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# Abbas **Ibn** Firnas



**Die Gebrüder Wright, Otto Lilienthal, der Schneider von Ulm, Ikarus – alles uns wohl-bekannte Flugpioniere. Abbas Ibn Firnas dagegen kennen nur wenige außerhalb der arabischen Welt – dabei soll er sich schon 1000 Jahre vor den Wrights in die Lüfte erhoben haben.**

In the ninth century AD, all but a northern strip of present-day Spain and Portugal formed the Andalusian *Caliphate* of Cordova. This was the high tide of Islamic Art and Science. Cordova and Baghdad were *twin* cultural centres of the world.

In 822, a new Caliph took the throne and set about to create a renaissance. His *ingathering* of talent began with an Iraqi musician called Ziryab. That meant *Blackbird* – a *nickname* that honoured his fine singing, and dramatic *appearance*.

A *jealous* music teacher had driven Ziryab out of Baghdad. So the Caliph *hired* him at a fine *salary*. In Cordova, Ziryab developed new musical forms. He introduced the *lute* to Spain, and expanded its *range* by adding a fifth string. But he also became a patron of the sciences. He *fostered* the development of astronomy, medicine, and many technologies. One person who joined this exciting world, so bubbling with ideas, was a young Berber astronomer and poet named Abbas Ibn Firnas. And here things get interesting.

In 852, a new Caliph and a bizarre experiment: A *daredevil* named Armen Firman decided to fly off a tower in Cordova. He glided back to earth, using a huge wing-like *cloak* to break his fall. He survived with minor *injuries*, and the young Ibn Firnas was there to see it.

Like Ziryab, Ibn Firnas worked at a huge variety of *enterprises*. He set up astronomical tables, he wrote poetry, he built a planetarium and designed a water clock. He developed a process for cutting rock crystal. Up to then, only the Egyptians knew how to *facet* crystal. Now Spain would no longer need to export quartz to Egypt, but could finish it at home.

Yet Firman's flight must have *lain* upon his mind. For, in 875, Ibn Firnas built his own glider. It was far more than a fancy cloak. He too *launched* himself from a tower. The flight was largely successful. However, the landing was bad. He *injured* his back, and left critics saying he hadn't taken proper account of the way birds pull up into a *stall*, and land on

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*see list	

their tails. He'd provided neither a tail, nor *means* for such a manoeuvre.

His death, just twelve years later, may've been *hastened* by the injury. And, as we tell our schoolchildren about the Wright Brothers, the Islamic countries tell theirs about Ibn Firnas, a thousand years before the Wrights. The Libyans have a postage stamp honouring him. The Iraqis have an airport named after him.

And I sit in *awe* of the nerve, the belief in self, behind such a stunt. I sit in awe of the *magnitude* of the driving *urge* to fly that was with us – long before even the legend of Dædalus and Icarus. ■

Prof. Dr. John Lienhard, University of Houston

Dieser Text ist Teil der Radioserie „Engines of Our Ingenuity“ und wird hier mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Autors und der Radiostation KUHF wiedergegeben. Den Originaltext und weitere 2600 Kurzberichte über die Geschichte der Technik finden Sie unter [www.uh.edu/engines](http://www.uh.edu/engines)

<i>appearance</i>	Erscheinung
<i>awe</i>	Ehrfurcht
<i>blackbird</i>	Amsel
<i>Caliphate</i>	Kalifat
<i>cloak</i>	Umhang, Mantel
<i>daredevil</i>	Draufgänger
<i>enterprise</i>	Unternehmung
<i>facet, to</i>	Facetten schleifen
<i>foster, to</i>	fördern, pflegen
<i>hasten, to</i>	beschleunigen
<i>hire, to</i>	einstellen
<i>ingathering</i>	Einsammlung
<i>injure, to</i>	verletzen
<i>injury</i>	Verletzung
<i>jealous</i>	eifersüchtig
<i>lain (lie, lay, lain)</i>	gelegen
<i>launched</i>	starten
<i>lute</i>	Laute
<i>magnitude</i>	Größe, Ausmaß
<i>means</i>	Mittel
<i>nickname</i>	Spitzname
<i>range</i>	Bereich, Umfang
<i>salary</i>	Gehalt, Salär
<i>stall</i>	Strömungsabriss
<i>twin</i>	Zwilling
<i>urge</i>	Drang, Verlangen