

The land of the ancient near east history essay

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The land of the Ancient Near East was mainly under control by the Byzantine and Sasanian empires with small communities of Jews spread out in different cities. The Byzantine and Sasanian empires were the two big ruling powers with the most land, each with their own religious backgrounds. Gradually after the coming of Prophet Muhammad, a historical transformational process took place when a small group of Muslims established themselves as a community in the city of Medina. This community transformed into a caliphate empire, which was centered in the city of Baghdad. To begin with the process of transformation, the tribe Quraysh, from which Prophet Muhammad came, were established traders with connections across Arabia (Donner, 6). The key point here was that along with having connections across Arabia they also had gained "experience in the organization and management of people and materials" (Donner, 6). This was important because if you had the knowledge on how to organize and manage people it was easier to establish control. We see the influence of these ideas when Prophet Muhammad begins to spread his message. Not many people joined him however, some members of his tribe did. Later, when his message reached Yathrib the connection with the people populated there helped Prophet Muhammad send his followers to safety in Yathrib. When he himself went there, Yathrib became known as "Medina" ("The Prophet's City") (Donner, 9). Here we can see the early stages of transformation where many of his followers that migrated to Medina were then considered a community, whereas before they were considered just a small group. As part of a community, Muhammad and his followers gained political standing and grew larger. After Prophet Muhammad's death, his successor Abu Bakr was able to

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take the Arabian Peninsula under control with the use of Ridda wars. From the Ridda wars, they were able to take over key areas of opposition but only went after the ones they could handle. When they had gained enough power and support up to the extent that they essentially had a standing army, they were then able to take on more stronger, powerful opponents (Donner, 11). What is important here is the formation of a standing army; a standing army is a critical part in early stages of developing an empire. It allows a developing empire to protect themselves from attacks and allows them to attack larger territories. This is what is seen when the Believers go after the Byzantine and Sasanian empires; this way they were able to gain more land and it opened a pathway to go beyond to further territories and resemble more of an empire. After Abu Bakr came successors Umar, Uthman, and Ali. During the times of Uthman and Ali, there was unrest between the Believers as to who the right successor should be and how to select them. This unrest ultimately led to the first and second civil wars. Nevertheless, all the Believers were devoted to the same cause, which allowed them to become one after the wars were over. This was important because they never lost sight from what they were actually trying to achieve regardless of whom to choose as leader. A form of unity remained which kept them going. The Umayyad dynasty began during the civil wars where Muawiya was recognized as the caliph with his capital in Damascus (Donner, 16). The Umayyad dynasty was overthrown by the Abbasids (Donner, 19). Before the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad's, they planned and initiated an opposition movement. The interesting thing they did was disguise themselves under the name of "the family of Muhammad," so no one knew their intentions for going after the caliphate. This allowed the Abbasids to go undetected by the

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Umayyad's when they were rallying up a movement. This way they were also able to gain support from other groups, such as the Shiites (Donner, 25). After the Abbasids came into power by conquering the Umayyad armies and killing the Umayyad caliph they wanted to start fresh from the Umayyad's. The second Abbasid caliph, Al-Mansur, created a new capital that was Baghdad in order to start fresh and to leave behind the evil the Umayyad's had created. The new capital, Baghdad became very important in the development of the empire because from then on the Abbasid dynasty had control over the caliphate all the way up to the end of its life in 1258. The Abbasid dynasty was in power from 750 to 1258. By making Baghdad their capital it helped them establish themselves as the holders of the caliphate, showing how much power they had. From Baghdad they ventured further to distant lands. Baghdad proved to be a powerful center for the empire up to the point that the Abbasids had to maintain their strong power against members of their own family who were also trying to get their way. It was not only them but also members of other groups (Donner, 25). This establishment of a new capital was a significant part in the development of a caliphal empire. From here on Baghdad became a power center for the developing empire, however there was the problem of how to choose the next successor. Even by trying to start fresh, there was still the struggle for the caliphate where the main issue in the struggle was succession. There were the Alids who were still trying to get to the caliphate. During the early Abbasid rule, we see an example of the strength they had in Baghdad, where some of the Alids realized that the Abbasids had become so strong in the centres of power of the empire that the Alids stood no chance in front of them. As a result, they had to leave and move to much more inaccessible

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places to establish bases so they could make plans to challenge the Abbasids. The Abbasids had to deal with outside people going after the caliphate as well as focus on how to manage their own succession within the Abbasid family dynasty (Donner, 26). Trying to manage succession within the Abbasid family led to many problems with a major one being a civil war after the death of the caliph Harun al-Rashid. He had tried to make the succession go to his son however, his brother al-Mamun took over, which led to much bitterness. As caliph, Al-Mamun tried to control the empire from his own capital, Marv. However, that did not work out so well and led to much discomfort, thus in the end he had to move his court to Baghdad and let it stay the capital. What this shows is the significance of Baghdad in the caliphal empire because when Al-Mamun tried to establish a new capital no matter how much he tried he could not make it work and had to accept Baghdad as the empire center (Donner, 27). This further demonstrated that Baghdad was critical in expansion of the empire. Baghdad became an important place for governing the empire, and in conquest for new land. In developing an empire you need to protect what you have, expand further, and to manage everything. To protect and expand an empire we need an army, which there was, but it was not a professional one; it was composed of regular people. Nevertheless, this army still helped the Abbasids' increase their territories and in attacking the Byzantines. Yet, it was still important that a professional army had more control and better protection against enemies, which is what led the caliph, al-Mutasim, to create a professional army. His professional army provided these necessities (Donner, 29). Making an army and conquering land is one thing but to manage it all is another. For this reason, the Abbasids created a bureaucracy. The bureaucracy contained

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intelligent heads that managed all the accounts and taxes. They collected taxes of all the lands, paid the army, and took care of all administrative records (Donner, 29). Baghdad was a very large city at the time with a number of citizens and size that is astounding. However, there were other cities that helped Baghdad grow. Since it was so large, everyday goods had to be imported and some goods even came from all the way across the globe (Donner, 32). This shows the mere size and reach of the caliphal empire that first started out from a small group of Muslims, grew into a large community then an empire.