



The House of Wisdom

When Muslim forces defeated a Chinese army in 751, Chinese prisoners taught their captors how to make paper. By 794 Baghdad had its first paper mill. Schools, bookshops, and libraries soon sprang up all over the Muslim world. By the tenth century, Baghdad's suqs boasted as many as a hundred bookshops. Each book had to be hand copied—printing presses had not yet been invented.

Baghdad was home to one of Islam's greatest libraries—the House of Wisdom, established in 830 by Caliph al-Ma'mun. Scholars from across the Middle East flocked to the caliph's court and to the House of Wisdom. Persian and Indian teachings were translated into Arabic. Baghdad's scholars also translated Greek treatises on mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy. And Baghdad's scholars made their own contributions. The scientist al-Khwarizmi, who flourished in Caliph al-Ma'mun's court, is considered the father of astronomy.

But not all the books in Baghdad were for learning. People used to listen to wonderful stories populated with princes, princesses, thieves, wizards, and genies. Many of the stories had roots in ancient Indian and Persian tales. One of Baghdad's most famous story collections, *One Thousand and One Nights*, was translated into Arabic in the tenth century. Storytellers in Baghdad and across the Islamic Empire added new details. Some of the well-known stories include "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp," "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," and "The Adventures of Sinbad the Sailor." Other tales were based on the exploits of members of the royal Abbasid family.