A Muslim Scholar of 9th Century Baghdad — a Hakeem

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.

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 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.

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 Muslim 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.

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.

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