**From Baghdad to Córdoba**

**Topic Overview**

This lecture will explore classical Islamic civilisation from around 750-1250. This period witnessed the rise of a number of cities in the Islamic world which functioned as significant cultural hubs within and beyond the Islamic world. This period is often now branded as a ‘Golden Age’ and a moment when Muslims and non-Muslims working in the Islamic world generated world leading science of various kinds. This has both positive and negative aspects in the present which will also be considered in the lecture.

**Books, articles etc that would be helpful for the teachers to use in preparing their own lessons**

* A. K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs*, London: IB Tauris (2009).
* J. Dodds, M. Menocal and A. Balbale (eds), *The Arts of Intimacy*,
* R. Hitchcock, *Muslim Spain Reconsidered from 711-1502*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2014).
* H. Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs: When Baghdad ruled the Muslim World*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson (2004).
* A. Salvatore, R. Tottoli, B. Rahimi (eds), *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam*, Oxford: John Wiley (2018).

**Websites/films**

* BBC Radio 4 ‘In Our Time’, numerous episodes on Islamic Civilization and History, including several on Islamic philosophers and scientists such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and al-Biruni.
* BBC Documentary: *Science and Islam* by Jim al-Khalili, available on YouTube.
* BBC Documentary: *An Islamic History of Europe* by Rageh Omar, available on YouTube.
* BBC Radio 3, *The Essay: The Islamic Golden Age*, 20 episodes,  <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03jyxbb/episodes/guide>

**From Baghdad to Córdoba (Amira K. Bennison)**

This lecture will briefly consider the Islamic world during the ʿAbbasid caliphate (c. 750-1250) with a focus on two cities, Baghdad in Iraq and Córdoba in Spain, which are described in Arabic sources as centres of high culture.

This is an interesting and important moment to study and insert into the world historical narrative to see the Islamic world, and the Middle East in particular, not as an aberrant, ‘failed’ region but as the nexus of an impressive world civilisation, comparable to Greece, Rome, India, China etc.

**The Big Picture: A Pre-modern Form of Globalisation**

This operated under the aegis of an Islamic religio-political institution – the caliphate – which allowed considerable local political autonomy but aspirations to be part of a larger religious and cultural whole – a medieval form of ‘globalisation’?

* Arabic as a *lingua franca*: religious language -> administrative language -> language of learning. Like English today, people spoke many languages but could communicate in Arabic in required settings.
* Mobility of people and ideas: religious importance of hajj -> search for knowledge -> information exchange.
* Strong urban networks and circulation of commodities (textiles especially), supported by an ethical market ethos. Cosmopolitan environment.

**The ‘Scientific’ Revolution in Baghdad**

Study of the cultural achievements of the Islamic world during the period from c. 750-1250, when the Abbasid caliphs ruled and/or reigned in Iraq, tends to focus on science, broadly understood, and the so-called Translation Movement (Greek, Pahlavi, Sanskrit -> Arabic). (Dimitri Gutas, George Saliba. Jim al-Khalili). Islamic contributions are very significant in the history of science.

* Mathematics (pure and applied)
* Natural sciences
* Astronomy and astrology
* Medicine
* Philosophy

Cultural achievement also encompassed:

* the actual development of the religious system what now constitutes ‘Islam’ out of the framework set out in the early Islamic period,
* the Arabic and Persian literary canons, and,
* forms of architecture and building that we still admire today.

This process was not limited to Baghdad but spread across the Islamic urban network to cities as far apart as Samarkand in Central Asia and Córdoba in the Iberian peninsula.

**Cosmopolitanism and Islam**

* Contributions of people of diverse background and religion using the *lingua franca* of Arabic but gradual conversion of families involved in knowledge production over time.
* High level Muslim patronage of scholarship in Baghdad, Córdoba and other cities, through payment of scholars, organisation of ‘salons’, foundation of libraries.
* Societal support and approval for learning, ‘seek knowledge to China’, a Baghdad ‘research culture’ (translation-engagement-transmission) which was then replicated in local forms across the Islamic world.

**The City in the Classical Islamic World**

Turning to the broader urban environment, cities like Baghdad and Córdoba were internationally renowned in their day for size, grandeur, and facilities such as baths, hospitals, water supply and disposal, and even street lighting in Córdoba which astonished visitors from Latin Christendom.

Quotes and Images

(Impact of the Ancient City project: archaeology combined with texts to make us think again about whether the rise of Islam and the Islamic empire was a rupture)

The Mediterranean borderlands between areas ruled by Muslims and Christians provided the portals through which knowledge travelled from the Arabic-Islamic environment to the Latin-Christian environment.

* Translation in Toledo after its capture by the Castilians in 1085.
* The multi-lingual and multi-cultural world of the Normans in Sicily.
* Fibonacci and Raymond Llull in North Africa.

**Studying the ‘Golden Age’ Positives:**

* De-linking Islam and Muslims from contemporary geo-political issues and the popular reductionist association of Islam with violence.
* Generation of a positive image of Muslim cultural achievements and recognition of their agency in contributing to world historical developments which are part of broader story of mankind.

**Studying the ‘Golden Age’ Pitfalls:**

* A tendency to become overly apologetic, see the past through ‘rose-tinted spectacles’, a common feature of the study of Iberia (modern Spain and Portugal), for instance, where *convivencia* is a common way of seeing Muslim-Christian-Jewish interaction. (creating reactions which argue the opposite), and a racist narrative contrasting benign European Muslims with ‘fanatical’ Arab and North African Muslims.
* The ‘Golden Age’ thesis also implies that everything afterwards has been a decline which is not really accurate with many cultural high points along the timeline, e.g. Ottoman Empire and Mughal India. Muslims themselves felt this during the 19th Century encounter with European modernity, when they perceived their societies as backward and stagnant despite past glories.