Scholarly Traditions of the Schools in Baghdad: The Mustansiria as a Model

by: Nabila A. Dawood (/authors/nabila-dawood)

Baghdad schools are a challenging topic, involving several different facets of history. These include cartography to identify the location of each school, biographical studies to identify their teachers, preachers, jurists and administrators, along with their chronology. As such, schools were—and remain—inextricably linked to life's numerous domains. Cultural continuity invites us to look further back into the scholarly traditions in the schools of Baghdad. Arabs and Muslims paid attention to knowledge from an early age, and during every stage of their lives. Knowledge, scholars and students were awarded unparalleled, unique status.

When Islam was founded, more emphasis was given to the importance of knowledge. The Qur’ān, addressed people in a terminology they understood, making reference to much of what they knew. The Qur’ān encouraged people to learn to write. Numerous mentions are made of writing, its etiquettes and tools, learning, knowledge and intellect. It encouraged people to use their intellect to contemplate. It praised those who upheld these characteristics.

Emphasis on learning to read and write began during the Prophet Muhammad’s time. He paid due care to this and considered it a vital matter. Muslims took him as their role model. He invited people to knowledge, and participated in applying this himself. It was valued to such an extent that teaching was accepted as a form of ransom to free prisoners of war.

Islam was unlike preceding religions; it came to organise the affairs of this world through working for this life and the hereafter. Arabs and Muslims, through Islamic and worldly education together, aimed to apply the Qur’ānic verse: ‘But seek, through that which God has given you, the home of the hereafter, and [yet], do not forget your share of the present world...’ Attaining this goal motivated people to delve into many fields. They encouraged people to learn and developed, and maintained, schools that taught religious sciences and shari‘ah (Islamic law).

With this increasing priority and growing experience, the features of the sciences began to take shape, and their methodologies began to be defined. For each field of study, there came to be a methodology defined by its tools, and a curriculum based on the imminent fundamental topic was formulated. During the first stage of formulating a methodological basis for scientific research, people revised books on Prophetic narrations, and compiled comprehensive works. These later came to be known as the authentic (sahih) compilations.

With the expansion of the Islamic domain, there arose a need to develop society, expand intellectual horizons, and grow scientific capital. People found they needed to study further sciences, turning their attention to fields such as linguistics, history, geography, chemistry, physics, medicine, engineering and...
Owing to this comprehensive culture, Muslims were able to build a tremendous civilisation, contributing unparalleled intellectual and scientific heritage to the world. Moreover, exceeding the bounds of imagination in quantity and scope.

This intense demand for knowledge and learning created the need for schools. Mosques acted as the first schools. Then arose adjoining or adjacent Qur'anic schools (khatā'ib). This education movement was set in motion by other institutions such as assemblies (majālis) of the ruling elite, their palaces, houses of knowledge (dur al-ilm), papermakers' shops, and libraries. Each of these establishments played its part, but there is no space to go into further detail here.

Due to the rise in the number of these houses, the role of the teacher gained prominence, and the importance of education became apparent. To quote al-Mawardi, there arose the profession of teaching for a living. Arab and Muslim scholars laid out the basis of the science of education, its procedures, etiquettes and rules. They described beginners' education as the primary stage of a progressive study of knowledge. They clarified issues relating to teachers, their selection and duties, teaching methods, cost-free education, teacher-parent relationships, mixed education, reprimands, weekends, and even learning foreign scripts.

Education traditionally took place in non-dedicated locations. This was until the surge in knowledge and its complexity warranting an increase the number of sub-disciplines. Hence, the need for a dedicated place to cultivate science and spread culture arose. Schools (madārīs) started to appear. In the Abbasid period, numerous schools were founded, especially in Iraq. Baghdad, the heart of the Abbasid Caliphate, provided science and scholars with the largest number. Books of history, historiography and biographies mention around 30 schools in Baghdad alone before the establishment of the Mustansiria.

Perhaps the oldest school (madrasa) in the technical sense of the word was the Nizāmī. As confirmed by consensus of historic sources, it was built by the Seljuk minister Nizām-ul-Mulk in 452 AH (1069 CE). The Nizāmī had its etiquettes, formalities and traditions, involving scholars, learners, endowments and student accommodation. Advancements which took place in the Nizāmī, particularly in teaching methods, were a result of Nizām-ul-Mulk's exertion of state control on schools. This condition continued with schools established after his reign. Nizām-ul-Mulk took care to ensure remuneration for students, teachers and maintenance of schools. He abolished tuition fees that had previously been imposed on students, transferring responsibility to the state.

Dr Imad Abd al-Salam states: "Linking the education system with the state during that period was, in the view of some who championed freedom of seeking knowledge, a great catastrophe for proper educational methods. In that vein, Hāfiz Khattīla (Kalip Celebi), mentions that the scholars of Transoxania grieved at the news of the emergence in Baghdad of tuition free schools that allocated salaries for teachers and learners. They said:

"Those who sought knowledge for its honour, and for their own wholesomeness, were highly motivated and sincere. Hence there arose high calibre scholars and knowledge. However, if knowledge is awarded a wage, the degenerate and the lazy would descend upon it."

However, this attitude did not persist for long. The school proved its reputation with benefits for both student and teacher. Some scholars even switched their school of thought to attain a teaching post within it. Schools in Baghdad increased in number after the Nizāmī, Ibn Jubayr, during his visit in 580 AH (1184 CE), counted 30 schools. He is reported to have said:

"It had around 30 schools all located in the east, every one of them magnificent to behold. The greatest and most famous is the Nizāmī, commissioned by Nizām-ul-Mulk, and later renovated in 504 AH (1110 CE). These schools possess great endowments with huge properties to provide funding for their jurists and teachers, and stipends for students. These schools and hospitals (māraṣṭal-āl) are a source of great honour and lasting pride. May God have mercy on those who established them, and those who followed in that fine tradition."

All of these developments preceded the founding of the Mustansirīa and provided it with a vast repository of traditions. From its onset, the Arabic-Islamic education movement operated within the framework of specific traditions. These traditions were constrained by the needs, circumstances and historical background of society at that time.

Such were the features and objectives of the education movement, and the creation of schools during the Abbasid period; the golden age of culture and diverse intellectual systems. Abbasid caliphs played a major role in this regard. The author of 'al-rubūdhi fī-'ilm al-kalām (A Historic Sketch) on Abbasid history writes:

"It was a blessed state, from which emerged scholars and jurists, and within which specialists were accredited to pass down hadith (a collection of traditions containing sayings of Prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily life (the Sunnah), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims after the Qur’an). As per the wishes of its elite, literature and writers flourished."

Even during periods of foreign intrusion and the caliphate's weakness, most Abbasid caliphs had an enthusiasm and almost obsessive love for knowledge which permeated the ages. Perhaps the most telling evidence for this is the establishment of the Mustansirīa. The Mustansirīa was chosen as a model, as within it, scholarly traditions became prominent and established. This was in terms of teaching, pedagogical and administrative systems, as well as other traditions.
The Founding of the Mustansiria

Concurrent with the Mogul invasions, the Mustansiria was the first major Islamic "university" (jami'a) in Baghdad during the late Abbasid period. All four schools of Islamic thought (madhabs) were taught within it. What is more, it was the first Arabic Islamic university concerned with the study of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the jurisprudential madhahib, the Arabic language, mathematics, medicine, healthcare and physical fitness.20

It was named the Mustansiria after the Abbasid caliph al-Mustansir Billah, Mansur bin Muhammad al-Dhahir (588-640 AH) (1192-1242 CE), who rose to power in 623 AH (1226 CE). The books of history and biographical studies (tabaqāt) agree that he was an eminent personality. Even his grandfather, al-Nasir, called him "the judge" (al-qādi) for his sound intellect.21

Perhaps the most famous of his exploits was his love for knowledge and scholars, along with his patronage of them. He crowned this devotion by establishing the Mustansiria. He seemed to have built it not to seek a lasting legacy, but rather out of genuine love for knowledge and learning. This is evidenced by his frequent visits and supervision of many of its affairs.22

Opposite the palace of the caliphate, the Mustansiria was built in the eastern side of Baghdad on the bank of the Tigris. Its construction began in 625 AH (1227 CE), it was completed in 630 AH (1232 CE) and it was inaugurated in 631 AH (1233 CE). Historians elaborated in describing the elegance of its construction; Sibt ibn al-Jawzi (d. 654 AH/1256 CE) said: "Never in the world has such a structure been erected, it was built in the most elegant fashion, in terms of appearance, facilities, halls, ornaments and number of jurists, and endowments."23 Ibn al-Tiqtaqa (d. 709 AH/1309 CE) describes it as being "greater than one could describe, its fame enough of a testament."24 Al-Arsab (d. 717 AH/1317 CE) describes it by saying: "it was soundly constructed, vast in dimensions, outstanding in appearance, and incredibly well-planned."25 Ibn Kathir (d. 774 AH/1372 CE) states; "no such school was built before it."26

Inaugural Ceremony of the Mustansiria

Inauguration of schools involved etiquettes and traditions demonstrating the caliphs' commitment and patronage of learning. The Mustansiria's inaugural ceremony was elaborate to such an extent that it had set an example for future schools.

Books of history present elaborate descriptions of the school's inauguration. Its inauguration day was "a public spectacle". It was inaugurated after its construction was completed on 6th Rajab 631 AH (6th April 1234 CE). The inauguration was attended by minister Nasir-ud-Din Ibn-al-Naqd as well as bureaucrats, administrators, judges, notables, preachers, ascetics, poets, dignitaries, eminent merchants, Sufis, Sages, and teachers and their assistants from other schools. The inauguration commenced with the distribution of "academic" robes to the builders, craftsmen and their associates, as well as to librarians and their assistants.27 The architect, master craftsmen, housekeepers, and orderlies were also robed and seated in a special guest house attached to the school.28

As part of the ceremony, an extensive feast was prepared. Historians including Ibn al-Fiki (d. 732 AH/1331 CE), al-Dahabi (d. 748 AH/1347 CE), Ibn Kathir and al-Ghassani (d. 803 AH/1400 CE) describe it at length.30 A great tablecloth was spread across the school courtyard or in the neighbouring guesthouse, holding many kinds of food and drink, and innumerable types of sweets. The jurists' dined lavishly.31 Ibn Kathir states that the feast was so large that after all those who attended had eaten, leftovers were carried throughout Baghdad's streets to the houses of notables and the public.32
After that, sixty-two students were chosen for each school of thought. Two rectors were appointed and two vice-rectors. The rectors were:

- Muhayl-din Abu-'Abdallāh Muhammad bin Yahya bin Faḍlān al-Shāfiʿī (d. 631 AH/1233 CE), and
- Rashīd-ud-dīn Abu-Haṣaf Umar bin Muhammad al-Farghānī al-Hanafi (d. 632 AH/1234 CE)

Each of the rectors was robed in a black gown (jubbah), indigo scarf, and provided with a mule featuring intricate saddlery and full kitting. The two vice-rectors were:

- Jamāl-ud-dīn Abū-Faraj Yūsuf bin Abd-ur-Rahmān bin al-Jawzi al-Hanbali (d. 656 AH/1258 CE)
- Abū-Hasan 'Alī al-Maghribī, al-Mālikī

Each of the vice rectors was dressed with a finely woven shirt and a long embroidered turban. Muhayl-din ibn al-Jawzi was away, so his son Jamāl-ud-dīn Abū-ur-Rahmān taught in his place. Ibn al-Jazārī (d. 739 AH/1338 CE) mentions that on the inauguration day, each of the 16 fellows was robed; granted a plain thobe, and an embroidered head cap. Each jurist was also robed, with a dammattan shirt and head cap. Ibn al-Fūṭī mentions that as part of the inauguration, the two rectors ascended separate teaching platforms and stood beneath them.

Later that day, the school was divided into four quarters. The quarter to the right of the qibla was given to the Shāfiʿis. The second, to the left of the qibla, was given to the Hanafis. The third, to the right as one enters, was given to the Hanbalis. The fourth quarter, to the left as one enters, was given to the Mālikīs. The lodgings and rooms were then occupied.

On the inauguration day, poets recited verse. One of them included Abū-Maʿṣūm Abū-Ḥadid al-Madāʿini who said:

None has laid eyes upon such a great structure
on Earth before the reign of Al-Mustansir

ما مثل هذا الفلك العظيم لمحبص
في الأرض قبل إيله المستنصر

This is a building expressive of its status,
it's foundations raised by a pure man

هذا نهج معرق عن قدرته
وقعت قراءة فعلاً مظهرة

On the eastern bank, which is
the Mount Sinai of every great speaker.

هو طور سينا كل صاحب مبهر
بالجبل الشرقي بالشطري، الذي

ومنها:

فهرت وعى مساحل لم يقهـر
ووضع الامل بها أساس باناتهـ
اورم شنا والعالم الامتحانـ
قد كانت القفاه قبل باناتهـ
أرجنها وأزيزع عترا المنصرـ (40)
فألوكم قد جمعت أمور الدين في

One poem recited during its inauguration is by an unknown author. It was presented before al-Mustansir by the ministry (diwan), on 20 Rajab 631 AH/Friday 21st April, 1234 CE. It begins:

I sleep without concern for my youngsters,
placing my trust in Al-Mustansir, the king

إبيت فلا أقيم على الصغار
وبالمستنصر الملك التصاماري

It also includes these verses:

You have built a house of knowledge,

The Lion's lair

All schools pale in comparison when one sets eye on it.

وقد أنشأت دار العلم قدـئـ
عربيع الثلث جل عن الوجـار
تضمامات المدارس إذ رأيتهـ
وبائت بالفلكة الصغيرـ
Endowments of the Mustansiria

Education was previously conducted in disparate locations; mosques, scholars homes, and houses of knowledge. It had thus incurred no such expenses as to warrant the charting of day-to-day finances.

As influential and affluent individuals' zeal for knowledge grew in to a fascination, it motivated them to disseminate knowledge for the masses. Thus emerged a new concept; endowing money and land. Endowments were recorded as a means to retain a dependable resource. In order to disseminate knowledge and learning, these endowments funded each house of knowledge throughout the benefactor’s lifetime and beyond. Dr Ahmed Shalabi indicates that al-Ma'mûn was a leading figure in this regard; his era was a cultural golden age. He took great care in allocating generous provisions for scholars, from the yieids of dedicated endowments.42

This principle continued to develop, until founding an institute or cultural establishment came to inherently entail a fixed endowment for its expenses.43 Endowments of wealth became a firm tradition of schools, particularly funding those working to serve knowledge within mosques. This was apparent at the founding of the Nizâmia in Baghdad. Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597 AH/1200 CE) mentions in the chronicles of 462 AH/1069 CE: "The governor Al-'Ameed Abu-Nasr gathered notables, the chief judge and witnesses to the Nizâmia. Endowment records for the school, books within it, as well as land, property, and a market built at its gate, were read before him, and before the sons of Nizâm-ul-Mulk, with the conditions set out within it."44

School endowments became so vast that the traveller Ibn-Jubayr; whilst passing through Baghdad, said: "These schools – the schools of Baghdad – have great endowments, and protected properties, controlled by the jurists and teachers. With it, they support the students and their needs".45 Thus, endowments came to be a firm tradition in founding schools. Accordingly, sources confirm that when al-Mustanşir built his Mustansîria, he allocated it vast endowments.

However, it seems that most historians had no chance to read the Mustansîria’s endowment records, saying only that they were extensive, despite their detailed descriptions of other aspects of the school. Al-Ghassani says: "he allocated a majestic endowment",46 and al-Qaramani (d. 1019 AH/1610 CE) says: "nothing on Earth was built more magnificent, or extensive in endowments".47 The only historian who describes the Mustansîria’s endowments in detail was al-Dhahabi. He mentioned that he had seen a copy of its endowment records in five volumes. He said that they included several quarters and shops in Baghdad, and villages large and small, amounting to a value of 900 thousand dinars.48 Commenting on this, he says: "There is no endowment in the world that approaches its assets, except that of the mosque of Damascus, though its (i.e. the Mustansîria’s) are possibly more extensive.49 He then lists its endowments as follows:

- Amongst its endowment in the region of Dujail:
  - Qasr Sumaikâ, measuring 3700 jarîbs.
  - Al-Jamadâ, and all of its settlements, an area of 6400 jarîbs.
  - Al-Ajmanah, all of it, an area of 5050 jarîbs.
  - Nahr al-Malik Barafta, all of it, an area of 5500 jarîbs.
  - The Bedouin district, an area of 390 jarîbs.
  - Quṣīlûsha, an area of over 3000 jarîbs.
  - Qaryat Yazed, all of it, an area of 4180 jarîbs.
  - The district of Tabṣana, an area of 8100 jarîbs.
  - Sûsta, an area of 3000 jarîbs or more.
  - The district of Arqa', an area of 4000 jarîbs.
  - Al-Farrasah, an area of 1000 jarîbs.
  - Qaryat al-Nahrayn, an area of 1200 jarîbs.
  - Al-Khattabiyâ, an area of 4800 jarîbs.
  - The district of Bizindeen, an area of 6500 jarîbs.
  - Al-Shaddadiyâ, an area of 20250 jarîbs.
  - Hisn Baqaia, an area of 4800 jarîbs.
  - Furfâ Tiyâ, 6000 jarîbs.
  - Hisn Khorasan, 5900 jarîbs, and an additional 7200 jarîbs.
- From the district of Nahî al-Iṣâa:
  - Qaryat al-Jadeedah, 2600 jarîbs.
  - Al-Qutniyah, 6400 jarîbs.
  - Al-Mansal, 5500 jarîbs.
  - Mibeensha, 2500 jarîbs.
  - Qaryat al-Deenaria, 4600 jarîbs.
  - Al-Nasîria, all of it, 190,000 jarîbs.

Al-Dhahabi continues:

"Those living off this school's endowments, as far as I know, are around five hundred people, teachers and juniors. I have heard that the hay of the endowment is enough for the group, and the harvest of these villages remains with the land rental, [considered to be] extraneous. Such is there righteouness."52

Al-Dhahabi also remarks elsewhere: "the endowments of the Mustansiria, in some years, exceeded seventy thousand mithqals of gold.53 The next in size and endowments is the Mustansiria of Cairo."

"he then expands on this, saying that what came to the Mustansiria in his day was far less than but a tenth of this.53

Al-Dhahabi’s account of the decline of the Mustansiria’s endowment suggests much of it had fallen prey to foreign intruders during that period. This is confirmed by Muhammad bin Shâkir al-Kutubî (d. 764 AH/1362 CE) in the chronicles of 684 AH, which describe the state of the Mustansiria. Its jurists were
What an unfitting state for the Lady of all schools,

Those within it [are an example to behold?].

Mustānṣirīa, finely crafted,

You were at your prime.

How could you decline,

After such greatness and honour.

Today you have become a travesty,

Falsified, fake.

Your palms were bombed,

Till their soft fruits were no more.

Nothing remained in your wounds,

But anguish and dry fibres.

I reminisce; a fine moment we spent together,

Recalled by the storytellers of Baghdad.

Every meaning reveals.

From one fine tale, another.

Oh, lady, so many were your visitors,

How empty is your bed since that night,

When crowds surrounded Al-Baqillānī,

Now all survive on bread (?)

As affirmed by Ibn al-Sā`ī in the chronicles of 595 AH/1198 CE, these schools’ endowments held great importance. These school and public endowments were assigned to the chief judge. 55

As a tool for the growth and development of its capabilities, this precedent clearly indicated society’s attention to the school as a prime method for safeguarding the ummah’s distinct spiritual and cultural identity. 56

Scholarly Systems of the Mustaṣnīrīa

The Mustaṣnīrīa was "one of the grandest schools of Baghdad, the city of peace". 57 From its foundation, it had an elaborate system defining its scholarly divisions, teaching staff, the number of administrative and general service staff, and their allocations in terms of salaries and allowances, monetary and otherwise. This system and these divisions were applied as per the conditions of its benefactor, al-Mustaṣnī. 58
The Mustans\'ri\'a was the first university in Iraq, and the first Islamic university to combine the four schools of thought within one building. In addition to the magnitude of its scholarly divisions, it provided a full board so that each of its affairs attained elaborate management and diverse services.

**Scholarly Divisions of the Mustans\'ri\'a**

Amongst the most important scholarly divisions of the Mustans\'ri\'a were:

**The House of Qur\’\'an**

Al-Mustans\'ri conditioned that his school contain it, specifying the following:

- A proficient reciter, [morally] suited to the Qur\’\'an.
- A fellow to aid him in his duties, teaching students the Qur\’\'an.
- A number of students, and 30 orphan children to learn the Qur\’\'an, with help from the fellow.
- The reciter is allocated 2 dinars monthly, 4 pounds of bread and a ladle of stew daily.
- The students are allocated an equal amount of stew, bread and wage as the orphans – the same as other students of jurisprudence.

**The House of Hadith**

Its conditions included:

- A senior scholar (shaykh) of hadith, of high status in the chain of narration.
- Two readers (q\’ar\’) and ten others working in the field of hadith.
- That prophetic narrations are read every Saturday, Monday and Thursday.
- The senior scholar of hadith was allocated a salary of 3 dinars monthly, and 6 pounds of bread and 2 pounds of meat daily.
- Those working in the field of hadith were each allocated a monthly salary of 2 dinars and 10 carats, and each was allocated a daily 4 pounds of bread and a ladle of stew.

**The School of Medicine**

One condition set out by al-Mustans\'ri for his school was that it included a senior scholar (shaykh) of medicine. Other conditions included:

- That it contain a proficient Muslim physician.
- That he employs ten Muslims in the field of medicine.
- That the physician provides treatment for any who fall ill whilst under the care of this endowment, and give the patient what medicines or syrups he prescribes.
- That the physician’s salary and expenses are identical to those of the other scholars. Students of medicine are reimbursed exactly as students of hadith in terms of bread, stew and salaries.

Ibn al-F\’u\’l\' narrates that this medical school was constructed two years after the Mustans\'ri\'a, and that it entered operation after the completion of the Tw\’\'an opposite the Mustans\'ri\'a, and the suffa in which the physician would sit, along with his group of practitioners and the patients.

As it was the catalyst for the flourishing of medical studies in Baghdad, this medical school held significant importance. Its prominence was such that the caliph himself would issue a signature appointing the teacher of medicine. Upon appointment, the teacher was then issued with teaching robes in a special ceremony held at the ministry house (d\’ar al-wiz\’irah). This ceremony was attended by the senior officer, administrators, judges, notables, all teachers from other schools and jurists. Whilst sitting on the teaching platform, the teacher would present his research to those present and place a symbolic school scarf upon his turban. This official attire could only be worn whilst holding this post.

Witness to the importance of this medical school, Ibn al-F\’u\’l\' describes the physicians’ examinations upon the arrival of “physician Majd-ud-din ibn al-Sabbagh al-Baghdadi in 688 AH (1289 CE), with a decree to examine the physicians and pharmacists of Iraq. Whoever he deems satisfactory, he approves his work, and whoever he deems unsatisfactory, he replaces with another whom he deems capable of practice, providing treatment and preservation of health and humour”.

It appears that this medical school did not teach theoretical knowledge alone, rather practical application was encouraged, also. Teachers of medicine, upon desiring students to perform practical application, moved them from the school to the neighbouring hospital. This was in the hope that students would be encouraged to apply their theoretical knowledge on hospital patients.

**Additional Fields**

As conditioned by its benefactor, additional fields taught in the school included grammar, literature and inheritance. The Mustans\'ri\'a had a shaykh of Arabic grammar and literature, yet no allocated place or school for those two fields. Rather, they were taught in the gallery of the Mustans\'ri\'a. Teaching grammar was subject to the following conditions:

- That the school contain a senior scholar of grammar, working in the field of the Arabic language.
- That he be allocated a salary of 3 dinars monthly, and given a daily 6 pounds of bread, and 2 pounds of meat, with its accompaniments, vegetables and firewood.
In addition to the aforementioned scholarly divisions, other fields such as inheritance, mathematics and all that relates to religious studies were also taught in the Mustansiriya. However, it seems that these were not assigned a formal location, also. Some historians make reference to the existence of these fields in its curricula, and some, including inheritance and mathematics, were mentioned to have been part of its endowment conditions.

Al-Arbali says of the Mustansiriya: "It is [as] the Ka'ba for people, the qibla for Islam... comprising collections and study of poetry... and distribution of inheritance and bequests, and study of mathematics and areas[ill], and study of medicine, and preservation of vitality of health and soundness of body."74

Ibn al-Fātī states: "Al-Mustansir conditioned that it includes someone to teach mathematics and inheritance."75 Ibn al-Jazari confirms this, saying that al-Fariḍ - one of the jurists - had, to his knowledge, more than 13 carats of gold.76

Along with their staff, salaries and food allowances, the preceding were the most important scholarly divisions within the Mustansiriya. Allowances for all staff were increased during Ramadan.77

It is also of note that the Mustansiriya had its own dedicated mosque to perform prayers, with an imām (prayer leader), khatib (sermon deliverer) and preacher. In his chronicles of 654 AH/1256 CE, the presence of this mosque is indicated by Ibn al-Fātī. He mentions that when a flood struck Baghdad, causing many of its houses and shops to collapse, the situation necessitated several Friday congregational prayers at the Mustansiriya's mosque to accommodate the people.78

Al-Ghassāni narrates, speaking on the Mustansiriya's scholarly system and its staff and students of jurisprudence, that every sect had an imām to lead its prayer, a reciter for the seven qirā'at (recitations) of the Qur'ān, and a preacher, each of which was given ten carats per month in addition to his monthly salary. He also mentioned that it contained a muezzin (to perform the call to prayer).79

The Library of the Mustansiriya

Books are the 'instrument of knowledge'. For this reason, people were concerned with gathering and preserving them. Libraries were built as the classical means of spreading knowledge. Due to their prohibitive cost, it was unfeasible for all but the wealthy to own books, so those who wished to educate the masses would make libraries containing book collections, and open their doors to the public.80 These libraries developed and became an essential tradition to accompany the founding of any school. This is manifest in the book stores of the Nizāmía school, which Ibn al-Jawzi describes:

"I viewed the vault of books endowed within the Nizāmía school, and found it to contain six thousand volumes. When al-Mustansir founded the Mustansiriya school, he paid great attention to its library, filling its stores with books."81

Al-Arbali states:

"Due to God granting him an inclination to the [various] fields of knowledge, he consistently – from the beginning of his times and life – concerned himself with religious and literary knowledge, working to copy books with commitment and consistency, elegant in handwriting, accurate in style. His love for knowledge drove him to construct a book store, in which he collected [books on] many fields of knowledge; diverse, contrasting and complementary. Thus, the book store – the most important scholarly division of the Mustansaṣna – became famous beyond description, due to the valuable books it contained."

On the day it opened, al-Mustansir had 'the noble quarter[v] and valuable books containing religious and literary knowledge, carried by 160 men, placed within the book store'.85 This was in addition to the books endowed by al-Mustansir. He endowed book stores unparalleled in quantity, beauty, and production quality of the books within.84 Ibn 'Inaba relates that al-Mustansir placed 80 thousand volumes within his store in the Mustansiriya, such that it became a library unrivalled the world over.86

In order to maximise their benefit, it appears that the sheer quantity of books held within the Mustansiriya's book store motivated their organisation and categorisation. Ibn al-Fātī describes how al-Mustansir, after moving the books from his personal stores to the Mustansiriya, approached Shaykh Abdul Azīz, head of the women's quarters in the school, to proofread the books.88 He delegated responsibility77 for the books to his able son, Dia-ud-dīn Ahmad. The keeper of the caliph's palace book store was also brought in, and he tended to the books and arranged them well, in detail and by art, so as to facilitate access for the reader.86

The increasing number of books in the Mustansiriya's book stores in the years following its inauguration led to the construction of a [separate] 'house of books' within it, containing many valuable [volumes]. This building was inaugurated in 644 AH/1246 CE89 and its inauguration was a spectacle. Muwaffaq-ud-dīn Abul-Gāsim Ibn Abi-Hadīd described it in verse90:

With books, brilliant in appearance
I have seen the store adorned.

Their names [so many], they eluded you
to compile them; the compiler did not lie.

In it, a collection as the sea, except
it is so lavish it has no coast.

In it, refinement of your excellence,
Sufficient yet generous.
in it is the means for what we seek, 
and in it is our end and perfection.

The book store in the Mustansīrah was of crucial importance, disseminating knowledge for many years through its valuable and rare contents. Hāfiẓ Khālfī (Kalīb Celles) mentions in 14 volumes and his original handwriting, it contained a complete copy of the history of al-Khālibī al-Baghdādi.91

Professor Abbās al-Azzaawi on the topic of Jalayirid poetry (738-864 AH/1337-1459 CE) says: “... How could poetry have died, or the literary spirit have extinguished, when the store of the Mustansīrah was still standing, offering reference to its artefacts? ... It was an instructor for when a teacher was unavailable, and a guide for the seeker of literature. It was, for [the visitor], an embers [to ignite] the love of poetry.”92

This store had a dedicated system in place. It was run by a number of staff to manage its daily affairs, and facilitate its benefits for students, including:

- The storekeeper (khalīzin) or bookstore-keeper, was the most important role, as his duty was to preserve the books; to “restore what had become dishevelled, bind them when they need binding, protect them from those who are unbecoming for them, provide them to those who need them, and present them to the poor and needy.”93
- The supervisor (mustafīf), was second in command after the storekeeper.
- Then came the copyist (nāṣikh), who copied the books. He was required to be of good moral standing. In particular that he is trustworthy, does not compromise his principles for worldly gain, as well as is meticulous and patient, so as to perform his duties proficiently.94
- There was also the librarian (muʿawāfī), whose job was to guide readers and students to the locations of books.95
- There was also the bookbinder and the translator.96

The duties of these staff members indicate the presence of systems and traditions, upheld in the establishment of these libraries. As illustrated by the size of its book store and the respect warranted to knowledge and scholars by its benefactor, the Mustansīrah was integral within this spirit. Al-Mustansīrah took all means to alleviate difficulties facing those benefitting from it. This is supported by al-Mundhirī’s description: “He was a driven philanthropist, stiving through numerous good works. ... He constructed his famous school, and arranged its affairs, surveying scholars and students conditions, considering their comfort and dealing with any difficulties they may face.”97

There is no service nobler than to present books to people of knowledge and its seekers. Al-Mustansīrah did this, concerning himself with their affairs, and tending to those who served their needs. He allocated library employees monetary salaries and non-monetary allowances. The salary of the store-keeper was 3 dinars monthly, and he was given 10 pounds of bread and 4 pounds of meat daily, with its accompaniments, vegetables and firewood.98 Librarians were salaried 2 dinars per month, and 4 pounds of bread and a fawād of stew per day.99 These salaries were increased during Ramadan.100

The Scholarly Committee of the Mustanṣīrah

Al-Mustansīrah conditioned his school to contain 248 men, 62 from each denomination. Each denomination would have a teacher, 4 fellows, a senior scholar of Qur’ān, another scholar of hadith, a third scholar for medicine, a fourth for science of inheritance, mathematics and bequests, and a fifth for the arts and grammar.101

Each of these were expected to have the personal qualities necessary to undertake the most critical, noble profession - teaching. In this regard, there were etiquettes and formalities associated with learning and teaching, celebrated in the Arabic tradition. It is enough of an honour that the Prophet was narrated to say: “God did not send me to compel [people], rather He sent me as a teacher to ease things.”

The teacher has personal qualities agreed upon by books on pedagogy and education, the same qualities nurtured in the Mustanṣīrah. The teacher as outlined in books on pedagogy102 must:

- Excel at presenting lessons, such that those in attendance understand it in a way suited to their own cognitions.
- Understand the topic of the lesson, as his shortcomings in this regard would disrupt the educational process, allowing those who are unfit to encroach upon the noble profession.
- Elaborate explanations, discussions and comments, giving his specialist topic the consideration it deserves.
- Take care not to contradict his statements with his actions, such as forbidding something and partaking in it.
- Preserve the science and keep it free of greed.

As well as numerous other qualities, a complementary set for the student was also outlined.

The Mustanṣīrah was the ideal place to apply pedagogical traditions and values. Al-Mustansīrah’s love for knowledge and science helped establish these, He loved his school to such an extent that he would sit in the neighbouring garden to view it, observing its conditions, supervising its jurists and inspecting their circumstances.103
Except for some mentions by Ibn Battuta during his visit to Baghdad, we do not have texts indicating teaching methods. He mentioned that the teacher in a state of serenity and dignity would sit within a small wooden dome upon a chair adorned with carpets, wearing [plain?] black. To his right and left were fellows, revising all that he mentioned. Thus was the arrangement of every session (majlis) at the school.¹⁰⁴

There are plentiful references to scholars who taught or learnt at the Mustanṣiria, their academic status, and their veneration by caliphs.¹⁰⁵

The fellow, al-Sutki (d. 771 AH) states: “his role surpassed listening to the lesson, [to include] clarifying it to the students, benefiting them, and doing what is implied by the term ‘aladah'[x]. Else, he would be [in] the same [capacity] as the jurist [i.e. the student].”¹⁰⁶

One tradition upheld by the Mustanṣiria was student selection. It was stringent in accepting students, choosing only those who were intelligent, renowned for compiling books and teaching. The student was also expected to have purified his heart from adverse traits, so as to be suited to receive knowledge and preserve it.¹⁰⁷ The student was expected to have sincere intentions in seeking knowledge.¹⁰⁸ As for the teaching hours, we know of no fixed times for them.¹⁰⁹

The teaching process began by reciting some Qur’ān. Methodologies differed from teacher to teacher, but the most important methods were lectures, discussions, dictation and instruction - particularly the latter two. When the number of lessons increased, priority was given to topics ‘in order of nobility and importance’, i.e. Qur’ānic exegesis (tafsīr), followed by prophetic narrations (hadith), then religious fundamentals (‘usul), jurisprudential tradition (madhhab), differences of opinion (khilāf) or grammar and rhetoric.¹¹⁰

Upon completion of education, the student was awarded a licence (jāzā). The learner could [alternatively] become certified - awarded a shahāda - without attending lessons.

Teachers' salaries at the Mustanṣiria were allotted as conditioned by the benefactor of its endowment:

- Each teacher's monthly salary was 12 dinars, 20 pounds of bread, and 5 pounds of meat.¹¹¹
- Each fellow was awarded 3 dinars monthly, and 7 pounds of bread daily.¹¹²
- Each jurist (i.e. student) was salaried 1 dinar and 4 pounds of bread, cooked food, sweets, fruit, soap and bedding.¹¹³

Peculiarly, the teacher was granted a mule, along with saddlery and full kitting.¹¹⁴

Administration and Public Services at the Mustanṣiria

The Mustanṣiria was established to be a boarding school, and enrolled students and teachers who enjoyed generous patronage by the caliph who took care of their expenses.¹¹⁵

Dr Naji Ma‘nouf mentions that al-Mustanṣir worked hard to afford students unprecedented luxuries so that they may dedicate themselves to knowledge, undistracted by life's problems. He provided them sufficient food and drink as well as monthly salaries.¹¹⁶

Due to the size of the school, and its numerous specialisms, a committee was required for its management, and another for its service and administration. Thus, its teaching staff were complemented by an administrative committee, consisting of a dean (nāṣir), a supervisor (muṣrīf), and an official (khitāb).

There is no information that indicates the nature of their work, but there are mentions of their salaries and allowances. It appears that the governor (wālī) held the highest position, followed by the supervisor, and finally the official. It also appears that the Mustanṣiria's governors and deans were chosen from amongst those of outstanding knowledge.¹¹⁷

In addition to these positions, there was a large number of staff, reflecting the Mustanṣiria's size. What is more, its high standards of service were telling of its advanced cultural setting. These staff included:

- muezzin (caller to prayer),
- qāyyim (registrar),
- mueqiq (time-keeper),
- chef and his assistant,

These numerous roles reveal the advanced services this school enjoyed, state patronage of knowledge and those working to attain it.

As for their salaries, they were allocated as follows:

- The Dean or Governor: 12 dinars monthly, 20 pounds of bread, 5 pounds of meat, as well as its accompaniments, vegetables and firewood.¹¹⁵
- The Supervisor: 7 dinars monthly, 10 pounds of bread, 3 pounds of meat.¹²⁰
- The Official: 5 dinars monthly, 5 pounds of bread, 2 pounds of meat.¹²¹

الوساطة

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74. خلاصة الذاهب السموك ص 287.
75. الحوادث الجامعة ص 58.
76. المختار من تاريخ ابن الجوزي ص 151.
77. المصدر نفسه ص 151.
78. الحوادث الجامعة ص 318.
79. المصدر السموك ص 460.
80. تاريخ الترقب الإسلامية ص 115.
81. أبو الفرج عبد الرحمن بن الجوزي: سيد الفاطم، بغداد ص 366-367.
82. خلاصة الذاهب السموك ص 286.
83. انظر الحوادث الجامعة ص 53. المصدر السموك ص 458.
84. البسات والهجرة ج 13 ص 140.
85. أحمد بن علي بن الحسين ابن عطاء (ت 828هـ): عهدة الطالب في ساس آل أبي طالب، النجف 1961، ص 206.
86. البسات الكتب فهرائها.
87. اعتبارها، تسبيبها واثرك من محتها.
88. الحوادث الجامعة ص 54.
89. المصدر نفسه ص 210.
90. المصدر نفسه ص 210.
91. مصطفى بن عبد الله حنفي خليفة (ت 1067هـ): كلفة الهزون، بغداد، مكتبة المي 1/171.
92. أحمد عبد العزيز البغدادي: تاريخ الأدب العربي في العراق، بغداد، الطبعة الأولى، ج 1 ص 332.
93. عبد الله بن اللال البخاري (ت 771هـ): مختصر عصره، البخاري، ج 110. ومن أشهر ظاهرة المستنصرية زيد الشهير ابن الساعي (ت 674هـ) فابن الطوي (ت 723هـ).
94. مختصر عصره، البخاري، ج 110.
95. تاريخ الترقب الإسلامية ص 143، د. حسن أمين: الحجيرة المستنصرية 98.
96. المصدر نفسه ص 143، د. حسن أمين: الحجيرة المستنصرية 98.
97. الكاتب نؤف بن الفقيه ج 3 ص 607.
98. المصدر السموك ص 459.
99. المصدر نفسه ص 459.
100. المصدر نفسه ص 459.
101. المصدر السموك ص 458.
102. المصدر البخاري ص 151، البخاري، ج 1 ص 141.
103. المصدر البخاري ص 142.
104. المصدر البخاري ص 142.
105. المصدر البخاري ص 142.
106. المصدر البخاري ص 142.
107. المصدر البخاري ص 142.
108. المصدر البخاري ص 142.
109. المصدر البخاري ص 142.
110. المصدر البخاري ص 142.
Some of these villages’ names were recorded, despite their locations being lost to history.

Translators note: i.e. around 300 thousand grams. At £10/gram, this would be equivalent to £3 million.

Translators note: ‘the study of areas’ is often used to mean Geography.

Translators note: The written Qur’ān was split into four huge volumes, known as the quarters (rubā‘ī)

Translators note: The Mu‘āid practiced ḥadāth, literally ‘repetition’. Today it refers to a teaching assistant.

al-‘asjad al-masbook, by Ismā‘il ibn al-‘Abbās al-Ghassāni