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The Abbasid Caliphate: An Era of Intellectual Revolution in Islamic History

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Abstract

The Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE) is commonly known as a golden age of Islamic civilisation that was characterised by great intellectual, scientific and cultural accomplishments. In this paper, the author discusses the elements that led to the prosperity of knowledge in the Abbasid period, such as political stability, economic prosperity, and deep support of the scholars. It emphasises the evolution of such key areas of science as mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and the improvements in philosophy, theology, literature, and arts. Particular focus is placed on the House of Wisdom and the translation movement that ensured the preservation of the knowledge of Greek, Persian and Indian traditions and their further expansion. The paper also discusses the role of Abbasid intellectual achievements in shaping European scholarship and providing the origins of the Renaissance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE) is regarded by many as being the golden age of Islamic civilization and represents a period of extraordinary intellectual, scientific and cultural development. In comparison to previous periods of Islamic history, the Abbasid era represented a great movement in the scope and depth of the achievement of civilization. While the time of the Prophet Muhammad focused on religious and political bases, and the time of the caliphate of the Khulafa al-Rashidun and the Umayyad vicinity was filled with a unit and political, military, and administrative consolidation, in the Abbasid dynasty all these merits were expanded by prioritising science, philosophy, literature, and building civilisation (Aliani, Alam, Rofiq, & Srinio, 2023; Sholichuddin, Muchtar, & Ratna, 2023). This multidimensional progress put the Muslim world on the top of world intellectual development (Nurhakim, 2017).

The Abbasid period is often described as one of the most brilliant periods of Arab and Islamic history in terms of literature, science and the arts (Fakhoury, 1951). Unlike the previous Umayyad rulers, who were more interested in political expansion, the Abbasid caliphs showed great patronage to intellectual activities and scholarly pursuits (Makdisi, 2005). Many Abbasid rulers were known for their love of knowledge and wisdom, and actively supported scholars and institutions that were dedicated to research and translation. As a result, the Islamic world became not only a centre of religious scholarship, but also a leading centre of scientific and philosophical enquiry. Scholars at this time did not merely pass on previously acquired knowledge, but engaged critically with traditions inherited and contributed new work. Harun Nasution laid stress on how the Muslim intellectuals of Abbasid days had studied Greek philosophy and science but also developed their own independent analyses and syntheses (Nasution, 1985). This imaginary integration of knowledge was a distinctive feature of the intellectual tradition in Islam: the lack of a hard dichotomy between the religious sciences and the rational sciences. Figures such as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd were a good example of this integration involving knowledge of medicine, philosophy, jurisprudence and spirituality that showed that scientific inquiry and Islamic values were deeply interlinked (Nasution, 1985).

Historians have always referred to the Abbasid rule as a "golden age" of Islamic civilization. Von Grunebaum (1970) referred to the period and especially the reigns of Harun al-Rashid and al-Ma'mun as the golden age of intellectual and cultural activity in Islamic history. Similarly, Jurji Zaidan (1978) said that during the Abbasid dynasty, Muslim society experienced unparalleled prosperity, power and intellectual production and the emergence of disciplines such as philosophy, astronomy, medicine, physics and mathematics. This intellectual awakening had a great influence on human thought and culture outside of the borders of the Islamic world (Saefudin, 2002).

The development of the intellectual life of the Abbasids received additional reinforcement from external cultural influences as well. The blending of Indo-Persian, Syriac, Greek and Indian traditions resulted in a dynamic and cosmopolitan intellectual atmosphere in Baghdad, which became the epicentre of scholarly excellence (Hitti, 2014; Bennison, 2009). The institutions such as the House of Wisdom were pivotal in promoting the works of translation, debate, and research, thus institutionalising the intellectual revolution then taking place (Hazari, 2023). The translation movement not only served to preserve classical knowledge but also heightened original research that would later go on to influence scientific progress around the globe.

In view of these developments, the Abbasid Caliphate marks a turning point in both Islamic and world history. Its intellectual revolution was based on political stability, economic prosperity, scholarly patronage, and cross-cultural exchange. This paper focuses on the Abbasid Caliphate as a period of intellectual awakening by analysing the socio-political basis of the scholarly flourishing of the age, the synthesis of religious and rational sciences and the long-lasting impact of its intellectual achievements on later civilisations.

2.1 Establishment of the Abbasid State

The Abbasid state formally was established in 750 CE as a result of the successful Abbasid Revolution to end the Umayyad rule. Claiming descent from al-'Abbas, the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Abbasids had as much religious as political grounds for their legitimacy. Their path to power was aided by various groups, in particular the non-Arab Muslims (mawali) of other lands such as Khurasan, who had felt marginalised under Umayyad rule.

One of the features of the administrative system of the early Abbasids was an inclusive one. Unlike the Umayyads who had mostly favoured the Arab elites, the Abbasids brought Persians and other non-Arabs into important bureaucratic and military posts. The establishment of organised institutions, especially the office of the vizier, resulted in the concentration of power and better administration. By making Iraq the centre of political power from Damascus, the Abbasids had settled in an area with a history of leading governance, commerce and intellectual exchange. This political condensation gave the stability within which long-term cultural and intellectual development could take place.

2.2 Cosmopolitan Baghdad

The establishment of Baghdad in 762 CE by the Caliph al-Mansur was a turning point in Islamic civilisation. Designed as a new capital of the empire, Baghdad was strategically situated on major trade routes between East and West. Its location on the Tigris River made commercial expansion easy and brought in merchants, scholars, and artisans from Persia, Central Asia, India, Byzantium, and further.

Baghdad quickly became a cosmopolitan city of cultural diversity and high levels of intellectual activity. The city became home to the Muslims, Christians, Jews, and other communities, who actively participated in the scholarly and economic life of the city. Institutions such as the House of Wisdom were key to the encouragement of translation, research and academic debate. Through sustained contact with the

traditions of the Greeks, Persians and Indians, Baghdad became a centre of intellectual synthesis and innovation. This multicultural and intellectually open environment provided the basis for the more general Abbasid intellectual revolution.

4. Scientific and Mathematical Innovations

The Abbasid period saw extraordinary developments in the field of scientific study, especially mathematics, medicine, and astronomy. Instead of simply maintaining previous knowledge, scholars during this period built on previously developed knowledge of Greek, Persian and Indian traditions to develop their own theories and systematic methods, which would go on to shape intellectual history around the world. The state's patronage of scholarship, along with institutional centres such as libraries and observatories, provided an environment in which scientific investigation could flourish.

4.1 Mathematics

One of the most important successes of Abbasid scholarship was the development of algebra as a separate mathematical discipline. Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi introduced a systematic method of solving linear and quadratic equations in the work that established the basis of modern algebra in 830. His approach changed mathematics from a largely geometric science to a more abstract and symbolic science.

Al-Khwarizmi's contributions were not only in the field of algebra. His works on numbers and the methods of calculation helped spread the Hindu-Arabic method of numeral representation, which was eventually used in Europe. The Latin translation of his works brought the word "algorithm" from his name to the Western scientific vocabulary. Through these contributions, Abbasid mathematics established analytical tools that became necessary in later developments in science and engineering.

4.2 Medicine

Medical science in the age of the Abbasids reached a level of high sophistication. Hospitals served not only as a treatment centre, but as an institution of medical education and research. Among the most influential of the physicians was Ibn Sina (Avicenna), whose encyclopaedic work “The Canon of Medicine” systematized the knowledge of medicine from earlier Greek authorities while adding his own clinical observations.

The Canon gave a systematic classification of disease, pharmacology and therapeutic methods. Its logical structure and its focus on empirical observation helped it maintain its authority. For several centuries, it was a principal medical reference work, both in the Islamic world and the European universities. Abbasid medicine was thus a model of synthesis between inherited knowledge, critical analysis, and the practical application of the same.

4.3 Astronomy

Astronomy also thrived under the patronage of the Abbasids. Observatories were set up in major cities such as Baghdad where scholars made systematic observations of celestial bodies. These institutions allowed astronomers to perfect earlier planetary models that had been inherited from Greek traditions and to correct some of the astronomical calculations.

Abbasid astronomers determined the circumference of the Earth to a significant degree of accuracy and enhanced astronomical tables used for navigational purposes, calculations of calendars, and for observing religion. Their empirical methodology and mathematical refinements set important foundations for future developments in Islamic and European astronomy. Through long-term observation and theoretical development, the astronomers of the Abbasid Caliphate turned astronomy into a more strict and quantitative science.

5. Philosophy and Theology

The Abbasid period was not only one of scientific advancement, but also a revolution in philosophical and theological thought. Intellectual openness, translation actions and court patronage inspired scholars to interact seriously with inherited Greek philosophy while at the same time tackling basic questions of Islamic theology. This interaction led to a unique intellectual tradition where reason and revelation were put in an ongoing dialogue with each other.

5.1 Islamic Philosophy (Falsafa)

Islamic philosophy (falsafa) grew out of an attempt to reconcile the Greek heritage of philosophy with Islamic intellectual issues. Influenced especially by the thought of Aristotle and Neoplatonism, Muslim philosophers did not merely translate the works of their predecessors but examined and reformulated them in an Islamic worldview.

Among the most prominent thinkers was Abu Nasr al-Farabi, who is often called the "Second Teacher" after Aristotle. Al-Farabi endeavoured to make metaphysics, logic, ethics, and political theory work together into a unified system of philosophy that was compatible with Islamic monotheism. In his political philosophy, he explained the ideal state as a state under the rule of a virtuous leader whose power was based on wisdom and moral virtue. His efforts provided the basis for subsequent philosophers to elaborate on the question of the nature of existence, the organisation of the soul and the role of reason in relation to prophecy.

Subsequent scholars advanced philosophical study in other fields, like metaphysics and ethics. They examined questions regarding the issue of causality, the nature of knowledge, and the ultimate purpose of human life. This intellectual tradition shows that philosophy during the Abbasid period was not a sideline but a central part of the life of scholarly activity.

5.2 Theological Debates

Parallel to the development of philosophy, in the Abbasid period there were intense theological debates which formed the Islamic doctrine and jurisprudence. Rationalist theologians, especially the Mu'tazilites, placed a lot of importance on the interpretation of religious texts through the use of reason. They preached such principles as divine justice and human free will,

and reasoned that rational inquiry was necessary to know theological truths.

In contrast, traditionalist scholars were more concerned to adhere to revealed texts and prophetic traditions. They were careful about depending too much on speculative reasoning, which they feared might lead to deviation of doctrine. The conflict between these intellectual currents reached its highest point during some periods of Abbasid rule, when theological views were supported or disputed at official levels.

These were not merely empty debates, but they had an effect on legal theory, notions of authority, and techniques of scriptural interpretation. The dialogue between the rationalist and traditionalist approaches led ultimately to a fruitful contribution of Islamic intellectual discussion to the evolution of a complex theological approach that reconciled faith and reason.

6. Literature and Arts

The Abbasid period marks one of the most dynamic periods in the history of Islamic literature and artistic expression. The political stability and economic prosperity of the empire, especially in the first few centuries, had provided the environment for intellectual and artistic creativity to flourish. Baghdad and other great cities became centres of literary endeavour, artistic experimentation and cultural synthesis, which was an expression of the cosmopolitan nature of Abbasid society.

6.1 Literary Flourishing

Arabic literature attained a high development during the Abbasid period. Poetry, which has been a central part of Arab culture for many centuries, took on new thematic and stylistic dimensions. Court poets wrote poems on more than just the traditional subjects of praise and satire, including philosophy, mysticism, love and city life. The influence of Persian and other cultural traditions brought in new forms of poetry and aesthetic sensibilities and enriched the scope of Arabic literary expression.

Prose literature also made a great leap forward. Historical writing, biographical dictionaries and adab (belles-lettres) literature became dominant genres. Scholars put together encyclopaedic works that were part moral reflection, part scientific knowledge and part literary elegance. Storytelling traditions also developed, and narrative collections that included elements of folklore, moral lessons and imaginative fiction became popular. These works were an expression of both the diversity of Abbasid society and its openness to multiple cultural influences.

6.2 Development of Calligraphy and Manuscript Culture

The spread of papermaking technology at the time of Abbasid rule revolutionised literary culture. Paper was cheaper and easier to use than the previous writing materials, and made it possible to expand the production of books. Libraries proliferated throughout the Islamic world, and the copying of manuscripts became a highly respected scholarly endeavour.

Calligraphy became a major art form, especially in the writing of the Qur'an. 10 Scripts became more sophisticated while at the same time maintaining a balance between aesthetic beauty and legibility. Manuscript illumination and ornamentation motifs added to the visual aspect of the written work, and they showed the coming together of the sense of art and religious devotion.

6.3 Architecture and the Visual Arts

Abbasid architecture was a period of continuity and innovation. Urban planning, monumental mosques, palaces and public buildings were evidence of advanced engineering and aesthetic design. The use of geometric patterns and vegetal motifs, as well as abstract ornamentation, became characteristic of the Islamic artistic identity. Decorative stucco, intricate brickwork and domed structures expressed both artistic creativity and symbolic meaning.

In addition to the architecture, ceramic arts and metalwork developed. The invention of lusterware ceramics and of well-made objects for both daily and ceremonial use reflects the great level of technical skill reached during this time. Artistic production was not confined to a religious setting but extended into the domestic and courtly settings, and is indicative of the incorporation of beauty into everyday life.

6.4 Cultural Synthesis

The achievements of the literary and artistic life during the period of the Abbasids were strongly influenced by the intercultural exchange. Persian, Greek, Indian and indigenous Mesopotamian influences were assimilated and adapted in an Islamic setting. This synthesis did not dilute the Islamic identity, but rather enriched it, resulting in a civilisation which had a penchant for creativity, knowledge and aesthetic excellence.

In sum, the literature and arts of the Abbasid period was an essential element in its intellectual revolution. They represent a society that felt secure in its cultural roots and open to the influences from the outer world, and have left a lasting legacy in Islamic and world civilisation.

Educational Institutions and the Free Circulation of Knowledge

The Abbasid period witnessed the institutionalisation of learning on a scale unknown before that time. While knowledge of earlier Islamic education had been centred expressly in mosques and informal study circles (halaqat), in the Abbasid era, knowledge was an organised, state-supported enterprise. This way of transformation was from decentralized oral transmission to organised intellectual production with political support. Such institutionalisation contributed in a decisive way to the maintenance of the intellectual dynamics that characterised the Abbasid intellectual revolution.

7.1 Institutionalisation in Learning

One of the representative things in the life of Abbasid intellectuals was the establishment of organized educational institutions. Libraries, academies and observatories were not just places where people went to access knowledge, but where

people researched, taught and debated. The rise of the organised academic environment is typical of the general Abbasid tendency towards the introduction of knowledge into the administrative and cultural framework. These institutions made possible to preserve, translate and expand earlier intellectual traditions in a systematic way and at the same time to generate original scholarship.

I. House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikmah)

Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) grew to be one of the most important intellectual institutions of the Abbasid era. More than a traditional library, it served as a translation bureau, research academy and centre of academic collaboration (Ahmed, 2008). However, from historical sources, it is known that its foundations were laid during the reign of the caliph Harun al-Rashid, and later expanded and renovated under al-Ma'mun in 217 H/832 CE (Fahruddin, 2009). As noted by Hitti (2014), Bayt al-Hikmah became the most famous intellectual center in Baghdad, the ideal of the Abbasid commitment to institutionalized scholarship. It housed the manuscripts, translated from Greek, Syriac, and Persian into Arabic and as a meeting place of scientists, philosophers, and theologians. The availability of its collections to scholars from far-flung areas is indicated by the fact that the astronomer Abu Ma'shar, so much impressed by the atmosphere of learned Baghdad that he stayed on the spot, took up the study of the subject (Hamawi, 1936). The influence of Bayt al-Hikmah was not limited to Baghdad, so great libraries were established in other Islamic cities (Elayyan, 1990). Its destruction in the Mongol invasion in 1258 was not only the political loss but also an extraordinary symbolic loss of Islamic intellectual history (Saefudin, 2002).

II. The Translation Movement

The translation movement of the Abbasid period was one of the most systematic intellectual efforts of the medieval world. While translation of works had been undertaken even before, during the Umayyad period, especially under Khalid ibn Yazid, these efforts were largely individual and not so extensive (Amin, 2015). Under Abbasids, however, translation became a project supported by the state and institutionalized. According to Watt (1990), there was an atmosphere of rational investigation already present within Islamic jurisprudence before the widespread translation of Greek works. The Abbasid period translated a concerted activity of the civilisation involving philosophical, medical, astronomical and mathematical texts of the Greek, Persian and Indian schools (Nakosten, 1964). Yatim identifies (2008) three major phases of this movement: a first phase under al-Mansur and Harun al-Rashid on astronomy and logic; a classical phase under al-Ma'mun on philosophy and medicine; and a later phase after 300 H, due to the extension of papermaking, opening the way to translation into several disciplines of science and religion. As Khalidi (2015) argues, this intellectual exchange is part of the larger concept that civilisations develop through interaction and not by isolation. The translation movement thus not only saved the earlier knowledge but provoked original synthesis and empowered the Muslims to build up a comprehensive culture of scholarship that embraced religion, philosophy, and science (Bocerd, 2006; Ferdian, Rusman, & Asrori, 2022).

7.2 The Role of the Madrasas and Mosques

Mosques remained important centres of learning with lectures in the study of the Qur'an, jurisprudence, theology and Arabic Grammar. Over time, more formal schools of thought called madrasas came into being, which provided a systematic teaching of religious sciences. These institutions did contribute to the professionalisation of scholarship and the formation of separate schools of legal thought.

Importantly, Abbasid education did not make a hard separation between religious and rational sciences. Students were often studying jurisprudence together with logic, mathematics or medicine. This integrated curriculum represented a single worldview of intellectualism, in which revelation and rational enquiry were viewed as complementary, rather than incompatible.

7.3 Libraries and the Culture of Books

The availability of paper to everybody gave the number of people with access to written materials a huge boost. Public and private libraries proliferated, containing collections of religious, scientific, philosophical and literary literature. Manuscript copying, cataloguing and circulation began to become ordered academic activities. This culture of books resulted in broader coverage of the intellectual activities and surety of systematic transmission of knowledge from region to region.

7.4 Networks of Scholars

Knowledge diffusion was made possible during the Abbasid period by dense networks of scholars. Teachers granted ijazah (certificates of authorization) to qualified students that guaranteed intellectual continuity as well as scholarly credibility. These networks stretched from Baghdad to Central Asia, North Africa and al-Andalus, becoming a transregional intellectual community. Through travel, correspondence, and scholarly exchange, a system of communication of knowledge was created by Abbasid-era scholars that endures to this day in the absence of political authority.

8. Impact on Europe and the Renaissance

The intellectual achievements of the Abbasid era transcended the geographical boundaries of the Islamic world to a great extent. Through translation and trade and cross-cultural interaction the scientific and philosophical legacy of the Abbasids played a significant role in the development of mediaeval thought in Europe and, eventually, the Renaissance.

8.1 Transmission of Knowledge

One of the most important channels of influence came from the movement of translation from Arabic into Latin. From the 12th century on, European scholars in such areas as Spain (al-Andalus) and Sicily translated Arabic texts on philosophy, medicine, mathematics and astronomy into Latin. These

translations helped bring classical Greek knowledge (much of which had been preserved and expanded by Muslim scholars) back into Europe at a time when much classical Greek knowledge was unavailable in Europe.

Works by the likes of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) in medicine and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in philosophy became standard references in the universities of Europe. Ibn Sina's Canon of Medicine had been a core medical work in European medical institutions for hundreds of years. Similarly, the likes of Thomas Aquinas were greatly influenced by Ibn Rushd's commentaries on Aristotle, which sparked the arguments about reason, faith and metaphysics.

8.2 Impact of Science and Mathematics

The contributions of the Abbasids to mathematics and astronomy had long-lasting consequences for Europe. The Hindu-Arabic numerals brought about by Arabic scholarship revolutionised the European ways of calculating. Developed and systematised by Muslim mathematicians, algebra developed new analytical tools, which later contributed to the development of physics and engineering.

Astronomical tables and improved models of the planets developed in the Islamic world were brought to Europe and informed further astronomical research. These intellectual foundations were an indirect contributor towards the scientific transformations that characterised the Renaissance.

8.3 Intellectual Method: Rational Inquiry

Beyond specific scientific accomplishments, the Abbasid intellectual tradition encouraged systematic reasoning, empirical observation, and philosophical debate. The contact with Greek philosophy, and in particular Aristotelian logic, had an influence on the development of the scholastic methodology in Europe. The focus on rational inquiry for an integrated worldview created a framework for an integrated worldview that later European thinkers adopted and developed.

8.4 Cultural and Civilizational Bridge

The Abbasid civilisation was a bridge between the classical knowledge of the past and early modern Europe. It was through the preservation, criticism and elaboration of earlier traditions that Abbasid scholars ensured that the intellectual inheritance of antiquity would not be lost. When this knowledge came to Europe, it helped in the revival of interest in science, philosophy and humanistic studies.

9. Decline and Legacy

The decline of the Abbasid Caliphate was a slow and complicated process, one that was both political, economic, and military, and the result of outside invasion. Although the early Abbasid period was characterised by centralised authority and intellectual brilliance, in time the structure of the state grew weak. Provincial governors increasingly were able to exercise autonomy, regional dynasties appeared, and the caliphs gradually lost direct control over distant territories.

One of the main causes of decline was the change in military organisation. The recruitment of Turkic slave soldiers, which was originally aimed at consolidating the power of the caliph, came to shift the balance of power in the state. Military commanders assumed political clout, and the caliphate became more dependent on factions within the army. Internal conflicts and rivalries in the courts caused the central authority to become even weaker.

Economic pressures were also involved. As the provinces took autonomy, revenues of the central treasury decreased. Political instability caused trade routes and administrative inefficiency. By the tenth century, actual political authority in Baghdad was frequently wielded by foreign dynasties who were attempting to obtain control, such as the Buyids and later the Seljuks, leaving the Abbasid caliphs as mostly purely figureheads.

The final, and most dramatic, blow came in 1258, when the forces of the Mongols under Hulagu Khan took and sacked Baghdad. The destruction of the city marked the end of Abbasid political sovereignty in Iraq, and this was effectively the end of the Abbasid Caliphate. Although a ceremonial Abbasid caliphate endured in Cairo under Mamluk protection, it no longer had independent political power of its own.

In spite of the political decline, the intellectual and cultural legacy of the Abbasids survived. The institutions, scientific methodologies and philosophical traditions that were developed under their rule were to continue to have an impact on Islamic scholarship and, through translation, also on European intellectual life. The Abbasid model of assimilation of diverse cultures, of encouraging scholarship and institutionalising knowledge, left a deep imprint on the civilisation of the world.

Thus, although the Abbasid Caliphate fell as a political force, its intellectual contributions had a much longer life beyond its death. Its legacy can still be seen in modern scientific terms, educational institutions, legal traditions and the general historical remembrance of the Islamic Golden Age.

10. CONCLUSION

The Abbasid Caliphate marks one of the most important eras in the history of Islamic and World civilization. Emerging out of a revolutionary political transformation, the Abbasids established a state that not only centralised political authority, but also provided an environment for intellectual development. Through reforms in the administration, economic growth, and the inclusion of cultural diversity, they provided the structural base for the development of learning.

The intellectual revolution of the Abbasid era was the integration of different traditions of knowledge. The translation movement, institutional development of libraries and educational centres, and the patronage of science and philosophy helped to provide unprecedented development of mathematics, medicine, astronomy, theology, literature, and the arts. Scholars did not simply preserve the knowledge of past generations but engaged critically with and added to previous knowledge, creating original contributions that informed the intellectual history that followed. Moreover, the Abbasid model of synthesising religious and rational sciences showed that they

had a holistic approach to knowledge. The lack of a hard division between theology, philosophy and scientific inquiry made possible a fluid intellectual culture based on faith as well as reason. This synthesis became one of the defining features of Islamic civilisation in the period of its golden age.

Although at some point political decline reduced the strength of the caliphate and led to its final destruction in the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258, the intellectual heritage of the Abbasids remained. Their work in sciences, philosophical debates and institutional structures continued to have an influence on both the Islamic world and Europe, which fed into the intellectual currents that shaped the Renaissance and modern science.

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