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Life of Scholars and Literati in the
Mamluk Period

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ABSTRACT:

The availability of book materials in conjunction with a considerable increase in the number of schools, as well as the enlargement of the class of *'ulamā'* devoted to research, aspiring to an academic-bureaucratic career and eager for prestige and recognition, contributed to a greater articulation of the professional and social identity of the Mamluk scholar. This article aims to shed light on how the consolidation of the culture of the book and its related practices may have played a significant role not only in defining the intellectual and social identity of the Mamluk scholar and of his professional profile, but also in influencing the dynamics of cohesion and competition among the members of this group.

KEYWORDS: Mamluk, book, bibliophile, *'ulamā'*, libraries.

1. Introduction

Although the spoken word dominated the intellectuals' frame of mind in the classical Arab-Islamic world and orality was regarded as the most authentic channel of communication (Ghersetti 2006, 71), J. Pedersen noted in his essay on the importance of the book in the Arab tradition that "in no other religion does the book play such role as it does in Islam" (1984, 12). Other scholars are of the same opinion and perceive Islam as a "text-based/focused culture" (Bloom 2001, 93). They attribute the building of the largest civilisation of the book in the pre-industrial world to the literatures which developed in the Islamic world starting

from the seventh century (Lancioni 2003, 233). In the introduction to his volume *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands*, K. Hirschler stated that “Societies within the Islamic world, especially those in the belt stretching from al Andalus in the west to Persia in the east, belonged in the medieval era to the world’s most bookish societies” (2011, 1). These definitions can be traced back to an increasingly central role taken on by the written text in the transmission of knowledge in Arab-Islamic culture in particular during and after the twelfth century (Toorawa 2005, 9; Petry 1993, 324; Gully 2008, 50). This has led H. Touati, in his essay on libraries and collections especially around the ninth and tenth centuries, to describe Islamic culture among those in medieval times as the most devoured by the passion for collecting books (2006, 17). As demonstrated by Behrens-Abouseif (2018, 17) in her study dedicated to the production of the book and to the organisation of libraries and book markets in the Mamluk era, the importance of the book continued to flourish and consolidate, increasing its influence on cultural life in general in those centuries. The historian Ibn Tag̃rībīrdī’s (d. 874/1470) (1992, XV, 212) still current observation regarding a particularly coarse and uneducated amir “*lam ara-hu munḍu ‘umr-ī masaka kitāb^{an} li-yaqra’a-hu* (I’ve never seen him with a book in his hand to read) emblematically summarises this vision of the Mamluk “bookish society” and underlines the indispensable value of the book in the personal, cultural and social life of even those belonging to the contemporary foreign military class.

This article aims to investigate how the spread of the culture of the book in the Mamluk period introduced significant changes in the professional and social life of the class of scholars and writers who were particularly interested in this sector as producers and users. It will also attempt to analyse how the consolidation of this culture and its related practices may have contributed not only to defining more clearly the intellectual and social identity of the Mamluk scholar and of his professional profile, but also to the dynamics of cohesion and competition among the members of this group.

2. The debate on orality and writing in the Mamluk period

In the Mamluk period, the age-old diatribe on the superiority of either the oral or the written mode seemed to have subsided, at least in the traditional disciplines, and no longer reappeared in strictly dichotomous terms (al-Ḥaṭīb al-

Baġdādī 2008, 17-147; Bloom 2001, 94-99; Cook 1997, 437-91; Schoeler 2006, 28-43; Hirschler 2011, 12-17; Gruendler 2020, 7-12).

Most of the belletristic literature dating back to the thirteenth-fifteenth centuries is limited to reporting a few references and in particular some excerpts from al-Ġāhiz's (d. 255/868-9) famous discourse on the virtues of the book (Skarżyńska-Bocheńska 1969, 118-122; Ghersetti 1994, 67-76; Hirschler 2011, 21-22), as well as to recalling the firmly recognised practical benefits of the written word. After underlining the well-known merits of writing for all religious, administrative, educational and relational fields, al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333) (2004, VII, 1-4) tried to delimit the domains of the two learning mediums: oral memorisation (*hiḏ*) and the consultation/reading of texts (*naẓar/qirā'a*). The first modality suited texts of a sacred-religious, poetic and oratory nature, namely: the Qur'ān, the sayings of the Prophet, the speeches of his Companions and of the eloquent men, as well as poetry, which thanks to their mnemonic features were easy for rote learning. In addition to their importance from a religious, cultural and argumentative point of view, these texts also enabled secretaries and intellectuals in general to maintain and enhance the linguistic and stylistic skills needed for the drafting tasks entrusted to them. The second domain, instead, included linguistic/grammatical, historiographic, epistolographic, aphoristic-sapiential and theological-juridical branches whose corpus was being constantly renewed. Consequently, texts had to be read and examined rather than memorized, which meant the scholar was always stimulated to carry out his research and to deepen his knowledge free from the limits of rote learning (30-31). Kamāl al-Dīn al-Damīrī (d. 808/1405) (III, 199) supported reasons similar to those of al-Ġāhiz (2005) and adopted al-Qurṭubī's idea (d. 671/1273). According to this view, the merit of writing in the preservation of sacred texts, of the knowledge of Greek philosophers and the early Muslim scholars, as well as in ensuring the proper functioning of the sacred and the profane was undeniably to be considered of great importance. Reiterating the traditional position taken by other secretaries in favour of writing (Gully 2008, 50-53), al-Qalqaṣandī (d. 821/1418) (1916, III, 7) summarised thus his opinion: "*al-ḥaṭṭ afḍal min al-lafẓ li-anna l-lafẓ yuḥim al-ḥādir wa-l-ḥaṭṭ yuḥim al-ḥādir wa-l-ġā'ib*" (the written word is better than the spoken word because the second is learned only by those who listen to it in presence, whereas the first is learned with those who are present and absent). It was in all probability - and paradoxically - Ḥalīl b. Aybak (d. 764/1363) (2000, XXI, 74-75), a prolific writer, secretary and scholar, among the few who still

found it difficult to place complete trust in the use of graphic support. After presenting the dispute that took place in the Fatimid era between ‘Alī b. Riḍwān al-Miṣrī (d. 453/1061?) and Ibn Buṭlān (d. 458/1066?) on the two modes of knowledge transmission, al-Ṣafadī sided with the Iraqi doctor in privileging direct learning from a master and recalled some famous errors caused by the defective writing of Arabic in previous centuries (al-Miṣrī 1986, 61-62).

With regards to the theological and juridical disciplines, the compromise reached in the first four centuries broadly outlined the operational and functional areas of these two codes and almost (practically) envisaged the distinction between the public and private domains of scholarly life: “writing, in this view, may be tolerated and even approved in the private storage of Tradition, but should not be allowed to feature in its public transmission” (Cook 1997, 476). In the Mamluk period, however, this compromise seems in part revised. The task of preserving knowledge, of guaranteeing its omnitemporality and omnispatiality, in addition to stimulating analysis and theoretical speculation was now assigned to writing. On the other hand, oral-aural communication was further confirmed as the best and most authoritative practice for teaching, debating and testifying in legal proceedings (Berkey 1992, 24-31; Id. 2002, 228; Messick 1993, 204-06; Chamberlain 1994, 133-51).

The Mamluk jurist ‘Alā’ al-Dīn al-Buḥārī (d. 730/1329-30) (2009, III, 74-75) went further and ensured the resolution of the controversy in favour of writing even within a discipline such as *al-ḥadīth*, which was traditionally known for its need for memorisation, recognising the written text’s higher reliability in transmission. Although Ibn Ḥaldūn (d. 808/1406) (2005, II, 312) judged oral expression as superior, he fully acknowledged the epistemological merits of writing “It enables people to become acquainted with science, learning, with the books of the ancients, and with the sciences and information written down by them”. Ibn Ḥaḡar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449) briefly mentioned in *Fath al-bārī* (I, 251) how the controversy over the compilation of the Prophet’s tradition originated and reassured his readers that “thanks be to God, written verbalization and theoretical speculation on the discipline of *ḥadīth* has consolidated and exponentially developed, producing great benefits”. The famous scholar, known as al-Hāfiz, a typical name given to the great memorisers and transmitters, even believed that there was no substantial difference between reciting the Qur’ān by heart or reading it directly from a text, reserving in fact to the latter modality greater reliability against any errors or alterations of the sacred book (ibid., IX, 67; see also Hirschler 2011, 21-22). Learning by rote

under the guidance of a recognised master, however, remained indispensable, first and foremost when the learner intended to pursue the career of professor (al-Nuwayrī 2004, VII, 31)¹. This hybrid attitude, aware of the complementary roles of the written and the oral and characteristic of the Mamluk period, finds its best representative in the jurist Badr al-Dīn b. Ġamā'a (d. 733/1333). He strongly advised his disciples to purchase the necessary texts for their learning rather than copying or borrowing them. He was also, at the same time, among those who most insisted on the irreplaceable nature of orality and direct contact with professors in the transmission/learning of knowledge (Ibn Ġamā'a 2012, 97; Berkey 1992, 26-29).

3. The book in academic and professional life

In the centuries prior to the Mamluk period, the scarce availability of writing materials, for economic and technical reasons, led to a natural economisation of its use with the consequent limitation of the number of volumes published in the various disciplines. Relying on few or often only single copies containing possible transcription errors and with risks of manipulation could not alone guarantee the survival of the written content. On the other hand, given that as a rule the transmission of knowledge took place orally in lectures and meetings and the memorisation of the text constituted, in this perspective, necessary and fundamental proof of complete mastery of the subject, writing was considered entirely ancillary as well as excessively expensive and precarious (Toorawa 2005, 7-12; Ghersetti 2006, 73). As various studies have shown, there was a constant development of the paper industry starting from the eighth century in the Arab-Islamic world which reached its peak in the twelfth-fifteenth centuries (Sayyid 1997, 27-31; Bloom 2001, 81-82). At the same time, there was a large spread of education, a greater enhancement in the production of manuscripts and a considerable improvement of the defective script of Arabic (Déroche 2004, 75; Hirschler 2011, 18-19). All these novelties, in addition to the growing chancery and administrative needs of the vast and complex bureaucratic apparatus of the Mamluk sultanate, stimulated "a transition in medieval Islamic times from a culture based on memory and gesture to one grounded in the written record" and a consequent

¹ For example, Ibn Taġrībīrdī (1992, XV, 244) criticised the jurist Šams al-Dīn al-Qayāfī's (d. 850/1446) way of teaching through the reading of a text, since it was the one used by non-Arabic speaking teachers with little expressive and persuasive ability.

“efflorescence of books and written culture incomparably more brilliant than was known anywhere in Europe” (Bloom 2001, 91, 93-94).

The exponential increase in the number of authors and readers among the lower and middle social groups such as traders, artisans, ordinary people and even the military, is also due to this explosion of the book industry. These new producers and users previously had greater difficulty in accessing culture through the official educational institutions, which normally required a long-term, full-time commitment and a stable stay in an urban centre of some importance without however offering any particular career guarantees for lacklustre graduates. The sources report (al-Ṣafadī 1998, IV, 443-44; Id., 2000, III, 58-59), in congratulatory tones, the news of a tailor from the city of Maḥalla in the Nile Delta who, thanks to his craft profession, managed to purchase a great number of books and reach a certain level of linguistic and grammatical knowledge that allowed him to establish friendships with prominent figures, such as Bahā' al-Dīn al-Naḥḥās (d. 698/1299) and Aṭīr al-Dīn Abū Ḥayyān al-Ġarnāṭī (d. 745/1344). Sugar workers, button makers, pearl piercers, sellers of cotton, daggers, silk and headgears, besides traders of various kinds and farmers could profitably continue to enhance their knowledge outside of schools (al-Saḥāwī n.d., IX, 37; IV, 163, 256; II, 126, 256; V, 190; I, 195; VIII, 127. See also Behrens-Abouseif 2011, 375-95). In addition to the various non-formal educational channels (private gatherings in mosques and at home) that the cultural life of the time offered (Berkey 1992, 85-90), the great availability of book material, that could be loaned in public and private libraries or purchased, certainly contributed to a more democratic spread of knowledge, even in scientific and literary disciplines that did not strictly make up the curriculum studiorum of religious institutions.

The affordability of books for a large swath of society (Shatzmiller 2015, 7-8) was probably the most crucial innovation that contributed to the consolidation of education and culture until the introduction of printing on a larger scale in the nineteenth century. The abundance of books in the Mamluk era, the substantial overcoming of mistrust towards the reliability of the written form and the relative improvement of the economic conditions, in particular of the lower and middle classes (scholars, bureaucrats, artisans and shopkeepers) naturally gave rise to a long chain of “distinctive transformation of cultural practices” and exerted significant impact on the “cultural and social settings that were inclined towards using the written word” (Lapidus 2008, 16-25, 32-38; Hirschler 2011, 3, 17). They also brought about notable changes that affected

the professional profile along with the intellectual and social identity of the *'ulamā'*, and of the educated in general, who were increasingly stimulated or obliged to use book materials in their studies, their teaching and research activities, as well as in communication and aesthetics (on this topic in the 'Abbasid period, see Gruendler 2020).

With respect to professional, academic and intellectual qualities, in the Mamluk period the recommendations that invited the scholars to engage in publicistic and research activities inherent to the discipline to which they were devoted became more insistent. Among the essential duties of the fully qualified scholar, Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 776/1277) (1980, I, 56-57) and Badr al-Dīn b. Ġamā'a (2012, 59-60) listed the commitment to study and inquiry (*katrat al-taḥqīq wa-l-muṭāla'a, wa-l-tanqīb wa-l-murāḡa'a*) together with the editorial and publication tasks (*al-iṣṭigāl bi-l-taṣnīf wa-l-ġam' wa-l-ta'līf*). The jurist Taḡ al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) (2019, 38) proposed arguments along the same lines as those advanced by al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī (d. 463/1071) and attributed to "taṣnīf" (classification or composition) the primacy of preserving and transmitting knowledge from generation to generation, as well as guaranteeing that authors would be remembered in the future (al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī 2008, 155; al-Saḥāwī 2017, 123; al-Durūbī 1989, I, 396; Schoeler 2009, 68-81).

Al-Zarkaṣī (d. 794/1392) (2016, II, 164) considered *taṣnīf* a communal obligation without which the community would have lost all its wealth of knowledge. In two short treatises, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) showed interest in the rules of composing and borrowing of books (*al-Ta'rīf bi-ādāb al-ta'līf* and *Baḍl al-maġhūd fī ḥizānat Maḥmūd*). This prolific and versatile scholar proudly recalled in his autobiography that he had begun writing at the age of seventeen and that by the time he wrote his historical text *Ḥusn al-Muḥāḍara* (ca. 899/1493), he had completed three hundred works, providing a long list of his numerous publications (1967, I, 338-39). al-Saḥāwī (2005, III, 330-31) in turn reserved considerable space to the discussion of the different approaches and editorial typologies in the discipline of *ḥadīth*, outlining the malleable boundaries between *ta'līf/taṣnīf/taḥrīġ/intiqā'* and assigning to the first method greater importance for being more exhaustive and analytical (See also Gherseti 2015, 25-26).

As we have already seen, Ibn Ḥaġar al-'Asqalānī (2001, I, 251) hinted at the merit of the book as having favoured the development of research and theoretical speculation, reiterating, in a more concrete way, the same ideas expressed a few centuries before by al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī. It was precisely to celebrate the completion of the monumental twenty-volume commentary by

Ibn Ḥaḡar on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḥārī* that two memorable presentation ceremonies were held in 842/1438 in two consecutive days with the participation of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Ġaḡmaq (d. 847/1444), the sultan's son, of numerous other amirs and of the entire scientific and religious community (al-Maqrīzī 1997, VII, 396; see also al-Biqā'ī 2001, I, 125-132; al-Ṣayrafi 2010, IV, 62-64). The drafting of the work had lasted about twenty-five years and many of Ibn Ḥaḡar's students who had taken part in it were generously compensated by the guests of excellence invited to the ceremonies. The first presentation consisted of the reading of a short passage from the concluding part of the commentary, followed by the recitation of multiple commendatory poems in praise of the work and its author, and ended with a huge, luxurious banquet costing the exorbitant sum of five hundred dīnārs. The high number of people and scholars attending made it an "extraordinary and almost unprecedented event in Egypt" with the first presentation being held in an open rural area near the Nile north of Cairo surrounded by a camp and a market set up specially for the public (ibid.). This ceremonial feast reveals, on the one hand, the great professional and social value of the author and of the discipline of *ḥadīth* in the Mamluk period and, on the other, the acknowledged position of the "book", in its narrow and broad meaning, in schools and in intellectual life as a whole during the fifteenth century.

Teachers' recruitment letters, the teaching certificates and the endowment deeds of the Mamluk schools consulted do not explicitly mention the activities in the modern sense of publication and the scientific dissemination among the requisite qualifications that the candidate or the figure appointed to professorships or other religious offices were expected to possess (al-Qalqaṣandī 1916, XI, 227-47; XIV, 322-27; Ibrāhīm 1966, 147-48; Berkey 1992, 76-77; al-'Anāqira 2015, 227-34, 256-62). Rather, the treatises on education in religious disciplines pointed out the reputation of the teacher, his in-depth knowledge of the scientific tradition of the subject and his intellectual, character and relationship qualities (Berkey 1992, 22-23). Yet, we can perceive that a virtuous scholar, in that period, was increasingly expected to engage in investigative activities and should be the author of recognised publications possibly disseminated and adopted by other colleagues: "*intaḡa'a bi-hi l-ṭalaba*" (which the students benefitted from) (al-'Asqalānī 1993, I, 239; II, 82); "*wa-i'tamada-hu kull man fī zamani-hi faḡl^{an} amman ba'da-hu*" (all his contemporaries and those who came later adopted it) (al-Ṣaḡḡawī n.d., III, 20); "*intaḡa'a bi-hi l-nās wa-tanāḡasū fī taḡṣīli-hi*" (many benefitted from his work and vied for it)

(ibid., I, 203); “*ištahara wa-tadāwala-hu l-nās kitābat^{an} wa-qirā’at^{an}, wa-qaraḍa-hu l-a’imma*” (his book has had so much fame and circulation, has been widely copied, read and praised by the most renowned masters) (ibid., IX, 94; see also al-Saḥāwī n.d., VII, 40; X, 261; al-Suyūṭī 1975, 155). Al-Suyūṭī (1975, 155-59; al-Durūbī 1989, I, 397) dwelled on this aspect in his autobiography and in his maqāmāt to highlight the great and unprecedented echo that his own texts aroused throughout the region, in Egypt, and even in India and Africa, exacerbating the feelings of jealousy of some Egyptian ‘*ulamā*’ towards him.

This competence gradually became closely linked to the profile of the scholar as it would allow him to be part of the influential class of *mu’allifīn*, that is, among the active producers and transmitters of knowledge: “*wa-ṣannaḥa taṣānīf kaṭīra intaṣarat fī ḥayāti-hi wa-ba’dā mawti-hi*” (He wrote many books that spread while he was still alive and even after) (al-‘Asqalānī 1993, II, 427; See also al-Saḥāwī n.d., III, 122; VIII, 23; X, 134). Therefore, the insufficient scientific productivity of those belonging to this social group was emphasised in order to express academic displeasure or to motivate the scholar’s inability to cover teaching positions (al-Saḥāwī n.d., III, 252; 4, 100). The limited circulation of a certain text was still reported with the intention of highlighting the negative effects on students and on the entire scientific community: “*wa-lākin lam yuṣannif ṣay’^{an} wa-lā intaḥa’a bi-hi aḥad min al-ṭalaba*” (He did not write any text and no student could benefit from his knowledge) (al-‘Asqalānī 1993, III, 163; see also al-Isnawī 1987, II, 194; al-Saḥāwī n.d., I, 301; V, 71).

The book in religious disciplines and even in other literary and rhetorical fields rarely had the task of reflecting the personality of its author or of proposing original reflections, rather it presented in most cases handed down traditions (Pedersen 1984, 20; Petry 1993, 324-325). Nevertheless, in the Mamluk period, due to the massive production of texts and the real difficulty of offering traditional themes still not well arranged or commented, the awareness of a need to propose a content which was thought of as innovative by authoritative experts grew significantly (Rosenthal 1947, 63-64): “*bi-mā lam yusbaq ilā taṣnīfi-hi*” (unprecedented texts) (al-Nawawī 1980, I, 57); “*ma’dūm qad uḥturi*” (creatio ex novo) (al-Ġarnāṭī 1998, I, 11); “*min banāt aḥkār-ī [...]. Lam aḡid-hu fī kitāb*” (ideas of my own invention that are not found in any other book) (al-Subkī 2003, I, 30); “*lam yu’allaḥ la-hu naẓīr*” (a text unique in its genre) (al-Suyūṭī 1975, 105). In an interesting passage, the Egyptian copyist, money-changer and historian Ibn al-Ṣayraḥī (d. 900/1495) (2002, 181) reported with great pride the amazement and admiration expressed by Ibn Taġrībīrdī when he

saw his book entitled *al-Ġawhariyya* on the prophet's biography and which showed remarkable novelty and refinement.

The idea that there was a close link between erudite, original research rich in unique notions and the possession of rare bibliographical sources that were difficult for other colleagues to access emerged more and more from the recognition of the value of innovation. Consequently, scholars' "texts hunting" constituted a necessary practice in order to be able to boast the scientific credit of rigorous and interesting writings: "*wa tuḡkar bi-dālika bayna l-'ulamā' wa-l-muḥaṣṣilīn ilā āḥir al-dahr*" (thanks [to the compilation of books] you will be mentioned among the '*ulamā'*' and scholars until the end of time) (al-Saḥāwī 2005, III, 330-331; see also al-Saḥāwī n.d., V, 227). Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311) (1881, 2-3) recalled having searched for Šaraf al-Dīn al-Tifāšī's (d. 651/1253) volume *Faṣl al-ḥiṭāb fī madārik al-ḥawāss al-ḥams* for more than fifty years so to claim credit for having discovered and epitomised it. His work *Niḡār al-azhār fī l-layl wa-l-nahār* could be published only after he had asked a friend to intercede with the unwilling holder of the only copy of the manuscript. Ġamāl al-Dīn al-Isnawī (d. 772/1370) (2009, I, 94-95) attributed the originality and relevance of his work on Šāfi'ī law to an ancient, precious and difficult-to-find bibliographical source for contemporary scholars. Al-Suyūṭī (1975, 138) claimed to have written eighteen original works thanks to the consultation of texts which had been unread by most of his contemporary and past '*ulamā'*'. Al-Saḥāwī (n.d., IX, 119) complained that his colleague Quṭb al-Dīn al-Ḥayḍarī (d. 894/1489), from Ibn Ḥaḡar al-'Asqalānī's circle, was withholding books (*Tārīḥ Baġdād* and *Tārīḥ Ġarnāṭa*) that he had borrowed from a public library to compile a biographical dictionary on Šāfi'ī scholars but also prevent the well-known biographer from undertaking the same task. Ibn Ḥaldūn (2005, III, 208-2012) expressed his disappointment for the endless production of sometimes "repetitive and useless" commentaries and compendia in the various disciplines because this excessive proliferation and fragmentation of publications would only hinder and prolong students' education. These exaggerated complaints about the abundance of texts written by young or unskilled people were due in Badr al-Dīn b. Ġamā'a's opinion (2012, 60), however, to jealousy and the fierce competition among the '*ulamā'*' (Rosenthal 2003, 1069-1071, 1081, 1085).

4. The paradigm of the virtuous bibliophile scholar

In addition to the skills in research, debate and scientific dissemination, the profile of the virtuous scholar that was taking shape was moving towards a refined model of the versatile intellectual with exquisitely literary and bibliophile inclinations. Bibliophilia was a very strong trend in the Abbasid period, mainly among members of the aristocracy and the *'ulamā'* with a high socio-cultural level and it was often associated with a considerable interest in culture and the accumulation of knowledge (Touati 2006, 22; Gruendler 2020, 141-43). However, the feverish activity of collecting books in the Mamluk period took on the connotations of a universal phenomenon of vast cultural and social significance, so much so that we can speak of a real collective cult of the book. This assumption is confirmed by the unquestionably higher number of private collections belonging to contemporary middle-ranking people (Ibrāhīm 1963, 22-41; Behrens-Abouseif 2018, 47-48). As the fifteenth century approached, a period that marked the apex of the flourishing of the book industry and trade in the Mamluk sultanate, indications of this passion in the profile of the literati and the *'ulamā'* became decidedly more frequent. This can be explained by the assiduous recourse to certain clichés and phrases in the biographical dictionaries of the fifteenth century that would prove the new dimension of a personal or elitist vocation which turned into a sort of social practice. In this context, examples reveal the rich variety of expressions used above all by al-Saḥāwī to remind his readers of this deeply rooted custom amongst *'ulamā'*, literati and even ordinary people of the time: “*ḡammā' a li-l-kutub*” (a great book collector) (n.d., II, 299; see also al-Saḥāwī n.d., III, 75; X, 199; al-Ṣafadī 2000, II, 108; XV, 211); “*iqṭanā min sār al-kutub šay' an kaṭīr^{an}*” (he bought many books of all kinds) (I, 115; II, 31); see also al-Ṣafadī 1998, III, 532; al-Maqrīzī 1991, I, 619); “*mustakṭir min al-kutub*” (he was a great book collector) (I, 224, 231, 320, 379); “*hawz li-naḡā'is al-kutub*” (he owned many valuable books) (III, 128), “*kāna kaṭīr al-kutub*” (he had many books) (IV, 176); “*al-i-tinā' bi-taḡṣīl al-kutub*” (he was interested in possessing books) (II, 299; VI, 250); “*igṭama' la-hu min al-kutub mā lam yakun fī waḡti-hi*” (no one else in his time owned such number of books as him) (IX, 282)². In support of this analysis, we can compare the relatively small number of bibliophiles not belonging to the Ayyubid or Mamluk ruling class living in the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries

² See also “*ḡaṣṣala ḡumlat^{an} min al-kutub*” (he owned a great deal of books) (al-Ṣafadī 1998, III, 408).

and mentioned by al-Ṣafadī in his monumental work *al-Wāfi* (about fifteen cases in all in the Mamluk period) or by other fourteenth-century biographers³, with the several dozen of cases reported by al-Ṣaḥāwī in *al-Ḍaw'* (more than seventy) which focused solely on the preeminent people of the fifteenth century.

Similarly to what Touati (2006, 35-40) wrote about book lovers in the Abbasid period (see also Makdisi 1990, 70-76), al-Ṣaḥāwī and more sporadically other contemporary authors duly described the intense relationship that bound the intellectuals to their, especially with metaphorical terms and phrases that often refer to a semantic field of a psycho-affective, moral and social nature. In fact, the same language was also frequently used in the sources of the period to define the relationships of loyalty, solidarity and esteem that existed between friends and colleagues and which acted as a relational glue. In this perspective, the book often ended up being represented as an object of profound idealisation, infatuation and even physical desire, while the act of reading was comparable to an erotic activity (Ibn al-Ḡawziyya 1983, 69-70; Rosenthal 2007, 241-242; Touati 2006, 19, 35): “*hawā mufrit*” (excessive passion) (al-Ṣafadī 2000, XVIII, 202); “*lā yuḥibb min al-dunyā illā siwā-hā*” (the only thing he loves in life) (Ibid., XXII, 210); “*hawas mufrit fī taḥṣīl al-kutub*” (excessive mania in collecting books) (al-Ḍahabī 2000, XLV, 68); “*ḥubb*” (love) (al-‘Asqalānī 1993, II, 140, 184); “*ṣaḡaf*” (ardour) (Ibid., III, 244); “*muḡram bi-ḡam’ al-kutub*” (seduced by book collecting) (al-Maqrīzī 1991, I, 710); “*muḡram bi-l-kutub*” (infatuated with books) (al-Ṣaḥāwī n.d., II, 299); “*mūla’ bi-ḡam’ al-kutub*” (passionate book collector) (X, 281); “*dā nahma fī taḥṣīl al-kutub*” (avid book collector) (IV, 276); “*ragba fī iqtinā’ al-kutub*” (a great desire to collect books) (V, 266).⁴

In the absence of primary sources that dealt with the subject, the descriptions of the biographical profile that usually accompanied the well-known cliché “*ḡammā’/a li-l-kutub*”, albeit brief and often repetitive, could shed some light on the social-cultural context underpinning the widespread bibliophile passion, in particular during the fifteenth century. Among the most common associations with this and other similar expressions, we find predictably those that emphasised the collector’s sincere vocation for study and knowledge which induced many of the scholars of the period to appreciate the written word and to become more interested in the possession of texts,

³ The same goes for *Fawāt al-wafayāt* by al-Kutubī and *al-Wafayāt* by Ibn Rāfi’.

⁴ See also: “*yuḡālī fī-hā*” (excessive interest in books) (al-Ṣafadī 2000, XVI, 124); “*ḡiwāyatu-hu fī-hā*” (strong attraction to books) (al-Maqrīzī 1991, VIII, 232); “*himma ‘āliyya fī taḥṣīl al-kutub*” (great enthusiasm into collecting books) (al-Ṣaḥāwī n.d., II, 299).

particularly “canonical”, of the most important disciplines at that time, such as *fiqh* and *ḥadīth* (see al-Saḥāwī n.d., VII, 9; V, p. 133; al-ʿAsqalānī 1969, II, 158). No one was apparently immune from the book fever and not even avarice was able to dissuade some from “chasing” books. It seems that the love of knowledge helped some to overcome their greed to the extent of arousing the amazement of friends and acquaintances (al-Ṣafadī 1998, IV, 622). Not even poverty deterred those affected by the bibliophile passion: the renowned jurist Ibn Daqīq al-ʿId (d. 702/1302) was prevented from holding some offices because his compulsive desire to read and own books drove him into debt (ibid., II, 235); see also al-Maqrīzī 1991, VI, 381; al-Saḥāwī n.d., V, pp. 230-31). Badr al-Dīn b. Ḡamāʿa (2012, 126), clearly encouraged by the abundance of books and the low cost of paper, strongly advised his students not to be satisfied with copying or borrowing the texts of the various disciplines but to buy them instead (Canova 2012, 242). From this perspective, we can understand the social prestige conferred on those who owned a large number of books as it was an important indicator of truly belonging to the world of culture and knowledge⁵.

After the adolescent years devoted to frivolity and fun, in other words to vice and superficiality according to the pedagogical perspective of the period, biographers saw in the rediscovered interest in books a transition to a new phase of life in the name of study as well as of psychological and intellectual maturity: “*al-i-rādʿ ʿan al-lahw wa-l-laḡw ḡumlatʿan wa-l-raḡba al-tāmma fī taḥṣīl al-kutub*” (he completely renounced play and frivolity, and showed a deep desire to collect texts) (al-Saḥāwī n.d., X, 227); “*wa-kāna fī ibtidāʿ amri-hi tāʿiṣʿan tumma tawaqqar wa-aḥabba ḡamʿ al-kutub*” (at the beginning of his life he was unleashed, he then became sensible and loved collecting books) (ibid., II, 299; see also al-Saḥāwī n.d., IV, 82; X, 274). The bibliophile passion also marked an awareness of the role of the individual in society, a rediscovery of faith and a profound philanthropy and indulgence towards other human beings: “*wa-niʿma l-raḡul sukūnʿan wa-ʿaqlʿan wa-faḍlʿan wa-raḡbatʿan fī l-ḥayr wa-taḥṣīl al-kutub*” (what a reserved, judicious, virtuous man, eager to do good and collect books!) (ibid., IV, 84); “*wa-aḥabba ḡamʿ al-kutub wa-kāna yukrim al-ḡurabāʾ wa-yubālīḡ fī l-iḥsān fī-him*” (he loved collecting books, was generous with strangers and treated them extraordinarily well) (ibid., II, 299; see also ibid., III, 128; V, 214; VI, 109; “*wa-yuṣāḥib al-ṣulaḥāʾ wa-yaqtanī l-kutub wa-yafʿal al-ḥayr*” (he accompanied

⁵ Recommendations that invited scholars and even ordinary people to collect books in every field of knowledge were frequent already in the eleventh century. Cf. al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baḡdādī 2008, 176-178; al-Saḥāwī n.d., IV, 176; Rosenthal 2003, 1072-1074.

godly people, collected books and did good to others) (al-‘Asqalānī 1993, IV, 421).

Books were perceived as a philanthropic act not only by those who wrote them, but equally by those who acquired, preserved and handed them down. A special relationship was born between the collector and his own books, not only a spiritual and intellectual one, but a true symbiosis that according to many was to be maintained even at the end of the person’s life. Each individual was expected to carefully guard their library to be donated after their death, thus helping others to achieve knowledge and at the same time giving themselves a renewable posthumous reward with each reading (al-Saḥāwī n.d., X, 201). Hence the old, but undoubtedly more widespread custom in the Mamluk era, of bequeathing one’s books to schools or mosques or, as in many other cases, to a special friend who was appointed to look after them as a sign of loyalty to the memory of the testator and of respect for his commitment to knowledge (III, 17; IV, 305. On this practice, see Touati 2006, 47-48; Behrens-Abouseif 2018, 34-42). After the death of scholars with needy heirs or little interest in keeping the books of their loved ones, public sales were organised that drew large numbers of colleagues and collectors eager to preserve a memory or find a rare text (II, 117; V, 162; see also Haarmann 1984; Touati 2006, 41-43). Among the frequent visitors to these auctions, which unfortunately took place more often following the repeated waves of plague (Ismail 2021, 15-16). we know of the jurist and expert of *ḥadīth* Ibn al-Mulaqqin (d. 804/1401), who lost his mental health after seeing his books and others borrowed from the schools he worked for destroyed in a fire. For this reason, he was later forced to be confined in his home by his children (VI, 100).

Buying books left by people of high scientific, religious and social importance acquired a meaning that unquestionably surpassed the actual price of the text. As Chamberlain (1994, 108) has pointed out, “dependence and loyalty between shaykhs and their disciples, and among shaykhs themselves, were the basis of the *a‘yan’s* social networks”. Similar to some social practices (*mulāzama*, *ziyāra*, *taraddud*, *suḥba*, *iḡtimā‘*, *maḡālis*) which took place in a dynamic community made up of masters, disciples, friends and colleagues, there were other meaningful ones after a member’s death which included participation in funeral processions and the preservation of the person’s memory (e.g. in the multiple and repetitive biographical dictionaries). In the same way, the handing down of books from one deceased member of the group to another appears to have strengthened a sense of belonging and

cohesion among the *'ulamā'* and in some way to have promoted generational turnover. Competitive auctions were organised to enhance the valuable inheritance of the deceased and guarantee possibly higher income to the heirs, as in the chancellor and jurist Kamāl al-Dīn b. al-Bārīzī's case (d. 856/1452) (*wa-lam yaḥluf ba'da-hu fī maḡmū'i-hi miṭlu-hu, wa-ḥaṣala l-taḡālī fī kutubi-hi ḥattā bī'at bi-aḡlā l-aṭmān* - after his death there was no one similar in quality and the books he had left behind were sold at the highest prices) and that of the well-known poet Šams al-Dīn al-Nawāwī (d. 859/1455) (*wa-taḡālā l-nās fī kutubi-hi* - people paid very high prices to buy his book legacy) (al-Saḥāwī n.d., IX, 239; VII, 232; see also al-Saḥāwī n.d., VI, 152; X, 90, 237, 258; al-Šafadī 1998, IV, 368; al-Šayrafī 2002, p. 455). The high esteem held for Ibn Ḥaḡar by his disciples led the amir Taḡribirmiš al-Mu'ayyadī (d. 852 /1448) to hope that his own death would not be before that of his teacher and friend, with the hope of receiving this handover even at the cost of incurring debt (III, 34). This personal and professional desire led some disciples to follow their masters on their long journeys abroad in order to be able to receive this honour if the inevitable fate should happen (VI, 18).

Moreover, many shared the collector's passion without, nevertheless, being strictly interested in knowledge. The "conspicuous consumption" of sought-after goods, as Thorstein Veblen (2007, 61) tried to demonstrate, was an important means of respectability, integrity and reputation especially in urban environments where mobility and human contact between individuals belonging to different classes were frequent. In the Mamluk period, amirs, trading bureaucrats, and wealthy people tended to stress their position and social status through typical consumer behaviours. From this point of view, we can observe the reiterated biographical references framing the collection of books as a natural consequence and manifestation of a person's economic well-being, together with other material goods which were considered important for qualitative differentiation, such as food, drinks and items of conspicuous consumption: "he bought precious books, properties and went beyond in the enjoyment and consumption of different kinds of food, drinks and the most desirable things"; "he bought many rare books, precious clothing and furniture" (al-Saḥāwī n.d., II, 100; IX, 33). Badr al-Dīn b. Ḡamā'a warned his disciples and readers against the behaviour of these "accumulators" of books and "impostors" (2012, 126).

The social distinction of the Mamluk amirs was primarily linked to their belligerent qualities and responsibilities in times of war. As time passed, some

of them became more aware of the need to earn other forms of social recognition as refined men by pursuing mystical, literary and cultural interests (on the cultural and bibliophile tendencies among some Mamluk amirs, see Haarmann 1988, 93-94; Behrens-Abouseif 2018, 18-19). Again, in Veblen's words, on the "leisure class" we may grasp this sense of book collecting developed by some of the members of the military oligarchy who refused to be considered "simply the successful, aggressive male, the man of strength, resource, and intrepidity", like many of their social group (2007, 53). They wanted to avoid appearing as in Ibn Taġribirdī's emblematic description of amir Taġribirmiš, viceroy of Aleppo, (d. 842/1439): "he has little religion which adds to his lack of intellect and taste and to a harsh temperament. He is devoid of all knowledge and art, and I have never seen him with a book in his hand to read" (1992, XV, 212). They also strived to "cultivate their own tastes and [had to be able to] discriminate with some nicety between the noble and the ignoble among consumable goods" (ibid.). For this reason, amir Argūn al-Nāṣirī (d. 731/1331), paradoxically known both for his avarice and his unbridled passion for collecting books, as soon as he learned of the amir Qiġlīs al-Silāḥdār's death (d. 731/1330), another famous warrior and collector, he sent his delegate with two thousand dīnārs to Cairo to buy as many volumes as possible left by his colleague (al-Ṣafādī 2000, VIII, 232). The bibliophile trend among amirs whose past and heritage lacked recognition and originality could also constitute an attempt to participate in deeply cultural practices shared among the educated and cultured indigenous class in order to legitimise their leadership and assert their own belonging to the collective Arab-Islamic legacy. However, collecting was certainly not sufficient at that time to affirm the distinct social status of those belonging to the higher rank of the "leisure class", namely the foreign military elite. Therefore, the inclination of some amirs to acquire expensive copies of the Qur'ān (*al-maṣāḥif al-'āliya al-gāliya*) in their own transcription or written by the most famous copyists (e.g. Sultan Baybars al-Ġāṣṣnākīr d. 709/1310, the amirs Ṣayḥū al-Sāqī d. 752/1351 and Baktāṣ al-Mankūrsī d. 757/1356) can be construed as the effort to remedy the growing democratisation of book ownership (ibid., X, 218; XVI, 124; Id., 1998, I, 700; Ibrāhīm 1963, 38). We could add, to this category, both the aesthetic collectors who also viewed the book as an object of art and who were constantly looking for precious volumes often referred to as "*naḥṣa*", as well as people who loved certain texts and fervently collected their various editions and the autographed manuscripts (al-Ṣafādī 1998, V, 534; al-'Asqalānī 1969, I, 355).

The bond between the scholar and his own books could also lead to psychological and moral dependence in addition to some vices frequently stigmatised by biographers. Furthermore, the widely spread bibliophile passion and the strong competition among scholars for positions or for simple scientific prestige meant that some unpleasant features of bibliomaniacs arose and inevitably influenced relations between the members of the group. Al-Saḥāwī cited some bibliocleptomaniacs loathed by their own colleagues for breaching the book borrowing rules. This matter was addressed in detail and several times in various treatises of the period (see for example al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī 1996, I, 369-382; al-Samʿānī 1993, 598-608; Ibn ʿġamāʿa 2012, 126-28), since this improper behaviour undermined the values of the group and the respective social and professional ethics. Many people did not lend their books, nor did they allow anyone to use or even see them; others, more avid, went so far as to publicly express their desire to throw their collection overboard on the verge of death in order to prevent anyone else from enjoying it (al-Saḥāwī n.d., I, 13; III, 254; vol. IV, 166, 293). Some, consumed by the irrepressible passion of possession, misappropriated library books through loans that were never returned or were denied, books of friends who had passed away, or forcibly obliged owners to give the manuscripts to them. The great jurist and chancellor Muḥibb al-Dīn b. al-Šiḥna (d. 890/1485) almost ended up leading the black list made by colleagues and librarians as the emblem of the best-known serial bibliocleptomaniac of that period. By taking advantage of his high socio-professional position in the Mamluk bureaucracy, he had a mania for not returning borrowed books, unless forced by more powerful people in the hierarchy (ibid., IX, 301; see also Behrens-Abouseif 2018, 45-46). Similarly, al-Badr b. al-Qaṭṭān managed to illegally seize as many as five hundred volumes from the library of his deceased master ʿAlam al-Dīn al-Bulqīnī (d. 868/1464), as well as others from Ibn Ḥaġar's estate, causing the anger of the latter's son who had to intervene to save his father's assets (IX, 250). For this reason, some explicitly forbade in the endowment deed the possibility of lending books to high-ranking people both in the circle of power and in the bureaucracy (Ibrāhīm 1962, 66). This group would also include the *ʿulamā* with a profound experience of the book world who were able to skillfully falsify the signatures of well-known authors and sell non-original, incomplete or damaged books as autographed copies, or to rent them at a very high cost to other needy colleagues and students who could not afford to buy them (al-Saḥāwī n.d., IX, 148; cf. Touati 2006, 193-198).

In the light of the cost of books, the perishable nature of the material, competition, social differentiation, as well as the severe restrictions imposed by public libraries on external loans, it is clear why being generous and willing to lend one's own volumes (*samḥ bi-ʿāriyat al-kutub*) held such an important social and ethical value in this Republic of Letters. It was a highly appreciated personal attribute of the erudite gentleman in the Mamluk era and duly reported by biographers as a demonstration of openness, empathy and altruism, fundamental for the unity of the group (Ibid., III, 150, 228, 313). It was to this generous and fruitful sharing of books between colleagues and friends that al-Ṣafadī (1998, II, 706; III, 50, 500, 510) dedicated various correspondence exchanges in poetry and prose that highlight this deeply bonding practice. Ibn Ḥaḡar al-ʿAsqalānī stands out among all the personalities who were remembered for generosity, a virtue that was in stark contrast with the selfishness driven by ruthless competitive rivalry. Al-Saḡawī reserved ample space in *al-Ġawāhir* (III, 1018-21) to various anecdotes in which Ibn Ḥaḡar willingly lent his volumes to other scholars, including bitter rivals such as Badr al-Dīn al-ʿAynī (d. 855/1451), to people intending to travel for long periods or to common students who ran the risk of not carrying out their research because of bibliocleptomaniacs like Abū Hāmid al-Qudṣī (d. 888/1483).

On the bibliophile trend and on the respective rituals, which, as we have shown, seem to have flourished in those centuries sources however report the contrasting voice of Abū Ḥayyān al-Ġarnāṭī. The exceptional linguist, grammarian and exegete, particularly known for his avarice, explicitly deplored the commercialisation of the book and its high cost, as well as the ostentatious attitude of collectors willing to spend fortunes to purchase books which were available for free in public libraries, thus refraining from helping colleagues or people in need instead: "he used to say to those who bought books: May God give you some common sense that can help you to live! I can borrow all the books I want from the *waqf* libraries. But if I wanted someone to lend me a few dirhams, I wouldn't find anyone willing to do so" (al-Ṣafadī 1998, V, 334-35). The jurist Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkaṣī was seemingly of the same opinion. He was a regular visitor to the Cairo book market where he used to spend his days in the shops, reading, taking notes and copying texts for his research and lessons without ever buying anything (al-ʿAsqalānī 1993, III, 398).

5. Conclusions

The partial and gradual shift from reliance on oral discourse and memory to a comparable reliance on the written record brought about important changes in medieval Islamic culture (Bloom 2001, 123). Thanks to a fortunate combination of economic, technical and socio-cultural conditions, the spread of the culture of the book favoured the emergence of new “reading and teaching practices” which required a more articulated organisation in book production, of libraries and markets for the sale of these items, which by then had become indispensable for a wider range of consumers with extremely varied personal and professional interests. The availability of book materials in conjunction with the consolidation of schools and the enlargement of the class of *‘ulamā’* devoted to research, aspiring to an academic-bureaucratic career and eager for prestige and recognition, contributed to a greater articulation of the professional and social identity of the Mamluk scholar. The importance of academic inquiry and publishing was affirmed as a distinctive element necessary for differentiation within the scientific community. The importance attributed to written material and, above all, to rare and difficult-to-access texts, grew, as they represented an indispensable source for rigorous and original research in a saturated market with an endless amount of repetitive works. We have also noticed a trend towards a major cultural and relational refinement and an aesthetic sensitivity of the scholar of religious disciplines. The jurist, the *ḥadīth* expert and the intellectual in general were expected to be gentlemen with a profound inclination to knowledge in its broadest sense, to literary and calligraphic art, to the accumulation of books, to leisure and, finally, professional, social and generational relationships. The new conventions and paradigms were developed into a series of practices that strengthened the visible and invisible links between the members of the community as well as the feelings of loyalty and belonging and, paradoxically, those of competition and rivalry, too.

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