THE TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE IN MEDIEVAL CAIRO
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AL-ZARNŪJĪ, the author of a treatise on education that will figure prominently in this book, advised his readers that "in the study of science one does not acquire learning nor profit from it unless one holds in esteem knowledge and those who possess it. One must also glorify and venerate the teacher." This book began as a dissertation at Princeton University, and during my time as a student there I had the fortune to study with a number of truly venerable teachers and scholars. It was in a seminar of A. L. Udovitch's that I first experimented with Mamluk history, and it was under his direction that this project first took shape. His interest in a dynamic mixture of social and cultural history has proved a source of great excitement, and has always helped me to see the broader implications of my own work. I cannot imagine having undertaken a project such as this without the skills and tools necessary for research in Islamic history that I acquired in a seminar with Bernard Lewis. Since then, Professor Lewis has consistently shared with me his vast knowledge of the historical legacy of the Middle East, and has patiently read through several successive drafts of this work, repeatedly saving me from a host of errors. Peter Brown has, from my first days at Princeton, provided inspiration for how exciting history can be; he has also read the entire manuscript, and brought to bear on it his extraordinary historical insight. I owe a special word of thanks to William Jordan, who kindly agreed to cross the Mediterranean (figuratively, of course) to read and comment upon my work, but who also, as much as anyone else, shaped my identity as a historian. I hope he will not flinch from that burden. Altogether, these teachers form a "chain of authority" that my medieval subjects would, I think, appreciate.

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On a more personal note, I want to thank, first of all, my parents. They are responsible in so many practical and spiritual ways for nurturing my interests in history and in the Middle East that it is necessarily to them that I dedicate the book. My wife, Vivien, has been so deeply involved in the writing of this book (in more ways, perhaps, than she would acknowledge) that it is difficult for me to conceive of it without her. But I prefer not to think of her relationship to my work, or mine to hers, in terms of debts and obligations. It would be better to say, simply, that we live and work as one.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION, NAMES, AND DATES

IN GENERAL, I have followed the system of transliteration of Arabic names and words used by the Encyclopedia of Islam, with a few minor but common variations: for example, "q" for "k" and "j" for "dj." For certain Arabic words and personal and place names that are commonly found in English texts or dictionaries, I have preferred to use the less technical form: for example, Quran, not Qur'an; muezzin, not mu'adhdhin; ulama, not 'ulamâ'; Cairo, not al-Qahira. I have also frequently indicated the plural of Arabic nouns simply by adding an "s," rather than giving the correct Arabic form (e.g., madrasas, rather than madaris). For the sake of convenience, dates are generally given according to the Western calendar. When an Islamic date is given for any reason, it is identified by the conventional abbreviation A.H.
THE TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE IN MEDIEVAL CAIRO
INTRODUCTION

Seek knowledge, even as far away as China.” So goes a famous injunction of the Prophet Muhammad to the men and women of the Islamic community. Relatively few would actually travel to what was, for medieval Muslims, quite literally the ends of the earth, but the “journey in search of knowledge” became almost a trope of the biographies of merchants and princes as well as religious scholars. Whether or not the attribution of the tradition to the Prophet is genuine, it accurately reflects a principle generally held in the Islamic world, and which formed a common theme of medieval literature: namely, that the pursuit of knowledge (ilm), and specifically religious knowledge, is an activity always worthy of approbation and encouragement.¹ Treatises praising knowledge and its acquisition repeated didactic anecdotes aimed at fostering a proper sense of values among those who would be students. One said of al-Shaf’i, the eponymous founder of one of the four principal rites of Sunni law, that he paid no attention to the advances of a slave-girl purchased for him by his students, much to her dismay. Frustrated after vainly waiting for him throughout the night, she returned to the trader who had sold her, complaining that he had bound her to a “crazy man.” The scholar, unfazed, responded simply and sincerely that “the crazy man is he who knows the value of knowledge, and who then squanders it, or hesitates so that it passes him by.”²

Islam’s high estimation of the value of knowledge translated naturally into broad-based social and cultural support for education. All Muslims are encouraged to acquire at least a functional familiarity with those texts—in particular the revealed Qur’an and the traditions (hadith) that embody sayings, commands, and stories handed down from the Prophet Muhammad and his companions—that form the basis of Islam as a religion and as an all-embracing way of life. This does not mean that every Muslim will or should become a scholar of the religious and legal sci-

¹The tradition is cited in Sharaf al-Dīn Muhammad al-Shaf’i, al-Muqaddimah al-bana’a fi bayan kathir min al-abd al-sitt al-mubtabara wa’l-‘adl al-‘adim (Cairo, 1950), 63. For general remarks on the importance of knowledge in the Islamic tradition, see Franz Rosenthal, Knowledge Triumphant (Leiden, 1970).

enences, or that all need be versed in the intricacies of the shari'a, the Islamic law that is far more than a 'holy law.' On the other hand, according to a late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century treatise, 'it is necessary for the Muslim to strive for as much knowledge as he may have need in his station, whatever that is.' Every believer must know, for example, what God requires of the faithful in terms of prayer, fasting, paying the alms tax, or performing the pilgrimage. Merchants must know enough of the law to avoid commercial practices abhorrent to it. The principles and precepts of the law of Islam, as derived from the Quran, hadith, and the consensus of the community, represent the revelation of God's will in its widest possible sense. And since knowledge of God's will is the surest means to avoid the sins of avarice, arrogance, profligacy, and more, learning is prescribed for all of us."

Muslim sensibilities, at least as refracted through the writings of the educated elite themselves, placed scholars of the religious and legal sciences at the pinnacle of society and at the vanguard of the forces it marshaled to defend itself against enemies and to bring order and meaning to its members. Ahmed As'ad, the twentieth-century Egyptian scholar and writer, described in his autobiography the difficulties he had in marrying, despite his good appearance, respectable pedigree, and comfortable income: the turban he wore, which indicated to all his religious education and orientation, acted as a social impediment, discouraging prospective brides and their families. In earlier centuries, such prejudices did not predominate, despite the contempt and ridicule apparent in popular tales about inept schoolteachers, such as those found in The Thousand and One Nights. True scholars, on the contrary, were revered, and the sons and daughters of a prominent jurist or professor made suitable spouses for the children of the political and military elite. A late medieval treatise on education approvingly quoted the hadith that "nothing is more powerful than knowledge. Kings are the rulers of the people, but scholars [al-'ulama'] are the rulers of kings." This represented no vague claim that the pen was mightier than the sword. The scholars of the religious sciences, especially jurisprudence and the Prophetic traditions, were guardians of an organic body of knowledge the transmission of which largely shaped Muslim culture, and which in itself defined the legitimacy of kings. Another tradition proclaimed that "one scholar [faqi'ah] is more powerful against the Devil than a thousand worshippers.""
emphasis on law, its pedagogy and institutions, and even in the language and metaphors that the surviving documents use to characterize the world of learning: the "wandering scholar" is as much a trope of Jewish history and legend as it is of the Muslim historical and biographical record. Islam’s emphasis on learning and scholarship may also serve to distinguish Islam from medieval European civilization. A fourteenth-century Muslim writer could routinely assert the spiritual power of the scholar against that of one thousand worshippers. How many contemporary Europeans would have made the same claim?

**The Madrasa**

From the beginning, then, Islam was a religion of the book and of learning, a society that esteemed knowledge and education above almost every other human activity. It was, moreover, before Muslim societies developed a network of institutions specifically devoted to religious knowledge and its propagation. In the medieval Muslim societies of the Near East, the institution of education par excellence was the madrasa, a noun of plural derived directly from a verb meaning "to study" and related etymologically to the Hebrew midrash, used in medieval Egypt to refer to a variety of institutions devoted to traditional Jewish learning. The madrasa has received considerable attention from historians in recent years, and their research provides us with a composite picture of the character of that institution.

Islam, like Judaism, is very much a religion of the law, and scholars have identified the madrasa as necessarily, if not exclusively, an institution for instruction in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). The model developed by George Makdisi and others presents an institution specifically devoted to the study of Islamic jurisprudence according to one or more of the four "orthodox" rites of law in Sunni Islam, the Shafi’i, Hanafi, Malik, or Hanbali. Other subjects elemental to a religious education, such as Qur’anic exegesis (tafsir), hadith, or the linguistic sciences might also form part of the madrasa’s curriculum, but only as ancillaries to the study of law. Certainly the curriculum offered in the madrasa concentrated on the traditional religious and legal sciences, to the exclusion of the so-called "foreign" rational sciences inherited from the Hellenistic world. Education in the madrasa, while traditional, was nonetheless of a "higher" character, focusing on the textbooks and commentaries written and compiled by Islamic scholars over the centuries, the students having acquired a preliminary grounding in the Quran and the Arabic language either in a primary school or from family members. These madrasas provided endowed professorships and student stipends in one or more of the religious and legal sciences, and, often, accommodations for both instructor and instructed.

Much of the previous scholarly literature has focused on the origins of the madrasa and its growth in Central Asia, Iraq, and Syria, and can only be briefly summarized here. Originally, of course, most instruction in the Islamic religious and legal sciences took place not in institutions formally devoted to education, but in mosques, where religious scholars would sit in teaching circles (talqqa, muqds) with their students. The systematization of Islamic law in the eighth and ninth centuries and the gradual coalescence of the various rites resulted in the need for more prolonged and intensive study than had formerly been the pattern. Beginning in Iraq and the eastern provinces of the Muslim empire in the tenth century, hosteleries (khana) began to be established next to mosques prominent for the teaching that went on inside them. These khans served as convenient accommodations for students and teachers who came to Baghdad and elsewhere from other cities or outlying areas, allowing them the opportunity to concentrate more intensively on their academic subjects.

The process that saw the growth of "mosque-khan complexes" culminated in the tenth and eleventh centuries in the establishment of madrasas. Islamic governments themselves never assumed financial respons-
sibility for the inculcation of the religious sciences; rather, these new institutions were established and endowed as a pious act by wealthy individuals, usually but not exclusively members of the ruling political elite. Devoted by the terms of the legal documents establishing their endowments (waqf, pl. waqaf) principally to the study and transmission of Islamic law and the other religious sciences, the madrasas provided the physical structure for instruction and income to support professors (mu'allim, pl. mu'allima) and students. The first madrasas were probably constructed in Khurāsān, but it was the Sāliḥ ważir (minister) Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 1092) who popularized the institution in the central provinces of the Islamic empire, specifically in Iraq. His famous madrasa, the Niẓām-iya in Baghdad, became the model for those established in Syria by the twelfth-century Muslim princes Nūr al-Dīn ibn Zangi and Salāḥ al-Dīn ibn Ayyūb (Saladin) and their successors.

Even if the madrasa was not always and explicitly a device of Sunni governments in their struggle against Shi‘i sectarianism, as a previous generation of scholars thought, it was nonetheless associated in a more general way with the assertion in the high Middle Ages of a self-consciously traditionalist and, in the wake of the Crusades, militant Sunni Muslim identity. The new institution proved to be extremely popular in those lands in which Sunni Islam re-established its preeminence following the decline and collapse of the Shi‘i governments that had dominated the Islamic East during the tenth and eleventh centuries. By the death of Saladin in 1193, there were already thirty madrasas in Damascus; between the end of the twelfth century and the Mongol invasions in the mid-thirteenth, sixty new madrasas were established in the Syrian capital.16 In Egypt, no doubt because of the lingering presence of the Fatimid regime, which followed the Iṣṭa‘lī branch of Shi‘ism, the madrasa was a relative latecomer. Egypt’s first madrasa may have been established as early as 1097, and several founded by Sunni ministers to the late Fatimid caliph were already functioning in Alexandria by the time Saladin abolished the Shi‘i caliphate and established his Ayyūbid dynasty.17 Saladin did establish the first madrasa in the Egyptian capital itself, or, more precisely, in the neighboring city of al-Fuṣṭāṭ, in 1170. Under his patronage, and that of his successors and other individuals, at least thirty-two madrasas for instruction in Islamic jurisprudence and related subjects were founded in the urban metropolis of Cairo-al-Fuṣṭāṭ by the time of the Ayyūbid coup against the last Egyptian Ayyūbid.18

13 Soured, “Diffusion,” 175.
15 On the institution of the madrasa in Ayyūbid Egypt, see Leiser, “Restoration,” passim, and “The Madrasa,” passim.
16 Thus, by the middle of the thirteenth century the madrasa had established itself as the primary forum for religious education throughout the Islamic Middle East, and in particular in the Egyptian and Syrian provinces of the Ayyūbid empire. The institution, like higher education itself, was a largely urban phenomenon. The principal cities of Syria—Damascus, Aleppo, Jerusalem, and others—were home to numerous madrasas and to many of the most reputable scholars of the later Middle Ages, and consequently attracted students from other Muslim countries as well as from the Syrian hinterland. In Egypt, the port city of Alexandria boasted a number of these schools, as did several of the smaller towns of the Nile Delta and the southern provinces. But it was Cairo, more than any other city of the later Middle Ages, that developed a reputation as a vital center of traditional Muslim learning. With the devastation of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 and the destructive, albeit temporary invasions suffered successively by Syria from the mid-thirteenth century on, Cairo became a haven for scholars and other refugees. But another, more important factor contributed to the city’s standing as the principal seat of Muslim scholarship and instruction. Under the aegis and through the munificence of the Ayyūbid military elite that ruled much of the Near East in the later Middle Ages, the Egyptian capital became the cultural hub of the central Islamic world.

The Ayyūbid Regime, 1250–1517

In 1250, following the defeat of the Sixth Crusade led by Louis IX of France and the death of the last effective sultan of Saladin’s dynasty, al-Malik al-Salih Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb, the government of Egypt passed into the hands of a warrior caste of slave origins, the Ayyūbids (literally, “those who are owned,” “slaves”). This is not the place for a detailed review of Ayyūbid history; a growing literature on the subject now includes several works of a general nature in addition to more focused studies.19 But a brief review of the structure of the sultanate and the character

14 At least two surveys are now available in English that cover all or a part of the Ayyūbid period: P. M. Holt, The Age of the Crusades: The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1517 (London, 1998); and Robert Irwin, The Middle East in the Middle Ages (London, 1988). More useful to the social historian in Lapidus, Muslim Cities, esp. in an introduction to Muslim urban history) 9–43. For more detailed studies, see the various articles and
of its ruling elite will provide background essential to understanding the social history of Islamic education in the Mamluk capital.

The phenomenon of a slave army was not new to the Near East. For several centuries, regimes in various corners of the Islamic world had relied upon a military drawn from slaves purchased and trained specifically for a military purpose. With the coup of the Mamluks of the sultan al-Malik al-Šâb against his son and successor, however, a band of those soldiers actually seized the reins of state. From 1250 until the Ottoman conquest of Cairo in 1517, the Mamluk military elite held a monopoly on the institutions and mechanisms of government in Egypt and, for most of that time, in Syria and the Hijaz as well. Historians usually divide the Mamluk period, somewhat arbitrarily, into two unequal halves. During the "Turkish" period (1250–1382), the corps of Mamluks was drawn principally from among Kipchak Turks. The following century and a half is referred to as the "Circassian" period, because of the predominance of Circassians among the Mamluk elite.

Whatever their precise ethnic roots, these Mamluks were by origin neither Arab nor Muslim. Imported at a young age from, primarily, the Caucasus and the Eurasian steppe, they were converted to the Muslim religion, taught Arabic, and trained as warriors to defend the lands of Islam. Upon the conclusion of their training they were freed, and entered the service of the government, or of particular Mamluks within it, in a variety of military and political capacities. From their numbers were drawn the sultan, who wielded central authority, and the amirs (military officers) of varying ranks who held the chief positions of government.

Superimposed upon the structure of Mamluk government was a more ancient political institution. From the middle of the eighth century, the Sunni world had been ruled, at least in theory, by caliphs of the 'Abbasid family, based in Iraq. Of course, effective political power had long since passed to local regimes, but the 'Abbasid caliphs remained as figureheads of Sunni unity and legitimacy. Following the Mongol destruction of Baghdad in 1258, refugees claiming to be members of the caliphal family settled in Cairo and were recognized by the Mamluks as the authentic caliphs. But real power remained in the hands of the Mamluks, and specifically in those of the sultan and the leading amirs. Politicians under the monographs by David Akay, which remain the most important works on the period and on the Mamluks as a social and political group.

10 CHAPTER ONE

Mamluks was rarely a stable game, however, and the political history of the regime, in its early decades as well as at its end, was punctuated by frequent coups and continual competition and maneuvering among the amirs.

In large part this instability resulted from what was perhaps the most astonishing characteristic of the Mamluk system. The Mamluks, as a ruling elite, reproached themselves—not biologically, through the establishment of family dynasties, but by the constant importation of fresh young male slaves. As individuals, of course, the Mamluks married, often into the local academic and religious elites, a fact of some importance for the history of educational institutions. But the sons of Mamluk sultans and amirs were, in general, systematically excluded from succeeding to their fathers' offices and political prerogatives, and within a generation or two had largely blended into the local population. Even the new sultan was not usually drawn from among the sons of the former ruler, but from among the leading amirs. Both the sultans and the amirs were therefore responsible for the supply of fresh Mamluks each generation. These new recruits were selected, trained, and ultimately freed by their Mamluk masters, to whom they developed a deep attachment. Their masters in turn depended upon the reliability and martial skill of their own Mamluks in the incessant jockeying for political power.

If one of the political consequences of the rejection of the dynastic principle was instability, a result of the continual importation of new Mamluks was to perpetuate a cultural and social divide between rulers and ruled. At the very heart of their domains, the Mamluks formed a breed apart. The formal conversion of young Mamluks to Islam may have been more sincere in some cases than in others, but many Mamluks readily indulged in what were blatantly non-Islamic practices. For most, some dialect of Turkish remained the principal language of communication, although some grew more accomplished in the Arabic language of the native Egyptians than others. Trained in the martial arts and monopolizing the business of the defense of the realm, the Mamluks found themselves, by training, inclination, and occupation, distinct from those they governed.

With the Mamluk military caste both sworn to defend the Islamic realm and in some ways profoundly alienated from it, the social and cul-

22 There were, of course, exceptions—exceptions that at times predominate so much as to seem almost the rule. From time to time, especially at the beginning of the Mamluk period, the son of a sultan would succeed to his father's throne. Often, however, this was only a prelude to a subsequent coup by one or more powerful amirs. The first half of the Mamluk period was dominated by the rule of al-Manṣūr Qalawwūn (d. 1290) and his sons and grandsons, but of the latter only two managed to establish effective, if not permanent rule: al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (d. 1345) and, for a short time, al-Shaḥrūṣ Shāhān (d. 1370).
tural gap separating the Mamluks from the indigenous population over whom they ruled understandably produced a certain social tension. The ambivalent character of this relationship between rulers and ruled is not, perhaps, historically unusual. What is remarkable, and requires explanation, is that the Mamluks took as keen an interest as they did in religious matters and Islamic education. Chapter Five will explore the complex ties that bound the Mamluks to both the institutions and the process of learning. For the present, it is enough to take note of a concatenation of factors that left the transmission of religious knowledge in some ways dependent on the voluntary donations of members of the ruling military elite: the absence of anything resembling a corporate ecclesiastical organization capable of owning, supporting, and perpetuating an institutional structure; the general failure of the state itself to systematically support religious institutions, or, more precisely, the lack of any notion that supporting them was its responsibility; the long tradition of individual charity in Islam; and the vast wealth amassed by the military and political elites. All of these factors combined to cast the burden of supporting the religious and educational infrastructure on individual Mamluks. Both the first and last effective sultans, al-Mu'izz Aybak (d. 1257) and al-Ashraf Qansuh al-Ghawri (d. 1517), established institutions of higher learning in Cairo, as did virtually all important Mamluk rulers, as well as many amirs who did not themselves reach the sultanate. The Mamluks were thus largely responsible for at least the physical and financial infrastructure of Islamic education in the Egyptian capital.

**Higher Religious Education in Mamluk Cairo**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the people, processes, and institutions involved in higher religious education in Cairo from the middle of the thirteenth to the beginning of the sixteenth centuries. By higher religious education, we mean instruction in and the transmission of those texts that preserved and presented the principles and "knowledge" that Muslims, as individuals or as a group, needed in order to live a fully Muslim life. Given the fundamental importance of the law in Islam, much of that education focused on the science of jurisprudence, and legal studies formed an important component of the curriculum of most Islamic schools. But other subjects were included, and indeed the boundaries between them and jurisprudence, and especially that between hadith and the law, were by no means distinct. The science of jurisprudence had originally grown out of that of hadith, and although it formed a distinct field of intellectual endeavor at least from the time of al-Shafi'i (d. 820), it was never wholly independent of the study of the Prophetic traditions, which formed its most important base. The methodologies of learning and instruction in the two fields were not identical, but they were similar in many respects, and shared many of the same values and presuppositions. Many works of legal scholarship consisted principally of quotations from the traditions, and, as we shall see, classes in "jurisprudence" in the schools of Cairo might dwell largely on those same traditions. Together, hadith and jurisprudence formed the core of the 'ulamā' nauhīyya, the "traditional or transmitted sciences," which ultimately traced their authority to the Prophet himself, as opposed to the 'ulamā' qadīmiyya, the "rational sciences," which derived from the learning of classical civilization. The rational sciences—such as philosophy, logic, and mathematics—had little part in the curriculum of the schools of higher religious education in Mamluk Cairo, except, for example, in so far as a student encountered logic as an ancillary to his study of the law. But our principal interest is less with the subjects studied than with the broader social world of learning; it lies less in the object of knowledge and in the contents of the books of law, hadith, and similar subjects than in the social context in which those texts were transmitted.

Given the central position of knowledge and learning in Islam, it is not surprising that education and the educated elite have figured prominently in many of the most important works on the social and cultural history of Islamic societies. From earlier research, we know much about the supreme value that Islamic societies have traditionally attached to knowledge, specifically religious knowledge, and its transmission. Recent work, especially the monumental studies by George Makdisi, has directed our attention to the content and form of higher legal education, the early development of the institutions that supported learning and instruction, and the legal framework in which such institutions were established.

The educated elite, perhaps more than any other segment of the population, has received the systematic attention of medievalists. Path-breaking studies by Ira Lapidus, Richard Bulliet, Roy Mottahedeh, and Carl Petry have illuminated the significant if difficult-to-define role of the ulama ("ulamā") in the social and political life of Islamic cities in different times and places. Their work has given rise to a distinct subfield within the broader range of medieval Islamic history, identified only facetiously as "ulamalogy," and many of their conclusions set the stage for this study of education and learning. Still, it is not always easy to define the ulama. On the one hand, the ulama—as those involved in the transmission of religious knowledge—possessed a self-conscious identity that...
marked them as a distinctive group, and in Mamluk Cairo that identity was as sharply defined as in any other medieval Islamic society. On the other hand, the ulama never constituted an exclusive group, and the same emphasis on knowledge and its transmission that imparted significance to the educated elite also ensured its capacity to absorb, in some limited but meaningful way, large elements of the population from widely different walks of life.  

Do not rely primarily on education or legal activities for a livelihood. This tension was perhaps never so pronounced as in Mamluk Cairo, and will lie at the center of the present study.

The field of medieval Islamic history occasionally suffers from a tendency to treat developments in different Islamic societies as fundamentally comparable and interchangeable, although not in any rigorous comparative sense. Consequently, despite the importance to all Islamic societies of knowledge and learning, the scholarly literature still is short of comprehensive and circumstantial social and cultural histories of Islamic education and the transmission of knowledge in the Middle Ages, although two model studies have recently shed much light on the role of traditional education in the modern world. What this study proposes to do is to fill a part of that gap: to offer an interpretation of the social and cultural consequences of Islam's regard for knowledge, and of the construction both of educational institutions and of a diverse community of learning and knowledge, within the parameters of a specific historical and social setting.

For a variety of reasons, Mamluk Cairo offers a unique laboratory for analyzing traditional Muslim education in particular, concrete historical circumstances, allowing the testing of general hypotheses against particular situations. One reason—the extraordinary intellectual vitality of the city and the factors that produced it—was discussed above. That vitality has in turn left a rich historical and literary legacy, as the extensive collections of manuscripts written during the Mamluk period that survive in both European and Near Eastern libraries attest. Multivolume contemporary chronicles and biographical dictionaries, most written by members of the academic and intellectual elite and, in the case of the biographical dictionaries, largely concerned with the education and careers of academicians, allow the social historian to reproduce the world of Muslim

scholarship in the later Middle Ages in finer detail than for any other premodern period.

The study of education in medieval Cairo, in particular, is enriched by the survival of a number of tawqifyyas, the deeds of endowment by which individuals established particular academic and religious institutions and that outlined the internal constitutional arrangements of the schools. No school was established in a vacuum. Their construction and endowment was certainly left to individuals, usually Mamluks but occasionally other wealthy individuals. Benefactors, however, structured their schools with reference to others already functioning. The deeds of endowment for several madrasas dating from the Mamluk period make explicit reference to practices in other institutions, or stipulate that their stipendaries follow practices "usual" in other Cairoine madrasas. Such references suggest that the terms which structured the activities of particular schools reflected more than the gratuitous whims of individual benefactors. They bespeak a consciousness of a certain commonality of purpose.

But the Islamic law of endowment as it affected institutions of learning allowed considerable leeway to the founder of a school, a point that George Makdisi has brought forcefully to our attention. Not surprisingly, therefore, the nature and structure of institutions created and endowed to support Islamic education in Mamluk Cairo followed no set pattern. The variety of men and women—sultans and amirs, scholars and bureaucrats, the wives and daughters of the same—who undertook the construction of schools of higher religious and legal education guaranteed that those schools would not be uniform. On the most obvious level, for example, religious institutions might be established by individuals of widely differing financial means. Consequently, as we shall see, the schools that were established varied considerably in physical size, in the preference that they allotted to one particular rite, in their commitment to Sufi devotions as well as rigorous academic work, and above all in the value of their endowments (and the income they generated) and the quality of the education they offered.

These endowment deeds offer the historian insight into the arrangement and ordering of educational institutions. In so far as similar endowments  

[26] The systematic use to which these sources can be put is clearly demonstrated in Petry's study, Christian Elites. An indispensable guide to Mamluk-period sources is Donald Little, An Introduction to Mamluk Historiography (Wiesbaden, 1979); for a less technical introduction, see the bibliographical survey in Holt, Age of the Crusades, 207-10.

[27] Ulrich Haarmann, "Mamluk Endowment Deeds as a Source for the History of Education in Late Medieval Egypt," al-Ahwar 28 (1996), 31-47; see also the seminal study of the social history of the endowments by Amin, al-Anqaf, esp. 232-61. The lack of such documents from earlier periods of Islamic history comprised one of the principal obstacles to Makdisi's research; see his remarks in Colleagues, 33.

[28] See Colleagues, 33-34.
of endowed institutions devoted specifically to instruction in the law notwithstanding, Islamic education remained fundamentally and persistently an informal affair. He urged that we not "systematize and formalize educational institutions," and that we recognize that they were "guided by an elastic custom rather than by a rigid theory."  

Tibawi based his judgments primarily on examples from the early history of the madrasa and other educational institutions in Iraq, Syria, and the Islamic East. Yet centuries after the flourishing of madrasas in Egypt and the Levant, his remarks should remind us to look beyond the institutional structure of higher education to the informal world of personal instructional relationships that guided the transmission of Muslim knowledge. To the social historian, of course, such a warning, far from being restrictive, is fraught with promise.

Consider, for example, the apparent anomaly of several institutions dating from the end of the Mamluk period that were specifically known by contemporaries as madrasas, yet which made no provisions at all for classes in any one of the religious sciences. The madrasa established in 1515 by the Mamluk amir al-Sayf Baybars, a relative of Sultan Qâsim al-Ghawri, supported an imâm (prayer leader), a shâkh for Sûfis, Qur'an readers, and a host of other minor religious functionaries—but no teachers or students. Provisions for the madrasa of Sultan al-Ghawri himself, also established in the early sixteenth century, are in essence the same. The terms of the institution's endowment deed suggest that it hired an imâm, a preacher (khatib) to deliver the Friday sermon, Qur'an readers, and muazzins (mu'alladûnąna) to issue the call to prayer, but no one specifically committed to instruction. In this case, however, the fact that the endowment deed provided for a khânegah complex directly across the street indicates that the choice of the term madrasa to describe the institution was deliberate.

The fact that madrasas such as those of al-Sayf Baybars and Sultan al-Ghawri provided for no lessons—that is, that no salaries were allotted to particular teachers and no stipends for students were provided—did not necessarily mean that the institutions would not be, primarily, places of instruction. The madrasa of al-Ghawri, for instance, must have functioned as a center of education, for only students and scholars would have benefited from the books of exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, usûl al-fiqh and usûl al-dîn ("foundations of jurisprudence") and "foundations of reli-

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gion”), logic, and linguistic sciences that comprised its substantial library, a library that, incidentally, was to be open only on “the days of classes” (aṣyām al-durūs). Yet why should institutions such as those founded by al-Sayḥ Baybars or Sultan al-Ghawri, clearly labeled madrasas by their deeds of endowment, explicitly provide for no students or teachers among the myriad of men they employed? Why provide stipends, in some cases by no means negligible, for prayer leaders, muezzins, Friday preachers, Sufis and their shaykh, and any number of Quran and hadith readers, not to mention numerous support staff, but none for professors or their students?

The root of the answer may lie in Tihawi’s observation that, for all the establishment of endowed and structured institutions of learning, Islamic education remained fundamentally informal, flexible, and tied to persons rather than institutions. It should be kept in mind that the biographical dictionaries of the Mamluk period abound with references to men—and, to a lesser extent, women—who taught one subject or another, but do not always tell us specifically where their classes took place. Similarly, they are rich in information about an individual’s teachers, but almost never mention the particular schools in which he studied. The biographers’ decision to include certain details from their subjects’ academic careers and ignore others reflects their own understanding of the terms by which an education should be evaluated. Contemporaries, in other words, considered the venue of instruction and education to be of secondary importance: what was critical was the character and knowledge of the individuals with whom one had studied. Teaching circles continued to meet in institutions such as those of al-Sayḥ Baybars or al-Ghawri; students gathered there around professors to hear lectures and discuss points of law, even though no professorial chairs or student stipends were provided, because what was ultimately of prime importance was not a stipend, but a relationship with a prominent scholar.

The deteriorating economic circumstances of the late fifteenth century may have encouraged the establishment of madrasas making no formal instructional appointments. Ira Lapidus, examining the Syrian provinces in particular, pointed to a decline in the establishment of charitable endowments over the last century of Mamluk rule, a development linked to the increasing impoverishment of the Near Eastern economy brought on by a more or less constant decline in population, the Mamluks’ brutal exploitation of official and unofficial sources of revenue, and, later, shifts in the patterns of Mediterranean commerce. Evidence to be presented below will suggest that, at least with regard to institutions of learning in Cairo, there was in fact little or no decline in the absolute number of new

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institutions established. Schools established after the middle of the fifteenth century did, however, often economize by dispensing altogether with monthly payments to students and teachers.

Poverty demands choices: which corners are to be cut? The evolving norms of piety and worship in the later Middle Ages, as we shall see, placed premiums on certain forms of religious expression: mystics performing Sufi rituals, the continuous public recitation of the Quran, and localized delivery of the Friday sermon, all of which had become, by the end of the fifteenth century, standard and necessary features of educational institutions. Financial limitations may have spurred an evolution in the conception of the role of wealthy individuals who wished to establish and endow a school. No longer was it their responsibility to provide guaranteed incomes for teachers and students; rather, they were to ensure, in addition to a suitable physical structure and an administrative staff necessary to support it, the performance of essential devotions and corporate worship.

The fact was that the provision of stipends to teachers and students could, if necessary, be eliminated without in fact threatening the transmission of knowledge. The founders of madrasas even in the early years of Mamluk rule had recognized that fact. Consider, for example, the following provision from the deed (dated 1359) that established the madrasa of Sultan Ḥasan:

If the endowment’s income should fall below the [level of the] stipulated above, the nadir [the supervisor or controller of the endowment] should first expend what is required for furnishing the buildings and for lighting them, and for the expenses and administration of the adhipa [water wheel], and for the provision of water to the buildings. . . .

Only after the basic physical needs of the institution were satisfied was the controller to disburse salaries to the stipendiaries. But even more significantly, in the event that income fell so precipitously that the school could not afford to pay its beneficiaries even half their stipulated stipend, the controller of the institution was to:

Begin by paying the preacher and the prayer leaders and the muezzins, then the bencelabs [gatekeepers] and the farshshahin [cleaners] and the service staff, then the Quran readers and the orphans [for the primary school] and their teachers and their teachers’ assistants, and the servants [of the founder’s tomb] and the servant of the water fountain and the rashahshin [those who would sprinkle water in the street outside the madrasa, to keep down the dust], and one to supervise the building’s roof and the reader of the Quran and the administrators. [They are to be paid] one-half their salaries.

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34 Compare Lapidus, Muslim Cities, 37, with Ansin, al-Ahwaf, passim.
as stipulated above. Then, the controller should pay the students of jurisprudence living in the buildings, and the professors [mu'allimun] and their assistants [mu'ładín] and the teachers [mugaddimówin] and half the students of hadith and half the students of exegesis, and the hadith receiver [qiṣṣ al-hadith], and the shaykh al-mu'ład and his readers, and the mu'allim, then he should spend what he receives on the rest of the stipulated expenditures.

The founder, in other words, placed a lower priority on the salaries of teachers and students than on those of prayer leaders, preachers, and even some of the service staff. Founders made sure of the essential: the creation of a suitable environment for the inculturation of the Islamic religious sciences, an environment conceived in both physical and spiritual terms. The actual educational process could safely be left to itself.

What all this highlights is the persistent informality of Islamic higher education, the activity of a pool of educators and students much larger than the number hired by the institutions established to support that education. Professors might or might not be appointed to teaching posts and receive salaries, but instruction would go on in any case. This study, therefore, will go beyond the institutional framework of education, and will begin by examining the informal system of instruction and the personal relationships on which it was based. Such an approach is liberating for the historian. It frees us from models developed perhaps in the shadow of Western patterns, and based too squarely on institutions and formal structures, and allows us to perceive the process by which Islamic knowledge was transmitted from one generation to the next in all of its social complexity. Islamic education took place in a vibrant world of fluid categories in which social, cultural, and institutional barriers dissolved or at least became indistinct. What will emerge is less a formal system than a dynamic network, loose but comprehensive in its inclusion of various disparate social groups, and extraordinarily effective, not just in transmitting knowledge, but also in forging a common Muslim cultural identity.

38 Waqiyat al-Nâ'îr Isâm, Dîr al-Wathïq No. 365, pp. 473-75.

II

INSTRUCTION

MEDIEVAL MUSLIM SCHOLARS, like intellectuals in any time and place, cannot be faulted for their humility. In this Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûtî, a prominent Egyptian teacher and jurist of the late fifteenth century, differed little from his peers, although perhaps his claims were somewhat more controversial. In his autobiography, al-Suyûtî set forth his own very generous reckoning of his achievements in different fields of intellectual endeavor. At the bottom of his list, along with medicine, al-Suyûtî mentioned the science of the variant versions of reading and reciting the Qur'an (qir'ât). This subject, al-Suyûtî confessed, he did not presume to teach, because in it he had had no teacher. The problem was not that he was unlearned—on the contrary, he wrote a book on the subject—but that he would be unable to transmit his knowledge on the authority of any recognized shaykh.1

The personal connection—the educational model relying not simply on close study of a text, but on intensive, personal interaction with a shaykh—has always been central to Islamic education, not simply in Mamluk Egypt. The famous historian Ibn Khaldûn, himself a Maghribi, described in his Muqaddimah how, after an intellectually barren period under the Almohad dynasty, rigorous "scientific" learning returned to northwest Africa during the course of the thirteenth century. The triumph of learning there arose not through the reception of unknown or forgotten texts, but through the personal efforts of individual scholars who traveled to the Muslim East, studied there with prominent professors and their pupils, and returned to the Maghrib to pass on the traditions to their own students.2 Where traditional Islamic education has survived into the modern period, this personal model has remained more or less intact. Muslim education in early twentieth-century Morocco was built around a vibrant, personal system for the transmission of knowledge remarkably similar to the medieval model, in which the intimate relation-


ships established between students and teachers proved determinant in shaping a student’s later career.³

Islamic higher education, in late medieval Egypt as in other periods, rested entirely on the character of the relationship a student maintained with his teachers, and not on the reputation of any institution. Cities such as Cairo and Kairouan in North Africa might acquire reputations as centers of learning and scholarship, but nothing like a degree system formally attached to particular institutions of learning was ever established. The choice of a professor, and even of a text to be studied, had always been a highly personal matter, and the spread of institutions devoted specifically to education between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries did little to change that. On the contrary, the inner dynamic of Islamic educational traditions, which had their origins in the earliest decades of the accumulation and transmission of Muslim learning, triumphed over the temporary attempt to channel instruction into particular institutions. The establishment and endowment of schools and mosques that provided financial support to teachers and students did have profound impact on the educated elite and on social relations within that group, as we shall see in subsequent chapters. But the critical factor that a successful student considered was always the character, intellectual quality, and reputation of his instructor. Treatises on education, both those written during the Mamluk period and those of an earlier era that circulated widely in the late Middle Ages, repeated over and over the qualities to be looked for in a teacher. "Regarding the choice of a teacher," claimed a tract widely popular in the Mamluk period, "it is important to select the most learned, the most pious and the most advanced in years."⁴ Other writers on education laid out similar guidelines.⁵ The choice was so important that a student arriving in a new city or country was urged to take as long as two months in choosing the proper teacher.⁶ The early fourteenth-century scholar and jurist Badr al-Din Ibn Jamā’ī, too, recognized in his treatise on education that "it is important that the student look ahead [muqaddimū t-nāzar] and ask God to indicate to him from whom he should study," a choice to be made on the basis of the shaykh’s learning, age, and character.⁷

The importance of the personal, as opposed to the institutional, connection is immediately apparent in the principal sources on the educated elite of the Mamluk period. The biographical dictionaries of medieval scholars, written by their contemporaries, tell us little about where important medieval Muslims studied—aside from an occasional remark that an individual studied a collection of hadith or some other text at a particular madrasa, the dictionaries are virtually silent regarding the schools in which a young pupil received his training. Their silence, however, speaks volumes. It was not that information about an individual’s education was unavailable. On the contrary, historians and biographers routinely supplied long lists of a scholar’s teachers, a sort of curriculum vitae in which the critical element consisted of the names of those on whose authority one transmitted the texts of Muslim learning. In a fairly typical passage, the historian Shams al-Din Muḥammad al-Sakhawī included in his biography of the Cairoene jurist ‘Alam al-Din Shāhī al-Bulqīnī (d. 1464) the names of more than a dozen of his teachers and shaykhs, but no information at all about where ‘Alam al-Din had been educated.⁸ The message is clear: one’s teachers mattered, but venue did not.

An education was judged not on lori but on personae. Students built their careers on the reputations of their teachers.⁹ Naturally, to have studied in some capacity with an especially prominent scholar was an honor eagerly sought after. A biographer, for example, might write of an outstanding jurist such as the Shafi’i Wali ‘I-Din Ahmad Ibn al-Iraqī (d. 1423) that “the number of his students and those who studied with him increased until there were few outstanding students of any rite who had not studied with him.”ⁱ⁰ A student would seek out the most reputable and distinguished teachers he could, in part, of course, because doing so increased his chances of actually learning something. But respected shaykhs imparted to their pupils more than mere knowledge; they also imparted authority, an authority over texts and over a body of learning.

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⁵ Nasir al-Din Tūsī, Rūğāt fi faṣā’il al-ʿilm wa-ādīd al-mustawallīn, Dīr al-Kutub al-Miṣṣīyya Ms. 19113b, fol. 17r; Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Bahṣāṣ al-‘Uthmānī, Ḫidr al-ta’rīf bi-hiṣb il-faṣā’il il-ʿilm al-sharīf, Princeton University Library, Yathrib Ms. 4260, fol. 72r.
⁶ Tūsī, Rūğāt, fol. 17r.
that was intensely personal, and that could be transmitted only through some form of direct personal contact. The world of traditional Muslim learning retained the notion, developed in the early Islamic period, that personal instruction with a shaykh, and in particular the oral transmission of a text, was superior to private study. Even the various words used to describe the process of education and transmission reflect this bias. Much of the content of Muslim learning was encapsulated in written texts—large compendia or small collections of hadith, scholarly treatises, textbooks, and abridgments. A student did not, however, simply read a book to himself, and in this way acquire knowledge. The operative verbs stress the personal and oral nature of study and instruction. An author published his book not so much through writing and transcription as through dictation (imāl), which he might give either from a written copy or from memory. By the same token, a pupil would not simply read a text silently to himself; rather, he "heard from" (sāmi'a min) some individual a particular text, that is, he heard the text read or recited from memory by its author, or by one who had himself previously studied the work with another shaykh. Alternatively he might himself "read to" (qara'a 'ал) a teacher, out loud, his own transcription of the text. The preference for personal instruction as opposed to private reading and study, and the belief that only oral transmission is truly legitimate, lies deeply embedded in the Islamic educational system. In places where traditional education has survived into the modern world, this bias has survived even the introduction of printed texts.

To be sure, written texts played an important role in education, and the immense number of manuscripts that survive from, say, the fifteenth century, testify to the important role of the book in a highly literate academic world that remained vibrant throughout the Middle Ages. Ibn Jamā'ā found it necessary to repurpose students who used their books as pillows, as fans, or to squash bedbugs, but most viewed them as an indispensable intellectual resource. Schools and mosques in Mamlik Cairo frequently housed large collections of books available for use by the institution's teachers and students, or by visiting scholars. These libraries


plies a generally conservative attitude toward knowledge and learning, an attitude that found expression in the aphorism, "a good teacher hands on what he has been taught, neither more nor less."14

Despite such precautions, the overall attitude toward writing and the physical, written book as a means of transmitting knowledge remained ambivalent. Private reading and note-taking did not in any way obviate the student’s obligation to check his reading of a text against that of his shaykh. True knowledge derives only from a learned person, insisted Ibn Jamā’a, and not from books; those who attempted to rest their education only on the written word were guilty of “one of the most scandalous of acts.”15 Learning requires that one “read with a shaykh [who is] a guide to the correct path, upright, and sincere, and not to proceed independently, relying on one’s self and one’s intelligence.”16 The same, of course, had to be strictly applied to the teachers one chose.

One should not study with another who himself studied only from books, without having read (them) to a learned shaykh. Taking knowledge from books [alone] leads to spelling errors [taṣlīf] and mistakes [ghalāb] and mispronunciation [tasāfīr]. Whoever does not take his learning [‘ilm] from the mouths of men is like he who learns courage without ever facing battle.17

Ibn Jamā’a, who wrote an extended treatise as a guide to education, warned students not to seek their instruction from those “who have studied the hidden meaning of pages [ḥaft al-nuṣūṣ] but who are not known to keep the company [ṣubḥ] of well-versed shaykhs.”18 Ibn Khaldūn reported that some overly eager students felt impelled to study the jurisprudence of the Zahirīs, a school of law (mādhab) that had become “extinct” before he wrote in the late fourteenth century, and whose doctrines survived “only in books, which have eternal life.” By doing so, however, the great historian suggested that they exposed themselves to the charge of illicit innovation, “as they accept knowledge from books for which no key is provided by scholars.”19 When the Sufis of Andalusia became embroiled in a dispute in the fourteenth century over whether or not one could rely solely on books as guides to a proper and complete mystical experience, to the exclusion of Sufi spiritual masters, it was

14 Tritton, Materiales, 50, cf. 66.
15 Muḥammad ibn Khālid ibn Minḥāj, Taṣkīkārat al-sālihīn, 123.
16 According to Zakartiy al-Anṣārī, in his short treatise al-La’la’ al-nasīf fi rūm al-nuṣūs wa-l-tāli‘ Tim (Cairo, s. h. 1319), 6.
17 Al-Uqba, Iṣbah, fol. 6r. For taṣlīf, the manuscript has taṣlīl; a marginal gloss comments, certainly correctly, “perhaps it should be taṣlīf.” The text also has ghalāb, courtesies, for which I have preferred to read ghulāq.
18 Ibn Jamā’a, Taṣkīkārat al-sālihīn, 87.
19 Ibn Khaldūn, Muqaddimah, 3:5-6.

pointedly recognized by some that they were not questioning the necessity of having a teaching master.24

Of course, a student could not study at all times under the direct supervision of a shaykh, but certain features of traditional Islamic instruction and study techniques implied the continued presence of the teacher’s authority. After classes, and after the departure of their teachers, students were encouraged to study together, to drill each other in their lessons (mudāhara), and, when alone, an individual student should “drill himself.”25 But even the act of reading to oneself was not usually a silent one, consisting rather of audibly pronouncing the words of a text. A student should raise his voice in his studies, according to a treatise entitled “The Encouragement to the Searc for Knowledge,” so that he hears himself read, for “what the ear hears becomes firmly established in the heart,” and also because reading out loud keeps the student more attentive.26 Reading or studying was sometimes described as being accompanied by a “rumbling” or “buzzing” (hamham).27

A comparative experience may suggest the significance of this. During the manuscript age, silent reading was the exception rather than the rule in Europe as well. There, at least in the early Middle Ages, because of manuscript traditions in which words were routinely put together, comprehension of the written word required the actual pronunciation of the words of the text. The spread of silent reading had to await certain developments in the art of writing—in particular the use of a cursive script, the clear separation of words in texts, and the use of punctuation. Once established, however, silent, and therefore private reading may have contributed to the development and diffusion of heretical and heterodox teachings.28 Despite its lack of written vowels, certain peculiarities of the Arabic scriptography—such as the initial, medial, and final forms for each letter—meant that students could read silently and privately, that the

26 Abū Zayd al-Būyaini, al-Aslāḥ, 4:106. See also al-Fardhāwī, Ḥadīth al-Bayyinah, 1:125-126. On al-Aslāḥ, see also 1:125-126. Al-Aslāḥ here used the word dare, which normally means “class,” but from the context, as well as from passages elsewhere in his text, it is clear that the term signified “studies,” or even “reading,” rather than a formal class.
The science of traditions placed special emphasis on memory, and the most proficient traditionalists were known as "those who have memorized traditions" (baffész, sing. baffész), but the other religious subjects relied upon memory as well. Biographical dictionaries from the Mamlik as well as earlier periods are replete with entries extolling the praises of scholars with prodigious feats of memorization to their credit. Some of these men were blessed with near-photographic memories, such as the jurist and professor of Māliki law Ibn Uktir Bahrān (d. 1440), who astounded his peers with his ability to memorize an entire page of text after only two or three readings. More often, however, students and scholars memorized their texts through a rigorous training that stressed the role of memory and through sheer force of will; learning by heart four or five hundred manuscript lines per day was considered a noteworthy achievement.

To assist the faint of heart, treatises on education listed those things which aided the memory (including honey, the use of toothpicks, and eating twenty-one raisins per day) as well as foods (such as coriander, eggplant, and bitter apples) that made one forgetful. The emphasis on memorization was not unique to Islamic education, but linked it to broader patterns of traditional and religious instruction in Near Eastern societies. The transmission of Jewish learning, for example, also relied heavily on memory, and this pedagogical similarity did not escape the notice of contemporaries. The fifteenth-century Muslim historian al-Maqriḍi, shortly before his own death, commemorated the passing in 1441 of a Jewish physician and scholar and, in language similar to that used to describe Muslims, mourned the fact that "he left not his equal in memorizing the Torah and the books of the Prophets among the Jews of Egypt." Nor did memorization play a role only in religious and legal subjects: the scribes of Ibn Ṭullûn hired a professor of medicine who, like his master, taught a hark of the traditional sciences, required his students "to memorize what he selected from among [the books of medicine]." These common patterns ran deep, and where traditional Islamic education has survived in the modern world, memorization of the Quran and other texts remains one if its central features.

But memorization, too, like reading, was an interactive process that drew the student firmly under the authority of his shaykh. It involved, in the first place, a habit of repetition to ensure that that which was memorized was retained. The student should repeat each day that which he

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[31] Tist, Rûda, fol. 22v–23r; al-ʿAskari, al-Ḥarīb, fol. 10v.
[34] Eickelman, "Art of Memory," 490.
had learned on previous days, five times if necessary, gradually reducing the number of repetitions until the text was fixed firmly in his mind. Silently reviewing his lessons would not suffice, however; it was "essential not to become accustomed to repeating silently since it is necessary that learning and repetition be carried on with vigor and zeal." And so memorizing, like reading, became a noisy, oral project in which the student repeated his lessons aloud, and thereby submitted his studies to the supervision of his teacher. He should periodically repeat the texts that he has memorized to his shaykh for correction or approval, and the shaykh should himself require his students to repeat the texts in his presence. Academic authorities agreed that attempting to memorize a text on one’s own was, like unsupervised reading, a dangerous and scandalous act.

The generally conservative Muslim attitude toward knowledge and learning, which could only have been reinforced by the emphasis on memory, should in no way be taken as an indication that scholarship was sterile and static. Commentators agreed that memorization alone was insufficient: to put his learning to use, a student must understand as well as memorize. "Memorizing two words is better than hearing two pages, but understanding two words is better than memorizing two pages"—an aphorism perhaps more elegant in Arabic, but that even in translation powerfully conveys a point. Serious educators maintained a distinction between ṭaqlīd, the capacity simply to memorize and transmit, and Ṱaql, the ability to use critically the materials memorized and apply them to particular academic and legal problems. Muslim scholars produced vigorous critiques of both ancient and contemporary writers, and academic exchange, at least at the higher levels of the study of jurisprudence, often revolved around the organized disputation (munāṣṣara, jujud) of controversial questions. This distinction between the means by which hadith and the basic texts of law were transmitted and the more rigorous and dialectical instruction at the advanced stages of jurisprudence is an important one, and should be borne in mind; it will have consequences for the participation of certain groups, such as women, in the transmission of religious knowledge. But for our present purposes, the important point is that here, too, in simple reading and memorization, the supervisory role of a shaykh was paramount. In a famous passage in which he likened scientific learning to a "craft" (qiyādah), Ibn Khaldūn acknowledged the importance of engaging actively in discussion and disputation, rather than relying solely on memory. But, as in any craft, such learning required instruction, and therefore also "a tradition (sanad) of famous teachers." Since individual teachers played the decisive role in the shaping of a student’s academic identity, the transmission of knowledge was regulated, not by any formal system of institutional degrees, but by the license (ijaza) issued by a particular shaykh to a particular student. The ijaza may have originated as a device for securing the accurate transmission of hadith, but quickly became the standard means by which all Muslim learning was passed on, from teacher to pupil, and from one generation to another. Ultimately, the ijaza took many forms, including that of a general permission which might be granted by a teacher to individual students of advanced standing to teach jurisprudence (tadris) or issue legal opinions (ijfa). For most individuals, however, Islamic education continued to focus on particular books or texts and their simple transmission. Consequently, in its most common form, the ijaza certified that a student had studied a particular book or collection of traditions with his teacher: the student had heard the teacher dictate the work and had transcribed what he had heard, or he had himself read his transcription to the teacher, who corrected any mistakes in the student’s recitation and copy.

The ijaza acted in turn as a license to its recipient to transmit the text, on the authority of his teacher, his teacher’s teachers, and all those in a chain of authority (sanad, isnad) reaching back to the author of the book or, in the case of hadith, to the Prophet himself or his Companions.

To be sure, the ijaza system grew subject to abuse over the course of the Middle Ages. The chains of authority on which an ijaza’s value depended might contain fictive transmissions; chronological gaps between the death of one transmitter and the birth of the next, or transmitters who, because of their youth or geographical distance, could not possibly

45 For an excellent discussion of the degeneration of the ijaza, see Goldziher, Muslim Studies, 2:175–79.
have received a genuine personal authorization from the shaykh who formed the proceeding link in the chain. Such abuses stretched back to the earliest Islamic periods, when the transmission of hadith was in its early, formative stages. Distinguishing genuine from spurious chains of authority formed one of the principal tasks for those who studied hadith, and an elaborate science to secure the authenticity of transmissions developed; one of its lasting contributions to Muslim civilization was the genre of the "biographical dictionary," which allows us to reconstruct in such fine detail the world of learning in the Middle Ages. But with the general reliance on ijtāz to certify the transmission of all texts in virtually all fields of Muslim intellectual endeavor, the system grew subject to a diminished discipline and rigor. Ijtāz were issued that were not so much disingenuous as they were diluted, deprived of meaning. A shaykh might issue a blanket ijtāz for every book or subject that he himself was authorized to transmit. He might authorize an ijtāz for a student whom he had encountered only briefly, or who had never actually heard his dictation; ijtāz might be issued simply on the basis of a written request and the pupil's reputation or (that of his family) for scholarship. Such was the inflation of ijtāz that even leading scholars of the Mamluk period, such as Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī, saw little shame in reporting having received ijtāz from transmitters whom they had not met, or with whom they had had only the most fleeting contact.

Moreover, it became routine for scholars to bring their children with them to sessions in which a collection of hadith or some other book was being recited, and for the presiding shaykh to issue ijtāz to the children as well. It was not at all unusual for men or women to have received ijtāz at ages as young as four, three, or even two years. A man born at the end of the fourteenth century received an ijtāz "in the year of his birth."66 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī, the prominent and controversial scholar who was born in 1445, recorded that "I have no doubt that I have an ijtāz from Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī, who died in 1449," since my father often attended his teaching circles.67 Especially in the transmission of hadith, ijtāz issued to very young boys and girls became quite valuable in the pupils' later lives for two interrelated reasons. In the first place, an ijtāz held by a young child from an elderly person would, ceteris paribus, rely upon an ijtāz with fewer names than one received from a younger


67 Scholarship on these muʾjamas is vast but scattered; the subject awaits more systematic study. The most important work is that of Georges Vajda, many of whose articles were gathered together in La transmission orale en Islam (VIF, XVIIIe siècles), ed. Nicole Cottart (London, 1983). Al-Sakhāwī, in his Āthār al-khawāṣṣ li-maṣāḥeh abī al-ṭarīqātī (Damascus, A.H. 1349), 158–19, gave a list of muʾjamas and mashāḥehs, many of which date from the Mamluk period; the passage is translated in Franz Rosenbach, A History of Muslim Historiography (Leiden, 1962), 378–79. Several muʾjamas were examined during the course of this present research, including Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī’s Maṣāḥeh al-muʿṣassas 11-l-muʿjam al-mufāḍāt, organized by the names of his shaykhīs, as was the usual custom, and his Maṣāḥeh al-mufāḍāt, Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, "Masūlah" Ms. 92, which is organized around the books that he studied; that of ʿAlī al-Dīn al-Waḥībī and al-Ṣakhāwī’s Muṣāḥahat al-Sakhāwī, Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, Ahmad Taymīrī Fāhā Collection, "Tārikh" Ms. 1446 [= Māhād Iḥṣāʾ al-Maḥāhidītī al-Arābiyyah, "Tārikh" Ms. 490]; that of Muhammad b. Abd Bākī Ibn Zaynīq, B. M. Or. 9792; and several others published or summarized by Vajda or his student Jacqueline Soubat. For a more complete bibliogra-
what in form and in the amount of detail they record about an individual’s education, but organized as they are around the names and qualities of particular teachers, they all implicitly stress the importance of the personal element in the transmission of Islamic knowledge.

Individual teachers thus transmitted to their students less an abstract body of knowledge embodied in particular texts than a personal authority over those texts, an authority that in the case of promising students was enhanced by the long and close personal relationship indicated by the Arabic word *ṣuḥba*. The concept of *ṣuḥba* lay at the core of Islamic higher education. The word means “companionship,” although often the word “discipleship,” with its implication of an authoritative relationship, is probably a better translation. The term described a pattern of personal relationship that permeated medieval Near Eastern society. It described the relationship between a prominent transmitter of the Prophetic traditions and his Mamhk patron, an avid student who employed his scholarly friend as a reader of hadiths. The model was one of close friendship, but could also indicate more precisely the relationship of master and disciple, as in the case of a young trader who performed commercial services for an older merchant who had previously initiated him into the practices of the business world.

In the context of education, *ṣuḥba* implied an extremely close personal and intellectual relationship between teacher and student, one fostered over the course of many years. Applied principally in the fields of hadith and jurisprudence, *ṣuḥba* and its synonyms (especially *mulāzama*) could in fact characterize a master-disciple relationship in any subject of instruction as well as in initiation to Sufi mysticism. But it is especially in its effect on the relationship between teacher and student that the concept interests us. In the Mamhk period, *ṣuḥba* continued to be the model for Islamic education, so that students were urged not to move “from one shaykh to another before mastering what was begun with the first, for to do so would be to tear down that which had been built up.” Not all students were counted among the disciples (*ṣuḥabā, sing. *ṣuḥab*) of a teacher, only those who devoted themselves to intensive study under him.

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Footnotes:

1. “Fournier” and “Lécluse.”
2. particularly *mulāzama*.
7. *Al-Mâlûki, “Ṣuḥba,”* 208–10. The verbs corresponding to the nouns *ṣuḥba* and *mulâzama* were: *ṣuḥba* and especially *ṣuḥab*, and *mulâzma* and *mulâzamah,* another used not infrequently was *itâba*’s.* Mâlûkî, *“ṣuḥba,”* 290, and idem, *Collège*, 129–29.
11. Al-Sakhâwî, *al-Dawâ*, 2:57, 4:172. For other examples of students who were the disciple of more than one teacher, see ibid., 1:151–52; 2:11, 81, 106, 3:115, 285; 4:190, 280, 282, 331. In such of these cases the operative verb used is that apparently preferred by Al-Sakhâwî, *Ibâ‘ al-Mawâni*.
possession of a certain authority that he could, through various devices, transmit to his students. As we shall see, this had practical consequences for the society of the learned elite in the Mamluk period.

The very language and images of those Muslim scholars who wrote self-consciously about education reflect patterns of relationship built on the absolute authority of the teacher. Ibn Jam‘a, in his treatise on education, employed a metaphor drawn from the world of medicine to describe the student-teacher relationship. A student, he wrote, should respect and obey his shaykh in all matters, "as the patient [obeys] the skillful doctor." More common, however, was the metaphor of a father and child.

Every student and teacher should show respect for the other, especially the former [i.e., the student especially should be respectful], because his teacher is like the father, or even greater, since his father brought him into the world of perdition, [while] his teacher leads him to the world of eternal life.

A shaykh should treat his students gently, since, in their devotion to him in the pursuit of knowledge, they are "like his children." Teachers certainly saw their obligations to their closest students in parental terms. Some went as far as to provide their students with food and sweets on special occasions, or even to distribute to them their own salaries. Of course, the almost filial devotion expected from students went even deeper. In all respects a student was expected to behave toward his shaykh as a dutiful son to his father. His responsibilities extended to physically shielding his shaykh from pressing crowds of people; approaching him only with clean clothing, clipped nails, and trimmed hair, and without unpleasant bodily odors; caring for his teacher’s children and descendents, and, as a virtual member of his extended family, visiting the dead shaykh’s tomb. Insubordination to a teacher, as to a father, drew especial reprobation, and if a student was rude to his shaykh, it was incumbent on his classmates to come quickly to the shaykh’s defense, and to censor their ungrateful colleague.

By the same token, a shaykh possessed a broad license to supervise his students’ lives with the firmness but also the sensitivity of a concerned parent. He was responsible not only for their intellectual growth, but for their moral behavior as well. Ibn Jam‘a’s treatise Tadhkira‘t al-sāmi‘, on this as on all subjects, displays an awareness of psychological realities that suggests that its author drew on his own extensive classroom experience, and which therefore confirms that the treatise accurately reflects actual classroom situations of the Mamluk period. It was, he wrote, the teacher’s duty to supervise the circumstances of his students in their behavior and direction and morals. If he uncovered an infraction, the shaykh should note and condemn the student’s action in his presence, but, at least at first, without singling him out before his peers. If the misbehavior continued increasingly harsh steps were to be taken, culminating with the refractory student’s expulsion from the class, especially if the shaykh feared the young man’s influence on his fellow students. A teacher’s responsibilities toward his students were of course especially important in schools in which many students were actually housed. Ibn Jam‘a made it clear that the professor of a madrassa had a duty to set an example by his behavior to those who lived in the school, for example by diligently performing his prayers.

The authoritative character of educational relationships was evident in the very form of classroom arrangements. In describing the prescribed behavior of students in class, Ibn Jam‘a made it clear that those who are to sit nearest the shaykh are those who are worthiest by virtue of their age, learning, or righteousness. But a significant physical, and immense psychological gap separated the teacher from even his most advanced students. According to a twelfth-century treatise on education that circulated widely in the Mamluk period, "it further behooves the student not to sit near the teacher during the lecture except under necessity, rather it is vital that the pupils sit in a semi-circle at a certain distance from the teacher, for indeed this is more appropriate to the respect due [the teacher]." The successful transmission of knowledge required the maintenance of a proper distance between the teacher and his pupils, and concerns for this prompted taboos that restricted the slightest physical contact. Respect for the teacher, according to Ibn Jam‘a, required that a student carefully refrain from touching his shaykh’s body, garment, or even the cushion on which he sat, with any part of his own body or clothing.

Ibn al-Hājj, in his long fourteenth-century treatise describing con-
38 CHAPTER TWO temporary practices of which he disapproved, condemned those scholars who, when delivering their lectures, sat on a raised dais or platform. Such behavior, he thought, smacked of conceit and an inappropriate sense of self-importance (taraffu'). But in fact the act of teaching from an elevated position must not have been unusual, or else Ibn al-Hajj would hardly have bothered to fulminate against it. The practice only reinforced an authority and awareness of superiority already implicit in the teacher-student relationship.

The burdens of such a relationship could at times prove inconvenient or embarrassing to the student. For example, the authority and importance of the teacher also justified his "glorification and veneration" by those who sought instruction from him, effected by such practices as kissing the shaykh's hand. Certain humiliations had to be borne by the student; in particular, flattering one's teachers was inevitable. "Flattery [al-tanalluq] is blameworthy except in the quest for knowledge," wrote al-Zarki, author of a treatise on education widely read and copied in the Middle Ages. "In order to learn from them, flattery of one's professor and associates is inevitable." Students might find the flattering of their teachers humiliating, but this and much more had to be borne in the pursuit of the greater goal, knowledge and the license to transmit it. Like other writers of educational treatises, Ibn Jam'i never ceased to counsel patience. A student must be patient in quarrels with his shaykh, or when the shaykh is of a bad disposition (si' khalaj), and he must always give his shaykh's actions the best possible interpretation, for that "is most beneficial for the student in this world and the next." The student, he wrote, should not tire of long companionship (si'ba) with his professor, for he [i.e., the shaykh] is like a date palm, under which you wait for something to drop on you.

The problem was that it might take some time for the dates to fall. It is clear from Ibn Jam'i's repeated advice to the students of incompetency, slovenly written, or forgetful shaykhs that medieval Islamic educational models and patterns, while producing the authoritative relationship I have been describing, did not guarantee quality of instruction. If the shaykh began to recite something the student had already memorized, the student should listen attentively, and try to convey his great joy at hearing the recitation, as if for the first time. If asked if he has memorized the text, the student should not say simply "yes," which would imply he no longer needed his teacher's instruction on the point, nor should he say "no," for that would be untrue; he should instead respond by saying "I prefer to hear it from the shaykh," or "[I memorized it] long ago," or "from you it is more correct," or with some such delicate phrase extricate the shaykh from potential embarrassment. Again, if the shaykh made an error, the student should not point it out, but should gently give him an opportunity to correct the mistake, for example by repeating the error himself in the shaykh's presence; if the teacher persisted in his error, the confused student should simply take the question to another shaykh.

Within this general framework, actual patterns of classroom authority were complicated by a number of factors. In the first place, of course, some "students" might in fact be individuals of comparatively advanced age. A shaykh who transmitted a particular text through an especially reputable chain of authorities might find others of his own age, or even older, attending his recitations and lectures in order to receive an ijaza from him, even for a work they had already studied with another scholar. We shall later encounter an individual who, although himself over the age of forty, nonetheless was installed as a student of hadith in one of Cairo's leading schools. In addition, under some circumstances teaching assistants compensated for but also reinforced the psychological gap between instructor and instructed. The professor, ideally, was to do more than recite a text, or listen to and correct his students' recitations. He should also make himself available at an appointed hour every day and remain for a time after class, to listen to the students as they studied their lessons, correct their mistakes, and answer their questions. But it seems that much of his responsibilities in that regard in fact devolved upon advanced students and young teachers, scholars whose careers had not yet advanced to the point where they could teach authoritatively on their own, and who therefore were not offered valuable professorships and whose reputations would not attract a sizeable body of students.

These "teaching assistants" were accorded a variety of titles: mustanlis, muftid, and mu'ad. The mustanli, usually an advanced and trusted student of a shaykh, was primarily associated with the transmission of the Prophetic traditions. In large circles in which hadith were recited, he repeated in a loud voice what the professor himself had dictated, and...
elicited his words to the listeners.28 A previous scholar noted that by the fifteenth century, the term, although still in use, was not common.29 In fact, the biographical dictionaries of the period rarely employ the word, although the infrequency of its appearance may reflect only the writers’ concern with other, more prominent aspects of students and hadith transmitters’ careers.

Far more common in the sources at our disposal were the terms muṭid (and its verbal noun, ʿifada, “to benefit” or “to be of use,” and by extension “to inform”) and especially muṭid (and ʿiḍa, “to repeat”), terms similar in meaning to those describing teaching assistants in the medieval Jewish academies of the Near East.30 In the Mamluk period at least, the sources suggest no clear distinction of function and responsibility between the muṭid (“one who benefits”) and the muṭid (literally, “repetitor”). Both terms indicate teaching assistants who were deeply involved in repeating the professor’s lesson, listening to the students repeat it from memory, and explaining obscure parts of the lesson to them. It is true that Tāj al-Dīn al-Suhḥī, himself an experienced educator, discussed muṭid and muṭifid separately in his treatise Muṭid al-nām wa-muṭd al-niqm (The Repetitor of Blessings and the Destroyer of Misfortunes), a work devoted to defining the proper behavior of those employed in a variety of academic, religious, bureaucratic, and economic tasks. Regarding the muṭid, al-Suhḥī wrote: “His responsibilities go beyond listening to the lesson, and include explaining [it] to some of the students, being of use to them, and doing what the term ʿiḍa requires”—that is, repeating and explaining the lessons dictated by the professor until the students under his charge had mastered them. By contrast, al-Suhḥī outlined the muṭid’s duties as “to employ what he derives from the lesson as a benefit [faḍlatan, i.e., to others]” from study beyond that of most students.”31 But it is clear from the usual language in the biographical dictionaries that to be a muṭid—ʿifada ‘l-talaḥa—was, like the muṭid, to participate actively in the transmission of knowledge to students.

The practical distinction between the terms muṭid and muṭifid arose in

28 On the role of the mustaʿmīn, see al-Suyūṭī, Taḥrīr al-ḥabīl, 2:138-39; Pedersen, Arabic Book, 26; Tritton, Materials, 35-37; Makdisi, Colleges, 213-14; al-Sam’ānī, al-ʿindī, esp. 84-108.

29 Tritton, Materials, 37.

30 On the muṭid and muṭifid, see Tāj al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Wahḥāb al-Suhḥī, Muṭid al-nām wa-muṭd al-niqm, ed. David Myrman (London, 1990), 154-55; Ibrāhīm, Fadḥirārat al-nāmis, 150, 160, 201; Makdisi, Colleges, 163-96. Similarly, teachers of the lowest grade in Jewish schools were called tasmūnaṭ, “repetitors.” Their duties, too, were to help young students memorize their lessons, since the oral pronunciation of Hebrew texts was also critical to their accurate transmission. Coitinos, Mediterranean Society, 2:196-200.

31 Al-Suhḥī, Muṭid al-nām, 154-55.

relation to their connection to the various institutions of education. The ʿiḍa was usually a paid position, a wāzīfa, for which the endowments of particular schools made provisions, and the biographical dictionaries frequently refer to it as such. By contrast, the sources comment simply that a muṭid “benefited students,” using a transitive form of the verb (ʿifada ‘l-talaḥa). If he did so, however, the muṭid must have functioned “informally,” as a private assistant to a professor. The surviving deeds of endowment suggest that no institution in the Mamluk period ever supported an endowed position called ʿiḍa. Pointedly, al-Suhḥī described the ʿiḍa as a wāzīfa, but only referred to the “compensation” that a muṭid might receive.32

A number of Cairene schools of the Mamluk period made specific provisions for the appointment of muḍid, provisions that shed some light on the muṭid’s responsibilities in the transmission of knowledge to students.33 At the mosque of Sūdīn min Ṣadār, for example, the muḍid were to sit with the students either before or after the professor’s lectures in order to “explain to [the students] what they had memorized from their books and to elucidate what was obscure to them from [the teachings of] their rite.”34 At the madrasa of ʿArqūmī, the muḍid apparently assumed even more responsibilities for the actual instruction, not surprisingly, since that madrasa’s professor faced at least sixty students of Ḥanafī jurisprudence, an exceptionally high ratio. During the class in that institution, each of three muḍid was to read a “lesson” (dars) from a book chosen by the professor. The latter was then to provide the students with answers to any questions they might have, but the responsibility for more intimate intellectual contact was left to the muḍid; each was to come to the mālis before the professor, and to remain after his departure, in order to help students with their problems or questions.35

32 Al-Suhḥī, Muṭid al-nām, 155.

33 A number also did not. Even leaving aside those “madrasas” such as al-Chawwar’s and al-Sayf Baybars’ that, as noted in the previous chapter, did not make provision for stipends for either students or teachers, several large schools such as the mosque of al-Muṣayyid Shaykh and the madrasa of Barsiby did not have provisions in their deeds of endowment for the appointment of muḍid. See Wahgīyat al-Muṣayyid Shaykh, Wawāṭ al-Muṣayyid o.s. No. 938; Wahgīyat al-ʿAshraf Barsiby, Dār al-Wathāʾiq No. 173. From one might conclude that the post of the ʿiḍa did not exist in those institutions. I think, however, it is more likely that in the fluid world of Islamic education during this period, the function of the ʿiḍa were undertaken by advanced students, possibly called muṭifid, or others whose appointments were less formal and who served more directly at the convenience of the professor.

34 Wahgīyat Sūdīn min Ṣadār, Dār al-Wathāʾiq No. 58.

These teaching assistants occupied a stage in an individual's academic career intermediary between that of student and teacher; not surprisingly, therefore, many mu‘āids were themselves perfectly competent scholars. Ahmad Ibn Ismā‘il al-Hanafi (d. 1489), for example, at some point in his career held the assistantship in Hanafi law at the large congregational mosque of Ibn Tulún. Ibn Ismā‘il was an exemplary, if not outstanding scholar of his time. He studied with a number of prominent ulama of the late Mamluk period, including ‘Alam al-Dīn al-Buḫqīnī, al-A‘mīn al-Aṣqarī, the historian al-Sakhāwī, and others, taught informally or as substitute for the professors in various institutions, and held in his own right several teaching posts. From all appearances, his appointment at Ibn Tulún represented simply a normal early step in the career of a successful late medieval scholar. Other prominent scholars who were mu‘āids at early stages in their careers included ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Salām al-Baghdādī (d. 1455), who assisted in Hanafi jurisprudence at the mosque of Ibn Tūlūn and the Jāmā‘īyya madrasa, and the famous judge and jurist Sirāj al-Dīn al-Buḫqīnī (d. 1403), who was mu‘āid at the Khurāshīyya madrasa before becoming its professor of Shāfi‘ī jurisprudence. Teaching assistants, by whatever term they were described, thus functioned as intermediaries between the shaykh on the one hand and his pupils and any others who might attend his classes on the other. Nonetheless, the authority that was passed was that of the shaykh himself. It was upon this authority, and the personal relationships established between individual teachers and particular students, rather than any formal affiliation to an institution, that Islamic education rested. An education was judged primarily by the number and character of the links that a student forged with prominent transmitters of the Islamic sciences. Those relationships were close and intense, at least in the case of advanced and promising students, even though their authoritative nature could produce a significant psychological barrier between the pupil and his teacher. But the ties were persistent, and followed a student beyond the close of his formal education. Indeed, they shaped not only the character of instruction and pedagogy, but also the course of a student’s later academic career, an issue that we shall address in a later chapter.

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The overwhelming preference for oral transmission, and the weight of personal connections in evaluating an individual’s academic training, should suggest to us the need to look beyond the formal outlines of particular institutions of learning—one scholar even gave his lessons while walking with his students up and down the main street of Cairo. The social consequences of this aspect of Islamic culture were immense. We shall see in later chapters how the prejudices of the system—for example, the value accorded to an ijtihād issued by an elderly man to a young pupil, and the personal authority such an act conveyed—facilitated the participation of disparate segments of the Muslim population in the transmission of Islamic learning. The social horizons of education in late medieval Cairo were very broad indeed, and were limited not by institutional structure, but by the informal system of which the various schools were a part. Despite this caveat, however, it is also true that many teachers in late medieval Cairo taught, and most students studied, in one or more of the city’s many institutions of learning, and it is to those schools that we now turn our attention.
III

INSTITUTIONS

THE PERSONAL and informal system described in the previous chapter characterized Islamic education from its inception through the end of the Middle Ages, and in fact survived intact into the twentieth century. Built upon the personal authority of the shaykh, channeled through relationships established between students and teachers, certified by the ijaza, and regulated by the contacts and networks that shaped the educated elite into a coherent social group, the transmission of religious knowledge never came to rely on an institutional structure or a formal system of degrees. Its very informality, as we shall see, guaranteed its vigor, and imparted a measure of openness missing from Western institutions of higher learning until a comparatively recent period.

By the Mamluk period, however, much education transpired in the context of particular institutions established and endowed for the pious purpose of aiding the transmission of Muslim learning. This marked a profound change, for instruction in the earlier Islamic centuries, although occasionally supported on an ad hoc basis by wealthy individuals and important personages in the state, had generally relied upon the independent means, or voluntary poverty, of those committed to learning and teaching. By contrast, Cairo in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was a city architecturally dominated by structures—madrasas, mosques, and Sufi convents—designed and constructed to provide shelter and accommodations for students and teachers and a forum for their classes. In many cases blessed with considerable endowments, they dispensed to the educated classes and to other sectors of the urban community, cash stipends and payments in kind to support the work of passing on the vast corpus of traditional learning from one generation to the next.

The spread of such institutions never resulted in any formalization of the educational process. There is little suggestion in the sources that particular schools ever acquired any lasting identity or mission within the academic sphere distinct from that of the individuals who taught within them: Islamic law allowed them no corporate identity; no method of granting institutional degrees was established; the whole system remained, as it were, thoroughly nonsystematic. The phenomenon of an extensive network of schools—buildings and endowments—became, however, a constant and significant presence in the life of the academic community and profoundly affected the social history of the learned elite of Mamluk Cairo. To give an example: the availability of stipends in particular schools might lead to competition, sometimes fierce, between prospective students and teachers for succession to a lucrative post. When, in 1365–66, the Mamluk amir Yalbugha al-Umari endowed a new course for Hanafis in the mosque of Ibn Ṭulun in Cairo, a number of Shafis students switched allegiance to the Hanafi rite, apparently to take advantage of the liberal stipends dispensed by Yalbugha’s endowment. For a scholar such as the famous judge and traditionist Ibn Hajir al-Asqalani (d. 1449), to whose example we shall have frequent occasion to return, endowed professorships—he held well over a dozen at one point or another during his career—came to represent a source of income taken largely for granted. They also introduced an element of patronage into the professional relationship between teachers and their brighter students, a subject we shall examine in detail in the following chapter.

The Variety of Institutional Types

Late medieval Cairo was, as much as anything else, a city of schools. Writing in the early fifteenth century, the historian al-Maqrizi, in his descriptive treatise on Cairo, mentioned seventy-three madrasas that were then or had at one time since the late twelfth century been in operation. Not all were still open when he wrote. The madrasa of Sultan al-Ashraf Sha’inan, for example, built on the spot just below the Citadel where the ruins of the Mshayyil hospital stand to this day, had been razed to the ground because it had so often been used by rebellious Mamluks as a staging ground for attacks upon the Citadel, the seat of government. Moreover, al-Maqrizi’s list is hardly exhaustive. Clearly others were built after al-Maqrizi completed his Kitab, including some of the more important madrasas of the Mamluk period, such as that of Sultan al-Ghawri in the central section of medieval Cairo to which it lent its name. He seems also to have neglected to mention several madrasas, such as that of his rival, the historian, judge, and market inspector Badr al-Din al-Ayni, that were in operation in his day. The lacunae in al-

1 Taqī, Tawāqit al-mamlūkīyya, 546, note 106; Taqī, Tawāqit al-mamlūkīyya, 246.
3 Oddly, al-Maqrizi apparently also excluded from his list a number of madrasas mentioned in the earlier work of his teacher, the historian Ibn Durayd, al-Insāq li-manṣūb 8al-al-anwār, 4:16, 18, 94, 95, 99. Al-Ṭa‘āwanī b. ‘Umar Ibn Habib, too, in his history of the Qalawunid dynasty, although primarily concerned with events in Syria, mentioned at least two madrasas founded in Cairo in the first half of the Mamluk period that seem to have escaped al-Maqrizi’s notice: see Ta‘alāwī, al-nahlī b. ‘asim aš-šafrī mamlūk wa-bahth
Maqārit's work, however, present only the initial obstacle to an attempt to outline the institutional framework of higher education in late medieval Cairo. As we will see, even those terms by which the chroniclers, scholars, and scribes of Manhāk Cairo described the schools in which they studied and taught reflect an ambiguity about the precise characteristics of those schools, an ambiguity that will, however, help us to understand the breadth and diversity of the underlying system of education.

The Egyptian capital's first institution specifically called a madrasa had been founded in al-Fustāt by Salāḥ in 1170. Under the Ayyūbīd regime, construction of madrasas proceeded apace. By the middle of the thirteenth century—the first years, that is, of the Mamluk sultanate—Cairo and the neighboring city of al-Fustāt between them boasted at least thirty-two institutions known as madrasas, established principally for instruction in jurisprudence and its ancillary sciences, especially hadith and exegesis.4 By the early years of the fifteenth century, as we have seen, that number had increased to more than seventy, and dozens more were established over the last century of Mamluk rule. Well over a hundred institutions devoted largely or exclusively to the inculcation of the religious and legal sciences opened their doors in Cairo at one point or another during the Mamluk period. The precise number functioning at any one time is probably impossible to fix. In part this results from oblique references in the sources to schools of which little or nothing is known.5 More importantly, however, since education remained grounded in the personalities of individual teachers, madrasas conceived in a broader, functional sense could exist wherever a professor taught—in a mosque or congregational mosque, a khānqāh (sufi convent), a private house, or in those institutions specifically labeled madrasas. One hundred schools were simply preexisting mosques or private houses for which a wealthy individual provided endowments to support one or more classes.

Before we can begin to analyze the institutional structure of higher religious and legal education in Manhāk Cairo, we must come to grips with a confusion in the meaning and application of the terms used to describe those institutions. The "madrasa," as classically formulated and as developed first in Baghdad and the East and, later, in the Muslim cities of Syria, was an institution devoted principally to instruction in Islamic law and the other religious sciences, providing salaries and, in some cases, accommodations for a group of teachers, students, and support staff. But increasingly over the course of the Mamluk period such a precise definition of the institution will simply not suffice. Not all madrasas were exclusively or even principally educational institutions, and, as in earlier periods, much serious legal and religious instruction took place outside of madrasas.

One of the institutions that dominated the educational scene in late medieval Cairo was that known as the Ashrāfīya. Constructed and endowed by Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay within a few years of his accession to the throne in 1422, the Ashrāfīya, which took its name from its founder, resembled many other institutions of learning in the city. Built on the so-called "cruciform" plan, each of the four open, recessed halls (inānā) surrounding the central courtyard provided the venue for an organized daily class in jurisprudence in each of the four rites of Sunni law: the largest iwan, that facing Meeqa and in which the prayer niche (mzar) was embedded, was reserved for the Hanāfī class, to which rite Barsbay himself, as well as most of the Mamluks, belonged. Separate professors were appointed to lead each class; the Hanāfī professor; doubled as the fiqh shahid. The institution's endowment provided monthly salaries for the school's instructional staff, as well as stipends for between ten and twenty-five students in each class. The school complex included rooms or cells (hulul) that served as a "hospital" (hirb) for its students. But the mission of the institution was by no means limited to formal instruction. The complex of buildings included a sabīl-kuttāb, a multistory structure containing both a public fountain and a primary school, increasingly common features of Mamluk-period schools, as well as a tomb chamber for the burial of members of the sultan's family. Its minaret clearly advertised its character as a place of public worship, and consequently the school's employees included a number of purely religious functionaries, including a prayer leader (imām), preacher (khatīb), and several teams of Qur'an readers.

The Ashrāfīya, like many other Mamluk-period schools, was obviously a highly complex institution. Not surprisingly, contemporaries sometimes had trouble knowing what exactly to call it. In 1426, reported the historian Ibn Iyās, "the construction of the madrasa of the sultan [al-

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Ashraf Barsbay, which he established in the khānqāh in the street [Bayn al-Qaṣrayn, the principal thoroughfare of the city], was completed. To be sure, this institution, by traditional definitions, was clearly both a madrasa, an institution devoted to instruction in Islamic law and its ancillary sciences, and a khānqāh, a convent housing and making provisions for sixty-five Sufis, and inscriptions on the building itself describe it in those terms. Yet the institution’s endowment deed—which described its buildings, enumerated the properties the income from which supported it, and established guidelines that regulated the activities of its beneficiaries—routinely referred to the institution as a jāmiʿ, a “congregational mosque.” By contrast, a “madrasa” in the desert outside Cairo, also established by Sultan Barsbay and provided for in the same document, supported four Ḥanafī students, but was embedded in an institution that served primarily as a convent for Sufis of the Rifa’īyya order.

This confusion reflected an evolution in the usage of the various terms by medieval Muslim writers. Etymologically, of course, the word madrasa derives from an Arabic verb meaning “to study;” and at first the word indicated unambiguously a place for education. Sultan Barsbay’s institutions were constructed and endowed in the early fifteenth century, more than 150 years after the founding of the Mamluk state. By contrast, Cairo’s institutions called madrasas established during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries seem to have been explicitly, and often exclusively, centers of religious and legal education providing salaries for professors of the various legal sciences and stipends for their students. These included several madrasas on Bayn al-Qaṣrayn, the main thoroughfare that bisected the medieval city of Cairo, such as that of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars (al-Zahirīyya), with its courses in Shafiʿi and Ḥanafī jurisprudence, hadith, and the variant Qur’anic readings, that of al-Mansūr Qalāwūn (al-Mansūrīyya), with classes in all four rites of law as well as hadith and Qur’anic exegesis, and that of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (al-Nāṣiriyya), with endowed professorships and student stipends in Mālikī, Shafiʿi, Ḥanafī, and Ḥanbalī jurisprudence. These early Mamluk madrasas resembled in their essentials a neighboring school established at the end of the Ayyubid period by Sultan al-Malik al-Salih (al-Salihīyya), the first in Egypt to provide classes for all four rites of law.

By the third decade of the fourteenth century, clear functional distinctions between institutions labeled madrasas on the one hand, and those called jāmiʿs, masjids (mosques), and khānqāhs on the other, began to break down. Terms such as madrasa, jāmiʿ, and khānqāh, as applied to particular institutions, seem to have been used with less and less precision. An early example is the khānqāh established by a Mamluk amir in 1329, whose shaykh was to lead twenty Sufis not only in their devotional exercises, but in a daily class in Ḥanafī jurisprudence as well. By contrast, the madrasa of Sultan Husam, built in the middle of the fourteenth century, was also known as and functioned as a jāmiʿ, providing for the recitation of a khitba (sermon) during Friday congregational prayers.

The accounts of contemporary Muslim chroniclers and biographers themselves reflect an uncertainty as to how to describe particular institutions. Increasingly, writers used different terms to refer to the same establishments; not infrequently, one and the same chronicler would himself use different terms. The historian and scholar al-Maqrīzī, for example, in his topographical history of Cairo, called the institution established by the amir Aṣlam al-Nāṣirī in 1345–46 a jāmiʿ, while his younger contemporary Ibn Taghī Birdī, an equally important historian and biographer, labeled it a madrasa. In another example, Ibn Taghī Birdī reported that Ḥanbīlī al-Dawādīrī was, in January 1428, buried in the madrasa he had established; yet both al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghī Birdī himself in another passage called the institution housing Jānībak’s tomb a jāmiʿ.

Comparing the terms used by historians and chroniclers with those in the surviving endowment deeds creates even greater confusion. The institution established by the amir Fakhr al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥanīfī in the early fourteenth century made provisions for professors of the Shafiʿi, Ḥanafī, and Mālikī rites, and in its deed is clearly labeled a madrasa, yet al-Maqrīzī calls it a jāmiʿ and discusses it in a section of his survey describing

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This confusion reflected an evolution in the usage of the various terms by medieval Muslim writers. Etymologically, of course, the word madrasa derives from an Arabic verb meaning “to study,” and at first the word indicated unambiguously a place for education. Sultan Barsbây’s institutions were constructed and endowed in the early fifteenth century, more than 150 years after the founding of the Manluk state. By contrast, Cairene institutions called madrasas established during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries seem to have been explicitly, and often exclu- sively, centers of religious and legal education providing salaries for professors of the various legal sciences and stipends for their students. These included several madrasas on Bayn al-Qârayn, the main thoroughfare that bisected the medieval city of Cairo, such as that of Sultan al-Zâhir Baybars (al-Zâhiriyya), with its courses in Shâfî‘i and Ḥanâfî jurisprudence, hadîth, and the variant Qur’ani readings, that of al-Maṣûr Qâlî- wîn (al-Maṣûriyya), with classes in all four rites of law as well as hadîth and Qur’anic exegesis, and that of al-Nâṣir Muḥammad ibn Qâlîwîn (al-Nâṣirîyya), with endowed professorships and student stipends in Mâlikî, Shâfî‘î, Ḥanâfî, and Ḥanbalî jurisprudence. These early Manluk madrasas resembled in their essentials a neighboring school established at the end of the Ayyubid period by Sultan al-Malîk al-Sâliḥ (al-Sâlihîyya), the first in Egypt to provide classes for all four rites of law.

By the third decade of the fourteenth century, clear functional distinc-
mosques. In the large khanqah of Janâl al-Din Yâsuf, as we shall see, the principal activities of the Sufis who inhabited the building were educational. The confusion of terms is almost complete: we have jami‘-s that principally supported Sufis, madrasas whose deeds of endowment made no provisions for academic courses, and khanqahs that, under the terms by which they were established, functioned primarily as schools.

What are we to make of this apparent confusion in the terms used to describe particular establishments? It is important that we, as late twentieth-century historians, not rely on terms such as madrasa, jami‘, masjid, or khanqah, terms to which medieval Muslims might have attached more abstract meaning. To popular perception, they signified less a particular place, institution, or building than a function, and as such their meaning as applied to specific institutions might change over time. Thus, the apparent confusion of terms should be viewed, in the first place, through the lens of that flexible, personal system that characterized Islamic education and the transmission of Muslim knowledge. That a student’s authority derived from that of his teacher, and not from the venue in which his education had transpired, meant that no institution, not even the madrasa, could ever establish a monopoly over the incultation of the Muslim sciences. Any open space—the floor of a mosque, a Sufi cell, a private living room, as well as a chamber in a madrasa—offered a suitable site for instruction. But it suggests also that education in this society cannot be considered in isolation; rather, it must be seen as one element in the broader continuum of Islamic piety and worship. The organized and rigorous transmission of those texts that constituted the body of the Muslim sciences was not accomplished in a hermetic environment. On the contrary, it took place alongside, and sometimes as a part of Sufi activities, public sermonizing, and popular religious celebration, and those who devoted themselves to education did not necessarily see their efforts as something fundamentally distinct from public worship.

\[\text{\textbf{Mosques as Centers of Education}}\]

It should first be made clear that organized and endowed instruction in Islamic jurisprudence and its ancillary sciences was by no means limited to institutions known as madrasas, and that a study of that education and of those active as students or teachers must encompass other institutions as well. The biographer of Sultan Qajmaq, a pious individual who reigned for more than a decade in the mid-fifteenth century, noted that although he did not build a madrasa, he nonetheless restored a number of

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12 Cf. Mudâni, Colleges, 28–29, where he recognized the role of the larger congregational mosques in higher education in Cairo.
Baybars al-Jashnakir spent more than 40,000 gold dinars in restoring al-Hākim’s mosque, and in the process established it in professors of Shāfi‘ī, Ḥanafi, Mālikī, and Ḥanbali jurisprudence, and of Ḥadīth, Qur’anic recitation, and Arabic grammar, as well as “a large number of students.” Al-Hākim’s mosque, as restored by Baybars al-Jashnakir, remained a major center of instruction and was the equal of any Mamluk madrasa: its first four professors of law were all prominent jurists, including the famous Shāfi‘ī judge Bāzī al-Dīn Muhammad Ibn Jām‘a.16

Other, smaller congregational mosques benefited from restoration work undertaken by Mamluk amirs and sultans, and in the process became centers for higher religions and legal education. At the jāmi‘ al-Māridānī next to the Khāṭṭ al-Tūbān outside Būz Zuwāyah, the southern gates to the city, a mosque first built between 1337 and 1340, the powerful amīr Şarḥštīnsh (d. 1358) established a class in Hanafi jurisprudence before building his own important madrasa near the mosque of Ibn Ṣūlūn. At the institution known as the ribāṭ al-Ādhār, a hospice and mosque housing certain relics of the Prophet that was originally established by the same Ibn Ṣūlūn who endowed a course in the mosque of Amr, the sultan al-Asḥāf Sha‘bān (reigned 1363–70) created “a class for Shāfi‘ī jurists, and established in it a professor and a number of students.” Both the Ḥanafi course at the al-Māridānī mosque and that in Shāfi‘ī law at the ribāṭ al-Ādhār operated throughout the fifteenth century, and their professorships were held at times by a number of prominent legal scholars.17

Other Mamluk-period institutions specifically and consistently called jāmi‘i houses endowed classes in jurisprudence from the moment of their foundation. These include the jāmi‘ al-Khāṭṭīrīn in Būlāq (established ca. 1336–37), which in addition to a large library housed a course for Shāfi‘ī’s; the jāmi‘ al-Magribī, not to be confused with a never-completed madrasa of the same name; the jāmi‘ of Aq Sunqur al-Salāri (d. 1343) near the Citadel; and that of Bāzī al-Dīn Āṣif al-Salāḥī (d. 1346).18 The mosques of Sūlūn min Zāda (established 1402) and al-Shibli

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17 On the al-Māridānī mosque itself, see al-Maqūţī, Khāṭṭīr, 2:308. Al-Maqūţī makes no mention of the institution’s professorship; for that, see al-Sakkāwī, al-Daw‘, 3:250, under the biography of Sa‘d al-Dīn Ibn al-Dīrī, one of the scholars who held the post. Al-Sakkāwī does not specifically say it was a Hanafi professorship, but all those known to have held it were in fact Hanafis, and of course Şarḥštīnsh himself was a partisan of that rite. On the ribāṭ al-Ādhār, see al-Maqūţī, Khāṭṭīr, 2:429.
18 See al-Maqūţī, Khāṭṭīr, 2:309–10, 312, 329. To these might be added the jāmi‘ of Usbūk al-Zahhār, established at the end of the fifteenth century. Al-Sakkāwī states categorically that he provided for “Sūfis and ‘teachers’ (mudarrisīn, or possibly ‘two teachers,’ mudarrīsan) as well as Quran readers and a library; al-Sakkāwī, al-Daw‘, 2:272. The endowment
Kāfūr (1414) provided salaries and stipends for a number of teachers and students, and were sometimes known as madrasas; but their endowment deeds survive, and identify them, respectively, as a jāmi’ and a masjid. Institutional “types,” therefore, can not fully delineate the boundaries of the world of higher education in late medieval Cairo. From an institutional or curricular viewpoint, there is nothing to distinguish these jāmi’s and masjids from other institutions commonly called madrasas. The same subjects—principally jurisprudence according to one or more of the four rites of law, and occasionally the other religious sciences as well—were taught in the jāmi’ of Ibn Tulún or the ribāt al-Atḥār as in masjids, and by the same people. Shāhāb al-Dīn Ahmad b. Muḥammad, of the famous al-Buḫqū family of scholars, held teaching posts in Shāfī’i jurisprudence at the al-Maghribī mosque, that of Ibn Tulún, and at the ribāt al-Atḥār, but also at the Ḥijāzīyya madrasa. Similarly, Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Jamā’ī, the author of an important treatise concerning education, was professor at the mosque of al-Ḥākim, but also at such prestigious madrasas as the Sāliḥiya in Bayn al-Quṣayr and the Naṣṣiyya (also known as the Sāliḥiya) next to the tomb of the imām al-Shāfī’ī. Madrasas and mosques drew their teaching talent from the same pool of scholars. There was, in fact, little to distinguish them.

Nothing in this is, or should be, surprising. For centuries before the advent of the madrasa, mosques were the only public venue for higher Islamic education. Scholars taught in them informally, gratis or in exchange for payments from their students, and no doubt continued to do so through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when institutions called madrasas began to be established. In the Mamluk period, however, mosques came to resemble madrasas in that—through the muwaffaq of the original builder or that of a later benefactor—they offered formal, endowed courses in the Islamic religious sciences.

But the two institutions drew closer still. A jāmi’ was, literally, a “congregational mosque” in which the communal Friday prayers were said and a sermon was recited by a preacher. According to some legal opinion, Friday prayers should be held at only one location in each Muslim community. This principle had begun to break down well before the Mamluk period, but by the time al-Maqrūzī wrote his topographical and historical description of Cairo in the fifteenth century, the number of

Caïrene institutions at which Friday prayers were said had reached 130. Many of these were known as madrasas, and by the fifteenth century it had become a standard practice to provide for a preacher to deliver the Friday sermons in these schools. The process was a gradual one, but began early in the Mamluk period. The madrasa of Sultan Hasan, established in the middle of the fourteenth century, has been identified as “the first to be attached to a congregational mosque, i.e., the first to be a madrasa at the same time as a jāmi’.” In fact, however, given the essential similarity between institutions known as madrasas and certain teaching mosques, the educational function of the academic class and the exhortatory function of the sermon had been brought into close spatial proximity several decades before the construction of the Ḥānṣiyya madrasa: at the congregational mosques of Ibn Tulún and al-Ḥākim, and at the smaller mosques of Aq Sunqur, Al Malik, al-Khaṣṭār, and al-Māridanī. Moreover, other, older madrasas had in the interim become venues for the Friday prayers: in 1339, after the approval of the qaḍā (judges) and the creation of a supplementary endowment to support a preacher, muzezzins (mu’ādhūnhā) to deliver the call to prayer, and Quran readers, they were said in the Sāliḥiya madrasa for the first time. To be sure, there was resistance to this innovation. As late as 1373, when a pious amir wished to construct a pulpit (minbar) and provide for a preacher in the Manṣūriyya, a madrasa established in the late thirteenth century by Sultan al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn, one group of legal scholars successfully objected to the planned restoration on the grounds that one could see the minbar of the Sāliḥiya from the door of Qalāwūn’s school. But the very fact that the objection was phrased on such narrow grounds indicates that already the functional fusion of madrasa and mosque was a fait accompli.

The blurring of the distinction between madrasa and mosque should remind us that the transmission of knowledge was, for medieval Muslims, first and foremost an act of piety. Study, like prayer, was an activity that could only be undertaken effectively in a state of ritual purity. Before attending a class, a scholar must “cleanse himself of ritual impurities and wickedness”; only in this way would he achieve “the glorification of

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16 Al-Maqrūzī, Khitāt, 2:444. Among the fifteenth-century madrasas that employed a khaṭīb were those of Sultan Barsbay, Zayn al-Dīn al-Usṭadār, Sultan Qaytbay, Quṭb Bīl Qaṣī, al-Sayfī Bāybars, and Sultan al-Ghawanī. In the provision of Sūfi conveits with preachers for the Friday prayers, compare Muḥammad M. Amīn, al-Asqaf wa l-Hāsār al-ṣūfīyya fi sīrī (Cairo, 1980), 206, with Fernández, The Khānqāh, 95–96.
17 Behrens-Abouseif, “Change,” 78.
18 Al-Maqrūzī, Khitāt, 2:317.