The topics of culture and learning in the classical Islamic world have intrigued many modern scholars. George Makdisi, and many in his wake, describe a sophisticated and surprisingly homogenous education system,\(^2\) while quantitative studies illustrate its geography and social makeup.\(^3\) Few studies, however, focus on the time which preceded the advent of madrasas as the standard educational institution, legal learning centres greatly promoted in Baghdad by the Saljuq vizier Nizam al-Mulk (d. 485/1092).

The production of culture in the pre-madrasa period was a fluid process, not codified enough to make for easy systematization.\(^4\) It is possible,

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\(^1\) This chapter contains material reworked from my ‘The Practical Matters of Culture in Pre-madrasa Baghdad’, Oriens 38 (2010): 145–164.


\(^4\) See for instance Christopher Melchert, ‘The Etiquette of Learning in the Early Islamic Study Circle’, in Law and Education in Medieval Islam: Studies in Memory of Professor George Makdisi, ed. Joseph E. Lowry, Devin Stewart and Shawkat Toorawa (Warminster: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004), 33–44 (reprinted in Gilliot, Education and Learning, 1–12), and, within the larger-scope debate on the transmission of knowledge in the first centuries of Islam, on which Gregor Schoeler has worked extensively, see his ‘The Relationship of Literacy and Memory in the Second/Eighth Century’, in The Development of Arabic as
however, to identify recurring patterns in the lives and careers of scholars of various disciplines and in the knowledge they produced. The caliphate of al-Muqtadir is often described as the golden age of Arabic culture; it therefore provides plenty of examples of lives which, in retrospect, can be seen as caught between an effervescent cultural debate and the struggle to make a living, between the munificence of patrons and the dwindling financial and political prosperity of Baghdad. It is a precarious balance destined to be disturbed a few decades after the death of al-Muqtadir, when Baghdad will lose forever its standing as the main cultural magnet for the fragmented empire. The present chapter attempts to contextualize this moment of equilibrium by looking at the cultural and scholarly environment surrounding the court of al-Muqtadir and identifying there elements of continuity and change which may have had repercussions in a broader context.

**Career Patterns and Sources**

Although students did not have standardized institutions to refer to in the pre-madrasa period, their careers followed recognizable patterns, the first of which can be identified by looking at their connection with the city of Baghdad. A young man, either local or arriving from the provinces, found himself teachers, as well as means to pay them if he was poor; through these teachers he hoped not only to further his knowledge but also to be introduced to greater sources of income. Of course, the more famous the teacher, the higher the probability of achieving one’s scholarly and financial aims; therefore, it was crucial to choose well.

One successful example of this pattern is the career of the grammarian Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. al-Sarī al-Zajjāj (d. 311/922). When al-Zajjāj met the Basran grammarian al-Mubarrad (d. 286/898), shortly after the latter’s arrival from Samarra, he understood that this was an excellent teacher.

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5 In or shortly after 247/861, when the caliph al-Mutawakkil died. Al-Zajjāj was then in his teens.