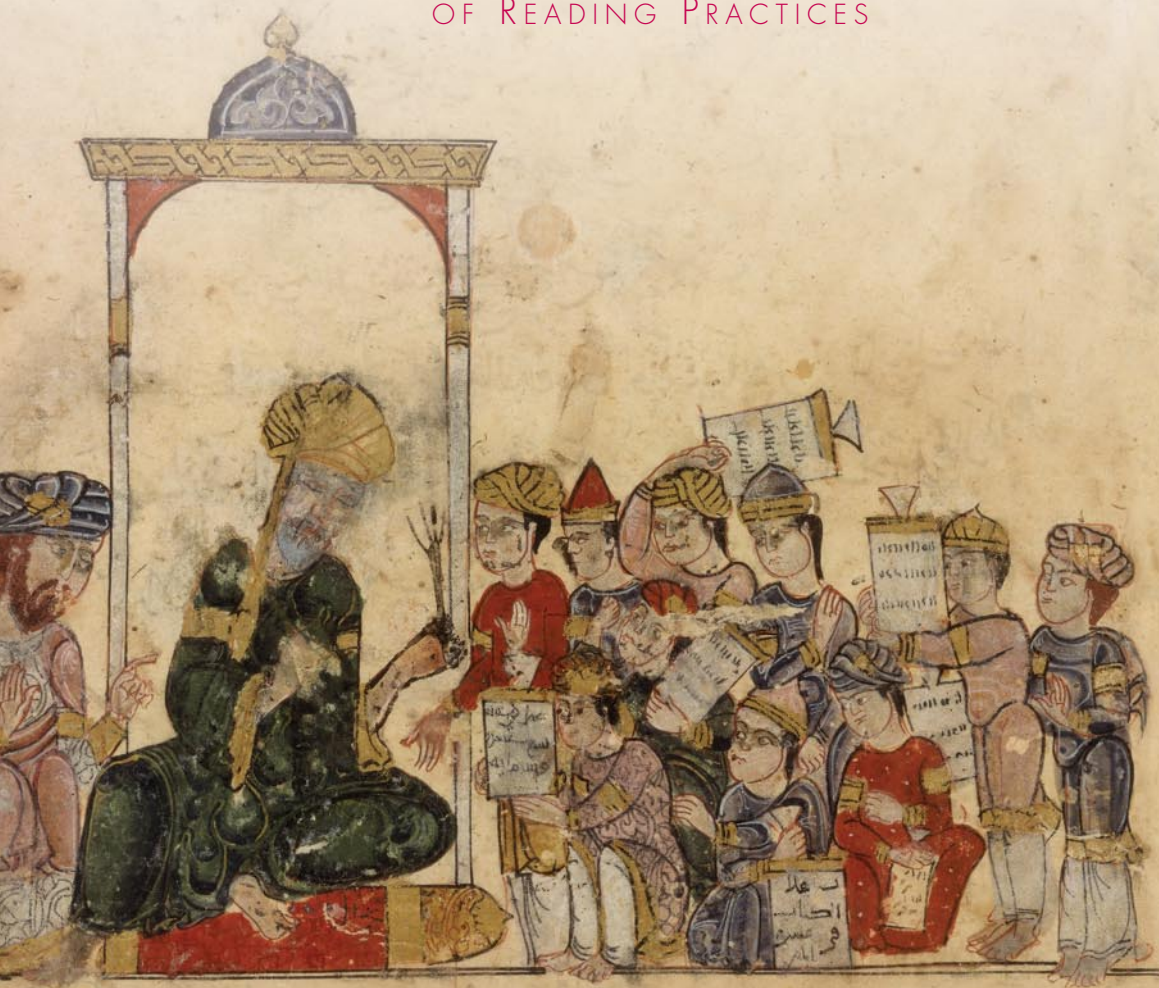# the written word
## in the
# medieval arabic lands

A Social and Cultural History
of Reading Practices

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# Contents

# Introduction

Societies within the Islamic world, especially those in the belt stretching from al-Andalus in the west to Persia in the east, belonged in the medieval era to the world's most bookish societies. The sheer number of works that existed – Ibn al-Nadīm in fourth/tenth-century Baghdad was already aware of several thousand titles – and the sophisticated division of labour for producing manuscripts, including author, copyist, 'copy editor' (*muḥarrir*), calligrapher, illustrator, cutter and binder bear witness to the central role of the written word. Reports on the lively manuscript markets, as well as on the countless individual legacies of manuscripts bequeathed to one's children, colleagues or libraries suggest the extent to which the written word remained in constant circulation in these pre-print societies. At the same time, manuscript-books acquired, at least in some quarters, such outstanding prestige that scholars such as the towering figure of al-Jāḥiẓ, writing in the third/ninth century, could expend page upon page praising their excellence. This fascination with manuscripts, as well as their massive production and constant circulation, even led some medieval scholars to fear the 'over-production' of manuscript-books.[1]

Modern analytical scholarship on the written word in these societies has been characterised by a set of chronological and thematic features that account, to some extent, for the choice of the issues that this book explores.[2] In chronological terms, most scholars focused on the 'Classical' or Early Period up to the fourth/tenth century. Studies such as those by Schoeler, Günther, Toorawa and Touati, to name but the most recent, have discussed in detail the development of a 'writerly culture', to borrow Toorawa's term, in the first four Islamic centuries, especially its interplay with oral and aural practices. It comes as no surprise that this focus on the Early Period is matched at the other end of the chronological spectrum with a comparatively rich literature on literacy and publishing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition to the cluster of works around the issue of the 'late' introduction of print to the Middle East, studies such as those of Messick and Eickelman have also taken up the question of the relationship between orality and literacy. The best and most recent overview of the development of the Muslim manuscript-book has reproduced

scholarship's chronological profile by devoting its largest sections to these two periods.[3]

For the long gap between the Early and Modern Periods – both of which have attracted so much modern scholarly interest in the different fields of Islamic/Middle Eastern history in general that they have shaped its profile over the last century – the scholarly output has been rather meagre. For the Ottoman period, at least, we have a number of detailed studies on specific aspects of writerly culture such as Erünsal's articles on libraries. However, there are hardly any works that directly address the issue of writerly culture for the Middle Period, stretching from the early fifth/eleventh to the early tenth/sixteenth centuries. During the 1970s and the 1980s, when the Middle Period started to be reassessed in scholarship beyond notions of decline and degeneration, the contributions of Badawī, Amīn and Haarmann, to name but a few, have remarked upon the quantitative rise and diversification of literary production. More recent work, such as Gully's discussion of letter-writing, has added further dimensions to the development of an increasingly writerly culture. Yet these studies have not focused on the chronological development and the broader outline of the spread of the written word in the Middle Period or the history of reading practices. The closest we get to a study of the manuscript-book and its consumption are those studies concerned with the transmission of knowledge in cities such as Cairo and Damascus, most notably those by Petry, Berkey and Chamberlain. Studies on aspects of cultural changes, for instance, by Leder and Bauer, and some in-depth discussion of issues such as education by Nabāhīn and libraries by al-Nashshār, supplement this scholarship.[4]

The second distinct characteristic of modern scholarship has been thematic: namely, that the main focus in addressing writerly culture has been on the production side, discussing issues such as authorship and the distribution of the written word. Pedersen's work on the Arabic manuscript-book, still seminal in its breadth, has little to say about the consumers of the written word, while Schoeler, in his reflections on the relationship between the written and the oral, also focuses mostly on the issue of how written materials came into being, not so much on what happened to them subsequently in terms of reception. The question of readership itself is only directly in focus in Touati's almost programmatic article on reading in the Early Period, which tries to link the history of reading to studies on this issue in other pre-modern world regions, especially European medieval studies. However, the two main studies on reading in Middle Eastern history are not concerned with the Early and Middle Periods, but with developments in later centuries. Fortna's study on learning to read in

the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic has shown how reading practices were transformed by the spread of educational institutions, an increase in state intervention and market forces. The second study, Hanna's work on the cultural history of Cairo, also remarkable in that it breaks with the standard chronological pattern, addresses the issue of reading among what she calls the 'middle classes' between the tenth/sixteenth and twelfth/eighteenth centuries.[5]

The present book addresses this profile of scholarship on reading by studying the history of reading, or rather aspects of this history of reading, during the Middle Period in the Syrian and Egyptian lands. The Middle Period is chosen as the chronological framework for this study not only in order to fill the gap in scholarship, but also for two further reasons. The first is to address the idea of 'decline' in Arabic societies after the end of the Classical Period; a sterile debate that is fortunately disappearing from the academic study of Middle Eastern history. However, standard works on the history of the book with a comparative outlook, such as Kilgour, still assume that an all-encompassing cultural decline set in at some point around the sixth/twelfth century. In addition, although the decline paradigm has mostly vanished from scholarly writing its repercussions in terms of periodisation are still evident in fields such as library studies (cf. Chapter 4).[6]

The second, and more important, reason for the choice of this period transgresses historiographical considerations and goes back to the actual transformation of writerly culture and reading practices. Although this period did not witness a complete break with previous eras, the diffusion of the written word and the concomitant spread of reading skills in societies of the Middle Period allow one to speak of a distinctive transformation of cultural practices. Taking a span of five centuries, this study offers a broad chronological framework and a first outline of the long-term developments of this increasingly writerly culture. This outline allows, at least tentatively, the developments in the Arabic-speaking lands to be contrasted to other periodisations that scholarship has proposed, mainly with reference to transformations of reading practices in Latin Europe. Gauger's six periods of reading cultures in world history, for instance, include a decisive break around 1300 with the transition from high medieval reading to early modern reading culture that was to continue until 1800 – a periodisation that sits very uneasily with the argument advanced in the following pages for the Arabic-speaking lands. While this book argues that the early Middle Period was the starting point for a profound cultural transformation, this is not the case for the end of the period under consideration in the tenth/sixteenth century. To end the discussion at this point follows above

all the periodisation of political history, that is, the advent of the Ottoman Empire in the Arabic-speaking lands. It might be that new factors, such as the linguistic change at the elite level to Ottoman Turkish, had repercussions on reading practices, but this assumption remains purely speculative and requires as in so many other fields further work that will transcend the divide between the Middle Period and the Ottoman era.[7]

This study focuses on Egypt and Syria as these two regions constituted the hub of cultural activities in the Middle East during the centuries under discussion. In the course of the sixth/twelfth century Syria and its cities emerged as one of the main centres of Arabic literary life, scholarship and manuscript production that increasingly rivalled and ultimately replaced Iraq and especially Baghdad in this role. In this period, the 'Syrian Century' from the mid-sixth/twelfth to the mid-seventh/thirteenth century, under the Zangid and the Ayyubid dynasties the Syrian lands achieved a large degree of autonomy from the dominance of neighbouring regions, especially Egypt. This unusual degree of autonomy was to disappear only in the centuries to come under the Mamluk Empire, when the Syrian cities were subordinate to the political centre in Egypt. Egypt emerged at this point in the seventh/thirteenth century not only as the leading political, but also as the main cultural region in the Arabic-speaking Middle East and was to remain in this position for the following centuries.

However, the book does not completely follow this shift as it continues to refer to Syrian developments as far as they are traceable in order to rebalance the strong focus on Egypt that has so decisively characterised scholarship on the later Middle Period. The long-term development of most aspects of writerly culture and the history of reading during the Middle Period did not directly depend on processes of political regionalisation or centralisation. For instance, the spread of libraries in Egypt and Syria was not a consequence of the regionalisation of political control as it was the case for the rise of new libraries in the Abbasid Empire during the fourth/tenth century.[8] Here, the dwindling authority of central rule in Baghdad was instrumental in the rise of cultural activities in the former provinces and new regional centres. In Syria and Egypt, by contrast, a process of intense centralisation, which concentrated political authority, military might and economic capital in Cairo, accompanied the spread of libraries in the Middle Period. This process of centralisation, starting with the dynastic change from the Ayyubids to the Mamluks in the mid-seventh/thirteenth century, thus did not entail an all-compassing decline of cultural activities in those regions that had become little more than provinces of the centralised Mamluk Empire.

In its approach, the book stands in the tradition of the aforementioned

works by Berkey, Chamberlain, Leder and Petry that have decisively contributed to making the combination of cultural and social history a standard feature for studying this period. In order to address these two themes, the book asks, on the one hand, how the spread of the written word affected cultural practices over the course of the Middle Period, including issues such as collective and individual reading, places of reading and times of reading. On the other hand, it addresses the social background of those groups that were instrumental in these changes as they had increasing access to written texts and started to participate in reading practices. The study's central concern is thus to trace the effects that the spread of written texts in the Middle Period had on the social contexts and cultural practices of consuming and receiving the written word. Reading will thereby be considered mainly in relation to scholarly and literary texts and to the exclusion of pragmatic literacy, that is, the role of the written word in fields such as administration, business life and legal proceedings. Also excluded from this study is Koran recitation as the sacralisation of the Koranic word engendered specific recitation and reading practices that constitute a field apart. On the basis of these assumptions and limitations, it is the book's central argument that the Egyptian and Syrian societies underwent a drastic reconfiguration of cultural practices during the Middle Period where the role of the written word significantly increased, a process referred to in the following as 'textualisation'. This went hand-in-hand with a fundamental transformation of the social contexts in which these practices took place, the process of 'popularisation', as the spread of the written word enabled non-elite groups in society to play a more active role in the reception and ultimately in the production of the written word.

Reading practices are notoriously difficult to grasp as reading, in contrast to writing, leaves fewer traces in the historical record. However, this study proposes that at least for the Middle Period we have a sufficient array of narrative, normative and documentary textual sources as well as illustrations that allow the study of such reading practices in some detail. The narrative sources are in the first place the standard chronicles, biographical dictionaries, travel accounts, autobiographies and topographical works that have been widely used for the period, such as al-Maqrīzī's topographical overview of Cairo, his *Khiṭaṭ*; Ibn al-ᶜAdīm's *Bughyat*; the collection of biographies of scholars in Aleppo; and Ibn Ṭulūn's Damascus-focused chronicle, the *Qalāʾid*. Among the normative sources, manuals for market inspectors, *fatwā* collections and pedagogical treatises are of particular importance. Starting with Ibn Saḥnūn's (d. 256/870) *Book of the Teachers' Right Conduct* the later genre witnessed a constant stream of works in the following centuries that provide some insights into

the realm of teaching and learning. However, the use of such normative sources has been limited in this study due to the obvious limitations of texts that were generally intended to depict what was understood to be the ideal. Even a cursory reading of a text such as the *Madkhal* by Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 737/1336) – to take one of the most blatant examples of this issue – alerts one to the author's constant attempts to depict his present age as one of decay in contrast to what he understood to be the correct course of affairs.

Consequently, this study employs to a large extent documentary sources, some of which are well-established in scholarship such as endowment deeds and some of which have received less attention such as reading certificates (*samāʿ*) and library catalogues. Although reading certificates have been studied for decades, their full implications for social and cultural history have only recently been understood, particularly in studies such as those by Leder (cf. Chapter 2). These certificates are one of the few pre-ninth/fifteenth-century documentary sources that are available in significant numbers for the Arabic-speaking lands. They provide historians of the region with a unique source genre for a variety of issues, including the history of textual reception, which is not available to the same extent for other world regions. Scholars issued these certificates mainly for readings of *ḥadīth* works, but it can be assumed that the practices reflected in them were not limited to this field. *Ḥadīth* studies had a paradigmatic function for other fields of learning in that authors often wrote, for example, pedagogical treatises as introductions to studying this field, although the texts obviously had implications for other fields of learning as well. The wider remit of the certificates is further evident from the works that straddled the borderline between *ḥadīth* and other fields such as the main case study in Chapter 2 that is positioned somewhere between *ḥadīth* and history.

While the reading certificates are a source genre that is practically unique to the region's history, library catalogues are a quasi-universal source genre. Scholarship has shown the potential of inventories and catalogues for gaining insights into the history of reception and reading, especially for Latin Europe in the Middle Ages.[9] For the pre-Ottoman Middle East, by contrast, research on libraries and book collections has traditionally relied on anecdotal evidence from narrative sources with some additions from endowment records. This study uses a set of documentary sources that provide more detailed evidence of the history of libraries and their organisation, most importantly the earliest surviving catalogue of a library in the Arabic-speaking lands that dates to the seventh/thirteenth century.

The final major group of sources for this study are illustrations in liter-

ary texts, which yield a fair amount of material – though far less than the textual sources – as their producers delighted in depicting their own world of scholarship and learning. While some might argue that their sole function was to elucidate the literary texts, this book regards them as a source that provides evidence of actual reading practices. When tracing the development of such illustrations over various regions and periods it clearly emerges that the illustrators also reacted to changing cultural practices in their non-textual environment. The most important group of illustrations for the history of reading features in the thirteen illustrated manuscripts of the *Maqāmāt* by al-Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122), one of the rare pre-modern Arabic texts that has brought forth a considerable number of images. The *Maqāmāt*'s illustrated manuscripts date to the seventh/thirteenth and early eighth/fourteenth centuries and they were produced in Egypt and Syria, with some possibly originating in Iraq. References in the *Maqāmāt* to a children's school resulted in six relevant illustrations (Plates 2–7), and those to a library in three relevant illustrations (Plates 13–15).[10] The production of illustrated manuscripts of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* suddenly stopped in the eighth/fourteenth century and no further Arabic work has produced a comparable set of material. Chapter 3 fills this gap with a set of illustrations (Plates 8–11) that were produced in the eastern Islamic world, including Iraq, for the romantic epic of Layla and Majnūn in the version of Niẓāmī Ganjawī (fl. seventh/thirteenth century). Due to their origin in the eastern lands they cannot serve as main primary sources for this study, but they allow the *Maqāmāt*'s images to be profiled in a comparative perspective, especially as both groups have some regional overlap in Iraq and with Plate 8 some periodical overlap in the early seventh/thirteenth century.

On the basis of this source material Chapter 1 introduces the issues of literacy, orality and aurality in pre-print Middle Eastern societies with a special focus on the Middle Period. It provides an overview of the long-term development of writerly culture and discusses the interplay between cultural and social history with regard to 'popular' cultural practices. The subsequent chapters progress chronologically, starting in the sixth/twelfth century with Chapter 2 and in the late seventh/thirteenth century with Chapters 3 and 4. The discussion in the latter two chapters leads up to the end of the Middle Period, which is also the focus of Chapter 5. At the same time, the chapters reflect the book's geographical shift, with Chapter 2 being mainly placed in Damascus and the following chapters being increasingly located in Cairo.

Chapter 2 focuses in particular on the issue of popularisation and discusses communal reading sessions with the large audiences that accompanied and followed the 'publication' of scholarly works. While these

reading sessions were a long-standing cultural practice for the purpose of transmitting knowledge and had always attracted non-scholarly audiences, documents started to systematically record the participation of these individuals only in the earlier parts of the Middle Period. The case study of *The History of Damascus* allows the social background of individual participants from a wide variety of walks of life, including craftsmen and traders, to be traced in detail. These non-scholarly groups attended reading sessions that closely resembled the standard scholarly sessions of the learned. Yet the 'popular' sessions that these groups attended had a distinct profile with regard to issues such as preferred weekdays and places of reading. While the popularisation of reading sessions transformed the social context of this cultural practice, its mostly aural character remained unchanged.

By contrast, Chapter 3 specifically addresses the close link between popularisation and textualisation by turning to the transformation of primary education and to the impact this transformation had on modes of reading acquisition. The spectacular spread of endowed institutions of learning and teaching that started to gain pace in Egypt and Syria during the seventh/thirteenth century entailed a significant rise in the provision of free schooling for children. Consequently, wider groups in society started to acquire at least a basic level of reading skills that enabled them to play a more active role as individual readers, and not only as participants in communal reading practices. This quantitative expansion of primary education was accompanied by qualitative changes in the curriculum. The written word increasingly played a central role in the teaching practices of children's schools to the detriment of mnemotechnical skills that had previously been dominant. These qualitative changes were ultimately to engender the first pedagogical reflections in Arabic on how to introduce children to the written word.

Chapter 4 returns to the spread of endowed institutions and traces the emergence of a new type of library: the local endowed library. These libraries replaced the central-ruler libraries of previous centuries and patrons from a wide variety of walks of life set them up. The increasing number of such libraries in cities and towns ensured that the written word was widely available even to those who could not afford to or did not want to purchase manuscripts. Documentary evidence of such collections shows that they had a thematic profile that was distinct from collections held by individual scholars and that they arguably catered for reading audiences beyond the scholarly world as well. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the organisation of the earliest extant Arabic library catalogue, which shows that cataloguers took care to make the collections accessible to non-specialists.

In Chapter 5 the argument turns away from the mostly scholarly settings of reading sessions, children's schools and libraries to discuss the emergence of distinct popular practices of reading. From the sixth/twelfth century onwards sources increasingly mentioned readings of popular epics, such as the *Sīrat ʿAntar*, and scholarly authors strove to distance themselves from these reading practices. However, the scholarly criticism of these readings resulted not only from the content of the texts, but also from the fact that these written texts circulated in spatial and social settings that were beyond the scholarly world. The chapter traces how the emergence of these epics as written texts induced scholarly authors to criticise what they perceived as a challenge to their control over the transmission of authoritative knowledge. Finally, the chapter turns to popular works authored by individuals from those groups in society that were gaining more and more access to the written word during the Middle Period. At this point, these new readers started to appear not only as consumers, but also as producers of books who started to turn their literary skills into authorship with works that catered for the expanding popular realms of reading.

## *Notes*

1. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*. Al-Jāḥiẓ: Günther (2006b). Overproduction: Rosenthal (1995).
2. 'Analytical' by contrast with descriptive works that basically summarise primary sources such as Ḥabashī (1982), Tritton (1957) and Shalaby (1954).
3. Schoeler (2009); Günther (2006b); Toorawa (2005); Touati (2003). Introduction of print: cf., for instance, Kunt (2008); Messick (1993); Eickelman (1978). Overview: Roper (2010).
4. Erünsal (1987), (1989), (2007); Badawī (1979); Amīn (1980); Haarmann (1971); Gully (2008); Petry (1981); Berkey (1992); Chamberlain (1994); Leder (2003); Bauer (2003); Nabāhīn (1981); al-Nashshār (1993).
5. Pedersen (1984); Schoeler (2009); Touati (2007); Fortna (2011); Hanna (2003).
6. Kilgour (1998).
7. Gauger (1994).
8. Ḥammāda (1970).
9. Cf., for instance, Lapidge (2006); Sharpe (2008).
10. Non-textual environment: cf. Guthrie (1995); Contadini (2007); on illustrations of readers in Latin Europe cf. Nies (1991); Alexandre-Bidon (1989). *Maqāmāt*: Grabar (1984); cf. Haldane (1978) for illustrated manuscripts of the Mamluk period. Baer (2001) discusses illustrations of Islamic children's schools, but does so in isolation from most other relevant sources. Seventh/thirteenth-century manuscripts: MSS. Paris, BnF, arabe 3929, 5847 and

6094; Istanbul, Süleymaniye, Esad Efendi 2961; London, BL, or. 1200; St Petersburg, Academy of Sciences, C. 23. Eighth/fourth-century manuscripts: London, BL, or. 9718, or. ad. 7293 and 22114; Wien, Nationalbibliothek, A.F. 9; Oxford, Bodleian, Marsh 458. On dates and origins cf. Grabar (1984), 7–19 and Rice (1959), 213–19; on individual manuscripts cf. Buchthal (1940); Grabar (1963); Haldane (1985); Bolshakov (1997). Some of the manuscripts have two – generally quite similar – illustrations of the school scene. London, BL, or. add. 22114 has eight additional illustrations on fols 85, 85v, 86, 168, 168v, 169, 169v and 170 that each show just one pupil with the two protagonists. The illustrations in the manuscripts Paris, BnF, MS arabe 5847, fol. 148v, Istanbul, Süleymaniye, Esad Efendi 2961, fol. 192 and Oxford, Bodleian, Marsh 458, fol. 116v do not provide additional material for the present discussion. Additional illustrations on the second *maqāma* do not focus on the library (Paris, BnF, arabe 5847, fol. 4v; London, BL, or. add. 22114, fol. 6v.; Wien, Nationalbibliothek, A.F. 9, fol. 8v; Paris, BnF, arabe 5847, fol. 6v.). The illustrations in London, BL, or. 9718, fol. 9 and or. 1200, fol. 6v depict the library scene, but do not include additional information.