

Honors Literature – World History

TASK: Read the following text carefully, making all appropriate notations. Identify SOAPStone, DIDLS, PERSIAN, and other information as evidence of your research and analysis of the piece of literature. Answer the related questions on notebook paper or on this document. You may use this information for any written essay on the piece. See the text at the very bottom of these notes.

TASK: Comprehension Questions

1. What does this passage reveal about Ibn Khaldun's views of the contrasts between nomads and urban dwellers?
2. Why does he see the former as a source of military power and political strength?
3. What forces undermine dynasties in later generations?
4. How well do these patterns correspond to the history of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties?

Ibn Khaldun on the Rise and Decline of Empires

Although he lived in the century after the Abbasid caliphate was destroyed in 1258, **Ibn Khaldun** was very much a product of the far-flung Islamic civilization that the Abbasids had consolidated and expanded. He was also one of the greatest historians and social commentators of all time. After extensive travels in the Islamic world, he served as a political advisor at several of the courts of Muslim rulers in north Africa. With the support of a royal patron, Ibn Khaldun wrote a universal history that began with a very long philosophical preface called *The Muqaddimah*. Among the subjects he treated at length were the causes of the rise and fall of dynasties. The shifting fortunes of the dynasties he knew well in his native north Africa, as well as the fate of the Abbasids and earlier Muslim regimes, informed his attempts to find persistent patterns in the complex political history of the Islamic world. The following passages are from one of the most celebrated sections of *The Muqaddimah* on the natural life span of political regimes.

We have stated that the duration of the life of a dynasty does not as a rule extend beyond three generations. The first generation retains the desert qualities, desert toughness, and desert savagery. [Its members are used to] privation and to sharing their glory [with each other]; they are brave and rapacious. Therefore, the strength of group feeling continues to be preserved among them. They are sharp and greatly feared. People submit to them.

Under the influence of royal authority and a life of ease, the second generation changes from the desert attitude to sedentary culture, from privation to luxury and plenty, from a state in which everybody shared in the glory to one in which one man claims all the glory for himself while the others are too lazy to strive for [glory], and from proud superiority to humble subservience. Thus, the vigor of group feeling is broken to some extent. People become used to

lowliness and obedience. But many of [the old virtues] remain in them, because they had direct personal contact with the first generation and its conditions.

The third generation, then, has [completely] forgotten the period of desert life and toughness, as if it had never existed. They have lost [the taste for] group feeling, because they are dominated by force. Luxury reaches its peak among them, because they are so much given to a life of prosperity and ease. They become dependent on the dynasty and are like women and children who need to be defended [by someone else]. Group feeling disappears completely. People forget to protect and defend themselves and to press their claims. With their emblems, apparel, horseback riding, and [fighting] skill, they deceive people and give them the wrong impression. For the most part, they are more cowardly than women upon their backs. When someone comes and demands something from them, they cannot repel him. The ruler, then, has need of other, brave people for his support. He takes many clients and followers. They help the dynasty to some degree, until God permits it to be destroyed, and it goes with everything it stands for.

Three generations last one hundred and twenty years. As a rule, dynasties do not last longer than that many years, a few more, a few less, save when, by chance, no one appears to attack [the dynasty]. When senility becomes preponderant [in a dynasty], there may be no claimant [for its power, and then nothing will happen] but if there should be one, he will encounter no one capable of repelling him. If the time is up [the end of the dynasty] cannot be postponed for a single hour, no more than it can be accelerated.

QUESTIONS What does this passage reveal about Ibn Khaldun's views of the contrasts between nomads and urban dwellers? Why does he see the former as a source of military power and political strength? What forces undermine dynasties in later generations? How well do these patterns correspond to the history of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties we have been studying?

