Mosques as Libraries in Islamic Civilization, 700–1400 A.D.

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"Read in the name of thy Lord and cherished Who created, created man out of a mere clot of congealed blood: Read! and thy Lord is most bountiful, He who taught the use of the pen, taught man that which he knew not . . ." (Sura XCVI, Qur'an).

This excerpt provides the Qur'an's basic justification for the rise of literacy; it was a clear indication to the Arabs to make a break with their mnemonic traditions and move toward a new literary era.

With the establishment of Islam as the cultural and political foundation of the Arab world, mosques flourished beyond being mere places of worship. Used as schools and informal gathering places for the exchange of ideas and impromptu poetry readings, mosques were a natural choice for establishing the first libraries in the Arab world. How these libraries developed, and their role in nurturing the germ of the European Renaissance, is the focus of this paper.

The Qur'an: From "It is said . . ." to "It is written . . ."

The words *Iqra* (read) and *Kitab* (book) occur frequently in the Qur'an. Reading and respect for books was strongly encouraged by the Qur'an, which served as the principal force behind the development and maturity of intellectualism in the Arab world. With the birth of Islam, the Arab peninsula emerged from obscurity to enter a new stage of creativity and cultural ferment that far surpassed two great civilizations, Persia (Sassanids) and Byzantium.

Before the dawn of Islam, no real education system existed for the Arabs. There was no significant written literary tradition. Rather, they relied heavily on memorization, preserving most of their legends, poetry, and (especially) genealogies through an oral tradition passed from

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generation to generation. Young Arabs learned from their parents not only how to tend camels and other livestock, how to care for tents or how to conduct oneself honorably in battle, but also how to speak with authority, drama, and inflection—an art known as *balagha* or rhetoric. This oral tradition did not disappear abruptly with the development of written literature, but rather dovetailed with and continued to thrive throughout the early Islamic years.

Through the discipline and rigor of *balagha* and the Arab oral tradition, Muslims were able to preserve the Qur'an until it was formally written down. The Huffadh were among the faithful and closest companions of Muhammed who were charged with memorizing the Qur'an.[1] These Huffadh not only taught and transmitted the teachings of the Qur'an from memory, but were instrumental in having it recorded. When a large number of Huffadh died in early Islamic battles for the conquest of Iraq and Syria, Muhammed's successor, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (d. 634 A.D.), directed those Huffadh remaining to collect the complete text of the Qur'an into one comprehensive manuscript. Thus the oral tradition of the first Muslims paved the way for the development of literature in Islam.

The third caliph, Uthman Ibn Affan (d. 656 A.D.), ordered the duplication of a few copies of the manuscript to be sent to each of the new conquered provinces. These copies were made under the caliph's own supervision and in consultation with those Huffadh who were still living. In turn, it was from these approved copies that dispersed Muslim communities prepared their own multiple copies, resulting in a second wave of duplication of the original text.[2]

The compilation of the Qur'an and production of multiple copies not only served to propagate the faith, but, especially, it provided a model for the standardization of the Arabic language. As history tells us,[3] there were many other dialects spoken besides that of Muhammed and his tribe, the Quraish of Mecca. Writing the Qur'an in a Quraishi dialect established it *de facto* as the official dialect of Arabic, and the language of Islam, both spoken and written. This standardization was elaborated and improved as the writers developed and created new scripts.[4]

For early Arabs the Qur'an itself represented a real intellectual, social, legal, and historical revolution. It was with the Qur'an and for the Qur'an that Muslims built their system of worship and education. There are Islamic sayings that "man should seek knowledge from birth to death"; and that "knowledge and fire are the only two things that grow by being spread." Islamic proverbs such as these unleashed an incomparable eagerness among Muslims for learning, teaching, and discovery.

This deep intellectual thirst was not limited to a learned elite of scholars, but included military and political leaders. Caliphs themselves often set the pace for expanded literary and scientific achievement. Amidst this ferment the Qur'an was taught in the mosques and regarded as the foundation of all knowledge and learning, both religious and secular (although the distinction between the two would have been meaningless to an early Muslim).

The Mosque: Place of Prayer, Government, and Learning

The mosque was the first institution Muhammed ordered built when he moved to Khaybar or al-Madinah. Primarily a place of worship, the mosque also served as classroom, where Muhammed expounded on Qur'anic passages; and as courtroom, where legal squabbles and moral questions were settled in light of Islamic teaching. As Arab-Muslim communities grew too large for one mosque, new ones would be constructed nearby, allowing the mosques to assume different roles within one community. This division of responsibility resulted in a hierarchy of importance among mosques in the same city, town, or village. Always it was the largest mosque that housed the largest, most complete library.

With Islamic expansion, mosques in non-Arab, originally non-Muslim provinces of the empire played a crucial role in the Islamization of each conquered nation. At the mosque, newly converted Muslims first learned Arabic in order to master the words and the teaching of the Qur'an. Often, a by-product of Islamization was Arabization. This served to cement the non-Arabs' identification with their conquerors. In an Arab-Muslim empire becoming increasingly pluralistic, the mosque served as a symbolic, yet very real, site for religious and cultural unity among Muslims of all nations.

Teachers, like missionaries, would staff the mosques in new territories and begin their task of exhorting the population to embrace Islam. But that was not all they did. Taking their cue from the Qur'an itself, these teachers set out imbuing new Muslims with the same zeal for learning that consumed them. The means for this Arab-Islamization was the written word: books. Thus it was only logical that manuscript collections and formal libraries would be housed in mosques.

Mosques as Libraries: Translation, Preservation, and Creation of Literature

The greater, more prestigious libraries of Muslim communities often were founded by learned individuals through the philanthropy of schol-

ars, aristocrats, governors, and caliphs. Under this patronage, many mosques flourished and developed enviable libraries accessible to scholars from all over the Islamic world.

One such scholar was al-Waqidi, who bequeathed his private collection to a mosque. "After his death al-Waqidi left behind six-hundred cases of books, each case a load for two men. He had two young male slaves who wrote for him night and day. He also collected some books costing two thousand gold coins."[5]

The Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) was another renowned collection established in Baghdad by the Abbasid caliph, Al-Ma'mun (813 A.D.). In addition to its function as a mosque for scholars and employees there, the Bayt al-Hikmah possessed a collection of Greek manuscripts that were translated into Arabic by the most competent scholars of the Islamic empire. Bayt al-Hikmah was ransacked by the Mongols in 1258 A.D.,[6] its rich holdings washed away in a river of ink in the Tigris and Euphrates.

In 988 A.D. a member of the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt donated funds to encourage higher learning at Cairo's Al-Azhar Mosque, where astronomy and other sciences were taught in addition to the Qur'anic literature.[7]

As Islamic libraries collected more and more documents and manuscripts, rooms and shelves were designed and constructed to house the burgeoning collections. The scheme for shelving books varied from library to library, with the exception of the location of the Qur'an, which was always placed on the highest shelf, a practice that is still observed today in the mosques. Duplicate copies of the Qur'an were available for daily use; and any passages too worn to be legible were verified from the original.[8] All manuscripts and books were classified and catalogued. One of the earliest known library catalogues, a bibliography really, is Al-Fihrist, written by al-Nadim (987 A.D.) using the dominant method of cataloguing of his time.[9] It ranges from Qur'anic studies and exegeses to literature, philosophy, and the sciences.

As political and military superiority shifted from one region to another, mosques of capital cities underwent corresponding surges and declines in reputation and influence. After the conquest of North Africa in 674 A.D., the army general Uqba Ibn Nafi ordered the building of a mosque in a rural area in what is modern-day Tunisia. The city that eventually grew up around the Qayrawan mosque was and still is considered among the oldest and most authentic Arab-Muslim cities in all North Africa. It was founded two centuries before Fez in Morocco and three centuries before Cairo in Egypt. As part of the Arab settlement in North Africa, Qur'an readers and Muslim scholars from the Arab east were brought to Qayrawan for the Islamization of the indigenous inhabitants. In this

process, much of the population was also Arabized. Copyists were imported to prepare manuscripts of the Qur'an for the new converts.

As successive dynasties ruled North Africa from Qayrawan, the mosque was enlarged to accommodate the growing number of worshipers who were attracted by the wealth and renown of the politico-religious center. New space was also provided for the libraries' increasing collection of manuscripts. The concentration of religious scholarship and political power within its walls enabled Qayrawan to exercise enormous influence on the literary flowering of Muslim North Africa. With the expansion of Islam further west into Morocco, an elite of Qayrawani scholars established themselves in Fez to teach in its mosque, which still bears the name of Qarawiyyin, signifying its role as a satellite mosque of Qayrawan.

In the establishment of Qayrawan mosque, as in mosques in Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad, and elsewhere, two phases of activity characterized its growth. First, there was a period of intense translation of foreign-language manuscripts into Arabic. Second, there was an era of creative literary outpouring and scientific discovery. Many of Qayrawan's manuscripts have been partially preserved in the National Library of Tunisia, in Tunis.

The eventual decline and deterioration of Qayrawan came about after its conquest by the Fatimid dynasty in 909 A.D. The Fatimid, who derived their name from Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammed, were a shiᶜa Islamic sect known as Ismaᶜilia.[10] Originally from Salamiya in Syria, the Fatimid unsuccessfully tried to depose the ruling Abbasid caliph of Baghdad. Fleeing west, the Fatimid decided to try their military strength against Qayrawan in North Africa, which was a distant province of the then-declining Abbasid empire. For the Fatimid, the conquest of Qayrawan was only a stepping stone to regaining a foothold in the east. Using the city as a place to regroup and refill their coffers in order to finance another offensive, the Fatimid moved the provincial capital of North Africa to Mahdiya on the east coast of Tunisia in 912 A.D.[11] From there the Fatimid caliph Al-Muᶜizz successfully led his forces back into Egypt.[12] An important means by which the Fatimid established themselves in Egypt was the building of the Al-Azhar Mosque in 970 A.D. The Fatimid presence in Egypt differed fundamentally from their stay in Tunisia. For while the Fatimid left no cultural legacy in Qayrawan, and in fact actually stripped it of its political and intellectual preeminence, they settled more permanently in Egypt and nurtured the prestige and influence of Al-Azhar Mosque. In an effort to overshadow the Abbasid in Baghdad, the Fatimid lavished much attention on Al-Azhar, making it a showpiece and the focus of rivalry between the two rival dynasties. Moreover, the Fatimid used the mosque as the center

point of their Ismaᶜili ideology.[13] In Al-Azhar, as in other mosques, religious, political, judicial, and educational affairs were all managed simultaneously. Bayard Dodge has described learning of this great mosque, where "archives were stored in the inner part of the building, while classes were held in the sanctuary and courtyard."[14]

Mosque Libraries in Christendom

The Arab-Muslim push into Sicily and Spain from North Africa was characterized by the same cultural transplantation and growth witnessed in Tunisia and Morocco. The Arabs did not dismantle Christian institutions already in place; they did, however, establish mosques and libraries that coexisted with Christian churches. In Spain, Muslims and Christians peacefully practiced their religion and supported their respective scholarly pursuits side by side. Christians and Muslims intermarried, too, as demonstrated by the marriage of Abd al-ᶜAziz Ibn Nsayr to princess Egilona in 718 A.D.[15]

The creative wealth of Islamic literature and scholarship coupled with its cultural and religious tolerance earned Muslims such a good reputation among Christian Spaniards that many identified themselves with the Arabs. Alvaro, a Christian of Cordova in the ninth century, remarked with regret:

> Many of my co-religionists read the poetry and tales of the Arabs, study the writing of Muhammadan theologians and philosophers, not in order to refute them, but to learn how to express themselves in Arabic with greater correctness and elegance. Where can one find today a layman who reads the Latin commentaries of the Holy scripture? All the young Christians noted for their gifts know only the language and literature of the Arabs, read and study with zeal Arabic books, building up great libraries of them at enormous cost and loudly proclaiming everywhere that this literature is worthy of admiration. Among thousands of us there is hardly one who can write a passable Latin letter to a friend, but innumerable are those who can compose poetry in that language with greater art than the Arabs themselves.[16]

Lament though it was, Alvaro's observation underscored the profound effects of the cultural grafting of Islamic thought in Christian Spain, a process that mosque libraries not only facilitated, but induced. The use of Arabic was so widespread that a priest named Vicencius translated the Bible into Arabic.[17]

The Arab-Muslim rulers in Spain spurred this cultural advancement

by diligently patronizing their mosque libraries, so as to rival the intellectual accomplishment of the Abbasid Muslims in the East.[18] Once again the mosques and their libraries, and ultimately the scholars and students using them, reaped the greatest benefits of dynastic rivalry within the Islamic world.

Given the dramatic explosion of ideas and information to come out of Spain, it was natural for these institutions to gain a reputation beyond the Iberic peninsula. Two of the few Europeans outside Spain to learn Arabic were Robert Retenensis and Hermano Delmarta. Sent by Petrus Venerabilis, the chief abbot of Cluny monastery, these scholars stayed in Spain to study astronomy and mathematics. They also translated the Qur'an into Latin in 1143 A.D. and wrote two books on Islamic doctrine and culture, *Doctrina Machumat et Nutrituraeus* and *Mendosa et Ridiculosa Saracenorum.*[19]

The eleventh century marked the awakening of Christian European nations to retrieve territories lost to the Arabs. In 1085 A.D. Toledo was once again under Christian control, though its Arab character and cultural greatness remained unweakened. Christian kings, such as Alphonso VII, astutely avoided interfering with the creative momentum by encouraging Christians, Jews, and Arabs to continue their endeavors in their respective institutions. Thus it was in Toledo that the translation of books from Arabic reached its apex. Dictionaries were written to help translators in this seemingly endless task. Johanne Fück mentions the *Glossarium Latino-Arabirum,*[20] one of a number of dictionaries that permitted the translation of the work of Arab scholars such as Averroës and opened the way for Christian research citing sources from farflung Byzantium.

The tradition of learning continued, even though there was a substantial decline in the role and importance of the mosque beginning in the fourteenth century. However, the existence of secular institutions such as colleges carried on the tradition of maintaining manuscripts and, after the invention of the printing press, books. Thus today the important libraries in the Arab world are no longer associated with mosques, but instead are attached to the European-style secular universities and institutions.

Notes

1. *Huffadh*, plr. *hafidh*, the one who memorizes; it can also be taken to mean a guardian or keeper (e.g., *hafidh maktaba*, keeper or director of a library).

2. Nasser al-Naqshabandi, "Early Islamic Manuscripts of the Quran," *Islamic Review* 1/18 (January 1958): 46-47.

3. Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1966), p. 9.

4. Abu al-Faraj Muhammed Ibn Ishaq Nadim (Ibn al-Nadim), *Kitab al-Fihrist*, ed. Gustav Flugel (Leipzig: Vogel, 1871) pp. 7-8.

5. Ibid., p. 98.

6. F. Krenkow, "Kitab Khana," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1925-1928), vol. 2, part 2, p. 1045.

7. Muhammed Kamil Husayn, *Diwan al-mu'ayyad fi al-din* (Cairo: Dar al-kitab al-Misri, 1949), p. 57 *n*2.

8. Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist*, p. 1046.

9. S. Vilayat Hussain, "Organization and Administration of Muslim Libraries (from 786 to 1492 A.D.)," *Pakistan Library Association Journal* 1/1 (July 1966): 8-11.

10. Henri Laoust, *Les schismes dans l'Islam* (Paris: Payot, 1966), p. 140; Bayard Dodge, *Al-Azhar: A Millennium of Muslim Learning* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 1974), pp. 1-2. See also Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Ismailism* (New York: W. Heffer and Sons Ltd., 1940), and "The Route to India," in *La Revue de la Faculté des Sciences Economiques d'Istanbul* (1953).

11. Abdallah Laroui, *L'Histoire du Maghreb: Un essai de synthèse* (Paris: Maspero, 1975), I: 120.

12. al-Maqrizi, *Al-Mawa'iz Wal I'tibar Fi Dhikr Al-Khitat wal Athar* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1911-1927), part II, p. 180; part IV, pp. 49-55.

13. Dodge, *Al-Azhar*, see chapter "Al-Azhar and the Fatimid Caliphate."

14. Ibid., p. 4.

15. Abu Muhammed Abd Allah al-Marrakushi Ibn Adhari, *Al-Bayan al-Mughrib*, ed. G. S. Collin et Lévi-provençal (Paris: Dozy, 1948-1951), part VI, p. 30.

16. Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, p. 123.

17. Francisco Javier Simonet, *Historia de los Mozárabes de España* (Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1903), p. 720.

18. Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, p. 124.

19. Johanne Fück, *Die Arabischen Studien in Europa* (Leipzig: O. Harrassowitz, 1944), pp. 89-90.

20. Ibid., p. 94.

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