

## [Transcript] The Rest Is History / 379. Baghdad: The Arabian Nights

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Back to add, in the heart of the House of Islam is the city of well-being. In it is to be found the learning which all the world desires to possess, and elegance and perfect courtesy. Its science is as penetrating as its winds are barmy. In it is to be found the best of everything that the world can boast, and all things that are beautiful. From it comes everything that is worth knowing, and everyone with any claim to fashion is drawn to it. It is the city of people's hearts.

Tom Holland, the podcaster of People's Hearts, you are back for the fourth time in this mighty series on the history of Baghdad and the Islamic Golden Age. Today, I'm very excited because we will be talking about Aladdin, Sinbad, and the Arabian Knights. Won't we, Tom? We will. Flying carpets, genies, all the works, but not first Dominic. That's disappointing. You're going to make me wait. No, because we've got loads of other exciting things to talk about as well.

Just on the Arabian Knights, the Arabian Knights have become, for a lot of people, so Theo, our producer, said he has only a very vague knowledge of the Arabian Knights. He knows there's carpets and there's lamps and genies. There's the Disney film, isn't there, Aladdin?

Yes. So I'm sure lots of children see that, and in Britain, children go to pantomimes, and you'll still get Aladdin and things like that.

Absolutely, you will. People still talk about my appearance in Sinbad the Sailor at the Theatre on the Steps in Bridge North in the early 1980s.

Who did you play in that?

So there was a character who gets shrunk, like an old man who gets shrunk, and I played him once. He had been shrunk as a sort of capering child, but I was painted green. I was totally green, Tom. You didn't play the terrifying old man who Sinbad meets him, and he asks for a lift because my legs are frail. I cannot walk. And so Sinbad, being a very nice guy, lifts him up, and the man kind of clasps him, wraps his legs around him, and Sinbad can't get him off.

I could have been that man.

Poor Sinbad has to walk around for months.

Right, with that man clinging onto him. To be honest with you, Tom, I can't actually remember whether I played him or not, but there's no doubt that I could have played him.

Of course you could.

And I would have done it in a very moving and evocative way.

You would have done. Well, we've come to the Arabian Knights, and I think that they are important because, as we've kind of touched on before, they do give to Baghdad a sense of being part of global popular culture, as they have been for centuries. Because I think that Baghdad is one of those world cities that its own mythology has become part of global mythology. So Sherlock Holmes

in London, Batman in New York, that Sinbad and Alibaba are kind of on that level.

Yes, I've forgotten about Alibaba.

Alibaba and the 40 Thieves. So I think that they are important. So we'll look at how they authentic records of Haruna Rashid's Baghdad.

Surely that story about the old man is not authentic, Tom.

Well, we'll come to that. But the passage that you read points to another reason why I think Baghdad matters, and I think it matters massively. It's a city on a level with classical Athens or

Renaissance Florence as a place that has changed how the world thinks. And because of its central role in Islam, and Islam has been so massively influential on the course of world history, the role that Baghdad plays in shaping the way that Islam will evolve, I think is really, really crucial. Okay, Tom, just before you start, just reassure me, there's no element here of you having smuggled in a podcast about Islamic theology disguised as a podcast about Alibaba and the 40 Thieves.

Well, you know, I love an abstract loud.

You do. You too. Absolute scenes here at the rest of history. Come on then.

Well, I'm not going to apologize for it, Dominic, because as I may have mentioned, the history of Christianity is obviously massively influential on the course of Western history. And so similarly, Islam is massively influential on the history of the Islamic world. I mean, that goes without saying. So it does actually matter, I think, and it enables those of us who are not part of the Islamic world to see perhaps what is distinctive about the West, things that we may take for granted. But there are other ways of conceptualizing the world, conceptualizing what states should be, how law should function, all that kind of thing.

Tom, do you know what? I could not be more excited. So crack on and satisfy my curiosity about Baghdad and its importance.

So this is, I mean, this is a hugely, hugely significant story. And it's a story that has obviously reverberated into the present continues to reverberate. So I think it really does matter.

So listen to who we've kept, if there are any, from the first episode. May you remember that we gave a portrait of the world before the coming of the Abbasid. So this was a world ruled by the Umayyad Caliphs. And the Umayyad Caliphs rule as self-proclaimed the deputies of God.

And they are essentially in a line of tradition that goes all the way back to the autocrats of antiquity. I mean, ultimately back to the great kings of Persia and Babylon and Assyria.

But they are increasingly challenged by a body of lawyers, of scholars, of textual critics called the Ulama, who are essentially committed to the idea that Muslims should be ruled not by Caliphs so much as by the rule of God, by the law of God. And the name that they give to this is the Sharia, which was originally an Arabic word, meaning the straightest possible path to water. So it's the idea that the Sharia will guide you through your life, through the course of existence, until you can imbibe the sweet waters of paradise when you die. And how do you know where

the Sharia is, how you follow it, what the course should be? You look to Sunnah, which originally meant custom. But by the time of the Abbasids has come to basically mean a body of law that is capable

of taming the iniquities of the age that is fashioned without reference to the figure of the Caliph and is supposedly grounded in the life and times and particularly sayings of the prophet.

And these are things called hadiths, is that right?

Absolutely. Yes. Yes. So these hadiths, which by the time of the Abbasids are being attributed directly to Muhammad, and therefore providing a kind of a license, a sanction, an understanding of God's purposes, with which the Caliph can't really compete. And the Abbasid revolution had won mass support among Muslims, because it was believed that it would return the Muslim people to the Sharia, that the Amayyads had, you know, with their kind of imperious aping of Caesar's and Shah's had failed to do. And so scholars who are, you know, interested, concerned to work out what the correct Sunnah should be, the correct custom for the Muslim people are given a massive

shot in the arm by the Abbasid revolution. And Baghdad provides them with a kind of global center. It becomes the go-to place for people who are interested in all this stuff. And the Caliphs, partly because the sheer number of scholars who are working on this is something that is now impossible for them to kind of regulate or control, but also because they, you know, by virtue of the Abbasid revolution are committed to upholding Sharia. They don't really have any choice except to show the Alama more respect than the Amayyads had ever done. And so a brilliant example of how this could affect a Caliph is the relationship that Almati, who is the son of Al-Mansur, the founder of Baghdad, the father of Haroun al-Rashid, and who in our last episode, listeners may remember, we talked about how he was a great fan of pigeon racing. He loved a pigeon

race. But, you know, he's going up there, he's getting his pigeons, he's flying them away. And then suddenly he is told by various scholars that this is illegal, that this is illicit.

It's contrary to the will of God because pigeon racing was invented by the people of Sodom. What? That is a twist.

And that Sodom was wiped out by God and that this was the sin of the people of Sodom was pigeon racing. I was under the impression the sin of Sodom was very different, but no.

No. Well, so there are scholars who say, no, the sin of Sodom was pigeon racing. And so Almati, he's thrown into a panic by this because he doesn't want to offend the rulings of God, or indeed the scholars who are telling this. So he does the obvious thing, which is to find a scholar who can affirm that actually the prophet had been a big fan of pigeon racing.

Right. So, few. Well, that's all right. But then it turns out, you know, the scam is revealed and it turns out that, you know, the scholar has invented this hadith and it's all very embarrassing.

And so Almati then is thrown into an even bigger panic and he kills his entire stock of pigeons, which is a tragic moment. Just on the hadiths, Tom. Yeah. People are uncovering these hadiths, as you put it. For a sceptical non-Muslim like me, would it be reasonable to say people are simply inventing these hadiths? They've been commissioned to produce them or whatever?

I think there are people who are doing that. But part of the scholarship that Baghdad comes to boast is a very, very disciplined and, I mean, not entirely objective, obviously, but to a degree objective winnowing of all these hadiths. And so they inspect them for what come to be called Isnad, which has kind of chains of transmission. So I heard it from this guy, who heard it from this guy, who heard it from this guy, who heard it from the prophet. And these have to be stress tested. And the question of whether this stress testing is actually adequate is a topic of much debate among scholars of early Islam now. Right. I mean, generally, for obvious reasons, Muslims are keener on the idea that hadiths can be authentic. And kind of skeptical Western historians are less sure of that. But, you know, people are not naive in this period. So for instance, it's very obvious that this guy who's come up with a hadith, which Muhammad says, pigeon racing is great. I mean, it's obvious it's a fake. And it's exposed as such. But equally, scholars do come to rule that actually pigeon racing is acceptable. So where things are necessary, you know, it will be done. And actually, one of the key intellectual developments in Baghdad in this period, which is why it's so important, is the development of a kind of a science of jurisprudence, what in Arabic is called Fik, which is how exactly do you know what the Sharia is and hadiths are certainly part of it. But the first and greatest of the scholars who kind of blaze this path is a guy called Abu Hanifa, who is a silk merchant from Kufa, and who ends up buried in the high gate cemetery of Baghdad. We mentioned it yesterday. He basically comes to embody an

entire school of understanding for how Muslims can know what the sunna should properly be. So various stories are told about this guy. Some stories say that he was kind of the principal advisor to Al-Mansur with the founding of Baghdad. Others say that Al-Mansur put him to death because

he wouldn't serve as a judge because he was far too busy with his scholarship. So he's a kind of legendary figure. But his tomb still stands in Baghdad to this day. It's much kind of admired and respected. And what Abu Hanifa emphasizes is the role that reason plays, that reason is a gift from God, and therefore you can use reason to arrive at an understanding of what God's purposes should properly be. And this is obviously very useful for the caliphs because they are trying to balance the requirements of piety with day-to-day convenience. And so the Hanifites, as they come to be called this school, are very, very useful to them. But there is religious opposition to this because, for instance, the pigeon racing would be another example, would be the license that the Hanifites give to people who want to get drunk. And they say, well, okay, you can't drink wine, but you can drink date wine. So you can't drink alcohol that's made from grapes, but you can from dates. And there's a notorious ruling that derives from this that you can drink until you can't distinguish between a beautiful girl and a beautiful boy.

I mean, this is not at all what the mainstream of the Hanifites are about, or Abu Hanif himself. I mean, they are very austere, pious, beautiful Muslims. But there is a feeling among some Muslim scholars that they're going a bit far. And so you get rival schools. So you get one that's centered in Medina, a guy called Malik Ibn Anas is the head of that school. And he kind of emphasizes

that you've got to study what the customs were in Medina and indeed Mecca. So there's this kind of emphasis on the role that is played by Muhammad much more than the Hanifites emphasize. You have a guy called Al Shafi, who is in Cairo, who emphasizes the absolute significance of Hadiths. And you have a guy called Ibn Hanbal, who is based in Baghdad, and he compiles the most authoritative body of Hadiths. And these are very, very significant figures because these schools come

to dominate in different parts of the Islamic world. So the Hanifites, you know, they're still kind of preeminent in Turkey, in Egypt, in Pakistan, in much of Central Asia. But the Malikites provide the kind of the understanding of the Sunnah to North Africa. And the Hanbalites are very, very strong influence on Saudi Arabia. And so it's often said that the kind of Islamic radicalism that has been roiling the world over the past two decades is essentially Hanbalite. So you can see how these understandings of Islam that develop in this period, I mean, they are really quite significant in their influence.

And what about the idea of the law more generally, Tom? So if I'm reading your notes correctly, the idea of the being a law that exists outside the state, indeed, that precedes the invention of the state, is massively important for Islam? Yes, because Islam, so in Christianity, there is no body of law that is given by God to Christians. The law exists in the heart, in the form of conscience. And that means that it's entirely acceptable. I mean, we take for granted that different states would have different frameworks of law. But for Muslim scholars in the Abbasid Caliphate, this kind of represents everything that makes Christianity kind of hopeless, because it means that if you have different systems of law, then it's constantly changing. And rules of conduct will fluctuate according to the rulers or to circumstances or to the whims and fashions of the people who are being governed. Whereas the whole point of the law that

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Islam has received from God is that it provides a secure and certain way of living. And the corollary in turn of that is that law is not the invention of man but of God, and therefore precedes any state. And in fact, states exist, if you like, to maintain and apply the law. So it's a very different understanding of the relationship of state and law to one that comes to dominate in the West. And I think, again, it kind of explains a huge amount about the chasm of misunderstanding that has been so long operated between the West and the Islamic world. And simply in terms of the Abbasid period, the Golden Age of Baghdad that we've been talking about, it obviously has long-term implications for the caliph, this idea that states exist really only to uphold the law of God. Because if these scholars are the key figures in interpreting and defining the law of God, then what's the role of the caliph?

Yes. So the figure of the caliph in the wake of the Golden Age of Baghdad over the course of the centuries that will culminate in the capture of the last Abbasid caliph and him being trampled to death by the cavalry of the Mongols. Basically, he ends up a cipher, the figure of the caliph. So that's the importance of Baghdad on Islam, on the world of Islam.

What about for the West, because you have an argument, don't you, that you think Baghdad really mattered in the course of Western history as well? It does, yes. So obviously, the development of the various kind of Islamic schools, the Sunni schools, hugely influential on Islam. But yes, Baghdad is also massively influential on intellectual trends in Christendom, in Western Christendom. And this role that Baghdad has is summed up by a very romantic phrase, the House of Wisdom. And the House of Wisdom serves as shorthand for a remarkable process of translation in which almost all the writings from ancient Greek, except for literature and except for history. So no Homer, no Herodotus, no, you know, Aeschylus or Aristophanes, but basically

everything else. So astrology, alchemy, philosophy, botany, books on military science, falconry, I mean, everything is translated. And this is an immense and basically unique project. I mean, nothing like it had happened in the episode we did on the Library of Alexandria. We talked about how actually there is no great translation project there. The Library of Alexandria is interested in books in Greek. But the Abbasids, when I say Abbasids, I mean, it's not just the caliphs, it's the entire elite. So it's the physios, generals, merchants, bankers, Arabs, non-Arabs, Muslims, non-Muslims, Sunnis, sheers. Basically, everybody is committed to this project and it enables it to be funded and it enables it to be done to really, really exacting standards. And the scholar who's written most interestingly on this is a guy called Dimitri Gutas, who's written this fantastic book on a Greek thought Arabic culture. And he sums up its significance that it's a truly epic making stage by any standard in the course of human history. It is equal in significance to and belongs to the same narrative as I would claim that of Pericles Athens, the Italian Renaissance, or the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. And it deserves so to be recognized and embedded in our historical consciousness. Right, grokey.

So that's what we're doing in this episode, Dominic.

Yeah, very good. Now, why are they doing it? Are they doing it because they are keen to learn from the Greeks? Are they doing it because they're just interested in a kind of enlightenment project? What does Dimitri Gutas think?

So that there is very much a kind of an idea that it's a proto-enlightenment. You'll often read that it's learning for learning's sake. It's an attempt to spell the clouds of darkness,



and to a degree, it is. But I don't think that it can be explained when I say I, I mean Dimitri Gutas. So Gutas' argument is that there is no one explanation for this, that it's a combination of circumstance and motive. And the circumstance is the collapse of the border that had existed between the Persian and the Roman empires. With the coming of Islam, all of the Near East is governed by a single power. And that means that scholars on both sides of what had previously been a bit of an iron curtain can now communicate with one another. And these people are usually multilingual. They are specialists in entire areas of learning. And this is an enormous resource that can be tapped. And it seems that the moment Baghdad is founded, scholars from across the Near

East are kind of zooming in on Baghdad. Now, why are they going there? Essentially because they know that they're going to get sponsorship, which in turn begs the question, well, why are they sure of that? Part of it, I think, is that we talked about how Al-Mansur has this ambition to make Baghdad a universal city in terms of time as well as space, that he wants to fold in the learning and achievements of previously non-Islamic civilizations into Baghdad so that they can serve the greater glory of Islam. And that means that he is interested in all ancient civilizations, so not just the Greeks, but the Persian as well. And again, I think if there's been a theme throughout these episodes, it's the importance of Persian culture on the making of Baghdad. So a lot of the first Greek texts to be translated are actually written in Persian. And House of Wisdom by Al-Hikmah was actually the Persian, Sasanian word for a library. So that's what it is. So the House of Wisdom is probably founded by Al-Mansur in Baghdad in very, very self-conscious emulation of the Persian example. That's what he's trying to do. And it exists specifically to how books have been translated, not from Greek, but from Persian. So these are translations of Persian translations of Greek. So the House of Wisdom is not a center for the translation of writings from Greek. It's not a research center. It's not a kind of conference center where scholars meet up. It is basically a library, as the Library of Alexandria was. But with the establishment of that, you have other caliphs who come in and they all have their own motives. So Al-Madi, the pigeon racer, he's very devout Muslim. He's very concerned to purify and clarify Muslims' understanding of their faith. So he has a lot of debates with the Christian Patriarch, Timothy, who has been invited to set up shop in Baghdad. And in the course of these debates, it's evident, I think, that Al-Madi realizes how much Christian theology has benefited from its immersion in Greek philosophy. So in Plato, but also particularly Aristotle. He's the first caliph to commission translations of Aristotle directly from Greek. I think he is doing that rather in the spirit that the Chinese today might steal intellectual property from Stanford University or something like that. So there's a verse in the Quran that says the Romans have been defeated, but they will be triumphant in the short term. It's that to be reckoned to have existed from eternity because if it is, it means that the defeat of the Romans was preordained. Whereas if it's created, then it means that the Romans had free will and all Muslims have free will. It's rather like debates that you get in Calvin or Augustine and Christian theology. It's a debate about the degree to which people have free will. And Greek philosophy is seen by Al-Mumun as a way to kind of back up his own take. But there's also another reason why Al-Mumun

in particular is keen to sponsor all these translations, which is that by this time, he's kind of waging an intellectual war against Byzantium and casting the Byzantines as unworthy of their inheritance that essentially he wants to cast the Muslims as the heirs of ancient Greek

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wisdom and to say the Byzantines have totally squandered it because they've got this mad kind of understanding of Christianity and it's all hopeless. So I mean, these are all good as his arguments, but I think you can see there a pretty convincing case that a single, oh, they did it because they loved wisdom or something like that is inadequate. Each Caliph has a different reason for promoting this incredible project of translation. And it matters for Christendom and therefore the West because as well as philosophy, there are also what we would ultimately perhaps come to call scientific treatises being translated. And these in turn will help to foster an incredibly vibrant scientific and philosophical tradition, which because, I mean, Al-Andalus in Spain, the Caliphate in Spain is not politically part of the Abbasid Caliphate, but they're part of the same world. And so all these works that are being penned by Arabic scholars, be they philosophical or be they treatises on eye surgery or other aspects of medicine or mathematics. I mean, algebra, of course, is an Arabic word. Astrology, alchemy, everything. When Christians conquer Spain, they will be able to set up their own House of Translation in Toledo and get access to these incredible riches, which in turn will help kind of fuel intellectual traditions in medieval Christian Europe.

Brilliant. So, Tom, do you know what you haven't mentioned? I'm so happy you haven't mentioned this because it allows me to share this myself with the listeners. People who love literature will know that in the story, *The Thief Who Stole Nothing*, Biff, Chip and Kipper visited medieval Baghdad, Tom, and they went to the House of Wisdom and they discussed early mathematics with Islamic scholars. So, for people who don't have children at primary school in England, these are horrendous series of... No, they're brilliant. That's absolute idiocy. No, they're terrible. They're absolutely terrible. That's the worst thing you've ever said in this podcast, to knock Biff, Chip and Kipper. No, they're terrible. They're absolutely terrible. Hello, Biff, said Kipper. No, rubbish. You invited yourself to my house on Mother's Day. Do you remember that for lunch? Yeah, I do.

And Arthur was reading *The Time Chronicles*, which are the sequels to Biff, Chip and Kipper, and you and Sadie were beside yourselves with excitement that Biff, Chip and Kipper was merely preparing the ground for more important adventures later on.

Well, that's because we never got onto it. Listen, what's it called? *The Thief Who Stole Nothing*. I heartily recommend it to the listeners. It's a brilliant, brilliant way of getting into the world of medieval Baghdad. And on that bombshell, we're going to go to the break and when we come back, finally, we're going to get to the Arabian night.

All right. Okay.

Welcome back to the rest of this history. At last, the moment is upon us. Alibaba and the 40 thieves, Simbad and the rock, Aladdin and his lamp, Tom Holland is poised to take us into the perfume scented world. But it's not all just perfume and scent, is it? Because it's out in the streets, the mean streets, a lot of violence, a lot of sex. So if you're a child and you read kind of authorized versions of them, you have no idea just how violent and often very rude these stories are. Well, Tom Tennyson writes about the Arabian ice, didn't he?

When the breeze of a joyful dawn blew free in the silken sail of infancy, the tide of time flowed back with me, the forward flowing tide of time and it goes on and on. I'm not going to read the whole thing, but it's all about gardens and the golden prime of good Haroun al-Rashid, says Tennyson.

Yeah. So there is a sense, I think, in which in the West, the understanding of the Arabian

nights is very clouded by the fact that it has become a very distinctive Western tradition. So Victorians loved it. They were always kind of doing translations of it and illustrations of it. So pre-Raphaelite paintings and stuff, all that kind of stuff. Yes. And there is kind of an argument, and it's been made sometimes by scholars of the Arabian nights, that the Arabian nights, as we understand them in the West, are pretty much a kind of Western invention. And that reflects the fact that they, by and large, are much more popular in the West. They've been much more influential than they've been in the Islamic world paradoxically. And that's due to the impact of the first guy who translated them into a European language, who is a man called Antoine Galon, who lived between 1646 and 1715, who was a brilliant linguist. He came from Piccadilly. And because of his capacity for languages, his mastery of tongues dominant, he gets taken by the French ambassador to the Sublime port in Constantinople in 1670. And there, he very rapidly learns Arabic. He learns Turkish as well. He learns Persian. So he has access to all these tales. And he goes back to Paris. He works on the first great Western encyclopedia of Islam, the Bibliotheque Oriental. And he writes the introduction to that. And in it, he says, why is it that people in the West are so much more interested in the Islamic world than Muslims seem to be in the Western world? And his answer to this is that it's because the literature of the Arab world is perfect. It's self-sufficient. It doesn't need to bother itself with anything else. What a cultural cringe that is. How interesting. It really is interesting. I mean, it's such a contrast to today. And to demonstrate this, he then embarks on a process of translating some of the tales that he's come across. So in 1701, he embarks on a translation of the tales of Sinbad the Sailor, which originally had not been part of the Arabian Knights, but will of course become bundled into the Arabian Knights. And then he starts on the Arabian Knights proper, which is an enormous kind of vast, vast body of different stories and massively long takes him 16 years, comes out in 12 volumes and is an enormous, enormous success. And in a way, it's the kind of the greatest collection of short stories ever written. And it has this brilliant framing narrative that I'm sure most people will remember just in case you don't. There's this king of Persia. So again, keep Persia in your mind. He's a king called Sharia, ironically. And he discovers that his wife has been carrying on with a slave in the kitchens. And he's furious about this. And then he finds that his brother similarly has been cook-oldest. And so he's convinced that all women are naturally depraved and are bound to portray any man who sleeps with them. So his solution to this is the very reasonable one that he will only take virgins to bed with him. And then having slept with them, he will then have them beheaded in the morning to ensure that he won't be betrayed. And he reached the stage where there simply aren't any virgins left. So he turns to his vizier who has two daughters and the elder daughter, Shirazade, says that she will step up to the plate and save the women who otherwise the king will murder. And she asks the king, can I have my sister Danyasada with me? And he says, yes. And Shirazade gets Danyasada to say, can I have a story? And the king says, fine. Yeah, okay. And so Shirazade starts on a story. And then it's just reaching the climax, as it were. And she drops it. And the king is desperate and says, but I've got to know what happens. And Shirazade says, well, you'll have to wait till the following night. And that of course means that she's spared execution. And so it continues for a thousand and one nights, Dominic. That's three years.



And these stories are, you know, incredible range of topics. You know, there are characters within the stories that tell stories. And there are characters within those stories that in turn tell stories. And so it goes on. You have romance, adventure, low life, high life, poetry, pornography. I mean, everything is there. So incredibly vivid and brilliant collection of stories. And Tom, obviously, your description raises the possibility that these are not ultimately medieval Arabic stories or indeed Persian stories, but they might have been invented by Galon. Maybe the germ of them was there, the genesis, but he honed them and turned them into something palatable for a 17th century French readership. Is there some truth in there? I think he does definitely bowdlerize some of them. It is a criticism even when they come out. I mean, people say, I suspect that the court of Haruna al-Rashid is more influenced by Versailles than by, you know, the actual medieval Baghdad. He definitely adds in some stories that were not originally part of it. So Sinbad is one. But perhaps the two most famous Arabian Knights stories, Aladdin and Alibaba and the 40 Thieves, they weren't part of the original Arabian Knights either. They were told to Galon by a Maronites, a Christian, Syrian storyteller. And he thought they were so great that he put them in. And so over the course of time, many more translations are done, particularly into English. And so perhaps the most notorious translation is by Sir Richard Burton, who's a terrible man. He famously disguised himself and goes to Mecca. Actually, he'd be a great subject for an episode. But Robert Irwin has a brilliant sentence about his translation and the stories that Burton has added to it. As far as I can tell, there is no Arab original for the story of how Abu Hassan break wind. So there are certainly European additions to the corpus of the Arabian Knights. But having said that, the text that Galon translates is original. And in fact, it's the oldest complete Arabic text that we have of them. I think it dates from the 14th century. But it is clear evidence that these stories are actually very, very old. So although lots of them are set in Cairo, probably written in the 14th or 15th centuries, because these stories describe places that weren't built until then, a substantial number of the stories in the Arabian Knights do indeed seem to go back to Abbasid Baghdad. But so Al-Masudah, who we've already mentioned, he mentions them in the 10th century, and he name checks Shirazada. So we know that these stories are current then. And again, in the 10th century, there's a kind of book collector, a guy who compiles literary lists called Ibn al-Nadeem, who intriguingly reports that the original source for the Arabian Knights was, again, in the Sasanian Empire, the Persian Empire that existed before the coming of the Arabs, and that it had originally been called not the A Thousand and One Knights, but A Thousand Knights. And if you read them, and you have any familiarity with Greek stories, you will recognize that lots, I think, lots of Greek antecedents. So Sinbad, I mean, I think there are trace elements of the Odyssey in that. There's an account of a thief in the Arabian Knights who shaves the side of guards who've been posted to look after treasure, which is a story that ultimately seems to come from Herodotus. Very exciting. But does it come from Herodotus, or do they perhaps share a common source? So these may be stories that are being told across the Eurasian world? Sure. Yes. I'm sure that's true. But I think that there are distinctive cultural traditions that are meeting in Baghdad. So there are Greek traditions. There are people who know stories from Herodotus or Homer, and these are not being translated. So these would be oral traditions. There are Indian traditions. There are traditions that come perhaps from Mesopotamian culture, going back to Babylon. So the corpus of the Arabian Knights, I think it starts to be compiled

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definitely in Baghdad. But the idea of a woman telling stories to stop herself being killed comes from Persia, and lots of the constituent elements are meeting from all these different cultural traditions. It's a cocktail dominant.

Cocktail. So basically, Tom, this is the literary embodiment of the thing that you've been saying throughout this series about the ideal of Baghdad being the crossroads of the world. Yes, absolutely. And that's why you will find in lots of the stories of the Arabian Nights mythologized versions of characters that we have been meeting throughout this episode. So Haroun al-Rashid, who, as we said, he's a kind of fun guy. Yeah.

The real Haroun al-Rashid seems to have been very kind of pious and austere.

So in the stories, he was disguising himself in things.

Yeah, he's kind of Bruce Wayne. He's going out from his great palace in disguise and cleaning up the streets and having all kinds of run-ins with everyday people.

Jafar is there, the son of the physio.

Oh, right. Yes. His friend.

Haroun al-Rashid's great friend. Yes. So there's a kind of wonderful Borgheean story. Borgheese, the great Argentinian short story writer, was obsessed by the Arabian Nights. And this story featuring Jafar kind of tells you why. So this is a story called The Tale of Ataf. And in it, Haroun, he visits a library in his palace. He takes a book out at random and he reads it and he laughs and he weeps.

And at the end of it, Jafar is with him. He says to Jafar, you must go.

And so Jafar is very upset by this. He doesn't know what's going on, what had Haroun read in this book. And so he heads off. He ends up in Damascus.

He meets a guy called Ataf. He gets embroiled in all kinds of adventures and shenanigans. And then he goes back to Baghdad and he reports back to Haroun.

And Haroun takes him into the library and pulls down the book and allows Jafar now to read it.

And Jafar reads it. And in it, he finds the story of his own adventures with Ataf in Damascus.

That is very Borgheean. Yeah, it's tremendous. And so there are lots of stories with these kind of twists. So Jafar is in it. Sabeda is in it. All the kind of, you know, the jeweled slippers and the wonderful spices and the poetry and all that kind of thing. And pavilions and, you know, all that kind of stuff. So that's all there. What's about Sinbad, Tom? You said he's not

in the Arabian Nights originally. No, so he's a corpus of stories that definitely goes back

to the Abbasid period. You do get kind of echoes of the Odyssey. So there's a kind of a giant who throws a stone at Sinbad's ship, which clearly, you know, is an echo of Polyphemus.

But I think the main inspiration for these stories is the fact that Muslim sailors are going from Basra down the Persian Gulf out into the Indian Ocean, and perhaps even beyond, and experiencing all kinds of extraordinary things. So one of the things you mentioned, the rock, didn't you? Oh, yes. In the opening, the giant bird lays an enormous egg and its wings put, you know, entire islands in their shadow. And where does this story come from? There are some who say, well, it comes from traditions of giant birds in Indian culture. I mean, that's one answer. But another theory, which is the one that I always loved when I was a child and obsessively reading about this, is that it's a sailor's garbled account of a giant bird on Madagascar known as the elephant bird that had gone extinct by the 16th century, but would definitely have been seen by sailors from Basra in the Abbasid period. So I like to think that that's the origin of the story. But I think the thing that is, in a way, most fascinating about

the Arabian Nights, if you're looking for the mirror that it might hold up to Abbasid Baghdad, is the accounts it gives of low life. Because really, the Arabian Nights are not high literature. They're not viewed as high literature, certainly by Arabs. And so a lot of these stories are clearly coming from the streets. It gives you a glimpse into the kind of the semi-underbelly domain. Oh, nice. I love a semi-underbelly term. So rather like the Romans, the Baghdadis have entire classes of people who were viewed with the utmost *hotir* by kind of poets and literatures, and who therefore very rarely feature in literature. So people who were looked down on in Baghdad included blacksmiths, butchers, conjurers, policemen, night watchmen, tanners, makers of women's shoes, dung collectors, well diggers, bath stokers, masseurs, pigeon racers, intriguing me. So there's still that kind of shadow hanging over pigeon racers and chess players, oddly. To be fair, I looked down on all those people today. So, well, then you would have fitted in tremendously well into golden age Baghdad. Oh, and I think I would. So these are all the kind of people who appear in adventures in the Arabian Nights. But there's one cast in particular who regularly feature, and these are criminals. And again, this is kind of echoes of Sherlock Holmes' London, Gotham City, the sense of master criminals. And this is something that does seem to have been a feature of Abbasid life, a kind of mingled fear and respect for Napoleon's of crime. So the most celebrated of them all was a master criminal called Al-Uqab, the eagle. The most famous story that was told about him was he had a bet with a doctor that he would be able to steal something from the doctor's house. And so the doctor obviously puts enormous numbers of guards, locks everything up. And Al-Uqab, he drugs the guards, and then his master stroke is that he disguises himself as Jesus, bursts into the house, and now he sees that he's Jesus, hypnotizes the doctor and steals the doctor himself, which is a superb twist. That's an excellent twist. And there are other master criminals as well. So there was a guy called Mercury Ali, and there was a female, I suppose she'd be a mistress criminal, wouldn't he? He was called Crafty Delilah, who was hailed by Al-Masoudi as being the most famous confidence trickster in Baghdad. So this is the kind of the real life stuff that is providing material for stories in the Arabian Nights. And there are definitely kind of stories that are being told about entire classes of criminals in a tone of kind of grudging respect. So we're told that stranglers, there are corpses of stranglers, bodies of stranglers who are going around, and they take dogs with them. And whenever they strangle someone, they'll beat the dog so that the dog's howling will drown out the cries of the guy who's being strangled, which is very sensible. But the best one is the burglars. And burglars never go anywhere in Baghdad without a tortoise. And they'll arrive at the house they want to burgle, they put the tortoise down, they get a candle out, they light the candle, put the candle on the tortoise's back, and then push the tortoise through the front door, and the tortoise will wander in. And one of two things will happen. Either someone in the house will go, Blimey, there's a tortoise with a candle on its back. In which case, they will know not to go in and burgle it. Or the tortoise will wander in, the candle will reveal that the house is empty, and that there's lots of things to nick, and the burglars will pile in, and they'll loot everything. So I think that this is very much the kind of background to, say, an oral story like Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves. I mean, because in a way, Ali Baba is a thief. This is the story, he sees the 40 Thieves, they say open sesame, the gate of the cave opens, it's full of gold. Ali Baba, in the long run, is able to perloin all this girl and finish off the 40 Thieves. And he does it thanks to the brilliant intelligence of his slave girl, Mojiana,

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and she was always my kind of favourite character in the Arabian Nights. And the wonderful thing about the Arabian Nights and its relationship to Abbasid Baghdad is that you can see that there were characters like this, there were people like this, that cunning was prized.

And even though, obviously, the stories themselves aren't true, they do, I think, derive from an authentic tradition. And it's a tradition that kind of brings Baghdad more alive than perhaps contemplating mosques or, I don't know, Islamic scholarship.

Well, as you said, Tom, so much of Baghdad is no longer standing. I mean, there's virtually nothing left, right, of the medieval cities. So this is our best window, probably, into that world, into the imaginations of the people who lived there. Fascinating. So your favourite character is Ali Baba's slave girl. Yes. Is that your favourite story, Ali Baba?

So she's the one who is, you know, the 40 Thieves are in kind of jars and she of course, boiling oil over them and everything. It's all great fun.

So that's your favourite story? Yeah, I think it is.

Okay. Yeah. I always like Sinbad because, of course, my pantomime career.

Of course. They're all great stories. I should read them more, actually.

I think Aladdin is actually a pretty bad story.

Is he? Yeah, I think so. Don't you? I mean, he's very passive.

Just doing stuff with his genie in the lamp and magic carpet.

I mean, genies are great as well. So they are kind of creatures made of fire who, you know, have their own courts and everything and they're always appearing in the Arabian nights. So all great stuff.

Right. And so, redolent of the romance of this world that you've been bringing your life for so brilliantly. Tom, dare I say, a tour de force?

Yeah, thank you. I think I will.

Thank you very much.

So that was tremendous. That's medieval Baghdad. Now, next week, we are sailing the high seas in the company of Yorkshire's finest Captain Cook. And we will be landing on Australia and New Zealand and interfering with the locals, like Captain Cook.

Like we will be doing, of course, later this autumn. So that will be very exciting.

But Tom, thank you very much. That was absolutely brilliant.

And thank you to all of you for listening. And we will hopefully see you next week. Goodbye.

Bye-bye.