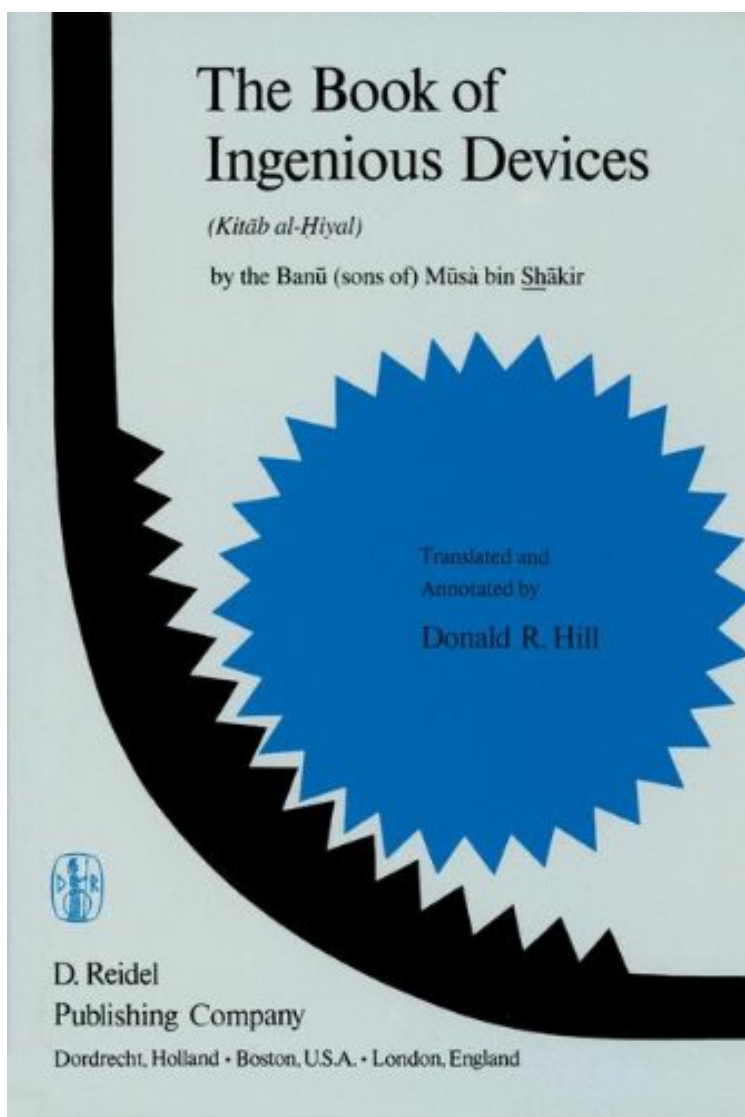


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skilled in geometry, ingenious devices (lives), music and astronomy. According to Ibn al-Nadim and Ibn Khallikan their weakest subject was astronomy, but this seems to conflict with the opinions of Ibn Yunus and al-Biruni, both good judges, who spoke highly of the accuracy of the Banu Musa's astronomical observations. Muhammad, who was the most influential of the brothers, specialised in geometry and astronomy, and excelled Almad in all the sciences except in the construction of ingenious devices. Al-I: Iasan 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'mun by saying that al-I: Iasan had read only six of the thirteen books of Euclid's Elements. Al-I: Iasan 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'mun acknowledged al-I: Iasan'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, 111 are to speech and writing." (H. 264). Al-I: Iasan 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 Musa were poor and needy (H.