
Education, general (up to 1500)

Adab

Learning

Madrasas

Pedagogy

Teaching

In its general sense, the word “**education**” denotes the act, process, and result of imparting and acquiring knowledge, values, and skills. This expression applies to both early childhood instruction and basic and higher learning that has the goal of providing individuals or groups of people with the intellectual, physical, moral, and spiritual qualities that will help them to grow, develop, and become useful members of the community and society. In pre-modern Muslim societies, the concept of education was expressed in a variety of terms, and most of these appear to have been used in this sense as early as in the Qur’ān.

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rabbā, “to let grow,” “to raise,” and “to educate”) is the word used to mean “education.”

The contents, objectives, and specifics of classical Islamic education are the subject of numerous proverbs, aphorisms, and wise sayings that are to be found in the numerous and varied forms of literature produced in Islamic lands from the second/eighth to the ninth/fifteenth centuries. Mediaeval Islamic scholarly discussions on learning and teaching are found most often in Arabic and Persian writings on philosophy and theology, as well as in many *belle-lettres*, historical, and mystical texts. A central characteristic of these mediaeval Muslim deliberations on education are is that they are often clearly, even if not explicitly, derived from principles stated in the Qur’ān and prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*); at the same time, however, classical Islamic educational thought was also deeply influenced by the paradigms of the ancient Greek *paideia* (“rearing,” “education”), which was creatively adapted and further developed by Muslim scholars, especially during the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, despite the almost exclusively philosophical nature of educational thought in antiquity.

1. From the “age of ignorance” to Islam

The history and characteristics of Islamic education must be viewed against the background of pre-Islamic Arabia. For the ancient Arabs, poetry was the “record of knowledge” (*dīwān al-‘ilm*) and “the highest expression of wisdom” (*muntahā l-ḥikma*), as Ibn Sallām al-Jumaḥī, a traditionist and philologist from Basra (d. ca. 232/847), put it. A poet (*shā‘ir*) was valued for his skills, as these enabled him to clothe the values and customs of his tribe in beautiful raiment. Moreover, he was highly respected as someone who had special knowledge, which, in turn, was believed to have been inspired in him by higher powers. Yet despite the high esteem in which ancient Arabic poetry continued to be held in Arab culture even after the emergence of Islam and indeed to this day, Muslims refer to the era before the advent of Islam as the “age of ignorance” (*jāhiliyya*). In Islamic retrospect, life in ancient Arabia was marked by paganism, polytheism, and a strong desire for individual fulfilment within the tribal alliance. Muslims of later times equated this period and culture with anarchy, crudeness, and barbarism, the antitheses of

order, culture, and civilisation: for them, Islam was a new way of life, the natural and perfect representation of the virtues of education, which was synonymous with enlightenment, humanity, and cultural progress.

2. Divine teaching and prophetic wisdom

In the Qur'ān, statements regarding education are extremely important. First, there is the assertion that God is the initial and supreme teacher of mankind “who taught by [means of] the pen, who taught man what he did not know” (Q 96:4-5). With these words, often understood in Muslim tradition to have been the very first of the Qur'ānic revelations, Muḥammad appears to have received the divine command to “read” or “recite/proclaim” the Word of God in the name of his Lord, and to teach humanity about God’s message (Q 96:1-5). Many other Qur'ānic passages also contain instructions on matters of faith and religious practice. For example, strong emphasis is placed on the idea that only those who have attained a certain level of education can properly understand the message of the Qur'ān, its teachings, and warnings. Such is the backdrop to the rhetorical question: “Say, ‘How can those who know be equal to those who do not know?’,” to which the immediate answer is: “Only those who have understanding will take heed” (Q 39:9). Similarly, it is stated in the Qur'ān that the ideal religious and political leaders are those to whom God “has given great knowledge and stature” (Q 2:247). Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), the famous rationalist Qur'ān exegete and philologist, illustrated its importance for Islamic education when he said that the Qur'ān is a book that “speaks through evidence and argumentation ... a book that – unlike all other books – can be read [and understood] by every person, and in any place” (al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 95-6).

The *ḥadīth* literature, that extensive body of collections of sayings and actions ascribed to the prophet Muḥammad, contains numerous instructions specifically related to teaching and learning. Oft-quoted statements attributed to the Prophet, such as “search for knowledge, even unto China!,” and “seeking knowledge is a duty for men and women alike,” emphasise the idea that knowledge acquisition and learning has neither geographical nor cultural boundaries, nor is it (male) gender-specific. On the contrary, the education of girls was said to have special

merit, because “a father who has a daughter and teaches her good manners, educates her in the best possible way, and spends on her from the blessing that God has bestowed on him ... will be safeguarded from hell” (*lahū sitr min al-nār*; cf. Ibn Ḥajar 22:210, no. 5995). Again, the purported instruction of the Prophet that the “person with the soundest understanding of the Book of God and the most experience in the interpretation [of Scripture] shall lead the people [... in prayer]” underlines the ideal that religious and social leaders should have a high level of education. The fact that this educational ideal includes both religious and secular knowledge is clearly expressed in other prophetic traditions as well. A prominent example is the account in which the prophet Muḥammad, after the Muslims had won the battle of Badr in 2/624, reportedly released seventy Meccan prisoners, who were literate, on the condition that each of them teach ten Muslim children from Medina how to read and write (see, for example, Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* iv, 92 (no. 2216); Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt* ii, 20).

3. Informal and institutionalised higher learning

In the first three centuries of Islam, the transfer of the knowledge needed in the religiously defined disciplines (such as the study of prophetic traditions, Qur’ānic exegesis, Islamic history, Islamic law, Arabic language, etc.) primarily took place in assemblies or “sessions” (sing. *majlis*) and in classes with a restricted number of students, also known as “study circles” (sing. *ḥalqa*). These were held in mosques, or sometimes in scholars’ private homes. Oral instruction was the predominant form of teaching, and students travelled far and wide in “the quest for knowledge” (*ṭalab al-‘ilm*). While the study circles were generally a small group of students listening to their teacher, sessions were often mass lectures that attracted thousands of people, becoming an important event in town life. Al-Bukhārī’s (d. 256/870) public lecture in Baghdad, for example, is said to have attracted 20,000 students, while the lectures of other scholars are reported to have had even larger audiences. Although these figures may be exaggerated, they still give an impression of the scale of this form of public education (Weisweiler, *Office*, 11). Those devoted to mysticism received spiritual training in more secluded places such as the *ribāṭ* (lit. “a thing which with one ties, binds, or makes fast”; a dwelling

for mystics; but see also Q 8:60), *zāwiya* (lit.: “corner” or “cell”; prayer room or small mosque), and *khānqāh* (“convent” or hostel).

The personal relationship between the teacher (*mu‘allim*, *mudarris*, *shaykh*) or, for mystics, the spiritual leader (*murshid*) and his pupil or student (*tilmīdh*, *muta‘allim*, *ṭālib*) or disciple (*murīd*) was considered a guarantee of the authenticity of the transmitted knowledge. The concept of close, personal contact between teacher and student as a way of safeguarding the transmission of religious knowledge is, to this day, a basic principle of teaching in the religious disciplines in Islam. Yet as early as the first/seventh century, teachers and students were regularly using written notes and collected materials as *aide-memoires*. From the third/ninth century onward, with the advent of readily available and relatively inexpensive paper, books and other written documents became a particularly effective and regularly-employed medium for the preservation and transfer of knowledge in Islam (Schoeler, *Genesis*, 111-26; see also Rosenthal, *Knowledge*, 76, 93, 240).

4. The reception of the Greek, Iranian, and Indian heritage

The period from the third/ninth to the seventh/thirteenth century was an extremely fruitful time for Muslim scholars in both the humanities and natural sciences. Islamic civilisation, which extended from the Iberian Peninsula to China, was becoming a knowledge society, one characterised by intellectual dynamism and a relatively high degree of religious tolerance and academic freedom. One stimulus to Islamic learning in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries whose importance cannot be overstated was the translation into Arabic of philosophical and scientific works. These translations included books of ancient learning, particularly in its Greek and Hellenistic forms, as well as works of Persian, Indian, and Babylonian origin, and, using these as a base, Muslim scholars were able to make significant advances in a wide range of fields. Indeed, these translation activities, mostly carried out by Arabic-speaking Syriac-Christian and Iranian scholars, resulted in what can be called the Hellenisation of mediaeval Islam. While the ‘Abbāsīd caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170-93/786-809) advanced and made the translation work that had been started in Umayyad times routine, it is primarily the

caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 198-218/813-33) who has been credited with sending out emissaries far and wide in search of ancient scientific and literary texts, which he then had translated into Arabic. He sometimes even attended in person the scholarly discussions of these works at his court (Biesterfeldt, *Hellenistische Wissenschaften*, 9-37; Gutas, *Greek thought*; Mavroudi, Greek language, 322).

Important centres of teaching and study arose in Damascus and Aleppo in Syria; in Basra, Ḥilla, Karbalā', Kufa, and Najaf in Iraq; in Qum, Mashhad, and Isfahan in Iran; and in Farghāna in what today is Uzbekistan. Important centres were also established in al-Qayrawān and Tunis in what today is Tunisia; in Fès (Morocco); and in Córdoba and Toledo in al-Andalus, that part of the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule between 92/711 and 897/1492.

Richly endowed libraries and special research institutions, famous far beyond local boundaries, were established in large numbers. The *Bayt al-ḥikma* ("House of wisdom") in Baghdad was the caliphal library of the early 'Abbāsids. Originally named *Khizānat al-ḥikma* ("Treasury of Wisdom") when it was founded by Hārūn al-Rashīd, it continued to develop and prosper under al-Ma'mūn. Storing, preserving, and transmitting knowledge, it provided scholars with a space for scientific reflection and research (Gutas/Bladel, *Bayt al-ḥikma*, 133-6; Janos, al-Ma'mūn's patronage, 441-2, which reconsiders some of Gutas' findings). Similarly, the Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥākim (r. 386-411/996-1021) established a *Dār al-'ilm* ("House of knowledge") in Cairo in 395/1005, which was primarily dedicated to non-religious sciences (Halm, *Fatimids*, 71-8).

5. Literary salons

Social gatherings, literary discussions, and scholarly debates were frequent events at the 'Abbāsīd court and the houses of the rich. At the time of the caliph al-Ma'mūn, there were large numbers of literary salons where scholars and littérateurs would assemble to discuss religion, philosophy, literature, and music. These salons, which hosted ritualised meetings for socialising and intellectual exchange, continued to flourish in Baghdad until the destruction of the city by the Mongols, apart from two brief intermezzos during the periods of the caliphs al-Mutawakkil (r. 232-47/847-61) and al-Mu'taḍid (r. 279-89/892-902), who

apparently attempted to suppress this kind of unrestricted learning and literary exchange, to some extent at least (Ali, *Arabic literary salons*; Behzadi, *Muslimische Intellektuelle*, 291-320).

6. Religious learning. Approaches and locations

As early as the second/eighth century Muslim scholars were employing a variety of approaches and locations for the religious instruction of pupils and students. A novel approach in schooling is evident, for example, in the increasing production and use of textbooks. Growing out of the needs of Qur'ān readers in the late Umayyad and early 'Abbāsīd periods, scholars of Arabic grammar, for instance, began writing textbooks on the subject. For example, Mu'ādh al-Harrā' (d. 187/803), a Kufan schoolteacher and grammarian, is recognised as one of the earliest authors of grammar books used in teaching (Abbott, 6-7, 25). His Basran and Kufan contemporaries penned diverse lexical and grammatical works serving the educational and practical needs of pupils, secretaries, copyists, and booksellers. The supply of textbooks on grammar and other topics, both religious and secular, "increased steadily to meet the demands of teachers (*mu'allimūn*) in the mosque schools as well as those of private tutors (*mu'addibūn*) and their charges at the court and in the homes of nobility and the wealthy," as Abbott has shown from her studies of Arabic literary papyri from the late third/early tenth century (Abbott, 6-7, 25-31). Furthermore, scholars increasingly combined teaching and research, as they initially presented their material in their lectures and seminars before subsequently publishing them. A notable example in this regard is the prolific exegete and historian Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (224-310/839-923), who reportedly included in his still authoritative compilations on Qur'ānic exegesis and Islamic history material that he first presented in lectures before then publishing (Ṭabarī, *History*, 1:80).

6.1. The mosque

Another development in Islamic religious learning relates to the fact that, alongside the conventional informal instruction in assemblies and study circles at the mosques and scholars' homes, schools and colleges emerged as places that provided the space and the environment for more professionalised and

institutionalised teaching.

These schools often appear to have been hosted by, or been physically identical with, the mosque. George Makdisi, whose ground-breaking work *The rise of colleges* has remained to date the classic study of Islamic educational institutions, wrote: “[it] is certain ... that the *masjid* was the first type of college in Islam, ... it was endowed, and the income of the endowment paid the salary of the professor, who was usually its imām, or leader in prayer. ... [T]he student benefited in that he had no tuition to pay; but he had to provide for his own lodging and subsistence” (Makdisi, *Rise*, 29).

Early mosques used for professional schooling include the *Masjid Rasūl Allāh* (“The mosque of the Messenger of God”) in Medina where the Qur’ān-reader and transmitter of prophetic traditions Yazīd b. al-Qa‘qā‘ al-Qāri’ is said to have taught before the battle of Ḥarra in 63/683, waged by the second Umayyad caliph, Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiya (r. 60-4/680-3), against Medina (Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt* 6:274). Other early school mosques were designated by the names of the scholars who taught at them, such as the *Masjid of ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak* (d. 181/797), a well-educated merchant and scholar. Some early school mosques had an adjacent *khān*, or “lodge,” a word of Persian origin, as a residence for out-of-town students (Makdisi, *Rise*, 21-4; Ahmed, *Muslim education*, 106).

A particularly famous early school mosque is the *Jāmi‘ al-zaitūna* (“Mosque of the olive-tree”) in modern Tunisia, which dates from the early second/eighth century. It later developed into an important institution of higher learning in the Maghreb, and is sometimes called the oldest university in the Islamic world. Likewise, the *Jāmi‘ al-Qarawiyyīn* (“Mosque of the people [of al-Qayrawān]”) was founded in 245/859 in Fès, Morocco, by Fāṭima bt. Muḥammad al-Fihri, the pious daughter of a rich merchant originally from al-Qayrawān (Ibn Khaldūn, *Ta‘rīkh*, 4:20); initially this was the Friday mosque for a quarter inhabited mainly by migrant families from al-Qayrawān. In the fourth/tenth and sixth/twelfth centuries, local Berber rulers and the Almoravids (r. 448-541/1056-1147) significantly extended the *Jāmi‘ al-Qarawiyyīn*, and it has played an important role in the Maghreb as a centre of religious, cultural, and social education ever since (Brandenburg, *Die*

Madrasa, 56). In 359/970 in Cairo, the Shīʿī Fāṭimid dynasty established *al-Azhar* (“The radiant,” or “The blooming”) as a mosque for the imām-caliph and his court. Soon after, in 378/988, the *wazīr* Ibn Killis (d. 380/991) ordered the erection of a building right next to *al-Azhar* for the exclusive purpose of teaching, with Islamic law being a focus of study. When the Ayyūbids came to power (r. 566-648/1171-1250) *al-Azhar* became a Sunnī mosque and institution of higher learning, and has remained so to this day, coming, over time, to be viewed as the perhaps most important religious university in the Islamic world.

6.2. The *kuttāb* and *maktab*

Smaller schools in or near mosques, and sometimes in bookstores or private homes, were called *kuttāb* or *maktab* (lit. “a place for people who write,” “place where the art of writing is taught,” “school”; cf. Lane, 7:2591). The mediaeval Arabic sources yield little direct information about the number, architecture, and curricula of these earliest schools for elementary teaching and the training that led to higher education. However, glimpses of the enormous educational potential of the early Islamic city are provided by the Baghdad historian and geographer al-Yaʿqūbī (d. after 292/905); given the fact that every large mosque and bookstore could potentially have served as a place of religious instruction – whether informally or on a more professional basis – al-Yaʿqūbī writes that, in the third/ninth century, thirty thousand mosques were located in a certain quarter (*qaṭīʿa*) of Baghdad, and there were fifteen thousand mosques located on the larger eastern side of the ʿAbbāsīd capital. In addition, a hundred bookshops (*ḥānūt al-warrāqīn*) were to be found in this part of the city (Yaʿqūbī, *Buldān*, 27, 35, 42-8; see also Toutah, *Contribution*, 15).

6.3. The *madrasa*

The institution of higher Islamic learning *par excellence* is known as the *madrasa*. Literally, the Arabic term *madrasa* means “place of study.” The verbal noun *tadrīs*, “teaching,” derives from the second form of the Arabic verb *darrasa*, initially meaning “to make someone read,” or “read repeatedly,” or “to make him study” in order to remember (Lane, 3:871). In a more specialised sense, *darrasa*, without a complement, also came to sometimes mean “to teach law (*sharīʿa*).” In

the classical period of Islam, the *madrasa* was an institution for specialised and professional high-level instruction in Islamic law and its auxiliary fields of knowledge, and is thus often rendered into English as “college” or “college of law.” The origins of the *madrasa* seem to have been early- and mid-fourth/tenth century Bukhārā and Nīshāpūr, which were at that time significant centres of religious learning in the eastern regions of Islam. From the fifth/eleventh century, the institution of the *madrasa* spread westwards, and the fifth/eleventh to eighth/fourteenth centuries are considered the heyday of the classical *madrasa*.

6.3.1. Early history

The question of when the first *madrāsas* appeared is still a matter of debate in contemporary Islamic studies. There are three major points of consideration. First, with the rapid advances in Islamic culture and civilisation under the ‘Abbāsids, the manner of scholarly communication changed in order to underpin educationally the growth of Arabic-Islamic society. For example, disputation (sing. *munāẓara*), a new method of scholarly exchange, had become, by the second half of the second/eighth century, a key aspect of the ‘Abbāsīd court during the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd, and increasingly took place in academic circles as well, especially between (orthodox) Ash‘arī and (rationalist) Mu‘tazilī theologians (van Ess, *Disputationspraxis*, 28-31; van Ess, *Theologie*, 3:31, 199), but also in other religious disciplines such as grammar and literary criticism, as well as in physics and medicine (McKinney, 66-81). Debate was now seen as a way of learning, as it helped to overcome one’s own scholarly shortcomings – a piece of advice given to students by the lexicographer al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. ca. 175/791) (*al-Jāhiz, Bayān*, 1:247). But scholarly debate was also used both as a method of reinforcing knowledge acquired previously and as a didactic tool through which scholars and students learned to defend their own position; this was especially the case in the study of law. The renowned jurist al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820) is said to have used the method of *munāẓara* extensively with other scholars, including Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), and with his students, as portrayed by al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066; cf. his *Manāqib*, 1:187-219; al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1:220, 236-7). Thus, learning through mutual studying (*mudhākara*) and disputation (*munāẓara, jadal*; cf. the scriptural

warrant for disputation at Q 16:125) gained in importance vis-à-vis the conventional methods of having students merely listen to lectures (*samāʿ*) and take down dictation (*imlāʿ*). This is illustrated, for example, by the fact that the famous *ḥadīth* scholar Abū Muḥammad al-Dārimī (d. 255/869) included in his *Sunan* (his widely recognised compilation of prophetic traditions) an entire chapter entitled *mudhākarat al-ʿilm* (“Studying through exchanging knowledge”; al-Dārimī, *Sunan*, 1:146-51). A particularly famous *munāẓara* on the relative merits of grammar and philosophy, which took place in 320/932 between the grammarian Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfī and the logician of the Aristotelian tradition Abū Bishr Mattā b. Yūnus, was reported by the man of letters and philosopher Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 424/1023, cf. his *al-Imtāʿ*, 1:107-29; also Mez, *Renaissance*, 179-80, and Sezgin, *Geschichte*, 1:58-62, for technical terms used in religious education). As mosques were generally unsuitable for such interactive instruction and scholarly debate, separate buildings for the exclusive purpose of schooling, the *madrasas*, came to be erected, though often in close proximity to mosques.

Secondly, a much more practical reason for the emergence and spread of the *madrasa* pertains to the fact that students, who often travelled far and wide “in search of knowledge,” needed somewhere to live after attaching themselves to a certain scholar for a long period of time. The older *madrasas* offered space for both teaching and lodging, and one specific function was to serve as hostels for the *ahl al-ʿilm*, or “people of knowledge” (Halm, *Die Anfänge*, 442-3). As such, it was not uncommon for a *madrasa* to be founded at the tomb, burial ground, or shrine (*qabr/maqbar, mashhad*) of a famous martyr, scholar, or ancestor, or near a mosque or a scholar’s home.

Thirdly, teaching at these earliest *madrasas* was rather informal. There was no distinct curriculum, no salaried teaching personnel, and no preference for any one of the many Sunnī law schools (later reduced to four) over the others. The scholar who founded a *madrasa* or taught at it instructed the students in his own scholarly interests and specialisation.

The earliest known *madrasa* was the Madrasa-ye Fārjak in Bukhārā. It was destroyed in 325/937 by a great fire in the city, as mentioned in the Persian *History*

of *Bukhārā* by Abū Bakr al-Narshakhī (d. 348/959; p. 26). Other early personal *madrasas* from the first half of the fourth/tenth century are reported to have been located in Nīshāpūr, including those of Abū l-Walīd Ḥassān b. Muḥammad al-Qurashī (d. 349/960), built near his house; Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṣibghī (d. 350/961), who is said to have issued *fatwās* there following the death of his father; and of Aḥmad b. Ishāq b. Ayyūb al-Ṣibghī (d. 342/953-4), called the *Dār al-sunna*, and which was built at the entrance of the Friday Mosque (Halm, *Die Anfänge*, 438). Other *madrasas* in Nīshāpūr were established for Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī (or al-Isfarāʾīnī, d. 418/1027) and Abū Bakr b. al-Fūrak (d. 406/1015), two distinguished Ashʿarī theologians and Shāfiʿī jurists of the time. While al-Isfarāyīnī's *madrasa* was constructed in a manner not previously seen in Nīshāpūr (a piece of information that thus confirms the existence of other *madrasas* in the city; *buniya lahū al-madrasa allatī lam yubna qablahā bi-Nīsābūr mithluhā*), Ibn al-Fūrak's was erected beside the *khānqāh* of the Ṣūfī al-Būshanjī (d. 348/959), as reported by the Nīshāpūr historian and teacher Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥākim, known as Ibn al-Bayyīʿ (d. 405/1014; al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 3:111, 137). Likewise, the Shāfiʿī jurist Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ʿUbaydallāh Abū Bakr al-Bustī (d. 429/1037), expressly identified in the sources as a leading teacher (*mudarris*) and disputant (*munāẓir*) in Nīshāpūr, built a *madrasa* at the gate of his house and gave it an endowment (al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 3:33, 111, 137; Mez, *Renaissance*, 180).

The *madrasa* of the Shāfiʿī scholar Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī (d. 354/965) was originally a *khānqāh*, a place for spiritual retreat, which he founded and where he taught between 948-51 when visiting Nīshāpūr for the second time. After his death it was turned into a *madrasa* and the students were provided with stipends from the endowment of its founder (al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:131). In Baghdad, the *madrasa* of the leading Twelver Shīʿī theologian and jurist al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022) was an example of an early Shīʿī *madrasa*, one whose designation was linked to the scholar who founded and taught at it (Stewart, *Portrayal*, 217; for scholars from the mid-fourth/tenth to the sixth/twelfth century who taught at *madrasas* in the eastern regions of the Islamic world see Nouri, 192, 208 and 626-30).

6.3.2. The classical madrasa

The largest and most widely known institution of higher learning in classical Islam was the Nizāmiyya in Baghdad, built in 459/1067. Unlike the early, personal *madrasas* of individual scholars, the Nizāmiyya was founded by a representative of the state, the Saljūq regent and *wazīr* Nizām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092). Nizām al-Mulk was born in Nīshāpūr and may very well have been inspired by the *madrasas* he had seen there. With his establishment of the Nizāmiyya, however, the development of the *madrasa* reached a new level, as academic life at these colleges now became professionalised and institutionalised. Thus, the *madrasa* supplemented, but never supplanted, the mosque as an educational institution, and “students and teachers moved freely from one to the other according to their inclinations or needs” (Tibawi, *Origin*, 225).

At the *Nizāmiyya*, the first chair of Shāfi‘ī jurisprudence was given to Abū Ishāq al-Shirāzī (d. 476/1083). He held this position for 16 years, the longest tenure for which it was held during this period. The Nizāmiyya’s most famous teacher was Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), an authoritative theologian, jurist, and mystic. He was known to lecture to more than 300 students at a time and was its rector for many years (Makdisi, *Institutions*, 31-48; Shalaby, *History*, 205-22).

The *Mustanṣiriyya* was another famous institution of higher learning in Baghdad. Its foundations were laid in 625/1227 on the instructions of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh (r. 623-40/1226-42). When the building was completed in 631/1234, the caliph appointed his *wazīr*, Mu’ayyad al-Dīn Abū Ṭālib Muḥammad b. ‘Aqamī, as the first *ustādh al-dār*, or rector of the college. The building consisted of two stories, with four rectangular halls (sing. *īwān*) running up to the full height of both levels. Each of these *īwāns* was dedicated to the use of one of the four Sunnī law schools: Shāfi‘īs, Ḥanafīs, Ḥanbalīs, and Mālikīs, thus making the *Mustanṣiriyya* the first “universal *madrasa*.” While the traces of many mediaeval institutions of higher learning have faded away, the building of the *Mustanṣiriyya* survived the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 656/1258 and has been restored (for the *Mustanṣiriyya* see Schmid, *Die Madrasa*; colleges of different types, including all four Sunnī law schools, are recorded in Makdisi, *Muslim Institutions*, 17-29; for Nīshāpūr *madrasas* see Bulliet, *Patricians*, 249-55).

6.3.3. Regional spread

Taking the *Nizāmiyya* in Baghdad as a model, Sunnī institutions of higher learning were soon also established in Ṭūs, Basra, Isfahan, Herat, Balkh, and Merv. Several *madrasas* were built in Anatolia by the Saljūq sultans (r. 469-706/1077-1307), and in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt by Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd Zangī (r. 541-69/1146-74) and by Salāḥ al-Dīn (“Saladin,” r. 567-89/1171-93), the founder of the Ayyūbid dynasty, as well as by that dynasty’s successors, the Mamlūks. Remarkable examples are those established in Konya, Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo (cf. Brandenburg, *Die Madrasa*, 23-54).

In North Africa and Islamic Spain religious learning continued to take place primarily in mosques, *kuttāb*, and the homes of teachers until around the middle of the sixth/twelfth century, when the Almohad dynasty was founded. In these regions the Almohad ruler Ya‘qūb al-Manṣūr (r. 580-95/1184-99) is credited with having built a *madrasa* north of the Great Mosque of Salā (Salé, in modern Morocco) in 593/1197. Likewise, the Marīnid ruler Ya‘qūb b. ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq (r. 656-85/1259-86) built *madrasas* for those in search of knowledge. His son, Abū Sa‘īd ‘Uthmān b. Ya‘qūb (r. 709-31/1310-31), followed in his footsteps in 723/1323 when he had *al-Madrasa al-‘uzmā* (“The great college”) built in Fès, on the northern side of the *Qarawiyyīn*. This *madrasa*, one of the most beautiful in the Maghreb, is known today as the *Madrasat al-‘aṭṭārīn* (“College of the [quarter of the] perfume vendors”). Other such institutions followed in Tlemcen, Tunis, Tripoli, and Grenada, where in 750/1349 a large *madrasa* was built by the Naṣrīd ruler Yūsuf Abū l-Ḥajjāj (r. 733-55/1333-54). Academic life and study courses at *madrasas* in the Maghreb appear to have been generally comparable to those in the eastern parts of the Islamic lands, with the notable difference that in its Western parts the study of Islamic law focused on the foundational texts of the Mālikī law school that was predominant in the region (al-Qāḍī, *al-Madrasa*, 703-14, 722).

Shī‘ī *madrasas* prospered in Iran under the Ṣafavid dynasty (907-1148/1501-1736) and served as a counterweight to the growing Sunnī influence in the realm of education elsewhere in the Islamic world.

6.3.4. Characteristics

Educationally, the classical *madrasa* was distinguished by its specialised curriculum, which focused on Islamic law and ancillary subjects such as the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, the Arabic language and, by no means the least important, logic. The latter two were deemed indispensable for the study of law and religion. Its institutional educational goals were the certification of teachers and students, and the preparation of personnel for the caliphal administration. The course of studies was informal and there were no examinations. The certificate from a professor confirming that a student had successfully completed the study of a particular text (*ijāza*) also authorised that student to transmit and teach the text in question (Stewart, *Doctorate*, 45-52).

Organisationally, the *madrasa* included “an organized and differentiated student body; a professoriate certified to teach”; as well as the appointment, tenure, and succession of the professor(s) (Chamberlain, *Knowledge*, 70). The institution was headed by a senior *shaykh* or *imām*. Political rulers supervised appointments, but did not generally play an active role in hiring the teaching personnel. They did, however, reserve themselves the right to appoint the head *imām*-professor. The *madrasa*'s buildings provided classrooms and living quarters for both teachers and students. *Madrasas* were maintained by dedicated endowments (sing. *waqf*) that provided financial support for faculty and students.

In social terms, the *madrasa* was “a privately endowed institution destined for the public, but [it was so] according to the wishes of the individual founder who established the institution, and who limited its public character” (Makdisi, *Rise*, 300). In other words, the classical *madrasa* was not a state institution, even though representatives of the state often instigated their founding. Furthermore, studying at a *madrasa* appears to have particularly benefitted men who were not part of a city's scholarly elite, or were immigrants. By attracting individuals from different social groups, geographical origins, and educational traditions, the classical *madrasa* helped facilitate both the formation of a more coherent body of scholars in a given city and the transregional association of scholars in the Islamic empire at large (Ephrat, *A Learned Society* 114-5).

Earlier generations of Western scholars (e.g., Goldziher, *Vorlesungen*, 120)

argued that the *madrasa* had a political function as an institution intended primarily to develop the ideological cadres necessary for the revival of Sunnī orthodoxy, which ended a period of the Shī'ī dominance in the eastern regions. This view was most strongly countered by Makdisi, who stressed that the classical *madrasa*'s main purpose was to institutionalise the teaching of Islamic law – an understanding supported by the case studies of later scholars (e.g., Berkey, *Transmission*; Chamberlain, *Knowledge*). While mediaeval *madrasas* did have a political dimension, the religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) enjoyed relative freedom with respect to the content and mechanisms of knowledge transmission and, for the most part, suffered little interference from those in power (Mottahedeh, *Mantle*, 231).

Certainly, the rise of an extensive network of *madrasa* colleges, both Sunnī and Shī'ī, especially in the eastern parts of the mediaeval Muslim world with their restricted, religiously oriented curriculum, increasingly came to affect the thematic cohesiveness of Islamic learning. This led to intellectual conservatism and, among certain scholars, to a disapproval of “secular” learning, something that would have repercussions for the general development of Islamic education in the centuries to come (Makdisi, *Rise*, 153; Makdisi, *Muslim Institutions*, 14-5; Fück, *Die Rolle*, 161-84; Berkey, *Transmission*, 44-94; Chamberlain, *Knowledge*, 72-90, 106-7).

6.3.5. The ḥawza

A different kind of higher learning institution was the Shī'ī theological seminary known today as the *ḥawza* or *ḥawza 'ilmiyya*, which originally meant “a place of guarding [religious knowledge]” (Lane, 2:668). The *ḥawza* was a centre of Shī'ī learning dedicated to providing education in a strictly structured religious environment. The *ḥawza* curriculum was rather flexible: instruction focused on Islamic law and the principles of Islamic jurisprudence according to Shī'ī doctrines, while other topics taught included the history of the Shī'ī *imāms* and their traditions, Arabic grammar and syntax, rhetoric, logic, Qur'ānic exegesis, theology, and sometimes philosophy (Halm, *The Fatimids*, 44; Günther, *Bildung*, 217-8).

The origins of these scholarly centres date back to Baghdad and Qum in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, a time when internal Twelver Shī'ī debates took place between rationalist scholars (in Baghdad) and traditionalists (in Qum)

(Newman, *Formative period*, 12-49, 193-201). The equivalent in Najaf was reportedly founded in the fifth/eleventh century, a time at which Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī, known as al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), played a key role in Shīʿī learning; today he is seen by most Shīʿī Muslims as the founder of the *ḥawza* in Najaf, as it is currently known. Al-Ṭūsī moved to the shrine of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib in Najaf after his house in Baghdad was plundered in 449/1057 following the Sunnī Saljūqs' takeover of the city. His notes (*dafātir*) and the chair (*kursī*) he used for teaching were taken away (Ibn Jawzī [d. 597/1201], *al-Muntaẓam*, 26:8) and burned, as reported by the Shīʿī scholar al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī (d. 726/1325, *Khulāṣat*, 249) and the Sunnī historian al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348, *Siyar* 18:335). In Najaf, al-Ṭūsī began teaching again and laid the foundations for the city to become an important centre of Shīʿī learning.

7. Elementary education

Generally, the elementary education of children from the age of six or seven years took place in primary or Qurʾān schools (sing. *kuttāb* or *maktab*). Classes were held in either a mosque's atrium or a sheltered place suitable for teaching that was in or near the teacher's home. The curriculum in these elementary schools consisted of certain mandatory subjects, including correct recitation and memorisation of the Qurʾān, or at least certain passages of it, reading and writing, and religious norms and rules for good behaviour as duties to God, as the Tunisian jurist Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn (d. 256/870) specified for the elementary schools in the third/ninth century (Günther, *Advice*, 95-110). Pupils were also instructed in writing, arithmetic, and the fundamentals of the Arabic language and grammar. The study of Arabic poetry and proverbs, as well as historical reports and the legends of the ancient Arabs was, however, only optional. Elementary schools in mediaeval Islam were, for the most part, solely attended by boys. Girls were usually educated at home, and often only in housekeeping (Günther, *Bildung*, 225; Hirschler, 82-123).

8. The concept of *adab*

The humanistic characteristics and objectives of classical Islamic education are embodied in the term *adab*. While in pre-Islamic Arabic the word mainly referred

to the good upbringing (of children) and behavioural etiquette, its meaning was profoundly expanded during the early centuries of Islam. Primarily between the third/ninth and fifth/eleventh centuries, *adab* came to mean intellectual education, the knowledge required for a certain profession, and blameless moral behaviour and refined manners. From the third/ninth century at the latest, *adab* also denoted an important category of Arabic writing with the dual purpose of both instructing and entertaining the reader, a concept for which the term “belles-lettres” provides a close approximation. Accordingly, the expression *ādāb al-mulūk* (“the rules of conduct for kings [and princes]”) refers to the “mirrors for princes” literary genre, a range of strongly didactic texts written in Arabic, Persian, and various Turkic languages. Particularly famous works of this type include the collection of fables *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (“Kalila and Dimna”) and the *Kitāb al-adab al-ṣaghīr* (“The concise book of good manners”) by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. ca. 139/756), as well as the works entitled *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk* (“Advice for kings”) by or attributed to al-Ghazālī, Abū I-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), and ʿAbd al-Malik b. Muḥammad al-Thaʿālibī (d. 430/1038), as well as *Kanz al-mulūk fī kayfiyyat al-sulūk* (“The treasure of princes about the fashion of behaviour”) by Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī (d. 654/1256) (Bosworth, *Mirrors*, 165-7; Zakeri, *Persian wisdom*, 1:xi-xii, 326-38; Marzolph, *Migration*, 175-8).

9. Pedagogical thought in classical Islam

The earliest Muslim treatise with an explicitly pedagogical approach was the *Kitāb al-ʿālim wa-l-mutaʿallim* (“The book of the one who knows and the one who wants to know”). This work has traditionally been ascribed to the Kufan jurist and theologian Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nuʿmān b. Thābit (d. 150/767), the eponym of the largest of the four Sunnī schools of law. However, this popular work was apparently written by one of his students, Abū Muqātil al-Samarqandī (d. 208/823; cf. Schacht, *Murciʿite treatise*, 96-117; Rudolph, *al-Māturīdī*, 44-53). In the Socratic manner, the treatise consists of the *quaestiones* a disciple asks his master and the detailed *responsa* the master offers. Although neither Abū Ḥanīfa nor al-Samarqandī are mentioned in the text by name, later Muslim scholars identified them as the two around whom the text revolves, and suggested that their conversation took place

during a meeting in Mecca. The thematic focus of the book is on Islamic “creeds and advice concerning the way a student puts questions and a teacher responds” (according to the Ottoman scholar Ḥajjī Khalīfa (d. 1068/1657); cf. Schacht, Murci’ite treatise, 97). In addition to the fact that this very early text promotes the question-answer pattern as a key method of active learning, it is also of pedagogical interest for its admonitions to make creative use of reason even in religious matters, to always apply cognitive investigation when attempting to distinguish truth from falsehood, and that those who strive for knowledge have an obligation to concentrate on the essence of things.

The first proper pedagogical manual in Islam was a handbook for teachers compiled by Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn (d. 256/870), a Mālikī jurist from al-Qayrawān. Under the title *Ādāb al-mu‘allimīn* (“Rules of conduct for teachers”), Ibn Saḥnūn provides elementary school teachers with legal and practical advice on various aspects of teaching, such as the hiring and paying of teachers, how to organise lessons and the curriculum, how to work with students in class, the permissibility of punishment, the required classroom equipment and teaching materials, and on examinations and graduation (Günther, *Be masters*, 369-71).

In his *Kitāb al-mu‘allimīn* (“The book of teachers”), the philosophical theologian and littérateur ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868-9) highlights the importance of instructing students in the techniques of logical argumentation and deduction, as well as in good written expression. The reading of books was also explicitly recommended for learning, as it was said to promote creative thinking (Günther, *Advice*, 110-26).

Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman (fl. first half of the fourth/tenth century), an Ismā‘īlī author, presented a full-scale dramatic dialogue of spiritual initiation in his *Kitāb al-‘ālim wa-l-ghulām* (“The master and the disciple”). Relating to the quest for and gradual achievement of spiritual knowledge, the author gives instructions in both “the proper behavior of those who are seeking the truth (*ādāb al-ṭālibīn*) and the ‘ways of proceeding’—through appropriate action, teaching and belief—of ‘the righteous,’ of those who are spiritually receptive, prepared and suited for those ways (*madhāhib al-ṣāliḥīn*)” (Morris, *Master*, 3).

The philosopher and logician Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), on the other hand, made a case for covering both “indigenous” (i.e. Islamic religious subjects based on the Qur’ān and Qur’ānic exegesis) and “foreign” sciences (i.e. those based on Greek philosophy and other “foreign” disciplines) in his *Iḥṣā’ al-‘ulūm* (“The enumeration of the sciences”). The idea of an integrated curriculum influenced the studies of philosophers (and physicians), as they generally followed this approach in their informal study and discussion circles. However, it failed to become established in formalised higher education in Islam. The polymath Abū ‘Alī b. Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 428/1037), in turn, was primarily interested in the education of children; in his great *al-Qānūn fī l-ṭibb* (“The canon of medicine”) he asserted, for example, that a stable emotional environment and the requisite protection of a child’s physical and psychological development are essential for successful learning and teaching (Ibn Sīnā, *Qānūn*, 68–9, 379; Günther, *Be masters*, 376-80).

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī is rightly considered the principal architect of classical Islamic education. He accepted Greek logic as a neutral means of learning and recommended that students of religion-related subjects, including theology and jurisprudence, learn to understand and apply it. Al-Ghazālī’s wealth of experience in teaching is reflected in his many treatises on the role of knowledge and of teaching and learning. In what is perhaps his most important book, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (“The revival of the religious sciences”), al-Ghazālī includes several lengthy chapters advising learners to begin by cleansing their souls of bad behaviour and reprehensible qualities in order to make themselves worthy of receiving knowledge. They should concentrate fully and completely on their studies, show no arrogance toward a subject or a teacher, achieve a firm grasp of one discipline before moving on to another, and structure their studies so as to begin with the most important branches of knowledge first. Furthermore, students should aspire to spiritual perfection rather than worldly fame and fortune. Teachers, on the other hand, are advised by al-Ghazālī to be empathetic to their students and to treat them as if they were their own children. Teachers should imitate the example set by the prophet Muḥammad in teaching without pay. They must never withhold

good advice from a student, must motivate learners with friendly guidance rather than discouraging them with direct criticism, and should facilitate success in, and enjoyment of, learning (Günther, Principles, 82-4).

Although not an author of a pedagogical manual *per se*, the Andalusī-Arab philosopher and physician Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 595/1198), in his famous *Faṣl al-maqāl* (“The decisive treatise”), makes important statements about educational theory and practice. The core of these is the idea that the pursuit of philosophy is a religious duty for the intellectual elite, while for the masses religion provides instruction in basic truths. However, Ibn Rushd saw logic as the main path to knowledge, with the intellect as its vehicle. Burhān al-Dīn al-Zarnūjī (d. first half of seventh/thirteenth century), in his widely read *Ta’līm al-muta’allim ṭarīq al-ta’allum* (“Instructing the learner in the method of learning”), offers detailed advice on the study of theology, for example with respect to content, technique (repetition and memorisation had a prominent role), and the importance of mutual respect between teachers and students. Like many of his contemporaries, and later scholars as well, he stressed the authority of knowledge that had already been ascertained. Ibn Jamā’a (d. 733/1333), a Shāfi’ī *qāḍī* from Egypt, wrote one of the best-known manuals on the contents and methods of Islamic learning. While he emphasises the central role of the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* as primary sources of knowledge, Ibn Jamā’a also strongly promotes the idea of books and wide reading as indispensable tools for learning. Furthermore, teachers are advised to adapt their instruction to the intellectual level and physical capacities of the student, and should motivate students, facilitate learning as much as possible, and constantly evaluate the students’ progress. The latter, in turn, should be sincere in their desire to learn. They should devote their youth to the pursuit of knowledge and divide their nights and days so as to learn most effectively: memorisation in the early morning, research at dawn, writing around midday, and study and discussion in the evening. Student access to sources that might contradict a teacher’s position, however, should be denied (Ibn Jamā’a, *The memoir*, 49-57; Rosenthal, *Technique*, 7-19; Günther, Principles, 86-8).

The historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), in his renowned *Muqaddima*

(“Prolegomena”), identifies three types of theoretical and practical knowledge: a) knowledge of the essences, which leads to an understanding of the reality behind phenomena; b) knowledge of the natural world and human culture, which enables people to order their lives and to understand and control the world in which they live; and c) moral knowledge, which relates to the human capacities of thinking and gathering experience. Ibn Khaldūn emphasises the importance of experience, social competence, and the ability to collaborate with others. He also reflects on knowledge of natural phenomena, saying it is essential if one is to influence the natural environment, and, contrasting it with *‘ilm al-‘umrān* (the “knowledge of civilisation”), an area of particular interest to him. Furthermore, within the framework of his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldūn offers comprehensive treatises on certain professions and trades and how they should be learnt and practised; on diverse areas of knowledge and methods of teaching; and on the various sciences, from the intellectual and literary disciplines to dream interpretation and even magic (Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, 2:309-463 and 3; Black, *History*, 165-82; for selected passages on the educational thought of this author and other classical Muslim writers, see Cook, *Classical foundations*).

10. Female education

Most mediaeval Islamic texts on education refer exclusively to male students. Certain historical and biographical sources, however, offer data suggesting that girls and women were not completely excluded from elementary or higher education and that their edification was not limited to moral education within the family. These sources also speak of girls and young women attending Qur’ān schools together with boys, for example. Also, *ijāzas* or certificates of authorisation for the transmission of texts, used as lecture notes in scholarly assemblies, sometimes include the names of women students. Furthermore, there is strong evidence in Arabic sources, for example, that women were instrumental to the general educational culture in pre-modern Islam, as they took part in Qur’ānic exegesis and taught prophetic traditions, as reported by Muḥyī l-Dīn al-Nawawī (676/1277), who devoted a section in his biographical dictionary *Kitāb tahdhīb al-asmā’ [wa-l-lughāt]* (“Emendation of names [of people] and expressions

[mentioned in certain earlier works]”) to the educational activities of famous women. Likewise, women composed fine poetry and worked extensively as copyists, musicians, singers, and, not least, mystics and spiritual guides, as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449) suggests in his biographical dictionary *al-Durar al-kāmina fī aʿyān al-miʿa al-thāmina* (“The hidden pearls among the eminent figures of the eighth [fourteenth] century”). Wealthy women, or those belonging to scholarly families, also acted as patrons of learning, and several *madrāsas* were founded by royal women (see also Toutah, Contribution, 78-83; Geissinger, Gender, 20-2, 32; and Marín, Writing the feminine, on the opportunities for and limits to female education in Islam).

11. The role of knowledge among Zaydīs, Ismāʿīlīs, and Ibāḍīs

The pursuit of knowledge is central to the identity of several Muslim religious communities, in particular the Zaydīs, Ismāʿīlīs, and Ibāḍīs. For the Zaydis, for example, principally located in Yemen since the third/ninth century, it is important that their religious and political leaders have outstanding intellectual and ethical qualifications (Haykel, 7). To the Ismāʿīlīs knowledge and wisdom are gifts from God, revealed to the people through the prophets. They instructed the great majority of the people in the obvious, “exoteric” (*ẓāhir*) meaning of the revelation, while the “esoteric” (*bāṭin*) meaning was taught only to a small elite by certain divinely authorised agents (Halm, *Fatimids*, 17-22, 28-9). The Ibāḍīs, who trace their history back to the earliest days of Islam and today live mainly in Oman and parts of North Africa, have their own (non-Sunnī and non-Shīʿī) legal doctrine. According to this tradition, they were the first to begin making knowledge available to the general population as well as the elite. This universalistic view of knowledge, as Ibāḍīs understand it, favours proselytising through education rather than through (military) force. This may also be the reason why from the fifth/eleventh century onwards, the Ibāḍīs began modifying not only their social but also their educational structures to guard against assimilation to other Muslim communities (Schwartz, 66, 72-4, 95i).

12. Ideals of education and literacy

In conclusion, it must be stressed that in classical Islam the acquisition of

intellectual and practical knowledge, along with the ideal of striving for education throughout one's lifetime, are inseparably and profoundly connected with both the religious and the ethical tenets expressed in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. This interconnectedness of faith, learning, and ethical aspiration defines the responsibility of humans for their actions both as individuals and as members of a community or society, and eventually determines each person's place in this world and the next. While these ideas of classical Islamic learning primarily reflect theoretical considerations, they also had an impact on the relatively high level of education among the elites, including high literacy rates among administrators, merchants, representatives of the government, and scholars. The numerous libraries (and bibliophiles) evidenced in the mediaeval Arabic, Persian, and Turkish sources, as well as the number of manuscripts, both religious and non-religious, that have been preserved from the classical time of Islam, also speak clearly in this regard. Moreover, the hundreds of bookstores reported by mediaeval Muslim historians in their descriptions of the larger cities of classical Islam must have had their frequent customers (Grohmann, *Libraries*, 317-9), while the large number of Arabic texts of that period that explicitly deal with both basic and higher education also signify that education had become available on a broader scale and was a dominant cultural concern.

However, while mediaevalists have intensively studied European sources on literacy, for example, literacy in mediaeval Islam remains comparatively unexplored (Morris, *Measure*, 231). A bold attempt in this regard has been made only recently by innovative empirical research that scrutinises historical evidence from a large spectrum of Arabic sources on education, training, and the dissemination of knowledge. As a result of these studies, it has been concluded that human capital formation in the mediaeval Islamic Near East “was linked to higher standards of living enjoyed by a reasonable portion of the population. With rising income, parents could invest in education to enhance their children's future gains, and workers could afford to buy books as items of consumption. Education, in this case literacy and numeracy skills, could take place once discretionary income appeared in the economy.” This process also helped develop markets for

non-essential goods and institutions, such as manuscript copies and books, as well as their collection in libraries, some of which were quite large (Shatzmiller, *Human capital*, 51, 68). Nonetheless, the question of literacy in the mediaeval Near and Middle East remains a problematic one, as it involves—for Muslims at least—a diverse and diffuse picture, rather than a sharp distinction between those who could and could not read (Berkey, *Popular preaching*, 10), and further case studies, based on the rich textual traditions as well as aspects of material culture, are needed to uncover reliable information on the practical sides of Islamic education in the period up to 1500 CE.

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