



# **The Book of Ingenious Devices / Kitáb al-ʿiṣyāl: Kitáb al-Hiyāl. By The Banú (sons of) Mūsà bin Shákir**

*Muhammad Ibn Musa Ibn Shakir*

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skilled in geometry, ingenious devices (ʿiyāl), music and astronomy. According to Ibn al-Nadīm and Ibn Khallikān their weakest subject was astronomy, but this seems to conflict with the opinions of Ibn Yunus and al-Bīrūnī, both good judges, who spoke highly of the accuracy of the Banu Musa's astronomical observations. Muḥammad, who was the most influential of the brothers, specialised in geometry and astronomy, and excelled Alī in all the sciences except in the construction of ingenious devices. Al-ʿIṣāṣān was a brilliant geometrician with a retentive memory and great powers of deduction. A rival once tried to discredit him in front of al-Ma'mūn by saying that al-ʿIṣāṣān had read only six of the thirteen books of Euclid's Elements. Al-ʿIṣāṣān replied by saying that it was unnecessary for him to read the remainder because he could arrive at the answers to any of Euclid's problems by deduction. Al-Ma'mūn acknowledged al-ʿIṣāṣān's skill, but did not excuse him, saying: "laziness has prevented you from reading the whole of it - it is to geometry as the letters a, b, t, l, l are to speech and writing." (H. 264).

Al-ʿIṣāṣān is rarely mentioned by name elsewhere in the sources and may have preferred to devote his time to scholarship, whereas his brothers were involved in a variety of undertakings. At the time of their entry into the House of Wisdom the Banu Musā were poor and needy (H.

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