

# Epicenter of Knowledge; A Historic Exploration of *Bayt Al Hikmah*'s Significance

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper examines the library of the Muslims world, 'House of Wisdom', known to the world as 'Bayt Al Hikmah'. The archive was made accessible to the public, where books were translated into Arabic so that the locals could get advantages from it. Not only the books from around the world were interpreted and translated in this library but original books were also produced. The Golden Age of the Muslim period was thus called golden since they acknowledged the importance of knowledge. The subsequent research paper discusses themes, historians and patrons and workings of the House of Wisdom. On the historical basis this research gathers and formulates pertinent evidence and resources about Bayt Al Hikmah and its connected features. Thus a period of political and economic stability came into being, of the Abbasid rule where Baghdad became the pivot of knowledge and understandings. The impact Bayt Al Hikmah left on the libraries was unprecedented*

**Keywords:** Abbasids, *Bayt Al Hikmah*, Baghdad, Arabic, Golden Age, House of Wisdom

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## Introduction

The institution situated in the heart of Baghdad, built by the early Abbasids reign was a collective and imperial expression of the rational ambition of the régime of the Abbasids. The library was originally founded by Caliph Mansur, later Caliph Harun Al Rashid and later his son Mamun expanded the institute and was made accessible for the public use. Mamun who reigned from 813-833 AD gathered scholars who were well known in their fields to discuss ideas, scholarly evidence, culture and ethos in the house of Wisdom (Anjum).

Scholars from different religious backgrounds worked at high post at the library. S.M. Mukarram Jahan in his paper, *Bayt Al Hikmah* and its achievements states that not only Muslims but Christians, and Jews were also given high rank at the library. House of Wisdom soon became a hub of intellectual and academicians, who took advantage from the library reading halls, lecture theater, in which different activities such as map making, bindings and interpreting were supported.

The world's wealthiest center of intellectual expansion of the time with a population of over a million, considered to be the biggest city of that time. During the Abbasids, Countless extraneous works were interpreted and translated into Arabic from idioms varying from Greek, Chinese, Sanskrit. Huge libraries were erected; academics and researchers victimized by the Byzantine Realm were welcomed. The *Bayt al -Hikmah* bring together a model of the library directory, where books were systematized into boundless categories and classes. The library also familiarized categories like translators, scientist, scribe, authors, poets, scribing, dissertation, discourse and argument (Anjum).

## Abu Ja'far al-Mansūr

Adel Abdul-Aziz Algeriani in his research article *The House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikmah) and Its Civilizational Impact on Islamic libraries: A Historical Perspective* pertains that Some archives refer that the organizer and founder of Bayt al-Hikmah was Abu Ja'far al-Mansūr (95-135 AH). Al Mansur had a huge personal collection on books on astronomy and astrology that he was keen to study. he even had a collection of books on medicines, astronomy, engineering and literatures. Other than this special focus was given to Quran and hadith and other related publications from the prophet Muhammad traditions. Al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf ibn Maṭar, an arithmetician and translator and interpreter. Al Hajaj was appointed by

Al Mansur to translate Greek literature, Element twice by Euclid. For this purpose, he was paid heavily by the Caliph. This according to many historians laid strong foundations of the *Bayt Al Hikmah*. (Algeriani)

Historians of the contemporary world regard Al Mansur as one of the greatest caliph of the Abbasids time period. Al Mansur was the founder of new capital called *Madinat as Salam*, meaning a city of peace and harmony. Al Mansur was also the first to sponsor the Translation movement of the Islamic world with the developing need of literature and thirst for knowledge. His personal collection of books includes a collection of Persian literature on philosophy, medicine, astrology, sciences and arithmetic. He got these books translated into the local vernacular. The books from other languages were also translated, authors and intellectuals were supported greatly in this matter.

### **Al Mamun's Translation Movement**

Al Mamun's greatest effort with the Romans and Greeks resulted in the buying of large number of books for the library. He prepared a delegation to visit places as Asia Minor, Cyprus and others in search of literature, books and manuscripts of all sorts. Al Mamun's reign is considered prime for its scientific works, intellectual activity, educational development and exceptional progress. Ibn al-Jawzi, who indicates that when the king had knowledge of a scholar consequently, a scholar converts into a king (Adel Abdul-Aziz Algeriani).

The caliph himself visited the institute regularly, showing keen interest in the process. Regular seminars and discussion were part of routine life of the library. These seminars were called *kalam*. *Kalam* is the skill of ethical and logical deliberation that Al-Mamun supported on from his Persian tutor, Jafar. Other than that major research projects were also patronized by the Caliph. These projects include correct mapping of the world, study to the pyramid of Giza and participated himself in excavations (House of Wisdom).

The Arab world was well aware of the translations and its was a significant part of their culture. Translation played a vital role in the dissemination of information. This started historically from the ancient world of Greeks to the Persian empire, and from Japan to the Arabs world. Muhammad ibn Mukarram ibn Alī ibn Ahmad ibn Manzūr al-Ansārī al-Ifriqī al-Misrī al-Khazrajī, also known as Ibn Manzūr, a pronounced Arab

Scholar defines the word translation in Arabic as, *Al Tarjama* which literally means, the one who deduces the words and utterance.

Translation movement was widely supported by the caliph of that time, but the movement quickly gained momentum and was patronized by the wealthy class of that time. They, not only aided in translations but also in procurement of rare and exceptional manuscripts from farfetched areas (editors, A polemical introduction). Two schools of translation were most distinguished. Al Jahiz and Al Safadi were the schools of translation in Islam. Al Jahiz moved to Baghdad under Mamun's reign. One count of the director of *Bayt Al Hikmah* declares, Al Jahiz was highly appreciated by the Caliph for his literary work and for his contributions for Bayt Al Hikmah (editors, Al Jahiz Muslim theologian and scholar).

The most notable translator from the Abbasids dynasty is the Aal Hunain Abu Zaid Hunain bin Isshaq (773-853). Aal Hunain was a Christian who studied medicine in Baghdad and was considered well versed in primordial Greek. Aal Hunain was appointed by the Caliph [al-Mutawakkil](#), a Abbasid Caliph employed him to the post of physician of the court; a post he held all his life. Not only him, but his family was also involved in different translation works. These includes his son, Isshaq and his nephew Jaish bin Al-A'asam. He and his family had a great reputation with work related to translation. Aal Hunain was so well-known and his work could effortlessly be known for his exceptional and matchless editing expertise. One account also says that Al Mamun gave him the rank of chief Translator and was often bestowed generous and precious gifts. Al Mamun also gave him tasks that were very critical. Aal Hunain was called Ibn Hunain by his sub ordinates, which literally meant Master Hunain (Akbar).

The translators employed for the library and specific other purposes were paid a salary of 500 *dinars* plus some donations by the officials (Ahmed Farras Oran). One source also says that during 276 to 892AH, Baghdad alone had 100 bookshops called *Warraqins* in the local vernacular (Oran). Translations done during Al Mamun's reign were of superior quality than the predecessors, for these incorporated ideas from the ancient worlds.

### **Historians and *Bayt Al Hikmah***

*Bayt Al Hikmah* also known as the Grand Library of Baghdad, was a library made for public during the Golden Age of Islam. The library was modeled after the Sasanian Imperial Library. For the promotion of

knowledge and literacy the noble class and the military also came forward and contributed great fund for the library maintenance. More than 60 translators were involved in the translation services (JAHAN). Researchers and historians from the Bayt al-Hikmah doubled as engineers and architects in major projects, reserved precise official schedules, and were civic servants. They were worked frequently as physicians and counsellors (House of Wisdom). Many historians worked for the advancement of the library. Below is the list of scholars who worked directly at the House of Wisdom.

- **Hunayn bin Ishaq**

Hunayn bin Ishaq was an Assyrian descendants liberal Muslim and belonged to Al Hira. He was appointed by the Caliph to look after the library because of his keen interest in science and Greeks. He along with others were involved in buying of books for the library. For this specific purpose they travelled to distant places like, Egypt, Persia, Mesopotamia and Syria and Palestine. These trips were funded by the Caliph and the wealthy men from the court of Baghdad. Hunayn was a proficient translator, the works translated by him into the local vernacular were of great importance. He had translated more than 100 books into Arabic and Syriac. Hunayn Ibn Ishaq was also the one who wrote more than 100 books on subjects of ophthalmology, medicine, veterinary medicine, universal history, syntax, logic and religion (JOHNA).

- **Banu Musa**

Ninth century mathematician, of Persian origin who worked at the astronomical laboratories established at the House of Wisdom in Baghdad. His famous works are done in the fields of mechanics, automation and geometry. These are the *Kitab Marifat Masahat Al-Ashkal*, *Qarashūn*, Book of Ingenious Devices on automata and mechanical devices and Book on the Measurement of Plane and Spherical Figures which talks about the basics of geometry, *Kitāb al-Daraj*, *Kitāb al-Hiyal*. During his life he inscribed 20 books, to which most of them have been destroyed.

- **Yahanna Bin Masawayah**

Not only Muslim but many Christians scholars also worked at high positions at the library, one of them is Yahanna Bin Masawayah. One of the earliest directors of the House of Wisdom was a medical expert and

wrote books on gynecological problem. His famous works includes, *Daghal Al-Ayn* (Disorder of the eye) with others being 445 writings in 799 publications in 9 languages (Ibn Māsawayh, Yūḥannā -857 or 858).

- **Al Jahiz**

Abū ‘Uthman ‘Amr ibn Baḥr al-Kinānī al-Baṣrī, frequently recognized as Al-Jāḥiẓ east Africa origin was a writer and wrote many books on literature, theology, zoology, and politics, religion and other discourses. Al Jahiz was a significant figure of the House of Wisdom. He was the first one to write about heresiographers in the Islamic world. Al Jahiz was encouraged to write for the common public using the local vernacular. His major contributions include books such as *Kitab al-hayawan* the Book of animals, the earliest zoological book in the history of Islamic thought. *Kitab al-bayan wa al-tabyin*, Book of eloquence and exposition, one of al-Jahiz’s best-known literary books. Other contributions include *Kitab al-bukhalap*, a book of misers, it talks about the greediness and unconventionality. *Risalat al-qiyan* are letters of singing girls. Al-Jahiz contributed massively to Arab literature (Athamneh).

- **Thabit bin Qurrah**

Thabit bin Qurrah was a prolific mathematician, who belonged to Sabian religious community of Baghdad. Thabit was involved in translating famous mathematical texts of the Greek, these texts include, On the Sphere and the Cylinder, Measuring the Circle, On the Division of the Circle into Seven Equal Parts and The Lemmata. His work and contributions is not limited to translations only. He, during his life wrote 70 books on the subjects of mathematics, astrology, philosophy, music, astronomy and physics (STRICK).

- **Al Kindi**

Formally known in the medieval Islam as, ‘The Philosopher of the Arab’. Historians of the era approves the fact that Al-Kindi was of pure Arab and a lawful successor of Kindah, originally a regal South-Arabian tribe. Al Kindi’s scholarship were recognized throughout his lifetime. He was considered a well versed teacher as well as an author. As a teacher, his students took great positions in the government, Ahmad ibn al-Tayyib al-Sarakhsi who was studying under al-Kindi later tutor of Caliph al-Mu’tadid. Al-Kindi is mentioned by Al-Nadim, his famous student in *alFihrist*. Muhammad ibn Yazid, students of Al Kindi known as Dabis, a

true alchemist and an artisan who made elegant ceramic wares and wrote a book on leather dyes and inks (Hamerneh).

As an author Al Kindi was prolific. His books on medicine includes an Introduction to the Healing Art. Many scholars of the time gave great prestige to Al Kindi by attributing him in their poems. During his life, Al Kindi wrote 239 titles including a sectional of book-size works, but the majority diminutive dissertations and letters comprising not more than a limited page (Hamerneh).

- **Al Khwarzami**

Part of a delegation for the library Al Khawarzami was a great mathematician, who studied methods of Greeks and Indian philosophy. His major works involves length of the Earth's equatorial belt that is accurate to this day. He also made map of the world measuring the distances between mountains seas and cities. On Al Mamun's request, Khawarzami created monetary financial records, framed land records, inheritance divisions, monetary rules, and then 700 formulas of algebra were established (TASCI).

In his book, *The Arabs: A Short History*, Philip Khuri, a Lebanese-American professor at Harvard University, [defined](#) Khwarizmi as "one of the greatest logical thought of Islam and the person who influenced mathematical understanding to a mark than any other mediaeval author."

- **Ibn e Nadim**

Muḥammad ibn Ishāq al-Warrāq, and frequently identified by the *nasab*. Ibn al-Nadīm was an Arab by origin; Muslim bibliographer and biographer of Baghdad. He was known for the compilation of the encyclopedia *Kitāb al-Fihrist*. His encyclopedia is a compilation of knowledge and literature of 10000 books and 2000 authors from the earliest Islamic era. This book shows Al Nadim's thirst for knowledge of the medieval Islamic era.

- **Al Ghazali**

Medival muslim theolists, philosopher, mystic, and a polymath. During his life, he worked on many books. Among his works, the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* is a breakthrough in the antiquity of philosophy. Ghazali played

a vibrant role in the development of Sufi order. He contributed towards Islamic jurisprudence and wrote more than 70 books.

### **Architecture of *Bayt Al Hikmah***

Researchers from diverse religious backgrounds worked at high post at the library. S.M. Mukarram Jahan in his paper, *Bayt Al Hikmah* and its achievements states that not only Muslims but Christians, and Jews were also given high rank at the library. House of wisdom became a hub of intellectual and academicians, who took advantage from the library reading halls, lecture theater, in which different activities such as map making, bindings and interpreting were supported.

The library's architecture, Mahmud Ahmad Derwich created a right architectural development for *Bayt al-Hikmah* by taking inspiration from scholarships on the golden castle erected by Al-Mansur during his power. The house of wisdom comprised of some lawns that were enclosed by halls; these halls had two story building, it was regulated by a penthouse on a row of pillars. In the midst of each side there was a hall that had a semi cylindrical dome. The main floor had rooms for specific purposes each being, copying, translating, binding and reading. The separate area of the library also had spaces for studying in all subjects of information, sciences arts and literature. The second floor was dedicated to the officials, authors, students, scholars and employees of the library. Besides these numerous other scholars also played a vital role in the formation of *Bayt Al Hikmah*.

### **Themes of study at the House of Wisdom**

Different subjects were studied, translated and inferred at the library. Scholars were keen to study subjects like, arithmetic, geometry, science, astrology, alchemy, philosophy, pharmacology, medicine and religion. This is the first distinguished library of the Muslim world which not only served as a library but also served as an educational institute. As the name suggest, books bought from around the globe were mainly of philosophy and wisdom(*hikmah*).

Arithmetic and mathematics were key areas of progress for the scholars of *Bayt al Hikmah*. They studied and took motivation from the Greeks. Adopting different rules from the Indians and generating the adoption of zero were the utmost accomplishments of the period. Muhammad bin Musa al-Khwarizmi particularized and deliberate numbers, cubes, and

squares and developed algebra and algorithms of mathematics. Few of his original work were later translated into Latin, these includes *Hisab al-Jabr wal Muqabalah*. Many other mathematicians existed and made contributions in the fields of mathematics that are still studied today (JAHAN).

Science was an integral part of knowledge for the House of Wisdom. The caliph formed a council of science which included eminent scientists of that time. Al Mamun's reign was the peak of development in science. Hunayn ibn Ishaq translated medical books from Greeks to Arabic, he was also known as the 'Sheikh of the translators' (House of Wisdom).

Astrology was studied widely during the Abbasids. For this, observatories were made in the House of Wisdom to facilitate the research. S.M Mukarram Jahan in his writings suggests that Astronomers were keen to study cosmic forms, the obliquity of the ecliptic, the precession of equinoxes, the span of the planetary year.

Alchemy and the field of chemistry, Jabir Bin Hayyan is known as the father of Chemistry. His significant contributions in the field is the use of experimental investigations which portrayed him as modern chemist. He is the author of many books, which includes *Kitab alKimya*, *Kitab al-Sab'een*, Book of the Kingdom, Book of the Balances, Book of Eastern Mercury and many others. He was also involved in the deconstruction of organic and inorganic substances (JAHAN).

Philosophy or *Hikmah* and wisdom has been a keen subjects of the library. Since the Muslim culture in Baghdad had taken great influence of philosophy from the Greek, they adopted the same for Bayt Al Hikmah. For this, Al Kindi was an influential figure. He, at the library overlooked at the Greek philosophical translations. He wrote many books on physics, morals, reason and psychology, to medication, arithmetic, astrophysics, astrology and optics. His major works includes, *Risalat Fusus al-Hikam*, *Risalah fi Ara Ahl al-Madina al-Fadilah*, *al-Siiyasah al-Madaniyah* (JAHAN).

Medicine and Pharmacology was given great importance by the ruler of the time. The pharmacists would go to different places and suggests medicines to the patients. Abū Bakr al-Rāzī often known as Razi was a Persian physician. No medical expert greater than him has been seen by the world. He worked and contributed a lot in the fields of medicine, pharmacology, psychology, physiology, beliefs of medicine and alchemy.

Religion has always been an important part of Baghdad. With the advent of Islam, Islamic education was given free by the caliph. This cross cultural hegemony caused them to be tolerant of each other opinion about religion, language and cultures. Al- Andalusī had believed that the religious unity had needed linguistic and civilizational harmony. Many Schools in Baghdad, which imparted religious studies had effectively and efficiently added to the advancement of great number of pupils travelling throughout the world to impart their knowledge and interchange. As a result of this many were granted very decent positions not only in school but in public institutions in the Islamic world (Adel Abdul-Aziz Algeriani).

One of the subjects taught at the institution was wisdom. This was done by the caliph so that the new generation could have leader. Caliph al Mamun keen interest in this subject was recorded by different scholars of that time, one of them being, Historians like al-Ya'qūbi who states that the caliph wanted the kids to learn wisdom so that in future they can decisions on leadership, policy and headship.

### **Mechanisms of *Bayt Al Hikmah***

Mohammad Ibn Zakariyah Al-Rāzī in his books has stated that Bayt al-Hikmah had a range of divisions that comprised of the subsequent sections.

Depository of books was a section dedicated to the books were books were sorted. Original written books and the books that were translated were of great importance. The caliph himself was involved in the process of buying books from different parts of the world. For this purpose, different delegations were sent by Al Mamun to buy books from libraries of Constantinople and Cyprus (Adel Abdul-Aziz Algeriani). The books could easily be borrowed. Staff was allocated to lend the books to the readers. Fine was also issued to people who destroyed the borrowed books. Once the translations were done, they were then copied by writers who, in their specific style copied the translated books. Al Mamun appointed writers himself to copy the translated work. The process of authoring the translated were also categorized on the basis of subjects, Mamun appointed Abū Ja'far Ibn Mūsā Ibn Shākir and brothers in assembly of mathematics and engineering, stars' movement and philosophy were assigned to Ya'qūb al- and to Ibn Farkhān al-Tabarī and the organization of Medicine was nominated to Ibn Ishāq al-Harānī (Adel Abdul-Aziz Algeriani). It is surprising to say that all these services were

provided free of cost to the common people as the Caliph himself was paying for the maintenance of the House of Wisdom (Adel Abdul-Aziz Algeriani).

### **Funding of House of Wisdom**

Historians of the contemporary world agrees to the fact that limitless financial support was given to the Institute for its day to day working. Large amount of money and gold were spent by not only the caliph but the wealthy class also took charge of the institute and supported it completely. This resulted in thriving and flourishing institute. The estimated budget of the House of Wisdom is said to have been over two hundred thousand Dinar of that time, this budget would cater to the salary of the employees, lecturers, food, habitation, and stationary items. One source says that a renowned translator was given the weight of what he translated in gold as a remuneration for his contribution. Medieval Muslim biographer and bibliographer, Ibn al-Nadīm has also stated in his encyclopedia, *Al-Firist* that few translators, like Ibn al-A'sam and Thābit Ibn Qurra had a monthly stipend that surpassed five hundred Dinars (Adel Abdul-Aziz Algeriani).

### **Downfall of *Bayt Al-Hikmah***

The House of Wisdom was not just a library, it was a pathway paved for the future Arab thinker and intellectual. The library also served as a mode of progress for the western world on the inventions in science, maps, translations and discoveries that served as a backbone for the researchers of the future both in the Islamic world as well the western world. Focus on just the theoretical studies was not part of the institution, the House of Wisdom also focused on practical aspects as well.

The successors of Al Mamun took over the library. During the reign of Al Mutawakil, the institution rapidly decreased, who moved away from rationalism and took no interest in science and arts. He on other hand took literal understandings of the Quran and *Hadith* and took Greek philosophy as anti-Islamic.

13 February 1258, marked the day when the Mongol invaded into Baghdad caused them to destroy the library. Some sources say that the Mongols built barn using the books from the library. Some books were thrown in the Tigris river and other manuscripts were burnt. These invasions caused the fall of Baghdad, as a consequence literary heritage,

knowledge, culture and an era of intellectual movements came to an end (ADEL ABDUL-AZIZ ALGERIANI). Collapse of Baghdad marked the fall of Abbasids caliphate, which gave rise to the disaster on the Muslim legacy resulting in Muslim civilization to experience a collapse.

Continuing human civilization was preserved by this House of Wisdom after the Greeks and the Roman. This contribution cannot be neglected by the contemporary scholars, researcher and educators.

### **Contemporary World and the Importance of Establishing *Bayt Al Hikmah***

House of wisdom of Bayt Al Hikmah played a significant role in the transmission of knowledge from the Abbasids Islamic world to the world. Substantial studies reveal that *Bayt Al Hikmah* and several other schools and libraries of the time played a vital role in the progress and development of human civilization. Many libraries and school in the Islamic world came into existence because of the impact that the *Bayt Al Hikmah*. Additionally, the structure and organizational hierarchy was also comprehended in the other libraries that were built after it. The library of the Abbasid had conserved the awareness and tradition of the ancient cultures, passing them to the western world with extraordinary contributions, employing some of the Abbasid period unparalleled sightings to display and revolutionize.

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