I heard, while we were at al-Askar (in Samarra), how Isḥaq b. Hanbal⁴⁹ deplored Abu ʿAbdAllah (Ibn Hanbal) asking him to go in to the caliph in order to command and forbid. He said: "This would be acceptable even in your case, since Isḥaq b. Hanbal⑤⁰ goes in to (ʿAbdAllah) Ibn Tahir in order to command and forbid." Abu ʿAbdAllah replied: "You refer to Isḥaq (b. Hanbal) although I do not agree with what he does! In my opinion there is no good in him, and in his opinion there is no good in me." Al-Marrudhi said: "I have heard Abu ʿAbdAllah saying: 'When I see him [the caliph], it is my duty to command and forbid him.'"

It is thus reproachable, in the view of Ibn Ḥanbal, to visit rulers, under any pretext. But if encounters happen, commanding and forbidding is an obligatory duty, even though it may entail unfavourable consequences for the scholar. A particularity of the collection authored by al-Marrudhi, however, is that he introduces his quotations, with very few exceptions, by the use of one of two terms: samāʾtu, which is most often used, and budāʾiḥa. The first term clearly refers to oral testimony; it could not yet be established whether the second may imply written materials, but there is some evidence indicating that the formula is referring to an indirect oral reception. As comparison reveals, al-Marrudhi regularly offers variant versions of longer reports. This also indicates a reproduction from oral and testimony not yet necessarily subject to the methods of formal transmission. His text therefore represents not only the transition from the transmission of text units to an authored collection, but also from informal oral transmission to the "great tradition" of Islamic scripture.

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49 Uncle of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, see Ibn Aḥī Yaʿla, Tabaqat, I, 111.
51 Authorities introduced by this term do not show any distinctive traits in terms of time, place or background. The term qaṣaʾiraʿa al-Marrudhi refers to the transmission of written materials through reading.

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Reading certificates (samāʾāt) as a prosopographical source: Cultural and social practices of an elite family in Zangid and Ayyubid Damascus

Konrad Hirschsler

The prosopographical study of premodern Middle Eastern societies relies to a large degree on biographical dictionaries, the narrative source genre that is, arguably, one of the most characteristic features of the literary production within these societies. These dictionaries also play an even more significant role in the study of fields as diverse as social history, urban history and political history. In many cases they constitute the very backbone of the source material, as in Bulliet's analysis of conversion rates in Persia and the Arabic speaking lands as well as in Petry's study of the civilan elite in Mamluk Cairo. However, the reliance on biographical dictionaries has contributed to a phenomenon which has been summed up by Mostaiedeh with his well-known phrase: "Ulumology is a noble science, at least we have to think so because it is about all the Islamic social history we will ever have." In addition, one may add that this noble science is often elite ulumology as biographical dictionaries were mostly concerned with those individuals, whom the authors perceived to be the "notables" among the religious scholars.

The present contribution seeks to modify the somewhat pessimistic view that the history of the (elite) religious scholars is all "we will ever have" when it comes to investigating social and cultural patterns of relationships and structures within premodern Middle Eastern societies. Manuscript notes, more specifically reading certificates (e.g. samāʾā), can serve as an important additional source genre to draw a wider picture of the society in which they were issued. It is here that many of those individuals who were not deemed worthy of an entry in the biographical dictionaries, those who were not perceived to belong to the "notables", appeared. In this sense, they allow us to step outside the vision that the dictionaries' authors proposed, to some degree, and to see beyond the social preconceptions that underlie their works. The authors of dictionaries had at their disposal considerable room to manoeuvre in structuring their narratives. However, the formalistic char-

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acter of reading certificates did not allow for a similar liberty when it came to tak-
ing a decision on the inclusion and exclusion of specific personalities. In other
words, the certificates tend to cast a wider net as they mention virtually all those
who participated in the readings, irrespective of their cultural and social rank. In
this sense they are relevant for prosopographical investigations into social history,
as individuals with professions such as coppersmith, sawyer, miller, glazier, baker, stone mason, tailor, and carpenter are mentioned. Although the perspective they
give on such groups is quite limited, these documents provide a unique opportu-

This is not to say that this source genre is beyond the problems of source criti-
icism. Firstly, the names, especially of those participants who did not belong to the
scholarly or civilian elites, are often too brief to derive meaningful information.
This poses considerable problems in the process of identifying and classifying
them. Thus, many of the individuals who are discussed below are only mentioned
with shortened names — the personal name and the name of the father, for exam-
ple. However, in the present article this poses less of a problem because the focus
is on a well-established scholarly family. As we are dealing with a close-knit family
group, it is generally possible to identify the relevant individuals and their position
within the family tree even if they were not mentioned in any other texts of the
period. Secondly, some writers of certificates took the decision to exclude partici-
pants who did not seem of relevance to them. A sixth/seventh-century writer of a
reading certificate, for example, duly registered the well-known participants, but la-
conically ended with the words “and a considerable number of others whose
names I do not know [were also present].” However, such examples were, at least in
the certificates that are discussed in this article, not typical for the writers.3
Reading certificates enjoyed an outstanding importance in Damascus from the
mid-sixth/seventh century onwards.4 This is linked to the rise of būdhīt scholarship

3 On this cf. Konrad Hirschler, The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands. A Social and
Cultural History of Reading Practices, Edinburgh 2012.

4 Certificate for yez 2 of Ibn ‘Asakir, Tabqah madinat Dimashq, ed. Salih al-Din al-Majjadī-
Nasuky al-Shābī et al., Damascus 1981 (ongoing), 1, 643.

5 This writer, Khalīd al-Nabulusi (d. 663/1265), acts only once as a writer for certificates per-
taining to the History of Damascus. He is also not mentioned as a writer in the certificates
published by Leder et al. (Stefan Leder, Yasmin M. al-Sawwās, and Ma‘ānī ‘al-Sa‘ghārī,
Muyyam al-samī‘at al-Dimashqiyah - zawar al-mahāri‘ah, Damascus 2000 [in following referred
to as Sawar]).

6 The chapter “Spreu van lees- en leerkunst in een twaalfde-eeuws handschrift uit Damas-
cus”, in: Jan Jant Witkam, Van Leiden naar Damascus, en veer langs-veer vormen van islamis-
tische leer- en leervaarden, Leiden: Legatum Wetteranaun, Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden
2003, 33-142, is a detailed discussion of this cultural milieu from the sixth/seventh to the
ninth/eleventh century by way of examining reading certificates. The documentary value
of certificates of transmission has been commented upon previously, see especially: Stefan
Leder, “Hörzerkredite als Dokumente für die islamische Lehrelders des Mittelalters”, in:
Ralf Georges Khoury, ed., Urkunden und Urkundenformulare im klassischen Altertum und in den

orientalistischen Kulturen, Heidelberg 1999, 147-166 and particularly on certificates as a to-
Zur Alltagsgeschichte der Haddiwissenschaft”, Supplement XI der Zeitschrift der Deutschen
268-79.

7 On this tendency cf. L. Pourzet, Damas en VIIe/XIIe siècle. Vie et structures religieuses dans une
métropole islamique, Beirut 21991, 35ff.

8 Compare for example the readings of his work on būdhīt that were conducted in the same
period as the readings of Ibn History of Damascus. The readings in the years 564/1169 and
565/1170 (both in the Umayyad Mosque) attracted only 26 and 14 participants (certifi-
that there are few other works that can boast such detailed documentation of their dissemination.

The work is of additional interest as it is situated on the borderline between hadith and biographical dictionary, whereas the certificates issued in this period in the Syrian and Egyptian lands tend to refer to works that are collections of hadith without a historiographical component. The work starts with extended passages on the merits (faḍāl) of Syria and Damascus, the urban topography and a detailed biography of the Prophet Muhammad. The remaining work consists of biographies of some 10,000 individuals (among them 200 women) who had lived in the town or passed through it, some of whom were prominent and some of whom were less so. Despite this historiographical focus, the readings of this work were documented with certificates. This can be to some degree explained by the fact that the author cited within the biographies also noteworthy hadiths that were reported by the respective individual.

The reading of such a voluminous work in its entirety could obviously not be concluded in a single session, but demanded a multitude of meetings that had to be stretched over long periods, occasionally more than eight years (on this and the following cf. figure 1). Each of these sessions was registered by a separate reading certificate. The sum of certificates that belong to a consecutive reading of the work will be referred to as a "reading strand". Readings are grouped into a strand according to the following criteria: sequence of dates, name of the attending authority, name of the reader, place, and person of writer, respectively. In total, there were at least eleven such reading strands, i.e. eleven distinct reading communities in the town of Damascus in the eighty years or so after the author had concluded the work.

The prosopographical information that is gained from this set of material is considered alongside and compared to two sets of sources. On the one hand, the Damascus Certificates, that is the certificates, which Leder et al. published in facsimile, are consulted. These certificates refer to readings that were conducted in Damascus and the surrounding area in the period 550/1151 to 750/1349. They offer crucial additional information, especially on those individuals who are not identifiable in biographical dictionaries. Biographical dictionaries are the second important set of additional sources. As this article is concerned with the reading of a work by a šafī‘i scholar in Damascus in the late sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, the main dictionaries used here are those which have a focus on the Damascus šafī‘i community of the period.10

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10 That is al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh al-islām wa-awāliyat al-mashāhid wa-urūd al-‘ilm, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadnūrī (Beirut 2002/03) and Abu Shima, al-Dhahabī ala’l-Kawadma‘yn (published as Tārīfījījirāl alqarnayn al-sadis wa-yahdīti), ed. Muhammad al-Kawthari, Cairo 1947. References for biographies in the following are generally to al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh where the main additional sources are mentioned.


12 Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Bakri (d. 615/1218, al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh, 611-630, 262/2).

“publication” are traced by considering the various reading strands. Finally, it is demonstrated how certificates can contribute to understanding the cultural and social strategies of a family in decline that disappeared from other sources, such as biographical dictionaries and chronicles.

Seating orders and notable families: The Banu ‘Asikir in Damascus

The ‘Asikir family was one of the important families of Damascus from the late fifth/eleventh to the seventh/thirteenth century. During this period it played a salient role within the town’s civilian elite by controlling important positions, and members of the family contributed to the city’s intellectual life until the eighth/fourteenth century. The social position of the family was enhanced via intermarriage with other prominent shaf’i families such as the Sulamis,14 the Zaki’s,15 the Naysaburi’s,16 and the Qarashi’s.17 While the Banu ‘Asikir encompassed a number of high-ranking individuals, ‘Ali Ibn ‘Asikir even gained a salient position within this illustrious environment by writing the History of Damascus. This work was seen as the characteristic element of his achievements, contemporaries praised it as exceptional and as proof of the author’s learnedness. At the same time was the work an expression of the close relationship that existed between Ibn ‘Asikir and the strongman of Syria, the Zangid ruler Nur al-Din, who brought Damascus under his control in 549/1154 and encouraged Ibn ‘Asikir to write and publish this work.

The composition of the History of Damascus was not only an expression of the close relationship with the political elite, but the subsequent reading sessions of this work were a salient feature in the Banu ‘Asikir’s claim of social prominence within the town and their attempts to foster this position. This is reflected in the certificates that add, for example, to the aforementioned picture of intermarriage among elite families that we can gain from biographical dictionaries. They show that the links that were constituted by such marriages were reinforced by participation in the readings of the History of Damascus. For instance, two nephews of the author from the Sulami family, al-Hasan and al-Hasan, participated in the readings of the Strands A and C.18 The son of the author’s cousin from the Qurashi family, to cite a second example, participated as well in Strand A.19 The structure of the certificates indicates furthermore that these relatives were seated in proximity to the presiding authority although they were in the early stages of their career and had not yet attained an important position in the scholarly and civilian elite of the town.

At this point it is necessary briefly to consider to what extent in which names are written in reading certificates reflects the actual seating of the participants in the reading session. From anecdotal material it is obvious that the order of seating in reading sessions was clearly regulated. For example a sixteenth/seventeenth century juridical reports on his study years:

When I first began to study law I sat at the end of the study-circle, the members of which took their places according to their several grades. One day a discussion took place between myself and a student who sat close to the professor, there being between us two or three students. On the following day I took my place as usual at the end of the study-circle. The man in question came and sat beside me. Whereupon the professor asked him, ‘Why did you relinquish your place?’ And he replied, ‘I am in the same grade as this student. I shall sit with him so that I can benefit thereby.’ By God! It was not long before I advanced in the field of law, and became strong in my knowledge of it, and I began to sit next to the professor with two students between me and the man in question.20

In this case, which is corroborated by others, there was a clear sense that the proximity to the professor, and consequently the seating order, depended upon the hierarchy of learnedness among the participants.

The question arises whether the order of names in certificates reflects this hierarchy. The problem is that we do not possess regulations on how the writer of a certificate should pen the names. For example, normative treatises on learning and teaching, where one might have expected to find such regulations, such as the works by al-Ajurri, al-Zarnawiji, Ibn Jama’a, and al-Samani do not touch upon this issue.21 Those works that contain passages on the writing of certificates, for exam-

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14 The author’s sister, for example, married a member of the Sulami family, Muhammad b. ‘Ali (d. 564/1169, al-Dhabahi, Tārikh, 661-670, 211), the first professor in the Aminiya Madrasa.
17 The author’s mother was a Qarashi. This family brought forth a number of high-ranking scholars, many of whom acted as judges such as the author’s maternal uncle Yahya b. ‘Ali b. ‘Abd al-Aziz (d. 534/1139, al-Dhabahi, Tārikh, 631-640, 363).
19 Muhammad b. ‘Ali al-Qurashi (d. 598/1202, al-Dhabahi, Tārikh, 591-600, 367/30, cf. for example the certificates for 59/6, 9, 97, 232, 235, 240, 263, 267, 284, 288, 373, 377, 380 in Ibn ‘Asikir, Tārikh, 1, 676-8, 702-4, X, 398-9; XXXI, 350/1; XXXII, 33/4, 330/1; XXXV/XXXVI, 178/9; 416; XXXIX, 15/6, 284/5; LV, 126/7, 347/8; LV, 198/9.
21 Al-Ajurri, Abdiyār al-dhālam, Beirut 1985; al-Zarnawijī, Taḥfū ad-dhālān, Cairo 1995; Ibn Jama’a, Taḥfiṣar al-dhāli
ple by al-Suyūṭi, focus on more general issues such as the need to include all participants and to write legibly.23 However, the certificates themselves hint at regular patterns that indicate a close relationship between seating arrangements in a session and the position of the names in the certificates. The order of names following that of the preceding authority reflects cultural and social norms that are closely linked to the practice of seating arrangements as illustrated above. Those participants who had the highest standing in the scholarly community, and were consequently seated closest to the preceding authority, are indeed named in the certificates’ first lines. They are followed by, or intermixed with, relatives of the preceding authority, relatives of other scholars, and members of the political and military elite. Non-scholars, traders, and craftsmen, by contrast, are generally to be found in the last lines of a certificate, reflecting their position within the seating order.24 Arguably, the writer of certificates registered the participants by working their way through the rows of participants from front to back. A concrete example of such a certificate’s structure is:24

1 presiding authority, 2 scholar (reader in the session)25, 3 son of the presiding authority26, 4/5 scholars27, 6/7 officers28, 7/8 slave with slave29, 9-11 scholars30, 12/13 sons of (a absent) scholar31, 14-17 sons of (a absent) scholar32, 18 scholar33,

Note: The numbers in parentheses indicate the order of seating in the certificate.


In this certificate the first nineteen positions were held by individuals who were of some prominence – at least of enough prominence to warrant their appearance in other sources that are indicated in the footnotes. We see that they were either scholars in their own right, sons of established scholars, high-ranking officers, and a son of the presiding authority. The following twenty-nine positions, by contrast, were held, with two exceptions, by individuals who are not mentioned in other sources. These individuals have a quite heterogeneous background: non-scholars, trader/craftsmen and a slave who attended without his master. The close link between seating order and the structure of the certificate is especially clear in the case of the two scholars in positions three and four, who were the outstanding participants in this session in terms of their scholarly prominence.

Thus, the ranking of the certificate reflects quite neatly the cultural norms that governed the arrangement of seating in sessions. This is corroborated by the fact that individuals are grouped together repeatedly in the certificate on the basis of blood-ties (such as the four brothers from no. fourteen to no. seventeen), professional background (such as the three craftsmen/traders from no. twenty-nine to thirty-one), and common origin (such as participants from no. thirty-nine to no. forty-five, most of whom originate from the Damascus suburb of Shaghur). In these cases it is again reasonable to assume that they are not only grouped together in the certificate, but that they were indeed seated together in the session. The clustering of participants who share such aspects of their identity is a widespread pattern in certificates. The link to the seating order is especially palpable when tracing names over different certificates. In Strand C, for example, two descendants of the Prophet (sharif) participated in three sessions and are named together in the respective certificates.37 Some twenty years later these two individuals participated in the reading of another work in Damascus and are again named together.38

If we now return to the above-mentioned case of ‘Ali b. ‘Askīr’s two nephews from the Sulami family, al-Hasan and ‘Ali, it is obvious that they did not only participate in reading sessions of the History of Damascus, but that they were
seated in prominent positions. They generally took positions three to six in the certificates, subsequent to 'Ali’s sons and grandsons. The participants who were prominent scholars but were not related to the Banū ‘Asīrī followed hereafter, although many of the relatives, especially these two nephews, had not yet attained any important position in the scholarly and civilian elite of the town. The prominent position in the reading sessions of individuals who were linked to the Banū ‘Asīrī through marriage underlines the readings’ importance for reinforcing such links – especially if compared to those participants who had no such family connections but were more established members of the scholarly elite.

**Attempting to control the family’s cultural capital:**

**Reading sessions of the History of Damascus**

A further element that emerges from the certificates is that the family took care to control the dissemination of the work for as long as possible. The author himself “published” the work in two distinctive strands that both started in the year 560/1164-5.40 On the one hand he read it in public to the larger audience of the town by running a series of sessions in the town’s central building, the Umayyad Mosque. This Strand A regularly drew up to sixty or even seventy participants to its weekly or twice-weekly reading sessions. The choice of al-Ḥasan b. Ṣaṣa as the main reader in this strand showed the prestige that was ascribed to this work: Ibn Ṣaṣa himself was one of the leading figures in the intellectual and social life of the town and his presence was certainly a crucial feature contributing to the work’s rising position. However, in parallel with this reading of the work to the town’s audience and its validation by the learned elite, the author busied himself with running a second series of lectures that served distinctively different purposes. This Strand B was mostly set in the author’s residence and was not intended to introduce the work to a larger audience. On the contrary, the reader in these sessions was the author’s son al-Qāsim (d. 600/1205)41 and the “audience” consisted exclusively of al-Qāsim’s son Muhammad (for the members of the Banū ‘Asīrī mentioned here and in the following cf. figure 2).42 Conse-

39 The author aborted a previous attempt to publish the work in a strand that he had started in 559/1164 in the Umayyad Mosque, cf. the certificates for jā’ī’s 1-10 in Ibn ‘Asīrī, Tarift, l, 58, 116, 182, 284, 310, 372, 428, 489, 560, and 620.


41 Al-Dihābī, Tarift, 591-600, 471-3.

42 For Strand B cf. for example certificates for jā’ī’s 231-5, 261-70, 277, 284, 373, 378, 401, 484 in Ibn ‘Asīrī, Tarift, XXXI, 278, 350, 419, 494; XXI, 33; XXXV/XXXVI, 63, 124, 178, 232, 288, 350, 416, 479, 546, 609; XXXVII, 376; XXXIX, 15; LIV, 128; LV, 59; LVIII, 276; LIX, 10.
quenty, this strand can be read as an attempt to ensure that the link of the author's family with the work would persist in the years to come by offering an exclusive family reading. In this sense, Strand B completes Strand A, which was aimed at ensuring the work's prestige and popularity among the wider audience.

This combination of public and family-based transmission proved to be successful. Al-Qasim, the most outstanding member of the Banu 'Asakir in the second generation,45 was able to control the transmission of the work in the decades after his father's death. In all of the three late sixteenth/seventeenth-century Strands C, D and E he acted as the main authoring authority. C, the first reading strand that was not presided over by the author himself, shows in particular that the author's strategy to seek popularisation and ensure family control succeeded. This reading strand mostly took place in the Umayyad Mosque and attracted, at least in the sessions on the initial parts, a considerable audience (between fifty and sixty participants).46 The transfer of social capital accompanied the transmission of cultural capital from father to son. The professorship in the Dar al-Hadith al-Nuriya, for instance, had been held by the author since the institution's foundation. After his death, he passed the position on to al-Qasim and it is no coincidence that we find in a history of this institution a reference to the new post holder's link with the History of Damascus, namely that he "copied the History of his father twice."47

The salient role of the Banu 'Asakir's second generation in the reading sessions is also clear in the structure of the certificates. After the introductory line, in which the attending authority was mentioned, family members invariably occupied the following lines. Only hereafter did the certificates list the reader and subsequently the prominent scholars, other scholars, and finally non-scholars.48 This clearly differs from later reading strands that were no longer controlled by the Banu 'Asakir. Here the certificates listed the participating members of the family within the group of the religious scholars according to their rank without assigning to them a specific status.

This direct line of transmission was bound to continue with al-Qasim's son Muhammad, who had acquired the right of transmission at an early stage of his career by attending Strand B. Furthermore, he participated not only in these "private" sessions, but attended also the parallel readings of the more "public" Strand A. At the same time we find him in readings of other works by his grand-

45 In the following, the generations of the Banu 'Asakir are numbered, starting with the author's generation as no. 1 and ending with his great grandchildren as no. 4. This classification also underlies the family tree (figure 2).

46 For sessions with high numbers of participants cf. for example for juz' 2 and 3 in Ibn 'Asakir, Tārikh, I, 638/9 and I, 649/9.


48 Cf. for example the certificate for juz' 1 (reading Strand C) in Ibn 'Asakir, Tārikh, I, 627: "This volume was read under the authority of [...] al-Qasim [Ibn 'Asakir]; his brother [...] al-Hasan, his cousins al-Hasan, [...] 'Abd al-Rahman, [...] Na'īr Allah, [...] 'Abd al-Rahim, sons of [Muhammad], and their nephew [...] Muhammad [...] by the reading of [...]."
transmission for the *History of Damascus* by attending reading Strand A and activated it only now, some fifty years later. However, it proved an important element in a career that saw him act as professor at various schools in Syria and as the leading šafi'i authority of the region.

However, this reading Strand F with its four presiding authorities hints already at the waning predominance of the Banū 'Asikir over the transmission of the *History of Damascus*. Many of these readings were held in a fixed location, the Umayyad Mosque, but interestingly in a number of cases the readings took place at a location linked to the presiding authority. Some of the readings presided by al-Maqdissi for instance were held in his Mosque in al-Mizzah and the readings presided by Fakhır al-Din were held in the Jānikhiya Madrasa where he was professor. The flexibility of the location contrasts with other readings that were more tightly controlled by the Banū 'Asikir. As has been noted, these took place rather in fixed locations, mainly the Umayyad Mosque and the Dār al-Ḥadith al-Nūrīya that they controlled (cf. Strands C, D, E, and H).

The loss of control that is apparent in Strand F is even more obvious in Strand G, which was conducted in parallel. This was the first series of readings after the publication of the work in which no member of the Banū 'Asikir played a role—he it attending authority, reader or scribe. The absence of any member of the Banū 'Asikir was replicated some fifteen years later in Strand K, the last series of readings considered in the framework of this article. Here, Muḥammad al-Shirāzī, who had formerly acted as co-presiding authority, monopolised this position. This waning influence of the Banū 'Asikir over the *History of Damascus*, the central work that had been produced by a family member, reflects the overall decline of the family's fortunes within Damascus after a 200-year period of considerable influence, with its heyday in the late sixteenth/twelfth century. For example, the attempt to insert 'Abd al-Rahmān Fakhır al-Din, who acted as co-presiding authority in Strand F, into the lines of transmission did not prove successful and we do not find him again as attending authority in another reading strand.

### Tracing a declining family:

**Reading certificates as a biographical source**

In the preceding sections the certificates allowed an insight into the cultural practices of the Banū 'Asikir that are not discernible from other sources, but the individuals discussed were generally known from biographical dictionaries. However,

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59 Cf. for example the certificates for *jaʾ* 10, 99, 234, 372, 377, 408 in Ibn Asikir, *Ṭaʾrīḥ*, I, 714/5; X, 508/9; XXXI, 494/5; LIV, 71/2 and 347/8; LV, 380; LIX, 308.

60 Cf. for example the certificates for *jaʾ* 3, 7-10 in Ibn Asikir, *Ṭaʾrīḥ*, I, 661/2, 691/2, 699, 711, 719.

61 Cf. for example the certificates for *jaʾ* 1, 9, 319, 403-406 in Ibn Asikir, *Ṭaʾrīḥ*, I, 632-3, 708-10; XLIV, 423/4; LVIII, 345; LXIII, 12, 87, 157/8.
with the family's loss of control over the work's transmission, the reading certificates' significance as an additional source-genre shifts. The certificates now gain in importance for tracing the fortunes of a family that no longer found itself at the very centre of the town's social and intellectual life. The social decline of the family is reflected in the fact that there are increasingly fewer family members who are included in biographical dictionaries. Consequently, the role of the certificates as an additional source for prosopographical research becomes more salient.

The family's decline is reflected by the fact that the family's ability to control the dissemination of the work was lost entirely by generation 3 and to a lesser degree by generation 4. Among the fourteen individuals of the third generation who are mentioned in the certificates, ten individuals are not mentioned in any of the pertinent biographical dictionaries. Of those four scholars who received entries in the biographical dictionaries, two, both sons of Zayn al-'Umānā', have only very brief entries of some ten words. These entries neither refer to any scholarly merits nor to their teachers or students, but merely give their names, genealogies and dates of death. They are registered in certificates pertaining to other works, but never took over the function of attending authority, reader or writer in these sessions. The third individual, a cousin of the above two brothers, played some role in the town's scholarly life and acted as attending authority in readings of other works, but never held any position, such as a professorship in a madrasa.

Ali b. Qāsim, the fourth individual of this generation who was mentioned in biographical dictionaries was a direct descendant of the author. He had started a promising career as scholar, but died during his scholarly voyage to the "eastern lands" at the age of 35.

None of these individuals reached the scholarly status of the previous generation—and nor did they occupy posts within the civil clientele. This shows that securing the right to transmit the work as a member of the Banū 'Asākir was no longer sufficient to guarantee some standing within the scholarly and civil clientele. In addition, this right was no longer seen as relevant for the sole family member who did embark on a successful scholarly career: the only member of the family in this generation who held a post, the last member of the family to hold

the professorship in the Dār al-Hadith al-Nūriyya, did not participate in readings of the History of Damascus. The marginality of the Banū 'Asākir in this generation is also clear in that eight of those individuals who have no entries in biographical dictionaries are also not mentioned in the Damascene Certificates. The two family members who are mentioned in other certificates each attended merely one session, both were of a young age and the sessions were conducted by either the father or the grandfather.

The near-complete absence of members of the Banū 'Asākir in the biographical dictionaries shows the declining fate of this family within the social fabric of Damascus. However, a closer consideration of the certificates pertaining to reading sessions of the History of Damascus allows a more refined understanding of how the family acted in this period. Although the Banū 'Asākir declined in importance, they tried to mobilise the main cultural capital that was at their disposal, the History of Damascus, in order to secure a place for their descendants. This attempt was ultimately unsuccessful (as is reflected in these dictionaries) but without the certificates it would not be possible to understand the processes that accompanied these attempts.

This process can be exemplified by the participation of the sons of the second-generation member Taj al-'Umānā' Ahmad (d. 610/1213). Taj al-'Umānā' was a typical representative of the second generation in that he held several grand posts, was closely linked to the town's greatest scholars and was remembered for the works he produced. He acquired the right of transmission for the History of Damascus by participating in Strand A, in which he repeatedly acted as the writer of the certificates. He had, according to the certificates, six sons, all of whom participated in reading strands of the work. He took care that his children participated at a young age in sessions on the History of Damascus. Muhammad b. Ahmad, for instance, started to attend sessions of Strand C at the age of six in the company of his paternal uncles. Some seven years later, Muhammad took his younger brother Hibat Allāh to readings of the same strand and both were


65 Abū ‘Abdallāh Muhammad b. Ahmad (d. 643/1245, al-Dhahabi, Ta’rikh, 641-650, 201/2; Leder et al., Sauva, 1088/3-6, fol. 42a and 1592/3-4, fol. 79b (participant) 1088/3-11, fol. 43a and 1592/3-10, fol. 81b (attending authority).

66 D. 616/1219, al-Dhahabi, Ta’rikh, 611-620, 307/8 and Abū Shāma, Dhayl, 120. For his participation in readings of other works cf. Leder et al., Sauva, 1592/1-14, fol. 14a and 3775/5-12, fol. 68b.

67 Abū al-Wahhāb b. Ḥasan (d. 660/1260, al-Dhahabi, Ta’rikh, 651-660, 419/20) who also presided in a number of readings of other works, cf. for example Leder et al., Sauva, 3778/8-3, fol. 87a.

68 The eight family members who are neither mentioned in the biographical dictionaries nor in the published Damascene Certificates of attendance by Leder et al. are: Abū Muḥammad Mu’ā'id b. Abū al-Rahmān, Abū ‘Ali ‘Asākir al-Muzaffar b. ‘Abdallāh, Abū al-Rahmān Ahmad b. Ahmad, Abū al-Rahmān Mū‘ājid b. Ahmad, Abū al-Rahmān Muhammad b. Ahmad, Abū al-Rahmān Ahmad b. Ahmad, Abū al-Rahmān Muhammad b. Ahmad, and Abū al-Rahmān Ahmad b. Ahmad, Abū al-Rahmān Muhammad b. Ahmad. Those who are mentioned in the Damascene Certificates are: Abū al-Futūḥ (Abū al-Ra‘īsah) b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Abū al-Rahmān (Leder et al., Sauva, 1088/3-14, fol. 48a, year 612/1216 [the attending authority was his father]) and Abū Tahir Muhammad b. Abū Qāsim (Leder et al., Sauva, 1592/3-4, fol. 79b, year 565/1170 [the attending authority was his grandfather, the reader himself]).

69 Al-Dhahabi, Ta’rikh, 601-610, 384/5.
joined at a later point by a third brother, Ahmad. Habinet Allah in turn started to attend the reading Strand D some nine years later — first on his own, but soon accompanied by his brother Ma‘mūd. Two more brothers, Fadl and Naṣr Allah, joined reading Strand E, where other family members were also present. Tellingly, they joined this co-presided strand in a session that was presided over by their uncle Abū al-Raḥmān Fakhr al-Dīn.72

The continuation of the practice of the second generation is also illustrated by the fact that all these sons were still seated in close proximity to the sessions’ respective presiding authority. Fadl and Naṣr Allah, for example, preceded other participants who were more prominent scholars or members of the military elite — the officer-cum-scholar Şīlī b. Ḫanūf al-Lanṭīṣ, for instance.73 Although none of ‘Īṭ al-Umānī’s sons, except Muḥammad b. Ahmad, was mentioned in the biographical dictionaries, their participation in readings of the History of Damascus shows that the Banū ‘Asākir did not completely disappear from the scholarly world during this period. Rather they attempted to bolster their position by recourse to the practice that had played such a pivotal role in establishing and reaffirming the second generation’s location in the scholarly and social fabric of the town. In other words, the family continued to pursue the same cultural practice, but owing to its changed position this practice lost its significance for the third generation, at least in the short term.

Although the persistence in focusing on the readings of the History of Damascus was of no avail to the standing of the third generation, the “reign” of the fourth generation shows the rationale that underlay this persistence. Here, the Banū ‘Asākir were in a relatively marginal position concerning the transmission of the History of Damascus compared to the first and second generation. Nevertheless, compared to the third generation, more family members who participated in the readings of the work are now mentioned in the biographical dictionaries: Among the nine individuals in this generation seven received entries, compared to four out of fourteen in the third generation. At the same time, the more active role of these individuals in the scholarly world is apparent in certificates pertaining to other works in which they are mentioned: Again, seven of the nine individuals in this generation were mentioned in the Damascene Certificates.74 At least two of them embarked on promising scholarly careers, but died at young age. One made a career in the Hijāz and another member was a reputed ḥadīth scholar in Damascus.75

In this fourth generation, the readings of the History of Damascus remained one central element of the family’s identity. Attendance in these sessions is the salient characteristic in the biographies of many of the family members. In contrast to the third generation, the members of the fourth generation succeeded in securing a more salient position in the town’s social and cultural elites. Arguably, the persistence in claiming a role, albeit marginal, in the transmission of the work was of importance in this process.

The partial reestablishment of the family’s fortunes in the fourth generation is again apparent when considering in more detail the practice of conducting readings of the History of Damascus. The transmission of knowledge often took place directly from the second to the fourth generation to the exclusion of the third generation. The focus of this trans-generational transmission was reading Strand J where the second-generation scholar Zayn al-Umānī was the presiding authority in most of the sessions. Zayn al-Umānī76 was already well into his seventies when the reading strand started. By contrast, the members of the fourth generation of the family were often still in their infancy being as young as four and six years old. It was this age discrepancy that allowed the generational gap between presiding authority and participants to be bridged. The participation of family members did not follow arbitrary patterns. For example, in one session of reading Strand J we encounter among the ten participants six members of the Banū ‘Asākir.77 All of them belonged to the fourth generation and no relative of the third generation accompanied them, although none was above fifteen years old.

71 Muhammad and Habinet Allah: certificate for jār’373 in Ibn ‘Asākir, Tārīkh, LIV, 127 (year 578/1183), Muhammad, Habinet Allah, and Ahmad: certificate for jār’106 in Ibn ‘Asākir, Tārīkh, LIX, 156/7 (year 579/1183).
72 Several certificates between the years 578/1183-2 (Ibn ‘Asākir, Tārīkh, L, 468/1) and 593/1197 (Ibn ‘Asākir, Tārīkh, XLIII, 197). Also see certificate for jār’ 4 in Ibn ‘Asākir, Tārīkh, LIX, 680, 191; Leder et al., Şanlar, 337/8-9, fol. 111a; Abū Hamīd al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Ali (d. 658/ 1260, al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh, 631-660, 341/2; Leder et al., Şanlar, 1088/14-19, fol. 231a; Abū l-Nasir ‘Ali b. Abū al-Latīf (Leder et al., Şanlar, 1592/9-9, fol. 41a; 397/8-1, fol. 111a; 390/3-22, fol. 38a). Among the fourth-generation scholars only Abū l-Fath b. Muhammad and Abū l-Muḥaddal Yahya b. Ḥafṣ b. Maysam b. Ahmad b. al-Dhahabi (d. 670/1270, al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh, 671-680, 333) were not mentioned in other certificates.
73 al-Qāsimi, ‘Ali (d. 618/1221, al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh, 611-620, 417; Leder et al., Şanlar, 1088/14-19, fol. 231a); Abū l-Walī b. Abū al-Malik b. Abū al-Walī b. al-Dhahabi (d. 643/1245, al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh, 641-650, 182; Leder et al., Şanlar, 1123/2-10, fol. 53a; 1592/9-9, fol. 81a; 375/9-8-4, fol. 115b); Hujjat, Abū l-Farāḥ b. Abū al-Ṣamād b. Abū al-Walī (d. 686/1287, al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh, 681-690, 268-70; Leder et al., Şanlar, 1592/9-9, fol. 81a; 1592/1-10, fol. 375/9-4, 115b); Damascus: Abū l-Fāth Ahmad b. Hāfat Allah (d. 805/1403, al-Dhahabi, Tārīkh, 691-700, 349/90; Leder et al., Şanlar, 995/3-1, fol. 21b, 955/2-13, fol. 24a; 955/2-14, fol. 25a; 955/2-25, fol. 25b; 1139/4-7, fol. 59b). He acted in all these sessions as presiding authority.
Their ties can also be seen in their proximity to one another, as these six participants were seated together in the session.

Ultimately the decline of the Banū 'Asikir's fortunes continued and the family was to disappear from the civilian elite of the town. In the course of the seventh/thirteenth century they lost, with one exception, all influence over posts in the civilian administration and the scholarly world.27 This waning influence is also apparent given the fact that members of the family do not only disappear from biographical dictionaries after the fourth generation, but that they also disappear to a large degree from reading certificates. While the Damascene Certificates still mention nine fourth-generation members of the Banū 'Asikir, the number goes down to four for the following generation. In addition, three out of these four were minor actors in the scholarly field who participated in a mere one or two sessions without assuming any role as attending authority or reader.27 This decline was not the product of structural changes within the civilian and scholarly elite in Damascus that would have excluded a family such as the Banū 'Asikir. Rather, the Banū 'Asikir were simply replaced by newly arisen families that did not substantially differ from them: they were well-established local families that belonged to the šafi‘i school. Among these were the al-Dawā‘is, the Banū al-Harārsānī, and the šafi‘i branch of the Banū l-Maqdisī.28

The decline of the Banū 'Asikir began in the early seventh/thirteenth century when the second generation started to disappear. However, the relative renaissance of the family's position in the fourth generation shows that the persistence of established cultural practices in the third and fourth generations were underpinned by a common and viable rationale. Family members continued to have recourse to the central element of the family's cultural capital that was at their disposal. The prominent place of the fourth generation family members in the seating order at readings shows that they still claimed an eminent position in the public performance of the work and that the other participants were still willing to grant them this position. In this sense the analysis of the certificates allows the tracing of the cultural strategies of a family that was on the brink of fading into insignificance and that had already disappeared to a large degree from the narrative sources.

27 The exception is the fifth-generation scholar al-Qasim b. Maqṭṭār b. Maḥmūd (d. 723/1323, al-Dhahabi, Zā‘īd, 706-746, 207/8) who held a post in the treasury and founded his own Dār al-Hadith. Cf. also Leder et al., Senār, 1039/7-7, fol. 73a and 1592/3/1, fol. 67a (and other certificates) where he acted as attending authority in sessions.
28 In addition to the above-named al-Qasim b. Maqṭṭār b. Maḥmūd, these were: 'Abd al-Rāmān b. al-Ḥusayn Aḥī Ḥamīd b. 'Alī (Leder et al., Senār, 3798/10,21-2, fol. 222b und 3798/10,21-16, fol. 231a), Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Maḥmūd and Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn b. 'Alī (both Leder et al., Senār, 3617/7-13, fol. 71b).

On the dominant šafi‘i families in Damascus during the seventh/thirteenth century cf. Pouzet, Damas, 41-46.


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Certificates of audition (in Arabic: samā‘āt) constitute an important source for a diverse range of issues. They proliferated especially in Damascus and Cairo from the 6th/12th to the 9th/15th centuries, with Baghdad, Mecca and Aleppo being other important centres.3 However, there are hitherto no systematic studies on the development of these certificates or on their regional peculiarities.2 While certificates of audition have long been used to reconstruct the transmission history of works and manuscripts, recent studies also demonstrated their value for the social history, historical topography, regional history, and the study of biographies of scholars.3 Nevertheless, the research on certificates of audition remains fragmented, and a large number of issues connected with these certificates have not yet been studied systematically. In the following it shall be demonstrated how certificates of audition can enhance our knowledge of the culture and the proceedings and practices of teaching.

To this end, a new approach to certificates was adopted. While the study of certificates has hitherto usually been confined to single copies or to a corpus of certificates of diverse sessions and by different scholars, the following study is based on the analysis of the certificates of several lecture series of the same teacher. Such lecture series became necessary when voluminous works were transmitted that could not be read in a single session, but were read in a series of consecutive sessions. As each session was documented through a certificate of audition, the reading of the whole book resulted in a series of certificates.

2 For a discussion of some regional peculiarities from Yemen cf. the paper of Quiring-Zoch in this volume.