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# Reading certificates (*samā'āt*) as a prosopographical source: Cultural and social practices of an elite family in Zangid and Ayyubid Damascus

*Konrad Hirschler*

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 a more or a less 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 civilian elite in Mamluk Cairo.<sup>1</sup> However, the reliance on biographical dictionaries has contributed to a phenomenon which has been summed up by Mottahedeh with his well-known phrase: "Ulamology is a noble science, at least we have to think so because it is about all the Islamic social history we will ever have."<sup>2</sup> In addition, one may add that this noble science is often *elite* ulamology 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 (sg. *samā'*), 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 formulistic char-

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<sup>1</sup> R. W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, Cambridge (MA)/London 1979; Carl F. Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Roy P. Mottahedeh, "R. W. Bulliet, The Patricians of Nishapur: A Study in Medieval Islamic Social History [review]", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975), 491-495, here 495.

acter of reading certificates did not allow for a similar liberty when it came to taking 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 opportunity to consider the history of those who are excluded from the period's narrative sources.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that this source genre is beyond the problems of source criticism. 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 example. 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 participants who did not seem of relevance to them. A sixth/twelfth-century writer of a reading certificate, for example, duly registered the well-known participants, but laconically ended with the words “and a considerable number of others whose names I do not know [were also present]”.<sup>4</sup> However, such examples were, at least in the certificates that are discussed in this article, not typical for the writers.<sup>5</sup>

Reading certificates enjoyed an outstanding importance in Damascus from the mid-sixth/twelfth century onwards.<sup>6</sup> This is linked to the rise of *ḥadīth* scholarship

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

<sup>4</sup> Certificate for *juz'* 2 of Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid/Sukayna al-Shihābī et al., Damascus 1951- (ongoing), I, 643.

<sup>5</sup> This writer, Khālid al-Nābulusī (d. 663/1265), acts only once as a writer for certificates pertaining to the *History of Damascus*. He is also not mentioned as a writer in the certificates published by Leder et al. (Stefan Leder, Yāsin M. al-Sawwās, and Ma'mūn al-Ṣāgharjī, *Muʿjam al-samāʿāt al-Dimashqīya – ṣuwar al-makhṭūʿāt*, Damascus 2000 (in following referred to as *Suwar*)).

<sup>6</sup> The chapter “Sporen van lees- en leercultuur in een twaalfde-eeuws handschrift uit Damascus”, in: Jan Just Witkam, *Van Leiden naar Damascus, en weer terug: over vormen van islamitische lees- en leercultuur*, Leiden: Legatum Warnerianum, Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden 2003, 33-142, is a detailed discussion of this cultural milieu from the sixth/twelfth to the ninth/fifteenth century by way of examining reading certificates. The documentary value of certificates of transmission has been commented upon previously, see especially: Stefan Leder, “Hörerzertifikate als Dokumente für die islamische Lehrkultur des Mittelalters”, in: Raif Georges Khoury, ed. *Urkunden und Urkundenformulare im klassischen Altertum und in den*

in this period that hints at a substantial transformation in contemporary religious practices. Most importantly, they are part of the increasing Muḥammad-veneration that also found its expression in the veneration of the Prophet's relic, his sandal, in the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiya, the increasing celebration of the Prophet's birthday and the writings of authors such as al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277).<sup>7</sup> Once the certificates had become a standard feature of scholarship, they developed a formulistic structure that included a wealth of information, most notably: 1) the name of the attending authority (*musmi'*), 2) the name of the reader (*qārī'*), 3) the name of the certificate's writer (*kātib*), 4) the names of the other participants, 5) the number of sessions that had been conducted in order to read the certified passage, 6) an identification of those participants who only participated in parts of the reading and an identification of the exact passages that they attended, 7) the date of the session (the last, if more than one), 8) the place of the session(s), 9) an endorsement of the certificate by the attending authority. In practice, one or several of these elements might have been neglected, but one tends to find that certificates adhere to this formulistic structure.

Previous discussions of the certificates' documentary value have generally relied upon certificates that pertain to a variety of works, but that were issued in a given period and locality. The approach taken here, by contrast, is to analyse reading certificates that are all linked to one single work, namely the *History of Damascus* (*Tārīkh maḍīnat Dimashq*) by 'Alī Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/1176). This allows the participation of individuals in reading sessions to be traced over a longer period, as many of the participants in these sessions obviously strove to attend more than the reading of one single passage of the work. The *History of Damascus* is particularly adaptable for this approach as it is a monumental work that enjoyed great popularity in the decades after its publication. In combination with the large number of persons who gathered in the specific sessions, this gives us an extraordinary wealth of information. The *History of Damascus* was published in the mid-sixth/twelfth century by its author in Damascus and nearly all the subsequent reading sessions also took place in this town. The certificates for these sessions list up to 80 individuals who participated in a single session. No other work by this author was able to attract comparable audiences<sup>8</sup> and it seems

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*orientalischen Kulturen*, Heidelberg 1999, 147-166 and particularly on certificates as a topographical source Stefan Leder, "Eine neue Quelle zur Stadtgeschichte von Damaskus. Zur Alltagsgeschichte der Ḥadīthwissenschaft", *Supplement XI der Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (26. Deutscher Orientalistentag Leipzig 1995), Stuttgart 1998, 268-79.

<sup>7</sup> On this tendency cf. L. Pouzet, *Damas au VIIe/XIIe siècle. Vie et structures religieuses dans une métropole islamique*, Beirut <sup>2</sup>1991, 357ff.

<sup>8</sup> Compare for example the readings of his work on *ḥadīth* that were conducted in the same period as the readings of his *History of Damascus*. The readings in the years 564/1169 and 565/1170 (both in the Umayyad Mosque) attracted only 26 and 14 participants (certificates in Ibn 'Asākir, *al-Arba'ūn al-abdāl al-awāli al-masmū'a bi-l-Jāmi' al-Umarī bi-Dimashq*, ed. M. al-'Ajmī, Beirut 2004, 86-88).

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 *ḥadīth* and biographical dictionary, whereas the certificates issued in this period in the Syrian and Egyptian lands tend to refer to readings of works that are collections of *ḥadīth* without a historiographical component. The work starts with extended passages on the merits (*ḥadāʾil*) of Syria and Damascus, the urban topography and a detailed biography of the Prophet Muḥammad. 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 *ḥadīths* 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 Damascene 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 550/1115 to 750/1349.<sup>9</sup> 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 shāfiʿī 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 Damascene shāfiʿī community of the period.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Stefan Leder, Yāsīn M. al-Sawwās, and Maʾmūn al-Ṣāgharjī, *Muʿjam al-samāʾāt al-Dimashqīya. Les certificats d'audition à Damas. 550-750/1155-1349*, Damascus 1996 and Leder et al, *Ṣuwwar*.

<sup>10</sup> That is al-Dhahabī, *Taʾrīkh al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mashāhīr wa-l-ʿalām*, ed. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmūrī (Beirut 2002/3) and Abū Shāma, *al-Dhayl ʿalā l-Rawḍatayn* (published as: *Tarājim rijāl al-qarnayn al-sādis wa-l-sābiʿ*), ed. Muḥammad al-Kawtharī, Cairo 1947. Refer-



strand	years	place	attending authority ( <i>musmi</i> )
A	560/1164 – 564/1168	Umayyad mosque	‘Alī Ibn ‘Asākir (author)
B	560/1165 – 563/1168	residence of ‘Alī Ibn ‘Asākir ?	‘Alī Ibn ‘Asākir (author)
C	571/1176 – 579/1183	Dār al-ḥadīth, Umayyad mosque	al-Qāsim Ibn ‘Asākir (2 <sup>nd</sup> generation), (Ḥasan Ibn Ṣaṣrā)
D	587/1191 – 595/1198	Umayyad mosque, Dār al-ḥadīth	al-Qāsim Ibn ‘Asākir (2 <sup>nd</sup> generation)
E	581/1185	Dār al-ḥadīth	al-Qāsim Ibn ‘Asākir (2 <sup>nd</sup> generation)
F	614/1217 – 615/1218	Umayyad mosque, al-Madrassa al-Jārūkhīya, Dār al-ḥadīth, mosque in Mizza	Muḥammad al-Shirāzī, Zayn al-Umanā’ Ibn ‘Asākir (2 <sup>nd</sup> generation), ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Maḥdīsī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn ‘Asākir (2 <sup>nd</sup> generation)
G	614/1218 – 615/1218	al-Madrassa al-‘Ādiliya, citadel of Damaskus	Sulaymān al-Bānyāsī <sup>11</sup> , Muḥammad al-Bakrī <sup>12</sup> , ‘Alī al-‘Amirī <sup>13</sup>
H	616/1219 – 618/1221	Umayyad mosque, garden of the <i>musmi</i> , Dār al-ḥadīth	Zayn al-Umanā’ Ibn ‘Asākir (2 <sup>nd</sup> generation)
I	618/1221 – 620/1223	Umayyad mosque, residence of <i>musmi</i>	Muḥammad al-Shirāzī (Zayn al-Umanā’ Ibn ‘Asākir)
J	621/1224 – 626/1229	Umayyad mosque, residence of <i>musmi</i>	Zayn al-Umanā’ Ibn ‘Asākir (2 <sup>nd</sup> generation), (Muḥammad al-Shirāzī)
K	631/1234 – 632/1235	residence of <i>musmi</i>	Muḥammad al-Shirāzī

Figure 1: Readings of the TMD according to certificates.

Names in brackets: relatively minor contribution to the respective strand.

On the basis of this source material one case study will be presented that shows the significance of reading certificates for prosopographical research. The case study focuses on the role of certificates in tracing and understanding the development of an urban elite family, namely the Banū ‘Asākir, in more depth than the narrative sources would allow. The discussion is structured into three main parts. First, the ‘Asākir family and the certificates’ relevance for understanding patterns of intermarriage between noble families are introduced. In this context a methodological issue, namely the question of whether the seating order in reading sessions can be reconstructed from certificates, is examined in some detail. Second, the family’s attempts to control the transmission of the work after its

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ences for biographies in the following are generally to al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh* where the main additional sources are mentioned.

<sup>11</sup> Sulaymān b. al-Faḍl al-Bānyāsī (d. 615/1218, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 611-620, 24).

<sup>12</sup> Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Bakrī (d. 615/1218, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 611-620, 262/3).

<sup>13</sup> Nūr al-Dawla ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-‘Amirī (d. 615/1219, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 611-620, 252).

“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 Banū ‘Asākir in Damascus*

The ‘Asākir 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 shāfi‘ī families such as the Sulamīs,<sup>14</sup> the Zakīs,<sup>15</sup> the Naysābūrīs,<sup>16</sup> and the Qurashīs.<sup>17</sup> While the Banū ‘Asākir encompassed a number of high-ranking individuals, ‘Alī Ibn ‘Asākir 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 the work was an expression of the close relationship that existed between Ibn ‘Asākir and the strongman of Syria, the Zangid ruler Nūr al-Dīn, who brought Damascus under his control in 549/1154 and encouraged Ibn ‘Asākir 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 Banū ‘Asākir’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 Sulamī family, al-Ḥasan and ‘Alī, participated in the read-

<sup>14</sup> The author’s sister, for example, married a member of the Sulamī family, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī (d. 564/1169, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 661-670, 211), the first professor in the Aminīya Madrasa.

<sup>15</sup> The judge ‘Alī b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Zakī (d. 564/1169, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 561-570, 203/4) was ‘Alī Ibn ‘Asākir’s brother-in-law.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Alī Ibn ‘Asākir’s nephew, Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, married the daughter of Mas‘ūd al-Naysābūrī (d. 578/1183, Abū Shāma, *Dhayl*, 136).

<sup>17</sup> The author’s mother was a Qurashī. This family brought forth a number of high-ranking scholars, many of whom acted as judges such as the author’s maternal uncle Yahyā b. ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 534/1139, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 631-640, 363).

ings of the Strands A and C.<sup>18</sup> The son of the author's cousin from the Qurashī family, to cite a second example, participated as well in Strand A.<sup>19</sup> 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 to briefly consider to what extent the order 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 sixth/twelfth-century jurispudent 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.<sup>20</sup>

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-Ājurī, al-Zarnūjī, Ibn Jamā'a, and al-Sam'ānī do not touch upon this issue.<sup>21</sup> Those works that contain passages on the writing of certificates, for exam-

<sup>18</sup> Abū Ṭālib al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Sulamī (cf. for examples certificates for *juz*'s 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 233, 378, 401, 405, 409 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh*: I, 624-6, 635-7, 645-7, 657-9, 667-9, 714/5; XXXI, 419/20; LV, 59/60; LVIII, 276; LIX, 85/6, 380) and al-Ḥasan's brother Abū l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Sulamī (d. 602/1206, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 601-610, 100/1, cf. for example certificate for *juz*' 377 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh*, LIV, 348).

<sup>19</sup> Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Qurashī (d. 598/1202, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 591-600, 367-70, cf. for example the certificates for *juz*'s 6, 9, 97, 232, 235, 240, 263, 267, 284, 288, 373, 377, 380 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh*: I, 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; LIV, 126/7, 347/8; LV, 198/9).

<sup>20</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntazam fi tā'rīkh al-mulūk wa-l-umam*, ed. Muṣṭafā 'A. 'Aṭā/Muḥammad 'A. 'Aṭā, Beirut 1992, XVII, 328/9, translated in George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*, Edinburgh 1981, 91/2. The jurispudent is Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Dinawarī, d. 535/1141.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Ājurī, *Akhlāq al-'ulamā'*, Beirut 1985; al-Zarnūjī, *Tā'lim al-muta'allim. Ṭarīq al-ta'allum*, transl. G.E. v. Grunebaum and T.M. Abel, New York 1947; Ibn Jamā'a, *Tadbkirat al-sāmi'*

ple by al-Suyūṭī, focus on more general issues such as the need to include all participants and to write legibly.<sup>22</sup> 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 presiding 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 presiding authority, are indeed named in the certificates' first lines. They are followed by, or intermixed with, relatives of the presiding 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.<sup>23</sup> 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:<sup>24</sup>

1 presiding authority, 2 scholar (reader in the session)<sup>25</sup>, 3 son of the presiding authority<sup>26</sup>, 4/5 scholars<sup>27</sup>, 6/7 officers<sup>28</sup>, 7/8 scholar with slave<sup>29</sup>, 9-11 scholars<sup>30</sup>, 12/13 sons of a (absent) scholar<sup>31</sup>, 14-17 sons of a (absent) scholar<sup>32</sup>, 18 scholar<sup>33</sup>,

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*wa-l-mutakallim fi adab al-ʿālim wa-l-mutaʿallim*, Haydarabad 1353; al-Samʿānī, *Adab al-implā wa-l-istimplā*, ed. Max Weisweiler, Leiden 1952.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Tadrib al-rāwī fi sharḥ Taqrib al-Nawawī*, ed. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, Cairo <sup>2</sup>1966, 89-92.

<sup>23</sup> The categorisation of the participants according to these cultural and social groups is part of the larger project that I am conducting on reading sessions. The methodology that I apply in order to categorise participants is based on a combination of an onomastic analysis and research in the period's narrative sources, mostly biographical dictionaries. "Non-scholars" are those participants that do not fit into one of the other groups.

<sup>24</sup> Reading of *juz*' 232 (Strand A) in the Umayyad Mosque on Friday 23.V. 562/173.1167 (Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīkh*, XXXI, 350/1).

<sup>25</sup> Muḥammad b. al-Mundhir b. Muḥammad al-Anṣārī (d. 628/1230, al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, eds. Hellmut Ritter et al., Istanbul 1931-97, V, 67/8).

<sup>26</sup> Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Ḥasan Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 600/1204, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 591-600, 432).

<sup>27</sup> ʿAbdallāh b. Muḥammad b. Saʿd Allāh (d. 584/1188-9, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 581-590, 183/4) and al-Khiḍr b. Ḥasan b. ʿAlī.

<sup>28</sup> ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Murshid Ibn Munqidh (d. 600/1203-4, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 591-600, 441) and Zayn al-Dawla Ḥusayn b. al-Muḥsin (Leder et al. *Ṣuwar*, 3761/13-5, fol. 136a).

<sup>29</sup> Ḥusayn b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (d. 589/1193, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 581-590, 323).

<sup>30</sup> ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Ibn Abī al-ʿAjāʿiz (d. 576/1180, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 571-580, 217/8), Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Qurashī (d. 598/1202, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 591-600, 367-70) and ʿAbd al-Wāḥid b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Anṣārī.

<sup>31</sup> Yahyā and Sulaymān, sons of ʿAfīf al-Dīn al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 581/1186, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 581-590, 121/2).

<sup>32</sup> Sulaymān, Muḥammad, ʿAbdallāh, and Aḥmad, sons of al-Qāḍī Shākīr b. ʿAbdallāh (al-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, XVI, 85-7).

<sup>33</sup> Muḥammad b. Hibat Allāh (d. 635/1238, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 631-640, 261-3).

19 scholar and trader<sup>34</sup>, 20/21 scholar with slave, 22/23 non-scholars, 24 scholar<sup>35</sup>, 25 soldier, 26 non-scholar, 27 scholar and trader<sup>36</sup>, 28 non-scholar, 29-31 craftsmen/traders (furrier, broker, weaver), 32/33 non-scholars, 34/35 scholars, 36/37 craftsmen/traders (furrier, silk weaver/trader), 38 slave (?), 39-45 non-scholars, 46 craftsman (clay worker), 47 scholar (writer of 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 the participants from no. thirty-nine to no. forty-five, most of whom originate from the Damascene suburb of Shāghūr). 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 (*sharīf*), participated in three sessions and are named together in the respective certificates.<sup>37</sup> Some twenty years later these two individuals participated in the reading of another work in Damascus and are again named together.<sup>38</sup>

If we now return to the above-mentioned case of 'Alī b. 'Asākir's two nephews from the Sulamī family, al-Ḥasan and 'Alī, it is obvious that they did not only participate in reading sessions of the *History of Damascus*, but that they were

<sup>34</sup> 'Alī b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Bazzāz (d. 615/1219, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 611-620, 252).

<sup>35</sup> 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. Barakāt (d. 636/1238, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 631-640, 294/5).

<sup>36</sup> Ḥamza b. Ibrāhīm al-Jawharī (d. 611/1214, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 611-620, 68).

<sup>37</sup> The individuals in question are Abū Ṭālib al-Muslim b. 'Abd al-Bāqī and Abū l-Ḥasan Idrīs b. al-Ḥasan (b. 545/1150-51, Ibn al-'Adīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab fī tā'rīkh Ḥalab*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār, Beirut 1988, III, 1324-6). The readings took place during Sha'bān 571/1176 (cf. certificates for *juz*'s 1, 2, and 3 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh*, I, 627, 638, 648).

<sup>38</sup> Leder et al., *Šu'war*, 3761/13-6, fol. 136a ("al-sharīfān").

seated in prominent positions. They generally took positions three to six in the certificates, subsequent to ‘Alī’s sons and grandsons. The participants who were prominent scholars but were not related to the Banū ‘Asākīr 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 ‘Asākīr 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.<sup>39</sup> 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. Ṣaṣrā as the main reader in this strand showed the prestige that was ascribed to this work: Ibn Ṣaṣrā 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.<sup>40</sup> On the contrary, the reader in these sessions was the author’s son al-Qāsim (d. 600/1205)<sup>41</sup> and the “audience” consisted exclusively of al-Qāsim’s son Muḥammad (for the members of the Banū ‘Asākīr mentioned here and in the following cf. figure 2).<sup>42</sup> Conse-

<sup>39</sup> 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 *juz*’s 1-10 in Ibn ‘Asākīr, *Ta’rīkh*, I, 58, 116, 182, 246, 310, 372, 428, 489, 560, and 620.

<sup>40</sup> On the issue of the father-son relationship in transmitting the work see J.J. Witkam, “The son’s copy. Remarks on a contemporary manuscript of Ibn ‘Asākīr’s ‘History of the City of Damascus’”, in: al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation: *Essays in Honour of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid*, London 2002, 591-610, who casts doubt on the fact that this relationship was indeed so close.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh*, 591-600, 471-3.

<sup>42</sup> For Strand B cf. for example certificates for *juz*’s 231-5, 261-70, 277, 284, 373, 378, 401, 404 in Ibn ‘Asākīr, *Ta’rīkh*, XXXI, 278, 350, 419, 494; XXXII, 33; XXXV/XXXVI, 63, 124, 178, 232, 288, 350, 416, 479, 546, 609; XXXVII, 376; XXXIX, 15; LIV, 126; LV, 59; LVIII, 276; LIX, 10.



quently, 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-Qāsim, the most outstanding member of the Banū 'Asākir in the second generation,<sup>43</sup> was able to control the transmission of the work in the decades after his father's death. In all of the three late sixth/twelfth-century Strands C, D and E he acted as the main attending 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).<sup>44</sup> The transfer of social capital accompanied the transmission of cultural capital from father to son. The professorship in the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Nūriya, for instance, had been held by the author since the institution's foundation. After his death, he passed the position on to al-Qāsim 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."<sup>45</sup>

The salient role of the Banū 'Asākir'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.<sup>46</sup> This clearly differs from later reading strands that were no longer controlled by the Banū 'Asākir. 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-Qāsim's son Muḥammad, 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-

<sup>43</sup> In the following, the generations of the Banū 'Asākir 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).

<sup>44</sup> For sessions with high numbers of participants cf. for example for *juz*'s 2 and 3 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'riḫ*, I, 638/9 and I, 648/9.

<sup>45</sup> Al-Nu'aymī, *al-Dāris fī ta'riḫ al-madāris*, ed. Ja'far al-Ḥasanī, Damascus 1948-51, I, 102.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. for example the certificate for *juz*' 1 (reading Strand C) in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'riḫ*, I, 627: "This volume heard under the authority of [...] al-Qāsim [Ibn 'Asākir:] his brother [...] al-Ḥasan, [his cousins] al-Ḥasan, [...] 'Abd al-Raḥmān, [...] Naṣr Allāh, [...] 'Abd al-Raḥīm, sons of [Muḥammad], and their nephew [...] Muḥammad [...] by the reading of [...]"



father in which the author himself acted as attending authority.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, Muḥammad never played an active role in the transmission of the work and also never made it into a biographical dictionary. The alternative direct line that the author tried to constitute via his second son al-Ḥasan did not prove more successful. Al-Ḥasan did not participate in the private sessions, but was at least a regular participant in the sessions of Strands A and C, which were presided over by his father and brother respectively. However, like his nephew Muḥammad he never played an active role in the transmission of the work. Likewise he participated in a number of readings of other works that were generally led by his father or his brother, but never himself acted as attending authority or even reader or writer.<sup>48</sup> He is at least mentioned in the biographical dictionaries, but the entries are rather brief and dull.<sup>49</sup> This insignificant role of the author's direct descendants also continues in the following generations, as discussed below.

Nevertheless, the demise of the author's direct descendants in transmitting the work did not open up opportunities for other families to take control of the work. Rather, it was another line of the Banū 'Asākir who stepped in, namely the descendants of the author's brother Muḥammad. His sons, who belong to the second generation of the Banū 'Asākir, partly built their quite impressive scholarly careers by playing important roles in the further transmission of the work. Al-Ḥasan Zayn al-Umanā' (d. 627/1230)<sup>50</sup> was involved in four of the six early seventh/thirteenth-century reading strands of the work, namely Strands F, H, I, and J, and acted in two of them as the main attending authority. Although Zayn al-Umanā' had already acquired the right to transmit the *History of Damascus* at the age of sixteen by his participation in Strand A,<sup>51</sup> he first embarked on a successful career in the town's administration as inspector of the treasury and endowments (*waqfs*). When he turned to scholarship, his rise to prominence within the scholarly world was buttressed by the rights of transmission from his uncle, the author of the *History of Damascus*, and his cousin al-Qāsim – rights that are repeatedly mentioned in his biographies. As in the case of al-Qāsim, this transmission of cultural capital proved successful: Zayn al-Umanā' was able to inherit the professorship of his cousin in the Banū 'Asākir controlled Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Nūriya. His role as attending authority in reading Strand J shows the importance that the right to transmit this work had for his scholarly profile. This reading strand was attended by a large number of the town's prominent scholars, such as Zakī al-Dīn

<sup>47</sup> Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1592/3-3, fol. 79b (*Arba'ūna ḥadīth<sup>m</sup> fi l-ḥathīb 'alā l-jibād*).

<sup>48</sup> Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1088/3-6, fol. 42a; 1592/3-3, fol. 79b; 1879/3-3, fol. 79a; 3761/13-6, fol. 136a; 3823/3-1, fol. 29a. His father was the presiding authority in the sessions 1592/3-3, 1879/3-3, 3823/3-1, his brother in the session 3761/13-6.

<sup>49</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 591-600, 432.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 621-630, 280-2.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. for example the certificates for *juz*'s 1-10, 377, 405, 407, 408 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh*, I, 624-6, 635-7, 645-7, 657-9, 667-9, 676-8, 685-7, 693-5, 702-4, 714/5; LIV, 347/8; LIX, 85/6, 231, 308.

Muḥammad al-Birzālī, one of the grand *ḥadīth*-transmitters of his period in the Syrian lands,<sup>52</sup> Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad, a representative of the influential al-Shīrāzī family and the later judge of the town<sup>53</sup> and Zayn al-Dīn Khālīd al-Nābulusī, the successor of Zayn al-Umanā' in the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Nūrīya.<sup>54</sup>

Zayn al-Umanā' also presided over a number of sessions in Strand F,<sup>55</sup> which again united a number of prominent scholars, such as 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Irbilī, *imām* of the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Nūrīya,<sup>56</sup> Zakī al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Birzālī who also participated in Strand J and Muḥammad al-Sulamī, one of the leading ascetics of the town and *ḥadīth*-professor in the 'Izzīya Madrasa.<sup>57</sup> More importantly, this strand was one of those that had more than one presiding authority. These authorities took their turn to preside over sessions without, as was often the case in readings of *ḥadīth*-works, acting as multiple attending authorities in one single session. Here again, the importance of the sessions for gaining and securing one's place in the scholarly world is apparent. Besides Zayn al-Umanā' three other scholars presided over sessions. These included not only the aforementioned judge of the town, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Shīrāzī, but also 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Maqdisī, a member of the influential al-Maqdisī family who was *khaṭīb* in the Friday Mosque of neighbouring al-Mizza.<sup>58</sup> It was mutually beneficial to these scholars to take turns in presiding over the strands sessions. Zayn al-Umanā' benefited from the salient positions of the two other figures, whereas the two others could step into this prestigious line of transmission. In the case of Muḥammad al-Shīrāzī, his presidency in later reading strands (Strands I and K) shows that this attempt was not in vain. For the Banū 'Asākir the fourth presiding authority was of importance: Zayn al-Umanā's brother 'Abd al-Raḥmān Fakhr al-Dīn.<sup>59</sup> He had acquired the right of

<sup>52</sup> D. 636/1239, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 631-640, 307/8 and Abū Shāma, *Dhayl*, 168. Cf. also his numerous participations in various functions in other readings documented in Leder et al. For his participation in Strand J, cf. for example the certificates for *juz*'s 98 and 372 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, X, 406; LIV, 73.

<sup>53</sup> D. 635/1238, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 631-640, 261-3; al-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, V, 157/8; Abū Shāma, *Dhayl*, 166.

<sup>54</sup> D. 663/1265, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 661-670, 145-7. For his participation in Strand J, cf. for example the certificates for *juz*'s 2-6 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, I, 643, 656, 666, 674/5, 684.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. for example the certificates for *juz*'s 375, 376, 378, and 407 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, LIV, 234, 292; LV, 61; LIX, 232/3.

<sup>56</sup> D. 644/1246, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 641-650, 254. Cf. for example the certificates for *juz*'s 96 and 97 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, X, 344/5 and 455/6.

<sup>57</sup> D. 637/1239, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 631-640, 345/6. Cf. for example the certificates for *juz*'s 4, 7, 8, 96, 97, 236, 237, 263, 373, 407 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, I, 661/2, 691/2, 699; X, 344/5 and 402; XXXII, 95/6 and 150; XXXV/XXXVI, 180; LIV, 73; LIX, 232/3.

<sup>58</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Manṣūr b. Nasīm al-Maqdisī al-Shāfi'i (d. 616/1219, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 611-620, 299/300). Cf. for example the certificates for *juz*'s 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, X, 175, 292, 344/5, 402, 455/6, 512. 'Abd al-Raḥmān was a member of the shāfi'i branch of the Maqdisī-family, which was predominantly ḥanbalī. On this family cf. Stefan Leder, "Charismatic Scripturalism: the Ḥanbalī Maqdisīs of Damascus," *Der Islam* 74/2 (1997), 279-304.

<sup>59</sup> D. 620/1223, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 611-620, 500-3 and Abū Shāma, *Dhayl*, 136.

transmission for the *History of Damascus* by attending reading Strand A<sup>60</sup> and activated it only now, some fifty years later.<sup>61</sup> However, it proved an important element in a career that saw him act as professor at various schools in Syria and as the leading shāfi'ī authority of the region.

However, this reading Strand F with its four presiding authorities hints already at the waning predominance of the Banū 'Asākir 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-Maḡdisī for instance were held in his Mosque in al-Mizza and the readings presided by Fakhr al-Dīn were held in the Jārūkhiya Madrasa where he was professor. The flexibility of the location contrasts with other readings that were more tightly controlled by the Banū 'Asākir. As has been noted, these took place rather in fixed locations, mainly the Umayyad Mosque and the Dār al-Ḥadīth 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.<sup>62</sup> This was the first series of readings after the publication of the work in which no member of the Banū 'Asākir played a role – be it as attending authority, reader or scribe. The absence of any member of the Banū 'Asākir 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 'Asākir 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 sixth/twelfth century. For example, the attempt to insert 'Abd al-Raḥmān Fakhr al-Dīn, 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 'Asākir that are not discernible from other sources, but the individuals discussed were generally known from biographical dictionaries. However,

<sup>60</sup> Cf. for example the certificates for *juz*'s 10, 99, 234, 372, 377, 408 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh*, I, 714/5; X, 508/9; XXXI, 494/5; LIV, 71/2 and 347/8; IV, 380; LIX, 308.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. for example the certificates for *juz*'s 4, 7-10 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh*, I, 661/2, 691/2, 699, 711, 719.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. for examples the certificates for *juz*'s 1, 9, 319, 403-406 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh*, I, 632-4, 708-10; XLIV, 423/4; LVIII, 345; LIX, 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-Umanā', have only very brief entries of some ten words. These entries neither refer to any scholarly merits nor their teachers or students, but merely give their names, genealogies and dates of death.<sup>63</sup> They are registered in certificates pertaining to other works, but never took over the function of attending authority, reader or writer in these sessions.<sup>64</sup> 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 *madrassa*.<sup>65</sup> 'Alī 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.<sup>66</sup>

None of these individuals reached the scholarly status of the previous generation – and nor did they occupy posts within the civilian elite. 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 civilian elite. 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

<sup>63</sup> Abū Sa'd 'Abdallāh b. Ḥasan (d. 645/1247-8, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 641-650, 272 and Abū Shāma, *Dhayl*, 180) and Abū 'Alī 'Abd al-Laṭīf b. Ḥasan (d. 644/1247, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 641-650, 180/1 and Abū Shāma, *Dhayl*, 180).

<sup>64</sup> Abū Sa'd 'Abdallāh b. Ḥasan: Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1070/5-3, fol. 129a; 1088/14-19, fol. 231a; 1592/3-10, fol. 81b). Abū 'Alī 'Abd al-Laṭīf b. Ḥasan: Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1088/14-19, fol. 231a.

<sup>65</sup> Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad (d. 643/1245, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 641-650, 201/2; Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 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).

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

the professorship in the Dār al-Hadīth al-Nūrīya, did not participate in readings of the *History of Damascus*.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup>

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 Tāj al-Umanā' Aḥmad (d. 610/1213). Tāj al-Umanā' 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.<sup>69</sup> 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*. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, 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, Muḥammad took his younger brother Hibat Allāh to readings of the same strand and both were

<sup>67</sup> 'Abd al-Wahhāb b. Ḥasan (d. 660/1260, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 651-660, 419/20) who also presided in a number of readings of other works, cf. for example Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 3778/8-3, fol. 87a.

<sup>68</sup> The eight family members who are neither mentioned in the biographical dictionaries nor in the published Damascene Certificates of audition by Leder et al. are: Abū Ma'ālī Mas'ūd b. 'Abd al-Rahmān, Abū l-'Asākir al-Muzaffar b. 'Abdallāh, Aḥmad b. Aḥmad, Abū l-Faḥ Naṣr Allāh b. Aḥmad, Abū Bakr Maḥmūd b. Aḥmad, Abū l-'Abbās al-Faḍl b. Aḥmad, Abū l-Ḥusayn Hibat Allāh b. Aḥmad, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm b. 'Abd al-Raḥīm. Those who are mentioned in the Damascene Certificates are: Abū l-Futūh 'Abd al-Razzāq b. 'Abd al-Rahmān (Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1088/3-14, fol. 48a, year 612/1216 [the attending authority was his father]) and Abū Ṭāhir Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim (Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1592/3-3, fol. 79b, year 565/1170 [the attending authority was his grandfather, the reader his father]).

<sup>69</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 601-610, 354/5.

joined at a later point by a third brother, Aḥmad.<sup>70</sup> Hibat Allāh in turn started to attend the reading Strand D some nine years later – first on his own, but soon accompanied by his brother Maḥmūd.<sup>71</sup> Two more brothers, Faḍl and Naṣr Allāh, joined reading Strand F, where other family members were also present. Tellingly, they joined this co-presided strand in a session that was presided over by their uncle ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Fakhr al-Dīn.<sup>72</sup>

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. Faḍl and Naṣr Allāh, for example, preceded other participants who were more prominent scholars or members of the military elite – the officer-cum-scholar Ṣāliḥ b. Ismā‘īl al-Lamṭī, for instance.<sup>73</sup> Although none of Tāj al-Umanā’s sons, except Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, 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 “revival” 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.<sup>74</sup> At least two of them embarked on promising scholarly careers, but died

<sup>70</sup> Muḥammad and Hibat Allāh: certificate for *juz’* 373 in Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh*, LIV, 127 (year 578/1183), Muḥammad, Hibat Allāh, and Aḥmad: certificate for *juz’* 406 in Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh*, LIX, 156/7 (year 579/1183).

<sup>71</sup> Several certificates between the years 587/1191-2 (Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh*, I, 680/1) and 593/1197 (Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh*, XLVI, 451/2).

<sup>72</sup> Certificate for *juz’* 4 in Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh*, I, 661/2.

<sup>73</sup> Certificate for *juz’* 4 in Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh*, I, 661/2. On him cf. al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 631-640, 149 (d. 633/1235-36).

<sup>74</sup> In addition to the four scholars mentioned below, the following scholars are mentioned in the Damascene Certificates: ‘Umar b. Muḥammad (d. 675/1276, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 671-

at young age. One made a career in the Hijāz and another member was a reputed *ḥadīth* scholar in Damascus.<sup>75</sup>

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-Umanā' was the presiding authority in most of the sessions. Zayn al-Umanā' 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.<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup> All of them belonged to the fourth generation and no relative of the third generation accompanied them, although none was above fifteen years old.

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680, 191; Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 3757/8-1, fol. 111a.); Abū Ḥāmid al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī (d. 658/1260, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 651-660, 341/2; Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1088/14-19, fol. 231a); Abū l-Nasīm 'Alī b. 'Abd al-Laṭīf (Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1592/3-9, fol. 81a; 3757/8-1, fol. 111a; 3803/3-22, fol. 38a). Among the fourth-generation scholars only Abū l-Faṭḥ b. Muḥammad and Abū l-Mufaḍḍal Yahyā b. al-Faḍl (d. 679/1280, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 671-680, 333) were not mentioned in other certificates.

<sup>75</sup> Al-Qāsim b. 'Alī (d. 618/1221, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 611-620, 417; Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1088/14-19, fol. 231a); Abū l-Wafā' 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 643/1245, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 641-650, 182; Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1231/2-10, fol. 53a; 1592/3-9, fol. 81a; 1592/3-10, fol. 81b; 3775/9-4, fol. 115b). Hijāz: Abū l-Yumn 'Abd al-Ṣamad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 686/1287, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 681-690, 268-70; Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1592/3-9, fol. 81a, 1592/3-10, 81b, 3775/9-4, 115b). Damascus: Abū l-Faḍl Aḥmad b. Hibat Allāh (d. 699/1300, al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, 691-700, 389/90; Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 955/2-1, fol. 21b, 955/2-13, fol. 24a, 955/2-14, fol. 24a; 955/2-25, fol. 28b; 1139/4-7, fol. 59b. He acted in all these sessions as presiding authority).

<sup>76</sup> Abū l-Wafā' 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (b. ca. 621/1223-4) in a session in the year 625/1228 (certificate for *juz*' 96 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, X, 294) and Abū l-Mufaḍḍal Yahyā b. al-Faḍl (b. ca. 619/1221-2) in a session in the same year (certificate for *juz*' 97 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, X, 403).

<sup>77</sup> The participants were Abū l-Faḍl Aḥmad b. Hibat Allāh, 'Umar b. Muḥammad, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, Abū l-Nasīm 'Alī b. 'Abd al-Laṭīf, Abū l-Faṭḥ b. Muḥammad, and Abū l-Mufaḍḍal Yahyā b. al-Faḍl (certificate for *juz*' 97 in Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*, X, 403).

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 ʿAsākir'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.<sup>78</sup> 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 ʿAsākir, 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.<sup>79</sup> 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 ʿAsākir. Rather, the Banū ʿAsākir were simply replaced by newly arisen families that did not substantially differ from them: they were well-established local families that belonged to the shāfiʿī school. Among these were the al-Dawlāʿīs, the Banū al-Ḥarastānī, and the shāfiʿī branch of the Banū l-Maqdisī.<sup>80</sup>

The decline of the Banū ʿAsākir 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.

<sup>78</sup> The exception is the fifth-generation scholar al-Qāsim b. Muẓaffar b. Maḥmūd (d. 723/1323, al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 700-746, 207/8) who held a post in the treasury and founded his own Dār al-Ḥadīth. Cf. also Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 1039/7-7, fol. 73a and 1592/3-1, fol. 67a (and other certificates) where he acted as attending authority in sessions.

<sup>79</sup> In addition to the above-named al-Qāsim b. Muẓaffar b. Maḥmūd, these were: ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. al-Ḥusayn Abī Ḥamid b. ʿAlī (Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 3798/10,21-2, fol. 222b und 3798/10,21-16, fol. 231a), Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Maḥmūd and Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī (both Leder et al., *Ṣuwar*, 3817/7-13, fol. 71b).

<sup>80</sup> On the dominant shāfiʿī families in Damascus during the seventh/thirteenth century cf. Pouzet, *Damas*, 41-46.