

5.13 Islamic Golden Age and the Golden Age package

A number of conditions must be in place for the emergence of a “Golden Age” in any civilization. These conditions are necessary, but they might not be sufficient. They include three interrelated developments: political stability, economic prosperity, and the emergence of cultural centers for the exchange of knowledge. But political stability and economic prosperity do not ensure there will be investments in learning. Golden Ages can take different forms but they tend to produce philosophical and scientific advances, experiments in art, literature, and monumental architecture.

One of the classic Golden Ages of global history was in the Islamic world between the 9th and 13th centuries. A possible start date is the founding of the House of Wisdom by the Abbasid Caliph Harun-al Rashid in Baghdad about 800 AD. It ended with the defeat of Abbasid caliphate by Mongol invaders at the end of the 13th century.

Under the sponsorship of the Abbasids, scholars migrated to Baghdad from across the Islamic world. They created an academic community that expanded knowledge of philosophy, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and optics. They also translated written works from other languages, including Greek and Chinese, into Arabic. During the Islamic Golden Age centers of learning were also established in Fez, Morocco, Cairo, Egypt, Iran, and al-Andalus (Spain).



Scholars at an Abbasid library by Yahyá al-Wasiti, 1237

Islamic artists often focused on replicating illuminated manuscripts. Architecture and engineering were dedicated to the construction of mosques. Poetry was a favored form of written expression. Unique intellectual contributions from this period included the development of algebra by the mathematician al-Khwarizmi. al-Khwarizmi promoted use of the decimal system and wrote about the astrolabe, sundial, and geography. For his book, *Picture of the Earth*, he calculated the coordinates of hundreds of cities and offered advice for creating a new map of the world.

Important contributions of the Islamic Gold Age were made in medicine. The earliest known Islamic hospital was built in Baghdad 805. Other hospitals were built in Damascus, and Cordoba, Spain. The hospitals had departments for systemic diseases, surgery, and orthopedics. They also prepared new physicians. The Arab physician al-Zahrawi performed the first recorded mastectomy to treat breast cancer.

Questions

1. Why is a “Golden Age” considered a “package”?
2. What were some important achievements of the Islamic Golden Age?
3. In your opinion, what is the most important factor contributing to the emergence of a Golden Age?