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Study Days and Vacations in Madrasas of Medieval Syria

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Abstract

This paper describes the study approach and schedule, focusing on study days and vacations conducted in Syrian madrasas during the Ayyubid and the Mamluk periods, until 1516. The author examines the impacts and the main factors affected on this arrangement, and the changes occurred until the end of the Mamluk State in Syria. The study, also, illustrates the local factors and developments existed in Syria that had strong impact on the changes. It is considered as an additional study of a previous one published in this journal (Vol. 1(7): 141 - 151, December 2011) about the process of education in the Mamluk era (1250 – 1517). The influence of ulama and judges, religious and natural circumstances affected on schedules of study days and vacations is also discussed.

Key words: Syria, Madrasas, Study Days, Vacations, celebrations.

INTRODUCTION

During the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, the schedule of lessons in the madrasas was usually stipulated as waqf conditions. Sources related to this period show that procedure was quite common in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt and Syria. The students in most of the madrasas studied on Sundays and Wednesdays, but because of the waqf conditions, it is noticeable that the study days and holidays were not uniform or consistent, but varied from institution to another, both according to the waqf conditions and the size and importance of the educational institution. On the other side, information collected from a review of the sources shows that the students were not scheduled for classes on Tuesdays and Fridays. Additionally, there had been longer vacations related to religious events and days, and the yearly big vacation known as “al-Batala al-Kubra”.

This study will follow the data given in different medieval sources about study days and vacations in the madrasas in Ayyubid and Mamluk Syria. Despite that, those phenomena were similar in the madrasas in other provinces of the Mamluk State, but it can be noticed some local differences in Syria. Hence, this study will examine the changes through the times, comparatively with the Ayyubid era, and the developments occurred in the Mamluk state in general, in light of political, social and environmental circumstances. This study tries to discuss in the data collected and answer the following research questions: What signified the study days and holidays in Medieval Syrian madrasas? Were there any changes in these phenomena through the times, from the Ayyubid to the Mamluk periods? What were the circumstances affected on study days and holidays in that period?

Methodologically, this study depends on a descriptive method, which deals with data collected from different sources, of relevant Arabic sources of medieval times, such as endowments deeds, history books, Biographies and others. Modern studies, Arabic, English and others, will be taken into account for comparison, discussion and analysis, especially, in topics of different processes of Medieval Islamic education.

Judges and Ulama in Charge of Control on Madrasas’ Activities

Since educational institutions, such as madrasa, began...
to depend on endowments (waqf) during late Medieval Syria, judges and different ulama made major efforts to get appointed to senior teaching positions in the largest, highest-status madrasas in the cities of Syria, in addition to controlling the administration of their waqfs. Since some of the madrasas in Syria were controlled by judges, as centers of jurisprudence, teaching, education and managing waqf matters, they became known by the name Madaris al-Qudat/Madaris al-Hukm (Madaras of Judges). By dint of the judges taking hold of positions in these specific madrasas, it became customary for judges and only judges to fulfill positions in these madrasas. Even beyond the waqf conditions set by the owners, the latter frequently limited appointments in the madrasas to judges. Due to the high status of these madrasas, they became focal for friction and rivalry amongst the highest ulama that competed to get appointed to the highest positions in those madrasas, be the position judge, teacher or waqf manager. These madrasas were usually located in the large cities, with economically rich waqfs, broad in scope. This engendered furious competition and conflict for control of the waqfs and other positions, power and taking decisions.

In Damascus, the various judges tended to cling to the important madrasas of their adherents, which were called the judges’ madrasas (madaris al-qudat), serving as both waqf managers and as teachers. Moreover, due to the high status and importance of these madrasas, they were called the foremost or great madrasas (al-madaris al-kibar). For example, al-‘Adiliyya al-Kubra madrasa served as the centre of operations and home of the chief Shafi‘i judge of Syria (qadi al-qudat) and his family for the entire time that he held this position. When the judge was dismissed or replaced, the living quarters were transferred to the new judge (Al-Nu‘aymi, 2: p. 172, 1988; ibid, 1: pp. 364-366, 424, 1981; Ibn Kathir, 13: 313, undated). Al-‘Adiliyya madrasa served not only as the Shafi‘i judge’s home but his courthouse, where witnesses were heard and trials conducted (Ibn Qadi Shuhba, 3: p. 352, 1977; Ibn Kathir, 13: p. 72, undated). The Shafi‘i judges usually ran the important madrasas associated with this school in Damascus, including al-‘Aziziyya, al-Taqwiyiya, al-Falakiyya, al-Adiliyya, al-Mujahidiyya, and al-Kallasa madrasas (Ibn al-Furat, 8: p. 47, 1936; Al-Nu‘aymi, 1: p. 222, 1981).

The judges of the other Sunni schools also utilised the madrasas as their courthouses. The Hanafi judges controlled the main madrasas in Syria which served their adherents, too. These madrasas were known by the nickname of the Hanafi judges’ madrasas (madaris al-qudat al-Hanafiyya). Al-Nuriyya madrasa in Damascus was used as the Hanafi judge’s seat (Al-Qalqashandi, 12: pp. 351-353, 1987). In addition to al-Nuriyya, al-Qaliyya madrasa also served as a courthouse for the Hanafi judge of the city (Ibn Kathir, 14: pp. 297, 298, undated; Ibn Qadi Shuhba, 2: pp. 407, 408, 549, 553, 669, 1994).

Appropriately, the judges tried to control many madrasas, taking advantage of their positions and their lofty status in the state. This becomes clear from the proclamation issued in 781/1379, to clarify the management of al-Zahiriya, al-Khatuniyya, and al-Qassa‘in madrasas, which were not subject to the judges’ authority. This proclamation was issued as a result of conflicts that erupted among the Hanafi judges over controlling the madrasas for the Hanafis (Ibn Qadi Shuhba, 3: p. 6, 1977). The al-Halawiyya and al-Shadhabakhtiyya madrasas in Aleppo were among the largest and most important of the Hanafi madrasas in the city, both in terms of the number of students and the size of salaries. They were subordinate to the Hanafi judge in the city (Ibn Shaddad, 1: p. 265, 1991; Ibn Hajar, 1: p. 64, 1993; Ibn al-Shihna, p. 115, 1984).

For the Hanbali judge, apparently al-Jawziyya madrasa in Damascus served as the courthouse for the Hanbali judge during the early Mamluk period (Al-Nu‘aymi, 2: pp. 33, 39, 51, 1988). Thus, when Shams al-Din ibn Muslim was appointed as the Hanbali judge of Damascus in 726/1326. He began to conduct his trials in al-Jawziyya madrasa, as those preceding him had (Ibid, 2: p. 39). Some of the Hanbali madrasas in Damascus were subordinate to the Hanbali judges there, e.g.: al-Sahibiyya, al-Hanbaliyya, and Dar al-Hadith al- Ashrafiyya in al-Salihyya. These judges controlled educational matters as well as managing the madrasa’s waqfs.

In addition to the madrasas that served the judges for jurisdictional locales, various madrasas also constituted seats of witnesses (marakiz al-shuhud), both to hear testimony and for verification and registration. These witnesses assisted the judge in fulfilling his role, and saw their work as an important means of earning their livelihoods. Sharaf al-Din ‘Isa ibn ‘Asakir (d. 741/1340) owned a notary office (markaz shuhud) inside al-Rawahiyya madrasa in Damascus, and made his living from this work. According to contemporary sources, a number of madrasas in Damascus, in addition to al-Rawahiyya, can be identified as notary centres where the work of witnesses was concentrated, like: al-Qaymaziyya, al-Mismariyya, al-Adiliyya al-Kubra, and al-Zinjiliyya madrasas (Ibn Qadi Shuhba, 2: pp. 172-173, 1994; ibid, 3: p. 559, 1977; Ibn Hajar, 2: p. 59, 1993; Al Nu‘aymi, 1: p. 529, 1981).

Due to the importance of al-Salihyya madrasa in Jerusalem, for example, its sheikh was directly appointed by the Sultan in Cairo; he usually held the title Shaykh al-Islam, and served as the city’s judge. The lofty position of the al-Salihyya teacher gave him special status, and the position was considered to be one of the three most important in the city, i.e.: the judge, the governor and the head of the waqf for Jerusalem and Hebron (Nazir al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn il-Quds wal-Khalil) (Al-‘Asali, pp. 66-67, 1981). In addition to al-Salihyya, al-Aminiyiyya madrasa/zawiya in Jerusalem was very important, with its
teacher appointed directly by the governor of Damascus (Al-Qalqashandi, 12: pp. 293, 420, 1987). Al-Jawuliyya madrasa in Jerusalem, served as the judge’s seat, both for handing down sentences and for lodging complaints, from the time that Shahin al-Shuja’i served as governor in 830/1426 (Al-‘Asali, p. 223, 1981).

With the growth of new madrasas during the first Mamluk period, additional madrasas were added to those under the authority of the judges in Damascus. That reinforced their status, since they controlled a large number of important madrasas in the city. Thus, their influence and authority of control and power were enhanced, not only in jurisprudence, but in managing waqf affairs and in the madrasas’ educational activities.

**Study Days**

The aspirations of the judges and highest-ranking ulama to control the madrasas added to the competition among them, and serious conflicts often erupted between the judges over control of these madrasas. It is noticeable from the data collected from biographies of ulama, and other related sources, that those judges and ulama made use their positions and status for serving their own interests and businesses. This behaviour appeared clearly in different phenomena, of them conducting study days and making decisions for stating holidays and vacations to serve their desire. Those phenomena grew worse during the second period of the Mamluks in Syria.

In addition to the madrasas’ roles as places of study, dormitories for students and teachers, seats for judges, courts and centres for notaries and witnesses, shelters for orphans, etc.; the madrasas were involved in arranging various social and public ceremonies. These ceremonies were in general related to the activities of the judges, the teachers, the students and the ulama class, since the madrasas and educational and religious institutions were their principal arenas of activities. The social and administrative relationships that bound this class to the other classes of the population and to the ruling class, turned the madrasas into active centres that served the ulama class. By the end of the Mamluk era in Syria, study days began to be disrupted. The evidence indicates that lessons in the largest, most famous madrasas were provided almost every day of the week. These madrasas, of course, enjoyed the highest waqf incomes, benefitting teachers and judges, students and other positions.

A perusal of the sources germane to Ayyubid and Mamluk Syria shows that at that time, the students in most of the madrasas studied on Sundays and Wednesdays. Al-Nu’aymi presents quite a number of examples of different study days in the different madrasas of Damascus (Al-Nu’aymi, 1: pp. 353-354, 424-426, 1981). This procedure was also common in

Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt. Muhammad Amin gives a wide description regarding this topic in his studies about the madrasa and waqf in Egypt during the same period. Jonathan Berkey, also, stressed on that point in his studies (Amin, 1980; ibid, pp. 854-855, 1990; Berkey, pp. 79-81, 1992).

By contrast, a very small amount of material exists concerning studies on other days of the week, especially those held in mosques (halaqat) and hadith studies at dar al-hadith institutions. When some lessons conducted on other days of the week, it was for the benefit of the students or to serve the interest of the ulama to get extra time for teaching. Judge Sham’s al-Din al-Wanna’, for example, gave his lessons at the al-Ghazaliyya and al-Badra’iyya madrasas on Tuesdays and on Saturdays gave lessons at the Dar al-Hadith al-Ashrafiyya and al-‘Adiliyya al-Kubbrá madrasas. Apparently, al-Wanna’ set up this schedule to enable figh students who studied on Sundays and Wednesdays to attend his classes as well (Al-Nu’aymi, 1: pp. 44-45, 1981).

Despite that Sundays and Wednesdays remained the principal study days teachers who taught in more than one madrasa obviously had to set up their teaching schedules, so that they taught on different days in each one. For example, when Taqiyy al-Din ibn Qadi Shuhba was appointed as a teacher in a number of madrasas in Damascus in 823/1420, he taught at the al-Shamiyya al-Barraniyya madrasa on Sundays, and at the al-Aziziyya madrasa on Wednesdays. In 837/1433, Ibn Qadi Shuhba started teaching at the al-‘Adhrawiyya and al-Aziziyya madrasas on Sundays; he taught his first lesson on the 19th of Safar. Simultaneously, he taught in other madrasas: al-Zahiriyya, al-Rukniyya and al-Taqaqwiyya, on Wednesdays. Even before that, in 813/1410, Ibn Qadi Shuhba taught classes five days a week: three in the al-Tawashi mosque and two in the Tankiz mosque (Al-Nu’aymi, 1: pp. 292, 397, 1981; ibid, 2: pp. 422-423, 1988). Judge Najm al-Din ibn Hajji also divided his time between madrasas in 823/1420, teaching at the al-Shamiyya al-Barraniyya and al-Ghazaliyya madrasas on Sundays and at the al-Zahiriyya, al-Rukniyya and al-Nasiriyya madrasas on Wednesdays. Al-Nu’aymi and Ibn Kathir present many examples of teachers in Damascus who divided their lessons among their madrasas on Sundays and Wednesdays (Al-Nu’aymi, 1: pp. 59-60, 198, 258, 261-262, 269, 289, 293, 309, 369, 381, 425, 464, 1981; Ibn Kathir, 13: pp. 277-278, undated; ibid, 14: pp. 85, 197-198, undated).

Some of the teachers taught on days other than Sundays and Wednesdays to serve their interests. That was abnormally relative to the ordinary and conventional habits accepted in educational activities. Although Tuesdays were considered days off at the madrasas, Shihab al-Din ibn Jahibal did not conform to this practice, and gave his lessons at the al-Shamiyya al-Juwaniyya madrasa on Tuesdays. He began his first

For the benefits of the pupils, providing lessons in madrasas on days other than Sundays and Wednesdays, gave the students the opportunity to participate in a greater number of lessons provided by different teachers. In the al-Tawba mosque in Damascus, for instance, the lessons (halaqat) on Ibn al-Hajib’s writings were given on Saturdays. Lessons on the same material were given at the al-Farisiyya madrasa on Monday afternoons (Al-Nu’aymi, 1: p. 315, 1981).

As mentioned above, the number of study days in the madrasas of Syria varied between one madrasa and another, both according to the madrasa’s size and status, and according to its waqf income, in addition to the interests of the teachers (ulama’ judges). For instance, Lessons were conducted almost every day of the week at the al-Salahiyya madrasa in Jerusalem. Mujir al-Din al-Ulaymi writes that in 876/1471, Kamal al-Din bin abi Sharif (shaykh al-Islam) taught his lessons four days a week at that madrasa. Over the course of two years and longer, he taught fiqh, hadith, tafsir (interpretation), ‘usul (sources of religion) and khilaf (comparison of judicial theories of the various schools) (Al-Nu’aymi, 1: p. 315, 1981).

At the al-Umariyya madrasa in Damascus, classes took place every day of the week, excluding Fridays by the late Mamluk era. The teachers coordinated their lessons among themselves, so as to provide their lessons without overlapping. Among the most well-known of the teachers there were: Burhan al-Din ibn Miflih (d. 884/1479), Judge 'Ala’ al-Din al-Mardawi (d. 885/1480), Yusuf al-Mardawi, Shihab al-Din al-'Askari, Najm al-Din ibn Miflih, Yusuf al-Kufssabbi, Taqiyy al-Din al-'Ajlini, and many others.

At the end of the ninth/fifteenth century, it became difficult to maintain the madrasas in Syria, due to the economic crisis and concomitant decrease in waqf income. This caused cutbacks in the number of days per week devoted to education in the madrasas. As a first step, lessons on Mondays and Thursdays were cancelled; later, lessons on Wednesdays were also cancelled. It must be recalled, that in the second half of the ninth/fifteenth century, significant changes were introduced into al-Umariyyamadrasa’s operations, and classes were provided for the other schools of Islam, e.g. not only for the Hanbali adherents, as had been originally stipulated in the waqf documents (see: Ibn Tulun, 1: pp. 259-263, 269 – 270, 1981).

This overview shows that some classes were held on almost every day of the week, except for Tuesdays and Fridays, which were days off. In exceptional cases, classes were even held on those days, which were considered unusual during that period. During those days, general meetings were usually held in the mosques, for preaching (wa‘z), which were attended by large crowds from the more popular schools; this was especially true on Fridays, when sermons were preached before or after prayers (Al-Asali, 3: pp. 874-875, 1990; Ibid, 1: p. 199, 1983). 'Ala’ al-Din ‘Ali ibn al-Zamalkani (d. 690/1291) taught at the al-Aminiyamadrasa in Damascus in 685/1286, and gave classes every day, including Tuesdays and Fridays. Although this practice was met with surprise and was viewed as strange by many people: “thummaiqtadara’yuha-wazaruhaan na al-darayudhkarakullayoawminhayatayawa al-Jumu’atiwa-l-Thulatha’… wa-hadha mina al-‘aja’biallati lam tu’had. wa-lam ya’tarid ‘alayhumu’taridun fi dhali’ka’ (He made his decision to conduct lessons every day, even on Fridays and Tuesdays… that was a strange step, which was not known before, and he did not encounter any opposition) (Al-Nu’aymi, 1: 194, 1981).

Holidays and Vacations

The madrasas sometimes served as places in which social events related to the lives of the ulama, teachers and the students were held, such as mourning or memorial services for deceased ulama and leaders. That happened, for example, when Sheikh Shams al-Din al-Ayki al-Farisi died in Damascus in 697/1297. Al-Ayki was in a high position, in charge of the Sa’id al-Su’ada’ khanqah and held the position of Sheikh al-Shuyukh in Egypt. A mourning event was held to memorialise him in al-Samisatiyya khanqah that was fitting to his lofty stature (Ibn Kathir, 13: p. 316, undated; Al-Nu’aymi, 1: p. 422, 1981; Al-Yunini, pp.18-19, 258-259, 1998). By contrast, sometimes weddings and marriage celebrations were held in the madrasas, as happened in al-Adiliyya madrasa in 796/1393, when the wedding party for Bey Khatun, the daughter of judge ‘Ala’ al-Din ibn abi al-Baqqa’, was held there. Due to Bi Khatun’s status as the judge’s daughter, many judges and honoured leaders of Damascus participated in the ceremony, in addition to
judges and Mamluk Emirs from Egypt, who were in Damascus at the time, accompanying Sultan Barquq during his visit to Syria (IbnQadiShuhba, 3: p. 517, 1977).

The ceremonies held at al-Adiliyya madrasa for reading out the order announcing appointments were accompanied by blessings and speeches complimenting the judge being appointed. That’s the way the ceremony was conducted for Judge Taj al-Din al-Subki when he was appointed chief judge of Damascus (qadi al-qudat) in 764/1363. He arrived from Egypt, and an appropriate ceremony was conducted for him at the al-Adiliyya madrasa, during which the order appointing him was read out to the assembled judges, ulama and city leaders. During the ceremony, those present blessed him, and writers present even read out odes to him that they had written (IbnKathir, 14: p. 338, undated).

Various other celebrations were held in the madrasas, to mark the beginning of studies or celebrate the end of studies of a particular subject. The city leaders were frequently invited to these parties, in addition to teachers, judges, parents and others; refreshments, including meals and/or pastries and sweets, were served. Thus, for example, when construction was completed on al-Ashrafiyah madrasa in Jerusalem in 873/1468, a party was held to present the first lesson given by the madrasa’s teacher, Sheikh Shihab al-Din al-’Umari, after the Friday prayers. The party was held in the madrasa’s main hall, in the presence of judges and ulama. After the lesson, the supervisor of the city’s holy sites (nazir al-Haramayn), Emir Bardibek al-Taji, distributed sweets to the participants (Al-Nu’aymi, 2: p. 286, 1988).

By carefully examining the medieval sources, especially concerning the regions and periods discussed here, one can divide the holidays and days off into two principal categories: first, general holidays or days off from studies that were decided upon by willing agreement and were customary in most Islamic regions. Second, temporary and local holidays, wherein classes were cancelled due to events or circumstances that forced such an action, are they political or economic factors, or natural disasters.

The general, agreed-upon days off were usually religious holidays. In addition to the two days per week, Tuesdays and Fridays, in which classes did not take place, in general, there were holidays due to the demands of the Islamic religion. These included the month of fasting (Ramadan), the period of pilgrimage (al-Hajj), the holidays at the end of Ramadan (al-Fitr) and the holiday of the sacrifice (al-Adha, the ninth and tenth days of the first month, Muharram (Taswi’a and ’Ashura).

Most modern sources agree with the medieval source of IbnJama’a, who states that Tuesdays and Fridays were holidays from studies (IbnJama’a, p. 22, 1994; Amin, 1980; ‘Abd al-Mahdi, p. 568, 1989; Berkley, p. 80, 1992). On those days, the judges met with witnesses and held court in the madrasas dedicated for them as Judges’ Madrasas (madaris al-qudat/ al-hukm), as mentioned above. Judge Jamal al-Din al-Misri (d. 623/1226), for example, held his judicial meetings and conducted his court cases on Tuesdays and Fridays, as it was scheduled and used to be during the early periods of madrasas in Syria. Judge al-Misri was also the first teacher at the al-Adiliyya al-Kubra madrasa in Damascus when it opened its doors in the Ayyubid era in 619/1222. He would invite the witnesses of Damascus to meet with him in the hall of the madrasa and hear them there, utilizing their evidence in passing judgment on the cases before him (IbnKathir, 13: p. 104, undated; Al-Nu’aymi, 1: p. 187, 1981).

Perusal of many waqf documents for educational institutions in Egypt shows that there the situation concerning vacations was almost completely identical to that of Syria, principally concerning holidays related to the religion. It seems that the long vacation(al-Batala al-Kubra) lasted about two months in the beginning, until the half of 8th/14th century. At the period of Sultan Barquq (ruled 784/1382 – 802/1399), and according to the waqf documents of Barquq madrasa in Cairo, the long vacation was somewhat curtailed there, and lasted only for the months of Sha’ban and Ramadan, and ten days into the month of Shawwal. However, Muhammad Amin, who has researched the subjects of waqf, education and community life in Mamluk Egypt, maintains that the vacation usually continued until the 20th of Shawwal (Amin, p. 855, 1990; ibid, 1980; Al-Hajji, p. 736, 1990). Then, this vacation had changed to three months: Rajab, Sha’ban and Ramadan (the seventh, eighth and ninth months, respectively, of the Hijri year).

The writings of IbnQadiShuhba show a similarity between Syria and Egypt concerning vacations during this period. While ‘Abd al-Jall’s ‘Abd al-Mahdi, in his study, argued that the long break only included two months, Sha’ban and Ramadan, in Syria (‘Abd al-Mahdi, p. 571, 1989), IbnQadiShuhba describes the vacation in Damascus as lasting longer than three months. He notes that in 746/1345, at the beginning of the long vacation, classes were cancelled in the madrasas of Damascus starting on the 21st of the month of Jumadi al-Thani (II) until after Ramadan was over (IbnQadiShuhba, 2: p. 449, 1994). This argument and differences in accounts about the length of the big holiday between researchers and sources depended on the period they stated their accounts.

During the second Mamluk period, increasing corruption and conflicts in the educational systems affected the ability of the educational institutions to function. Teachers, ulama and judges acted as they pleased, making arbitrary decisions about the beginning of the teaching year and the length of vacations. IbnQadiShuhba stated that originally, lessons before the long vacation were cancelled from the beginning of Rajab, but over time, and during IbnQadiShuhba’s time,
they started gradually extending the long vacation, until it started at the end of the Rabi' II (IbnQadiShuhba, 3: pp. 463, 511, 543-544, 1977).

The long vacation (al-batala al-kubra) got longer as a result of the unacceptable acts of some of the judges and teachers in extending them. Apparently, these changes were more obvious in Damascus, starting when Judge Shihab al-Din al-Ba'uni took office in 794/1391-1392. At that time, he announced that lessons were cancelled and he advanced the vacation so that it began on the ninth of the month of Junadi al-Awwal (I), instead of during the month of Rajab. Although this action angered some of the teachers, like Najm al-Din ibnHajji, it nevertheless became standard practice, as other teachers and judges copied Judge al-Ba'uni, and advanced the start of vacation. Thus, the long vacation began in Junadi al-Awwal and lasted more than four months, until the end of Ramadan. In 795/1392-1393, the Shafi'i judge acted as had his predecessor, and cancelled classes for vacation starting on the second of Junadi al-Awwal. IbnQadiShuhba severely criticized the changes that Judge al-Ba'uni introduced in lengthening the vacation by two months more, “hadhaamrun lam yusbaqlayhianyubtala li-Rajabin min awwalijunadi al-Ula” (previously, this case was not known to begin holiday from the beginning of Junadi the first). He also noted that after three years, Judge al-Ba'uni was not satisfied with only this change, and further extended the vacation, announcing that it would begin at the end of the month of Rabi' al-Thani (II), 797/February, 1395 (Ibid, 3: pp. 425, 1977).

As noted above, Muhammad Amin, who utilized waqf documents for educational institutions in Egypt for his research, maintains that the vacation lasted until the 20th of Shawwal. Studies recommenced on the 21st of Shawwal and continued until the end of the month of Dhu al-Hijja, with a break of two days, the ninth and tenth (Tasua' and 'Ashura') of the month of Muharram (Amin, p. 855, 1990).

Evidently, then, during the Ayyubid and first Mamluk periods, the teachers and judges strictly adhered to accepted study days, and began holidays and vacations on time. Alterations in these arrangements began with the spreading corruption and decline in education in Syria beginning at the end of the 14th century and continuing until the end of the Mamluk period. These distortions in schedules were manifested not only by lengthened vacations and their extension by almost two months, but by delays in beginning the school year in the month of Safar. An examination of the sources leads one to conclude that the study year usually began at the beginning of Safar, after an extended vacation in the month of Muharram. Teachers usually went on vacation during this month, both because of the holiday on the ninth and tenth, and because the friends and families of pilgrims returning from the holy places (al-hajj) during that month welcomed them with celebrations and parties (Al-Nu'aymi, 1: p. 289, 1981). Judge Burhan al-Din ibnJama'ahad cancelled classes in his madrasas in Damascus on the 16th of Muharram in 786/March, 1384, because of returning pilgrims from Mecca. His madrasas consisted of: al-Ghazaliyya, al-'Adiliyya, al-Atabikyya, al-Rawahiyya, and Dar al-Hadith al-Ashrafiyya (IbnQadiShuhba, 3: pp. 130-131, 1977).

The case of Judge Najm al-Din ibnHajji, who began his classes in the al-Shamiyya al-Barraniyya madrasa on Sunday, the fourth of Rabi'al-Thani (II) 830/February 1427, emphasizes the adjustments and changes made in scheduling and the beginning of the study year during this period. He delayed the opening of the study year by two months, from the month of Safar. By contrast, although Taqiy al-Din ibnQadiShuhba planned to postpone the start of the study year in 837/1433 to the month of Rabi'al-Awwal (I) instead of Safar, because he was busy harvesting grain, he changed his mind; he did not want it to become a precedent (Al-Nu'aymi, 1: pp. 291-292, 1981).

The chief judge (qadi al-qudat) was responsible for making the decision to cancel classes due to weather. Sometimes, days off were mandated by circumstances in Syria, such as on occasion of severe weather conditions that forced the cancellation of lessons. Heavy rains, extreme cold and snow sometimes kept both students and teachers from attending classes. This occurred during the second half of the eighth/forteenth century, when Judge Taj al-Din al-Subki had to cancel studies one winter, because of the extreme cold that gripped Damascus (Ibn al-'Iraqi, 1: pp. 243-244, 1989). In 829/1425-1426, the chief judge, Najm al-Din ibnHajji, had to cancel studies during the month of Safar because of the heavy rainfalls and snowstorms around Damascus. The cancellation of lessons lasted almost a month, until the 19th of the month of Rabi' al-Awwal/January, 1426 (Al-Nu'aymi, 1: p. 290, 1988). The heavy rainfalls in various regions of Syria frequently damaged educational institutions, which forced the cancellation of studies. In 717/1317, heavy rains severely damaged 13 mosques and madrasas in Ba'albek, and destroyed or damaged a lot of property in them, like books and Qur'ans that were regularly used (IbnSabat, 2: pp. 630, 632, 1993).

The agricultural year, too, had its impact on students and teachers, who tended to absent themselves from studies in order to participate in the grain and fruit harvests. During the harvest of apricots, for example, lessons were frequently cancelled, so that the fruit would be harvested on time. This hiatus in studies even had a name of “Batalat al-Mishmish” (the Apricot Holiday). The first to cancel lessons for the apricot harvest was Judge Najm al-Din ibnSaniyy al-Dawl (d. 680/1281), when he served as chief judge during the reign of the Mamluk sultan, al-ZahirBaybars. Because of the groves of apricot he owned and the short harvest season of that fruit, the
judge was forced to cancel the classes he taught, which led other teachers to copy him, and it became a custom (fa-qadahdathazamana al-mishmishibatalatala al-darsi li-annahu kana lahubustun bi-arzial-sahmi...fatabata al-nasu fi hadhihi al-ayyamiwa-ittaba'uhu he found at the apricot season lessons off, because he had an orchard in al-Sihm land, so the other people had a holiday in those days and followed him ...) (IbnKathir,13: pp. 201-202, undated).

The apricot holiday (Batalat al-Mishmish) continued to be a seasonal holiday in Damascene madrasas during the Mamluk period. Some teachers continued the holiday until the end of the apricot season, as did Judge Burhan al-Din ibnJama'a in 786/1384. That year, the apricot holiday lasted almost 50 days, and Judge IbnJama'a only returned to teach class on the sixth of the month of Jumadi al-Awwal, after the long period of time off (IbnQadiShuhba, 3:p. 134, 1977). Judge al-Zuhri, also, cancelled classes at al-Ghazaliyya madrassa on the 15th of the Jumadal-Thani (II), in 792/June, 1390, because of the apricot season, and many other teachers in Damascus copied him (Ibid, pp. 334-335).

Such seasonal holidays varied from place to place in Syria, depending on circumstance and events. The spread of contagious diseases and epidemics also affected studies, and sometimes caused their cancellation. In 750/1349, for example, the study year began late because of an epidemic that had spread the year before; many people were still feeling the effects when the study year was supposed to begin. At the end of the fourteenth century, epidemics and contagious diseases spread in different parts of Syria, which caused the cessation of studies. In 800/1397, for instance, epidemics caused the cancellation of lessons in many regions throughout Syria (IbnQadiShuhba,2:p. 662, 1994;Ibid., 3: p. 633, 1977).

Of course, wars and political conflicts between groups of Mamluks, or the Mongol invasion of Syria also strongly affected, to their detriment, the ability of educational institutions to function. Many institutions were damaged during the conflicts and wars of the era, or the waqfs supporting them were damaged. This weakened their ability to provide educations, or spread corruption among the functionaries and relevant officials, e.g. judges, ulama and various educators. Such political and economic circumstances caused significant damage to the educational system, both because funds for salaries and the madrasas' expenses were received irregularly if at all, and because the facilities and funding sources of many waqfs were destroyed, so that future stabilization was impossible. This occurred principally during the fifteenth century and after the last Mongol conquest of Syria in 803/1400.

Conclusion

Evidently, during the Ayyubid and first Mamluk periods, the teachers and judges, who were in charge of the educational activities in addition to other functions and businesses, strictly adhered to accepted study days, and began holidays and vacations on time. The sources of Ayyubid and Mamluk Syria show that at that time, the students in most of the madrasas studied on Sundays and Wednesdays. But, when some lessons conducted on other days of the week, it was for the benefit of the students or to serve the interests of the ulama.

It is concluded that the number of study days in the madrasas of Syria varied between one madrasa and another, both according to the madrasa's size and status, and according to its waqf income, in addition to the interests of the teachers (ulama' judges) in charge. This overview shows that some classes were held on almost every day of the week, except for Tuesdays and Fridays, which were days off. But in exceptional cases, classes were even held on those days. So, by the end of the Mamluk era in Syria, it is noticeable that study days began to be disrupted.

Despite that holidays and vacations from studies in Syria's madrasas were usually determined by established procedures, for the most part set to coincide with religious holidays, in addition to the two days per week, Tuesdays and Fridays, it is concluded that in some cases, days off were mandated by local circumstances in Syria.e.g. War, political and economic reasons, natural disasters and severe weather, epidemics, and agricultural seasons. During the second Mamluk period, increasing corruption and conflicts in the educational systems affected the ability of the educational institutions to function. Teachers, ulama and judges acted as they pleased, making arbitrary decisions about the beginning of the teaching year, days off and the length of vacations.Thus, during the late Mamluk era, the long vacation lasted more than four months, instead of two months at the Ayyubid and first Mamluk eras.

References


pp. 717-761


