in high esteem
- Mostly Turks
- Known for military abilities
Mamluke revolt

- Lack of community ties a problem
- Did not speak Arabic
- Turkish, Caucasian or Georgian descent
- 836 riots in Baghdad due to local tensions with Mamlukes
- Al-Mu’tasim moves imperial city and garrisons to Samarra
- 861 Mamluke coup in Samarra
- Prop up Caliph puppets to rule on their behalf
- 6 different Caliphs assassinated between 861 and 870
- Indicative of infighting between Mamlukes
3. The rise of local dynasties

• Abbasid empire dissolves
• Replaced by precarious local dynasties and principalities
• Some small and evanescent
• Some larger and become well-established
• Major dynasties:
  • Buyids
  • Ghaznavids
  • Seljuks
  • Fatimids
  • Crusaders
**Buyids (934-1062):** Shi-ite Persian dynasty ruled the area of Iran and Iraq including Baghdad.
The Ghaznavids (977-1186): Sunni Turkic empire ruled Persia and central Asia
The Seljuks (1037-1194): Turkic empire ruled Iran, Iraq, central Asia, Syria and Anatolia
The Fatimids (909-1171): Ruled Egypt and North Africa for almost 300 yrs
Crusaders

Period of weakness and infighting

Europeans conquered the Levant
Foreign rule

• Ghaznavids and Seljuks are Turks
• Do not speak Arabic
• No shared history with the people they rule
• Sometimes have some regional political legitimacy
• When expanded borders often used Islamic justifications (e.g., defending the caliphate)
End of Islamic empire?

• Political fragmentation marks end of consolidated Abbasid power
• But empire should not be thought in terms of consolidated political rule
• Despite end of political unity cultural unity is retained
• Islamic empire transcends the government of the Abbasid Caliph
Thesis put forward by Lapidus and Hodgson

As a coherent culturally entity the Islamic empire not only survives but is strengthened after the dissolution of centralised power
Why this is the case

- Local and dynastic political powers have little political legitimacy or any organic bonds to the local people over whom they ruled
- While they eviscerate political and military power of the Caliphate
- They heavily invest in its symbolic power
- Swear allegiance to the Caliph as head of Islamic community
- Actively engage in public demonstrations of piety
- Support the Caliphate and Caliphal court
- Baghdad remains symbolical heart of empire
4. Islam and legitimacy

Dynasties used Islam as a mechanisms of political legitimacy and social unity

- Often worked with Abbasid rulers and clans
- Upheld the office of Caliph
- Established local courts and court cultures
- Created strong Islamic society
- Supported the Ulama
The rise of the ulama

• Ulama – mean of learning
• Muftis, Islamic scholars, poets
• Heavy investment and patronage of ulama
• Turbulent political period
• Dynasties rising and falling
• Scholars constantly on the move
• Also in high demand
Ibn Khaldun

- One of the greatest Islamic scholars
- Political theorist and historian whose work still read and debated today
- Spent most of his life moving from dynasty to dynasty
- Political tide turned quickly
Why ulama important

• Facilitated network between different classes
• Provided Islamic legitimacy
• Symbolised piety
Facilitated network between classes

- Successful exercise of authority meant working through traditional institutions and local channels
- Rulers did not understand local institutions or systems
- Relied upon ulama who were integrated and respected in community
- Muftis, qadis and other men of learning involved in many areas of religious and secular life
- Advised or involved in education, trade, commercial banking, etc.
- Many secular activities had ulama to advise on how to make processes and transactions ‘Islamic’
Provided Islamic legitimacy

- Tense but necessary symbiotic relationship between dynastic rulers and ulama
- Dynastic princes ruled by virtue of political and military authority
- Ulama ruled by virtue of their religious legitimacy
- Foreign rulers needed the Ulama to establish legitimacy and facilitate administrative and bureaucratic machinery
- Ulama needed local rulers because depended upon patronage and the offices of state they bestowed
Symbolised piety

- Local rulers used symbols of religious unity to solidify political solidarity and obedience
- Patronised not just ulama but artists and poets at court
- Ulama played a central in symbolising a cohesive cultural empire in a fragmented political world
Symbolism of piety

• Foreign rulers had to legitimate political authority
• Did so within acceptable terminology of the day: Islam
• Islam a dominant and operative centrifugal force
• The language through which political legitimacy articulated
• Saladin: famous for vanquishing crusaders
• Portrayal in classical literature: man of piety
• Whether piety for real or show a matter of debate
• Point: it was felt to be necessary
In the post imperia period, the unity of the Middle East was no longer to be found in empire, but in the almost universal diffusion of certain forms of social and political organization and of allegiance to common values and symbols. For the first time in Middle Eastern history, the people of Iran and Iraq belonged, if not to the same empire, to the same culture, religion and type of political society. Islam had become a universal society without a universal empire (Lapidus, p. 236)
It cannot be said that the civilisation broke up into so many separate cultures. It was held together in virtue of a common Islamicate social pattern which, by enabling members of any part of the society to be accepted as members of it anywhere else, assured the circulation of ideas and manners throughout its area. Muslims always felt themselves to be citizens of the whole Dar al-Islam (Hodgson Vol. 2 p.9)
Conclusions