

Snapshot from History: A Muslim Scholar of 9th Century Baghdad — a Hakeem

SETTING: Baghdad, the month of Ramadan, 217 after Hijrah, or 832 CE.

PERSON: A middle-aged Muslim scholar, or Hakeem.

PLACE: The House of Wisdom (**Bayt al-Hikmah**) in Baghdad, founded in 830 CE by Ma'mun, son of the legendary Khalifah Harun al-Rashid. Later, Khalifah Ma'mun, hoping to aid the cause of learning in the Abbasid state, greatly expanded the House of Wisdom, making it a museum, library, translation office, teaching institute and conference center. Scientific and other works were translated into Arabic from Greek, Persian, Syriac, Hebrew and other languages. He hired Persian, Christian, Jewish and Hindu scholars to work side-by-side with Arabic-speaking Muslims to translate books and write new works on many topics. The books were copied and illustrated by calligraphers and artists, and bound to be stored in the House of Wisdom's large library. Translators were sometimes rewarded in gold according to the weight of the books.

In the background are **shelves of books** in one of many libraries in Baghdad. Some libraries contain thousands of volumes, catalogued and placed flat on the shelves. Some libraries are even cooled by water flowing through pipes.

The writing is **Arabic script**, universal language of scholars across Muslim lands from Spain to Central Asia. Since Muslim scholars used **Arabic** as the language of learning, they had no trouble communicating ideas from place to place. This helped to advance learning in the Muslim lands, from which it later spread to other cultures.

He writes a **letter** about his latest work to a fellow scholar in al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain, using a **reed pen** carefully cut and trimmed from plants grown on the banks of the Tigris River. The ink is made from **lamp-black** and **gum arabic**.

The Hakeem writes on a **low desk of wood**, inlaid with **ivory** and **ebony** from Africa, and mother-of-pearl from the Persian Gulf.

The Hakeem's **turban** is wrapped from several yards of thinnest muslin cotton, named for the city of Mosul where it is manufactured.

His **robe** is made of **damask**, rich cloth with a floral pattern woven into it, a specialty of the city of Damascus, Syria. The robe was a **traditional gift of honor** from the Khalifah Ma'mun as a token of appreciation for the Hakeem's scholarly achievement.



Volumes stacked on the floor represent some of the scholar's many works on medicine, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics and religious subjects. This Hakeem, like many others, has a broad education and is interested in many fields.

He writes on **paper** made in Baghdad from cotton fiber. Paper is a new product for Baghdad; it originated in China, and was brought to the Muslim world after 750. It is rapidly replacing parchment and papyrus, in use since the time of the ancient Egyptians. Paper has begun to spread across the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain, but it will not arrive in Christian Europe until the 13th century, when it is brought by pilgrims and scholars traveling to Spain.

It is late afternoon, and the scholar's **stomach** is empty, and he is thirsty. **Ramadan** is the month of **fasting** for all Muslims, but at sundown he will break his fast, pray and enjoy dinner at the court or at one of the palaces of prominent Baghdad residents.

A **copy of the Qur'an** is placed, as a sign of the great respect given it by Muslims as holy scripture, on a **special stand of fragrant, carved sandalwood** imported from the tropical forests of Southeast Asia. The Hakeem, like any educated Muslim, began his schooling by memorizing the Qur'an. The Qur'an is also inspiration for the Hakeem's scientific work; it contains many references to seeking knowledge and investigating the creation. The Qur'an shows beautiful **calligraphy**, or decorative writing, and **illumination** in geometric designs, using inks with gold and jewel-like colors.