



## House of Wisdom

**T**HE HEYDAY OF BAGHDAD was twelve hundred years ago when it was the thriving capital of the Islamic world. For about five hundred years the city boasted the cream of intellectuals and culture, a reputation gained during the reigns of Caliphs al-Rashid, al-Ma'mun, al-Mu'tadhid and al-Muktafi. It was the world's richest city and a centre for intellectual development, being second in size only to Constantinople, with over one million inhabitants.

People on the cutting edge of development and discovery group together and so it was in Baghdad under the four generations of these caliphs. The reason that Baghdad had reached, and maintained, such a pinnacle was that these caliphs had taken a personal interest in collecting global, groundbreaking scientific works. As well as books, they brought together Muslim scholars to create one of the greatest intellectual academies in history called the House of Wisdom. This intellectual powerhouse, coupled with the prowess of Baghdad, meant the city was the headquarters for the Arts, Sciences and Letters, and the role

it played in the spread and development of knowledge in the Arts and Sciences was huge.

The House (Academy) of Wisdom was known by two names according to its development stages. When it was like a single hall in the time of Harun al-Rashid it was named *Bayt al-Hikmah* but later, as it grew into a large institute/academy, in the time of al-Ma'mun, it was named *Dar al-Hikmah*, and both mean 'the House of Wisdom'. It housed a large library, 'the Library of Wisdom' or *Khizanat al-Hikmah*, and this held a huge collection of different scientific subjects in many languages, making it a scientific academy.



*Brian Whitaker wrote in the UK Guardian newspaper in September 2004 that 'The House of Wisdom was an unrivalled centre for the study of humanities and for sciences, including mathematics, astronomy, medicine, chemistry, zoology and geography.... Drawing on Persian, Indian and Greek texts - Aristotle, Plato, Hippocrates, Euclid, Pythagoras and others - the scholars accumulated the greatest collection of knowledge in the world, and built on it through their own discoveries.'*



Baghdad in 1932. Eleven centuries earlier, this capital was the site of the House of Wisdom.



Syrian stamps issued in 1994 showing al-Kindi, a leading scholar in the House of Wisdom, who translated the work of Aristotle.

Caliph Mohammad al-Mahdi first began collecting manuscripts when he came across them during his war expeditions. His son, Caliph al-Hadi, carried on this work until his son, Caliph Harun al-Rashid, who reigned from 786 to 809 CE, formally built the scientific collection and Academy of Science. Caliph al-Ma'mun, who reigned for twenty years from 813, extended the House of Wisdom and designated a section or wing for each branch of science, so the place was full to bursting with scientists or 'Ulama, art scholars, famous translators, authors, men of letters, poets, and professionals in the various arts and crafts.

These medieval brains met every day for translation, reading, writing, discourse, dialogue and discussion. The place was a cosmopolitan melting pot and the languages that were spoken and written included Arabic, the lingua franca, Farsi, Hebrew, Syriac, Aramaic, Greek, Latin and Sanskrit, which was used to translate the ancient Indian mathematics manuscripts.

Among the famous translators was Yuhanna ibn al-Bitriq al-Turjuman, known as 'the Translator Jonah, son of the Patriarch'. He was more at home with philosophy than medicine and translated, from Latin, *The Book*

*of Animals* by Aristotle which was in nineteen chapters. Hunayn ibn Ishaq was also a renowned translator of the books by the Greek physician Hippocrates and Galen.

Al-Kindi, the physician, philosopher, mathematician, geometer, chemist, logician and astronomer, was chosen by Caliph al-Ma'mun to be one of the scholars leading the translation of the work of Aristotle. He had his own personal library which used to be referred to as al-Kindiya.

Al-Ma'mun was a forward-thinking caliph and contacted other world leaders in his pursuit for knowledge. It is said that he wrote to the king of Sicily asking him for the entire contents of the Library of Sicily, which was rich in philosophical and scientific books. The king responded positively to the Caliph by sending him copies from the Sicilian Library.

The transportation of books varied. Without the availability of modern planes, it is also said that al-Ma'mun used a hundred camels to carry handwritten books and manuscripts from Khurasan in Iran to Baghdad.

The Byzantine emperor was also approached because al-Ma'mun wanted to send some of his scientists to translate the useful books that

**'If he (the teacher) is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.'**

**Khalil Gibran in his book *The Prophet***



were stored in his empire. The emperor said yes and the scientists went, and were also charged with bringing back any books of the Greek intellectuals.

Caliph al-Ma'mun not only steered the organization of the House of Wisdom, but also participated with the scientists and scholars in their discourses and discussions and built an astronomy centre called Marsad Falaki. It was run by his personal astronomers, a Jew named Sanad ibn Ali al-Yahoudi and a Muslim named Yahya ibn Abi Mansour. It is said that Sanad became a Muslim at the hands of al-Ma'mun himself.

As well as taking up the reins of the House of Wisdom, al-Ma'mun took after his father in establishing many higher institutes, observatories and factories for textiles. It is said that the number of higher institutes during his reign reached 332. They were packed with students pursuing various subjects in the arts and sciences.

He also apparently asked a group of wise men to prepare a map of the world for him which they did. This was known as 'al-Ma'mun's map', or *al-surah al-ma'muniyah*, which expanded upon those which were available during the lifetime of Ptolemy and other Greek geographers.

Among the House of Wisdom's luminaries of the time were the Banu Musa brothers, Muhammad, Ahmed and al-Hasan, known as mathematicians and inventors of trick devices; al-Khwarizmi, the 'father' of algebra; al-Kindi, inventor of decryption and musical theory; Saeed ibn Haroun al-Katib, a scribe or writer; Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-'Ibadi, physician and translator, and his son Ishaq. These names appear time and time again throughout this book because these individuals were researching, discovering and building a vast edifice of knowledge, based on real experiments, that has provided a firm bedrock for much of what we know today.

Al-Ma'mun was a visionary of education and some historians have given him the title of 'The Master of Arab Civilization' because of what was left behind as cultural heritage in Baghdad. The House of Wisdom and the splendour of Baghdad made it a pulsating metropolis, crowded with the great minds of the day.

However, we must distinguish between the Abbasid House of Wisdom above and the Fatimid House of Wisdom (*Dar Al-Hikma*), which was established in Cairo in 1005 by the Caliph Al-Hakim. This academy lasted 165 years. Other cities in the Eastern provinces of the Islamic world established several 'Houses of Science' (*Dar al-'Ilm*), or more accurately 'Houses of Knowledge', in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries to emulate that of *Dar Hikma* in Baghdad.



Artistic impression of the House of Wisdom in Baghdad.

