

Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth

Guide based on:

Evelyn Fishburn & Psiche Hughes, *A Dictionary of Borges*

Various reference books.

Ibn Hakkan (Abenjacán) The name of three well-known viziers of the Abbasid dynasty. This may be of some significance in the context of the story in which the apparent king Ibn Hakkan (Abenjacán) turns out to be Zaid, his vizier. Aleph 73 (115) *Aleph* 123

Abbasids (Abbasida) An Islamic dynasty that lasted from 750 to 1258; its eighth Caliph was Al-Mu'tasim Ibn Harun (794-842). In 762 the Caliph Mansur transferred the capital from Damascus to Baghdad, a move which marked the rise of Arab over Persian influence in Islam. Aleph 35(50) *Ficc.*41

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A dynasty of Sunni Moslems--took over the Caliphate from the Umayyads in 750 and held it until 1258. They established their capital in Bagdad. During their reign, Islamic arts, literature, and culture blossomed and flourished. The location of the capital in Bagdad had a big impact on Islam, transforming it from a distinctly Mediterranean religion to one with more eastern elements. [from: Official Islam Glossary for Introduction to Religion]

Unwin A fictional character; in the context perhaps an allusion to Sir Raymond Unwin (1863-1940), the English architect who laid out the first English garden city. Aleph 73(115) *Aleph* 123

Fermat, Pierre de (1601-1665) A distinguished French mathematician, in his day second only to René Descartes, some of whose ideas he disputed. Fermat was considered by some the discoverer of differential calculus and is credited as the founder of the modern theory of numbers. Aleph 73 (115): the story is told that, while reading an edition of the *Arithmetica* of Diophantus, Fermat discovered an important theory of higher mathematics which he noted on the margin of his copy but did not bother to set out fully [...]

Diophantus (Diofanto) (fl. 250) A Greek mathematician who introduced symbolism into Greek algebra. His chief work is the *Arithmetica*, which was translated and commented on by the Arabs.

Nilotic (Nilótica) The Nilotic Sudan, an area along the Nile south of Egypt approximately equivalent to ancient Nubia. Aleph 73 (116): its inhabitants are east central African tribes forming a distinct ethnic and linguistic group. Aleph 73 (116) *Aleph* 123

Poe, Edgar Allan (1809-1849) An American writer of poetry, literary criticism and fantastic tales, credited as the originator of the detective story; his character C. Auguste Dupin inspired many writers of detective fiction, Borges among them. [...] A well-known detective story by Poe, 'The Purloined Letter', the second of Dupin's stories, is a masterly

tale of courtly intrigue, concealment and revenge. Dupin, by working out the mentality and reasoning of the culprit, deduces that the stolen letter has been left in full view, finds it and steals it back. Lab. 67 (40) *Ficc.* 51, Aleph 74 (116) *Aleph* 124

Zangwill, Israel (1864-1926) An English novelist and poet, an early pioneer of Zionism. Aleph 74 (116) refers to Zangwill's *The Big Bow Mystery* (1891), a work important in the development of the detective story because it was the first 'to be based solidly and solely on the concept of the locked room' (E.F. Bleiler, *Three Victorian Detective Novels*, NY 1978, xv). A crime is committed in a place where all the exits are locked from the outside and there is no criminal inside; the solution is that the murderer is the person who discovers or pretends to discover the crime. Poe's classic 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' had already used a similar device.

De Cusa, Nicolas (1400-1464) A German cardinal, scientist and philosopher, influential in Renaissance thought for the doctrine of human knowledge expounded in *Of Learned Ignorance* (1440). Arguing that the essential nature of God, from whom everything flows and returns was unknowable, De Cusa concluded that all human knowledge was simply 'learned ignorance'. His philosophy was humanistic, with pantheistic tendencies. His cosmology, anticipating Copernicus, held that the earth moves round the sun. Aleph 74 (116) refers to De Cusa's preoccupation with straight lines which, according to him, were segments of a large circle.

"by turning always to the left..." In "The Garden of Forking Paths" the narrator recalls: "The advice about turning always to the left reminded me that such was the common formula for finding the central courtyard of certain labyrinths."

Babel An Assyrian word, Bab-ili, meaning 'the gate of the God', the original name of Babylon; cf. Hebrew *balal*, to 'confuse'. The story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) seeks to explain the diversity of mankind. Man's presumption in building a tower to reach heaven is frustrated by God, who confounds the language of those who built it, dividing their speech. The story was probably inspired by the pyramidal temple-tower in Babylon. Lab. 78 (51) *Ficc.* 85

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Babylon (Babilonia) The Greek form of Babel. An ancient city on the Euphrates, first mentioned in a tablet of 3800 BC, famous for its astronomical and astrological practices. From 2250 BC Babylon was the capital of an extensive commercial empire periodically fighting for supremacy with the neighbouring Assyrians. After the fall of Nineveh in 606 BC Nebuchadnezzar II rebuilt the town, fortifying it with towers and a wall which joined the Tigris to the Euphrates. When the western regions of the empire rose in revolt, led by Egypt, Babylon retaliated, destroying Jerusalem and enslaving the Jews. The decay of Babylon began in 500 BC with King Belshazzar, who saw the 'writing on the wall'. It was occupied first by Cyrus of Persia and then by Alexander of Macedon, after whose death in 323 BC it dwindled to a group of villages. Lab. 55 (30): among the Babylonians all transactions were carried out on clay tablets, many of which survive, along with documentation of their religion, magic and astrology. A complex system of gods involved a hierarchy of priests and many liturgical rites, including the making of horoscopes. A

vast legal organisation governed the life of individuals: capital punishment was applied for theft, and the judicial system was based on the Lex Talionis ('an eye for an eye').

Allaby, The Reverend The name recalls Rector Allaby, the money-conscious rector of Crampsford in Samuel Butler's posthumously published autobiographical novel *The Way of All Flesh* (1903). Aleph 75(117) Aleph 125

"...he told this story from the pulpit." This story is "The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths". In his commentaries for "The Aleph and other stories", Borges writes: "The pseudo-Arabian parable preached by the timorous Mr. Allaby from his pulpit was written before 'Ibn Hakkan.' How it found its way into the story is now a mystery to me."

Pliny the Elder (Plinio) (23-79 AD) A Roman writer, author of the 37 volumes of *Historia Naturalis*, a source of information on every branch of natural sciences known to the ancient world. Pliny was exceptionally industrious and wide-ranging in his interests and wrote also on grammar, military strategy and Roman history. His scientific zeal was the indirect cause of his death for, in order to observe closely the eruption of Vesuvius, he set sail towards it and lingered too long and too near the volcano. For Pliny's dragons, see *Historia Naturalis*. Lab. 89 (61) Ficc. 120, Lab. (149) Aleph 26, Lab. 152 Aleph 38

Historia Naturalis A rambling scientific treatise by Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79) which deals with geography, anthropology, physiology, botany, agriculture, medicine and the arts. Compiled from vast reading, and citing about 500 authors, of whom about 150 were Roman, it is a major source of our knowledge of ancient life. [...] Aleph 76: the dragons alluded to can be found in books 8 (32-3) and 12 (33-4), where Pliny describes how every species of animal is 'cunning for its own interest'. He gives several accounts of how dragons (by which he means any long-toothed snake) attack elephants in the summer in order to cool off by drinking their cold blood, 'both combatants dying together, the vanquished elephant as it falls crushing with its weight the snake coiled around'. The reference is probably to the account of the contest quoted by Borges in his *Imaginary Beings* under the heading of 'The Dragon'. Lab. 89 (61) Ficc. 120, Lab. 149 (118) Aleph 26, Lab. 152 (121) Aleph 38

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From "The Book of Imaginary Beings": "Pliny informs us that in summer the Dragon craves elephant blood, which is notably cool. It will make a sudden foray on the elephant, coil round it, and plunge its teeth into it. The bloodless elephant rolls on the ground and dies; so does the Dragon, crushed under the weight of its victim. [...] In Pliny there is also a chapter devoted to remedies derived from the Dragon. Here we read that its eyes, dried and then stirred with honey, make a liniment that is effective against nightmares. The fat of the Dragon's heart stored in the hide of a gazelle and tied to the arm with the sinews of a stag assures success in litigation; Dragon teeth, also bound to the body, ensure the indulgence of masters and the mercy of kings. With some skepticism Pliny cites a preparation that renders men invincible. It is concocted of the skin of a lion, a lion's marrow, the froth of a horse which has just won a race, the nails of a dog, and the tail and head of a Dragon."

Aboukir Bay The scene of the battle of the Nile (1-2 August 1798), in which the English fleet under Nelson defeated the French. Aleph 76 (120) *Aleph* 128

Trafalgar A cape in Spain, south of Cadiz, the scene of Nelson's famous victory in the Napoleonic wars (21 October 1805). Aleph 76 (120) *Aleph* 128

Suakin A town in the Sudan, on the Red Sea, formerly the port whence slaves were shipped to the Americas and Muslim pilgrims sailed to Mecca. Aleph 77 (120) *Aleph* 128

Crete (Creta) A Greek island in the south Aegean. Aleph 79 (123): the famous labyrinth of Crete was constructed by Daedalus for the Minotaur. Aleph 79 (123) *Aleph* 131

"Dante imagined it as having the body of a bull and a man's head." in "The Book of Imaginary Beings" Borges writes: "The idea of a house built so that people could become lost in it is perhaps more unusual than that of a man with a bull's head, but both ideas go well together and the image of the labyrinth fits with the image of the Minotaur. It is equally fitting that in the center of a monstrous house there be a monstrous inhabitant. [...]Dante, who was familiar with the writings of the ancients but not with their coins or monuments, imagined the Minotaur with a man's head and a bull's body (Inferno, XII, I-30)."

Nibelungs (Nibelungos) In the Norse sagas and German legend, a race of dwarfs named after Nibelung, their king. They become the possessors of the golden treasure that brings about the downfall of their people and their gods. [...]