Golden age of Arab and Islamic Culture

by Gaston Wiet, "Baghdad:
Metropolis of the Abbasid Caliphate"

Chapter 5: THE GOLDEN AGE OF ARAB AND ISLAMIC CULTURE

"Baghdad, at the confluence of two cultures, Aramaean and Greek, became, in the tenth century, the intellectual center of the world." As capital of the caliphate, Baghdad was also to become the cultural capital of the Islamic world. Our purpose is to show, as briefly as possible, the role that this region played in the transmission of the knowledge of antiquity, in the evolution of religious attitudes, and in the flowering of Arabic literature. We shall not try to find out, any more than did the caliphs of the period, whether the actors were Iranians, Arabs, Moslems, Christians, or Jews. Men of letters and of science had gathered in this city either through cultural affinity or because they had been summoned to the caliph's court for their worth or their competence. An effort was made to keep the language and the religion at an indispensable cultural level. In reality, there was but a single aim: It was necessary to study the structure and the rules of the language of the Koran in order to have the language respected and understood. We shall not spend too much time on the grammatical work, since we want to follow the more universal tendencies, especially in their influence on medieval Europe. We shall mention only Khalil, the inventor of Arabic prosody, the first author of a dictionary, and especially his pupil Sibawaih, who has the distinction of having codified definitively all the problems of grammar. Later, Mubarrad wrote a work which is not only didactic but a valuable collection of poetic quotations. He also shares with his rival and contemporary, Tha'lab, the honor of having contributed to the philological training of several poets. Some authors wrote the biography of Mohammed in the broad sense, by including the literature of the hadith, "The Conversations of the Prophet." The names of two of the first authors in this category should be remembered: Muhammad ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham.

Two of the founders of the four schools of jurisprudence lived in Baghdad and exerted decisive influence there for a long time. Abu Hanifa is already known to us because of his material participation in the founding of the city. He had the merit of integrating into the formalism of the law a living element, which consisted of both an analogical method and, when necessary, personal common sense. His tomb is still venerated in Baghdad. Opposed to this type of thought stands Ibn Hanbal, whose followers were talked about a great deal during the early centuries of the Mesopotamian city. This austere traditionalist was perhaps the victim of his own work, which is nothing more than a collection of hadith. Indeed, he came to consider tradition, after the Koran, as the only source of law. A fierce enemy of all innovation, Ibn Hanbal created a puritan school within Islam, which still in our day inspires the people of the Saudi kingdom. His tomb was in Baghdad too, but it has disappeared. The first commentaries on the Koran were written in Baghdad but we shall not spend much time on them. Religious circles were affected by a contemplative movement begun by the Mutazilites, etymologically "those who keep to themselves," as they did during the political quarrels which divided the Moslems the century before.

The Mutazilites, preaching essentially that God was a Perfect Being took no attributes other than his unity into account. This conviction led the believers to deny the eternity of God's word; thus, for them, the text of the Koran became a creation of the Divinity. This doctrine, with its appeal to reason, is particularly important because three caliphs imposed it officially upon the people in a particularly unpleasant way. The religious spirit, moreover, was to be undermined by Jahiz and, even more violently, by Razi. It was during this time that the doctor of laws, Ash'ari, sprang up from the Mutazilite ranks. He dominated and definitively unified all the future beliefs of Islam. He is mentioned now because he lived during this period, but his influence will be seen

in the discussion of the Seljuk period when his ideas had official approval. During the two hundred years after AD. 750, the intellectual ferment did not lessen for a single moment. Even limited to the names of those scholars, writers, and poets who absolutely should be known, the list is an impressive one.Even before the founding of Baghdad, whose well-earned fame grew for at least four centuries, the caliph Mansur sullied his own reputation by having Ibn Muqaffa', the creator of secular Arabic prose, put to death for what were probably political reasons. The writer was only thirty-six years old when he was executed in 757. The caliph thus did away with the reputed translator of the Fables of Bidpai, known today under the title of Kalila and Dimna. It is a masterpiece of Arabic prose, whose literary qualities have never been denied by Arab writers.Mamun was the caliph who was largely responsible for cultural expansion. An Arab historian states the following: "He looked for knowledge where it was evident, and thanks to the breadth of his conceptions and the power of his intelligence, he drew it from places where it was hidden. He entered into relations with the emperors of Byzantium, gave them rich gifts, and asked them to give him books of philosophy which they had in their possession. These emperors sent him those works of Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, Euclid, and Ptolemy which they had. Mamun then chose the most experienced translators and commissioned them to translate these works to the best of their ability. After the translating was done as perfectly as possible, the caliph urged his subjects to read the translations and encouraged tbem to study them. Consequently, the scientific movement became stronger under this prince's reign. Scholars held high rank, and the caliph surrounded himself with learned men, legal experts, traditionalists, rationalist theologians, lexicographers, annalists, metricians, and genealogists. He then ordered instruments to be manufactured." Astronomical observation was begun in Baghdad in an observatory in the Shammasiya section, on the left bank of the Tigris, east of Rusafa. The staff set to work measuring the ecliptic angle and fixing the position of the stars. In addition, the caliph ordered that two terrestrial degrees be calculated in order to determine the length of the solar year. (This work was not to be taken up again for seven centuries.) The engineer Ibrahim Fazari, who helped plan the founding of Baghdad, was the first in the Arab world to make astrolabes. (The Bibliothque Nationale in Paris has perhaps the oldest instrument of this type, one dating from the year 905. It was probably made in Baghdad, since it has on it the name of an heir apparent to the caliphate, a son of the caliph Muktafi.).People of the West should publicly express their gratitude to the scholars of the Abbasid period, who were known and appreciated in Europe during the Middle Ages.

There were the astronomer al-Khwarizmi (850), from whose name comes the word "algorithm"; Farghani, whom we call Alfraganus (about 850); the physician Yahya ibn Masawayh, called Mesua in the West; the astronomer Abu Ma'shar, the Albumasar of the Europeans (about 996). The caliph Mamun was responsible for the translation of Greek works into Arabic. He founded in Baghdad the Academy of Wisdom, which took over from the Persian university of Jundaisapur and soon became an active scientific center. The Academy's large library was enriched by the translations that had been undertaken. Scholars of all races and religions were invited to work there. They were concerned with preserving a universal heritage, which was not specifically Moslem and was Arabic only in language. The sovereign had the best qualified specialists of the time come to the capital from all parts of his empire. There was no lack of talented men. The rush toward Baghdad was as impressive as the horsemen's sweep through entire lands during the Arab conquest. The intellectuals of Baghdad eagerly set to work to discover the thoughts of antiquity. Harun al-Rashid, Mamun's father, was particularly interested in the physicians brought to his capital.

The physicians who had become justly famous under the first caliphs of Baghdad had been students at the Persian school of Jundaisapur. The first representative of the famous Bakhtyashu family came from this school, too. The family furnished physicians to the Abbasid court for more than 250 years. The biography of one of them indicates that the examination of urine was a common practice.The Nestorian Christian, Yahya ibn Masawayh, wrote many works on fevers, hygiene, and dietetics. His was the first treatise on ophthalmology, but he was soon surpassed in this field by his famous pupil, Hunain ibn Ishaq. Their books are of special value since there is no Greek treatise on the subject. Particular mention should be made of the man to whom Arab science owes so much, the man who could be called the father of Arab medicine, Hunain ibn Ishaq, also a Christian. In medieval Latin translations he was known as Johannitius. For him the caliph Mutawakkil restored the

translation bureau, which had been originally established by Mamun. Not only did Hunain work at translations, but he directed a team of scholars. His enthusiasm was responsible for great progress. He can be credited with having greatly increased the scientific knowledge of the Arabs. By inventing medical and philosophical terms, he was largely instrumental in forming a scientific language. Thanks to him and his collaborators, Arab writers formed the cultural avant-garde for a century or two. In the field of morals, this school was the first to translate the Hippocratic Oath. Razi, the physician of genius known in medieval Europe as Rhazes, profited greatly from these works. His own medical work was extensive. This fine clinician, who had universal interests, had his differences with the Moslem religion because he was opposed to all dogmatism. For this reason, extremely violent diatribes were directed against him.The way in which the caliph Mamun kindled the enthusiasm of others is admirable. Three brothers, the sons of Musa ibn Shakir, sought to distinguish themselves by giving fabulous sums of money to collect manuscripts and to bring translators together. The Banu Musa were themselves scholars who made advances in mathematics and astronomy.Kindi, who was to be known to posterity by the honorary title "philosopher of the Arabs," lived in Baghdad in this richly intellectual milieu. Because of his Mutazilite convictions, he attained the threefold position of translator, teacher, and astrologer. With him, "Arab intelligence rises to the level of philosophy." Of the role he played, it is enough to say that he was the creator of a doctrine that was to flourish in Arab philosophy, the idea of conciliation between the positions of Aristotle and Plato. Kindi's successor, Farabi, who lived in later years at the court of the Hamdanid princes in Aleppo, had his early training in Baghdad. Without detracting from Kindi's merit, a pre-eminent place must be given to Farabi, who, with his more scientific mind, was the true creator of Arab peripateticism.

This "second master," after Aristotle, continued along Kindi's path, too, in affirming the similarity of Aristotle's and Plato's views. In addition, he adopted the platonic theory of emanation. His Model City is an adapta-ion from Greek philosophy in which he describes his conception of the perfect city. This scholar, who was also an ecellent music theorist, contributed to the evolution of philosophical language. This master of logic also created a harmonious system that was a credit to his merit, his rigor, and his knowledge. In the meantime, the paper industry was born. After the battle of Talas in the Ili Valley at the end of the Umayyad period, a Chinese prisoner of war had been brought to Samarkand. There he began a paper industry using linen and hemp, imitating what he had seen in his own country. In 795, mention is made of the creation of the first paper factory in Baghdad. For a long time Samarkand remained the center of the industry, but, in addition to Baghdad, paper was manufactured in Damascus, Tiberias, Tripoli in Syria, Yemen, the Maghreb, and Egypt. The city of Jativa in Spain was famous for its thick, glazed paper. After the appearance of paper, the number of manuscripts multiplied from one end of the Moslem empire to the other.

This prosperous period for the publishing and selling of books was essential for cultural development. Paper was, therefore, of prime importance in the ninth century. From then on the book business was established in the Orient. However, we do not know whether the publishing was done by the author, a specialized merchant, or both at the same time. Well-stocked bookshops were often set up around the main mosque. Scholars and writers met in them, and copyists were hired there. In addition to the public libraries open to everyone, Jean Sauvaget, quoting an Arab source, spoke of "reading rooms where anyone, after paying a fee, could consult the work of his choice." Readers squabbled over works copied by well-known calligraphers, whose names were scrupulously recorded in the chronicles. The main libraries had their official copyists and their appointed binders. Wealthy writers had teams of such people. As is well known from monuments and manuscripts, calligraphy was an important art in Moslem countries. The most famous of the calligraphers of the time was Ibn Muqla, who was unfortunate enough to have been the vizier of three caliphs, an honor that earned him the cruel punishment of having his right hand amputated. It is said that he attached a reed pen to his arm and wrote so well that there was no difference between the way he wrote before and after he lost his hand. Baghdad had become an intellectual metropolis, an achievement which was to overshadow the elorts made by its two rival cities, Kufa and Basra. The work of the en- thusiastic translators was only the beginning; there was a very intimate rapport between the Arab writers and Greek thought, and the attempted assimilation was often quite successful. A little later, there also developed in Baghdad the famous quarrel between the partisans of culture stemming from the text of the Koran and the pre-Islam poets and their adversaries, the writers of Persian origin

who controlled the administration of the caliphate.

The writers' leader, Sahl ibn Harun, was director of the Academy of Wisdom, which played a considerable role in literature. The discussions, which were very violent at times, were favorable to the development of Arab literature. The "Arab" party, if it can be called that, defended itself stubbornly and glorified as well as it could itsreligious position which made of the Koran a revelation in the Arabic language. It also exalted its ancient poems, which were not really under attack. Both sides carried on the entire campaign in Arabic. Thus adversaries and partisans of Arab intellectual life agreed in honoring Arabic. In two of his letters, Ibn Muqaffa' freely used the Arabic word adab, a term which needs some explanation since it covers a wide variety of ideas, such as to conform to the dictates of a strict religious spirit, to adhere to the customs of polite society. The term is somewhat similar to the ancient arete, with the omission of military courage.

There are the same elements of practical morals, the feeling for justice, strength of soul, and piety. Good manners and courtesy became almost a technique and were, together with pure morality, the basis of Moslem education. But under the influence of the desire for cultural attainment, the term acquired a figurative sense which necessarily included the knowledge of Arab philosophy, of poetry and ancient stories, and of stylistic elegance.Under the Abbasids, there was also the social advancement of administrative secretaries, which enabled them to succeed the poets of an earlier period, who had been the only ones to earn their living in the field of letters. Thereafter the scholars, mathematicians, astronomers, astrologers, and translators of the works of Greek antiquity were supported by the first caliphs of Baghdad.The political history of this period is rather bleak. If only the succession of events were to be taken into consideration, we would have a false view of the cultural civilization under the Abbasids. Moreover, the Iranization of the empire had an influence on the way of thinking, feeling, and writing.

The discovery of Sassanian antiquity and Hellenic thought at the same time added fresh impetus. In the field of literature, there was a somewhat coordinated Iranophile movement called shu'ubiya. It consisted of a reaction, not always calm or tender, against Arab domination, both political and cultural. The promoter of this anti-Arab opposition was Sahl ibn Harun, director of the Academy of Wisdom, but in all fairness it should be said that even before him there were members of the fabulous Barmekid family who were prominent during Harun al-Rashid's reign because of their omnipotence and their tragic fate. They realized that poets played the same role as modern journalists. Poets should not, therefore, be led to oppose the regime. These great ministers were also famous for their broad tolerance; that the underlying motive was either coolness toward Islam or faithfulness to Iranian beliefs does not alter the facts.

We know, for example, that a number of famous disputants among Islamic theologians, free-thinkers, and doctors of different sects met at the home of the educated andenlightened Yahya, the grandson of Barmek. Thus, in ninth-century Baghdad a fertile literary center was formed which lighted the way for Arab letters. Poetry continued to be cultivated with the same care. The poets of the Abbasid period were worthy of their great ancestors of pre-Islamic times and of the Umayyad court. A list of the poets of genius would include: Bashshar ibn Burd, who died in 783, the standard-bearer of the shu' ubiya and an erotic poet of great talent and robustness whose capabilities were rather disturbing from a religious point of view; Muti' ibn Iyas, who died in 787 as famous for his debauchery as for his blasphemy, as skillful in praising as in attacking; Saiyid Himyari, who died in 789 a more or less sincere panegyrist, who sought protection in the traditional way, who is particularly praised by the critics for his simplicity of style, and, as far as we are concerned, who escaped banality by his Shi'ite convictions, by the variety of his poetic themes, and by his artistic qualities; Abbas ibn Ahnaf, who died in 808 who speaks of the "power of love,"always expressed his thoughts delicately and thus stands in opposition to the licentious poets who surrounded him, which explains his success in Spain; Abu Nuwas, who died in 8I3, the singer of the joy of living, the greatest Bacchic poet in the Arabic language, a sensual, debauched devil who became a hermit toward the end of his life and left a number of religious poems.

Muti' ibn Iyas and Abu Nuwas, two great Iyric poets, had a pronounced taste for scandal nand blasphemy. It would be an exaggeration to claim that they represented fairly accurately a certain aspect of Baghdad society. Yet, the smutty tales of the Book of Songs prove that the upper bourgeoisie was hardly overcome with moral scruples. Drunkenness was common, it seems, and perhaps even more violent thrills were sought. These poems, however, should be taken into account as a reflection of a part of society which was hungry for pleasure. Our honors list also includes Muslim ibn Walid, who died in 823 author of love poems and drinking songs; Abu Tammam (843) and Buhturi (897), famous for their original odes and their anthologies of poetry; Di'bil (960), who lived in peril because he associated with robbers and wrote satires in truculent and unpolished language; Ibn Rumi (896), whose verses include philosophical ideas and a close look at reality and whose satires are fine and cruel without being vulgar; Ibn Mu'tazz (908), who was caliph for one day and paid for it with his life, who, as a poet of transition, painted the society around him, describing the caliph's palaces in a rather delicate style, and who, in a moving poem, gave a glimpse of the future decadence of the caliphate; Ibn Dawud (9I0), leader of the school of courtly love and early ancestor of our troubadours; and, above all, the peerless Abul-Atahiya (825), the earliest Arab philosopher-poet, who wrote of suffering in verses that proclaim the vanity of the joys of this world. The anthologies of these poets were compiled perhaps to combat the Iranian spirit of the shu'ubiya in an attempt to conserve the masterpieces of the pre-Islamic period.Songs and music are perhaps more important in Baghdad than in other regions of the Moslem world. There are great names in the field of theory, Farabi for example, and in composition, the Mausilis, father and son, and Ibrahim ibn Mahdi, the ephemeral caliph.

During the reigns of several Abbasid caliphs, the Mausilis delighted the court of Baghdad. Ibrahim (804) had been the favorite of the caliphs Mahdi, Hadi, and Harun al-Rashid; he was the hero of some rather racy adventures. He led his musicians with a baton and was perhaps the first orchestra conductor. The great historian Ibn Khaldun wrote, "The beautiful concerts given at Baghdad have left memories that still last." Several poets gave accounts of the lives of the gay blades and the tough characters who frequented the cabarets of the capital. One small work, by Washsha, contains a sketch of the worldly manners and customs of the refined class of Baghdad and is a veritable manual of the life of the dandies of the period. It also gives minute details on dress, furniture, gold and silver utensils, cushions, and curtains, with their appropriate inscnptions. Another writer, Azdi, who is reminiscent of Villon, describes the society of debauched party-goers. His poems are difficult to translate because of their truculence, their strong language, and their defiance of decent morals. We should not be too surprised at the contrast between the studious world of the translator and the medical specialists and that of the writers of licentious poetry who sang, with some talent, of pleasure and debauchery and bragged of overtly displayed corruption. The Abbasid golden age gave rise to a capable and imposing group of translators, who tried successfully to regain the heritage of antiquity.

Men of letters took advantage of this substantial contribution. They entered into passionate and fruitful discussions, which were dominated by the astonishing personality of Jahiz (d.868). He is probably the greatest master of prose in all Arab literature. He was a prolific writer with a vast field of interest. In addition, his Mutazilite convictions made him a literary leader. In order to describe reality, he broke with a tradition which was bound to the past. He laid the foundations of a humanism which was almost exclusively Arab and hostile to Persian interference at the beginning, and which took on more and more Greek coloration later on. His love of knowledge and his great intellectual honesty are evident on every page of his works. Jahiz is outstanding because of his exceptional genius, his qualities of originality, and his art in handling an often cruel and sometimes disillusioned irony, in which he was more successful than any writer before him. Jahiz pushed sarcasm to the point of mocking irreverence toward Divinity, more in the style of Lucian than of Voltaire. It is due to the tremendous talent of this prodigious artist that Arabic prose became more important than poetry.Another great writer, Ibn Qutaiba, ranks high, immedi- ately after Jahiz, whom he survived by about twenty years (d.88g). He too had an intellectually curious mind which made him a grammarian, a philologist, a lexicographer, a literary critic, a historian, and an essayist. In literature, he is an advocate of conciliation, through conviction and not lassitude, and a partisan of the golden mean. His Book Of Poetry, which shows him

to be a creator of the art of poetry, contains judgments of great value.

Ibn Duraid is worthy of mention because of the role re- cently attributed to him by an Arab critic as creator of the Maqama, of the Seance, which will be discussed later. This philologist is one of the last contestants in a battle which, during his lifetime, interested very few men of letters, the battle against Iranophilia. Mas'udi must certainly not be neglected, not only because he was born in Baghdad but because this tireless traveler has left us a most interesting account of the history of the Abbasid caliphate. The writer of memoirs, Suli, is of interest because he speaks of events of which he was a sad and, at times, indignant witness. His contemporary, Mas'udi, says, "He reports details which have escaped others and things which he alone could have known." The date of Tanukhi's death (994) places him in the Buyid period, as does his style, but in one of his works he speaks especially of the upheaval during Muqtadir's reign. Although it was meant to entertain, this book, written in a lively style, contains a good deal of solid judgment. Another short work consists of a series of amusing, merry stories which, if taken too seriously, might give a disturbing picture of the Baghdad bourgeoisie. It is dangerous to generalize, since the book is probably about a circle of party-goers and unscrupulous revelers. In short, reading Tanukhi is quite arnusing. It is impossible to mention all the prose writers who added to the glory of the ninth century in the Arabic language.

Those who spent several years in Baghdad profited from the extraordinarily feverish atmosphere of the place. We must not omit Ya'qubi, the geographer, who left us exciting pages on the founding of Baghdad, and Ibn Hauqal who used Baghdad as the point of departure for his voyages. The object of this resume is to show the splendor of the literary milieu of the time. Profiting from circumstances which revealed the secrets of Hellenism to them, the writers became the "keepers of Greek wisdom" and humanists of a cultural scope to be envied by future generations. The cultured residents of Baghdad liked their pleasure. They gathered secretly in cabarets, and some of them met in Christian monasteries on the outskirts of the city. The Book of Convents by Shabushti is really a description of the city's taverns. Wine was certainly drunk in these places. The Bacchic poets of the time were there to testify to that. Snow sherbets were eaten. Concerts were given in rooms cooled by punkahs. Abu Nuwas exclaims, "In how many taverns did I land during the night cloaked in pitch-like blackness. The cabaret owner kept on serving me as I kept on drinking with a beautiful white girl close to us." Gambling houses were also popular. Chess, especially, was highly favored and backgammon was second in popularity. It is probable that the shadow-theater was a form of entertainment also.

The privileged at the caliph's court were probably invited to play polo or go hunting. Horse racing for the aristocratic public and cock-fights and ram-fights for a lower level of society were common pastimes. Popular entertainment was offered in public places. First there were the preachers, who not only delivered homilies. Perhaps they also told stories, such as the ones which were the origin of The Thousand and One Nights. Mas'udi writes, "In Baghdad, there was a street storyteller who amused the crowd with all sorts of tales and funny stories. His name was Ibn Maghazili. He was very amusing and could not be seen or heard without provoking laughter. As he told his stories, he added many jokes which would have made a mourning mother laugh and would have amused a serious man." There were also street hawkers who ofered extraordinary products to their gaping customers. There was even a man with diseased eyes who sold passers-by a cure for ophthalmia. We should have liked to gather archaeological evidence about the city's past. There would have been a great deal of it; the remains of Samarra could have supplied information not very long ago. We should have liked to learn about the quality of an artistic civilization that we know only through comments in books.Our enthusiasm is somewhat satisfied by the beautiful descriptive poems by Buhturi, but it is risky to depend upon poetry to analyze a piece of architecture or even to enjoy its decorative aspects.We have no authentic documents from the earlier periods on the art of the city of Baghdad itself, but we do have several vague but enthusiastic descriptions by writers. They speak of porticoes and cupolas; they go on at length about the luxuriously rich furniture in the various palaces, as we have seen in the description of the Byzantine ambassador's reception. Mural paintings are especially mentioned. At this point it is appropriate to add two quotations that contain a good deal of information. The first is from the poet Bashshar ibn Burd, who was blind.

He had ordered a vase from a Basra potter and questioned the artisan about its decoration. The potter answered, "Flying birds." The poet, thinking of the pouncing animal motif which was popular at the time, said, "You should have put a predator above, ready to swoop down on them."

The great artist Abu Nuwas also clearly indicates the tastes of the time. "Wine flows among us in an ornate goblet in which the Persians had carved all sorts of figures. Horse- men, at Khosrau's side, aim at an antelope with their arrows." Fortunately, the art of Samarra makes up in part for the gaps. This decoration on plaster is bold, marked with holes, and is elegantly winding with deep, sinuous grooves. The paintings of the palace of Samarra disappeared during World War I, and we know them only through the publication by E. Herzfeld, who brought them to light. Some have remained famous and appear in all the works dealing with Moslem frescoes. There are two women dancers who approach each other and pour wine into a goblet. The flowers and the various animals recall the classic art of the Hellenic east. But of particular interest is a solemn figure, draped in a robe decorated with a wheel motif, whose shoulders are covered with a striped hood. This could very well represent a monk. If so, it brings to mind the painting with which Mutawakkil, the inveterate drunkard and persecutor of Shi'ites and non-Moslems, had his palace decorated. It was of an assembly of monks in a church choir and was a copy of a fresco that he had admired in a monastery in the suburbs of Baghdad. In the third quarter of the tenth century, Mesopotamian painters were invited to Egypt to paint frescoes. The story is told by Maqrizi, who refers to a History of Painters, which can be placed in the eleventh century. The passage is reminiscent of Mesopotamia. The paintings of lapis lazuli, vermilion, verdigris, and other colors were covered over with varnish. We are told that the relief of these frescoes was remarkably executed in the style of the Basra painters.Samarra sent for glassmakers and potters from Basra, and for more potters and color mixers from Kufa. A Chinese text insists that Chinese artists taught painting in Akula (the Syriac name for Kufa), in Lower Mesopotamia. The problem, which has not been solved, is an interesting one since it concerns a region which later became famous for its book decorations. Although we do not know exactly where these industries and crafts were located in the earlier period, we know that Mesopotamia was much advanced in weaving and ceramic techniques and in brick and wood sculpture. Fortunately, an Arabic text tells of the quality of the ceramic mural tiles that were sent from the Mesopotamian capital, along with other materials, to decorate the mihrab of the Great Mosque of Qairawan: "These precious faence panels were imported for a reception room that the Aghlabid emir wanted to build, and also beams of teakwood from which to make lutes. He had the pulpit for the Great Mosque made of it. The mihrab was brought in the form of marble panels from Iraq. He placed the faence tiles on the facade of the mihrab. A man from Baghdad made tiles which he added to the first ones." And, indeed, Georges Mar,cais, who studied this decoration carefully, wrote, "Two origins can be distinguished.

One, with a more skillful and a richer design using enamel of various colors, consisted of exotic pieces; the other, of simpler, larger decorations in one color, consisted of locally manufactured pieces." We find "a very wide decoration composed of very simple geometric combinations interlaced with floral forms, as in the linear groove decoration of columns and carved wood." Many specimens of pieces of ceramic vessels were found in the Samarra excavations. These too are of yellow and green glazed pottery. When the Arab historians describe the famous Cupola of the Donkey, with its gently rising ramp, they speak also of the minaret with the spiral ramp in the Samarra mosque. All the briefly mentioned documents give evidence of a great unity of style, and Baghdad can be credited with a floral decoration which, although already conventional, was not yet geometric. Great admiration should be expressed for this civilization born in Baghdad. In this center of universal culture were found polite manners, refinement, general education, and the confrontation of religious and philosophical thought which made the Mesopotamian city the queen of the world during that period.

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