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Al-Subkī and His Women

The historiography of the Mamluk period has over the past four decades developed more thoroughly than that of most other eras of pre-modern Islamic history. There are a number of reasons for this, not least of which is the extraordinary literary legacy of the period. Chronicles, biographical dictionaries, and other sources relevant to the reconstruction of social, political, and cultural life survive from the Mamluk period in numbers that dwarf those of most earlier periods. No less important, perhaps, is the intrinsic interest of the Mamluks themselves. Several important Western historians have found themselves captivated by these slave soldiers who established a state in the middle of the thirteenth century that dominated much of the Middle East until they were eclipsed by the Ottoman Turks at the beginning of the sixteenth century. With the passing of David Ayalon and Ulrich Haarmann, no one has done more to advance our understanding of the Mamluk regime than Carl Petry, to whom this volume of the *Mamlūk Studies Review* is dedicated.

Of late, Petry's contributions have been devoted principally to political history. His studies of the Mamluk sultans Qaytbāy and Qanṣūh al-Ghawrī¹ are models for a type of book—that of the reigns of particular sultans—which now includes detailed investigations of Baybars, Qalāwūn, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, and Barsbāy.² But his first book was arguably more influential because it contributed to and served to strengthen an important emerging field of historiography. *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages*³ was one of several monographs published in the wake of Ira Lapidus's ground-breaking study of *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*.⁴ These were the first books to bring to pre-modern Islamic studies the

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¹ *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamlūk Sultans and Egypt's Waning as a Great Power* (Albany, 1994); *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamlūk Sultans al-Ashraf Qāyt Bāy and Qanṣūh al-Ghawrī in Egypt* (Seattle, 1993).

² Peter Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt: Sultan Baybars of Egypt and the Near East in the Thirteenth Century* (London, 1992); Linda Northrup, *From Slave to Sultan: The Career of al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn and the Consolidation of Mamluk Rule in Egypt and Syria (678–689 A.H./1279–1290 A.D.)* (Stuttgart, 1998); Amalia Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (1310–1341)* (Leiden, 1995); Ahmad Darrag, *L'Égypte sous le règne de Barsbāy, 825–841/1422–1438* (Damascus, 1961).

³ Princeton, 1981.

⁴ Cambridge, Mass., 1967. Other important works included Richard Bulliet's *The Patricians of Nishapur: A Study in Medieval Islamic Social History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), and Roy Mottahedeh,



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disciplines and conventions of social history as it was then developing, especially among historians of medieval and early modern Europe.

The Civilian Elite of Cairo concerned those individuals who represented and led the city's Muslim inhabitants in their religious and academic lives, and also those who administered the offices and institutions of the state under the rule of the mostly foreign-born Mamluk military caste. Essentially, the "civilian elite" represented the social group which Richard Bulliet, discussing a different medieval Islamic society, had earlier identified as the "patriciate." They included prayer leaders, preachers, and Quran readers in the mosques, professors and other functionaries in the city's many institutions of higher education, judges of the shari'ah courts, and leaders of the Sufi organizations which, by the later medieval period, played a dominant role in the spiritual lives of many if not most Muslims. They also included a cadre of men employed as scribes and administrators, both in the various offices of the government and also by the religious endowments (*awqāf*, sing. *waqf*), which supported religious and academic institutions and which proliferated throughout the Mamluk period.⁵

Obviously, this constituted a broad range of people, in terms of their background, training, wealth, status, and power. Indeed, the group is so varied that the term "elite" might be a little misleading. It is a fair question to ask whether the prayer leader of some minor mosque and the holder of a valuable and prestigious "chair" in, say, Shafi'i jurisprudence at the grand madrasah established by Sultan Ḥasan below the Cairo citadel shared a sufficient community of interests that we can identify both as members of an analytically distinct social group. Beyond "vertical" social distinctions such as that separating the prayer leader and the professor lies an even more significant range of "horizontal" differences. Most importantly, the "civilian elite" included both those whose activities defined the religious and academic life of the city (i.e., those known in Arabic as the *'ulamā'*, sing. *'ālim*) and those whose careers focused on scribal and bureaucratic tracks.⁶ Those two domains were not necessarily distinct; there was some overlap between them. But by the Mamluk period, there was a fair degree of specialization and

Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society (Princeton, 1980).

⁵ These endowments are not directly relevant to this essay, but it is worth pointing out that the fortuitous survival of several hundred of them from Mamluk Cairo has been in the last several decades a leading catalyst behind the flourishing of historical studies of the city, and also that Petry has both pioneered their investigation and championed the use of the *awqāf* by other historians. The present author is not the only one who has benefited tremendously from his knowledge of and experience in the archives in which the endowment deeds are preserved.

⁶ Cf. Petry's comment about the term "civilian elite," which included all "the nonmilitary personnel whom the biographers regarded as notables, but who may not be classified solely as *'ulama'*." *Civilian Elite*, 4.



professionalization, so that a religious scholar and a bureaucrat, although they might share their initial training, would soon find their career paths diverging.⁷ Indeed, in the Egyptian case, the distinction between ulama and bureaucrats might be especially sharp since many of the latter were from Coptic families, and although they were generally formally converted to Islam, their credentials as Muslims, let alone as students and scholars of the Islamic religious sciences, were often suspect.

Nonetheless, there are good reasons for thinking of the “civilian elite” as a meaningful category of historical analysis. Not the least is the fundamental social division between the Mamluks and the local population. Of course, even here the boundary was sometimes blurred. Some Mamluks became learned in the religious and legal sciences; others served as administrators of *awqāf*.⁸ Some offices, especially that of *muhtasib* or “market inspector,” were held at different times by both religious scholars and high-ranking amirs.⁹ And of course the Mamluks often married into local families, and their sons and descendants were eventually assimilated into local social groups. Still, the social and cultural gap between the foreign-born, mostly Turkish or Circassian ruling elite, who held a virtual monopoly on political power, and their Arabic-speaking subjects was real and fundamental. In the Mamluks’ case it was widened by their slave origins, but in its essence the gap which separated rulers and ruled in Mamluk Egypt and Syria was paralleled by others which cut across most Middle Eastern societies in the Middle Ages. Leading social groups from the “ruled” side of the divide—ulama and scribes, for example—thus found themselves in structurally similar relationships to the wielders of political power.

A more positive reason for thinking of the civilian elite as an identifiable if not unified social group has to do with the centrality of education and the transmission of the Islamic religious sciences to social and cultural life in Cairo, and indeed in all medieval Islamic cities.¹⁰ Participation in the informal networks through which religious knowledge was transmitted carried value as a pious activity and conveyed considerable social prestige. Consequently, it was not simply professional academics who engaged in it; ulama status was widely shared

⁷ Petry, *Civilian Elite*, 312f.; cf. Daphna Ephrat, *A Learned Society in Transition: The Sunni ‘Ulamā’ of Eleventh-Century Baghdad* (Albany, 2000), 95–124.

⁸ On the Mamluks and education, see Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton, 1992), 128–60. On Mamluks as *nāzīrs* of charitable endowments, see Petry, *Civilian Elite*, 214.

⁹ Petry, *Civilian Elite*, 224; Jonathan P. Berkey, “The Muhtasibs of Cairo Under the Mamluks: Towards an Understanding of an Islamic Institution,” in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, ed. Amalia Levanoni and Michael Winter (Leiden and Boston, 2003), 243–76.

¹⁰ Cf. Petry, *Civilian Elite*, 312.



throughout the population.¹¹ As this last point might suggest, it was the ulama, broadly speaking, who constituted the central component of the “civilian elite” and to whom the indigenous Muslim population looked most naturally for local leadership. This point has been recognized for some time. To some degree, the importance of the ulama may be an optical illusion produced by the fact that the biographical dictionaries (*tarājim*), which constitute one of the major literary sources for medieval Islamic history, dwell principally on the lives and careers of the ulama. Indeed, as Roy Mottahedeh once observed, we had better appreciate the social history of the ulama, as it is “almost all the Islamic social history we will ever have for this [pre-modern] period.”¹² But the central social role of the ulama, in Mamluk Egypt and elsewhere, can hardly be doubted. For this reason, the strain of social history to which *The Civilian Elite of Cairo* was such an important contribution has sometimes been (lovingly) called “ulamalogy.”

As preparation for what follows, I wish to draw attention to two themes that have emerged from the literature on the “civilian elite” as it has developed over the last several decades. The first—what we might call a “major theme”—concerns the persistent informality of Islamic education. The proliferation of institutions devoted to the transmission of religious knowledge was one of the most important and widespread developments in the cities of the medieval Islamic world. Madrasahs and their cognate institutions, especially Sufi convents and mosques with endowments that made provisions for instruction in the religious sciences, became a ubiquitous feature of the medieval Islamic urban fabric.¹³ Nonetheless, the standards by which an education was measured remained informal and personal. No system of institutional degrees was ever established; rather, the ulama sought to control the transmission of knowledge through the personal attestation that a person had acquired command of (or at least exposure to) a text or a body of knowledge. That attestation, usually in the form of an *ijāzah*, could only be given by an individual who was himself already recognized as an authority over the text.¹⁴ Consequently, the regulation of the transmission of knowledge, and also of access to ulama status, depended on a variety of mechanisms by which those personal relationships linking one authority to another, and linking teacher to student, were identified, recorded, and published to the wider community.

¹¹ On this, see Berkey, *Transmission of Knowledge*, 210–18.

¹² Roy Mottahedeh, review of *The Patricians of Nishapur: A Study in Medieval Islamic Social History*, by Richard Bulliet, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 495.

¹³ On the madrasah, see George Makdisi’s ground-breaking work, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh, 1981).

¹⁴ On the persistent informality of education and on the networks of relationships which characterized the ulama, see Berkey, *Transmission of Knowledge*, passim, and Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge, 1994).



This was the public face of what was otherwise a very private matter (that is, the acquisition of knowledge), and its centrality to the system by which religious knowledge was preserved and handed on has enabled modern social historians to investigate the lives and experiences of the medieval ulama in some detail.

The second or “minor” theme has to do with the surprising importance of women in the social, institutional, and intellectual world of higher education. As with most other public activities, the transmission of religious knowledge was dominated by men. And in certain areas, women were excluded entirely: no woman, for example, was ever appointed *mudarris* in one of the many madrasahs in Cairo or, presumably, other medieval Islamic cities. Nonetheless, some women were able to carve out important roles for themselves. Women as well as men might possess wealth and develop the charitable instincts that led an individual to establish and endow a madrasah in the first place, and quite a few schools, in Cairo and elsewhere, owed their origins to acts of charity by women.¹⁵ Perhaps more surprisingly, many women served as financial controllers of the endowments that supported the activities of madrasahs and other religious institutions.¹⁶ But most importantly of all, women played an active and important role in the transmission of religious knowledge, especially of hadith. What made this possible was the persistent informality of the process, and the importance of those personal relationships by which authority over texts was transmitted. If a woman had, for example, acquired an *ijāzah* over a text from a particularly reputable individual, she as well as any man might become a valued link in the “chain” (*isnād*) of authorities stretching back to the original author of the text. Especially if the woman survived to become one of the last living people connected to that individual, she might acquire a reputation of her own and become someone with whom younger students sought to study.¹⁷

These two themes provide the framework for this minor contribution to the social history of the “civilian elite” of the Mamluk period. The fundamental importance of the networks between scholars and between teachers and pupils required that medieval Muslims, in various ways, preserve a memory of those networks and of the individuals who formed them. The most important mechanism for doing so was, of course, the biographical dictionary. These compilations

¹⁵ Berkey, *Transmission of Knowledge*, 162–64.

¹⁶ Carl Petry, “A Paradox of Patronage During the Later Mamluk Period,” *The Muslim World* 73 (1983): 182–207.

¹⁷ Jonathan P. Berkey, “Women and Education in the Mamluk Period,” in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven, 1992), 143–57. For a fuller exploration of the careers of two prominent female scholars of the Mamluk period, see the splendid article by Asma Sayeed, “Women and Hadith Transmission: Two Case Studies from Mamluk Damascus,” *Studia Islamica* 95 (2002): 71–94.



of short biographies of prominent men (and some women) have a long history in the Islamic world; they were not new to the Mamluk period, nor did they focus only on scholars.¹⁸ But quite a few compilations were published during the Mamluk era, including major works by Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī,¹⁹ ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī,²⁰ and Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī,²¹ who is the subject of this piece. Some recorded biographical data about many members of the ruling elites; that by Ibn Taghribirdī is an essential source for the study of the Mamluks themselves. But by and large the authors of these books were scholars of hadith and jurisprudence, and so were interested especially in the interlocking lives of the ulama.

A related genre of works was the *muʿjam* or *mashyakhah*.²² These were essentially lists of an individual’s teachers or of those on whose authority he transmitted texts.²³ They were compiled by the individuals in question themselves, or by their students, or by some other interested party. Not every scholar compiled such a list, but many did; al-Sakhāwī, writing in the late fifteenth century, estimated that more than a thousand were extant.²⁴ These constitute a well-known but underutilized source for the social history of the ulama in the medieval period.²⁵ At first glance they seem to be somewhat superfluous as a source for social history. The biographical notices they contain tend to be fairly short and usually simply repeat or summarize accounts from the more comprehensive biographical dictionaries. There is, for example, little if any information about Ibn Ḥajar’s teachers in his *muʿjam* that is not available in his better known account of academic and other luminaries of the eighth/fourteenth century, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*.

Yet the very fact that scholars found it expedient not simply to write but to *publish* these collections—publish, that is, in the pre-printing sense of the term—is significant. They were not simply compiled for the personal use of the author, to record his own private account of his education. We know that the *muʿjams* themselves were copied; even more, they were formally transmitted from the author

¹⁸ On the biographical dictionary as genre and on its origins, see Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Maʿmūn* (Cambridge, 2000).

¹⁹ *Al-Durar al-Kāminah fī Aʿyān al-Mīʾah al-Thāminah* (Cairo, 1966–67).

²⁰ *Al-Ḍawʿ al-Lāmiʿ li-Ahl al-Qarn al-Tāsiʿ* (Cairo, 1934).

²¹ *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfiʿīyah al-Kubrā* (Cairo, 1992).

²² Other terms used to indicate comparable works include *fahrasah*, *barnamaj*, and *thabat*. See *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., articles “Fahrasa” and “Idjaza.”

²³ Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī compiled one as a list of the *books* he had studied, as well as one of the more usual type that listed his shaykhs.

²⁴ Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden, 1968), 451.

²⁵ Georges Vajda was their most enthusiastic student; his previously-published studies of several different *muʿjams* are collected in *La transmission du savoir en Islam (viie–xviii siècles)*, ed. Nicole Cottart (London, 1983).



to others, from teacher to pupil, for many years after the original compilation.²⁶ Indeed, they continue to be read and studied; those compiled by Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, for example, have recently been printed.²⁷ At a minimum, they are a compelling witness to the importance of those networks of personal relationships on which the authority of the ulama rested. For the modern social historian, they provide the most comprehensive account of the training, the intellectual development, and the social networking of prominent scholarly members of the civilian elite.

The Dār al-Kutub in Cairo preserves a copy of the *mu‘jam* of Tāj al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Subkī (d. 771/1370), perhaps the most illustrious member of a well-known family of Shafī‘ī ulama from the Mamluk period.²⁸ His father, Taqī al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd al-Kāfī al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), had been born in the family’s ancestral village of Subk in the Nile Delta in Egypt but was raised in Cairo, where his own father taught hadith in a number of madrasahs. Taqī al-Dīn’s teachers included some of the most prominent religious scholars of the day, such as the Shafī‘ī qadi Ibn Bint al-‘azz, and the famous Shādhili Sufi Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh. Taqī al-Dīn acquired an impressive reputation in a number of fields, and held professorships in several institutions of higher learning in the Mamluk capital. His most lasting work, perhaps, was a collection of fatwas which has been reprinted several times in recent decades. In 739/1338–39, the sultan Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad appointed Taqī al-Dīn Shafī‘ī qadi in Damascus. During his service there over the next sixteen years, he also held teaching appointments as professor of *fiqh* and hadith in a number of the city’s most prominent schools.²⁹

The Subkī family was prominent in the intellectual life of Cairo and Damascus for six generations or more in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—a point of some relevance here. An academic career of course required an independent reputation. A scholar seeking preferment had to establish his bona fides through the usual channels: by publishing commentaries on legal and religious topics, and by acquiring status within the informal networks through which the ulama

²⁶ See, for example, Georges Vajda, “La transmission de la Mašyaḥa d’Ibn al-Buḥārī d’après le manuscrit Reisülküttab 262 de la Bibliothèque Süleymaniye d’Istanbul,” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 18 (1974): 55–74. See also Fāṭimah bint Ibrāhīm (# 13), below.

²⁷ *Al-Majma‘ al-Mu‘assas li-Mu‘jam al-Mufahras* (Beirut, 1992), and *Al-Mu‘jam al-Mufahras, aw, Tajrid Asānid lil-Kutub al-Mashhūrah wa-al-Ajzā‘ al-Manthūrah* (Beirut, 1998).

²⁸ Compiled by Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyá ibn Muḥammad ibn Sa‘d [or: Sa‘id] al-Maqdisī (on whom see Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 5:54). Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyah, Aḥmad Timūr Pāshā Collection, “Tārikh” ms. 1446. I consulted a microfilm copy preserved at the Ma‘had al-Makhtūṭāt al-‘Arabīyah, “Tārikh” ms. 490.

²⁹ On Taqī al-Dīn ‘Alī, see Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyah al-Kubrā*, 2nd ed. (Beirut, 1992), 10:139–70; Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab fī Akhbār Man Dhahab* (Cairo, 1931–32), 6:180–81.



supervised the transmission of religious knowledge. Nonetheless, having an *‘ālim* for a father or grandfather or other close relative could be of enormous advantage to an individual seeking to carve out an academic career, not least because it gave an individual a head start in constructing those networks of personal and intellectual relationships through which a reputation was established. The proliferation of endowed institutions of learning in the medieval period gave an especially sharp edge to the advantage held by the sons and grandsons of established scholars. It was frequently possible for a scholar who held a teaching appointment in a madrasah or mosque to ensure that his position—that is, the income he drew from the institution’s endowment—be inherited by his sons or other chosen relations.³⁰ More generally, an accomplished scholar was naturally more likely to ensure that his sons received the sort of training on which an academic career depended. This training would include instruction in the Quran, hadith, jurisprudence, and the other disciplines relevant to scholarly and academic life.

Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī was born in Cairo in 727/1327 or 728/1328, and like other sons of the ulama, he was educated at first by his father and then by some of the leading scholars of his day. When he was eleven, his father moved to Damascus, and Tāj al-Dīn naturally accompanied him there. It was principally in the Syrian capital that al-Subkī received the education that would establish him as one of the leading scholars of his age. His teachers included the great historian Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Dhahabī and the jurist Shams al-Dīn Ibn al-Naqīb. Tāj al-Dīn was a precocious student. Already before the age of 18, he had begun to teach as a substitute for his shaykh Ibn al-Naqīb. In 754/1353, he began to assist his father as qadi of Damascus, and within two years he had been formally vested in the office. For most of the rest of his life, he served as chief qadi in the Syrian capital, although his tenure was controversial, and at one point he was dismissed and spent eighty days in jail, apparently on accusations that he had misappropriated funds intended for the support of orphans. He died at a relatively young age in 771/1370.

The education of Tāj al-Dīn is relatively familiar to historians of medieval Egypt and Syria, because in many respects it was typical of those of the leading ulama of the Mamluk period. But the survival of al-Subkī’s *mu‘jam* allows us to examine it in greater detail than most. One of the most striking things about the names recorded in that document is the number of women it includes, confirming the prominent position that female hadith scholars managed to carve out for themselves. Of the 172 names of shaykhs with whom al-Subkī had studied and on whose authority he transmitted texts, 20 belong to women. That proportion was

³⁰ See Berkey, *Transmission of Knowledge*, 119–27.



not, in fact, atypical for the leading scholars of the day.³¹

What follows is an inventory of the women listed in al-Subkī's *mu'jam*. The list includes their names, as they appear in the *mu'jam*, and basic biographical information drawn from the *mu'jam* or (as indicated) other sources. The entries in the *mu'jam* itself include considerably more information concerning the women's teachers and their own pupils than is recorded here. I have included only the names of especially prominent shaykhs, or others worthy of note for one reason or another, and other information requiring comment. The number in brackets at the beginning indicates the number of the page (the manuscript has been paginated by hand) on which the biographical entry appears.

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(1) Asmā' bint Muḥammad ibn Sālim ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Hibbat Allāh ibn Maḥfūz ibn Ṣaṣrā al-Rab'ī al-Taghlibī, Umm Muḥammad, al-Dimashqīyah.³² Born in 638/1240–41 or 639/1241–42, she died in Damascus in 733/1332–33. She issued an *ijāzah* to al-Subkī in 728/1327–28. She had begun to recite hadith already in the year 683/1284–85, and continued to do so until her death.

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(2) Āminah bint Ibrāhīm ibn 'Alī ibn Aḥmad ibn Faḍl ibn al-Wāsiṭī, al-Dimashqīyah, Umm Muḥammad.³³ She was born around the year 664, and died in 740/1340 in Damascus. She held a *samā'* (a certificate of audition) from her father dated 665. She heard hadith from a number of prominent scholars, including the Hanbali scholar Zayn al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Dā'im (d. 668/1270)³⁴ and Zaynab bint Makkī (d. 688/1289).³⁵ Among those who recited hadith on her authority were her contemporaries the prominent *muḥaddithūn* Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Uthmān al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348),³⁶ who was also among al-Subkī's teachers (and who was also the author of the monumental *Tārikh al-Islām*),

³¹ Cf. Berkey, *Transmission of Knowledge*, 176.

³² See also 'Umar Kaḥḥālah, *A'lām al-Nisā' fī 'Ālamay al-'Arab wa-al-Islām*, 4th ed. (Beirut, n.d.), 1:63–64; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 1:384–85.

³³ Kaḥḥālah, *A'lām al-Nisā'*, 1:8; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 1:441–42.

³⁴ Ibn al-'Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, 5:325–26.

³⁵ 'Abd Allāh ibn As'ad al-Yāfi'ī, *Mir'at al-Jinān wa-'Ibrat al-Yaqzān fī Ma'rifat Mā Yu'tabaru min Ḥawādith al-Zamān* (Hyderabad, 1337 A.H.), 4:207–8; Ibn al-'Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, 5:404; Kaḥḥālah, *A'lām al-Nisā'*, 2:116–19.

³⁶ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyyah*, 9:100–123; Ibn al-'Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, 6:153–57.



and al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Birzālī (d. 739/1339).³⁷

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(3) Ḥabībah bint ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Ismāʿīl ibn Manṣūr al-Maqdisī, Umm ʿAbd al-Raḥmān.³⁸ Born around the year 650/1252–53,³⁹ she died in 733/1333. She heard Ibn ʿAbd al-Dāʾim and others recite hadith, and she received *ijāzahs* from scholars throughout the Muslim world, including Baghdad, Egypt, Mecca, and Medina, as well as from towns in Syria. Both al-Dhahabī and al-Birzālī heard her recite hadith. Al-Subkī received an *ijāzah* from her in 728/1327–28.

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(4) Zāhidah bint Abī Bakr ibn Ḥamzah ibn Maḥfūz al-Ṣaḥrāwī, Umm Abī Bakr, al-Ṣāliḥīyah.⁴⁰ Born in 682/1283–84, she died during the plague in 749/1348–49. She also heard Zaynab bint Makkī recite hadith, and al-Dhahabī in turn heard her recite traditions.

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(5) Zahrah bint ʿUmar ibn Ḥusayn ibn Abī Bakr al-Khuthnī.⁴¹ Al-Subkī heard her recite traditions in 729/1329.

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(6) Zaynab bint Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥīm ibn ʿAbd al-Wāḥid ibn Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Ismāʿīl ibn Manṣūr al-Maqdisī, Umm ʿAbd Allāh, known as Bint al-Kamāl.⁴² One of the most prominent female hadith scholars of the medieval period, she was born in 646/1249–50 and died in 740/1339. She heard hadith recitations from numerous scholars in Damascus, including Ibn ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, and received *ijāzahs* from “many people” (*khalq kathīr*) from Baghdad, Mosul, Mardin, Harran, Aleppo, and Egypt, as well as her home town of Damascus. Those

³⁷ Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 3:321–23.

³⁸ Kaḥḥālah, *Aʿlām al-Nisāʾ*, 1:241; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 2:85–86.

³⁹ Ibn Ḥajar gives her year of birth as 654/1256–57.

⁴⁰ I have not been able to locate other biographical notices for Zaynab bint Abī Bakr.

⁴¹ Kaḥḥālah, *Aʿlām al-Nisāʾ*, 2:42; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 2:208.

⁴² Kaḥḥālah, *Aʿlām al-Nisāʾ*, 2:46–51; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 2:209–10.



who heard her recite included, again, al-Dhahabī and al-Birzālī. Al-Subkī himself transmitted many volumes (*ajzā'*) of hadith and other subjects, on her authority, *bi-al-samā' wa-al-ijāzah*. She distinguished herself as the last person to relate traditions from the prominent *muḥaddith* Sibṭ al-Silafī and others *bi-al-ijāzah*.

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(7) Zaynab bint Ismā'īl ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Sālīm ibn Sa'd ibn Rikāb al-Anṣārīyah al-Dimashqīyah, Umm 'Abd Allāh and Umm Muḥammad.⁴³ Born in 659/1261, she died in 749/1349. She heard Ibn 'Abd al-Dā'im and others recite hadith, and she herself recited on the authority of a large number of shaykhs; al-Birzālī was among those who heard her do so. Al-Subkī says that he heard her recite a “volume” (*juz'*) by al-Anṣārī,⁴⁴ which she recited on the authority of twenty-eight different shaykhs whose recitations of the text she had heard (*samā'an*).

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(8) Zaynab bint Yaḥyá ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn 'Abd al-Salām ibn Abī al-Qāsim ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Muhadhhib al-Sulamī al-Dimashqī.⁴⁵ Born in 648/1250–51, she died in 635/1335. As a five-year-old girl, she attended hadith sessions with a number of shaykhs, and in 650/1252–53 she received *ijāzahs* from Egypt from Sibṭ al-Silafī (*ajāza la-hā . . . min al-diyār al-miṣrīyah*)—that is, apparently without her actually travelling to Egypt. Al-Birzālī heard her recite traditions, and al-Subkī received an *ijāzah* from her in 728/1327–28.

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(9) Safrā bint Ya'qūb ibn Ismā'īl ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Dimashqīyah, Umm Muḥammad, whose grandfather was known as Ibn Qāḍī al-Yaman.⁴⁶ Born sometime after 660/1261–62, she died in Damascus in 745/1245. Al-Birzālī heard her recite hadith. Al-Subkī heard her recite traditions on a chain of authority going back through her famous grandfather.

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⁴³ Kaḥḥālah, *A'lām al-Nisā'*, 2:54–56; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 2:211–12.

⁴⁴ It is not clear to whom this refers.

⁴⁵ Kaḥḥālah, *A'lām al-Nisā'*, 2:122–23; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 2:215.

⁴⁶ Kaḥḥālah, *A'lām al-Nisā'*, 2:197; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 2:232.



(10) Ṣafīyah bint Aḥmad ibn Aḥmad ibn ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī, Umm Aḥmad, whose father was the grandson of the famous Hanbali jurist Muwaffaq al-Dīn ibn Qudāmah (d. 620/1223).⁴⁷ She died in 741/1341. She heard Ibn ‘Abd al-Dā’im recite the entirety of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim, one of the principal Sunni collections of hadith. She issued an *ijāzah* to al-Subkī in 728/1328–29.

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(11) Ṣafīyah bint Abī Bakr ibn Ḥamzah ibn Maḥfūz al-Ṣaḥrāwī, Umm ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣāliḥīyah.⁴⁸ She died of the plague in 749/1348–49, and was buried in the tomb of Muwaffaq al-Dīn ibn Qudāmah. She heard Zaynab bint Makkī and others recite traditions. Al-Subkī heard her recite a volume by al-Anṣārī.

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(12) ‘Ā’ishah bint Muḥammad ibn Musallam ibn Salāmah ibn al-Bahā’ al-Ḥarrānī, Umm Muḥammad, al-Ṣāliḥīyah.⁴⁹ Born in 648/1250–51,⁵⁰ she died in 736/1336. She heard hadith from a number of scholars and recited them herself; al-Dhahabī and al-Birzālī were among those who heard her. Ibn Sa’d⁵¹ compiled her *mashyakhaḥ*. She issued an *ijāzah* to al-Subkī in 728/1328–9.

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(13) Fāṭimah bint Ibrāhīm ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī al-Ṣāliḥī, Umm Ibrāhīm⁵²—like Ṣafīyah bint Aḥmad above, from the famed Banū Qudāmah dynasty of Hanbali scholars. Born in 654/1256–57, she died in 729/1329. She heard hadith from Ibn ‘Abd al-Dā’im and others; both al-Dhahabī and al-Birzālī heard her recite in turn. She received *ijāzahs* from her relation Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī (d. 658/1260).⁵³ As she aged, she became known as the last surviving individual to transmit hadith from several of those on whose authority she relied, including Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī

⁴⁷ Kaḥḥālāh, *A’lām al-Nisā’*, 2:230–31; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 2:306–7.

⁴⁸ I have not been able to locate other biographical notices for Ṣafīyah bint Abī Bakr.

⁴⁹ Kaḥḥālāh, *A’lām al-Nisā’*, 3:189; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 2:342.

⁵⁰ According to Ibn Ḥajar, 647/1249–50.

⁵¹ The same Ibn Sa’d who compiled al-Subkī’s *mu’jam*? See note 28.

⁵² Kaḥḥālāh, *A’lām al-Nisā’*, 4:23–24; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 3:300.

⁵³ Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī, also from the Banū Qudāmah. Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, 5:295.



“by *ijāzah*.” According to al-Subkī, “she recited frequently, and many benefited from her.” Al-Subkī read to her the *mashyakhah* of Shahdah bint Aḥmad ibn al-Faraj al-Dīnawariyah (d. 574/1178),⁵⁴ a female Baghdadi hadith scholar of such prominence that she was known as “the support of Iraq” (*masnadat al-‘irāq*), with Fāṭimah’s *ijāzah* from Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī, who was himself the last person to transmit “by *ijāzah*” from Shahdah.

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(14) Fāṭimah bint Abī Bakr ibn Muḥammad ibn Turkhān ibn Abī al-Ḥasan ibn Raddād al-Dimashqī al-Ṣāliḥī, Umm Aḥmad.⁵⁵ Born around the year 653/1255–56, she died in 729/1329. She attended classes lead by Ibn ‘Abd al-Dā’im, and received *ijāzahs* from Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī, among other scholars. She recited hadith, and al-Dhahabī and al-Birzālī both heard her do so. In his own *mashyakhah*, al-Birzālī noted that he heard from and recited hadith on the authority of this woman, and also her brothers, as well as their father and mother. She apparently distinguished herself by writing *ijāzahs* “in her own hand” (*bi-khaṭṭihā*). Al-Subkī received an *ijāzah* from her in 728/1328–29.

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(15) Fāṭimah bint ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar ibn ‘Iwaḍ ibn Rājiḥ ibn Bilāl al-Maqdisī, Umm ‘Alī al-Ṣāliḥīyah.⁵⁶ Born in 650/1252–53, she died in 729/1328⁵⁷ after returning from the hajj. She heard traditions from Ibn ‘Abd al-Dā’im, and she recited them in turn to al-Dhahabī and al-Birzālī, among others. Al-Subkī received an *ijāzah* from her in 728/1328–29.

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(16) Fāṭimah bint ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Isā ibn al-Musallam ibn Kathīr al-Dimashqī, Umm Muḥammad, al-Ṣāliḥīyah.⁵⁸ Born in the 650s,⁵⁹ she died in 740/1339 and was buried in the tomb of Muwaffaq al-Dīn ibn Qudāmah. Ibn ‘Abd al-Dā’im was among those from whom she heard traditions, and she received

⁵⁴ Al-Yāfi‘ī, *Mir’at al-Jinān*, 3:400; Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, 4:248; Kaḥḥālāh, *A‘lām al-Nisā’*, 2:309–12.

⁵⁵ Kaḥḥālāh, *A‘lām al-Nisā’*, 4:36–37; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 3:303–4.

⁵⁶ Kaḥḥālāh, *A‘lām al-Nisā’*, 4:69; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 3:305.

⁵⁷ Ibn Ḥajar gives a date of death of 734/1333.

⁵⁸ Kaḥḥālāh, *A‘lām al-Nisā’*, 4:72; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 3:304–5.

⁵⁹ According to Ibn Ḥajar, 656/1258.



ijāzahs from Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī as well as his brother ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd. Al-Birzālī heard her recite hadith, and al-Dhahabī mentioned her in his *mu‘jam*.

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(17) Fāṭimah bint Fakhrāwar ibn Muḥammad ibn Fakhrāwar ibn Hindawīyah [*sic*] al-Kunjī al-Ṣūfī, Umm Maḥmūd.⁶⁰ Born in 659/1261,⁶¹ she died in 733/1333 outside Cairo. Unlike most of the other women cited by al-Subkī, she lived in the Egyptian capital, where her father was a pious ascetic. She received *ijāzahs* from a number of scholars in the year 663—that is, when she was a young girl. She recited hadith, and also had a reputation for preaching to women. In Cairo in 731/1331, that is when he was four, al-Subkī heard her recite the *Kitāb al-Jum‘ah* from the hadith collection of al-Nasā‘ī (author of one of the six “canonical” collections of hadith) according to an *isnād* going back through al-Mu‘īn [Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī ibn Yūsuf] al-Dimashqī⁶² and Ismā‘īl [ibn ‘Abd al-Qawī ibn Abī al-‘Izz] ibn ‘Uzūn [?] (d. 667/1268)⁶³ to [Hibbat Allāh ibn ‘Alī ibn Mas‘ūd] al-Būṣīrī (d. 598/1201).⁶⁴

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(18) Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad ibn Jamīl ibn Ḥamīd ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī ‘Aṭṭāf ibn Aḥmad al-Baghdādiyah al-Ṣāliḥiyah, Umm Muḥammad.⁶⁵ Born in 646/1248–49,⁶⁶ she died in 730/1330. She attended recitations given by her father in Baghdad when she was just a year old. She received *ijāzahs* from a number of prominent Iraqi scholars and later recited hadith to al-Dhahabī and al-Birzālī among others.

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(19) Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Jibrīl ibn Abī al-Fawāris ibn Jibrīl ibn Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Darbandī, Umm al-Ḥasan, known as Sitt al-‘Ajam.⁶⁷ Born in 661/1263, she died in Cairo in 737/1337. She heard hadith from numerous scholars and received *ijāzahs* from Ibn ‘Abd al-Dā‘im and others “from Damascus”—she herself lived in Cairo. In turn, she recited hadith to many people.

⁶⁰ Kaḥḥālah, *A‘lām al-Nisā’*, 4:89–90; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 3:308.

⁶¹ According to Ibn Ḥajar, 658/1260.

⁶² See Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, 5:331.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 5:324.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:338.

⁶⁵ Kaḥḥālah, *A‘lām al-Nisā’*, 4:100; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 3:308–9.

⁶⁶ 656/1258, according to Ibn Ḥajar.

⁶⁷ Kaḥḥālah, *A‘lām al-Nisā’*, 4:128; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 3:309.



When he was four, al-Subkī heard her recite al-Nasā'ī's *Kitāb al-Jum'ah* according to the same *isnād* held by Fāṭimah bint Fakhrāwar, above.

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(20) Nāranj bint 'Abd Allāh al-Rūmīyah, the *'atīqah* of al-Ḥājj Muflīh, the *'atīq* of al-Ḥājj 'Alī ibn Ḥusayn ibn Manā' al-Takritī al-Tājir, Umm 'A'ishah.⁶⁸ She died in 741/1340. She heard recitations by Ibn 'Abd al-Dā'im in 659/1261; al-Subkī received an *ijāzah* from her in 728/1328–29.

In many respects, much of the information contained in these short biographical notices in al-Subkī's *mu'jam* is unremarkable. That is, it parallels accounts of the lives of other (male) scholars, not just in this text, but in the biographical dictionaries more generally. This in itself is worthy of note, for it reaffirms just how thoroughly integrated women were into the world of textual, and especially hadith, transmission, both as teachers and as pupils.⁶⁹ A fuller reading of these notices in the context of a larger analysis of the entire *mu'jam* would provide the basis for a comprehensive intellectual biography of this major Mamluk-era scholar and jurist. But even a preliminary analysis confirms several important points.

The standards of hadith transmission recognized several different methods by which a pupil could acquire authority over a text. Close reading and analysis of the text in the presence of the shaykh was obviously preferred, but one could receive an *ijāzah* with less intimate contact. It was even possible to request and receive an *ijāzah* without actually encountering the individual issuing the certification, and when Zaynab bint Yaḥyá received an *ijāzah* from Sibṭ al-Silafī "*min al-diyār al-miṣrīyah*," it is possible that she had not left her Damascene home.⁷⁰ Al-Subkī himself appears to have included the names of several women from whom he received *ijāzahs* in a similar way, the Damascene Asmā' bint Muḥammad, for example, who issued him an *ijāzah* in 728/1327–28, when he was an infant in Cairo.⁷¹ This does not mean, however, that all transmission between women and men was accomplished at a distance, and it is clear from al-Subkī's *mu'jam* that many of his *shaykhahs* transmitted from their teachers *bi-al-samā'*, that is,

⁶⁸ Kaḥḥālah, *A'lām al-Nisā'*, 5:158; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 5:129.

⁶⁹ At least one of the women listed in al-Subkī's *mu'jam* had a *mashyakhah* of her own compiled; see 'A'ishah bint Muḥammad (# 12).

⁷⁰ # 8. Cf. Ḥabībah bint 'Abd al-Raḥmān (#3) and others, who received *ijāzahs* from scholars in cities throughout the Muslim world.

⁷¹ #1. Cf. Zaynab bint Yaḥyá (# 8), Ṣafīyah bint Aḥmad (# 10), 'Ā'ishah bint Muḥammad (# 12), Fāṭimah bint Abī Bakr (# 14), Fāṭimah bint 'Abd Allāh (# 15), and Nāranj bint 'Abd Allāh (# 20).



having themselves “heard” texts from male transmitters, and that al-Subkī himself physically encountered many of his female teachers and heard them recite texts. But virtually all of the women listed here were elderly at the point of contact, and al-Subkī himself was quite young—sometimes, as in the case of Asmā’ bint Muḥammad, an infant. The advantage of hearing the recitation of hadith or receiving an *ijāzah* at such a tender age is that, all things being equal, it shortened the *isnād*—i.e., it reduced the number of links in the chain of transmission. Several of the women listed here died shortly after the young al-Subkī arrived in Damascus, meaning that he would be among the last individuals to recite texts on their authority.⁷² In a similar vein, several of al-Subkī’s *shaykhahs* distinguished themselves by aging until they became the last surviving transmitter from a particular shaykh of an earlier generation.⁷³ It is partly for this reason that, in general, older teachers were preferred. In the case of a superannuated woman transmitting a text to a very young male pupil, an added advantage was that the sexual tension implicit in an encounter between non-*maḥram* individuals was lessened.

A second point reaffirmed by al-Subkī’s *mu‘jam* is the advantage that birth into an academic family gave an individual seeking to establish a scholarly career. The infant al-Subkī did not think to request an *ijāzah* from Asmā’ bint Muḥammad and others; it was his father’s foresight which took the steps to lay the foundation for his son’s later reputation. The young al-Subkī was also able to take advantage of his father’s posting as qadi in Damascus in 739/1338–39 to make more direct contact with scholars, both male and female, in that city. On the “supply” side, it is striking how many of the women whom al-Subkī listed as *shaykhahs* themselves came from established and reputable scholarly families: those, for example, from the famous Banū Qudāmah dynasty of Hanbali scholars.⁷⁴

It is clear, finally, that in a certain sense the community of scholars actively engaged in the transmission of hadith was a small world: small, that is, in the sense that the individuals who populated it formed a close-knit group. It is striking how frequently certain data replicates itself in most of the biographical notices: for example, that al-Dhahabī and al-Birzālī listed the *shaykhah* in question among those on whose authority they related traditions. Similarly, a high proportion of the women listed here included particular shaykhs of an earlier generation—especially Ibn ‘Abd al-Dā’im and Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī—among their teachers. At their base, the networks through which the educated class established its reputation were broad and inclusive: they were broad and inclusive enough to

⁷² See for example Āminah bint Ibrāhīm (#2), Bint al-Kamāl (#6), and Fāṭimah bint ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (#16).

⁷³ See, for example, Fāṭimah bint Aḥmad (# 13).

⁷⁴ For example, Ṣafiyah bint Aḥmad (# 10) and Fāṭimah bint Ibrāhīm (#13).



include members of social groups that might otherwise be marginalized, such as women. But the values and principles that governed the transmission of religious knowledge also brought certain individuals to the fore. The women listed in the *muʿjam* of al-Subkī had reached that exalted place, and in the process made an important contribution to the shaping of the “civilian elite.”



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