

THE ROLE OF THE MADRASA IN MAMLUK CITIES

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The madrasas that emerged in Cairo in the 11th century were much more than simple educational establishments. Although they primarily provided a suitable environment within the city for the transmission of knowledge, they also had other important financial, religious and communal functions. In a culture that perceived of the acquisition of knowledge as an act of piety, the madrasas formed a vital part of the range of institutions that fulfilled Muslim needs.

At the most basic level, the madrasa was a suitable environment where a teacher could lecture to groups of students. The Muslim tradition of education was deeply personal. Students would gather to a particular teacher, one of great repute for learning and piety, not to a particular school. The tradition was also essentially oral rather than written. To learn from a teacher, a student had to *hear* a teacher.¹ This required an urban space for these study groups. Initially, knowledge transmission took place in mosques but as Islamic law and rite became more complex in the 10th and 11th centuries, the madrasa emerged as an alternative urban location.² Despite its clear educational function, the madrasa did not however assume the institutional nature seen in contemporaneous Western universities. It neither issued degrees nor controlled who could attend classes. This reflected the personal nature of the education given. The *ijaza* – the license – issued by a particular teacher was far more important than a degree issued by a faceless institution.³

Many madrasas did go beyond the simple provision of space for teaching. The *waqfiyyas* of Cairene madrasas frequently provided for stipends for one or more professors, teaching assistants and students. Indeed, the

largest madrasas, such as the Ashrafiyya, could provide stipends for hundreds of scholars and the larger professorial stipends were highly sought after.⁴ Many madrasas also provided living space for their students. However, those endowing madrasas did not necessarily consider stipends for scholars to be a vital part of a madrasa's *waqfiyya*. Smaller madrasas often had stipends for administrative and religious staff but no money for professors or students. The *waqf* of such a madrasa would provide for a suitable environment for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge and professors would teach for free or for donations from students.

The nature of this teaching environment was essentially religious. Teaching in mosques predated the emergence of madrasas, and often the madrasas themselves resembled mosques. These lines ultimately blurred to such an extent that *waqfiyyas* might call the defined institutions a madrasa, a *jami* or a *khanquah* and still have the same function.⁵ Many madrasas provided stipends to imams, Qu'ran readers, muezzins – all religious functionaries – and held Friday prayers and sermons. What constituted a *madrasa*, as opposed to a mosque with teaching functions, was often merely a case of semantics. This is a sharp contrast to schools and universities in Europe, which were gradually emerging from the control of Church and cathedral, but it is understandable within the context of Islam, in which education, law and religion were so intimately intertwined.

The madrasas fulfilled a religious function that supported a specifically Sunni orthodoxy. Their presence itself in areas previously ruled by Shi'ites might alone be a reminder of the return to preeminence of Sunni rulers and the ascendancy of Sunni thought. In addition, the madrasas focused upon the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence in

¹ Jonathon Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 21–22.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48

their teaching. Berkey also maintains that the oral and personal nature of the teaching itself tended to prevent the dissemination of unorthodox views and maintain a highly conservative status quo.⁶ This tendency, presumably, is why Ether Wolper characterized the madrasas of Anatolia as part of “high” religion and compared them to the “folk” religion nature of the dervish lodges.⁷ However, with regard to the Cairene madrasas, this characterization would fall short of the full picture. Madrasas frequently had strong links to Sufism, especially from the 14th century onwards. Sufi shaykhs would not only be professors of jurisprudence or hadith, but also serve as devotional leaders in some madrasas, including the Ashrafiyya. The teaching of law in the morning and the performance of Sufi devotions in the afternoon was a frequent model for such madrasas⁸

Madrasas also served important community functions in the Islamic cities. Like the dervish lodges described by Wolper, the Cairene madrasas would often have large windows through which Qu’ran readers would recite, audible to passing people in the streets, were often the donors of significant charity and were located in highly populated areas of the city.⁹ Yet, they also served other communal functions. Qadis often rendered judgment of legal matters in the madrasas. Madrasas provided water from their cisterns to neighbors. Imams would lead daily prayers in a setting that was, contrary to the impression given by Wolper, not private but public and open to all comers. Indeed, the public nature of the madrasa was very important to its communal function and the architecture of the madrasas frequently reflected this. The large porticos and open spaces pointed to the inclusiveness of such buildings.¹⁰ Madrasas were not exclusive islands within the sea of the city, but rather integral parts of urban life.

One important communal function the madrasa also often assumed was the responsibility to teach all Muslims the fundamentals of religious teachings. Without a formalized priesthood or a corporate entity to establish dogma, there was a strong emphasis in Islam upon the individual to learn and understand the religious information necessary to live a good life. Different strata of students emerged. In addition to the elite students aiming for lives as scholars or judges, there were others who attended the lectures and readings of the professors without restriction. This, Berkey implies, allowed women, Mamluk soldiers and common people to attend sessions and find a place in the education system. For a wider range of people yet, those not at a level to understand or benefit from the professors, the madrasas also provided help. The *qari’ al-kursi* would recite lessons to whomever wished to listen, focusing upon comprehensible, usually religious texts especially those that illustrated good Muslim behavior. The *mi`ad*, a similar role, read from and discussed the Qu’ran, hadith and other religious texts.¹¹

Madrasas in Mamluk cities did not have a single, definable role but rather were centers of education, religion and communal activity within the urban setting. While their focus was upon education, especially in the Sunni legal rites, they also provided for the education of the wider populace and a suitable setting for all forms of the transmission of knowledge central to Islam.

⁶ Ibid, 25

⁷ Ethel Sara Wolper, *Cities and Saints: Sufism and the Transformation of Urban Space in Medieval Anatolia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003)

⁸ Berkey 58

⁹ Ibid 191–193.

¹⁰ Ibid, 189–190

¹¹ Ibid, 203–205