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Astronomers Studying an Eclipse  
~Antonio Caron (1521-1599)

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Cover: The painting that graces this issue was discovered in 1947 by Sir Anthony Blout, who attributed it to Antoine Caron and titled it, "Astronomer's Studying an Eclipse." Caron was a major figure in the history of French renaissance art and a court painter in Paris, France during the reign of Catherine de Medici. Although he was known for his allegorical style, hypothetical subjects, and brilliant colors, no written references have been found that explain this particular work. The scene was identified as Paris in 1530-50, yet no total eclipses were visible in Paris during Caron's lifetime. Note too, that the shadows seem to come from a strange direction and along with an armillary and a globe, the sharp eye will find intriguingly, a compass and a square.

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# Buran of Baghdad:

## An Astrological Woman in the Early Middle Ages

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by Kenneth Johnson

*Many current practitioners of astrology are dismayed to discover that, despite all the work that is being done in the reconstruction of our history, we have not uncovered the names of any women astrologers until the twenty-first century.*

*Kenneth Johnson, proficient in both Western and Vedic systems and skilled in the fine art of historical sleuthing, has given us a portrait of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Buran of Baghdad, the earliest astrological woman whose identity is known to us. He sets this biography amidst the turbulent politics of the early Islamic empire, whose rulers had court astrologers and who were instrumental in establishing centers for the translations of astrological texts from Greek, Persian, Sanskrit, and Syriac into Arabic.*



To the best of my knowledge, Buran is the first female astrological personality from classical times whose identity has become known to us. One hopes that others shall eventually appear.

Buran of Baghdad (807-884 C.E.) was the wife of a reigning monarch and a powerful political figure in her own time. As a member of Baghdad's intellectual elite, she was involved with the creation of a famed astrological academy, and she was roughly contemporary—and probably acquainted—with the best known astrologers of the early Arabic period, notably Masha'allah, Abu'Ali, Omar of Tiberias, al-Kindi, and Abu Ma'shar. Buran is unique in respect to the fact that a great deal of biographical material exists concerning her life—among ancient astrologers, only the lives of William Lilly, Nicholas Culpepper, and Abu Ma'shar are recorded with anything like the complexity of Buran's life story. This is in large part due to the fact that she was culturally and politically prominent; I call her an *astrological woman* rather

than an astrologer because it is unlikely that she ever practiced astrology as a profession. Medieval Muslim historians worked in much the same fashion as contemporary journalists—when constructing a history, they interviewed everyone concerned with an event, including palace guards, cooks, eunuchs and harem girls. Their histories are filled with rich anecdotal details.<sup>1</sup> It is thanks to their thoroughness that we know as much about Buran as we do, right down to her birth data.

Buran was born in Baghdad on a Sunday evening, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the month of Safar, in the 192<sup>nd</sup> year after Hegira (December 5, 807 C.E.).<sup>2</sup> At the time of her birth, Baghdad was only forty-five years old, and Buran's family predecessor (probably her great-grandfather), Nawbakht the Persian, had been the astrologer in charge of choosing the birth chart for the city. The Nawbakhts were perhaps the most prominent of all astrological families during the early Arabic period and supplied four or five different court astrologers during the early Abbasid period;<sup>3</sup> they were descended from an old, aristocratic Persian clan, and Buran's father, Hasan ibn Sahl, may very well have named her in honor of Queen Buran, daughter of one of Persia's last great independent monarchs, Chosroe II. Queen Buran of Persia was crowned in 630 or 631, in time to take over the management of her father's famous academy of astrology at Jundishapur.<sup>4</sup>

One wonders precisely what Hasan ibn Sahl may have seen in the birth chart of his daughter, Buran; she too would reign as a queen and become deeply involved with a legendary academy of astrology and other sciences.

Her most probable rising sign is Cancer, and the ruler of the horoscope, the Moon, falls in the seventh house, where it is present along with Venus. The

Moon's dispositor, Saturn, is in the auspicious fifth house, witnessing the Moon with a helpful sextile. Since this is a nocturnal horoscope, the Moon is the sect ruler, while the Moon and Venus are the first two rulers of the Moon's triplicity; they are both angular, and both in the seventh. A brilliant marriage might have been predicted; she became a reigning queen when she married the caliph. The association with wisdom is more difficult to see, but Jupiter, ruler of the ninth, is very well placed, being angular in the fourth, as well as being witnessed by the Sun, the Moon, and Venus—all the other benefics. In regards to Buran's expertise with astrology, the contemporary astrologer will be immediately drawn to the rather close conjunction between Mercury and Uranus in her birth chart, though she herself could not have known of the existence of Uranus, and would have seen Mercury as an indicator of astrology. (It is, however, worth mentioning that another gifted medieval astrologer, al-Biruni, had a conjunction of Uranus with the Moon, while Abu Ma'shar may very well have had a close conjunction of Uranus and the Sun.)<sup>5</sup>

Buran grew up in the Baghdad of the Arabian Nights—quite literally. It was the reigning caliph of the time, Harun al-Rashid, for whom Scheherazade allegedly spun her fabulous stories. When Harun died, he left a divided empire. His older son, Amin, ruled as the official caliph in Baghdad, while his younger son, al-Ma'mun, enjoyed virtual autonomy in eastern Persia and central Asia, including the present-day Afghanistan. Ruling in this region, now so remote to the world at large, did not relegate al-Ma'mun to the kind of political exile we might imagine—quite the opposite. At that time, eastern Persia was the intellectual and spiritual heart of the empire, and produced some of the most renowned thinkers—including astrologers—of that era.

In fact, during the early years of his reign al-Ma'mun enjoyed the services of a brilliant court astrologer—Omar of Tiberias (d. c. 815), who was highly influential during the Latin Middle Ages, and whose work is still available today.<sup>6</sup>

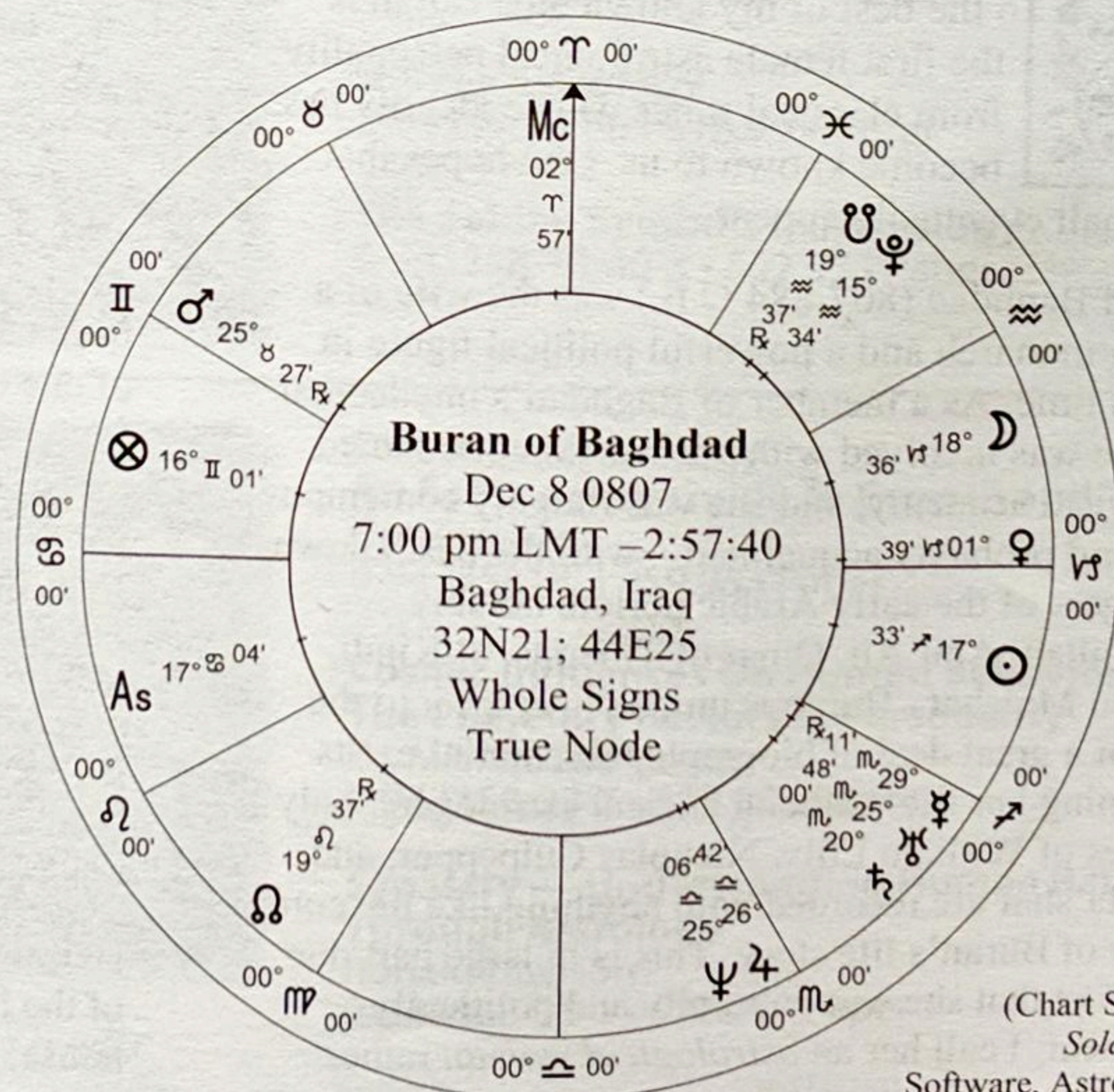
Civil war between the two brothers was inevitable, and when it finally erupted, it was al-Ma'mun who emerged the victor in 813. However, the new ruler was secure in Persia and suspicious of Baghdad—rightfully so, since Amin's adherents continued to stir things up in that city and rebellion simmered. It was Buran's father, Hasan ibn Sahl, who acted as the caliph's personal agent in Baghdad, ferreting out potential malcontents and making the capital safe for al-Ma'mun's eventual arrival in 819. Hasan was well rewarded for his loyalty in 825, when his daughter Buran married the great caliph; she had been betrothed to him ever since she was ten years old.<sup>7</sup>

The marriage took place when Buran was eighteen. This was a seventh house year for her by profection; Capricorn was her annual profected Ascendant, with the Moon and Venus rising, aspected by their ruler Saturn from the natal fifth or profected eleventh. As Buran's contemporary, Abu 'Ali al-Khayyat, wrote: *"And when the profection of the year of the Ascendant of the radix comes to the seventh sign ... it signifies marriage in that year."*<sup>8</sup>

The wedding ceremony became famous:

The marriage ceremony of the Caliph al-Ma'mun to the eighteen-year-old Buran, daughter of his vizir, al-Hasan ibn-Sahl, was celebrated in 825 with such fabulous expenditure of money that it has lived in Arabic literature as one of the unforgettable extravaganzas of the age. At the nuptials a thousand pearls of unique size, we are told, were showered from a gold tray upon the couple who sat on a golden mat studded with pearls and sapphires. A two-hundred-rotl candle of ambergris turned the night into day.<sup>9</sup>

Though Buran and al-Ma'mun eventually became close—even inseparable—their first few years of marriage were stormy. It is said that



the caliph; al-Ma'mun died on campaign before returning to Harran.

The story itself is likely to be false, but the Sabaeans of Harran probably did receive an edict of tolerance during the time of al-Ma'mun, for it is after this time that their influence upon the intellectual scene begins to thrive. Next only to the scholars of the House of Wisdom, the Sabaeans were instrumental in preserving the ancient Greek knowledge of science—and of astrology. They were especially renowned for their expertise in astrological image magic, and it is probably for this reason that Marc Edmund Jones, many centuries later, paid them a tribute (albeit with a slight variation in spelling) by naming his own magical astrological images the Sabian Symbols in their honor.

The florescence of science, learning, and culture under al-Ma'mun lasted a mere seven years from the time of his marriage to Buran and his founding of the House of Wisdom until his premature death in 833—apparently by food poisoning as a result of eating bad dates. He was on campaign in Anatolia at the time, and Buran was by his side during his last moments.

Then everything changed. The caliph was succeeded by his younger brother, Mu'tasim. This individual was a completely different sort of man; a rigorous fundamentalist with a taste for war, he had no interest in Greek learning or science. The House of Wisdom, neglected, sank into obscurity for years. Buran's father, Hasan, no longer enjoyed the favor of the court, and became a nervous, frightened man, old before his time and afraid of the dark. (Let this be a cautionary tale for astrologers who wish to involve themselves in politics.) The new caliph's vizier, Muhammad ibn al-Zayyat, was a brutal person, a former oil merchant who is credited—or blamed—for the invention of that notorious instrument of medieval torture called the Iron Maiden. This charming character quickly conspired to defraud Buran of many of her lands. She and her father retreated to the obscurity of their family palace in Baghdad, where she occupied her time studying astrology. It was during this time that the event which constitutes her principal *claim to fame* as an astrologer took place.

According to the historian ibn-Khallikan, Buran "*used to lift the astrolabe and look at the horoscope of the caliph, al-Mu'tasim.*" One day she noticed that the ruler was in danger through some sort of wooden instrument. She sent her father to the palace to tell the caliph what she had foreseen. Mu'tasim may have been a fundamentalist, but astrologers were still taken seriously; when his servant arrived shortly thereafter with the caliph's comb and toothpicks, al-Mu'tasim ordered him to try them first. No sooner had he done so than his head or face swelled up and he fell dead.<sup>14</sup>

Hasan was restored to court favor and Buran was able to reclaim her land-holdings from the acquisitive vizier. The Nawbakht family was back on top. As for the evil vizier al-Zayyat, a subsequent caliph eventually became annoyed with him and locked him into his own Iron Maiden.

It would be gratifying if ibn-Khallikan had told us precisely what Buran saw in the sky that led to her prediction. It should be remembered that at that time most predictions for individuals were based upon a combination of profections, solar returns, and planetary periods; when placed all together. These techniques even made it possible to focus upon a specific day. However, the fact that Buran was using an astrolabe suggests that she was engaged in an activity which is usually regarded as a more modern pastime and of only secondary importance to Hellenistic and medieval astrologers. An astrolabe creates a picture of the sky at any given moment; it does not chart periods or profections. Buran was probably studying transits to the caliph's birth chart.

Al-Mu'tasim didn't enjoy life in sophisticated, cultural Baghdad. He had surrounded himself with a band of Turkish mercenaries who were fiercely loyal to the caliph but obnoxious to Baghdad's citizens. Al-Mu'tasim's response was to build an entirely new city to house himself and his mercenaries. It was called Samarra, and is still in existence today; it now has the reputation of being one of the most turbulent cities in war-torn Iraq.

Though many of the elite followed the court to Samarra, Buran remained in Baghdad. Her father had been given his own palace as part of his reward for helping al-Ma'mun during the years of civil war; it was named the Hasani Palace after him. While the caliphate descended into an endless series of wars, assassinations, and revolutions, Buran continued to maintain her palace as an independent woman, surviving the ups and downs of fortune for more than 50 years.

She was over 80 years old in 892 when everything changed again. A new caliph, called Mu'tadid, succeeded to the throne. A student of Greek, he longed to restore the House of Wisdom to its ancient glory and re-establish the cultural innovations which al-Ma'mun and Buran had begun so long ago. In that spirit, he decided to return the caliphate to Baghdad, but by that time the caliphs had been in Samarra for so long that they no longer even owned any palatial real estate in the old capitol.

Mu'tadid's agents went to the Hasani Palace and approached Buran. It is not recorded how much, if anything, they paid her for the palace. She did, however, willingly agree to give her home to the new caliph. It is recorded that:

al-Ma'mun tried to divorce her on the grounds that she was unable to bear children. Somehow Buran got word of his intentions and hired a well-known lawyer from Syria to help plead her case. By the time al-Ma'mun got around to challenging her, she had already constructed a series of legal arguments which forced him to back down; Buran remained the wife of the caliph. (An astrologer would have advised the caliph not to marry a person with Saturn in the fifth house if he had child-bearing on his mind—especially since she also had Saturn opposing the ruler of the fifth house, Mars, which is retrograde as well as in its detriment in Taurus.)

It was around the same time that al-Ma'mun founded one of the greatest institutes of higher learning ever to impact the history of astrology. The House of Wisdom (*Dar al-hikma*) was dedicated to the preservation and reclamation of Greek science and culture; it was here, more than anywhere else, that translations from Greek scientists (including astrologers) were made and circulated amongst the Arabs. Soon,

Arab students found themselves equipped with the greater part of the works of Galen, Hippocrates, Ptolemy, Euclid, Aristotle, and various other Greek authorities. The work of translation was two-fold; versions were made in Arabic and also in Syriac. All these were better translations than had been known in the past and were made from good Greek manuscripts, many of them procured by agents of the khalif who were sent into the Roman Empire and empowered to spend considerable sums on the purchase of the best codices.<sup>10</sup>

It is difficult to say how much Buran may have been involved in the House of Wisdom. She was not only a member of the Empire's foremost astrological family, she was also a descendant of the old Persian aristocracy who formed the intellectual elite of the early Muslim Empire. Buran was certainly an educated woman with scientific interests, including astrology—because we must remember that the early Arabs regarded astrology as a branch of legitimate Greek science rather than as mysticism or magic. It is also recorded that Buran did in fact, exercise considerable influence in state affairs.<sup>11</sup>

So closely bound were Buran and al-Ma'mun that she even accompanied him on his military expeditions against the Byzantines in Anatolia.<sup>12</sup> In so doing, she participated in one of the more culturally important events of her era.

The ancient caravan city of Harran in eastern Anatolia was perhaps the last remaining stronghold of Graeco-Roman paganism; the people there had survived every effort of the Byzantines to convert them to Christianity, as well as subsequent efforts by the Muslims to convert them to Islam. The following story is more likely to be fiction than fact, but it makes an important point.<sup>13</sup>

When al-Ma'mun passed through the city of Harran, he noted that its inhabitants were still pagans. He offered them the usual choice which Islam bestowed upon non-believers: they could either convert to Islam, prove themselves to be “people of the Book” and pay a tax, or they could die.

The prophet Muhammad had used the phrase “people of the Book” to describe religions that possessed a revealed scripture, like the Muslim themselves. Such religions received a special dispensation; they need

not convert entirely, but could retain their religious practices if they simply paid a tax. The same privilege did not extend to pagans. The people of the Book were Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and—Sabaeans.

Who were the Sabaeans? Scholars have argued about which Near Eastern religious group may have been meant by this term, but without any particular show of agreement. The term was already so obscure by al-Ma'mun's time that the great intellectual caliph himself probably had no idea what it meant. This was what the pagans of Harran were counting on, at least, when they declared themselves to be Sabaeans. According to the story, they never had to argue their point in front of



—*Parmenides of Elea* (c. 510 B.C.E.)  
Contemporary of Heraclitus,  
distinguished between the world as  
daily experienced and the reality  
reached by thinking, an idea that  
proved to be one of the most  
influential in western culture  
(center left, *The School of Athens*).

... she asked for a few days respite so that she could move out and hand it over to him. She then repaired the palace, plastered and white-washed it and decorated it with the best and most exquisite furnishings, hanging all sorts of curtains on its portals. She filled the cupboards with everything that might be of use to the Caliph and arranged for men servants and slave girls to answer whatever need should arise. Having done this, she moved and sent word to the Caliph that he could go ahead with the transfer of his residence.<sup>15</sup>

Buran had lived long enough to hand over her palace to the spiritual successor of her husband al-Ma'mun. The new caliph, Mu'tadid, moved back to Baghdad, re-established the House of Wisdom, and Buran's Hasani Palace became the capitol of the Muslim Empire for the next five hundred years. A later caliph expanded the palace by importing stones from the ancient Sassanid palaces where the other Buran had ruled more than two hundred years earlier.<sup>16</sup>

Buran died in September of 884 and was buried at the Mosque of the Sultan in Baghdad.<sup>17</sup> Neither the palace nor the mosque remain standing.✽

## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> The monumental *History of the Prophets and Kings*, by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, has recently been translated into English and runs to 38 volumes; Ibn Khallikan's *Biographical Dictionary*, much more brief, encompasses a mere 7 volumes in English translation. Another primary source for the period is al-Mas'udi's *Meadows of Gold*; there is partial translation in English. There is even a work which deals with the artistic and literary court life of the period, Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani's *Book of Songs*, never translated but comprising 20 volumes in Arabic. The Muslim historians are nothing if not detailed.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibn Khallikan, *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary* (trans. MacGuckin de Slane, New York and London, Johnson Reprint Corp., 1842), Vol. I, p. 270. Ibn Khallikan's exact words are: "...she was born on Sunday evening, 2<sup>nd</sup> Safar, A.H. 192 (December, A.D. 807), at Baghdad." Muslim months are counted from the first appearance of the lunar crescent, and thus the second day of the month is the day after the Moon first becomes visible. I have researched every possible Sunday in December of 807, as well as backwards into November and forward into January, to allow for all possible calendrical mix-ups. Sunday December 5 is the only candidate which places the Moon at something close to the correct phase.
- <sup>3</sup> See Holden, James H., *A History of Horoscopic Astrology* (Tempe, AFA, 1996), pp. 99-100 for background on the Nawbakht family.
- <sup>4</sup> Pingree, David. *From Astral Omens to Astrology: From Babylon to Bikaner* (Rome, Istitutio Italiano per L'Africa e L'Oriente, 1997), p. 60.
- <sup>5</sup> Holden, *op. cit.* Al-Biruni's birth data is on p.126; a speculative date for Abu Ma'shar is on p. 113.
- <sup>6</sup> Omar of Tiberias, *Three Books of Nativities* (trans. Robert Hand, Berkeley Springs, WV, Golden Hind, 1997).
- <sup>7</sup> Hitti, Philip K. *History of the Arabs* (London, MacMillan & Co. 1956) p. 302, fn. 5.
- <sup>8</sup> Abu 'Ali al-Khayyat, *The Judgments of Nativities* (trans. James H. Holden, Tempe, AFA, 1988), p.48.

<sup>9</sup> Hitti, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

<sup>10</sup> O'Leary, DeLacy, *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs*, citation to come.

<sup>11</sup> Hitti, *op. cit.* p. 333.

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy, Hugh. *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World* (Cambridge, Mass., Da Capo Books, 2004), p. 172.

<sup>13</sup> The story originally comes from al-Nadim, and is recorded in his *Fihrist* (trans. Bayard Dodge, New York, Columbia University, 1970), Vol. II, pp. 751-2. See also Tamara Green, *The City of the Moon God* (Leiden, Brill, 1992), pp. 4-6.

<sup>14</sup> This story from Ibn Khallikan is told in George Saliba, "The Role of the Astrologer in Medieval Islamic Society," in *Magic and Divination in Early Islam* (ed. Emilie Savage-Smith, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 2004), p. 361.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 164, quoting Jacob Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages* (Detroit, 1970), p.85.

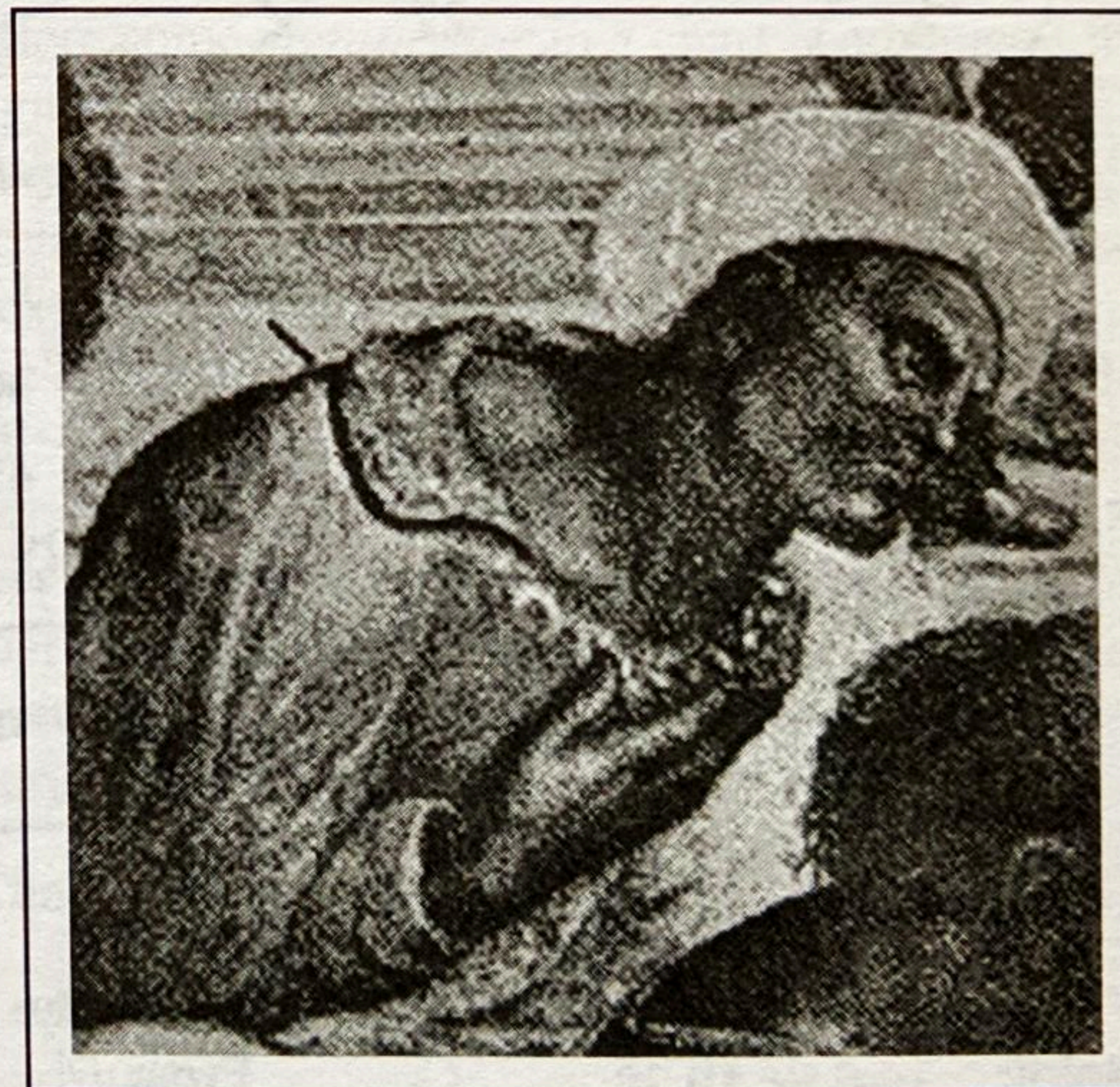
<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Khallikan, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

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—Averroës (Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198 CE),  
Islamic religious philosopher who contended that  
philosophic truth is derived from reason, not faith, and  
who integrated Islamic traditions and Greek thought  
(lower left, Raphael's *The School of Athens*).