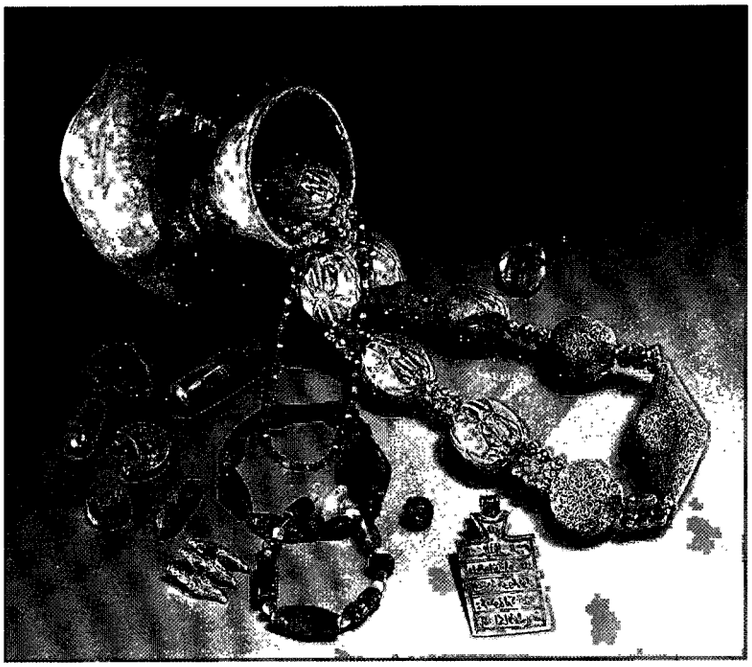
In the Abbasid Empire

In 750 an Abbasid coup d'etat removed the Umayyads from the caliphate. The new rulers transferred the seat of power from Syria to Iraq and established a new capital, Baghdad, which soon became the political and economic center of the empire, seat of all government institutions, hub of emissaries and messengers, spies and benefit-seekers, military units and commercial caravans, all busily coming and going. It was also the cultural capital, where the caliph and his court provided patronage for religious and artisitic activity, which was



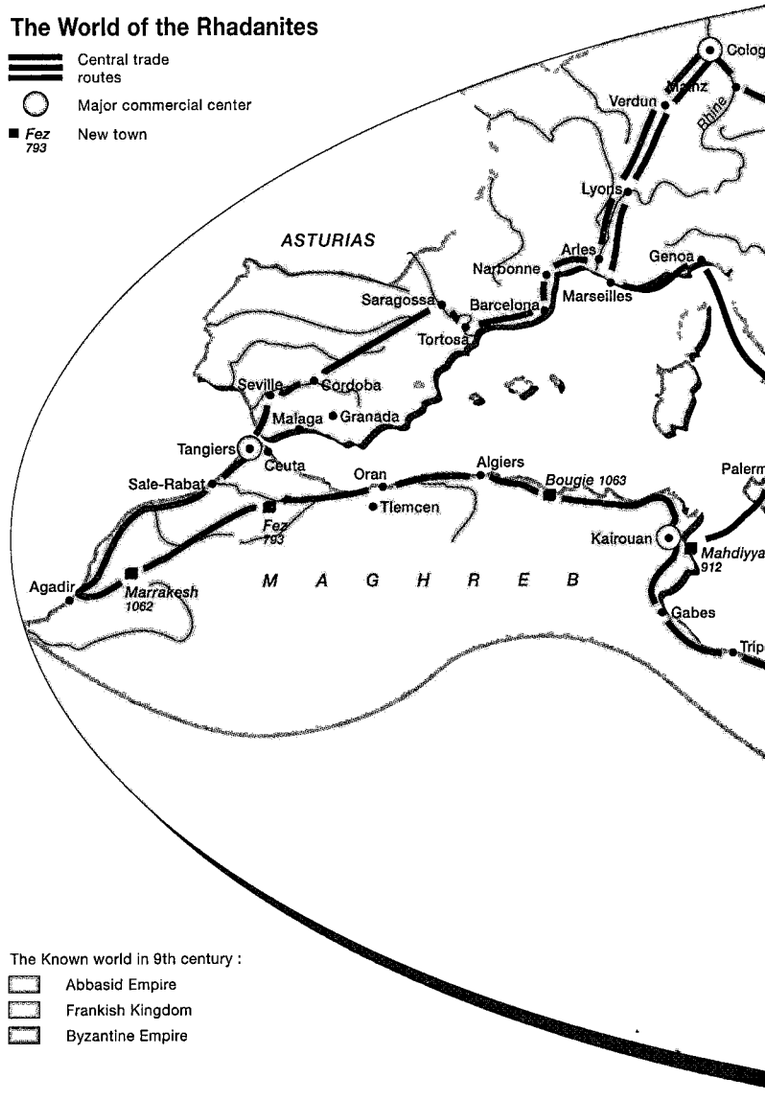
1. Jewelry from the Fatimid period. Caesarea, 11th century.

faithful to Islam, yet touched with elements of Greek tradition.

This was undoubtedly a turning point in the history of the people of Israel. At the beginning of the ninth century, a new literary language emerged: Arabic written in Hebrew characters. In this language Jews began writing philosophical and scientific works in obvious imitation of contemporary Arabic literature. Even authors of religious works were affected by new discursive trends. The talmudic debate, dialectical in character and based on the association of ideas, was giving way to a form of thematic discourse. These texts were based on the authority of the Talmud, yet the very attempt to assemble, classify, and publish a "post-talmudic *Halakhah*" was clearly a sign of the authors' self-confidence and position of strength.

The Jewish accommodation of Muslim influences was, however, selective and partial. Although they adopted idiom and style from their Arab colleagues, Jewish writers still tried to preserve the specifically Jewish content of their teachings. Following the pioneering work of Saadia Gaon, Arabic became a legitimate vehicle for Jewish expression, and the structure of Arab texts its principal model. Gradually, particularly in fields where there was no previous Jewish tradition, words and concepts borrowed from the Islamic world began to penetrate Jewish texts in the form of titles of philosophical and scientific works, principles concerning laws of matrimony, regulations which at times contradicted Jewish legal traditions in commercial and financial spheres, and Arabic terms appearing in all *halakhic* literature.

The emergence of this Judeo-Arabic culture was linked to another aspect of Jewish life in the Abbasid caliphate: international trade. We have seen elsewhere how Jews shifted from agricultural work to dealing in commerce under Muslim rule. By the end of the eighth century the presence of Jews in all caravans connecting the East to the West was predominant. Known as the Rhadanites (probably after the name of the Jewish quarter in Baghdad), these Jewish merchants maintained the link

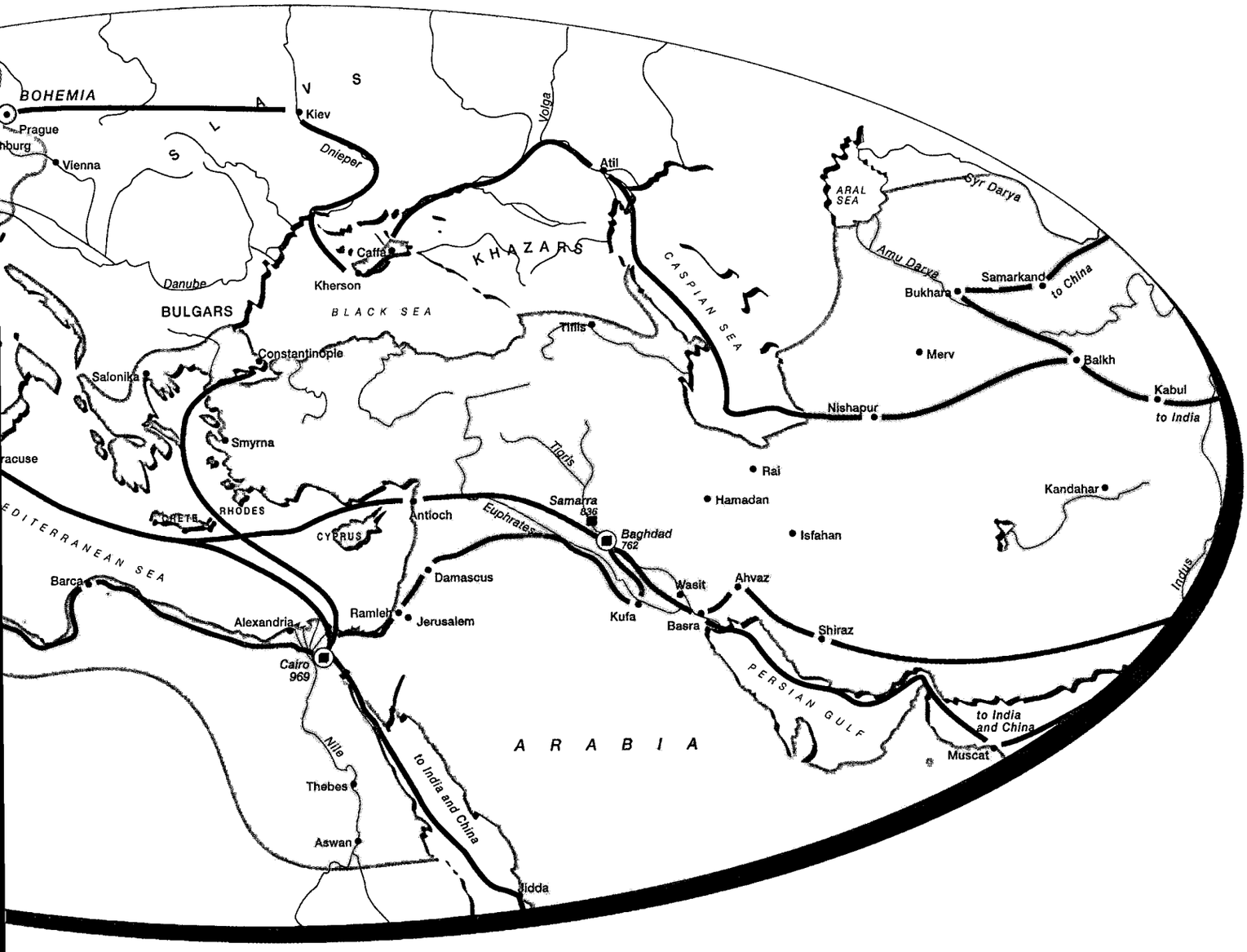


Accession of the Abbasids 750 — **Founding of Baghdad** 762

between trade stations on the Saharan frontier and the commercial centers of North Africa, and between these and the heart of the caliphate. They traversed the commercial routes in the Caspian region, frequented the Khazar kingdom, and reached as far as India by roads along the Red Sea and through the Arab Peninsula. They had certain advantages over all other traders: a unified legal code; supportive Jewish communities along the trade routes; and mastery of two international languages, Arabic and Hebrew. Thus they also became important cultural agents, bringing the teachings of the Babylonian center to all communities of the diaspora and contributing to its increasing authority.

For the Jews, as for Muslims, all roads led to Baghdad. The merchants' need for investment channels led to the emergence of a class of rich Jewish bankers who soon formed an affiliation with the courts of high Arab officials and potentates. By financing their military campaigns and luxurious lifestyle, these bankers became indispensable to the Muslim rulers, and in return were allowed to farm taxes. Their position in the princes' courts enabled them to protect their community's interests and they thus earend the awe and respect of their co-religionists who dubbed these influential men "the corners of the congregation."

8th–10th centuries



Fatimid Caliphate in North Africa | **Umayyad Caliphate in Spain** | **The Fatimids in Egypt**

750: Accession of the Abbasids; the center of the Muslim world is transferred from Syria to Iraq.
797: A Jewish interpreter named Isaac is a member of the delegation sent by Charlemagne to Caliph Harun al-Rashid.
c. 800: First evidence of Jewish emigrants from the East settling in North Africa.
825: David ben Judah and his brother Daniel, each supported by one of the two academies, fight bitterly over the title of Exilarch ("prince of the exile", political leader of the Babylonian community); the Abbasid Caliph El-Ma'mun authorizes the multiplication of religious sects among the *dhimmis*. The controversy and the caliph's decree both lead to a decrease in the Exilarch's prestige.
c. 840: The Babylonian Exilarch demands financial support from the communities in North Africa and Spain.
c. 850: According to the *Ahimaaz Scroll*, chronicle of an important Jewish family in Italy, a certain Aaron of Baghdad arrives in southern Italy and serves as a link between western and Babylonian Judaism.



2. Piece of cloth. Palestine(?), c. 12th century.

c. 880–930: The prospering of the *jahbadhiyya*, rich Jewish bankers in Baghdad, influential at the caliph's court.
890–898: Hai bar Rav David Gaon transfers his *yeshiva* from Pumbedita to Baghdad.
c. 900: Isaac ben Solomon Israeli composes his works in philosophy and medicine.
910: Beginning of Fatimid rule in North Africa; emergence of the community of Kairouan (in Tunisia), destined to become an important center of the Jewish world.
916: Death of Netira, founder of an important Jewish banking firm in Baghdad.
928: Saadia ben Joseph, nominated Gaon of the Sura academy; Saadia Gaon was undoubtedly the greatest Jewish scholar in the Abbasid period.
929: The Umayyad prince of Spain proclaims himself Caliph.
c. 950: Dunash ibn Tamim composes his works in philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy; Baghdad and its wonders are described by Nathan ben Isaac ha-Bavli ("the Babylonian") for the benefit of the Jews of North Africa.
c. 960: First manifestations of autonomy in the Spanish community: Hisdai ibn Shaprut founds a library, supports writers and linguists, and appoints Moses ben Hanokh to the rabbinical seat in Cordoba.
969: Conquest of Egypt by the Fatimids.
983: A group of rich Jewish merchants convenes in Mosul to debate questions of philosophy.
990: The legend of the "four captives": sold in four different countries and ransomed by their brethern, they establish four independent Jewish centers – in Egypt, Tunisia and Spain (the fourth is not named). Although the story is fictitious, it reflects a historical reality: the emergence of several Jewish centers which are gradually freed of Babylonian tutelage.
c. 1000: Said ben Babshad composes *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) which constitute a short encyclopedia of natural science.