

The Significance of the *Bayt Al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom) in Early Abbasid Caliphate (132A.H-218A.H)

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Abstract: Translation Movement once initiated in the second century after *Hijrah* (A.H.) is one of the most important turning points in Islam's history. The study examines the importance of this scientific institute which contributed to the scientific advancement and growth of Muslim world. Its precious effects influenced Eastern and Western world for many years and the most eminent universities throughout the world took the advantages of its blessings. Through this vast movement, the findings of sciences were transferred to the Muslim world. Base on translation movement, the preliminary steps were taken for the establishment of a scientific institute. Those who were professional and competent in translation initiated translating the works. The existence of numerous books which were transferred to the caliphate centre from one hand and the propagation of paper, as well as the translation of the transferred works and producing them in great numbers necessitated the establishment of a place for keeping and maintaining them. Therefore, a public library was established in a large area with the open doors and rooms, full of books and was named the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikma*). This study implies the House of Wisdom was the Islamic scientific base and referral point to flourish sciences in Islamic history and civilization.

Key words: House of Wisdom % *Bayt al-Hikma* % Translation Movement % Abbasid caliphs % Islamic sciences

INTRODUCTION

One of the important events in the history of great Islamic civilization is the scientific movement which happened during the second, third and fourth centuries (A.H.), comprising the extensive translations of the scientific and scholarly works of pre-Islam or contemporary with Islam civilizations. Through this vast movement called the Translation Movement, the findings of sciences which were the results of the researches and studies of the scientists, scholars, philosophers and literati of the ancient world civilized countries over centuries such as Assyrians, Chaldeans, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Indians, Iranians and Greeks were transferred to the Muslim world. The sciences were circulated among the scientific centers of Greece, Egypt

and Iran and each center played a crucial role in enriching the sciences. It is worthwhile to note that Greece and Iran's contribution was more than the others. After the advent of Islam and capturing the neighbourhood countries, Muslims got access to their scientific resources. During the first century (A.H.), Muslims paid more attention to spreading the life-saving teachings of Islam, consolidating and preserving the newly established social system, expanding liberations and expulsing enemies. From the scientific aspect, they were more engaged in discussing and investigating about the Quran and Islamic laws. Among Islamic sciences, they only paid attention to jurisprudence, syntax, theology, tradition, philology and the history of liberations. At the beginning of the second century (A.H.), the situation changed. The external dangers reached its minimum and

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Muslims' social system was consolidated. Muslims inclined to sciences and crafts which were mostly at the hand of non-Muslim civilizations. The study of the development of the Translation Movement which happened at House of Wisdom, within Islam comprises many components, each of which must be investigated individually so as to realize the development of the Translation Movement and the role of House of Wisdom as a whole. In the following study, the researchers attempt to investigate the significant of the House of Wisdom from different aspects and have proposed to outline some of these components and investigate them meticulously to achieve a thorough understanding of the progress of the Translation Movement at this unique scientific institute. It is worth mentioning that ignorance of the importance of this institute by some western scholars is not acceptable for the researchers and have tried to provide some reasons for their wrong claim.

Bayt Al-Hikma (House of Wisdom): Prophet Muhammad introduced a novel and peculiar ideology base on divinity.. This ideology which was based on the belief in unity of God and Resurrection Day led the human beings to a world beyond the world of nature and material. Although this ideology opened people's eye into the world of nature and material, it taught them how to conceive the essence of the objects, creatures and the wonders of nature. It invited mankind to speculate and take the advantage of observation, sense and experience. Undoubtedly, under the shadow of this ideology, Muslims' knowledge and insight became deeper and they became more motivated to acquire knowledge and Wisdom. Moreover, Prophet Muhammad's eloquent statements and the remarks of his famous followers regarding the high position of knowledge, made the people more eager to acquire knowledge and Wisdom. Prophet Muhammad himself highly encouraged Muslims to learn. Even after the battle of *Badr*, those captives who were not able to pay ransom, but had the ability to teach reading and writing to ten children from Medina could be freed [1]. In fact, it was because of Prophet Muhammad's encouragement that Zayd ibn Thabit learned Hebrew or Syriac language or both [2]. This kind of encouragement and persuasion led Muslims to acquire knowledge and Wisdom. According to Zarrin Kub [2], 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abbas became familiar with the Old Testament and Evangel. 'Abd Allah ibn 'Amr ibn al-'As also became familiar with the Old Testament and Syriac language as well. The emphasis put on the elevated value of acquiring knowledge and Wisdom, in a society which was static in

terms of scientific activities, is considered very important in researchers' viewpoints. In *Futuh al-Buldan*, al-Baladhuri has stated that at the time of the advent of Islam there were hardly more than seventeen literate people in the well-known tribe of *Quraish*. He reminded only a few literate people from the other tribes and mentioned that since the number of literate people and writers was very few, anyone who knew writing, archery and swimming was considered as a perfect man [3].

Putting great emphasis on acquiring knowledge and Wisdom in the Quran, the Holy Prophet Muhammad's (P.B.U.H.) traditions and his followers' remarks is wonderful in the society of that time. Besides, the nature of Islamic laws and their proper implementation made education and learning and even creativity and invention inevitable. For instance, astronomy was implemented by Muslims for determining the pray time, fasting time and identifying the direction of *Qiblah*. Muslims implemented mathematics and geometry for determining the amount of revenues such as *Khums* (one fifth), *Zakat* (tithes), tribute, legacy and the like. Islam's emphasis on protecting the body and the mind led Muslims to learn and develop the science of medicine. These kinds of teachings accompanied with the Muslims' inner faith encouraged them to learn the teachings of their own religion, Islam.

The necessity of reading and reciting the Quran and tradition, interpreting religious texts and deducing religious codes led to the appearance of some sciences which had no prior background. This new phenomenon accompanied with Muslims' sensitivity regarding the preservation of the Quran and tradition made the recording of the mentioned texts inevitable. A group of people called revelation writers of the Quran and tradition appeared in the Islamic society and they protected the Holy Prophet's legacy from distortion and alteration. In this way, writing and compiling books got an elevated position in Islam's territory and the number of literate people increased day by day [2].

In the first century (A.H.), the religious and spiritual energy of the newly established society was spent on establishing and developing Islam's territory. In this era more attention was paid to religious sciences, grammar, syntax and history and only a few people such as Khalid ibn Yazid were interested in the alien sciences called '*Ulum al-awail*' [4]. Muslims paid attention to the intellectual sciences, which were highly emphasized in the Quran, only after the establishment and consolidation of Islamic society and the termination of civil and outer wars. Over the two centuries most of the ancient sciences were transferred to Islamic world and implemented. In this

historical period, most of the scientific works of the ancient world were transferred to Baghdad from different countries and translated from Greek, Syriac, Indian and Persian languages into Arabic by the help of the professional translators. It was a crucial step towards the human advancement which was heading decline at that time.

At the end of the first century (A.H.), Islamic translators initiated the translation activities; however, the true Translation Movement started from the middle of the second century (A.H.). This movement reached its hey day in the second and third centuries, referred to as the Golden Age of Islam and continued until the end of the fifth century (A.H.). Muslims were engaged in translating scientific, philosophical, literary and religious works of the ancient civilizations for more than three centuries. They took the advantage of the great human legacy which its sources were in the six known languages of that time, namely Hebrew, Syriac, Persian, Indian, Latin and the most important of all, Greek. A scientific center called the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikma*) was established for sheltering the translators and preserving their works. Some people got mission to travel Iran, India and Constantinople to find precious and invaluable books.

In order to be faithful to the elevated thoughts of the other languages, while translating them into Arabic, the translators both translated and revised the previous translations or translated them once more. These various translations were the starting points for initiating scientific activities and research. The very first translations dealt with sciences related to people's daily life. Khalid ibn Yazid, the ruler of Egypt at the time of the *Umayyad* dynasty, was very interested in alchemy and natural sciences [5]; may be this was because of his residence in Egypt. He wrote some books in alchemy as well. This alchemy-loving ruler asked Alexandrian scholars to translate the books related to alchemy and medicine from Greek or Coptic into Arabic. According to al-Nadim, these books were the first works of translation in Islam world [5]. By the command of 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, the *Umayyad* caliph who was more interested in science in comparison with the other caliphs, a dissertation in medicine was translated into Arabic. However, all these translations were incomplete and the 'Abbasid dynasty continued Islamic translations seriously.

The second 'Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur, who was very interested in science, initiated a great change in the scientific history of Arabs. He established Baghdad in 145 (A.H.) and turned it to an heir of Athena and

Alexandria [6]. While establishing this 'Abbasid institution, he sought for physicians and translators who were efficient in elevating and promoting the position of Islamic culture. His successors followed his path as well. For instance, al-Ma'mun accomplished the innovation movement and encouraged the translation and study of the classic works. After a short while, Arab Muslims became familiar with the sciences of the various nations such as Greeks, Syriacs and Iranians. They learned different sciences from various nations and made some changes to them. They adjusted the sciences based on their own beliefs and turned them into tools for developing Islamic thoughts.

Those sciences which were heading decline regained their positions and in an Islamic framework became the center of attention of European researchers in the sixteenth and seventh centuries (A.D.). Most of the texts written by Muslim scientists such as Avicenna, al-Farabi, al-Biruni, ibn Rushd and many other scholars were taught at the scientific and educational centers of Europe after the Middle Ages.

The initiating point for the scientific flourishing of Islamic civilization was the translation of scientific texts by Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sabian, Arab and non-Arab translators and interpreters under the shadow of Islam. The scientific centers had a special position in the Islamic civilization. The great cultural heritage over the centuries disclosed that these scientific centers achieved much superiority at the heyday of the Islamic civilization and were considered as pivotal pillars to the Islamic society. In fact, libraries and the other educational institutions namely, schools, universities, learning circles (*halaqah*), houses of Wisdom (*buyut al-Hikma*) and others were founded and flourished at times of peace during Muslim rule. Such places assisted the growth and the flourishing of great schools and libraries in the Islamic civilization and became well-known centers of culture during their era [7].

After the Prophet migration (*Hijrah*) from Makkah to Madinah, he established a mosque during his first days in Madinah [8]. This mosque which was the first one in the Islamic epoch turned to the center for education, advocacy, judiciary, political and military affairs as well as cultural practices [9]. The mosques were the first centers for religious gatherings in the Islamic word. If one were to discuss the ancient school of thought and scientific centers within the Islamic states, attention must be paid to the mosques. The buildings of these scientific centers and schools which subsequently became centers of education were very similar to the buildings of the mosques. The mosques kept their educational resources even after the invention and establishment of schools [10].

As people became interested in participating in mosques classes and learning circles (halaqah), libraries appeared next to the mosques to respond the desire and aspiration of knowledge seekers. These libraries which were independently established were known as Dar al-'Ilm, Dar al-Kutub, Dar al-Hadith, Bayt al-Kutub and Khizanah al-Hikma. These libraries were directed as public or semi-public institutions. In fact, these libraries were regarded as centers of knowledge and culture that offered courses in teaching, research, writing and translation works [7].

The growth of the Translation Movement, the work of writing (books and other treaties) and the transfer of a large number of works from those places which had been liberated by the Islamic world led to the increase in the number of books in different Muslim cities and gave rise to libraries, both large and small, in the Islamic world [11].

According to Nasr following the establishment of a new Islamic system of government and the maturity of identity with Islamic society, educational institutions emerged which played a pivotal role in the promotion of the arts and sciences [12]. The first important centre especially concerned with philosophy and the natural and mathematical sciences was the House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikma), established in Baghdad by the caliph al-Ma'mun around 200 A.H. /815 A.D., to which a library and an observatory were attached. Available documents do not tell us whether Bayt al-Hikma was a separate building or whether it was attached to the court. As part of Bayt al-Hikma, al-Ma'mun built an astronomical observatory which was used by astronomers for systematic observation of celestial movements [5].

This well-known institute which was supported by the state treasury became the gathering place for many scientists and scholars and especially for qualified translators, who translated nearly the whole of Greek scientific and philosophical literature into Arabic, thus preparing the condition for the absorption of that literature by Islam [12]. Serious and consistent efforts were made to translate the materials which were necessary for the Arabic speaking students to carry out philosophical and scientific researches [13]. The amount of translation from Greek and Syriac and also from Pahlavi and Sanskrit, during the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, by some figures such as Hunayn ibn Ishaq, Thabit ibn Qurrah and Ibn Muqaffa, all of them skilled scholars and scientists, was in fact so great that even today more of the writings of the Greek Aristotelians of Aristotle and his commentators exist in Arabic than in any

of the modern European languages. In addition, there are many segments of the works of Aristotle of the Alexandrian philosophers, the Neo Pythagoreans and Neo Platonists, the Hermetic Corpus and the works of some scientists such as Galen, which exist today only in the Arabic translation done at al-Ma'mun academy or by translators who were aroused by the activities of the House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikma) [13].

Bayt al-Hikma became the focus of research activities in medicine as well as in astronomy and physical sciences. It was placed under the guidance of Yuhanna ibn Masawayh (d.857 A.D.) who was good at both Syriac and Arabic languages and also knew Greek. The most important work of the academy was performed by his pupils and successors, especially Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-'Ibadi (d.876 A.D.). The 'Abbasids had both the aspiration and the resources to advance knowledge and were able to find men with necessary linguistic abilities for translation among the minorities of the Islamic Empire [14].

Bayt al-Hikma was more than a translation office. It was like the museum of Ptolemy in Alexandria than a modern university. It had an astronomical observatory, a translation office and a great library, serving research scholars and their pupils rather than large numbers of immature students [15]. According to Marouf, Bayt al-Hikma was a large building with many halls and rooms which included a collection of scientific works shelved under the names of the donors such as the collection of al-Rashid and the collection of al-Ma'mun. Bayt al-Hikma staffs were scientists, librarians and other employees. The work was carried out by competent translators who were assisted by excellent scribes, copyists and bookbinders. The staff came from different religious and cultural backgrounds [15].

Gutas believes that Bayt al-Hikma is the translation of the Sasanian name for a library, it is understood from the statement of Hamzah al-Isfahani (d. after 350/ 961), one of the most sophisticated writers on pre-Islamic Iran. Al-Isfahani in the introduction of the collection of poetic proverbs (*Al-Amthal al-Sadira an buyut al-Sirr*) notes that in pre-Islamic Sasanian Iran, books which comprised Persian historical love, reports about wars and different pieces of information about well-known pair of lovers and which were originally written in prose, were changed into poetry for the Sasanian Kings. These poems were written down in books and preserved in storehouses (Khaza'in) which were the houses of Wisdom (buyut al-Hikma). The report clearly implies that these were royal libraries [16]. In the Islamic time and at the time of the 'Abbasids,

Harun al-Rashid was the first one who established a library in Baghdad for the Muslims. Al-Mansur during whose reign the Translation Movement initiated ordered the translation of several books into Arabic. These books were the building blocks for the libraries mentioned above [17]. It seems there is a misunderstanding of Persian word by Gutas analysis here. He considers *Khazane* as a store in ancient time in Iran and applies the same word for House wisdom and says it is a place for keeping the valuable things. It is true that books were valuable for Iranians in ancient time, but doesn't mean Bayt al-Hikma in Arabic is equivalent for this Persian word. Bayt al-Hikma in Arabic considers a scientific place not a barn or reservoir for goods.

Yahya ibn Khalid al-Barmaki, grand vizier to Harun al-Rashid, encouraged translators and supervised the translation process during his premiership. He also made a particular place to accommodate those translated books [18]. During the rule of al-Ma'mun, contributions to learning began to flourish. He brought a large number of books to Baghdad carried by hundreds of camels. The books were given to Muslims in the wake of peace treaty between al-Ma'mun and the Roman Emperor, Michael II. Furthermore, he spent about three hundred thousand dinars for those books to be translated [5]. It is clear all these activities were base on a scientific place which had a capacity of hosting scholars and scientific activities.

CONCLUSION

Bayt al-Hikma was the focus of research activities in different fields of sciences namely medicine as well as in astronomy and physical sciences. It was supervised under the guidance of Yuhanna ibn Masawayh (d.857 A.D.) who was good at both Syriac and Arabic languages and also knew Greek. The most important work of the academy was performed by his pupils and successors, especially Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-'Ibadi (d.876 A.D.). The 'Abbasids had both the aspiration and the resources to advance knowledge and were able to find men with necessary linguistic abilities for translation among the minorities of the Islamic Empire. Bayt al-Hikma was more than a translation office. It had an astronomical observatory, a translation office and a great library, serving research scholars and their pupils. According to Marouf, Bayt al-Hikma was a large building with many halls and rooms which included a collection of scientific works shelved under the names of the donors such as the

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