

# The House of Wisdom: Intellectual Achievements of the Abbasid Caliphate

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**Abstract:** The intellectual achievements of the Abbasid caliphs cannot be overemphasised. It covered a wide range of fields, science, literature, and the preservation and dissemination of knowledge. It not only laid the foundations for today's scientific developments, but also left a valuable legacy for the Islamic world that propelled the Islamic Golden Age to its zenith, and also had a profound impact on the European Renaissance. This era of high scientific and cultural prosperity cannot be separated from an academic institution, the House of Wisdom. Factors such as economic development, trade prosperity, political clarity, supportive rulers and social stability at that time combined to promote the creation of the House of Wisdom and its step-by-step growth into the most important academic centre of the time. The House of Wisdom was not only a centre for academic exchange, but also acted as a translation centre, an education centre and a resource centre, among other roles, and drove the scientific and cultural progress of the period.

**Keywords:** European Renaissance, House of Wisdom, Islamic Golden Age, Translation Movement.

## 1. Introduction

From the 7th century to the following one or two hundred years, the Arabs initially established a world-wide empire spanning Asia, Africa and Europe from the Spanish Pyrenees in the west to the western borders of Datang and the Sindh region of India in the east - the Arabian Empire. The Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 AD) was the second hereditary dynasty of the Arabian Empire, an era of unprecedented scientific and cultural prosperity (Hazari, 2023) [1]. Civilisation in this period reached great heights and its scientific and cultural achievements remained at the forefront even long after the end of the empire, until the Renaissance, when the world centre of science shifted from there to Europe. The scientific achievements of the Arabian Empire have made an indelible mark on the development of human society and have occupied an important place in the history of Islamic development and even in the history of human civilization.

The intellectual achievements during the reign of the Abbasid Caliphate had a profound and wide-ranging impact on the scientific and cultural fields of later generations. Some modern day objects that we take for granted, such as the camera, soap, watches, and cologne trace their roots back to this era (Afikra, 2023)[2]. The birth of algebra and the famous collection of stories "The Thousand and One Nights" were also created in this era. The House of Wisdom in the capital, Baghdad, was at the heart of the intellectual boom of the age, not only as a library but also as a centre of cultural exchange, attracting scholars from all over the world to engage in intellectual exchanges such as translations, debates and research. The rulers of that era, particularly Caliph Al-Ma'mun, exhibited significant support for scientific and scholarly endeavours, thereby fostering the advancement of the House of Wisdom. The House of Wisdom, meanwhile, developed into a centre of knowledge that led to the development of science and culture at the time, driven by a combination of political, economic and socio-cultural values.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the creation, growth and role of the House of Wisdom and to evaluate the

intellectual achievements of the Abbasid Caliphate and its far-reaching implications. It is hoped that it will provide new perspectives for the study of intellectual achievements, the House of Wisdom and the translation movement during the Abbasid caliphate, and related topics such as the Islamic Golden Age.

## 2. Research Questions

Based on the research context and research objectives, this paper proposes the following research questions, which will be organised around these three key research questions.

RQ1: How did the House of Wisdom become a centre of intellectual and cultural exchange for the Abbasids?

RQ2: What were the major intellectual achievements during the Abbasid period? And how did the House of Wisdom facilitate or contribute to these achievements?

RQ3: What was the impact and significance of intellectual achievements during the Abbasid caliphate?

## 3. Literature Review

The Abbasid Caliphate was an era of unprecedented scientific and cultural prosperity, and the House of Wisdom received much attention as the intellectual centre of the time. Related studies dealing with the development of the House of Wisdom and its role in the intellectual achievements of the time are numerous.

### 3.1. Driving Force for the House of Wisdom

Scholarly accounts of the founding of the House of Wisdom differ. One view is that the house of wisdom was founded by Abu Ja'far al-Mansur (712-775 CE) (Al-Diyaji, 1975)[3]. Another view is that the house of wisdom was founded in the time of Harun al-Rashid (766-809 CE) (Ma'ruf, 1969)[4]. I hereby agree with the second view and use it as a basis for my examination of the development of the house of wisdom.

There are many factors that make the House of Wisdom an iconic institution of the Abbasid era. One prevailing view is

that the support of the rulers of the time was a very important factor. The Caliphate of Haroon al-Rasheed brought Baghdad to the height of its splendour during his reign (Tech & Tech, 2023)[5]. He strongly encouraged scholarly exchanges in all fields, and during his reign, the use of paper became commonplace, and he decreed that writing should be done only on paper (Ekinici, 2016)[6]. His son Caliph Al-Ma'mun founded the House of Wisdom and added many other research centres and an observatory to enable more scholars to conduct research (Johnson, 2023)[7]. On the other hand, Benabdeljalil (2022)[8] argues that the economic and trade boom during the Abbasid caliphate also provided an important historical context. The capital city of Baghdad was a crossroads of the land and sea silk routes and an important trading centre (Bartha, 2018)[9]. The prosperity of trade facilitated the movement and exchange of people from all over the world and brought about the interaction of different cultures and ideas, laying a good economic and socio-cultural foundation for the creation and development of the House of Wisdom.

### **3.2. Functions of the House of Wisdom**

Daniesyah (2022)[10] believes that one of the most important achievements of the House of Wisdom is the Translation Movement, which involved many levels of society and the intellectual culture. One of its most successful and widespread translation events was the collection of knowledge and books from different languages of different civilisations in the world, which were translated into Arabic for collection and preservation. As Algeriani & Mohadi (2023)[11] state, the House of Wisdom served as a major Abbasid library as well as a leading university. It was highly esteemed in Islamic history and served as a model for many libraries during and after its operation. For example, the Aghlabids House of Wisdom, the Andalusian House of Wisdom and Cairo's House of Wisdom were modelled on the House of Wisdom. They argue that these libraries built to imitate the House of Wisdom further promoted the scientific progress and cultural development of the time. The role of the House of Wisdom, as stated by Selim (2023)[12], encompasses many aspects. Its main role is as a scholarly resource centre, as it houses a collection of classic works from different civilisations around the world, providing scholars who come here with the materials they need for their research. But the House of Wisdom, as the main institution of the translation movement, also acts as a centre for translation, where many of the classic works of the translation period were done, and it provides a place for translators and scholars to translate, study and discuss.

In summary, scholarly research into the founding and growth of the House of Wisdom and its influence on the intellectual achievements of the Abbasid caliphs has been extensive, with the prevailing view focusing on the fact that the political stability of the empire at the time, along with the development of economic trade, provided the basis for the development of scholarship, and that the support of the rulers was also a very important factor. In terms of the roles and functions performed by the House of Wisdom, whether as a library function, a scholarly exchange function, or as a translation centre, the focus of research may differ, but the broad and important role played by the House of Wisdom is undisputed and generally accepted in existing research.

## **4. Creation and Development of the House of Wisdom**

### **4.1. Origins of the House of Wisdom**

As mentioned in the literature review, there are different views on the founders of the House of Wisdom. I agree here with the view that the House of Wisdom was founded by Harun al-Rashid (766-809CE) and have examined it on this basis. The House of Wisdom was originally constructed by Caliph Harun al-Rashid (reigned 786-809 CE) as an impressive library housing a vast collection of manuscripts and books amassed by his father and grandfather. These works covered a wide range of disciplines in the arts and sciences, and were written in multiple languages. After thirty years, the collection had expanded to such an extent that Caliph Al-Ma'mun, his son, constructed additional sections to the original structure, transforming it into a vast academy known as the House of Wisdom. This institution accommodated various fields of study (The House of, 2023)[13]. Caliph Al-Ma'mun used to allocate resources and donations specifically for the library. It is claimed that he motivated translators to make contributions to the library of the House of Wisdom by paying them with the weight of gold for each completed book. At the House of Wisdom, translators, scientists, and philosophers convene to engage in translation, reading, and intellectual discourse. This platform offers translations for a wide range of scientific issues, philosophical notions, thoughts, manuscripts, and books written in several languages. Subsequently, he expanded the number of study centres to accommodate a greater number of scientists conducting their research. Additionally, he established an observatory in 829. The House of Wisdom encompasses a wide range of disciplines, including translation, mathematics, and astrology.

### **4.2. Key Factors Contributing to its Status as a Knowledge Centre**

The rise of the House of Wisdom as a centre of intellectual and cultural exchange was the result of a combination of policy support from rulers, economic resources, cultural pluralism and a society that held knowledge in high esteem. Together, these factors created an environment in which scholars could thrive and contribute to the rich intellectual heritage of the Abbasid era.

Firstly, the economic base determines the superstructure, and economic prosperity is the most basic element of cultural prosperity. The capital city of Baghdad was the crossroads of the Silk Road on the road and the sea at that time, and the booming trade boosted the economy during the Abbasid period (Mahmood, 2022)[14], which in turn made it possible to invest more money in academic development. At the same time, thriving trade exchanges have increased links and interactions between different cultures. The supportive policies of the rulers, on the other hand, played a crucial role. The rulers of the time, especially the Caliph Al-Ma'mun, adopted many supportive policies to encourage translators and scholars to engage in activities such as the translation of books, academic debates and scientific research. In addition, the Abbasid period was characterised by a strong scholarly atmosphere that contributed to the growth of the House of Wisdom. The House of Wisdom was located in Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, which was a political, economic, trade, religious and transport centre, as well as a scholarly centre for

the clash of civilisations and ideas.

## **5. Major Intellectual Achievements and Wisdom House Facilitation**

### **5.1. Major Intellectual Achievements**

#### **5.1.1. Scientific Field**

In the field of science, great advances have been made in the fields of mathematics, medicine and astronomy. Arabic numerals, as an example, are inextricably linked to our present lives. This marvellous number was absorbed from the Indians by the wise Muslims of the Arabian Empire and introduced to the West and the East. At the same time, these Muslims introduced the number "0" and decimalisation to the world. Specifically, it was through al-Khwarizmi's (780-850 CE) famous book "Indian Calculations" that this marvellous number, which had an incalculable impact on the world, became known and accepted. For this reason, they are called Arabic numerals. Today, Arabic numerals are inseparable from our lives. The field of optics reflects the accomplishments of physics, and the primary source for information on the science of optics is Ibn al-Haytham's Book of Optics. The study of medicine played a significant role in Abbasid science, particularly in the fields of anatomy and pathology. Ibn Sina, a Tajik scientist, was a prominent physician during this period and is known for his writings *The True Work of Medicines* and *The Book of Health*. Astronomy and alchemy were also developed at this time.

#### **5.1.2. Literary and Artistic Fields**

In the field of literature and art, including poetry, storytelling, philosophy, theology and architecture, there were important achievements. Arabic poetry and literature reached its zenith during the Abbasid Caliphate. The crowning achievement of Arabic literature at this time was the world-famous *Thousand and One Nights*, which was not actually the work of any one writer, but was collected, refined and processed over a period of several hundred years by a wide range of Middle Eastern townspeople and literati, and was the result of the ingenuity of a wide range of Arabs and Persians in the region. In addition, at that time, numerous poets rose to prominence in the courts of Baghdad and the provincial capitals. Among them, we count Abu Tammam, Abu Nawas, and Al-Mutanabbi.

#### **5.1.3. Field of Knowledge Preservation and Dissemination**

In the preservation and dissemination of knowledge, the Arab empire inherited a great deal of the scientific literature of its forefathers as it advanced its frontiers. The empire not only preserved this valuable cultural heritage of mankind well, but also embarked on the translation of literature of great significance. The Abbasid translation movement involved a great deal of translation work, translating classic works from ancient Greek, Indian, and Persian cultures into Arabic, and studying and disseminating them. The scholars of the Arab empire were not satisfied with the knowledge gained through translation, but corrected many of the errors and deficiencies of the ancient texts and carried out in-depth examinations and meticulous interpretations and evaluations.

### **5.2. Role of the House of Wisdom**

During the reign of the Abbasid Caliphs, the House of Wisdom began as a large library and evolved into a centre of scholarly exchange for the time and one of the main

institutions of the translation movement. It certainly did not limit itself to this function, but also played a variety of roles.

#### **5.2.1. Academic Exchange Centre**

There is no doubt that the House of Wisdom was a centre of intellectual and cultural exchange. The House of Wisdom is located in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid dynasty. Baghdad was the richest city in the world at that time and the political, religious, economic, commercial, academic, and transportation centre of Islamic civilization. At that time, the Abbasid Dynasty was politically clear and economically prosperous, and the rulers had a strong interest in scientific development. They not only provide economic and political support for academic development, but also advocate the social value of pursuing knowledge, attracting many scholars to come here for academic exchanges, and further promoting the integration of different ideas and cultures (Kaviani et. al, 2012)[15], consolidating the role of the House of Wisdom as an academic centre. As an academic centre, the Wisdom House provides a place for academic exchange activities such as research, discussion, and learning for scholars who come here.

#### **5.2.2. Translation Centre**

The Abbasid translation movement lasted for hundreds of years and had far-reaching influence. The House of Wisdom plays an important role as the main institution of the translation movement. Many famous works were translated and preserved in the House of Wisdom. The Caliphate vigorously advocated and sponsored the translation of academic classics from ancient Greece, Rome, Persia, India and other countries into Arabic to absorb advanced cultural heritage (Bsoul, 2019)[16]. For example, Aristotle, Plato, Ptolemy, and Karshi from Greek culture, and the Mahabharata, the Vedas, and other works from Indian culture.

#### **5.2.3. Education and Resource Centre**

The role of the House of Wisdom has long transcended that of a library; it also plays an important role as an educational centre and resource centre as a comprehensive university. It houses a large collection of classical materials and information in various fields, attracting scholars from all over the world to exchange ideas and providing them with academic resources. In addition, this process of exchange and collision between scholars of different cultures and backgrounds is also a process of mutual learning, which plays an important role in nurturing talents and promoting the integration of different cultures and knowledge. Al-Khwarizmi and Ibn Sina, for example, were talents that had a profound impact on the scientific and cultural achievements of the period, and even on the development of the Islamic world as a whole.

## **6. Influence and Significance of Intellectual Achievements**

### **6.1. For the Development of Science**

The intellectual achievements of the Abbasid period opened the path and laid the groundwork for scientific research in later times, which was mainly reflected in the breakthroughs in the scientific fields of mathematics, medicine, chemistry and astronomy. For example, algebra was the basis for man's entry into mathematics and other natural sciences, and it was in the hands of the Muslims of the Arab empire that the discipline of mathematics was formalised. The most influential work on algebra by Khorezm,

the Treatise on Arithmetic and Algebra, was the first treatise on algebra in the history of mankind, and the Latin translation of this book was widely used as a textbook in European universities up to the Renaissance.

## 6.2. For the History of Islam

The Abbasid period, with its political stability, economic prosperity, and the culmination of the development of science and culture, has been described as the Golden Age of Islamic history, preserving a valuable intellectual heritage for the Islamic world and human civilisation. The support of the Caliphate transformed Baghdad into the centre of learning in the world at that time and facilitated the spread and mutual exchange of various civilisations and foreign cultures here. Arab Islamic culture was deeply influenced by Persian, Indian and Greek culture. The Arabs not only inherited and developed the essence of their own culture, but also absorbed many excellent foreign cultures, which contributed to the development of the scientific and cultural fields of the period, and the One Thousand and One Nights depicts the prosperity of this scene and the achievements in the field of literature of the period.

## 6.3. For the Renaissance

The intellectual achievements of the Abbasid period had a significant impact on the European Renaissance across time and space. This was mainly in the preservation and dissemination of knowledge through the translation movement. Ancient Greece was one of the major sources of European civilisation, and its philosophical, scientific and literary achievements had a profound impact on later generations. By translating ancient Greek writings into Arabic, Abbasid scholars and translators not only spread the essence of ancient Greek culture, but also preserved many ancient Greek texts that had otherwise been lost. During the translation movement, many ancient Greek works were widely disseminated, such as Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Plato's *Ideal State*, and Ptolemy's *Book of Astronomy* (Fancy, 2012)[17]. During the European Renaissance, many Greek works were lost, and scholars retranslated and used them by re-translating the Arabic versions that were preserved during the translation movement.

In summary, this period was the golden age of Islamic history, when political, economic, scientific and cultural prosperity reached its zenith. Intellectual achievements covered a wide range of fields, including science, culture and the preservation and dissemination of knowledge. These scientific and technological breakthroughs and cultural and intellectual achievements not only left a valuable intellectual legacy for the history of Islamic thought and the history of world civilisation, but also had a direct impact on the European Renaissance, providing it with an important source of knowledge, and opening the way and laying the foundations for the development of science in the later generations, which even today still holds a very important position, which is evident from its far-reaching impact.

## 7. Conclusion

Through examining the creation and development of the House of Wisdom, studying its role in the scientific and cultural development of the period, and analysing and evaluating the intellectual achievements of the period and their continuing impact, this paper provides a new and comprehensive perspective and an important historical

context for the study of topics related to scientific achievement in the Abbasid period.

In Conclusion, academics have different views on the founding of the House of Wisdom, but this paper agrees that the House of Wisdom was founded in the time of Harun al-Rashid. The House of Wisdom developed step by step under the support of the rulers to become a centre of intellectual and cultural exchange for the Abbasids, and played a variety of important roles in promoting the intellectual achievements of the period. The intellectual achievement of the Abbasid period was far-reaching and wide-ranging. Its scientific achievements in the fields of mathematics, medicine, chemistry and astronomy laid the foundations and opened the way for the development of science in later times, and its influence continues to this day. The intellectual achievements of the period culminated in the Islamic Golden Age and left a valuable intellectual legacy for Islamic history and human civilisation. And, the century-long translation movement of that time had a direct impact on the European Renaissance, and the works that were translated and preserved became the spark that ignited the European Renaissance.

However, since this paper's study of the intellectual achievements of the Abbasid period is based on a comprehensive perspective, it covers a wide range of areas, and it is more difficult to analyse the detailed characteristics of the achievements made during this period and the specific aspects of their impact. Subsequent studies can focus on the House of Wisdom as a centre of intercultural exchange during this period as an entry point for further research on the achievements of this period under the influence of cultural fusion, which will help to gain a deeper understanding of the universality and uniqueness of the intellectual achievements of this period.

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