

## Emory Resources on the Middle East

### Great Books of the Islamic World (II):

#### *The Catalogue of Ibn al-Nadim*

Ibn al-Nadim's work *al-Fihrist* ("The Catalogue") is an invaluable source, for it is something like the card catalogue of the books available in all the libraries of Baghdad in the late tenth century. Written in 987 C.E., it includes the titles of many works which no longer exist, having been lost, burned, eaten by insects, or damaged by floods. It thus throws light on the history of Arabic literature in the broad sense as well as medieval Islamic intellectual history in many fields. It is also one of the most valuable sources regarding the translation movement that took place between 750 and 950 C.E.. In addition, the *Fihrist*, like Dewey's decimal system, is an exercise in mapping out the organization of human knowledge and not just an inventory of book titles. This unit provides a basic background for understanding the *Fihrist*, introduces some of the types of information it provides, and discusses the translation movement and the importance of "the ancient sciences" in medieval Baghdad.

#### **Historical Background:**

632 the Prophet Muhammad dies  
632-61 Medina is the capital of the Islamic Empire under first four Caliphs  
636 Battle of Yarmuk  
637 Battle of al-Q•disiyyah [al-Mad••in "the Ruins" = Ctesiphon]  
712 Muslim armies invade Spain  
732 Battle of Poitiers  
661-750 Umayyad Caliphs , capital at Damascus  
750-1258 the Abbasid Caliphs, capital at Wasit, then Baghdad  
al-Saff• , 749-54  
751 Paper introduced to Iraq  
al-Manßür 754-775  
762 Baghdad founded  
al-Mahdı 775-85  
782 Caliph al-Mahdı commissions a translation of Aristotle's *Topics* from the Nestorian Christian Patriarch Timothy I  
al-H•dı 785-86  
\*H•rün al-Rashıd 786-809  
al-Amin 809-813  
al-Ma•mün 813-833 ...  
833-848 The Inquisition

945 Shiite Buwayhids conquer Iraq, reducing the Abbasid Caliphs to figureheads.  
1055 Seljuk Turks conquer Iraq; conservative Sunni regime established  
1258 Hulagu takes Baghdad; capital moves to Tabriz  
Baghdad is ransacked and the Caliphal libraries are destroyed.

### **Baghdad, the Abbasids' Capital of the Islamic Empire:**

In 750 C.E., the Umayyad dynasty, which had ruled from their capital in Damascus since 661 C.E., came to an end. It was overthrown by a revolt that had started in far-off eastern Iran. The victors established a new dynasty of Caliphs, called the Abbasids because they were descendants of the Prophet Muhammad's uncle al-`Abbas. The new dynasty immediately moved the capital of the Islamic empire to Iraq, ruling first from a city called Wasit between the Tigris and Euphrates in southern Iraq. In 762, the Caliph al-Mansur founded the new capital city of Baghdad. It was situated on the Tigris river at a point where the Tigris and Euphrates come close together but do not join—they join far to the south, just north of Basra. This was very close to Ctesiphon, now the ruined site of the capital of the Iranian dynasty, the Sassanians, that had been toppled by the Islamic invasion over a century earlier. The new city was built as a circle with the Caliph's palace at the center. It has been claimed by some that this plan was inspired by Euclid's geometry.

Baghdad grew rapidly. It was the capital of a large empire, stretching from Spain to Pakistan, and received a great deal of revenue from the provinces. In addition, advances in irrigation, central control, and technology, produced an unprecedented agricultural surplus in Iraq itself. In addition, through the port city of Basra at the northern end of the Persian Gulf, Baghdad controlled trade from the Indian Ocean coming into the Middle East. The tremendous income produced by agriculture and trade combined is what allowed Baghdad to prosper. Within a century, Baghdad was the largest city in the world outside China, several times larger than the largest contemporary cities in Europe. It is estimated that Baghdad had roughly one million inhabitants. Reports state that there were ten thousand public baths in the city.

Baghdad became a center not only for wealth, power, and luxury, but also for scholarship. Scholars of all fields flocked to the city because of opportunities to learn, obtain books, get support through stipends provided by wealthy patrons, and find work as copyists, tutors, lecturers, or other gainful employment. In nearly every field, whether grammar, literature, history, Islamic law,

mathematics, or astronomy, the scholars of Baghdad were soon producing the most advanced scholarship in the world at the time. This blossoming of scholarship was helped by the discovery of a way to make paper quickly and cheaply. Before the late eighth century, scholars in the Middle East wrote on parchment, made of animal skins, or papyrus, made of the papyrus reed native to Egypt. Parchment was extremely expensive and time-consuming to produce. Papyrus was less expensive, but was brittle when dry and did not last in humid climates. The Abbasids learned to make paper out of pulp from craftsmen in Khurasan (north-eastern Iran) who had in turn learned to make paper from Chinese craftsmen who had been captured by a military force. By 800 C.E. a number of major paper works had been established around Baghdad. The availability of cheap paper led to an explosion in publishing. Soon, many Baghdadi authors were writing individual works of 3,000, 5,000, even 30,000 pages! It is estimated, for example, that Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923 C.E.), a famous historian, hadith scholar, jurist, and commentator on the Qur'an, wrote 40 pages a day for 40 years! A new profession was created, that of *warraq*, or "paper man". The *warraq* was a combination copyist, bookseller, and publishing agent. In the ninth century, there were over 100 bookshops in the "Market of the Papermen."

#### **The Life of Ibn al-Nadim:**

We know very little about Ibn al-Nadim except what we can figure out from the *Fihrist* itself. As far as we can tell, he lived his entire life in Baghdad. We know that he made an extensive trip to Mosul because he mentions seeing books of various kinds in the library of a book collector there. He died in 990 C.E. His birthdate is unknown. He must have been a grown young man already by 952 C.E., because he mentions meeting a certain Barda'i, a Mu'tazlili theologian belonging to the Khariji Islamic sect, in that year. Scholars have therefore estimated that he was born in 937 C.E. or earlier. He apparently studied with several famous scholars, including the literary scholar Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, famous for his *Book of Songs*, and the prolific literary critic al-Marzubani. He also seems to have belonged to a circle of scholars who were patronized by `Isa ibn `Ali ibn `Isa, a nobleman who belonged to the Jarrah family, several of whom had served the Abbasid Caliphs as Vizier.

The title *al-Nadim* means "boon companion," essentially a professional dinner guest who was meant to entertain and enlighten the Caliph and his companions with amusing anecdotes and instructive tales and information. It is not clear whether the author of the *Fihrist* was a *nadim* himself or whether his father or some earlier ancestor was. It seems clear, though, that Ibn al-Nadim was a *warraq*, literally a "paper man," someone who copied and sold

books. During this period, there were over one hundred book shops in the "Papermen's Market" in Baghdad, and the *Fihrist* shows that Ibn al-Nadim was not only extremely knowledgeable about paper, pens, and the construction of books but also had access to rare books, booklists, and anecdotes about ancient and hard-to-find works that would have been rare in someone of any other profession.

Ibn al-Nadim wrote the *Fihrist* written in 987 C.E.; we know this because he mentions the date at least four times in the work. At this date in history, the Buwayhids, Shiite warlords from Daylam, the area just south of the Caspian Sea in northern Iran, were ruling most of Iraq and Iran. They had captured Baghdad in 945 C.E., reducing the Abbasid Caliphs to ceremonial or de jure heads of the empire. They established capitals in the Iranian cities of Rayy, Isfahan, and Shiraz, as well as Baghdad itself for a time. The rivalry between the many courts in Iran, Iraq, and Syria produced an intellectual flowering similar to that of the Italian Renaissance. Baghdad was still a major world city, but it had met a new rival in Cairo, founded by the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt in 969 C.E. This time was at the tail end of the translation movement, which had been heavily patronized by the Caliphs and other figures connected with the caliphal court over the last two centuries. He is thus able to give in his Catalogue a fairly comprehensive survey of the accomplishments of the movement.

Ibn al-Nadim belonged to the Imami or Twelver Shiite sect of Islam. While they were a decided minority compared to the Sunni majority in the Islamic world at the time--now, they represent roughly 10% of the world population of Muslims--Shiites played a very important role in the history of this period. Shiite dynasties ruled most of the former Islamic Empire: the Fatimids ruled over Tunisia, Sicily, Egypt, southern Syria, and western Arabia; the Qarmatis controlled eastern Arabia; the Buwayhids ruled over most of Iraq and Iran; the Hamdanids ruled over northern Syria; and several lesser Shiite dynasties ruled in parts of northern Syria and northern and southern Iraq. Because of this unprecedented level of political control, the period 950 C.E.-1050 C.E. has been called "the Shiite century." We know that Ibn al-Nadim was a Shiite because of the respect he shows to the line of twelve Imams the Shiites considered to be the rightful rulers of the Muslim Community. He calls the first Imam, `Ali, "the Commander of the Faithful", a title used by Sunnis to refer to all of the historical Caliphs, including the contemporary Abbasid Caliph. He uses the phrase "peace be upon them" after mention of the Imams' names, which is a typical Shiite usage. Sunnis usually only use this phrase after the names of prophets such as Abraham, Moses, etc. Ibn al-Nadim expresses amazement at having seen documents written in the hands of `Ali and his sons Hasan and Husayn, the first three Imams. He knew the leading Shiite scholar of his day, al-Shaykh al-Mufid, personally, and had attended his lectures. The terms

he uses to refer to Sunnis and Shiites also point to a Shiite identity. He calls Sunnis *fi•mmı* "majority, general, popular" and Shiites *kh•ßı* "special, elite, minority." Sunnis tend to use other terms.

We can also tell from the text that Ibn al-Nadim was an adherent Mu` tazili theological school. The Mu` tazilis school of theology arose in the late eighth century, and was characterized by a rational approach to scripture and the understanding of God and God's characteristics. They had controlled the religious scene in the early ninth century, but had been marginalized after the Abbasid Caliphs failed to impose their doctrines, including the doctrine that the Qur'an was created and not eternal, and then turned against them. They experienced a come-back in Ibn al-Nadim's time, only to become nearly extinct in the course of the eleventh century. Ibn al-Nadim pays a great deal of attention to their famous authors, such as Abu Hudhayl, al-Nazzam, and al-Jahiz. A give-away, however, is his use of the term *ahl al-tawhid wa'l-`adl* "the Proponents of Divine Unity and Justice" to describe them, for this was the Mu` tazilis' preferred title for themselves.

We can also tell from the text of the *Fihrist* that Ibn al-Nadim was an aficionado of the Greek sciences, that is, philosophy, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and medicine. His chapter on these sciences is extremely detailed and includes long sections of narrative explaining the reasons for the great interest in these sciences within the Islamic Empire. It is because of this interest that his book is so valuable for an understanding of the translation movement.

### **The Translation Movement:**

The translation movement was important from about 750 C.E. until 950 C.E. A few works had been translated before the Abbasids came to power, but translations began to be produced rapidly and in large numbers soon after the establishment of the Abbasids. The Abbasid caliphs who were most active in promoting translation and supporting translators were al-Mansur, al-Ma'mun, and al-Hadi. Many other figures, including viziers, government secretaries, and individual scholars, patronized and supported translation. The Caliph al-Ma'mun built a royal library called the Bayt al-Hikmah ("House of Knowledge"), which served as an important resource for scholars and translators. He and other caliphs paid to have scientific works brought from the Byzantine empire to Baghdad, including superior manuscript copies of works that were available only in corrupt form.

Works were translated into Arabic from a number of languages. Chief among them were Greek, Syriac, Persian, and Sanskrit (the scholarly language of India). In some cases, the works were translated directly, say, from Greek into Arabic or Persian into Arabic. In other cases, works were translated from Greek into Syriac, and then from Syriac