

House of Wisdom

The **House of Wisdom** (Arabic: بيت الحكمة, romanized: *Bayt al-Hikmah*), also known as the **Grand Library of Baghdad**, refers to either a major Abbasid public academy and intellectual center in Baghdad or to a large private library belonging to the Abbasid Caliphs during the Islamic Golden Age.^{[1][2]} The House of Wisdom is the subject of an active dispute over its functions and existence as a formal academy, an issue complicated by a lack of physical evidence following the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate and a reliance on corroboration of literary sources to construct a narrative. The House of Wisdom was founded either as a library for the collections of the Caliph Harun al-Rashid in the late 8th century (then later turned into a public academy during the reign of Al-Ma'mun) or was a private collection created by Al-Mansur (reign 754–775) to house rare books and collections of poetry in both Arabic and Persian.^{[1][3]}

The House of Wisdom and its contents were destroyed in the Siege of Baghdad in 1258, leaving very little in the way of archaeological evidence for the House of Wisdom, such that most knowledge about it is derived from the works of contemporary scholars of the era such as Al-Tabari and Ibn al-Nadim.

The House of Wisdom existed as a part of the major Translation Movement taking place during the Abbasid Era, translating works from Greek and Syriac to Arabic, but it is unlikely that the House of Wisdom existed as the sole center of such work, as major translation efforts arose in Cairo and Damascus even earlier than the proposed establishment of the House of Wisdom.^[4] This translation movement lent momentum to a great deal of original research occurring in the Islamicate world, which had access to texts from Greek, Persian and Indian sources.^{[note 1][4]}

The House of Wisdom was made possible by the consistent flow of Arab, Persian, and other scholars of the Islamicate world to Baghdad, owing to the city's position

as capital of the Abbasid Caliphate.^[5] This is evidenced by the large number of scholars known to have studied in Baghdad between the 8th and 13th centuries, such as [Al-Jahiz](#), [Al-Kindi](#), and [Al-Ghazali](#) among others, all of whom would have contributed to a vibrant academic community in Baghdad, producing a great number of notable works, regardless of the existence of a formal academy.^{[5][4]} The fields to which scholars associated with the House of Wisdom contributed include, but are not limited to, [philosophy](#), [mathematics](#), [medicine](#), [astronomy](#), and [optics](#).^{[6][5]} The early name of the library, *Khizanat al-Hikma* (literally, "Storehouse of Wisdom"), derives from its function as a place for the preservation of rare books and poetry, a primary function of the House of Wisdom until its destruction.

In 750, the [Abbasid](#) dynasty replaced the Umayyad as the ruling dynasty of the Islamic Empire, and, in 762, the caliph [al-Mansur](#) (r. 754–775) built [Baghdad](#) and made it his capital instead of Damascus. Baghdad's location and cosmopolitan population made the perfect location for a stable commercial and intellectual center.^[10] The Abbasid dynasty had a strong Persian bent,^[12] and adopted many practices from the [Sassanian Empire](#)—among those, that of translating foreign works, except that now texts were translated into Arabic. For this purpose, al-Mansur founded a palace library modeled after the Sassanian Imperial Library, and provided economic and political support to the intellectuals working there. He also invited delegations of scholars from India and other places to share their knowledge of mathematics and astronomy with the new Abbasid court.

In the [Abbasid Empire](#), many foreign works were translated into [Arabic](#) from [Greek](#), [Chinese](#), [Sanskrit](#), [Persian](#) and [Syriac](#). The Translation Movement gained great momentum during the reign of caliph [al-Rashid](#), who, like his predecessor, was personally interested in scholarship and poetry. Originally the texts concerned mainly medicine, mathematics and astronomy; but other disciplines, especially philosophy, soon followed. Al-Rashid's library, the direct predecessor to the House of Wisdom, was also known as Bayt al-Hikma or, as the historian [Al-Qifti](#) called it, Khizanat Kutub al-Hikma (Arabic for "Storehouse of the Books of Wisdom")

Under the sponsorship of caliph [Al-Ma'mun](#) (r. 813–833), economic support of the House of Wisdom and scholarship in general was greatly increased. Furthermore, Abbasid society itself came to understand and appreciate the value of knowledge, and support also came from merchants and the military.[10] It was easy for scholars and translators to make a living and an academic life was a symbol of status; scientific knowledge was considered so valuable that books and ancient texts were sometimes preferred as war booty rather than riches.[14] Indeed, [Ptolemy's *Almagest*](#) was claimed as a condition for peace by Al-Ma'mun after a war between the Abbasids and the [Byzantine Empire](#). [15]

The House of Wisdom was much more than an academic center removed from the broader society. Its experts served several functions in Baghdad. Scholars from the Bayt al-Hikma usually doubled as engineers and architects in major construction projects, kept accurate official calendars, and were public servants. They were also frequently medics and consultants.

Al-Ma'mun was personally involved in the daily life of the House of Wisdom, regularly visiting its scholars and inquiring about their activities. He would also participate in and arbitrate academic debates.[10] Inspired by Aristotle, Al-Ma'mun regularly initiated regular discussion sessions and seminars among experts in *kalām*. *Kalām* is the art of philosophical debate that al-Mamm carried on from his Persian tutor, Ja'far. During debate, scholars would discuss their fundamental Islamic beliefs and doctrines in an open intellectual atmosphere.[2] Furthermore, he would often organize groups of sages from the Bayt al-Hikma into major research projects to satisfy his own intellectual needs. For example, he commissioned the mapping of the world, the confirmation of data from the *Almagest* and the deduction of the real size of the Earth (see section on the [main activities](#) of the House). He also promoted Egyptology and participated himself in excavations of the [pyramids of Giza](#).[16] Al-Ma'mun built the first

astronomical observatories in Baghdad, and he was also the first ruler to fund and monitor the progress of major research projects involving a team of scholars and scientists. His greatest legacy to science is that he was the first ruler to fund "big science".

Following his predecessors, Al-Ma'mun would send expeditions of scholars from the House of Wisdom to collect texts from foreign lands. In fact, one of the directors of the House was sent to Constantinople with this purpose. During this time, Sahl ibn Harun, a Persian poet and astrologer, was the chief librarian of the Bayt al-Hikma. [Hunayn ibn Ishaq](#) (809–873), an [Arab Nestorian Christian](#) physician and scientist, was the most productive translator, producing 116 works for the Arabs. The patron of this foundation was under Caliph Al-Ma'mun. Al-Ma'mun established the House of Wisdom, putting Hunayn ibn Ishaq in charge, who then became the most celebrated translator of Greek texts. As "Sheikh of the translators," he was placed in charge of the translation work by the caliph. Hunayn ibn Ishaq translated the entire collection of Greek medical books, including famous pieces by Galen and Hippocrates.[18] The [Sabian Thābit ibn Qurra](#) (826–901) also translated great works by [Apollonius](#), [Archimedes](#), [Euclid](#) and [Ptolemy](#). Translations of this era were superior to earlier ones, since the new Abbasid scientific tradition required better and

better translations, and the emphasis was many times put on incorporating new ideas to the ancient works being translated.[10][19] By the second half of the ninth century, Al-Ma'mun's Bayt al-Hikma was the greatest repository of books in the world and had become one of the greatest hubs of intellectual activity in the Middle Ages, attracting the most brilliant Arab and Persian minds.[13] The House of Wisdom eventually acquired a reputation as a center of learning, although **universities** as we know them did not yet exist at this time—knowledge was transmitted directly from teacher to student without any institutional surrounding. **Maktabs** soon began to develop in the city from the 9th century on and, in the 11th century, **Nizam al-Mulk** founded the **Al-Nizamiyya of Baghdad**, one of the first institutions of higher education in Iraq.

The House of Wisdom flourished under Al-Ma'mun's successors **al-Mu'tasim** (r. 833–842) and his son **al-Wathiq** (r. 842–847), but considerably declined under the reign of **al-Mutawakkil**. Although Al-Ma'mun, al-Mu'tasim, and al-Wathiq followed the sect of **Mu'tazili**, which supported broad-mindedness and scientific inquiry, al-Mutawakkil endorsed a more literal interpretation of the **Qur'an** and **Hadith**. The caliph was not interested in science and moved away from rationalism, seeing the spread of Greek philosophy as anti-Islamic.

On February 13, 1258, the Mongols entered the city of the caliphs, starting a full week of pillage and destruction.

With all other libraries in Baghdad, the House of Wisdom was destroyed by the army of [Hulagu](#) during the [Siege of Baghdad](#).^[21] The books from Baghdad's libraries were thrown into the Tigris River in such quantities that the river ran black with the ink from the books.^[22]